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I. M. Pei, Marcel Breuer, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and the New American Museum Design of the 1960s

In May 1943, with the United States at war, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's project for a museum for a small city, his submission to the famous *Architectural Forum* series inviting architects to imagine the "architecture of 194x," was but a dream of an imminent, if not yet datable, postwar renaissance of American community and cultural life (fig. 1).¹ By the early 1960s a veritable museum boom was under way in cities small and large throughout the country, with parallels in Germany, Italy, and Latin America. Pan Am passengers browsing the pages of the in-flight magazine *Pan Am Clipper* in March 1967 read of the "cultural explosion" in an article celebrating Marcel Breuer's building for the Whitney Museum of American Art, which was enjoying box office records—for a small museum—of 100,000 visitors a week at its new site on New York's Madison Avenue (fig. 2). Hailing the Whitney as the flagship of a new fleet of art museums represented in nearly every one of the airline's ports of call in the United States, the *Clipper* noted: "Similar sagas of new buildings and growing audiences abound throughout the country. In fact, the number of art museums has doubled in the past decade to 700, with a staff of nearly 2,000 curators."² In 1978, 26 percent of the museums in the United States had been built between 1960 and the early 1970s. Long before the Beaubourg and Bilbao effects were diagnosed by cultural critics, a

new alliance between tourism and culture was giving rise to spectacular architecture that would change the topography of culture in cities. Mies' advice that "the first problem is to establish the museum as a center for enjoyment, not interment of Art" had been accepted as the ethos of the new museum; indeed, by the mid-1950s "fine arts center" was often preferred to "museum," both for its avoidance of solemn overtones and as an endorsement of the call for community centers issued in *The Heart of the City*, the influential manifesto of the Congrès international d'architecture moderne.³

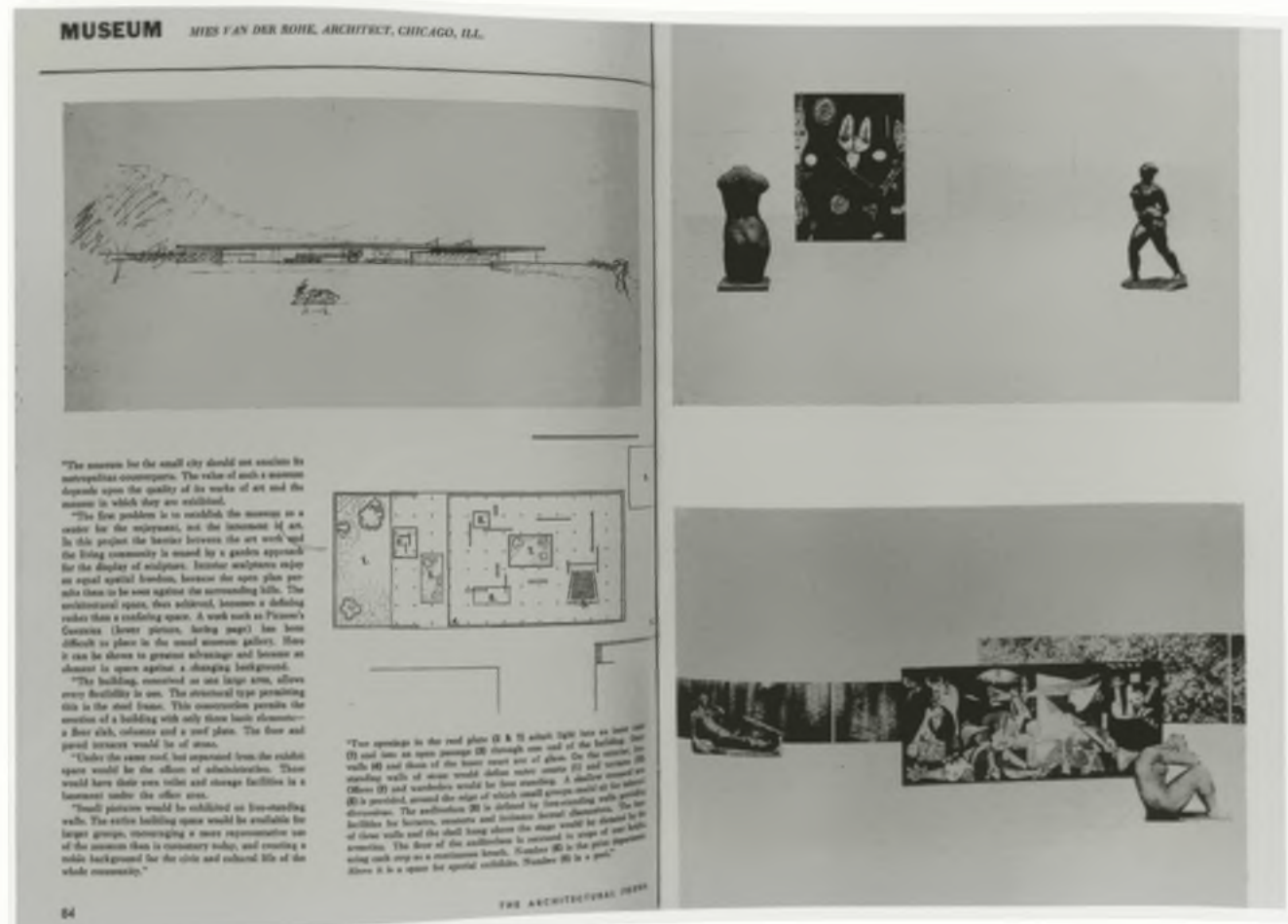
In the renaissance of American museum architecture in the 1960s, Mies was indeed a path breaker and a model giver. In his seminal design for West Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie (1962–1968), he replaced the neoclassical model of the museum as sanctuary, epitomized by the domed pantheon of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum (1823–1828) in Berlin—a building from which, Mies claimed, a young architect could learn everything there was to know about architecture—with a glazed but classically ordered, templelike pavilion set on a densely programmed podium. (Most of the art was, paradoxically enough, relegated to largely windowless galleries in the podium.) But the search among a rising generation of younger American architects for a new museum of enjoyment and community interaction was to take place in a

Whitney Museum of
American Art, interior view
Jeff Goldberg © Esto

complex dialogue, as much in critique as in emulation of the Miesian museum ideal, with its aura of transparency. As the ambitions of local museums to achieve higher visibility coupled in many cases with large-scale downtown renewal schemes driven by federal and state urban renewal programs and funds, Mies was very much in view, both in American cities such as Chicago and Detroit, where his crystalline pavilions were set in counterpoint to urban renewal plans, and in the models his cultural buildings provided for Germany's postwar urban reconstruction.

Nowhere was the idea that the museum might serve as the beacon of urban reconstruction more vividly essayed than at the edge of war-torn West Berlin, where Mies' Neue Nationalgalerie, commissioned in 1962 as the Galerie des xx. Jahrhunderts (Gallery of the twentieth century) and rebaptized after construction began in 1965, rose from the rubble to form the first piece of a projected "Kulturforum," facing off against the blank surfaces of the newly erected Berlin Wall on the other side of Potsdamer Platz (fig. 3).⁴ As American cities likewise began to contemplate the devastation of downtowns in the early 1960s—even if the warfare here was socioeconomic and racial—a fascinating critique of the Miesian model began, one that had run a very interesting course even before Robert Venturi coined the maxim "Less is a Bore" in his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). In that same year, the three museums I consider in this short essay passed milestones in their design histories. Edward Larrabee Barnes was commissioned to design the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (fig. 4), ground was at last broken for I. M. Pei's Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York (fig. 5), and Breuer's Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City—designed after the Everson but completed earlier—opened its doors and a new chapter of public discussion on what a museum should look like.

