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Function or folly? Philip Johnson's pavilion for pre-Columbian art in Washington DC

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ABSTRACT

Nestled within the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington DC is a modern pavilion for viewing art, designed by Philip Johnson in 1963. Johnson utilised a circular module organised into a three-by-three grid, with an open courtyard in the centre. Each module is encased by glass walls, as Johnson wanted to merge nature and architecture. The building is outfitted in a minimal palette of luxurious materials, with an aesthetic that pulls stylistically from Johnson's travels. With no programmatic or budgetary constraints, Johnson was able to design conceptually, similar to his own projects where he designed small structures with little purpose, termed follies. Critically acclaimed yet lesser-known, the pavilion has not been analysed as a museum. As such, this article asks the question, is this structure merely a **folly** or does it **function** as a space to exhibit and view the pre-Columbian objects in the collection?

KEYWORDS

Museums; exhibit design; architecture; interior design; pre-Columbian art

1. Introduction

Nestled within the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks in the upper Georgetown neighbourhood of Washington DC is a modern pavilion for viewing pre-Columbian art, designed by Philip Johnson in 1963. This intimate museum is comprised of strong architectural concepts and ideas. The artwork exhibited in the pavilion is from the collection of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss, who gifted their collection of Byzantine art; their house collection of Asian, European, and American artworks; their interior furnishings; and their 1920s home and gardens to Harvard University, to become the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in 1940.[1] Their pre-Columbian collection, previously on display at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington DC, needed a space of its own.[2] It was then that Johnson received the commission of a lifetime, as he stated, 'Very few times you get a perfect client with a perfect program with all the money in the world'.[3] For the design of the pavilion, Johnson utilised a circular module organised into a three-by-three grid, with an open courtyard in the centre. Each module is encased by glass walls, as Johnson wanted to integrate the lush gardens with the pavilion, to merge nature and architecture (see Figures 1 and 2). The building is outfitted with a minimal palette of luxurious materials, while the overall aesthetic of the pavilion pulls stylistically from Johnson's travels to include Arabic and Islamic forms. With no programmatic or

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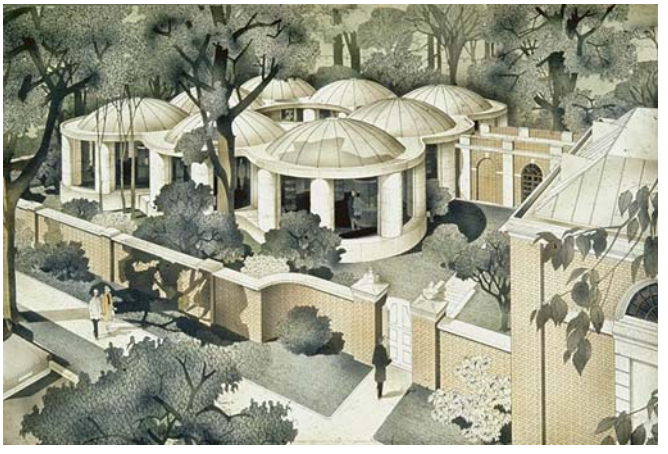

Figure 1. Exterior watercolour Helmut Jacoby for Philip Johnson Associates ca. 1960 (PC.J.073). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

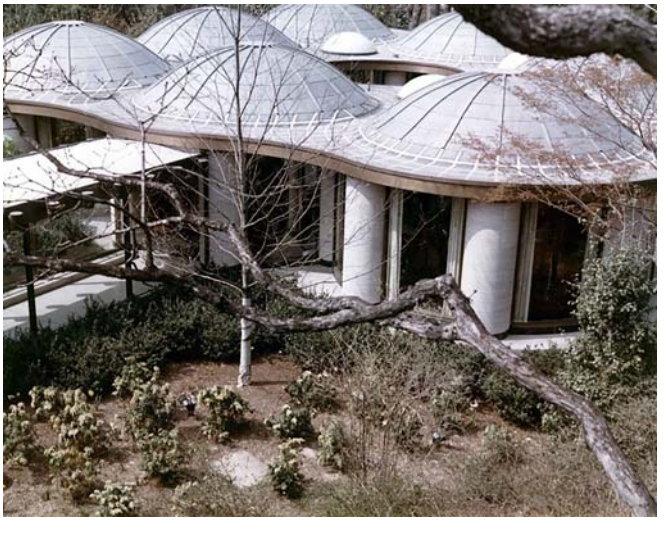

Figure 2. Exterior photograph 1963–70 (PC.J.162). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

budgetary constraints, Johnson was able to design conceptually, similar to the work at his 40+ acre site in New Haven, Connecticut, where he designed his iconic Glass House, as well as 13 other small buildings/structures, some with little or no real purpose that he termed 'follies'.[4]

