

REQUEST FOR EVALUATION (RFE) - INDIVIDUAL, INTERIOR, SCENIC

INSTRUCTIONS:

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is responsible for identifying and designating the special buildings and sites that represent the architectural, historical and cultural heritage of New York City. The Commission's Research Department accepts suggestions from the public regarding potential historic resources throughout the five boroughs. If a property appears to rise to the level of significance necessary to be considered for Landmark designation, the agency may conduct additional research, and may recommend it for consideration by the Commission.

Please complete all 5 sections of this form. Fields marked with an asterisk (*) are required. An incomplete submission may slow down review of your request. You may mail this form to the address above or send it by email to RFE@lpc.nyc.gov.

Requests will only be considered if a property is 30 years or older and if it is not already designated as a New York City Landmark. Please be advised that if a property is located within the boundaries of a Historic District or Scenic Landmark, the exterior of the property is already protected under the full extent of the law. LPC does not regulate the use or occupancy of Landmark buildings and sites.

1. SUBMISSION CHECKLIST

To request the evaluation of a property's Landmark eligibility, you must include ALL of the following materials:

- Completed Request for Evaluation Application Form (5 sections)
- Statement of Significance (on Page 2 of application form)
- Current photographs of the site. Photographs should comprehensively reflect current conditions.

2. PROPOSED LANDMARK TYPE (Please select ONE of the following)

- Individual:** The exteriors of individual structures, ranging from farmhouses to skyscrapers. (e.g., Woolworth Building; Pieter Wyckoff House; Cyclone Roller Coaster)
- Interior:** Building interiors that are customarily open or accessible to the public, and meet the criteria for individual landmarks (e.g. Empire State Building lobby; Grand Central Terminal concourse and waiting room). The site cannot be a private residence or religious property
- Scenic:** City-owned parks or other landscape features (e.g., Prospect Park; Central Park; Ocean Parkway)

3. REQUESTOR INFORMATION

NAME*		TELEPHONE*	
E-MAIL ADDRESS		AFFILIATION/REPRESENTING*	
ADDRESS*		APT./STE./FLR.*	
CITY, STATE*		ZIP CODE*	DATE OF REQUEST*

4. PROPERTY TO BE EVALUATED

PROPERTY/ADDRESS*		BUILDING OR INTERIOR NAME (IF APPLICABLE)	
BOROUGH*	TAX MAP BLOCK*	TAX MAP LOT*	DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (IF KNOWN)
ORIGINAL USE (IF KNOWN)		ARCHITECT (IF KNOWN)	

5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Please provide a statement explaining why you think this building or site should be considered for designation as an Individual, Interior, or Scenic Landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Request for Evaluation, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1966

Primary research by Thomas Collins

Edited and submitted by Docomomo US and Docomomo US New York/Tri-State.

Address: 945 Madison Avenue

Tax Block: 1,389 Tax Lot: 50

Architect: Marcel Breuer and Hamilton P. Smith; Michael H. Irving, consulting architect

We recognize that this address lies within the 1981 Upper East Side Historic District. We have prepared this report with a focus on seeking Interior Landmark Designation but would argue that this landmark merits consideration for Individual Landmark Designation as well.

Introduction

"What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan? Surely it should work, it should fulfill its requirements, but what is its relationship to the New York landscape? What does it express, what is its architectural message? It is easier to say first what it should not look like. It should not look like a business or office building, nor should it look like a place of light entertainment. Its form and material should have identity and weight in the neighborhood of 50 story skyscrapers, of mile long bridges, in the midst of the dynamic jungle of our colorful city. It should be an independent and self-relying unit, exposed to history, and at the same time it should have visual connection to the street, as it deems to be the housing for twentieth century art. It should transform the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art."

- Marcel Breuer, "Comments at the Presentation of the Whitney Museum Project", November 12, 1963, 1 (Syracuse University Archives).

"The Whitney Museum of American Art, within the historic district, with its asymmetrical massing and poured concrete forms has been praised as one of the most distinguished works of modern architecture in New York, despite the somewhat startling effect of its presence on Madison Avenue."

- Landmarks Preservation Commission, Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report, Vol. 1, p. 1194

In 1908, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942), the daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt II and wife of financier Harry Payne Whitney, established two galleries in her studio on MacDougal Alley that quickly became a hub for renowned artists like George Bellows, Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, Jo Davidson, Paul Manship, and James E. Fraser. The Whitney Studio held the first solo exhibitions of John Sloan and Reginald Marsh, as well as the inaugural showcase of American folk art.[1] As the gallery gained recognition, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney expanded her enterprise to 8 West Eighth Street. The Museum of Modern Art declined Whitney's offer to acquire her collection in 1929. Two years later, in 1931, the Whitney Studio Galleries, then encompassing the four residences at 8, 10, 12, and 14 West Eighth Street, were remodeled by Noel & Miller Architects and converted into the Whitney Museum dedicated to the public display of six hundred artworks primarily produced by living American artists.[2] Under the direction of its first director, Juliana Force, the Museum hosted its first biennials, retrospective exhibitions on celebrated artists, and lectures.

The museum announced its intention to merge with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1943, but ultimately decided to abandon this plan in 1948. The following year, the Whitney Museum entered into an agreement with the Museum of Modern Art to occupy a section of its newly constructed building on West 54th Street.[3] It wasn't long, however, before the museum quickly outgrew the limited space provided by MoMA. On June 18, 1963, the *New York Times* reported that the trustees had acquired a plot of land on Madison Avenue, which had long been a hub for arts and antiques dealers. The architectural firm Marcel Breuer and Associates was chosen to design the new project. Marcel Breuer designed the project in collaboration with his partner Hamilton P. Smith.[4] Michael H. Irving served as consulting architect.

Situated prominently at the southeast corner of Seventy-fifth Street and Madison Avenue, the museum's architecture is characterized by its commanding presence and sculptural massing that conveys notions of solidity, permanence, and grandeur. The museum's internal layout is manifested through the vertically stacked arrangement of volumes, which artfully expresses the open floor plans prevalent within the interior spaces. The inverted ziggurat form utilizes cantilevered floor plates stepping outwards as the building ascends, a feat made possible thanks to the pioneering work of structural engineer Paul Weidlinger. Relying on reinforced concrete walls on the north and south, the structural load of the upper floors are carried across 80 foot longitudinal steel trusses. The glass-fronted entrance on Madison clearly announces the primary façade's independence from load-bearing supports.[5] This innovative structural system enables the flexible floor plans that support nearly column-free 50-foot wide galleries. In a 1963 lecture at the University of Michigan, Breuer remarked that his "Buildings no longer rest on the ground. They are cantilevered from the ground up. The structure is no longer a pile - however ingenious and beautiful - it is very much like a tree, anchored by roots, growing up with cantilevered branches, possibly heavier at the top than at the bottom." (Quoted in Bergdoll, "Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness," *Places Journal*, June 2018 (Accessed October 16, 2023): Through the cladding of dark gray granite panels the facade exploits the innate materiality of surface and finish to hide the frame, coalescing into a unified mass that appears remarkably austere.

Equally as distinctive as its sculptural form, the Whitney Museum's relationship with its environs remains one of its most dramatic attributes, presenting itself as an isolated entity divorced from the neighboring historic townhouses of the Upper East Side. Set back from the street, a sunken sculptural court serves as a buffer from the traffic of the Avenue, nearly severing the building from the bustling thoroughfare, while enhancing the stark contrast between the void carved from the solid mass of the structure. An entrance bridge and canopy constructed of exposed board-formed concrete carries the visitor across the sculptural court, initiating the *promenade architecturale* that has become one of New York's most iconic and visually captivating entrance sequences.

The Madison Avenue elevation is further accentuated by the inclusion of a single trapezoidal window on the fourth floor, imbuing the museum with visual intrigue and artistic sophistication. Six smaller trapezoidal windows pierce the planar 75th Street facade, providing strategic glimpses of the neighborhood from within the upper galleries. Breuer's vision for the museum encompassed a deliberate use of windows primarily for their psychological impact, serving to alleviate any sense of claustrophobia that visitors might experience. Absent skylights, the gallery spaces are illuminated through precisely controlled artificial lighting systems. When conceiving the interior galleries and public areas, Breuer aimed to create versatile spaces that would provide an ideal environment for the enjoyment of modern art and sculpture. Subsequently, he placed great emphasis on the sensory qualities of the building, striving to avoid a dark, somber, or monotonous ambiance. By prioritizing the interplay between light, materials, and spatial configurations, Breuer succeeded in creating an environment that engages and captivates visitors, ensuring that their experience within the museum would be one of aesthetic pleasure and discovery.

Breuer's design for the Whitney Museum belongs to a movement that sought to re-introduce civic-oriented monumentality as a counterpoint to the International Style. Its emphasis on robust massing, dramatic spatial sequences, and contrasting textures departs from the era's prevalence for sleek minimalism and diaphanous curtain walls. Breuer's handling of materials, particularly the use of concrete and stone, further enhances the museum's sense of monumentality, showcasing the strength and permanence of the structure. During this period, architects like Louis Kahn, I. M. Pei, and Edward Larrabee Barnes also underwent similar evolutions in their designs for new museum projects, which moved away from lucid structural tectonics, opting instead for opaque cladding systems and sculptural design solutions. (See B. Bergdoll, "I. M. Pei, Marcel Breuer, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and the New American Museum Design of the 1960s") Representing a new era of museum architecture tailored to house collections of modern art, the Whitney Museum departed significantly from the traditional temple-like museum plans that had already been challenged at Louis I. Kahn's 1953 Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven and Frank Lloyd Wright's 1959 Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue. The increasingly weighty geometric forms seen in Breuer's later career were a natural evolution from his earlier design principles, a dialectic between the experimental approaches taught in the Bauhaus preliminary course and traditional modes of construction. The architectural historian Barry Bergdoll has recounted the artistic trajectory of Breuer's career: "[I]t is important to note that for Breuer,

the tubular steel and molded plywood of his early designs and the raw concrete for which he became known in his later career were analogous vehicles of expression." (26).