These three buildings, which galvanized discussion on the form and functions of the museum for small and large American cities in the 1960s, were the work of architects, all close friends, who had begun to rival Mies in both national and international prominence in the years around 1960. Pei



1. Mies van der Rohe, "Museum for a Small City," *Architectural Forum* 78 (May 1943)
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

2. Marcel Breuer, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1964–1966
Ezra Stoller © Esto

3. Mies van der Rohe, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 1962–1968
Wayne Andrews © Esto



4. Edward Larrabee Barnes,
Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, 1966–1971
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

5. I.M. Pei & Associates,
Everson Museum of Art,
Syracuse, 1961–1968
Pei Cobb Freed & Partners

and Barnes trained at Harvard's Graduate School of Design during the years when Breuer, a former Bauhaus master, taught there alongside Walter Gropius after coming to the United States (1938–1946). In the early 1960s, the three led the way in answering the critique of functionalist designs and neutral spaces, voiced as early as 1957 by Italian émigré architect Romaldo Giurgola in an article calling for an end to "functionalist dictates" in museum design. The result of these, he wrote, had been "the elimination of architecture—unless one insists on maintaining that an occasional fountain, marble bench, or stray ornamental relief

constitutes 'design.'" Louis Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery of 1953 was one of the few exceptions that Giurgola could cite in the United States, although he directed attention to new Italian gallery design in Milan and Rome.⁵ Pei, Breuer, and Barnes declared emphatically that an art museum should itself be a work of art; and in each case the critical reception of their large-scale and uncompromisingly abstract forms turned around the notion that architecture had emulated, even surpassed, sculpture in exploration of pure form and creation of a three-dimensional experience that could be understood only from multiple viewing points. In place of the Miesian ideal of transparency, reaffirmed in the architect's new building (1957) for the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Breuer, Pei, and Barnes offered a monumental hermeticism. In place of his structural clarity, they cultivated a deliberate bravura of structural achievement whose means were not immediately legible. In place of a quiet and classical elegance, they offered an expressive and materially rough presence.

The moment Pei's design for Syracuse's new museum was released in autumn 1962, the architectural press heralded a new approach to museum design. "Obviously, this museum is one of the strongest statements to come out of Pei's office," declared *Progressive Architecture*. "It is quite consciously a piece of abstracted sculpture placed within a civic plaza setting—a sort of sculpture to house sculpture, one might say—a work of art for other works of art."⁶ Pei's firm, I.M. Pei & Associates, had broken its exclusive contract with developer William Zeckendorf in 1960, and after more than a decade as in-house designer for Zeckendorf, Pei was eager to assert high-culture credentials. Receipt of the commission for a new museum in Syracuse in 1961 was also the occasion for Pei to reconnect with the unfulfilled challenges of his Harvard thesis project, done for Gropius in 1946: a museum for Shanghai, in which he clearly wrestled with Mies' famous collage presentation of a museum for a small city of three years earlier (figs. 6 and 7). On the one hand Pei staged a minor rebellion—not quite a palace coup—using Mies as a means of finding an expression outside the Gropius norm,

much as his Harvard classmate Philip Johnson did in those years with his design for his own house on Ash Street in Cambridge, a variant on a Miesian courtyard house. But at the same time, Pei offered a subtle critique of Mies' universal values by taking up the challenge of a modernism that might refer to local conditions and traditions, the theme of Breuer and Gropius's engagement with the New England vernacular in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷ Pei set himself a double problem: what a museum for a Chinese city might look like and whether a space to display Chinese art would require a different approach from one for Western art. The second point is driven home by the substitution of Chinese works of art in a collage that clearly refers to Mies' widely published precedent even as it asserts the presence of a structural frame, and by a courtyard garden, every bit as important as the works of art in creating the experience of viewing art. While Mies sought to extend his notion of a universal space in which works of art might interact freely, with the architecture stepping into the background, Pei—in drawings and a balsa wood model of a museum composed of interlocking pavilions and a tea garden with a stream running through it—explored the idea of multiple viewpoints, of a space in which the perspective—much as in Chinese gardens—is fractured and sequential.⁸ While Mies hoped to assert the glory of the materials of American steel-frame construction, Pei proposed that the two-story concrete frame for his Shanghai design be clad in marble veneer to create an honorific space. Years later, when *Art News* interviewed Pei on the occasion of the East Building's opening, he recalled the lively discussion at Harvard in 1946 when his thesis project was taken up as a challenge to International Style orthodoxy; he noted that "Breuer led the discussion; in fact, already at that time it showed Breuer had misgivings of his own."⁹ Even today Pei recalls the moment as a threshold in his questioning of Gropius' faith that the global spread of the International Style was imminent and inevitable.¹⁰

In the early 1960s Pei and Breuer would again enter into a dialogue on museum space in the complex cultural politics of Nelson Rockefeller's New York. Pei led the

way, turning the commission for a highly provincial collection in Syracuse into an artistic happening that did both the upstate city's urban planning scheme and the newly appointed director of the museum proud. The design of the Everson Museum in 1961 cannot be understood outside the long saga of Syracuse's urban renewal schemes, which had been under discussion since the end of World War II.¹¹ Between 1900 and 1960 the population of Syracuse and its immediate suburbs had almost doubled, reaching nearly a half million, but subsequently the city center followed the typical postwar pattern of white middle-class flight and the symbiotic mushrooming of a ring of suburban shopping malls. By the late 1950s the city and county were working with pioneer shopping mall designer Victor Gruen—who had designed the shopping center of *Architectural Forum's* vision of 194x—to craft the ambitious Community Plaza, a mixed government and cultural center, as the anchor of an enormous 101-acre urban renewal project on the near east side, immediately adjacent to downtown.¹² As demolition was scheduled for the inner-city neighborhood, plans were afoot to attract suburbanites back downtown to a new cultural complex with easy freeway access and parking. In addition to a new city hall and county offices, cultural facilities, including a concert hall and museums of industry, natural history, and fine arts were to surround a series of linked pedestrian plazas stretching over a superblock created by eliminating through streets and flanking the area north and south with multistory parking garages (figs. 8–10). Gruen proposed a careful staging of construction for minimum disruption of downtown traffic and maximum early appeal to the regional audience. The final stage, which was never built, was middle-income high-rise housing immediately to the east of the cultural center.

The first cultural amenity to be built was a fine arts center, which would form the southern edge of Community Plaza. This would house the newly merged Syracuse Museum of the Fine Arts and Everson Museum. Founded in 1896, the Museum of the Fine Arts was then housed in the nineteenth-century Lynch Mansion. It was

one of the earliest museums in the country with a public school art program, developed in the late nineteenth century, and was much beloved for its important collection of ceramics; but it had no distinctive civic presence. Its meager painting and sculpture collections were totally overshadowed by those of museums in rival upstate cities, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, where Gordon Bunshaft designed a dramatic new wing in these years, and the impressive American art collections of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in much smaller Utica. In Utica—scarcely an hour's drive away with the completion of the New York State Thruway—work was nearly complete on adapting Philip Johnson's idea project for a museum for a small city, a fascinating heavy rendering of Mies' Crown Hall at IIT, into one of Johnson's earliest explorations of the idea of overtly processional spaces.

In Syracuse, the other partner, the Everson Museum, had neither collection nor home but possessed a long-coveted dowry. In 1941 hardware heiress Helen S. Everson had left in her estate a bequest of \$1 million "to build and maintain a museum," but the bequest was still, in the late 1950s, held up in legal and probate disputes. When the board of the Syracuse Museum agreed to cede its collection to the board of the Everson, the institution seemed poised to make a bid for a national reputation; the city quickly promoted it to the keystone of an announced "Syracuse Renaissance." After the selection of Max Sullivan, a museum curator from Portland, Oregon, with close connections to the New York gallery and artistic scene, the board and the city decided to make the search for a museum architect the first step in expanding the urban renewal scheme from a local enterprise to a bid for a place in the national news. In 1961 the museum's building committee interviewed five firms, one local and four with national reputations: Mitchell/Giurgola; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Pietro Belluschi, and I. M. Pei & Associates. Although Sullivan pushed hard for Belluschi, with whom he had been friendly for years in Portland, Belluschi—now dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT—recommended alumnus Pei, whose



design for the new S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University had just been unveiled. When the board selected Pei, Belluschi agreed to serve as design consultant.

