

WIESŁAWA GADOMSKA*

ART AND THE CITY: THE ISSUE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSEUMS IN THE LANDSCAPE OF NEW YORK CITY

SZTUKA I MIASTO – PROBLEMATYKA ROZWOJU OBIEKTÓW MUZEALNYCH W PRZESTRZENI NOWEGO JORKU

Abstract

Other than their basic mission to collect and promote art, museums serve the important culture-producing role of creating architectural landscape in cities. This article provides an analysis of characteristic examples of museums' spatial expansion (the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art) characterised by specific urban, architectural and cultural conditions existing in Manhattan borough of New York City.

Keywords: museum expansion, Manhattan, urban landscape, genius loci

Streszczenie

Obiekty muzealne, poza podstawową misją kolekcjonerską i popularyzatorską, pełnią ważną funkcję kulturotwórczą związaną z kształtowaniem krajobrazu architektonicznego miasta. W artykule przeanalizowano charakterystyczne przykłady rozwoju przestrzennego obiektów muzealnych (Museum Guggenheima, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art) w specyficznych uwarunkowaniach urbanistycznych, architektonicznych i kulturowych jakie stwarza lokalizacja nowojorskiego Manhattanu.

Słowa kluczowe: rozbudowa muzeum, Manhattan, krajobraz miejski, genius loci

* Ph.D. Arch. Wiesława Gadomska, Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn.

1. Introduction

In May 2015, a new building for the Whitney Museum of American Art in Downtown Manhattan opened. After nearly 50 years in its previous setting in Upper East Side, marked by numerous trials of expanding the facility crucial for the city's architectural landscape, the museum's management made a critical decision to change its location and set up a new facility with a larger amount of functional space.

Searching for new opportunities of spatial development and the necessity to expand buildings has become an issue for nearly all of the renowned museums in New York, its



Ill. 1. Manhattan – localisation of the analysed museums (the author's own work)

basic reasons being: the expansion of collections and museum resources; searching for new ways to exhibit items; increasing visitor footfall. For many years, there has also been synergy between the above mentioned and the visible tendency to expand the basic functions of museums, likely to be accompanied by new, commercial functions [1, p. 113–118] e.g. highbrow gastronomy, specialist stores (art, books, designer shops etc.) as well as high-quality rental space. The phenomenon, inevitable as it is in the rampant commercialisation of art, requires additional, indispensable space of high quality in architectural sense.

The complexity of expanding buildings, apart from basic formal conditions (the local law) and spatial conditions (limited property area, neighbourhood etc.), stems from a feature characteristic of museum facilities – they have often been unique architectural

objects which, are themselves, sublime elements of art history. They have also determined the level of attractiveness and the beauty of their cities in the surrounding city landscape [2]. It is often this very aspect of culture that most determines the complexity of expansion (Ill. 1).

In the research we used the method of comparative analysis and the analysis of individual cases. The studies were based on research in situ.

2. Expansion of the Guggenheim Museum – architectural background of the unique body of the building

The Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum, erected in the years 1956–1959 according to the design by Frank Lloyd Wright, has been one of the most recognisable architectural objects in the world [3, p. 239–249]. The main building erected to house the exhibitions of modern art was the last object built while Wright was alive. It has been living proof of the artistic originality and maturity of this most outstanding American architect [4, p. 308–319]. The body of the building as viewed within the city landscape is a highly expressive composition, abstracted from its surrounding, of unchanging impact despite the passage of years and changing trends in architecture (Ill. 2).



Ill. 2. Expressive body of the Guggenheim Museum emphasized with off-white and deep chiaroscuro (photo by W. Gadomska)

The decision to locate the future museum on the prestigious Fifth Avenue at the very beginning also determined its future status, allowing the designer to create a unique object, standing out of the conventional Manhattan line of blocks. A huge, square plot with a wide front spreading between 88th and 89th Streets provided a unique placement of the building viewed from the perspective of Fifth Avenue and is additionally enriched by the view of the adjacent Central Park. The orientation of the plot also favoured the unique, picturesque positioning of the building in the south-west sunlight.