Contrary to arbitrary formalist gestures, the visionary design of the museum can be attributed to the architect's meticulous examination of the functional requirements dictated by the client for the interior layout of both primary and ancillary spaces. The site's constrained nature posed considerable challenges that Marcel Breuer resolved to fulfill the museum's diverse programmatic needs. Notwithstanding its modest height of merely 97 feet, the building ingeniously accommodates an expansive 30,000 square feet of gallery space on a rather unconventional corner plot. According to the project brief, the museum's scope necessitated 29,815 square feet for the display of artworks, along with 8,115 square feet allocated for storage and an additional 3,560 square feet designated for administrative offices. This spatial allocation effectively tripled the available gallery space in comparison to the previous location, enabling the museum to significantly expand the scale of its annual exhibitions while simultaneously facilitating the continuous display of a portion of its esteemed permanent collection. The lower level features a restaurant that is oriented towards a connection to the open sculpture court within and without, effectively delineated by expansive double-height glazing. The vertical circulation system for the public occupies a narrow zone discretely integrated along the southern party wall adjacent to the neighboring townhouses. On the fifth floor, one finds a configuration of offices and conference rooms, while a fourth-floor mezzanine, initially designed to provide supplementary office space, was later repurposed to accommodate galleries and has since been repurposed back into offices for the Frick Collection's temporary relocation.

Within the interior spaces, Marcel Breuer's deep affinity for natural materials becomes apparent. Granite, natural wood, and a virtuoso handling of concrete surfaces predominate, reflecting his penchant for contrasting textures. The meticulous juxtaposition of polished granite with roughhewn stone, or the interplay between gleaming metal trim and the warm tones of wood, showcases Breuer's astute attention to materiality in an approach he described as direct and emotive. He believed that the building should resonate with people on a human level, engaging their senses of sight, sound, and touch. In his own words, Breuer proclaimed, "It is a sensual building in its direct use of materials...it is a physical experience, it is an emotional experience".[6]

The bravura use of raw concrete within the Whitney interiors had been in keeping with basic theoretical principles established among practitioners of the brutalist movement. The concept of "honesty of material," central to Brutalism, can trace its origins back to Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* in Marseilles and subsequent refinements by Alison and Peter Smithson. Reyner Banham, a prominent advocate for the movement, emphasized the value of materials for their inherent qualities "as found." The poetic treatment of concrete, driven by an ethical responsibility of architecture to address contemporary social needs, was a defining characteristic of Brutalism. Breuer's use of raw concrete, characteristic of the brutalist style, had become a defining element of his later career, notably through his involvement in the UNESCO Headquarters undertaken in collaboration with Pier Luigi Nervi and Bernard Zehrfuss. Together, they employed techniques such as exposed reinforced

concrete with board-formed finishes and sandblasted precast concrete, resulting in rough surfaces that emphasized the expressive potential of the material and encouraged tactile engagement with the architecture. The Whitney Building's powerful sculptural handling and interior spaces vividly embody the essence and fundamental underlying principles of Brutalism. From the elegant concrete entrance canopy to the unrivaled interior staircase, Breuer's meticulous treatment of concrete elevates the raw materials to a higher status, forging a connection between the public and the art showcased within the museum.

The Architects

Marcel Breuer, FAIA (1902-1981)

Breuer was “one of the mid-twentieth century's leading architects. Born in Pecs, Hungary, in 1902, he attended the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany (1920-24), served as head of the school's carpentry workshop in Dessau (1924-1928), and emigrated to the United States in 1937 to teach architecture at Harvard University (1937-1946).

During the first decade of his career, Breuer was a leading innovator in furniture design. Many of his best-known pieces were executed in bent tubular steel, juxtaposed against leather, canvas, and woven rattan. These daring cantilevered works became classics, and various models, such as the Wassily chair, continue to be manufactured. Breuer received his first architectural commission, the Harnischmacher House, in 1932. Located on a sloping garden site in Weisbaden, Germany, the stuccoed concrete structure recalled projects by his professor and colleague Walter Gropius and the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. In the United States, he and Gropius became partners. Between 1937 and 1940, they collaborated on a series of notable residences, combining local and modern materials. In 1946, he moved his architectural practice to New York City. One of his first projects was an exhibition house, presented by the Museum of Modern Art in 1949. This exhibit was extremely popular and enhanced his reputation. In the decade that followed his practice flourished, resulting in numerous designs for private and institutional clients, including the UNESCO Headquarters (1958) in Paris, France, Saint John's Abbey Church (1953-61) in Collegeville, Minnesota, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (1963-68) in Washington, D.C. He received many awards during his career, including the AIA Gold Medal (1968) and the Grande Medaille d'Or from the French Academy of Architecture (1976). The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, acknowledged his achievements in 1973, devoting its first one-man architectural exhibition to his work. In Manhattan, Breuer designed the acclaimed Whitney Museum of American Art (1963- 66), part of the Upper East Side Historic District.” -

Begrish Hall at Bronx Community College, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, 2002

Hamilton P. Smith, FAIA (b. 1925)

Born in Bronxville, New York, Smith received an AB Magna Cum Laude from Princeton in 1947 and a masters degree in architecture from Yale University in 1950. He worked for Eero Saarinen and Associates for three years and then joined the office of Marcel Breuer in 1953. In 1964 he became a partner in Marcel Breuer & Associates. At the same time, Robert Gatje (1927-2018) and Herbert Beckhard (1926-2003) also became Breuer's partners. By then, all three architects, who were a generation younger than Breuer, had worked with him for over ten years. Tician Papachristou (1928-2018) became a partner in 1974. Breuer usually collaborated on the design of each project with one of his younger partners. All four would remain with the firm until after Breuer's retirement in 1976. Smith became a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1975.

Hamilton Smith collaborated with Breuer on the design of the Whitney Museum and numerous other significant projects across the U.S. and abroad. In New York City, he played an important role in the design of three buildings for New York University on what was then their University Heights campus in the Bronx, now Bronx Community College. The sculptural cast-in-place concrete Lecture Halls Wing (1959-61), now Begrisch Hall, was designated a New York City Landmark in 2002. The first of two laboratory buildings, Technology Building I (1959-1961), later Gould Hall of Technology, now known as Carl J. Polowczyk Hall, is connected by a pedestrian bridge to Begrisch Hall. The second laboratory building, Technology Building II (1967-1970) is now named Meister Hall. Other notable projects he designed with Breuer include: virtually the entire campus of Saint John's Abbey and University (1954-68) in Collegeville, MN, including the monumental Abbey Church; a sizable new wing for the Cleveland Museum of Art (1968-70), the Becton Engineering and Applied Science Center (1967-70) at Yale University and the Atlanta Central Public Library (1977-80). The Whitney's cornerstone, located at the northeast corner of the sculpture court reads:

MARCEL BREUER
HAMILTON SMITH

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ARCHITECTS
1964 - 1966

Michael Henry Irving, AIA (1923-2003)

Consulting Architect

Michael Irving was born in New York City in 1923. A descendant of Washington Irving and Eleuthere Irenee du Pont, he was a graduate of the Buckley School in New York and the St. Paul's School in Concord, NH. Irving received an AB from Harvard College in 1945 and a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the Columbia University School of Architecture in 1953. He worked for Harrison & Abramovitz in New York City from 1953-54, for Sherwood, Mills & Smith in Stamford, CT from 1954-1960, and then established a private practice, Michael Irving, Architect. At the beginning of the Whitney project his firm was located in Westport, CT and during the project he relocated his office to 2 Park Avenue in Manhattan. Later he returned to Connecticut, first based in New Cannan and finally in Norwalk. By the early 1980s, the firm had been renamed Irving and Jacob Architects. He designed houses, institutional buildings and commercial buildings, mainly in Connecticut.

Irving's involvement with the Whitney seems to have been by far his most notable architectural project. It is the only project specifically mentioned in his obituaries. It appears that he served as an advisor to the Whitney's administration and building committee and as an intermediary between them and Marcel Breuer & Associates, rather than as a designer. In 1947 he married Flora Miller (b. 1928) who was the daughter of Flora Payne Whitney Miller and granddaughter of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who founded the Whitney Museum. Mrs. Michael Irving became a

museum trustee in 1958 and president of the Whitney in 1977, serving in that role until 1995. They were divorced in 1979 and with her second marriage she became Flora Miller Biddle. Michael Irving himself became a Trustee of the Whitney in 1964 and served in that role for many years. According to one obituary, when he passed away in 2003 he was an emeritus member of the Whitney's Board.

Commission and Reception

Breuer was awarded the commission in June 1963. Between his selection and the presentation of his design to the Board on November 12th, plans for the museum underwent several revisions.[7] Yet, even at this early stage, the fundamental design for the museum had been established, with subsequent modifications made to minor details. For example, Breuer initially proposed an architectural concrete ceiling grid in the lobby, a spiral staircase to the lower-level, and a different location for the coat-check. Additionally, the entrance canopy had not yet been developed and was reportedly added at the request of the client (Comments to Whitney, 8-9).

The Whitney Museum's board revealed their design for the new museum to the public in December 1963, described by Ada Louise Huxtable as a "serious and somber addition to New York's skyline." The following week, Huxtable noted the museum's plans had generated considerable attention from the public while defending the integrity of Breuer's design: "The new building may turn out to be impressive in a stygian way, or it may be a kind of miniature Alcatraz on Madison Avenue. But it will not be cheap, thin, tinny, thoughtless, dull, facile, shoddy or routine, and that is more than can be said of most of the city's current construction." [8] In January 1964, *Progressive Architecture* noted Breuer had conceived of the museum as a sculpture in its own right whose composition had been determined through functional requirements.[9]

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Whitney Museum took place in August 1964, and construction commenced in late October. The cornerstone was laid on October 20 in the presence of Mayor Wagner.[10] Supply-chain issues resulted in construction delays, pushing back completion by several months.