Although one of Johnson's lesser-known works, the pavilion was critically praised by renowned architectural critic Ava Louise Huxtable, who stated 'The effect is of ancient treasures in a modern jewel box'.[5] Critique of the pavilion has focused mainly on the exterior, even though, as Johnson stated, 'It is only an interior'.[6] There has been little discussion about *how* this building works as a space to view art. As such, this article asks the

following questions: Does the pavilion, with its circular forms and glass walls allow for the art to be exhibited and viewed successfully? Does the strong geometry and modularity allow for flexibility? How does the transparency create different experiences throughout the day/night? And, how do the architectural elements enhance and/or disrupt the user's experience?

It became evident that while there are challenges with this non-traditional space, the building creates infinitely more dynamic and engaging experiences than a traditional box gallery. The modules provide a sense of organisation; the circular forms facilitate movement; the clear plastic exhibit configurations allow the users to flow around the art and examine it from many angles; and the connection to nature is heightened as the line between interior/exterior is blurred. While the whimsy and imagination of Johnson's pavilion certainly conjures a **folly**, a term used to refer to the somewhat frivolous, stylistic structures that dotted eighteenth-century English and French gardens, it is the format of the exhibition and the depth of the user experience—both influenced by the architecture—that allows the pavilion to **function** as a space to view art.

2. Analysis I: architectural concepts and ideas

Philip Johnson (1920–2004) was a key figure in architecture and art circles as the founding director of the architecture department at the Museum of Modern Art, where he curated ground-breaking exhibitions that first introduced modernism to the masses. He returned to his alma mater, Harvard University, in his thirties to study architecture, and went on to design a large portfolio of projects in a wide range of styles, specifically in his later, larger-scale work—as he famously stated 'I did some bad ones'.[7] However, a small number of his early works are critically acclaimed, and the pavilion is included, as New York Times architecture critic Paul Goldberger states in Johnson's obituary,

> Because of his frequent changes of style he was often accused of pandering to fashion and of designing buildings that were facile and shallow. Yet he created several designs, including the Glass House, the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, and the pre-Columbian gallery at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington that were widely considered among the architectural masterworks of the 20th century.[8]

Yet, with all the accolades, the pavilion is still mostly unknown, and it has not been widely discussed from the perspective of function.

Johnson had free reign to do as he wanted as he stated:

> I had none of those troubles I had with other buildings of a practical nature, because everything was taken care of … I didn't have to do toilets … I didn't have to do a door or a coat closet or an information desk. How could you imagine a better program?[9]

Other functions, such as art storage and mechanical work would be located under the pavilion, in the basement. In addition, Johnson took full advantage of unlimited funds provided by Mrs. Bliss, as he boasted, 'There was no budget. No budget at all. The critic Peter Blake once figured out it was the most expensive building per square foot ever built'.[10] Without standard restraints of practicality or budget, Johnson was able to push his work conceptually, with the result being described as a rare jewel, 'The new wing is a delicate gem—a modern glass and stone museum of intimate size and limitless

scope, blending the simple flowing circles on the interior with the intricate foliage patterns of the outdoors'.[11]

The pavilion's location is north of the original Bliss house, located within a part of the garden known as the copse (see Figure 3). This was actually the second location; the original design had the pavilion located south of the house. The move toward the rear was more private but decreased the overall size of the pavilion.[12] The agreed upon spot, surrounded by greenery, was important to Johnson as he wanted to eliminate the separation between interior and exterior, something he did successfully at his Glass House where the view is integral to the interior, and where he famously stated 'I have expensive wallpaper'.[13] Whereas the Glass House sits on a large grassy lawn and the trees are more distant, the pavilion is nestled tightly in the woods, so the scale of the 'wallpaper' is different, but the idea is the same. Johnson 'wanted the garden to march right up to the museum displays and become part of the glass walls and the sound of splashing water audible in the central fountain'.[14] Although vegetation does not grow up against glass, as Johnson had hoped, the greenery—mostly holly and evergreen for density—was planted as close to the pavilion as possible.[15] Even with this slight separation, there is a continuum of inside/outside, as the interior dissolves into the surrounding green environment.