Different spatial concepts presented in preliminary designs of the future museum [4, p. 308–319] share a common feature for the body of the museum building – a dominating main exposition space contrasted with a sub-dominant ground floor area with an entrance hall and accompanying rooms. One of the concepts Wright took into account was based on an

attempt to reflect the fixed and dense development in Fifth Avenue's frontage through shaping the main body of the museum in the form of a geometric, regular polygon. However, what eventually prevailed was the author's uncompromising approach in his search of individual architectural expression – represented by a different design to those typical of Manhattan architecture, as well as by the organic form and colour of the building. The museum opened in 1956, and, due to its unprecedented design which blatantly ignored the context of the local architectural landscape, was interpreted by many as “Wright’s slap in the city’s face” [5, p. 142–147]. Despite extremely contradictory opinions on its architectural appearance, the building soon became an icon of New York’s landscape [6].

For long years, the building faced much criticism as being inadequate for the function it served [5, p. 142–147]. As a result of the growing museum’s resources and the adopted strategy of exhibiting, an alarming shortage of usable area for exhibition, administration, and storage occurred in the late 1980s. As a consequence of arbitrary and absurd decisions of the museum’s management aimed at reorganising the space in the building; the upper level of the exhibition gallery was turned into improvised storage space, which ruined the primary assumption of the designer regarding the viewers’ perception of the space and the way resources should be exhibited. Guggenheim Foundation executives faced a tough decision to expand the museum, against the risk of harsh criticism and opposition from those who found any interference into the unique body of the building unacceptably profane [4, p. 308–319]. Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, the authors of the expansion project design, adopted an extremely moderate concept of museum enlargement, with clear attention to the unique cultural heritage the previous building had embodied. Rich programming assumed by the investor was to be housed in a rectangular, ten-storey building to be erected in the north-east part of the allotment at the back of the main building, which used to serve as access for external services (Ill. 3). In this way, the new cube became a background for the basic body of the museum and created a coherent architectural tissue with the surrounding dense development of Manhattan. Due to its sandstone façade, the colour of the new building is a bit darker than the original structure, this emphasises the fact that it is secondary to the warm white original building.



Ill. 3. The expansion in the form of a backstage quadratic building serves as a neutral background for the expressive main building of the museum (photo by W. Gadomska)

As a result of the expansion which terminated in 1992, the museum gained new exhibition space within four separate galleries, a technical floor, as well as additional facilities located underneath the pavement of Fifth Avenue. The old and the new buildings were connected with a terrace allowing exhibitions of sculptures. Commercial space for retail shops with books on architecture, designer objects and souvenirs was introduced on the existent first floor, below the smaller rotunda. The volume of the new building against the old one is enough to give a clear message of it serving as a background to emphasise the value of the outstanding original building.

3. Expansion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art – a record of a turning point in history

The unique spatial context of the largest museum in New York stems from its location: the classicistic building forms a huge part of a long line of prestigious Fifth Avenue's westward development (Ill. 4), whereas the whole body of the building, consequently expanded over the years, is located in the Central Park – an invaluable facility of the city [7, p. 97–108].

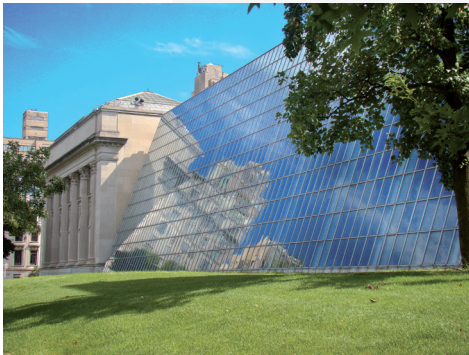


Ill. 4. Monumental entrance façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art located along Fifth Avenue (photo by W. Gadomska)

In 1872, New York City Department of Parks indicated a new location for a museum – the area in the east side of a newly designed park. The decision was taken against the opinion of Frederick Law Olmsted, the author of the park's design, who was not in favour of interfering with the park's landscape, even if it would serve an important investment of public nature.

The primary neo-Gothic building was erected in 1880, according to the design by Calver Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould. Further expansions in the neoclassical style reshaped the layout of the building into more regular form, as well as adding to its metropolitan scale and final architectural appearance.