In the autumn of 1965, work progressed on the interior spaces. Bush-hammering began on the first floor in September and continued on the remaining floors until March 1966. The installation of the ceiling grid commenced in late November and was not substantially completed until June of the following year. The installation of the bluestone bases began in mid-December. In 1966, the hanging of the ceiling grid on the second and third floors took place in January and was finalized in the entire building by April. Bluestone pavers were laid on the cellar to the fourth floors in February. The completion of interior bronze finishes (i.e. handrails, reveals, door hardware) was among the final outstanding tasks, as of July 15, 1966. A letter dated August 6th from Hamilton Smith to Jack Bauer instructed the museum to regularly maintain the bronze trim through the regular application of oil to preserve its condition. On Wednesday, May 25, 1966, the museum staff moved into their new premises, although certain mechanical equipment, such as air conditioning, had yet to be installed.[11] The official opening of the building to the public took place on September 28, 1966, featuring the inaugural exhibition "Art of the United States: 1670-1966." The exhibition comprised 365 artworks from the museum's then collection of 2,600 pieces, offering a comprehensive survey of American art history from "Albers to Zorach." The private opening party held the previous evening was attended by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

The new Whitney Museum garnered effusive acclaim from critics, who almost universally hailed its functional gallery spaces and meticulous attention to interior craftsmanship that established it as a ground-breaking museum for the display of 20th-century art. In her review for the *New York Times*, Ada Louise Huxtable praised the museum for surpassing mere architectural prowess to ascend to the realm of artistic achievement, as exemplified by its masterful utilization of materials, light, and forms, particularly evident in the captivating stairwell.[12] While Breuer's architecture frequently rivals the collections and exhibited objects housed within the Whitney Museum, it seldom upstages them. Huxtable aptly notes in her conclusion how Breuer's building skillfully navigates this delicate balance, stating that "... the building becomes its own exhibit. Yet, unlike the Guggenheim, it does not overshadow the main attraction. The new Whitney Museum leverages the disciplined and understated fulfillment of its functional program as the foundation for a significant and triumphantly executed architectural achievement."

Charles Millard, writing for the *Hudson Review*, found the sculpture court less successful in accommodating large-scale artworks, but commended Breuer's functional design of the galleries, deeming them to be a flattering backdrop that enhanced the artworks, noting: "In general, the interior spaces, as shaped by Breuer, exhibit a captivating warmth, adorned with a plethora of enchanting alcoves and stimulating variations in lighting, scale, and materials. They provide a splendid setting that truly accentuates the artistic creations".[13]

Moreover, the refined levels of craftsmanship displayed by Breuer, exemplifying his unwavering commitment to the harmonious integration of art and technical acumen in resolving design challenges, resulted in the creation of a superlative structure precisely attuned to fulfilling the museum's objectives. Wolf Von Eckhard, in his *Washington Post* review, acknowledged this achievement, stating, "It is Breuer's mastery of craftsmanship, his ability to seamlessly unite the realms of art and technical science in the pursuit of inherent design solutions, that renders the Whitney Museum an exquisite edifice perfectly suited to its purpose".[14] The fusion of aesthetics and functionality in Breuer's interiors reflects his unwavering adherence to the principles of the Bauhaus movement, which celebrated the unity of form and function as the essence of architectural excellence.

As the Whitney Museum had been Marcel Breuer's first art museum, it had a significant impact on his subsequent projects, including the north wing of the Cleveland Museum of Art (1971) where Breuer applied similar principles of monumentality and expressive use of *béton brut* concrete in the interior to reveal and celebrate its construction. Both museums reflect Breuer's commitment to creating architectural spaces that not only house art but also serve as artistic statements in their own right. Other details, such as the treatment of raw concrete and wood handrails at the Whitney Museum's stairwells, recur in various other projects such as the Atlanta Public Library. As a tour-de-force of sculptural expression and detailing, the Whitney Museum exerted an enormous influence on the design and planning for subsequent art museums. And the exaltation of craftsmanship in modern materials can clearly be seen in the career of Tod Williams + Billie Tsien, whose acclaimed (and sadly demolished) American Folk Art Museum generously borrowed from the Whitney staircase in its cantilevered terrazzo stairs and turned wooden handrails.

The Whitney Museum was recognized with a number of prestigious design awards. It received the 1968 Albert S. Bard Award for Excellence in Architecture and Urban Design from the City Club of New York and it also received an award from the Fifth Avenue Association in 1968. The project received an American Institute of Architects National Honor Award in 1970. The jury, which included architect I.M. Pei, stated in a comment, "A bold manipulation of form and space, this building employs handsome materials appropriately and is beautifully detailed. The large exhibition hall is a particularly successful and attractive space." *AIA Journal*, June 1970, 17. The Whitney appeared on the cover of the October, 1966 issue of *Interiors* magazine and a photo of its facade appeared on the cover of the September-October, 1966 issue of *Art in America*.

The Whitney Museum endures as a grand monument to an era that prized the vibrancy of artistic expression and the pursuit of new ideas. The overarching design of the building's exterior exudes a commanding and confident presence, effortlessly yielding to an interior architecture characterized by remarkable subtlety and refinement. Within, elegant details and refined finishes contribute to a captivating drama that unfolds across its floors; it is a drama told through the interplay of light, contrasting textures, and the enduring patina of time, etched upon the materials of wood, stone, bronze, and concrete. Among generations of New Yorkers and visitors from across the globe, the former Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue holds an indelible place within the annals of architectural and artistic history. Its interiors stand as a testament to its uniqueness and distinction as the most revered example of brutalist architecture in New York. Through its enduring legacy, the museum continues to occupy a pivotal position in the illustrious career of Marcel Breuer and holds an esteemed status within the architectural canon as a seminal work that radically redefined the American art museum of the 20th century.

Subsequent History

1973: First Whitney Biennial in the new building

1978: First expansion proposal, designed by Norman Foster and Derek Walker

1985: Michael Graves addition proposal controversy

1995: Interior renovations including alterations to fifth floor and fourth floor mezzanine, designed by Richard Gluckman.

2001: Rem Koolhaas expansion proposed

2005: Renzo Piano expansion proposed and approved by LPC but never built.

2014: Museum relocates to Gansevoort Street in its new building designed by Renzo Piano, closing the Madison Avenue location; its last exhibition was devoted to a Jeff Koons retrospective.

2016: The Metropolitan Museum of Art completes an award winning restoration designed by Beyer Blinder Belle.

March 2016: Met Breuer opens hosting exhibitions devoted to the museum's modern and contemporary art collections

March 2020: After just four years, the Met Breuer closes, instead of remaining seven years as originally planned.

March 2021: The Frick Collection relocates to 945 Madison as a temporary home for its permanent collection during renovations to the Frick Mansion on Fifth Avenue.

Lobby

“The materials of the Whitney are magnificent, and they have been used with a sure hand. The flame-treated gray granite employed outside and in, unpolished and polished, is one of the handsomest stones to be seen in New York. ... Concrete aggregate walls and teak and bronze fittings inside, all meticulously crafted, are deliberately understated luxury, detailed with exemplary finesse.”

– Ada Louise Huxtable, “In the Right Building,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1966.

The Whitney Museum lobby offers a study in careful programmatic control, dramatic spatial sequences, and refined materiality. Multiple functions have been combined into discrete zones to maximize efficiency. Even in its earliest conceptual stages, the program included a coat check, admission/sales, vertical circulation, gallery, and reception occupying the first floor. The open plan allows visitors to proceed to one of several possible routes through the museum—down to the sculpture court and café, or directly to the upper floor galleries by means of the staircase or large elevators. In an interview with *Town & Country*, Breuer stressed the importance of inter-connected spaces that flow seamlessly into each other. “One space must flow into another, as one note follows the other. Architecture is an experience in flow. Architecture is an experience in time.”[15] Originally intended to serve as a space for happenings and exhibitions of an “experimental nature,” the lobby’s rear gallery was later converted to a gift shop [16] and subsequently to the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Gallery.

Breuer’s first scheme was completed in July 1963, and early presentation plans show that the basic organization of the lobby had been established by September 1963. Breuer modified the initial plan to relocate the coat check to the northwest corner, modified an earlier proposed circular staircase to the lower level, eliminated a circular bench, and re-configuration of the rear gallery. Construction documents filed June 15, 1964 reflect the present condition of the lobby as built.

Set back from the street wall, the lobby is open to the sculpture court below, and the double-height curtain wall windows provide a connection to both the street and sculpture court, unifying the two floors. “New Yorkers who have seen only the exterior say the museum looks like a fortress, or even a garage. Those who have been inside are impressed by its great strength and beauty.”[17]

Upon arrival, visitors at street level step into the lobby through a modest vestibule, featuring a suspended concave plaster ceiling that conceals lighting above. Enclosed by concrete walls on two sides and accessed through double glass doors, the vestibule orchestrates a compression and expansion sequence that artfully creates the illusion of a more spacious reception area within the lobby, visually expanding its actual physical confines. A bronze-framed transom window gracefully crowns the glass doors, adding a touch of refinement to the entrance experience.

Within the lobby, the ceiling lighting emerges as a captivating architectural spectacle, exuding a distinct sense of theatricality. A remarkable grid comprising 370 aluminum saucer domes stretches across the entire floor, with each saucer gracefully suspended by wires. Silvered light bulbs nestled within each fixture illuminate the space, creating a mesmerizing display. These exquisite light fixtures were specially crafted by Century Lighting for the Whitney Museum and incorporate a custom dimming capability, enabling a seamless transition from subtle ambient lighting to dazzling brightness. The originals were replaced with LED bulbs in the 2016 restoration. The lobby's gridded light system echoes the concrete coffered ceiling found in the galleries situated above, harmoniously weaving together different elements of the museum's architectural language.

The lobby floor is paved throughout with bluestone paving slabs set in a running bond. Breuer had preferred a slightly uneven floor on the basis that it would wear more comfortably on the feet. Specified throughout the museum's public spaces with the exception of the second floor galleries, the bluestone paving provides a modulation of color from ochre to deep indigo.

The lobby of the Whitney Museum features a selection of meticulously designed, fixed-in-place concrete furnishings that exemplify both solidity and Breuer's "heavy lightness." Positioned directly across from the entrance, the visitor's attention is immediately drawn to the sales and information desk, strategically placed to provide a subtle sensory cue that guides and compels the visitor further into the space. The information desk is made from concrete with custom hinged bronze doors providing access to sales staff at each side. The countertops of both the book bar and coat check are adorned with polished French Creek black granite sourced from Chester County, Pennsylvania. The information desk countertop boasts serrated, angular planes that serve the dual purpose of supporting printed gallery guides and manifesting a highly sculptural form that harmoniously unites aesthetics with functionality. Ervin Galantay, in an article for *The Nation*, hailed the desk as a veritable work of art.[18] Adjacent to the information desk, a wall of polished granite is set at a slight incline and adorned with horizontal grooves, creating insets for acrylic book display supports.[19] Although partially obscured by a large-screen video display added during the 2016 renovation, the original granite display wall remains intact.