The location in the woods also gave Johnson stylistic freedom to stray from the Georgian revival architecture of the existing Dumbarton buildings as Mrs. Bliss remarked,

> Mr. Johnson would have had to be tactful toward the things we built earlier. We wanted him to be wholly free, instead; so we thought of the surrounding shrub garden as a little device to make Johnson's design entirely independent of everything else that was there already.[16]

This allowed Johnson to make original choices for the design of the building, specifically his use of individual, modular forms capped with domes, two significant aspects of the building. These were inspired by a myriad of Johnson's sources, such as his admiration for early sixteenth-century Turkish architect Mimar Sinan and the Madrasa School in Istanbul with its clustered domed roofs.[17]

This cohesion of cultures creates a modern work with no singular architectural reference. Johnson was exploring these ideas in other buildings of the same time period, such as the Kreeger House (now a museum) also in Washington, DC, and completed in 1968, which shares a modular concept and domed roofs. This reveals that both of these ideas

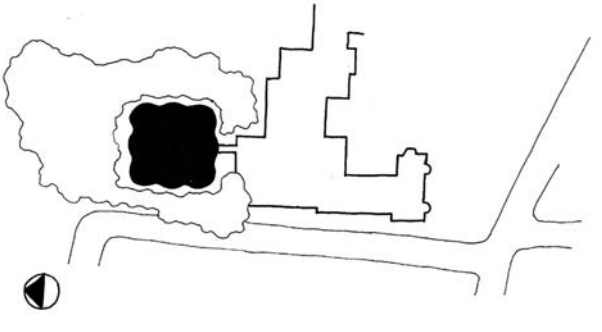

Figure 3. Site plan. Source: Drawing by Stephanie Travis, 2020.

were less about the function as a gallery or the art inside, but about the ideas that Johnson was exploring at the time. To gain approval from the DC Commission of Fine Arts in the historical Georgetown neighbourhood, one that is characterised by colonial architecture, Johnson added a brick wall along the property to hide the structure.[18] This addition only enforced Johnson's claim that

> … the building is not meant to be looked at from the outside. It's not really a building that would cause you to say, Oh there's an interesting building. But the minute you take an inside view you see what the idea is. It's a purely an 'inside' building. It has no facades at all.[19]

The core organising concept is a circular module of nine twenty-foot diameter circles set in a three-by-three grid (see Figure 4), overall forming a square. Each individual circle creates a smaller room or gallery within the larger pavilion. One enters from a glass bridge, a rectangular connector from the larger museum to the pavilion, into Gallery Eight. The user naturally progresses to the right into Gallery One to begin the experience (for wayfinding purposes, roman numerals are located on the columns indicating sequence). The reason for entering into Gallery Eight, as opposed to Gallery One, is that the entrance was moved during the design process from the top module to the centre module to avoid cutting down a large oak tree, and the roman numerals were never updated.[20] Early drawings show the entrance as a circular module, but this was later changed to a rectangular hallway. In the watercolour rendering (see Figure 1), it is shown in brick, and more classically detailed; but the final design (see Figure 2) is a glass hallway, with minimal detailing. This latter design, as built, is successful in that it serves merely as a link in which to transition between two very different buildings, and doesn't compete architecturally with either building. Once inside the pavilion, circulation is intuitive to the design, as the curvature of the glass encourages movement and provides a sense of fluidity as one moves within, and from, one gallery to the next (see Figure 5(a)).

Each circle is defined by eight circular columns; each column is three-feet, one-inch in diameter and covered in smooth Illinois Agatan marble. This marble is also located on

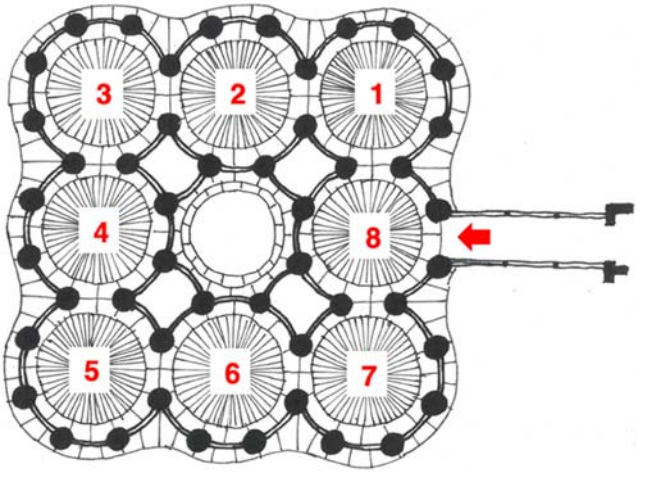

Figure 4. Floor plan. Source: Drawing by Stephanie Travis, 2020.