The museum's management faced the necessity to expand the building in the late 1960's, provoked by the ancient Temple of Dendur which relocated from the banks of the Nile to become one of the museum's exhibits. It demanded space adequate for its size, as well as particular light and other conditions of exhibiting – this problem initiated strategic decisions on the further expansion of exhibition space for housing other elements of the museum's program. The long-term, long-sighted design of the museum's expansion was made in 1967 by Kevin Roche¹ & John Dinkeloo, to be completed stage by stage until the early 1990s. The basic restriction of the future expansion stemmed from the specific urban context providing limited construction space. In order to stay within Fifth Avenue's line of development with its characteristic, historic façade underlined by the monumental, axial entrance, the museum had to expand westwards and partly absorb Central Park. It expanded in such a direction that the spatial character of the building remained undisturbed. The modern wings implanted into the historic structure of the building were shaped in a less formal way [6]. Façade glass used as a basic architectural material made the elements of the extension seem similar to the development characteristic for parks: an orangery or a large-scale winter garden. Clear cultural stratification [6] created a new, capacious spatial context located between the historic walls of the building and the transparent walls of its newly-built extensions, with open views to the landscape of the park (Ill. 5). Despite critical voices over this juxtaposition, the exhibition space created within the whole museum is consistent and has thus far provided attractive, unique conditions to exhibit the still growing collections of the Metropolitan Museum.



Ill. 5. Museum wings extend into the space of Central Park (photo by W. Gadomska)

Lasting for almost 25 years, the expansion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has been recognised as the largest expansion of a museum in the US [6] – it brought about a 20-fold increase of internal space reaching a final floor area of 120 thousand square meters. In spite of the large scale of the expansion, the modern interference was moderate enough to create an interesting architectural contrast and emphasise the historic turning point between the old and the modern phase of the museum's life.

¹ The Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1982 and the AIA Gold Medal in 1993.

4. Expansion of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) – development inside the urban fabric

The spatial development of the Museum of Modern Art in New York has been an on-going process in parallel with MoMA's near 90-year-old mission to promote modern art. The museum's headquarters, erected in 1939 in Midtown Manhattan, triggered a new way of designing urban street frontage by implementing an individual character within it. The process, envisaged to continue through future decades, is expansive in its nature and leads to gradual use of the city's urban structure of blocks [8] in the rectangular area within Fifth and Sixth Avenues, and 53rd and 54th Streets of Manhattan for museum purposes.

Since the beginning of the museum's existence, its architectural design has accurately reflected its exhibitions' artistic profile. In 1939, not more than 6 years after purchasing a traditional urban house located at 54th Street, the museum moved to new premises designed according to a modern international architectural style. The design's authors, Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone² [9, p. 154], innovative as they were in a formal sense, maintained the existent dense line of frontage middle-class development. Respect of the existent architectural scale was also a clear link with the architectural context: despite the new building being higher by two floors than the neighbouring traditional development, it was made optically lower through its horizontal orientation. However, the white façade of the new body, so skilfully introduced into the existent context, made it conspicuous in its surrounding – this way, the concept of 'modernity' introduced by the museum, combined with a huge dose of respect for the existent tradition, was likely to gain acceptance among a vast community of New Yorkers.

In the 1960s, the museum went through an important stage of its spatial development, Philip Johnson being the head of the project. The existent building with its closed exhibition space was surrounded by a vast sculpture garden, adjacent to 54th Street. The open space, framed within the dense development of blocks of Midtown Manhattan, created a new context of the urban fabric by making it less dense and giving it more natural light [9]. Johnson also designed the extension of the main building – the proportionate, black glass cube superseded another sequence of the old development from the frontage of 53rd Street enlarging the museum eastwards at the same time (Ill. 6).

Further expansion, modernisation and reconstruction obliterated the original, clear architectural concept of MoMA. Year 1984 was marked by a failed attempt to reshape the space of the building and develop a new character for it. The projected development of museum's western side comprised not only exhibition rooms, but also a 55-storey apartment building – a powerful landmark which disintegrated the existent original development, introducing into the low-scale building a component characteristic to the repeated, corporate architecture of Manhattan.

The architectural shape of the museum as it is today dates back to the radical reconstruction and expansion of exhibition space that took place in the years 2002–2005, after a mixture of individual ideas were proposed by different architects engaged in the process of MoMA's spatial development. The project's main issue, other than the functional layer that consisted