Sullivan and Pei joined forces in putting forth the strategy of designing not for current programs and unimpressive collections, but rather programming a building of distinction that could attract donors, collections, and the audiences sorely lacking. The program they shaped in a series of lively

9. Victor Gruen, proposed cultural center for Syracuse, perspective with view to the "fine arts center," from "The Community Plaza, City of Syracuse/County of Onondaga," n.d. [c. 1958–1959]
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

8. Victor Gruen, proposed cultural center for Syracuse redevelopment, photomontage, from "The Community Plaza, City of Syracuse/County of Onondaga," n.d. [c. 1958-1959]

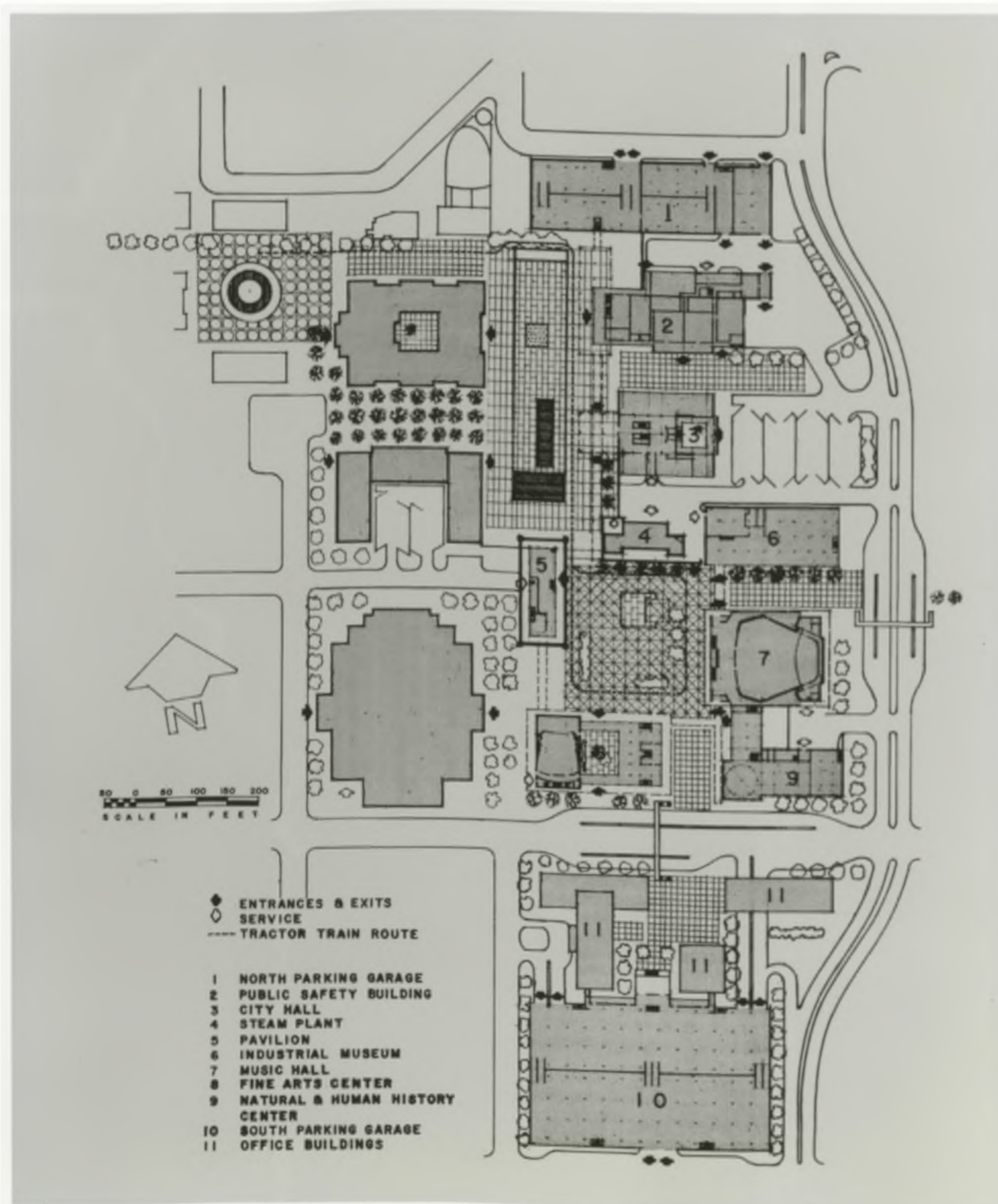
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

board meetings was for a museum wished for, rather than for one inherited. The city's business elite were quickly galvanized into action, and a series of fund-raising campaigns and events was staged to address an audience too long missing from the galleries: well-off suburbanites and tourists who bypassed Syracuse on their summer trips to the Finger Lakes, the season when most upstate museums closed their doors to allow vacationers to devote themselves to nature.

Pei presented his philosophy to the board at its November 1961 meeting, where he "defined a museum as a community's expression toward cultural values and... [stated] that its responsibility is to nourish the growing need for expression of and interest in art, and that improvement in

10. Victor Gruen, proposed cultural center for Syracuse, plan, c. 1958-1959

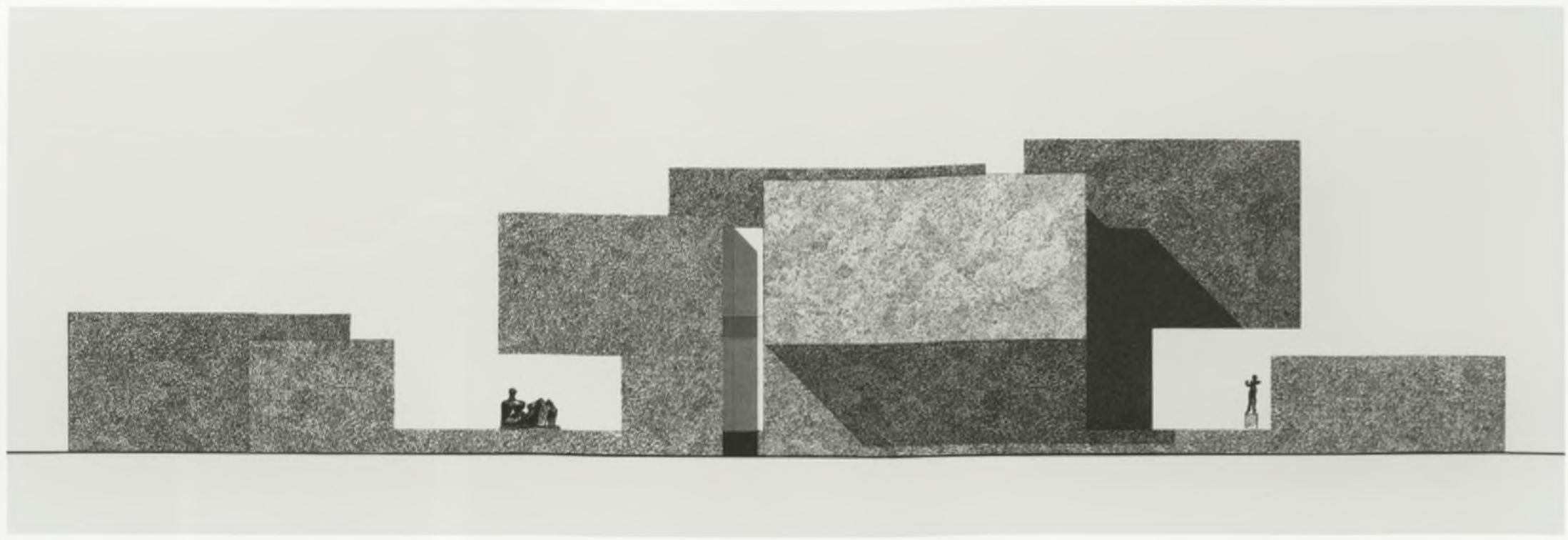
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



quality will follow. He stressed the need of making the museum the center of the cultural life of a community and that to create a building of quality would symbolize this self assurance."¹³ It is perhaps this idea that explains the decision to reverse the formula of Mies' Neue Nationalgalerie (see fig. 3) and to embed the community functions—auditorium, studio spaces, and the like—in the broad podium that filled the generous site at the Community Plaza's southern edge already reserved by Gruen and his team for a museum.¹⁴

Above the podium Pei would craft a dynamic and exciting set of gallery spaces around a central atrium that would be a work of art even before the assembly and installation of collections. *New York Times* critic Ada Louise Huxtable perceived the success of the gambit at the opening in late October 1968: "Anyone who wants to know what the 20th century is about esthetically will be well rewarded by a trip to the Everson Museum of Art, a small, superb structure that opened... last weekend... an object lesson in art and museology... [It] sets a standard that other cities, embarked on a wave of museum and culture center building of epic proportions and some historical significance, will now be called on to match." "The visitor," she continued, "will not find a notable permanent collection. There are other cities to go to for that. But he will have what the contemporary art museum can and should uniquely provide: a fully dimensional esthetic experience in which the building and its contents interact on the highest plane."¹⁵ Clearly Governor Nelson Rockefeller understood that the building uniquely combined two of the programs to which he lent his greatest personal support, the development of arts funding throughout the state, embodied in the new New York State Council on the Arts and the programs of the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC). For the opening Rockefeller lent works from his own collection of contemporary art, otherwise displayed in the Albany State House, and two years after the museum opened it hosted an exhibition of urban projects of the UDC.