Parallel to the elevators, a concrete double-sided bench is upholstered in black leather, offering seating for guests while also serving as entry control into the circulation axis running north-to-south. Another cantilever bench is located on the north wall near the coat-check. Both benches utilize cantilevered construction to minimizing the reliance on extraneous forms and traditional leg supports, conveying what the architectural historian Barry Bergdoll has termed a "heavy lightness" that defines Breuer's career, from his earliest tubular chairs to his Brutalist period.

The east wall of the lobby features bronze doors that provide access to the loading dock, service elevator, and back-of-house areas. The elevator walls and doors, as well as the channeled trim, are finished in a dark, oiled bronze, requiring regular maintenance and application of oil. The elevator doors are surrounded by bush-hammered concrete walls,

with a bronze recess located on the south side of the lobby and three galleries above. Public spaces are served by two elevators. The larger cab measures 8' 1 1/2" wide, 10' 5" deep and 12' 5" high, can accommodate 25 passengers and can be used in off-hours for art transportation. The smaller elevator functioned for service/staff during weekdays.[20] Both the elevator doors in the lobby and lower level are adorned with bronze coverings. Originally, the elevator cab was painted blue, adding a touch of color to the space. Breuer consciously employed dark, oiled bronze for elements that are frequently touched by visitors, such as door handles, balustrades, and elevator doors.

A non-historic clock is mounted on the northern wall of the lobby. The construction documents indicate a circular recess for the clock, but the specific design details are not provided, suggesting that the clock face was likely sourced from an external vendor as a custom order or off-the-shelf product. Although the Bauhaus did not manufacture clock designs, the minimalist, numberless graduations seen in the Whitney's clock design, both in the original and subsequent iterations, are reminiscent of the modern watch dials produced in Germany in the 1930s, which were influenced by Bauhaus design principles. These clock designs embody a functional, machine-age aesthetic that is in line with the modern graphic designs of that era.

The lobby reveals Breuer's preoccupation with the expressive potential of raw concrete. Wall surfaces have been defined through poured concrete that has been board formed and then bush hammered to reveal the desired coarse textural effect. During the pouring process, Breuer added obsidian to the concrete aggregate to provide for small, irregular pieces of stone that catch the light. Both joints and form ties remain visible from the pouring sequence in order to break up the wall planes and express the method of construction. At various locations such as the entrance bridge, sculpture court, and surface edges, the concrete has a smooth, timber shutter pattern that exposes the wood grain of the plank forms. Breuer "frames" the bush hammered walls with board formed edges in a manner recalling the picture frames of artworks in a gallery. These smooth concrete borders recur throughout the interiors as a contrasting element.

Marcel Breuer adopted a fondness for showcasing the wood grain textures of exposed formwork from Le Corbusier. This design approach embraces the idea of incorporating the traces and imprints left by the construction process as part of the aesthetic experience. The supple and skillful treatment of concrete in the lobby of the Whitney Museum demonstrates a combination of robustness and sensuality, yielding remarkable textural effects. Through this medium, Breuer masterfully expresses a sense of solidity, employing thick sections of concrete for elements such as parapets, benches, and desk ends. Every wall surface in the lobby is clad in concrete, creating an enclosed space that immerses the visitor in a soothing palette of light tones, reminiscent of natural greystone. While the ceiling's dazzling impact is the initial focal point, it is the exposed concrete walls that leave the most lasting impression on the observer. These walls possess an earthy quality that harmonizes with the bluestone floor, creating a cohesive visual vocabulary. Breuer artfully manipulates the concrete to introduce carefully crafted textural effects, which not only enhance the material's visual appeal but also contribute to its weathering process. In a statement made in December

1963, Breuer expressed his intention to allow the concrete to develop a "patina" reminiscent of weathered stone or brick, thereby capturing the passage of time and adding a layer of depth to the space.

The lobby's open, asymmetrical plan, effective utilization of contrasting materials, and meticulously orchestrated lighting come together to establish the defining motifs that permeate the entirety of the building.

Lower Level

“The Whitney’s Madison Avenue entrance bridge, for instance, does not just convey you into a building; it draws you into a space: the sculpture court below, the overhangs above, sharply delineate a void that continues when you enter the building. The bridge also introduces you to a material, a structural technique and the angular vocabulary of forms from which the entire building is made.

The split-slate floors of the lobby are discernibly from the same palette as the dark gray granite of the facade; the concrete coffered ceilings of the galleries above echo the reinforced concrete framing walls outside. Integrity, in other words, is the design’s overall effect. The parts have an integral relationship to the whole.”

- Herbert Muschamp, “Considering the Once and Future Whitney Museum,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1996.

The lower-level was originally designed to include a cafeteria, lounge, restrooms, and a sculpture gallery area, which was separated from the outdoor sculpture court by vast expanses of double-height windows. As the lobby’s floor plate stepped-back from the exterior wall and entrance, an open-air, double-height space was created that extends to a height of 25 feet, permitting the display of large sculptural installations visible from the lobby parapet into the gallery. Subsequent alterations to the lower level have removed the partitions that separated the cafeteria from the gallery. The lounge area partitions were replaced and expanded towards the west, while still maintaining the angled west partition. Three telephone booths, which appear to be original, and still have pay phones within, occupy the lower level in the southeast corner near the restrooms.

Nestled in the far southwest corner of the lobby, the highly sculptural switchback staircase provides access to the lower level, facilitating a clockwise movement as the visitor descends to the lower level and providing varying glimpses of the lobby and sculpture court. Originally, the staircase was envisioned as a spiraling helix; however, the city’s stringent building codes dictated the current configuration.[21] The granite risers of the staircase are specifically designed with an undercut for toe space, while the teak handrail is elegantly supported by bronze rails and double posts to provide lustrous, metallic accents, creating a contrast between warm and cool elements. Both the thick and weighty slab of the granite treads and the landing are of the same thickness, corresponding with the granite coat check desk. The woodwork used throughout the museum can be attributed to Naftaly Weiss (Robert F. Gatje, Marcel Breuer: a Memoir, New York: Monacelli, 2000: 198.) The upper stair run is supported by a concrete wall, whereas the lower granite steps cantilever above a void, restating the building’s main parti. The angled “cut” of the concrete wall, the smooth finish of the stair stringer, and the interlocking wood and bronze railings all merit attention for their impeccable detailing.

The lower level showcases some of the “largest sheets of glass ever installed in New York,” sourced from Europe. [22] Bronze mullions subdivide the window panes, creating deep

interior reveals that correspond in thickness to the exterior wall, resting on a bush hammered concrete parapet. The bluestone flooring of the lower gallery continues out into the exterior sculpture court, creating a unified transition between exterior and interior. Access to the outer sculpture court is provided by a centrally placed door below the entrance bridge. Here the visitor has a fine view of the central bridge support whose angular, tapered form resembles a sculptural installation.

Staircase

“The detailing and craftsmanship of the Whitney’s staircase—with its subtly scooped stone stair risers and the exquisite carpentry work of the teak rails—make its utterly utilitarian design real architecture. It conveys some of the satisfying pleasure that, in our shoddy mass produced age, people venture to Kyoto, Japan to find.”

- Wolf Von Eckhardt, *Washington Post*, “The New Whitney Museum Challenges Wisecrackers,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 1966.

“No doubt one of the most stunning spaces in any 20th-century building is the magnificent stairwell... Here we find some of the finest examples of the sensuous and sensitive views both of ordinary and extraordinary building materials.”

- *L.A. Times*, September 25, 1966, Henry J. Seldis [L.A. Times art critic]

“As the stairwell is one of the great architectural problems, Breuer’s is one of the great solutions. On each floor, the sequence begins with an orienting curved wall that sets up the experience in terms of direction, materials, and lighting. Then comes the stair itself, both complexly figured and perfectly, restfully modulated. Let me recall some fragments. The initial overlook to the street. The fine rail of metal and wood. The rhythm of compression and expansion of space. The stone treads cantilevering out from the concrete armature, visible only from beneath. The investigation of adjacent values in materials, rough, smooth, dense, and less. The mysterious diffusion of light. The benches like altars. A helluva place.”

- Michael Sorkin, *Village Voice*, June 25, 1985.

“Even the staircase on Madison Avenue is a masterpiece of architectural craft and character, an attraction all by itself.”

- Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, April 19, 2015.

Quite possibly the most admired and beloved space within the museum is the Whitney staircase (“Stair No 1” in construction document sets). Breuer’s staircases were heralded for their refined detailing, from the earliest staircases, exemplified in the Harnischmacher House, to the brutalist concrete staircases of the Atlanta Public Library. Here, this small gesture of humane “servant” space offers a quiet study in intimate scale, connectivity, attention to detail, and vertical movement through space. Typically treated as an afterthought in most buildings, the humble staircase has here been transformed from merely an interstitial space into an enclosed catalyst of drama that thoroughly integrates the building’s entire design philosophy into a coherent statement.

Sheltered from the crowds of the lobby, the staircase serves as a liminal space (from latin *limen*, meaning threshold) to prime and transition its users for the experience of contemplation that awaits within the galleries. Like the canopy-bridge-vestibule, the

staircase plays on the modernist trope of a processional sequence of contraction/expansion and contrasting juxtapositions to heighten the impact of the dramatic open form of the museum interiors. Crucially, the stairwell does not open directly onto the gallery floors; it requires a 90-degree turn within a curving concrete wall and low shutter-framed ceiling that yields to the expansiveness of the gallery.

Connecting every floor (and publicly accessible from the lobby level to the fifth floor), the switch back staircase serves as the primary vertical circulation route throughout the museum, strategically positioned adjacent to the elevator service wing of each floor. Leitmotifs and material vocabulary expressed in the lobby's lower-level staircase return to find their fullest expression in the main staircase. From the first to fifth floor, the stairs are configured in four runs per floor, with the length of runs varying based on ceiling height between floors.

The intimate spatial dimensions allow the public close inspection of Breuer's craftsmanship at eye-level, where the underside of stair soffits and landing ceilings showcase exposed board formed concrete. Massive granite benches are set at alternate split-level landings, softly lit from downlights. The western elevation on the first two floors utilizes large windows looking onto the street, where the landings are setback from the wall to reveal a void below, replicating the lobby's mezzanine relationship with the lower level.