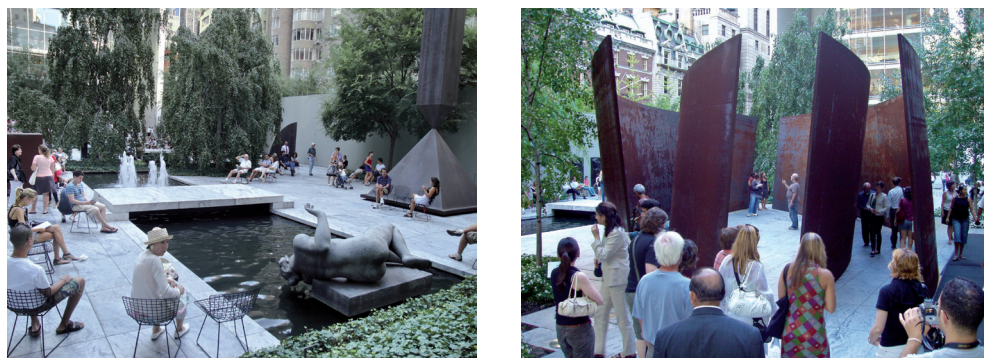
² The generation gap between the two architects is worth noting: Goodwin (born in 1885) was related to architectural historicism, while Ed Stone (born in 1902) is regarded as a representative of the international style, of which the other examples are Eero Saarinen or Minoru Yamasaki.



Ill. 6. Southern façade of the museum with characteristic horizontal division
(photo by W. Gadomska)

in the enlargement of the existing area by over 20 thousand square meters, was rooted deeper – it concerned regaining by the disintegrated museum building the spatial identity that was lost in the process of subsequent reconstructions [10, p. 324–327]. Yoshio Taniguchi, the Japanese architect and the author of the reconstruction, brilliantly used the open area of the existent sculpture garden by enclosing it with the glass walls of the new eastern and western wings of the museum, which gained an attractive view of the patio that was thus created (Ill. 7). Additionally, clear functional division consequently provided effective organisation of space – the eastern wing was designed for research and education, the western wing was used to house exhibitions. As a consequence of minimalist expansion, MoMA regained its original modernistic look, its clearly defined form, and characteristic façade from the 54th Street side. Interference into the constantly rebuilt façade from 53rd Street's side was made in style according to the westward expansion of the museum, clearly marking another phase of its spatial development.

As a result of the expansion of the museum's functions in urban space, from its beginnings in the 1930's, the building of the Museum of Modern Art has had its area enlarged by a factor of over twenty – this has had a substantial influence on the urban architectural landscape. The development of the institution envisaged for the future is limited by the natural boundaries of 53rd and 54th Streets (north to south), and Fifth and Sixth Avenues (east to west). The immediate vicinity of another museum, the American Folk Art Museum erected in 2001 [11, p. 199], an invaluable architectural gem to the west of MoMA, limits further expansion of MoMA in a cultural sense. Its authors, Tod Williams, Billie Tsien & Associates, designed an interesting museum with respect of the original scale of the development at 54th Street – the front width and the façade's height is in line with the surrounding buildings – the museum exhibits American vernacular art in its intimate, original interiors. Despite the purchase of the



Ill. 7. Interior patio serving as a sculpture garden (photo by W. Gadomska)

indebted property by the management of MoMA in 2011, the demolition of such a precious building characteristic of Midtown Manhattan in order to make further expansion of the Museum of Modern Art must imply challenging questions about what constitutes acceptable, non-financial expenses of further development of an institution that has, among other duties, a responsibility for the protection of modern architecture [12].

5. A new location of the Whitney Museum of American Art: identity and local *genius loci* issues

Founded in 1930s by the art collector Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the Museum of American Art was first located in Greenwich Village of Southern Manhattan. After over 20 years of its growing importance among museum establishments, the museum moved to eastern Midtown Manhattan, and 10 years later, facing intensive growth of exhibition resources, the management board of the museum made a decision to purchase a plot at the crossing of Madison Avenue and 75th Street.

An exposed corner location near the prestigious Fifth Avenue was, on the one hand, bound by restrictions imposed by the traditional frontage development of neighbouring ‘brownstone’³ historic buildings; on the other hand, it allowed daring design ideas due to the vicinity of the outstanding 1959 Guggenheim Museum. The decision to entrust Marcel Breuer with the design of the future museum resulted in a building very characteristic of New York, which over time, gained the status of an icon of the city [9, p. 77]. Despite the Bauhaus school origins Breuer shared with major modernists of the 20th century [13, p. 194], the designed building is loaded with a big dose of expression, so exceptional among the ‘international’ development characteristic of the New York of the 60’s [9, p. 155; 14, p. 27]. The characteristic body of the building (Ill. 8), aside from the sculpture-like tectonics and brutalist raw façade, modified the local spatial context by its deep cantilevered void on the ground floor which was designed to introduce more light into the lower part of the building.

³ Residential development characteristic to expensive districts, made of red-brown sandstone, valued for its endurance as well as the high level of craftsmanship.