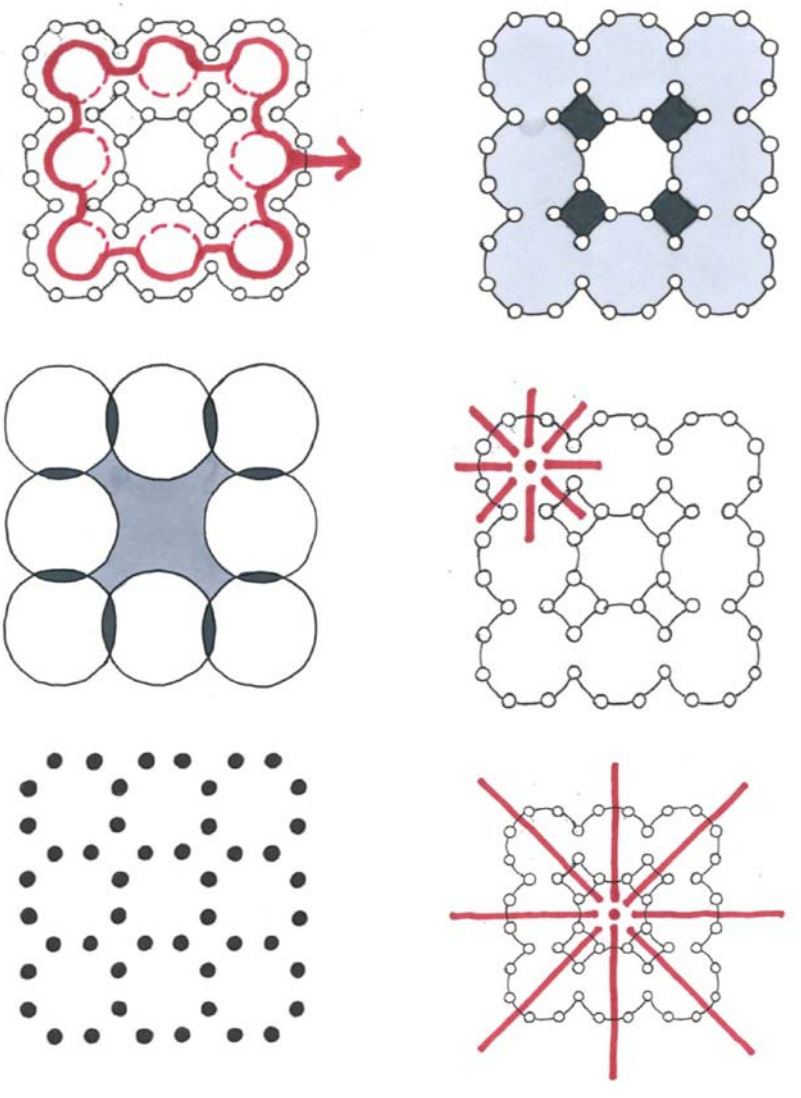

Figure 5. Diagrams show architectural concepts and ideas. Source: Drawings by Stephanie Travis, 2020. (a, left, top) Circulation, (b, left, middle) Overlapping, (c, left, bottom) Columns, (d, right, top) Hierarchy, (e, right, middle) Views: Circle, (f, right bottom) Views: Pavilion. Source: Drawing by Stephanie Travis, 2020.

the eight-foot two-inch soffit that encircles the dome. The dome is approximately four-feet, five-inches to its highest centre point, making the tallest point over twelve feet. Curved glass is located at the centreline of the columns (with the exception of the interior openings that lead from one circle to the next) so that the columns are one-half inside and one-half outside. The marble continues from inside to outside, as if the glass is non-existent. Circular columns were a part of Johnson's architectural vocabulary, and he used them in many of his projects including the Glass House, where he would increase their scale and thickness to create a sense of monumentality.[21] The floors are teak wood set in a radial pattern, further emphasising the circular form, with a surround of green

Vermont marble that enforces each gallery as an individual module; the marble also extends through the glass to the exterior, again diminishing the line between interior/exterior. Natural materials are joined by warm, bronze metal that frames the windows and outlines the domes. Up lighting runs along the lower edge of the dome and creates a uniform glow that illuminates the space, while bronze spotlights attached to the base of the domes provide focus on the exhibits. Overall, the materiality connects the interior to the exterior, reinforces the singularity of each module, and connects the modules to the larger whole.

Although pure in form, each circle connects with its adjoining circles; an overlapping attribute that enforces the idea of connection (see Figure 5(b)). This architectural concept of *overlapping circles* is further emphasised when looking at the columns; each circle 'shares' four to six columns (see Figure 5(c)), which visually illustrates the idea that these elements are not independent, but parts of a whole. The spatial idea *to overlap* encourages the user to move from one circle to the next, and provides a sense of connection between spaces. The emphasis on the user's sequence through the modules originated with Johnson's interest in history, as the movement through the circles took on a Baroque concept of moving through a space, and how it unfolds cinematically.[22] The three by three grid also creates three clearly delineated zones that set up an architectural hierarchy (see Figure 5(d)), the outer zone (in light grey) are the galleries; the inner zone (in white) is the exterior courtyard with a central fountain, and the in-between zone (in dark grey) is the 'leftover' space filled with vegetation.