The staircase walls feature bush-hammered concrete with pour lines carefully framed to demarcate each floor level. Each step is made of terrazzo, acid washed to create a rough appearance and provide a distinct texture to the aggregate.[23] The stairs appear as thick blocks of overlapping terrazzo which cantilever outwards from the concrete walls and meet flush with bluestone landings, a contrasting thematic essay in the treatment of roughly hewn vs. smooth surfaces. Bronze bar double posts support flat bronze railings and square section teak handrails. Where they turn at the landings, the teak box joints have been exposed for aesthetic effect. The design and execution of the staircase interior juxtaposes the warmth of wood and diffuse lighting against the coolness of concrete and bronze, highlighting the tactile dimension of architecture and the enclosed sculptural movement it evokes.

Some of the curved passageways separating the staircase landings and the gallery spaces have subsequently been altered prior to the 2016 renovation. Construction documents refer to these areas as "knockout panels." These panels, provided because the Whitney anticipated the possibility of expanding into the townhouses at the south, would have allowed passage through at those locations..

Charles Simonds & Dwellings

In 1981, the Whitney Museum commissioned the artist Charles Simonds to install one of his Dwellings in the museum's staircase. Visitors who happen upon Simonds's work are drawn to its precarious position within the museum's brutalist architecture and the broader cultural context of the Whitney's role in shaping the contours of American art. Its improbable, "hidden" placement appears strategically designed to invite audiences to engage with their surroundings and ruminate on the fleeting nature of time and its impact on our monuments, cities, and lives. Meticulously assembled from unfired clay bricks, seven densely clustered masonry dwellings evoke the archetypical vernacular architecture of ancient civilizations, particularly the adobe villages of Southwest indigenous populations of the Pueblo peoples. As with most of Simonds's work, there is an air of dilapidation and abandonment conveyed through the artifice of strewn bricks and collapsed roofs that suggest an archaeological dimension of ruins in various stages of decay. The absence of human figures underscores the passage of time and migratory settlements of peoples across geographic and temporal distances.

Constructed from a variety of materials including clay, sand, stone, wood, and plaster, the Dwellings consists of three components arranged in an active dialogue, one nestled within a corner of the Whitney's staircase and two additional dwellings situated opposite the Whitney at the former Chemical Bank at 940 Madison Avenue on the second-story windowsill and rooftop chimney. These companion pieces augment the staircase dwelling, extending its reach beyond the museum's walls and providing the illusion of migratory patterns of settlement and abandonment that underlie Simonds's mythology of the "Little People." Simonds had previously employed this device for an earlier Whitney Dwelling executed for the 1977 biennale, discussed below.

The Whitney's Dwellings was the third dwelling created for the Whitney by Simonds. The curator Patterson Sims, who worked at the Whitney during the period of Simonds's activity, recalled that Marcia Tucker had first approached Simonds in 1972 to contribute an artwork for the 1973 biennial, which Simonds declined.[24] The first Whitney dwelling, commissioned for the 1975 Biennale, had been constructed on a parking lot at the southeast corner of Mercer and Prince Streets. [25] The label in the Museum gave a general location and instructed visitors to seek out the installation. [26] Simonds's reluctance to showcase his work within the museum at this time can be seen as part and parcel of his general hesitancy to frame his dwellings as "Art," and by extension, his ambivalent relationship with the larger New York art establishment. In 1977, Simonds was invited back to the Whitney Biennale, where he contributed three models: Park Model/Fantasy (1974-76), Quarry (1976), and Dwelling (1977), the last work was placed within the angular frame of Breuer's gallery window linking it with other dwellings erected across 75th Street on the window ledges of row houses.[27] These works were intended to remain as temporary exhibits and were destroyed at the conclusion of the biennale. Only for the third and final work, installed in 1981 for the biennial curated by John G. Hanhardt, Barbara Haskell, Richard Marshall, and Patterson Sims, had the artist construct a permanent dwelling for the staircase, a location strategically chosen to exist within a

transitional place where the visitor passes from one primary public area into the next. The museum had decided to commission a permanent work from Simonds “around 1980” and negotiations with the Chemical Bank to secure rights to place elements on the exterior facade had been facilitated by a Whitney board member who also happened to serve as the bank’s president at the time.[30]

Charles Simonds had earned a reputation as an artist through his earlier site-specific installations in Soho and the Lower East Side during the 1970s. It was here that his Dwelling series captivated pedestrians as they stumbled upon miniature villages ingeniously integrated into crevices, cracked walls, condemned buildings, and window ledges. Unfortunately, many of these remarkable creations have succumbed to destruction or loss due to exposure to the elements. Simonds' dwellings, resembling miniature ruins in various stages of decay, delve into themes of ephemerality, the relentless passage of time, the complex layering of urban centers, and, most significantly, archaeology. Within his imaginative narrative, Simonds introduces the concept of "Little People" who construct, inhabit, and ultimately abandon these dwelling places. Usually constructed within the span of a few hours or the course of a day in abandoned lots, street gutters, and windowsills of decrepit tenements across the Lower East Side, the dwellings invariably lasted for only a short duration before their destruction, typically at the hands of human participants.

Placed within a museum, the Whitney’s specimen strives to permanently preserve a semblance of the earlier lost works, while evoking the time-based aspect of those dwellings where their destruction had been a defining feature of their conceptual intent.[32] Simonds’s Whitney Dwellings presents multiple conflicting and mutually reinforcing connections to its architectural environment. The diminutive interior dwelling, measuring a scant $17 \frac{3}{4} \times 39 \frac{1}{2} \times 29$ in., contrasts against Breuer’s imposing brutalist fortress. Taken as a whole, the intricately crafted, historicizing architecture of Simonds reflects a general appreciation for the American vernacular that can be traced to the influence of Bernard Rudofsky’s exhibition “Architecture Without Architects” held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1964 as well as the writings of Vincent Scully who brought the architecture of the Pueblo people to the attention of the American public. Thus, Simonds’s art finds common currency with a broad movement that sought to challenge the prevalent modes of modernist discourse animating architectural and urban planning, coalescing around the figures of the New York Grays in the 1970s. Set primarily within abandoned lots and crevices of tenements, the surreal, fantastical qualities of the Dwellings forced viewers to confront the living conditions around their broader environs.

Within this contradiction of permanence that gestures towards ephemerality, the Simonds work occupies an architectural space that is built to resist the forces of time. Yet within its functional design, Marcel Breuer conceived the museum as a monument that would also express the passage of time through human interaction within the environment. This is vividly experienced within the museum’s celebrated staircase interior where visitors are drawn to touch the warm teak handrails and concrete walls, leaving the accumulation of imprints on materials that weather over time. In her master’s thesis, Sarah Elizabeth Sher first noted that Breuer anticipated the impact of time and weathering on his buildings

through human interaction as an added value.[33] Over years of use, the Whitney began to reflect its age through a variety of subtle indicators despite minimal alterations to its spatial and functional designs. The oils of human hands discolored concrete, bronze plates and handrails darkened, and the luster of bluestone floors diminished. Rather than see these degradation as negative qualities, Breuer considered their inevitable appearance as a net value that enhanced the user experience, aligning his Bauhaus framework along with earlier nineteenth century attitudes towards building restoration informed by the writings of Ruskin. [35]

Although Simonds recreates the effects of weathering on buildings artificially, his Dwellings convey an emblematic architecture that expresses archetypal relationships between buildings and time. His work offers a glimpse into a lost world of ancient Pueblo, the Little Peoples and their complex mythologies, New York in the 1970s, and the inner mind of the artist himself, whose own mortality is presaged by the crumbling, fragile clay walls of his dwellings in collections around the world. Set within the staircase of the former Whitney Museum, Dwellings engages in an active dialog with its host architecture through its ambiguous relationship to the street. Both the brutalist interior and counter-cultural art object seek to transcend time despite approaching questions of permanence from differing perspectives. Like Calder's Circus, the Whitney Dwellings had maintained a popular presence within the Whitney's permanent collection among museum audiences for its personal, whimsical defiance of art-world laden values from within the institution itself. As the earliest extant example of Simonds' New York Dwellings, this installation holds a prominent place in the history of the Whitney Museum's contributions to the exhibition of American art, as well as in the legacy of one of America's major contemporary artists.

Upper Galleries

“The old galleries are perfectly scaled, circumscribed but fluid, serious and endearing.”

- Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, April 19, 2015

“It married form and function, beautifully. The exhibition floors weren’t just practical and flexible. They were also particular, refined and muscular, with their gridded concrete ceilings. Outside and in, the mix of gray granite, concrete and slate conveyed extreme finesse. The building celebrated handicraft and innovation. It was not forbidding but cocoon-like, human-scaled. If Breuer’s moat was gloomy to enter, it eked out room from a constrained site and brought daylight into the basement. Artists loved it. Time proved that it even fit well into its neighborhood.”

- Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, April 19, 2015

The upper-level gallery floors of the Whitney Museum are characterized by expansive open floor plans, almost entirely devoid of columns, to maximize flexibility for exhibition layouts. Visitors are efficiently ushered directly onto the gallery floors from the elevators or stairwell. These floors are divided into two zones: an open space designed for flexible exhibitions, demarcated by movable partitions, and smaller permanent galleries enclosed by fixed partitions along the northern wall. The alternating floor heights allow for the display of artworks of various scales, preventing smaller objects from feeling lost in cavernous galleries.

Each of the three gallery floors features a ceiling grid composed of prefabricated concrete coffers, suspended from a structural framing that creates an ethereal floating effect above the galleries. The ceiling grid consists of 4' x 8' panels, composed of smaller 2' x 2' grid segments with ribs and voids, forming the overall grid pattern. The fourth floor gallery, for instance, consists of a total of 180 panels. The concrete ceiling grids are supported by steel rods connected to the structural steel, and they were designed to accommodate movable partition panels within each two-foot module. The ceiling grid also assists in concealing air conditioning and mechanical equipment.

Artificial lighting played a crucial role in Breuer's design, given the absence of top-lit galleries in the museum. This aspect of the design received universal praise from critics and visitors. Each opening within the ceiling grid offers optional spot lighting and electrical outlets for highlighting sculptures or artworks, while also providing a low-light level for general illumination. Dimmers enable precise control over the lighting. The development of the ceiling grid lighting (designed in conjunction with Edison Price) required two years of research. The Whitney museum employs lighting to fulfill functional and symbolic purposes. In contrast to the lobby which combines natural daylighting with bright ceiling luminaires to create an active social space, the upper gallery floors predominantly utilize low-level artificial lighting to establish a darker, atmospheric ambiance conducive to the

contemplation and viewing of artworks. Although skylights and laylights have been prevalent in museum design since the 18th century, Breuer's use of artificial lighting showcases the advancements and precision of mid-century architectural lighting design. The floodlights in Breuer's design featured diffusion lenses and tiny mirrors, spreading light evenly across art objects, as opposed to focusing on a single area of a painting.[37] The esteemed American art critic Emily Genauer hailed the Whitney Building's lighting as "splendid."