Ill. 8. The western façade makes part of the Madison Avenue frontage (photo by W. Gadomska)

one, which in the end would become a minor element of an unnaturally large-scale, arbitrary composition in the surrounding architectural context. What was worth noting in the design, though, was a clearly visible, almost by the book dualist modernistic idea and reflecting the post-modernistic philosophy of the time, generally visible in architecture of the 1980s [14, p. 5–8].

The beginning of the new century was marked by the further search for solutions to expand the space of the museum. The authors of the concepts that followed were Norman Foster in 2001, who took the risk of combining a luxurious block of apartments within the new body of the museum building, and Rem Koolhaas, who in 2003 presented a controversial project of a building with additional volume hanging atop and dominating the original building. Neither of the proposals was favoured by the city authorities, nor by the strongly represented local community.

Another concept of expanding the museum was presented by Renzo Piano in 2004. Unlike his predecessors, this architect reduced to a minimum interference into the existing building and into historic brownstones, flanking from the south. Instead, he designed an autonomous, high museum structure in the second row of the Madison Avenue development. He had applied a similar convincing solution to the same problem with the nearby Morgan Library

Thus created illusive urban interior broke out of the scheme of typical for Manhattan repeated perpendicular crossroads of streets and avenues. The new building of the Whitney Museum became an important element of the architectural landscape of New York City.

The museum, gaining in prestige and popularity, soon faced strategic decisions of further development. The board, anticipating the imminent necessity to enlarge the exhibition space and enrich it with new functions, took a decision to purchase the plot adjacent to the existing museum in order to make feasible plans for future expansion.

The first project to enlarge the museum was made public in 1985. It consisted of a post-modernistic design by Michael Graves, it was the proposal of a building that dominated over the body of the original

[15, p. 446-447], which he had expanded despite a troublesome historic and urban context. The expansion made between 2000 and 2006 introduced a neutral, modern architectural implant that complemented the space among the historic buildings of museums and libraries. The moderate, well-balanced design with clearly distinguished boundaries between the original and the extended part of the library buildings undoubtedly served as recommendation in Piano's future negotiations with the Whitney Museum board.

The negotiations took a new turn in 2006 when the museum board made a breakthrough decision to change the museum's location and move it to the south of Manhattan. The attitude to this decision may be ambivalent – on the one hand it served to protect the original iconic building of the existent museum, allowing the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art to rent Whitney's space [16]. On the other hand, it resulted from a rational calculation of any future expansion's high costs and doubtful effects as to new exhibition space gained by way of expansion. Again, Renzo Piano was entrusted with making a design. The attractive new location next to the unique High Line Park opened in 2009 [17] made it possible for the architect to design a building that would comprise both a volume expected by the investor, capable of housing adequate programming, and an architectural modern style that would fit the revitalised, post-industrial district [18, p. 273–284] (Ill. 9, 10). The museum opened in May 2015, after nearly 85 years back to the location where it embarked on its primary mission in 1931.



Ill. 9. New premises of the museum located by the unique High Line Park
(photo by W. Gadomska)

Nearly twenty years' quest of an idea how to expand the building, so deeply rooted in the city's modern history, made it clear how difficult and restricted expansion of museums has been in modern times. The public debate that arose over the radical change of the museum's



Ill. 10. Observation decks providing the experience of a big city landscape
(photo by W. Gadowska)

location provoked, other than architectural issues, many equally crucial questions about museums being a productive element of urban development, creating a city's cultural potential and its characteristic *genius loci* in its surroundings.

6. Conclusion

Other than their basic mission of collecting and spreading knowledge of art, museums have an important culture-producing function of shaping the architectural landscape of the cities they are located in. The biggest museums of New York City located in the specific 'Culture of Congestion' [19, p. 10] of Manhattan have faced the necessity to expand their premises due to the growth of their resources and collections, the need of creating new conditions to exhibit them, and the need of enriching their programs. The possibilities of spatial expansion of the analysed institutions were, on the one hand, limited by the complex local cultural context – commitment to the architectural heritage of the original building or respectable neighbouring development; on the other hand, they were pragmatically bound by the necessity of enlarging the existent functional space. The quoted examples of museum expansion in practice show characteristic formal ways of incorporating buildings into urban fabric to co-exist as a part of the architectural landscape. This article also focuses on the extent of limits whose exceeding leads to breakthrough searches for new locations within the city borders⁴ [20, p. 60-65] and developing new buildings for museums from scratch.

⁴ An alternative for museums in cities: e.g. Dia: Beacon Museum of Dia Art Foundation and collections outside New York City.

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