Another unique aspect of the pavilion is that it facilitates the user to look both inward and outward. One of the ways the architecture allows the user to look inward, is that the nature of a circle is the centre; one naturally looks toward the centre of a circle (see Figure 5(e)), yet on a larger scale, the user looks internally towards the central courtyard (see Figure 5(f)). Therefore, this internal focus is seen both on a micro and macro scale, which is unusual for a glass building, where one would assume to have a predominantly external focus. The courtyard, seen from all angles, creates balance and provides a grounded element. The central fountain, surrounded by black slate set in a radial, brings a natural aspect to the experience and further enforces the idea of fluidity/

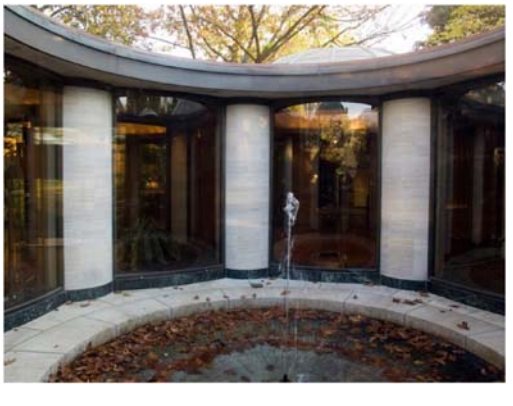

Figure 6. Exterior photograph of courtyard (AR.DP.MW.PC.042). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

movement through the use of water, on a timer when the pavilion is open, while also adding an acoustical element (see Figure 6). While the architecture facilitates the idea of looking inward, the use of glass walls and the placement of the pavilion on its site in the garden gives the user a multitude of views of nature. This organic response allows the viewer to look outward, and to feel a part of the dense, green landscape. All aspects of the architecture enforce this idea; even the overhang of the roof that connects the pavilions is an organic curve that mirrors the curved lines in nature (see Figure 7).

3. The collectors and the art

Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss began a lifelong interest in pre-Columbian art in Paris in 1912, where Mr Bliss was stationed as a diplomat. The Parisian artworld had gained an interest in non-Western art and, by 1850, the Louvre had collected and exhibited nearly 1000 pre-Columbian works, predominately from Mexico and Peru. This was the earliest non-Western art to be exhibited at the museum, although these works would later move to the Musee d'Ethnographie du Trocadero.[23] Aztec and Mayan sculpture was appreciated for its abstraction, symbolism, and beauty, and leading modern artists utilised its qualities in their own work. When Mr Bliss visited a Parisian art dealer in 1912, he stated, 'I had just come from the Argentine Republic, where I had never seen anything like these objects … (and) … that day the collector's microbe took root in … very fertile soil'.[24]

The Blisses' friend/art advisor, Royall Tyler, encouraged their first major purchase in 1913 of Inca gold and silver objects, including the tall, silver *Standing Man Figure*. Soon after, Mr Bliss added more objects to the collection, including a ten-inch stone *Hacha* and the sculptural *Standing Figure* made from green jade, both from Mexico and considered to be significant pieces in the collection (the latter is currently on display). During World War I, their collecting stalled, picking back up in 1929 as they resided in Buenos Aries, where Mr Bliss was then serving as the US ambassador. Over the years, they would purchase many pieces of gold, silver, and precious/semiprecious stones from private collector sales across Europe.[25] By 1933, the Blisses were back in Washington DC as residents in their home at Dumbarton Oaks. Discussion began with Harvard University, the alma

Figure 7. Exterior photograph (PC.J.054). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

mater of Mr Bliss, regarding setting up a museum and research centre for their collections, although this did not yet include the pre-Columbian works.[26]

Meanwhile, Harvard's Art Museum mounted an exhibition on pre-Columbian art which incorporated many of Blisses works, and by 1940, the gifts to Harvard of their home, collection, and research centre at Dumbarton Oaks was complete. As such, Mr Bliss refocused on his pre-Columbian collection. During World War II, the Blisses moved to California, where Mr Bliss purchased more works from a Los Angeles gallery, including two important pieces, *Net Jaguar Mural* and *Birthing Figure*, both currently on view in the pavilion. Interest in pre-Columbian art increased in the 1950s as more museums mounted exhibitions and more collectors competed for works. This led Mr Bliss to publish, in 1957, his collection in a large-format book titled *Pre-Columbian Art*. After lending works to various museums throughout the world, Mr Bliss was determined to find a semi-permanent place for his collection, which he found in the NGA.[27] After fifteen years at the NGA, the collection moved to its final home in the pavilion, in 1963, as Mr Bliss was 'eager to have the indigenous arts of the Americas represented permanently in the capital of this country'.[28]