Breuer's upper-floor galleries can be seen as a response to and departure from the enclosed, white-box residential-scaled interiors of the previous generation, as exemplified in the Museum of Modern Art designed by Goodwin and Stone and completed in 1939. Certain design elements, such as track lighting, movable partitions, and white walls, had been ubiquitous in mid-century art galleries. In Breuer's design, these elements are translated into fluid spaces and concrete and stone, reflecting Late Modern or Brutalist sensitivities toward cultural interiors. The large open plan of the gallery floors also recalls Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie. However, Breuer's functional planning emphasizes the solidity of walls to provide ample wall surface for hanging pictures, a consideration in contrast to the unused perimeter space in Mies's glass pavilion, which necessitated housing most of the display galleries in the lower level.

Second Floor Gallery

The Second Floor of the museum occupies a spacious area measuring 75 by 75 feet, boasting a ceiling height of 12'10" for the main galleries and 14'4" for the rear galleries. The elevator alcove is adorned with bluestone paving and a gypsum ceiling, while the elevator wall is covered in thermally finished granite, complemented by flush bronze channel trim. This design solution effectively concealed a non-adhering joint that became apparent during construction. However, on the second-floor elevator alcove, Breuer made a deliberate choice to conceal imperfections in the concrete pours by employing granite cladding. This decision was driven by his commitment to upholding the highest aesthetic standards in that particular area of the museum. The elevator doors feature concrete reveals with a bush hammered finish.

Throughout the exhibition space and gallery rooms, oak parquet flooring was installed. According to the *New York Times*, this wood floor was intentionally designed to serve as a dance floor for performances and benefits, as mentioned in Esterow's article on September 8, 1966.[38] The main gallery space showcases a concrete coffered ceiling, while the north-wall gallery features a gypsum ceiling. The 22-foot-wide galleries on the north side of the building receive natural daylight through a single projecting 13-foot-6-inch trapezoidal "eyebrow" window overlooking 75th Street. The perimeter walls are adorned with bluestone base trim.

The desire to display more of the museum's permanent collections in a rotating exhibit motivated the relocation to Madison Avenue.[39] The second-floor side galleries, originally known as the Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Memorial Galleries, exhibited the museum's permanent collection and aimed to evoke the intimate ambiance of the original Eighth Street studio. The walls and ceiling of these galleries featured lightly varnished paneled pear wood, accompanied by gray carpeting and recessed lighting, creating an office-like aesthetic. Over time, curators replaced the partitions desiring more open spaces.

Later removed, a 156-seat auditorium opened onto the exhibition floor from the east-side of the interior. Initially, the auditorium was furnished with Don Albinson chairs from Knoll.

Third Floor Gallery

The exhibition spaces on the third and fourth floors feature floors composed of waxed, natural-cleft bluestone pavers. Following the specifications outlined in the construction documents, the pavers were arranged in a simple running bond pattern to correspond with the design of the ceiling coffers above. Originally, the wax on the floor was artificially darkened with pigment to create a slate-like appearance, as initially specified by Breuer (Beyer, *The Dignity of Time*, Met Bulletin, 44). When properly cleaned and maintained, the waxed floor exhibits a deep, lustrous finish that contrasts beautifully with the illuminated ceiling above. In a letter to John "Jack" Baur, Hamilton Smith mentioned that Breuer instructed the application of additional wax to the floor before photography to enhance its texture advantageously (3 June 1966, Syracuse). As Breuer noted in his architectural report for the Whitney, "This material, like the concrete ceiling grid, contributes its own intrinsic texture and color to complement painted wall surfaces." (Breuer, 6)

The third floor is devoted entirely to exhibition space and materials are uniform throughout. The bluestone floor extends across the entire floor, while gypsum is employed on the ceiling of the elevator alcove, with the remaining areas featuring a concrete coffered ceiling. As there are no permanent galleries on this floor, the trapezoidal window is positioned directly opposite the elevator entrance on the north wall. Two structural support columns, encased in concrete and plastered, mark the boundaries of the permanent galleries on the second and fourth floors. The interior measures 110 by 75 feet, with a ceiling height of 12'6". An additional 2,000 square feet of space was gained through the stepping-out massing on Madison Avenue. The elevator walls are finished with bush-hammered concrete and bronze trim.

Fourth Floor Gallery

“The greatest expanse and loftiest ceilings were reserved for the fourth-floor gallery: here it was as if not only ancient tradition but also modern rivals were turned on their head; here was a free span space like Mies’s Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin but lifted high above the city.”

- Barry Bergdoll, “Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness,” *Places Journal*, June 2018 (Accessed October 16, 2023):
<https://placesjournal.org/article/marcel-breuer-and-the-invention-of-heavy-lightness/?cn-reloaded=1>

The Fourth Floor gallery represents the pinnacle of the museum's carefully orchestrated spatial progression, evident through the expansive 17'6" ceiling height and the monumental west-facing window aperture. With its dimensions of 120 x 75 feet, this floor marks the largest extension of the east-west inverted pyramid configuration over Madison Avenue, projecting an impressive distance of 40 feet from the building's foundation line. . The slightly lower ceiling height in the permanent gallery rooms can be attributed to the presence of the office mezzanine above, which was later converted into gallery space for the Met Breuer (and back to offices for the Frick Collection). Both the permanent gallery rooms on the fourth floor and the mezzanine floor feature a small eyebrow window positioned in vertical alignment on the north elevation. Thomas Hess, writing for *Art News*, noted that the fourth-floor gallery “gives a landscape vista to the whole area, ... is one of the most handsome interiors in America.”[40]

The exhibition space on the fourth floor is punctuated by the museum's largest window (measuring 18' 1.25") on the western wall, which turns slightly towards the north to minimize direct sunlight entering the gallery and emphasize the street corner. With faceted reveals in plaster and bronze window frame, the massive trapezoidal window endows the gallery with a sculptural centerpiece whose form has been rendered in a fully realized cubist composition; it serves as a focal point within the gallery, redirecting the flow of movement from east to west.

The main gallery area is adorned with bluestone paving and a coffered concrete ceiling, while the elevator bank features bluestone paving and a gypsum ceiling. The north galleries are characterized by gypsum ceilings and concrete floors. The increased ceiling height was specifically designed to accommodate the growing prevalence of larger sculptures and paintings that were dominating the American art market, as the display of monumental canvases had presented a challenge for galleries since the emergence of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

The movable furnishings, primarily found in the permanent galleries on the second and fourth floors (excluding the restaurant), were carefully selected by Constance Breuer. They included pieces by Breuer (Stendig), Florence Knoll (Knoll settee), and Georg Jensen.

Fifth Floor

“In the trustees’ room Breuer lined the walls with the lovely patterned granite, carved niches into them, even laid down a massive octagonal granite conference table top. Ash trays are carved into the small monoliths of granite end-tables.”

- Olga Gueft, “Breuer's Whitney Museum,” *Interiors*, Oct. 1966: 107.

The Fifth Floor was originally devoted to offices. It was converted to exhibition space as part of the 1998 renovations designed by Richard Gluckman.

The Trustees Room was originally specified to be covered in teak paneled walls. Later changed to polished granite with a finish identical to the exterior.[41]

Renovations

In 1998, Gluckman Mayner converted the existing offices on the fifth floor into exhibition space for the museum's permanent collection. In the late 1980s, Gluckman had designed several art galleries, most notably the Dia Art Foundation in Chelsea. At the Whitney, the new galleries featured blond wood floors, white plastered walls, and exposed concrete ceilings painted light gray, meant to evoke the aesthetic of art galleries in SoHo. Skylights provided illumination from above, a return to earlier tradition of gallery design that can be traced to Soane's top-lit Dulwich Picture Gallery. Gluckman Mayner designed the entrance gallery to overtly suggest Whitney's 8th Street home, with the return of the metal French doors designed by Carl Walters, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's fountain. Breuer's bluestone floor was preserved in the opening gallery off the elevators.[42]

In 2016, Beyer Blinder Belle completed the most recent interior restoration of the former Whitney building for the Metropolitan Museum of Art who leased the building for the display of their contemporary collections following the Whitney's departure to the newly designed Renzo Piano building on Gansevoort Street. During the renovation, the non-original drop soffit bulkhead at the coat check that had previously been installed in the 1990s was removed. Original flooring, finishes, and concrete were restored throughout public spaces, while the restoration architects were careful to respect Breuer's desire for patinated surfaces. Much of the restoration work entailed removing clutter and fixing circulation issues in the lobby. Notably, a new ticket desk utilizing materials of blacked bronze and wood was inserted in front of the eastern coat check wall.

The widely acclaimed 2016 restoration successfully restored the building's original luster. The restoration project was recognized by the architecture and preservation community with several design awards including: 2016 DOCOMOMO Modernism in America Awards - Design Citation of Merit | Civic/Institutional; 2016 AIA New York State Design Awards, Citation, Adaptive Reuse/Historic Preservation; 2017 Landmarks Conservancy Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award; and 2017 AIANY Design Awards – Interiors Merit Award.

Alteration History

Non-historic clock in lobby; lower-level restaurant gypsum walls altered; elevator cab walls replaced; gypsum wall board panel in stairwell alcoves; Second Floor: Permanent galleries now office space for Frick. Fourth Floor: The original permanent galleries wing is now the conservation room and the Frick Art Reference Library (FARL) reading room for the Frick. Fifth Floor: Entrance gallery now lobby for Frick office. Mezzanine: 5th and 4th Floor mezzanine now office space.

Conclusion

As a seminal work of a Bauhaus master and the longtime home of one of New York's most prominent cultural institutions, The Whitney Museum of American Art undoubtedly deserves protection as a designated New York City Interior Landmark. Since its opening 57 years ago in 1966, the building has customarily been open or accessible to the public. Today, the recently restored interior is largely as it was originally designed. Docomomo US and Docomomo US/New York Tri-State consider these interior spaces to be not only of local significance but of national significance. One might easily argue that they are also of international significance.