Having broken with Zeckendorf, Pei now raised the stakes of the Syracuse project by breaking with the imagery of a universal



language of forms for all the components of Community Plaza as Gruen's team had suggested it (see fig. 9). Whereas the designs for the various museums and the concert hall, and even the pavilion—a structure to house the commercial functions and café of all the museums together in a single building with a vantage point on the public square—shared a common language of polite background modernism, Pei created a foreground object of sculptural singularity. Exploiting the cantilevering capacities of engineered reinforced concrete with a drama reminiscent of Soviet constructivism of the 1920s, Pei brought in the young Quebec engineering firm of Roger Nicolet, which had already worked with him on the great cantilevered mass of the main skyscraper of Montreal's Place Ville-Marie. But the forms were now rendered not with the curtain walls of the International Style, but with the brutalist aesthetic of heavy openness pioneered by Breuer in such recent commissions as Begrish Hall, on the Bronx campus of New York University (1959–1961), which Pei called “a pure piece of sculpture.”¹⁶ Recently Pei looked back to the period in the late 1950s when he and Breuer were such close friends that the families vacationed together: “[Breuer] had a great interest in the expressive possibilities of concrete, an interest that we shared. I like to think that back in the 1950s the two of us were probably the pioneers in this field.”¹⁷ Experimenting with newly developed bush-hammered texturing—a technique confined to vertical surfaces—for the exteriors of

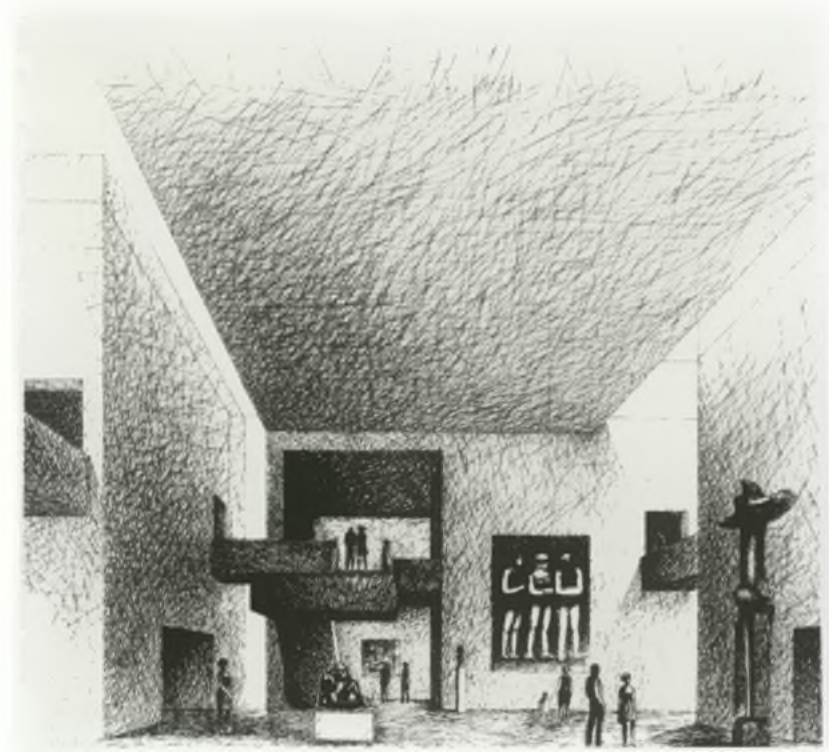
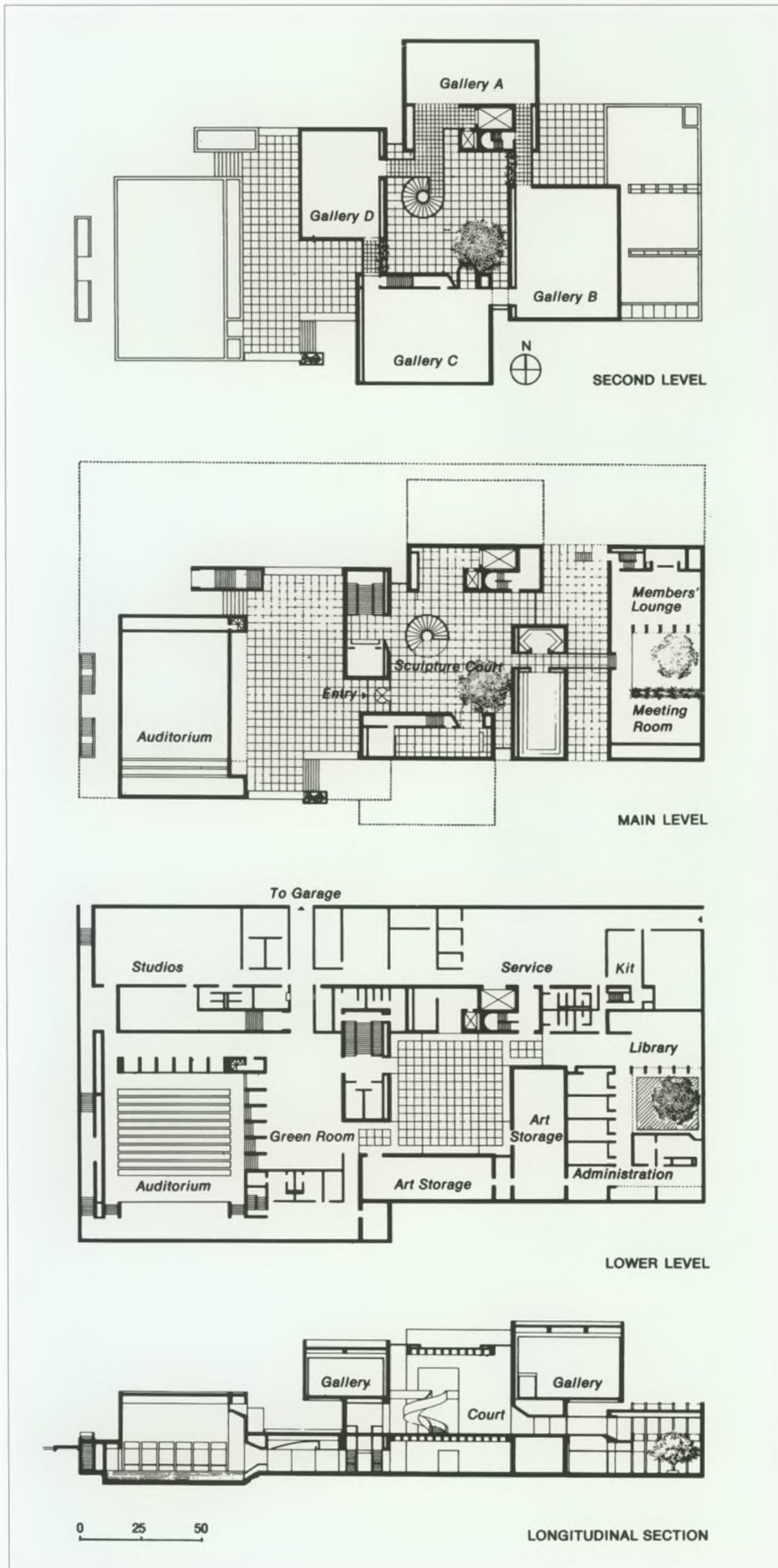
the great cantilevered boxes of the Everson Museum, Pei strove also to impart both a local accent and a sense of craft to the traditional blank walls of a museum's exterior. Experiments were made under the direction of project architect Kellogg Wong to achieve the proper hue, mixing various test aggregates, including Kingston red granite and the local brown-colored stone of Syracuse, so prevalent in its great nineteenth-century commercial and public buildings. The surfaces were then bushhammered to bring out this local coloration, adding warmth to Pei's abstract experimentation and giving an almost handcrafted sculptural effect to the museum's blank vertical surfaces. Rudolph had earlier pioneered this technique in the Art and Architecture Building at Yale (1957–1963), but here it rendered a subtle, understated diagonal grooving pattern of the type Pei had introduced in the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado (1961–1967). There the striation would hold its own against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains; in Syracuse it would make a strong statement on the clean slate of urban renewal. In Pei's words, the Everson “needed to be a strong building to survive in that environment, on that featureless site” (fig. 11).¹⁸