Unfortunately, Mr Bliss died in 1962, and did not see the pavilion complete. Mrs. Bliss acquired a few works after his death, with some assistance, including *Relief Panel with Three Figures*, which is currently on display in the pavilion. In the late 1950s, attitudes toward collecting archaeological objects shifted and US laws changed regarding the importation of antiques. After 1970, it was difficult to legally export archaeological/cultural objects due to looting of sites to provide objects for sale.[29] The permanent collection, then and now, has over 700 objects, made from metal, stone, ceramics, architectural panels, and textiles.[30] As opposed to paintings and more traditional art that was the focus of most collectors, the fields in which the Blisses collected, pre-Columbian and Byzantine, were lesser known, with many possibilities for scholarship.[31] To this day, the focus continues to be on research, symposia, and publications.

4. Analysis II: a space to exhibit and view art

As discussed, the modular design of the museum creates eight, small circular 'rooms' that link to form an overall square. Johnson did not work with a program, although he addressed the nature of the scale of the art as he stated, 'It is a place to look at objects. And these rooms are small enough so you can. If you put these objects in a great big museum, they'd be lost'.[32] Johnson was a collector of twentieth-century American art, but was familiar with and interested in all periods and mediums; while he did not collect pre-Columbian art, he understood its importance and how it should be viewed.[33] Since the building does not have a literal connection to pre-Columbian culture, Johnson took into account the scale and materiality of the objects, as well as how the user would move through the spaces and view the objects.

Ultimately, it was the architecture that informed the overall organisation of the art—what pieces would be exhibited from the larger collection, what pieces would be located in which gallery, and how would they be exhibited. Mr Bliss preferred his collection to be viewed as art objects as it was displayed at the NGA, as opposed to chronological or encyclopaedic display as historical museums approach archaeological art. Elizabeth P. Benson (1924–2018), previously with the NGA, became the first curator of the Blisses'

pre-Columbian collection, and would provide the original exhibition design for the pavilion since exhibit designers did not yet exist as a profession. The curator would typically work with an installer, and in this case, Curator Benson also worked with Dumbarton Oaks Director John Thacher (see Figure 8).

The unusual layout of the pavilion was a challenge; after touring the site, Curator Benson exclaimed, 'It's a beautiful building. How do you put anything in it?'.[34] This led to a unique placement of art that was not a rigid system, but a mixture of region, chronology, and how to view the objects in the most compelling way. It was about creating a visual narrative that balanced the works based on material, locale, and content, as she stated, 'Well, we simply tried to make things look as good as possible and to think of them as handsome objects and to show them off to their best advantage'.[35] Scale was also an important consideration, as Curator Benson tried to create a balance with the placement of different sized objects, so that the viewers were drawn in by larger works, since the collection contained mostly smaller pieces.[36] That is why the substantial scaled art—the Palenque *Relief Panel with Three Figures* and the Teotihuacan *Net Jaguar Mural*—were significant to the original layout as they were placed on opposite ends, thus strengthening the whole, creating focal points, and engaging the user within the space.

The pavilion is currently exhibited in a similar manner; the works are organised around themes that connect locales and ideas, with a mix of scale and material. On view are 200 objects, approximately one-third of the collection, and the galleries are broadly organised by region and time period. As one naturally moves counter-clockwise through the galleries, they move south from Central Mexico to the Andes.[37] One can also move clockwise, and travel from north to south, which would not affect the narrative, since it is more geographical than chronological. The current procession of objects provides a strong method of organisation as the cultural identity of a location is integral to archaeological art, yet the selection of works within each theme and the way they are exhibited places importance on the objects as art, which would have pleased Mr Bliss.

Figure 8. Elizabeth P. Benson + James Mayo, first pre-Columbian collection installation, 1963 (LA.GP.38.06). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Reinforcing the architectural concept of *overlapping circles* is the circulation through the spaces; as the spatial verb *overlap* conjures movement. The circles and the curvature of the glass emphasise this idea, as one flows naturally around each module, from one to the next. The lack of ninety-degree angles creates a softer architecture and more fluid experience, and since the galleries are in a loop, it is easy to lose oneself in the experience, yet finish where one started. The natural circulation creates a meditative experience, where the focus is on art and landscape, not wayfinding or decision making, as larger, more complex museums require.