The building has recently been sold by the Whitney Museum to Sotheby's which intends to occupy it as the New York headquarters of their auction house. For the first time it will no longer serve its original purpose as a museum. Nor will it be occupied by an institution. As the Landmarks Preservation Commission is undoubtedly aware, when buildings change ownership their integrity is often at risk. Docomomo US and Docomomo US/New York Tri-State respectfully request that the Landmarks Preservation Commission evaluate and consider protecting the unique interior spaces of the Whitney Museum of American Art in a timely fashion before a new owner with different priorities executes any irreparable alterations.

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- [1] Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes/The 1931 Whitney Museum; 'Rebels on Eighth Street' Redux," *New York Times*, September 12, 1993.
- [2] *Whitney Museum of American Art: history, purpose and activities, with a complete list of works in its permanent collection to June, 1937* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1937), 3-4.
- [3] Robert A. M. Stern, et al., *New York 1960* (New York: Monacelli, 1997), 826.
- [4] "Whitney Finds a New Home", *New York Times*, June 18, 1963.
- [5] "Architect's Report," Whitney Museum of Art, November 1963, 3.
- [6] *Home Furnishings Daily*, October 3, 1966.
- [7] Marcel Breuer, "Comments at the Presentation of the Whitney Museum Project", November 12, 1963.
- [8] Ada Louise Huxtable, "SOMETHING AWRY; Three New Buildings Pose Big Problems What About the Big Ones? More of the Same," *New York Times*, December 22, 1963.
- [9] *Progressive Architecture*, Jan. 1964, 49.
- [10] Sanka Knox, "Corner Stone for New Whitney Museum Laid," *New York Times*, October 21, 1964.
- [11] Hamilton Smith to Marcel Breuer, Letter, May 27, 1966, Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library.
- [12] Ada Louise Huxtable, "Harsh and Handsome," *New York Times*, September 8, 1966.
- [13] Charles W. Millard, "The Great Grey Whitney", *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4 Winter 1966-1967, 618.
- [14] Wolf Von Eckhard, "The New Whitney Museum Challenges Wisecracks," *Washington Post*, September 25, 1966.
- [15] *Town in Country*, 95.
- [16] P/A Observer, October 1966, 238.
- [17] "2m home for American art," *The Daily Telegraph*, September, 14, 1966.
- [18] The architect's program refers to the desk as a sculpture.[\[link\]](#)
- [19] A similar display wall welcomed visitors in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, where recessed shelving facilitated the exhibition of catalogs behind the gracefully curving reception desk.
- [20] Marcel Breuer, "Comments at the Presentation of the Whitney Museum Project", November 12, 1963, 5.
- [21] Isabelle Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect: The Career and the Buildings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 197.
- [22] Breuer, Work, 198. During transportation, several of these sheets suffered cracks due to an oversight by a truck driver who misjudged the height of a highway overpass.
- [23] Hamilton Smith, Letter, September 16, 1966, Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library.

- [24] Patterson Sims, "Dwellings for the Whitney," Lecture, Institute of Fine Arts, New York, NY, April 2, 2016.
- [25] *1975 Biennial Exhibition: Contemporary American Art*, (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art), 106.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] *1977 Biennial Exhibition: Contemporary American Art*, (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art), 76.
- [28] Sims, op. cit.
- [29] John Beardsley, "On the Loose with the Little People: A Geography of Simonds's Art," *Charles Simonds* (Chicago, USA, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), 29.
- [30] Sims, op. cit.
- [31] Gerald Jonas, "The Little People," *New Yorker*, November 22, 1976, 39-40.
- [32] Germano Celant identifies the *Dwelling* erected in the cafeteria of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago as a key work in Simonds's transition from the transient nature of things to permanence. Celant, Germano. "A Nomad in the City," in *Landscapebodydwelling: Charles Simonds at Dumbarton Oaks* (2011), ed. John Beardsley (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2011), 46-7.
- [33] Sarah Elizabeth Sher, "Marcel Breuer's 'Patina': The Aging-Value of Anticipated Soiling on Brutalist Concrete," Master's Thesis, Columbia University, New York, 2011.
- [34] Quoted in John H. Beyer, *The Dignity of Time Notes on the Renovation and Conservation of The Met Breuer*, in "Marcel Breuer Bauhaus Tradition, Brutalist Invention," *Met Bulletin*, Summer 2016: 43.
- [35] Sher, op. cit.
- [36] Mohsen Mostafavi, *On Weathering: the Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 16.
- [37] Milton Esterow in The New York Times preview of the Whitney Museum on September 8, 1966.
- [38] For further information on the intersection of dance and the Whitney museum's cultural programming, refer to Claire Bishop, "The Perils and Possibilities of Dance in the Museum: Tate, MoMA, and Whitney," Cambridge University Press: 13 January 2015.
- [39] Building Program, undated, Whitney Museum of American Art, Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library. [link](#)
- [40] Quoted in Stern, op. cit., 829.
- [41] Hamilton Smith, Letter to Michael Irving, Dec. 5, 1964, Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library.
- [42] Roberta Smith, "ART REVIEW; Whitney Whittles Intimate Corners," *New York Times*, April 3, 1998.

KEY PRIMARY DOCUMENTS [FOR REFERENCE ONLY]

Construction Progress Schedule: [Progress Schedule - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Wood & Tower Schedule: [Progress Schedule by Wood and Tower - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Presentation set: [Presentation Set - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Scheme A Preliminary [7-19-1963]: [Scheme A - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Scheme B Preliminary [7-26-1963]: [Scheme B - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Scheme C Preliminary Plan [8/1-23 1963]: [Scheme C Preliminary Plans \(Dwg. Nos. SK1-SK8\) - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

First iteration - Preliminary Plan [9-30-1963]: [Preliminary Plan - Entrance Level - With Revised Stair Plan - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Revised scheme [9/16 - 10/2 1963]: [Revised Schemes - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Second iteration [undated]: [Plans: Sheets Nos. 2-7 - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Ground floor plan [Feb-1964]: <https://breuer.syr.edu/xtf/view?docId=mets/55801.mets.xml;query=;brand=breuer>

Construction Set [6-15-1964]: [Construction Set: Architectural \(A1-A31\) - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Auditorium layout: [Auditorium Layout - Marcel Breuer Digital Archive \(syr.edu\)](#)

Photographs

Recent photos of the building's interior follow.

The Whitney Museum of American Art has been widely published. To provide documentation of original conditions when the building opened in 1966, we are submitting as an attachment a pdf copy of the book *Whitney Museum of American Art* published by Princeton Architectural Press in 2000, with photographs of the building taken by Ezra Stoller in 1966. The later color photos in that publication were taken by Jeff Goldberg in 1999-2000.



Whitney Museum of American Art
Overall exterior
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby & Lower Level
Main entrance
View looking northwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
Overall view looking northwest
Photo: Sean Khorsandi
August, 2023



Lobby
Overall view looking north
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



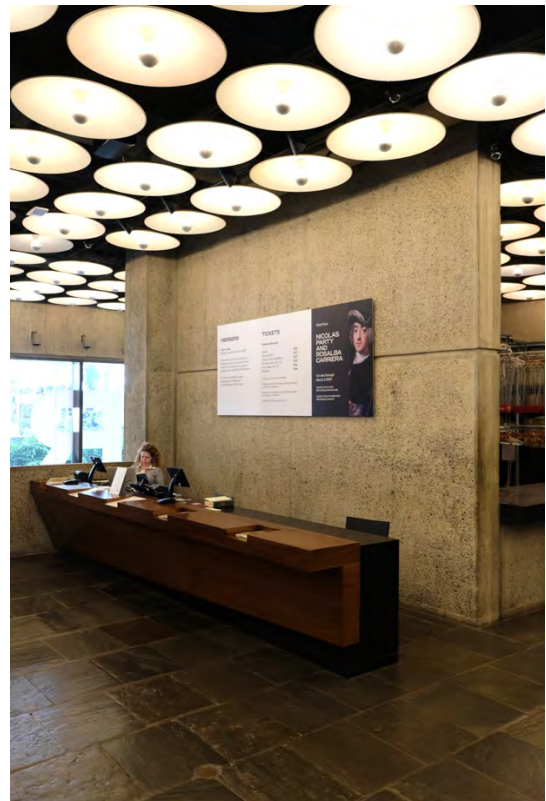
Lobby
View of Main entrance looking west
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
View looking southwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
View of coat check area looking northwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



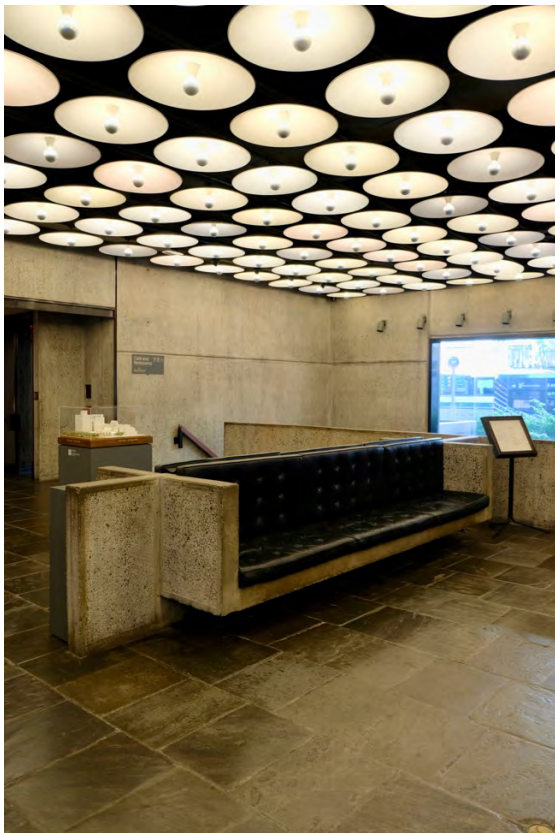
Lobby
View of ticket desk looking northwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
Overall view looking south
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
View of Sales counter looking southeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