While on the exterior the compact concrete “tree” of four differently sized concrete boxes appeared opaque and impenetrable, the interior was a complex set of interlocking spaces radiating from a two-story atrium formed by the encounter of the four second-

11. I. M. Pei & Associates, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1961–1968, elevation drawing by Dale Byrd Pei Cobb Freed & Partners

12. I. M. Pei & Associates, Everson Museum of Art, plans and section of the principal floors Pei Cobb Freed & Partners

13. I. M. Pei, Everson Museum of Art, early interior elevation study of lobby with switchback stair Pei Cobb Freed & Partners



floor galleries—the forerunners of the three “house museums” of the East Building (figs. 12 and 13). The enclosed atrium would house large-scale works of contemporary painting and sculpture, much of it either acquired with Pei’s assistance or borrowed from such well-known New York galleries as André Emmerich.¹⁹ But the primary display was the architecture itself. Light admitted through glazed slots created an unexpected luminosity inside the opaque cluster of closed volumes and formed shifting patterns of shadow and relief that helped pull the museum’s component concrete volumes into a taut dialogue across the central void. At the same time the slotted openings provided carefully framed and ever-changing views to the plazas surrounding the building, all the while screening from sight both cars along Harrison Street, the only surrounding street left open on grade, and the great smokestacks of the municipal steam plant on the other side of the plaza behind the museum. Not only was Pei’s atrium to be developed as a critique of the universal space and single focus of Mies’ great contemporary atrium in Berlin; it also sought to achieve something of the three-dimensional and sectional complexity that was the legacy of work by Breuer that Pei had admired as a student, notably Breuer’s house in Lincoln, Massachusetts (1939). Pei had noted that it was a “small house but it had a huge space. It had a remarkable three-dimensional flow of space that moved up level by level, space that moved vertically as

well as horizontally in contrast to the 'two-dimensional' space of Mies, for example, that moved horizontally."²⁰ Later Pei would state that the inspiration had come from cubist painting and Chinese gardens, both claims true enough but also perhaps avoiding a certain anxiety of influence engendered by the more direct inspirations of Breuer and, even more recently, Le Corbusier's play of levels and ramps in the entrance hall to the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo of 1959.²¹ Certainly the dramatic coil of the Everson's spiral stair, which Pei substituted for the original switchback design at the same time that he added the heavy egg-crate coffering to the atrium ceiling,²² is a nod to Le Corbusier's purist villa designs, even as it amplifies the continually shifting sets of overlapping planes and spaces the visitor experiences on the kaleidoscopic ascent to the main gallery spaces.²³

Mies' panoramic space in Berlin is here replaced by a deliberate cultivation of multiple and sequential points of view—an anticipation, then, of the three vanishing points Pei developed in the triangular geometries of the East Building, designed as the final touches were being put on the Everson's central space. But the most innovative aspect of the plan comes on the second floor, where the galleries connect neither with the axial insistence of a classical enfilade nor with the imperceptible flow of a modernist free plan or Miesian universal space subdivided by partitions. The four distinct pinwheel galleries are both separated and connected by catwalks of varying types, lengths, and configurations, not only multiplying the number of vantage points for viewing the atrium and the works displayed there, but also providing breaks in the quiet remove and stasis of galleries devoted to the permanent collection or loan shows. "The eyes need a rest," Pei said, referring to the need to interweave the viewing of art and everyday life as discrete units or staccato experiences rather than creating either a seamless transparency, as in the Miesian pavilion, or a total remove, as in the neoclassical norm of, for example, John Russell Pope's National Gallery of Art West Building. The idea of subdividing the gallery space into a series of museums from which one always returns to the public square, however artificial and

idealized, was perfected here years before Pei developed it first in a solemn and heavy and then in a light-filled version for the National Gallery East Building.

That Pei had chosen to take on Mies is more than apparent in the most famous chiaroscuro elevation—based on one of Pei's own drawings—of the south, or Harrison Street, facade, where the staccato rhythm of volumes can be scanned like a musical score for passing pedestrians and cars (see fig. 11). Bookended by the blocks of the upper stories of the auditorium on the left and of the library, offices, members' lounge, and café on the right, the varied heights of the cantilevered galleries stand proud, just as figural sculpture echoes dynamic tensions of abstract architectural form. By the time the facade rendering was in process, the museum was acquiring Henry Moore's *Two-Piece Reclining Figure No. 3*, and just as Mies had used figures by J.H. Maillot as a foil to his own classical abstraction, Pei was particularly drawn to Moore's work with its fragmentation of a single figure into two pieces held in dramatic tension. He placed it brilliantly, toothlike in a gap in the exterior composition of solid and void, and as the pivotal point around which the visitor arriving at the car drop-off on Harrison Street must rotate to make the 180-degree turn from the short flight of steps leading onto the museum's podium to the hidden entrance into the atrium. The collagelike drawing became something of a talisman, not only for the museum, which used it repeatedly in fund-raising publicity and incorporated it into newly designed brochures and letterhead, but also for the Pei firm. Frequently reproduced by the firm, it remained one of Pei's favored visions of his architecture of the years after he broke away from the world of speculative building in which one "never had the luxury to think beyond practical necessities." The original rendering of the atrium, with its smooth ceiling and switchback stair, hung for years like a banner over the Pei Cobb Freed & Partners drafting room on Madison Avenue; long-time Pei associate Stephen Rustow remembered it there during the first phase of the Louvre project in the 1980s.²⁴

The Everson was to bring Pei numerous museum commissions during the rest

of the decade, many of them even before the Syracuse museum opened its doors. In 1967, while it was under construction, the selection committee for a new museum for Cornell University came to see its progress. The committee had been granted a huge budget by university trustee Herbert Johnson, whose father had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright on the Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, on the condition that it hire an architect of stature and was hesitating among Kevin Roche, Louis Kahn, Marcel Breuer, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and Pei. The visit clinched the decision, as the head of the committee recalled: "We went into this building all shrouded by canvas, and walked into the interior lobby. . . . It was just pure poured concrete and wood forms. We walked in and it was glorious, it was the most exciting space I had ever seen, an ingenious use of volume and form."²⁵ A year later Ada Louise Huxtable could note of the Everson's board of directors, "They must be doing something right, because Mr. Pei has received the commission for the extension of the National Gallery on the strength of the Syracuse job."²⁶

This upstate outpost had put Pei on the cosmopolitan radar screen of the trustees of the Whitney Museum when, in June 1963, they decided, after only eight years in a new building on West Fifty-fourth Street on land donated by the Museum of Modern Art, to get out from under the shadow of their more famous neighbor and sometime rival and establish a new presence and identity in the heart of the 1960s art gallery scene on the Upper East Side. After interviewing Pei, Breuer, Kahn, Rudolph, Barnes, and Johnson—the last by far too associated with MOMA to get past a first conversation—the Whitney's board, headed by Flora Miller Irving, granddaughter of founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, choose Breuer to create a building that could situate American art more prominently both on the grid of Manhattan and on the world map. Breuer, whose architecture had been escalating in elemental and sometimes ponderous monumentality since the 1953 commissions for Saint John's Abbey and UNESCO headquarters, understood the challenge immediately. If associate Robert Gatje's memory is correct, he returned from a weekend at home in

New Canaan with a design for an inverted ziggurat clad in flame-treated gray marble to loom mysteriously over the corner of Madison Avenue and Seventy-fifth Street.²⁷ Without breaking any building or zoning codes, Breuer inverted the image of the famous setback skyscrapers of the 1920s and 1930s and of the apartment houses sprouting up in the East Side's residential building boom to create a building at once of the urban fabric and decidedly singular. "What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan?" Breuer began his remarks when he presented the completed project on November 12, 1963.