As for how the work would be exhibited, the decision was influenced directly by the architectural materials. It was determined that wood and metal, which were standard display case materials at the time, would clash with Johnson's teak and bronze palette; thus, the idea would be to 'float the objects in space'.[38] Staff at the Smithsonian were already working with clear plastic (although Dumbarton was the first to produce a full exhibit using this material) and Curator Benson worked with Thacher to further this idea of transparency while creating cases that varied in height and width (see Figure 9). This was an excellent material in that it created a three-dimensional view, where visitors could walk around the piece and explore it from different angles. Since many of these pieces are sculptural, they need to be experienced in this manner, as the 'front' does not tell the whole story. In an oral history project with Curator Benson in 2008, she doesn't mention selecting a transparent material as a means to allow the landscape to integrate with the exhibit, which is unusual since the pavilion's connection to the exterior is so dominant. This is exactly why these transparent cases work so well in this specific building; they allow the landscape to become a backdrop for the art. Viewing the objects against the greenery is very unique as most museums lack windows. As intended, the pieces appear to float, while enhancing the view and allowing natural light to permeate the galleries.

The cases were designed to be rectangular and were mostly placed in front of a curved wall, alluding to the building as an overall square. Curator Benson stated that 'you can get

Figure 9. Interior photograph showing display cases 1963–70 (PC.J.107). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

away with the occasional diagonal case, but most of the cases we put flush with what would be the straight wall'.[39] It is unclear if the idea of curved cases that mirrored the curvature of the walls, or even circular cases (located at the centre of the circle) were discussed, as that would provide more cohesion with the architecture, since the linear geometry of the cases contradict the circular architectural vocabulary. Interestingly enough, if one looks very closely at the watercolour rendering from 1960 (see Figure 1), the display cases represented inside the pavilion are curved and/or round. It is not clear if this decision was made by the artist to add interior detail, or if Johnson had this in mind for the case design. While the building is square in the overall plan, as seen on an architectural drawing, the visitor does not experience it as such. Curved cases that follow the radius of the architecture would speak the same architectural language of the pavilion, and add more cohesion to the overall design.

From 2004 to 2008 the pavilion underwent a major renovation (see Figure 10). The curator, Juan Antonio Murro, worked with a team of three researchers and an exhibit designer that followed the same principles from the original exhibit design, but altered the sizes and shapes of the cases. Before, the cases were shorter and many of the objects were laid horizontally, even if they were vertical objects. Now, the cases are six feet tall, so that the taller objects are displayed vertically.[40] Unlike many museums, the exhibit in the pavilion is fixed; once a hole is drilled in the plexiglass, it is permanent. However, there are temporary exhibits displayed outside of the pavilion in other spaces within the museum; these flexible spaces allow the curator to rotate other works from the collection that are not on permanent view in the pavilion.[41] On occasion, objects in the permanent collection are loaned to other museums; when this occurs, they are either replaced with another object that fits the case, or a temporary sign is placed in its absence.

One significant issue with the interior was the use of glass walls around the entire perimeter and exterior. Johnson was ahead of his time in his utilisation of glass in the totality of a building, as renowned Johnson scholar, Hilary Lewis, states,

Figure 10. Interior photograph pre-Columbian pavilion re-installation, 2008 (AR.DP.MW.PC.002). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

> The pavilion is a combination of Baroque and Sinan, but then to take these historical references and make it into glass, that's much more in line with his earlier work at the Glass House and his fascination with glass as a modern material.[42]

While this idea was strong conceptually, it did create issues with sunlight that was too strong at certain times of the day to view the exhibit, as well as temperature control. Curtains were ultimately added. At night, the drapes were drawn to distract viewers who walked toward the curved glass to see a distorted image reflected back at them. Spotlights were also added on the exterior to negate reflections.[43] In the oral history project, Curator Benson discusses the light from a user point of view, but not from the perspective of the artwork, so there did not seem to be large concern that the light would damage the work. This would be different if Benson were designing the exhibit now, since conservators play a large role in designing current exhibitions, and each artefact has their own set of rules—even metals and natural materials such as stone. As veteran Exhibit Designer Barbara Brennan states 'Climate control was not a priority when the pavilion was designed, and the damaging effects of moisture on various materials was not yet known'.[44]

In the 2008 renovation, all of the windows were replaced with UV filtered glass; while the original glass had a greenish hue, the updated glass casts a brownish hue. While the green tint fit nicely with the landscape, the brownish tint connects with the warm materials in the space, specifically the bronze metal that trims the windows. The curtains have been removed, as well as the textiles that were originally on display. When the museum is closed to the public, all of the objects are covered with fabric. Now, the glass walls are a design advantage as the light creates different experiences throughout the day, depending on time and movement of the sun. Curator Murro states,

> the space is very difficult to work with, but it shows the objects beautifully. You can come to this museum many times a year; one with snow, another with sunlight, another with rain … and everything is going to look different.[45]

The renovation's glass upgrade also helps with temperature control, and the new plastic cases, which also have a UV filter, provide more stability for the objects.