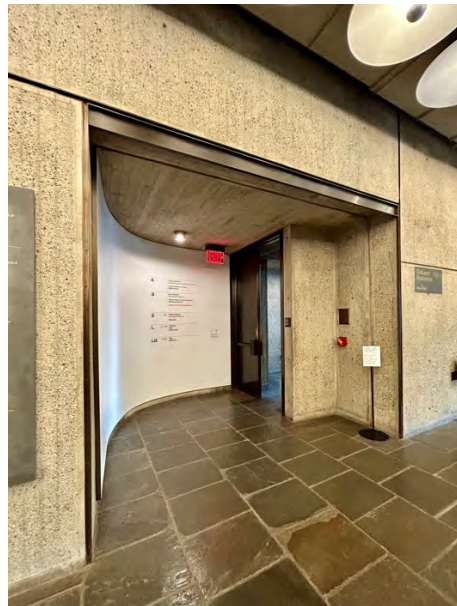
Lobby
View of bench looking southwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
Bench detail
Photo: Sean Khorsandi
August, 2023



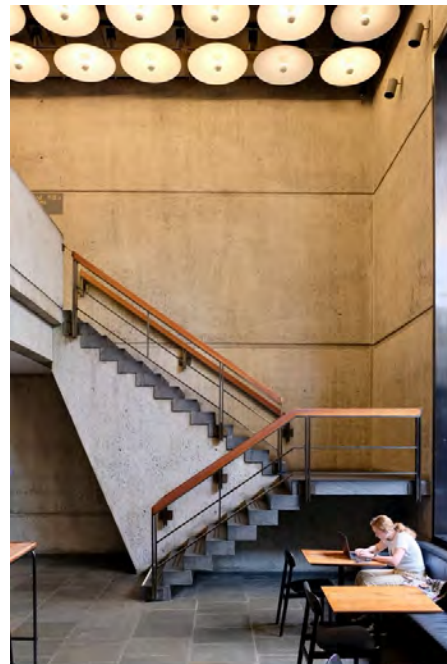
Lobby
View of entrance to Ehrenkrantz Gallery looking east
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lobby
View of entrance to staircase looking south
Photo: Sean Khorsandi
August, 2023



Lower Level
Overall view looking northwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lower Level
View of stair looking south
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lower Level
View of stair looking southeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lower Level
Stair detail
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Lower Level
View looking south
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



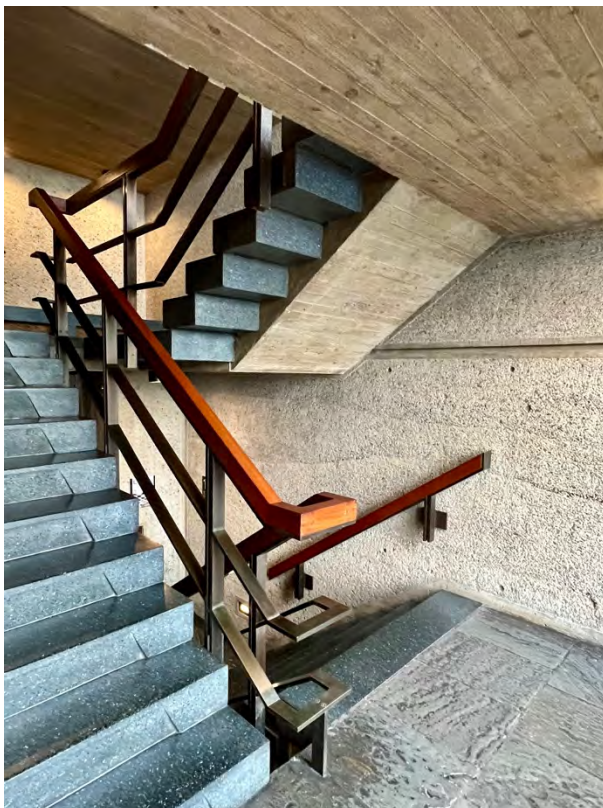
Lower Level
View of café area looking northeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



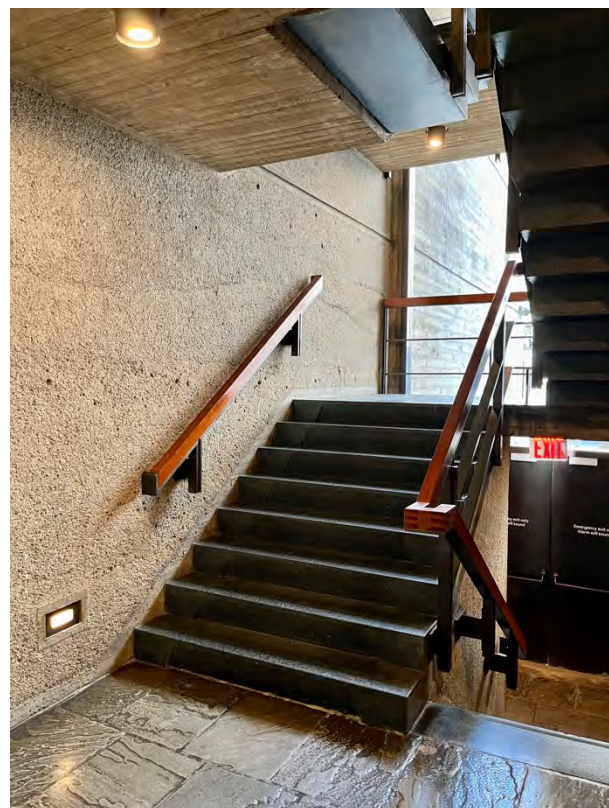
Lower Level
View of Elevator Doors looking southwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



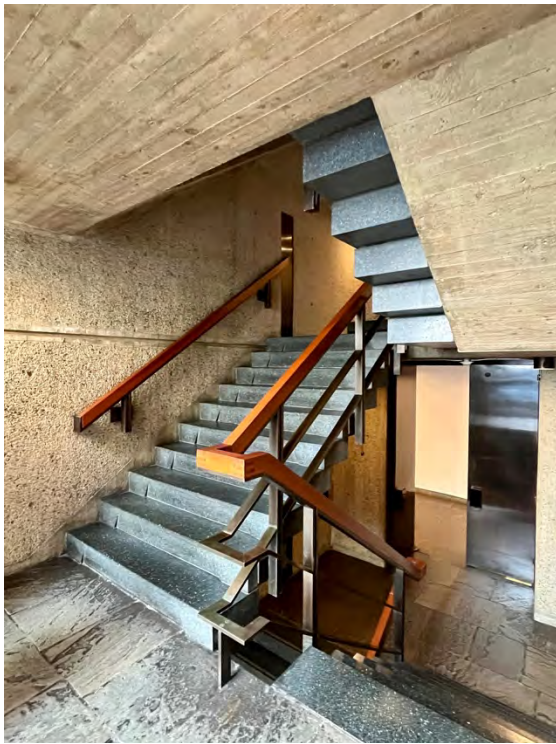
Lower Level
View of telephone booths looking north
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
View looking southeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
View looking southwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



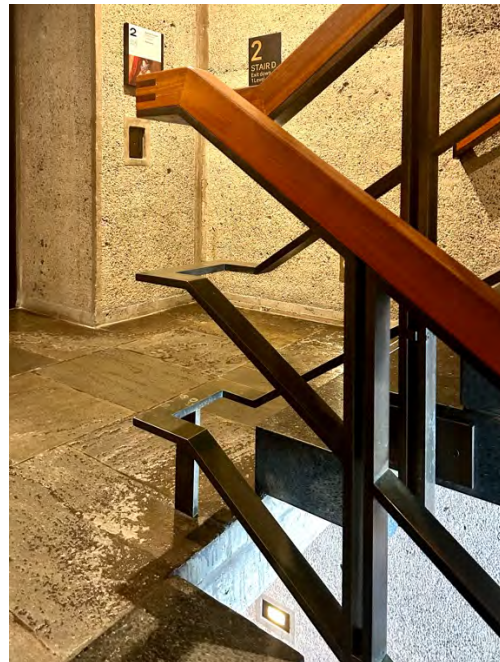
Staircase
View looking northeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
View of bench at landing looking southeast
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
View looking north
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



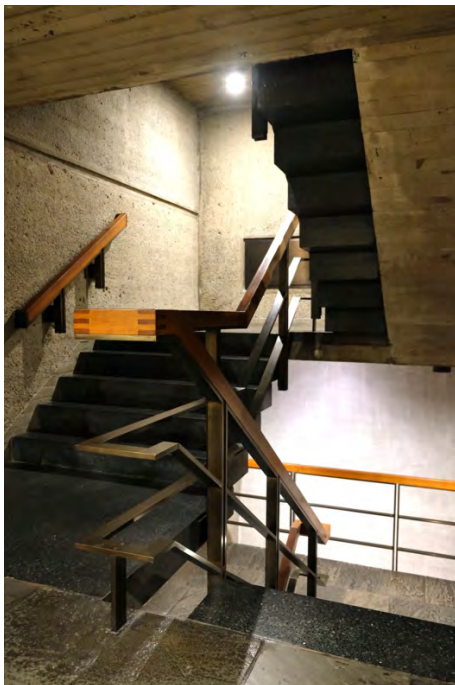
Staircase
Detail
Photo: Sean Khorsandi
August, 2023



Staircase
Detail
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
Dwellings by Charles Simonds
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Staircase
View looking southwest
Photo: John Arbuckle
August, 2023



Second Floor Gallery
Van Dyck portraits
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



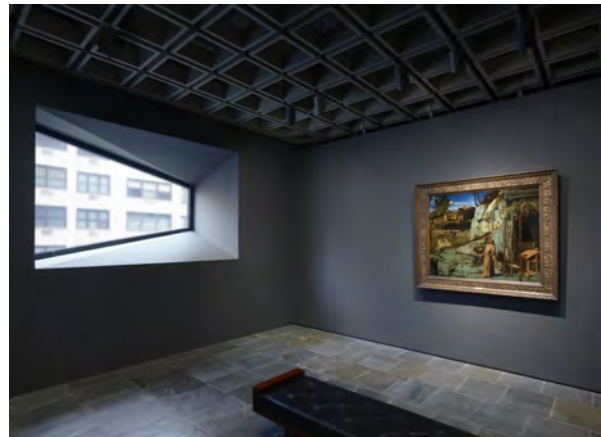
Second Floor Gallery
Rembrandts
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



Third Floor Gallery
Italian art
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



Third Floor Gallery
Italian art with Asian ceramics beyond
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



Third Floor Gallery
Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert with
trapezoidal window
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



Fourth Floor Gallery
British Painting
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021



Fourth Floor Gallery
Fragonards with trapezoidal window overlooking Madison Avenue and original bench
Photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.
c. March 2021

Request for Evaluation - Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue
Photos of Current Conditions