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 forms and its materials should have identity and weight in a neighborhood of 50 story skyscrapers [the Carlyle Hotel on the next block, the only tall building in the vicinity], 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 [he knew how to refer to the institution's annex anxiety from Fifty-fourth Street], and at the same time it should have a 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.²⁸

Profundity—of meaning and physical presence—was the word of the day as the modernists of the 1920s retooled their program in the early 1960s: in 1957 Sigfried Giedion had delivered at the National Gallery of Art the lectures that would be published as *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Architecture*, celebrating the relevance of the weighty forms and symbolic aura of Mesopotamian temples, Sumerian ziggurats, and Egyptian pyramids, and in 1963 he was working on the page proofs for their publication as Breuer penned an introduction entitled "The Contemporary Aspect of Pharaonic Architecture" for Henri Stierlin's book on Egyptian architecture.²⁹ In March 1963, just weeks before his interview at the Whitney, in a lecture at the University of Michigan entitled "Matter and Intrinsic Form," Breuer had expounded his philosophy that the challenge to modern architecture was to marry the sculptural



14. Whitney Museum of American Art, interior view
Jeff Goldberg © Esto

weight of primordial architectures with the revolution in space making of modern building technique. Concrete construction allowed a synthesis of the ancient mysteries of building with the modern wonders of engineering: "With the rebirth of solids next to glass walls, with supports which are substantial next to glass walls, with supports which are substantial in material but not negligent in structural logic and practical requirements, a three-dimensional modulation of architecture is again in view; the brother or lover of our pure space," he concluded. "Although not resting on lions or acanthus leaves, space itself is again sculpture into which one enters."³⁰

The experience of entering the Whitney is too well known to require an extended description, but several details of the design development are relevant to considering the possible mutual influence of Pei and Breuer. Pei insists that in these years their relationship was primarily social and involved little discussion of architecture,³¹ but it is an important unwritten chapter in the history of Pei's thinking about architecture in the years preceding the Washington commission. As much as the Whitney design

resonates with the emergence of minimalism in sculpture in the 1960s, Breuer was thinking largely in terms of issues of history and symbolism that had entered the internal critique of architectural modernism with the debates on monumentality in the mid-1940s. "Today's structure in its most expressive form is hollow below and substantial on top—just the reverse of the pyramid. It represents a new epoch in the history of man, the realization of his oldest ambitions: the defeat of gravity," Breuer told his friend Peter Blake at *Architectural Forum* in 1964 as the concrete frame for the Whitney was being poured. Breuer would rewrite Louis Kahn's loft spaces of the Yale Art Gallery into a stacked temple of modern American art for a Manhattan street corner. With exposed, bushhammered fin walls to set off his granite-faced sculpture on its corner site, Breuer cut out the urban equivalent of the white box gallery so beloved by his contemporary minimalists and asserted the singularity of culture, creating an aura to protect art from the nearby world of commercial culture and to create a sense of remove. Perhaps the German architecture magazine *Baumeister* best captured this

growing American trend in its review of Pei's Everson: "Modernes Mysterium oder nur Kunstkiste?" (Modern house of mysteries or just an art storehouse?).³²

Just as Pei had exploited slots of light to set off the volumes of his interlocking solids and to edit the contact between the world of art and the realm of the everyday, so Breuer lifted his stepped cantilever mass above a glazed, recessed ground floor—the world of the sidewalk and the sales counter, on axis with the entrance and connected by a fixed-in-place drawbridge—and inserted great panes of glass into the recessed stair tower between the inverted ziggurat and the midblock fin wall. Breuer clearly had an eye on what his former pupil was doing in Syracuse as he worked on the complex section of the negative space created by excavation of the below-grade sculpture court, a space that also would form the moat separating the sanctuary of art from the hotdog sellers on the sidewalk. Although in the first project he explored glass panels providing an unobstructed view of this sunken sculpture garden, in the end he replaced this with a low parapet of granite, easily peered over by pedestrians but carefully screening the skirts and shorts of the sidewalk from the abstractions on display below. Here was a complex cubist spatial sculpture, replete in the initial design with a spiral stair as at the Everson (although this had to cede to a more conventional switchback stair after review by the New York City Department of Buildings). The only other addition, made at the request of the trustees, was the late inclusion of the sculptural canopy.

The controlled dialogue between interior and exterior would continue in the stair, where Kahn's servant spaces were converted into the place of greatest connection between the ritual of the museum visit and life outside. The great windowpanes of the stair provide changing views of the Madison Avenue streetscape with each switchback, the first in a series of framed views echoed in the great neutral galleries, where the visitor discovers the function of the mysterious trapezoidal "eyelid" windows attached in a free arrangement like ornamental brooches on the blocky exterior. To keep the great planes of glass from conflicting with the emphatic reliance on artificial light for

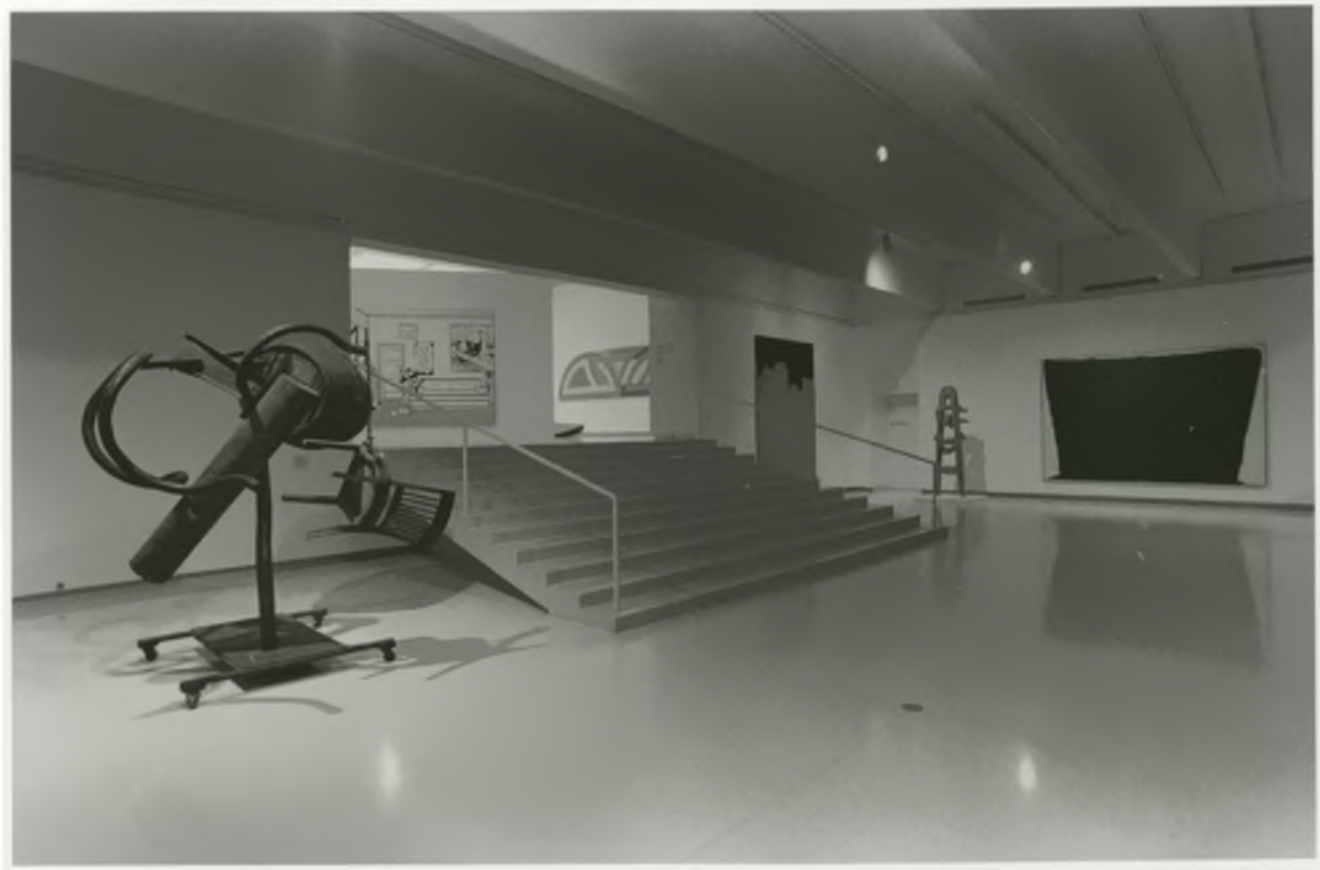
displaying art, the trapezoids are angled outward to provide somewhat uncanny vignettes of the city and glimpses of sky, while avoiding any capricious play of light in the inner sanctuary. Breuer referred to them as "psychological" (and, in an even less auspicious choice of words, "a crutch." They were a respite in any case from the viewing of art, which was to be protected from that form of distraction that aesthetic theorists in his Weimar youth had found such a challenge to the modern condition of art. Although unable to follow Pei's lead in the creation of an interior atrium on the confined urban site, Breuer managed to triple the Whitney's exhibition area on a footprint nearly identical to what it had enjoyed on Fifty-fourth Street. At the same time he created a building of deliberately contrasting experiences: a lobby based on the new ideal of flow and spatial excitement, in which architecture, large-scale public sculpture, and the city engaged in a dialogue, while on the upper floors attention was focused inward. In the first two galleries the visitor enters, the Whitney's equivocation between its roots as a club for the artistically initiated and its mandate to open wide to the public and to the new scale of postwar art was expressed by a counterpoint between loft spaces and sequences of rooms with warm wooden paneling and domestic modern furniture selected by Breuer's wife Constance, then working in the firm on interiors (fig. 14). The greatest uninterrupted expanse and loftiest ceilings were reserved for the fourth-floor gallery, its long dimension a full 118 feet of clear space before the installation of the system of movable panels. It was as though both ancient tradition and modern rivals had been turned on their heads: here was the space of Mies' Berlin gallery lifted high above the city, its panoramic glass replaced by the largest of Breuer's trapezoidal windows, the only one on the Madison Avenue front.

