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Source: *MoMA*, No. 31 (May, 1984), p. 2
Published by: Museum of Modern Art
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4380932
Accessed: 19-02-2016 07:35 UTC

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Cesar Pelli (right), with Richard E. Oldenburg, Director of the Museum

AN INTERVIEW WITH CESAR PELLI

In February 1977, one month after assuming the duties of Dean at the Yale School of Architecture, Cesar Pelli was commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art to design its expansion and renovation project. Pelli previously had been partner-for-design at Gruen Associates in Los Angeles, where he directed several notable projects, including the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo.

A native of Argentina, where he earned a Diploma de Arquitecto from the Universidad Nacional, Pelli came to the United States on scholarship in 1952 to study at the University of Illinois. He received a Master of Science degree in Architecture from that institution and, for the next 10 years, worked in the offices of the renowned designer Eero Saarinen. He was project designer for such celebrated Saarinen buildings as the TWA Terminal at JFK International Airport and the Morse and Stiles Colleges at Yale University.

Pelli's New Haven-based firm, Cesar Pelli & Associates, is currently involved in the design of the World Financial Center at Battery Park City in lower Manhattan and numerous other educational, commercial, and institutional projects around the country.

MoMA: Is this the first Museum you've designed?
Cesar Pelli: Yes.

How did you feel about having to "add on" to an existing building rather than having had the chance to design a completely new museum building?
I would say that in terms of just having fun and ending up with something that will be more noticeable and more clearly yours and therefore receive more attention from peers, the press, and the public, doing a completely new museum would have been the best thing to do. But in terms of dealing with what is critical in our time—recreating our cities, protecting them, making them better—The Museum of Modern Art project was exemplary. All of the issues and problems architects confront when dealing with the urban environment are present here to a significant degree.

To what specific issues and problems are you referring?
For example, how do you make something new that ties into the old? Especially when the old is not necessarily that old. How do you stitch those things together so that the new part has an identity of its own, but an identity that is secondary to the old, even though the new part is many times larger? These are extremely difficult problems. One of the most difficult decisions we faced was whether to preserve the Edward Durrell Stone and Philip Goodwin facade on the 1939 No. 11 building, or alter it to blend in more with the new West Wing and the 1964 East Wing by Philip Johnson, both of which are darker in color. We did have schemes with many alternatives, where the No. 11 facade was kept, extended, redone, or where we redesigned it and Johnson's facade. However, for me, after giving the problem sufficient thought, the conclusion was inescapable. The facade had to be preserved. It means "The Museum of Modern Art" as much as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.* When it was built, that crisp, white facade on the dark street was both a promise of a new world and a very strong challenge to the old. It still captures and symbolizes all that modern art meant in the simplest, single image. To reface it would be like painting over a Cézanne.

So you chose preservation?
Yes, we decided to preserve the sequence of change along 53 Street. There are the two dark wings on either side, ours and the 1964 East Wing. And the white 1939 building in the middle with the entrance remaining there where it has always been. We did end up referring directly to the 1939 building in the size of the glass panels on the West Wing facade, which are on the same module as those on the original building. Indeed, the module, the scale, and the alignment of our design all come from the 1939 building, but the color comes from the East Wing.

What were you trying to achieve with the Garden Hall?
That was a nice, complicated design problem, although not difficult in the same way that the philosophical questions concerning the facade were difficult. What we did was try to understand the Museum's new, expanded functions, and in doing this, we had to provoke a typological change. The Museum was originally designed as a house. You moved from floor to floor, and on each floor there was a tight-knit group of rooms. The path led from room to room and back to the stairway and elevators. The 1964 addition of the East Wing added to the number of rooms but did not change the type. The new West Wing is of such magnitude, however, that the circulation type had to be changed. Now, after strolling from gallery to gallery, the visitor will have a more pronounced pause when moving to another floor or another Museum wing via the glass-enclosed Garden Hall. The Hall has been designed like a glove, a minimum enclosure, to gather the east-west, horizontal circulation between wings using connecting halls, and the vertical circulation between floors using escalators. The visitor, after looking at works in relatively small spaces under artificial light, will now come into this airy and luminous space open to views of the Sculpture Garden, 54 Street, and the skyline of Manhattan. The Garden now becomes part of the Museum-going experience even for those who stay inside the building.

What approach did you take in designing and renovating the galleries?
Designing the galleries agreed well with my attitude toward architecture. I don't believe the architect has any business imposing his preferences, biases, or prejudices about every function on earth on people who well know how those functions take place. The Museum of Modern Art has incredibly well-developed theories and attitudes about how modern art should be exhibited, and we took advantage of them.

So you designed the kinds of gallery spaces the department directors and curators wanted?
Yes, and the new galleries are not all that different from the old. They remain relatively small and intimate for all the work up through the Abstract Expressionists. Even the galleries for later work, much of which is large-scale, are not significantly larger. They are, however, more flexible so that many different kinds of work can be shown to advantage. The desire to maintain smaller-scale galleries as expressed by the curators and department heads reflects a body of knowledge gained from being in the vanguard of exhibiting modern art for 50 years.

With the recent boom in museum building around the country, the old arguments have cropped up in the press about whether the architect should design an understated building that serves as a background to a museum's collection or whether the museum itself can be a dramatic, artistic statement. Could you comment on this?
It depends largely on what the museum is built for and what the collection is. In the case of The Museum of Modern Art, there is no question that the building should be a background to the Collection. But there are many museums being built around the country in communities where the intention is more to make the museum primarily an element of civic pride and a focus for cultural activities. If you have a good foreground, then you do a background. But if the foreground is not there in sufficient strength, then I believe that role passes on to the architecture. Of course, you do have situations such as the Guggenheim Museum, which has an outstanding collection. There the tension between the architecture and the art exists, and, unfortunately, the architecture always wins. I can never go there to look at paintings; I look at the building and the paintings are there to enhance the architecture.

The skin of the West Wing and tower, with some 11 shades of opaque glass organized in a very intricate and delicate manner, is very beautiful and quite unusual. How did you arrive at the colors?
In addition to the 11 shadings of opaque glass, which are divided among orange grays for the tower and red grays for the Museum with two blue grays, there is also tinted-vision glass. They are all very desaturated, and we studied not hundreds but thousands of color combinations before deciding on the ones we used. I feel these colors fit almost perfectly into the color quality of this part of Manhattan. If you look at them from all angles, against the limestone buildings, against the dark brown ABC building, the dark gray granite of CBS, or against any of the surrounding buildings, they are never out of place. They strengthen the best color qualities that are already there. The ceramic glass we used is a fairly new, clean, tight skin. The colors are of the place and the skin of our times.

And their arrangement?
The patterning was designed for aesthetic purposes, to make a beautiful building, and also to express the tower's function, to say this is an apartment tower. This was done by expressing floors and rooms and secondly by expressing that the rooms have different sizes and characters. Some panels are opaque, some are transparent and their sizes vary from small to large as the rooms inside the apartments vary. One recognizes immediately that this is an apartment tower. The other two tower types, hotels and office buildings, have repetitive or undifferentiated patterns of windows.