The domes, too, had unforeseen issues. If one speaks while standing directly under a dome, their voice will be amplified as if speaking into a microphone. The sound reflection can be quite startling, since it is reverberated with a great amount of clarity (although no one else will hear it that way besides the speaker). Another acoustical trick is if the user whispers softly under the dome, a user some distance away will hear the speaker clearly. This echo is the reason early photographs of the gallery show orchid plants in the centre (see Figure 11), which Benson used to discourage museum goers from speaking in the centre of the dome.[46] This was an awkward design fix that has been eliminated; round cases placed at the centre under each dome would have been a better solution. While users were unsettled by the acoustical issues, Johnson was not surprised at all; on the contrary, he seemed to be amused by it when he stated, 'Oh, isn't that marvelous? I knew that would happen, but I didn't know what fun it would be'.[47] Looked at from Johnson's perspective, the echo creates an unexpected experience which is almost otherworldly. This detachment from reality is further heightened by the lighting in the domes. A continuous strip of artificial up lighting runs along the bronze lower edge of the dome, casting a soothing glow into dome's interior and illuminating the entire module, creating a dream-like experience. During the 2008 renovation, the lighting was upgraded to LED lights;

Figure 11. Interior photograph showing plant in centre ca. 1963 (PC.J.167). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Curator Murro recalls it took some time to match the look of the original lighting, which makes the ceiling under the dome appear to be infinite (see Figure 12). 'We tried five different lights to replicate the old look, where the roof just disappears'.[48]

A striking omission in the exhibit, then and now, is the lack of graphics in the pavilion. Since there are no walls for information, the graphics would need to be hung from the ceiling, on floor supports, or in/on cases. And while there are labels in the cases next to the art, there is not a lot of text to provide the overall context.[49] Not all museums find this tactic necessary, some have ample text and some have little to no text. In the pavilion, the addition of signage would disrupt the elegance of the architecture. Curator Murro revealed that after the 2008 renovation they were able to put much more information on labels, since the cases provided higher space for objects, and lower space for labels.[50] Aside from graphics, museums have relied on optional audio tours or exhibit booklets; now that most users have smartphones, viewers can utilise the Dumbarton Oaks website for more information while they explore the galleries.

5. Conclusion

When the pavilion opened, critics called the building 'so delightful that it competes with the pre-Columbian art'.[51] That is what makes this building so complicated to critique, as many of the elements that make this building wonderful—the modular organisation, strong geometric forms, transparency, and domed ceilings—also create challenges in curating and exhibiting art in these spaces. However, the idea of engaging with these objects in these intimate spaces, surrounded by nature—where one can view the artwork three-

Figure 12. Interior photograph showing dome (PC.J.080). Source: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

dimensionally, undistracted by elaborate cases or graphics—allows one to lose oneself in the process. Through its architecture and materiality, visitors are encouraged to reflect internally and externally, as they move throughout the overlapping circles, and connect with art and landscape. Clear, acrylic cases allow the objects to levitate, bringing a clearer focus on the works. Even the ceilings disappear under the domes.

Johnson integrated Arabic and Islamic forms with the experiential aspect of the baroque, and a sense of geometry from modernism. Aside from Johnson's acknowledgment that the Blisses' pre-Columbian collection was mostly small in scale, he did not overthink the function of a museum in his design. Instead, his focus was on spatial concepts such as scale, overlapping spaces, and movement—architectural ideas that emphasise how the user moves from one module to the next. The configuration of transparent circles is what makes the pavilion special; not only does the pavilion show the art beautifully, but it creates an unique experience for the user.

It is not often that architecture has such a profound effect on the viewing of art. Curator Murro describes the pavilion as 'peaceful and serene … an intimate space to explore the art and architecture by oneself or in a small group'.[52] Although Johnson designed the pavilion without a program, the spaces exceed in their ability to function. And, while he referred to many of his geometric, historically-inspired pavilions as follies, which are interesting to look at and sometimes interact with, but served no real function, this building—and its convergence of art, architecture, and landscape—has true purpose.

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