While the American press was overwhelmingly positive, even if not ebullient, the British magazine *Architectural Design* took Breuer to task for failing to achieve the relationship between art and the outside world, between the sanctuary and the street, that he had tackled in the new Whitney. "In conscious emulation of the Gug-

genheim Museum in New York," the critic complained,

the Trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned and have built a compact and prestige-laden edifice in the heart of New York. . . . The oversailing floors and the odd relationship of scale between the new building and those surrounding it at once recall Frank Lloyd Wright's idiosyncratic structure [the Guggenheim]. But there the relationship ends. For the conception of the Whitney museum is conservative, limited and limiting. There is no unifying architectural space, there are no disturbing oblique lines and planes to intrude on the viewer's encounter with art. The trustees and the architects have, probably rightly, played safe. But so safe that they have sought a vernacular air for architecture—an odd vernacular in the heart of New York—the ceilings are of roughly textured concrete, the walls of white painted canvas, the floors are flags of slate. . . . The whole is redolent of artifice. A pure artificial light is designed to pervade the interior. There is no feeling for the fleeting and changing quality of works of art, revealing ever new aspects under different conditions of daylight. They are, so to speak, embalmed here under "ideal lighting" conditions. The odd attempt to isolate the works of art is perhaps the chief failing of the enterprise. The institution was inaugurated expressly to show off modern, the most modern, American art, yet Breuer has conceived this art as something "sincere and profound," altogether separate from what he recognizes as the vitality of the surrounding streets—there is a bridged ditch between the pavement and the entrance hall to emphasize this point. This pretentious sculptural shrine (this is an attempt, in the words of Breuer, to form the building itself as a sculpture), has been designed to hallow art to unctuous, stultifying effects.³³

But that view remained a minority one, as the Whitney had many admirers among museum directors. Sherman Lee's response led to another museum commission within the year, a project, first discussed in winter 1967, to expand the Cleveland Museum of Art, and as late as 1974 Breuer was invited to compete for the new building of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen in Düsseldorf because of director Werner Schmalenbach's high opinion of the Whitney ("one of the great museums in the United States," he later asserted).³⁴



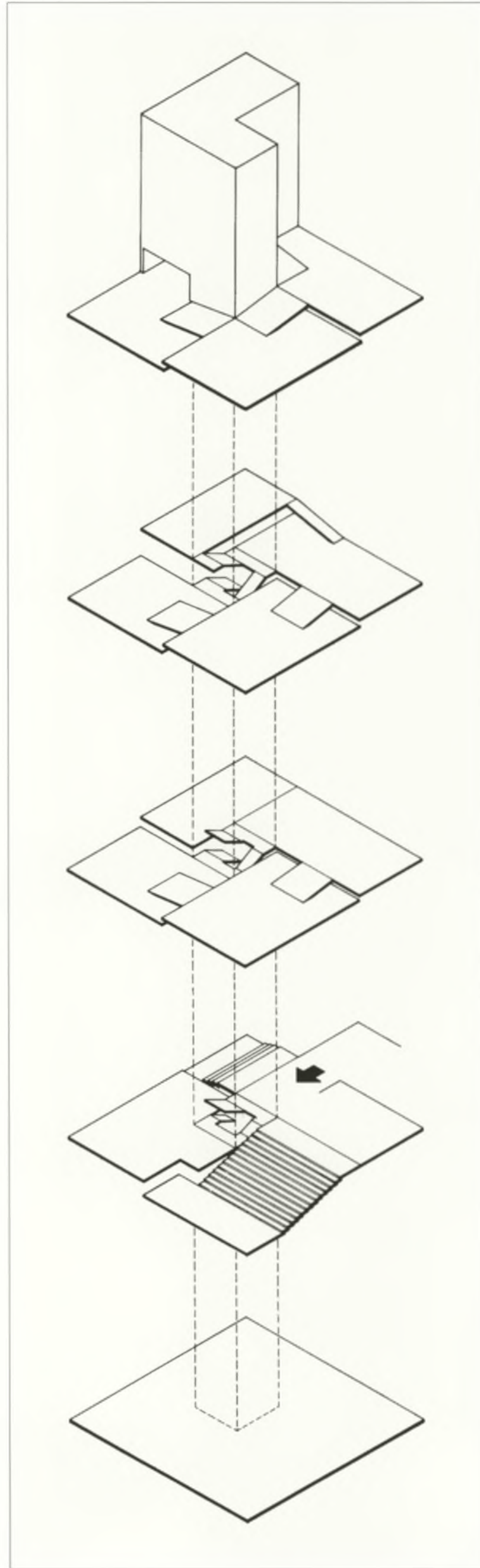
15. Walker Art Center, interior view
Eric Sutherland for Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

No one seems to have learned more from both the Whitney's achievements and its weaknesses than Breuer's former pupil Edward Larrabee Barnes. In Minneapolis Barnes created a much-admired museum and an urban masterpiece, in some ways the synthesis of the new American art museums created in the heroic moment of what Breuer had called the "rebirth of solids." Having been passed over for the Whitney in 1963, Barnes got his first chance at museum design five years later when he was selected to design the new Walker Art Center, adjacent to Ralph Rapson's recently completed Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis (figs. 15 and 16). Peter Blake described the Walker inside and out most succinctly in an article entitled "Brick-on-Brick and White-on-White":

[B]uilt on an almost impossible site next to a freeway . . . [it] is a very modest-looking six-story-high cluster of boxes covered head-to-toe with a neat and understated veneer of plum-colored iron-spot brick. . . . It is a difficult building to describe, because the anonymous, relentlessly white-on-white loft spaces that are contained in that cluster of bricks seem to dissolve before the human and the camera eye.³⁵

Barnes' brilliance was to merge galleries and circulation space as Wright had attempted to do two decades earlier in the Guggenheim, thus resolving the split not only between lobby and galleries that char-

16. Edward Larrabee Barnes,
Walker Art Center, helical
plan, c. 1970
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis



acterizes the Whitney but also between the ideal of the museum gallery as a distinct moment of stasis and the modernist love of flowing space. Barnes thus broached a synthesis between the divided schools of Mies and Breuer. "Flow is more important than form," he declared years later (although the Walker's exterior gives the lie to this false modesty of ceding the newly gained sculptural aesthetic to the crafting of space).³⁶ At the Walker the seven galleries spiral upward in a helical plan around a central elevator core, the height of these white loftlike spaces—which Blake compared to the studios of artists such as Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ellsworth Kelly—gaining with each step. The culmination is two great galleries: one an enclosed eighteen-foot-high space with a great wall of glass taking in the panorama of the Minneapolis skyline beyond the freeway, the other a series of open sculpture terraces on three levels on the building's roof. "[T]he new Walker is...beginning to shift the center of gravity of the American art world from New York to this rather intriguing little Midwestern city, previously known chiefly for thermostats," wrote Blake.³⁷ If the Everson had not quite managed to supplant Carrier Corporation as Syracuse's major claim to fame, in Minneapolis Barnes briefly put a museum for a small city in the spotlight. A few years later, Pei would succeed in turning all eyes to the National Mall in Washington for the spectacle of art rather than protest.

NOTES

1. Mies' project appeared in *Architectural Forum* 78 (May 1943): 84–85. On the "museum for a small city" see *Mies in America*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (New York, 2001), 426–428; see also Neil Levine, "'The Significance of Facts': Mies's Collages Up Close and Personal," *Assemblage* 37 (December 1998): 70–101. Andrew Shanken is at work on a comprehensive study of the *Architectural Forum* series based on his doctoral dissertation, "From Total War to Total Living: American Architecture and the Culture of Planning, 1939–194x" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1999).
2. Charles Powers, "The Culture Explosion," *Pan Am Clipper* 7, no. 1 (February–March 1967): 17.
3. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, quoted in Sanford T. Meech and David C. Ashley, "The Status of Contemporary Art Museum in the United States Today," in *The Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 19 (3rd quarter 1957): 16. See also Congrès international d'architecture moderne, *The Heart of the City* (New York, 1952).
4. On Mies' Nationalgalerie in Berlin see Paul Kahlfeldt and Andres Lepik, eds., *Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin, dreissig Jahre*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 2001).
5. Romaldo Giurgola, "Positive Design Is Displacing the Neutral Interior Meant Solely as a Background for Display," *The Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 19 (3rd quarter 1957): 27–35; originally published as "Museums, Positive Design Is Displacing the Neutral Interior . . .," *Interiors* 116 (December 1956): 80–81.
6. "Museum of Art," *Progressive Architecture* 45 (November 1962): 128.
7. See Barry Bergdoll, "Encountering America: Marcel Breuer and the Discourses of the Vernacular from Budapest to Boston," in Alexander von Vegesack and Mathias Remmele, eds., *Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture* [exh. cat., Vitra Design Museum] (Weil am Rhein, 2003), 258–307.
8. I. M. Pei, "Museum for Chinese Art, Shanghai," *Progressive Architecture* 29 (February 1948): 50–52.
9. Barbaralee Diamonstein, "I. M. Pei: 'The Modern Movement Is Now Wide Open,'" *Art News* (summer 1978): 64.
10. I. M. Pei, interview with the author, 6 January 2005. I am most grateful to Pei not only for his comments on the presentation on which this essay is based, given during the symposium at the National Gallery in April 2004, but also for the opportunity for an extended follow-up interview and conversation in his office in January 2005 and in public at a program organized by the National Building Museum, Washington, D.C., 17 January 2008.
11. Syracuse-Onondaga Post-War Council, *Community Facilities: Preliminary* (Syracuse, 1944); Blair Associates, *Onondaga-Syracuse-Metropolitan Area Planning Studies*, 10 vols. (Syracuse, 1961–1962). (Both in Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.)
12. Ketcham-Miller-Arnold, Gordon P. Schopfer Planning and Design Consultants, Victor Gruen Associates, and Raymond and May Associates, coordinating architects, "The Community Plaza, City of Syracuse / County of Onondaga," n.d. [c. 1958–1959], copy in Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University). The Syracuse project is mentioned but not treated in any significant detail in M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia, 2004).
13. According to Robert F. Neuhaus in an unpublished note, "The Selection of I. M. Pei," in a box of papers and clippings concerning the museum design held in the library of the Everson Museum of Art; see also Board of Trustees Minutes, November 28, 1961, Everson Museum of Art Archives.
14. The podium, moreover, would be developed with direct underground connections to adjacent parking garages, giving a sense that the public was to arrive by car rather than on foot, just as years later in Paris Pei would develop underground bus access to the Louvre along with ceremonial entrance through the pyramid. Originally it was possible to enter the Everson from within the podium or on grade through the vestibule.
15. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Architecture: Object Lesson in Art and Museology," *New York Times*, October 29, 1968.
16. I. M. Pei, "'A Sophisticated Way of Looking Natural': The Architect I. M. Pei about His Friend Marcel Breuer," in von Vegesack and Remmele 2003, 170.
17. Pei in von Vegesack and Remmele 2003, 169–170.
18. Pei 2005. Thanks to Robert Haley of Ashley McGraw Architects, Syracuse, for information on the aggregate.
19. Pei recalls an active role in acquiring large-scale works for the museum, including the Morris Lewis that long hung in the atrium and a sculpture by Ernest Tino Trova, one of four pieces he chose directly and recommended to Sullivan.
20. I. M. Pei, quoted (without source) in Isabelle Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect: The Career and the Buildings* (New York, 2001), 106.
21. In his interview with the author in January 2005 Pei recalled his admiration for Le Corbusier's building and his disappointment when he visited it some years later on a trip to Japan.
22. In conversation (Pei 2005) Pei expressed his disappointment at the time that a smooth-planed ceiling linking two of the four boxes could not be realized with the concrete technology of the time. The pan ceiling was a compromise developed when it became clear that a precise rendering of the flat ceiling was impossible.

23. Pei cited the "pivotal" influence of a lecture Le Corbusier gave at MIT in 1935; see Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 96–97.
24. Stephen Rustow, conversation with the author, April 2004. This was confirmed by Pei in the January 2005 interview, in which he also remembered that the drawing was done by a young man named Henderson, then in the office.
25. Cited in *Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Handbook of the Collection* (Ithaca, 1998), 20.
26. Huxtable 1968.
27. Robert F. Gatje, with a foreword by I. M. Pei, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir* (New York, 2000), 196. This story was confirmed by former Breuer associate Paul Willen, who worked on the Whitney design (interview with the author, January 2008).
28. Quoted from "Notes for M.B.'s comments at the Presentation of the Project on November 12th," Marcel Breuer Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm, reel 5729, frame 431. Cleaned up, these notes later appeared in many publications, including the *AIA Journal*; see "Breuer's Approach to the Design of the Whitney Museum," *AIA Journal* 47 (April 1967): 67. They are also reprinted in Ezra Stoller, *Whitney Museum of American Art: Photographs by Ezra Stoller* (New York, 2000).
29. Sigfried Giedion, *The Beginnings of Architecture*, part 2 of *The Eternal Present: A Contribution on Constancy and Change*, Bollingen Series 35 (New York, 1964; Marcel Breuer, "The Contemporary Aspects of Pharaonic Architecture," preface to Jean-Louis de Cenival, *Living Architecture: Egyptian* (New York, 1964; translation of *Architecture universelle: Égypte, époque pharaonique* (Fribourg, 1964).
30. Marcel Breuer, "Matter and Intrinsic Form: The Second Annual Reed & Barton Design Lecture," printed pamphlet, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1963, n.p. (final page of printed pamphlet). The same lecture was delivered in November to Cornell University; a bound typescript, "Remarks of Marcel Breuer, December 4, 1963, Cornell University," is in the collection of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
31. I. M. Pei, conversation with the author at the symposium "The East Building in Perspective," National Gallery of Art, April 30, 2004, reiterating a point made in his interview in von Vegesack and Remmele 2003, 168.
32. "Modernes Mysterium oder nur Kunstkiste?," *Baumeister* 12 (December 1970): 1480–1483. For a provocative discussion of the possible relation of Breuer's forms to debates on art and commercialism, see K. Michael Hays, introduction to Stoller 2000, n. 21.
33. *Architectural Design* 36 (December 1966): 583.
34. Schmalenbach was defending Breuer's building against the proposed Michael Graves addition in 1986; quoted in Hyman 2001, 185.
35. Peter Blake, "Brick-on-Brick and White-on-White: The Walker Art Center May Be the Best Modern Museum in the U.S.," *Architecture Plus* 2 (July–August 1974): 40. Since this was written a succinct history has appeared; see Cathy Madison, *Walker Art Center: Art Spaces* (Minneapolis, 2005).
36. Barnes' diagram of museum circulation is published in *Edward Larrabee Barnes: Museum Designs* [exh. cat., Katonah Gallery] (Katonah, N.Y., 1987), n.p.
37. Blake 1974.