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Piano's Grand Opus

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Piano's Grand Opus

By almost any measure, Renzo Piano's recently unveiled Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago should be counted a grand success. Ten years in the planning and execution, and carrying a price tag of close to \$300 million, it is already immensely popular with the public, touted by Chicago's civic leaders, and widely praised by the critical establishment. The reaction is understandable, for the building is replete with those qualities that one associates with Piano's work at its most paradigmatic – an almost classical lightness, elegance, and grace. In many ways, however, this is precisely the difficulty. Piano's relentless tact seems strangely misplaced in Chicago, a city whose beauty was once famously likened by Nelson Algren to that of “a woman with a broken nose.”¹ If anything, Piano's building suffers from an excess of loveliness; in a city that is stubbornly proud of its rough-hewn, broad-shouldered charm, the building's ingratiating, fragile beauty seems curiously out of place.

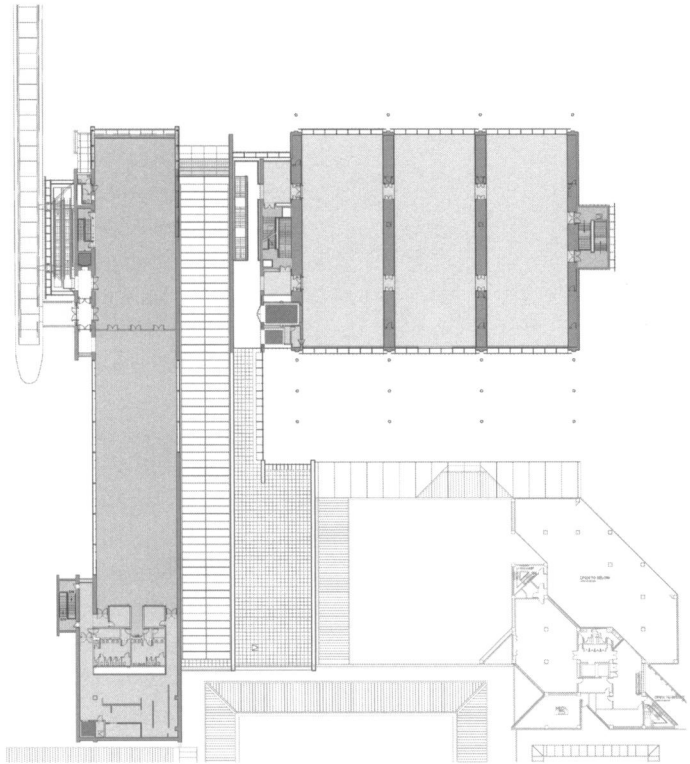
1. “Like a woman with a broken nose, you may find lovelier lovelies. But never a lovely so real.” From Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951).

Of course, this is the Chicago of the 21st century, a city in the process of reimagining itself. Its legacy of working-class toughness and confrontation, much like its tradition of social and labor activism, seems a rapidly fading memory. This is the Chicago of Richard M. Daley, not Richard J. Daley. It is the city of Obama, rather than Jesse Jackson, in which tensions are elided and controversy assiduously sidestepped. Piano's refined if somewhat rigid building – resolutely pleasant and inoffensive, rather than daring or disjunctive – is a logical and unsurprising match for this new milieu.

The new wing goes well beyond simply being an expansion of the museum's current floor plan – although it certainly does an admirable job in that respect, providing an additional 264,000 square feet of exhibition space and educational facilities on three floors; it also involves a radical reorientation of the Art Institute's focus and identity. Vastly increasing the proportion of gallery space devoted to art since 1900, the Modern Wing also provides a new entrance to the museum, one that pivots away from the busy commercial thoroughfare of Michigan Avenue and orients itself toward the city's new, garish heart – the nearby Millennium Park. The addition was originally intended to extend the Art



**RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP,
MODERN WING, ART INSTITUTE OF
CHICAGO, AERIAL VIEW. PHOTO:
ANDREW CAMPBELL PHOTOGRAPHY.
COURTESY OF THE ART INSTITUTE
OF CHICAGO. BELOW: THIRD FLOOR
PLAN WITH BRIDGEWAY LANDING
(LEFT). DRAWING COURTESY OF
RPBW.**



RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP,
NICHOLS BRIDGEWAY, MODERN
WING, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.
PHOTO: JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS.

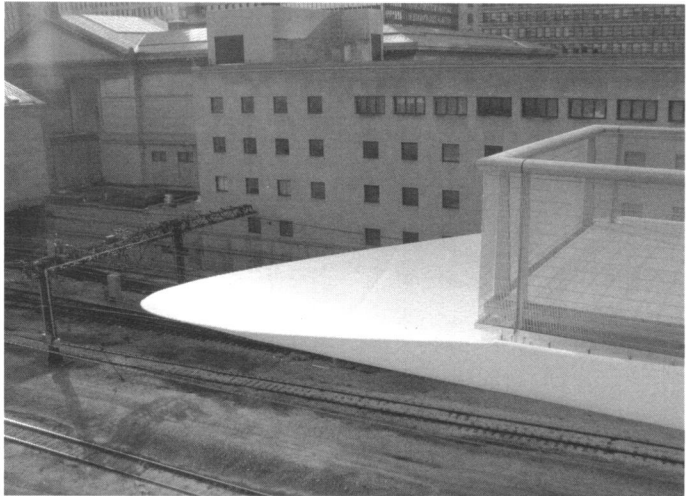


Institute to the south; the completion of Millennium Park in 2004, however, prompted the decision to reorient the project in such a way as to integrate it with its neighbor to the north.

To effect this joining, Piano fashioned the Nichols Bridgeway, a 620-foot-long pedestrian ramp that spans Monroe Street and connects the west pavilion of the museum directly to Millennium Park. The somewhat uninspired, slightly rounded form of the walkway – vaguely modeled on that of a racing scull – cannot help but suffer by comparison with the ecstatic coils of Frank Gehry’s own nearby pedestrian bridge, which links the park to the lakefront. And yet it serves its purpose, insinuating itself deeply inside the park, rather like the proboscis of an oversized mosquito, and siphoning off a steady stream of tourists. It seems clear that the Nichols Bridgeway was a late addition to the Modern Wing’s design, and it remains in some respects the most problematic and incongruous element of Piano’s project. It is perhaps also the most telling, foregrounding as it does the imperative to capitalize on the popularity of the city’s new would-be centerpiece.

The Art Institute stands on either side of the tracks of a working commuter railway, which is easily visible as one ascends the pedestrian bridge and approaches the building itself. The tracks are bridged by Gunsaulus Hall, a part of the museum’s previous structure that was renovated by Piano during the recent overhaul, and that now serves to link the Modern Wing with the rest of the museum complex. The steel rails of the tracks provide an explicit reminder of Chicago’s industrial past, as well as a prosaic utilitarian counterpoint to the delicate steel columns that support the museum’s floating roof and the slender metallic shafts in the

RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP,
“NOSE” OF THE NICHOLS BRIDGEWAY
WITH COMMUTER RAIL TRACKS THAT
RUN ALONGSIDE AND UNDER THE
ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. PHOTO:
JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS.



glass facade. Perhaps not incidentally, the tracks also highlight a general shift in the way that cities have made use of cultural institutions in the wake of deindustrialization. No longer valued chiefly as a means to mollify the dehumanizing effects of industry, culture – particularly in the form of tourism – is now deployed as a replacement for industry. The necessary corollary is the development of highly choreographed tourist destinations, like Millennium Park, as a replacement for genuinely civic, democratic spaces. The protesting crowds that filled nearby Grant Park during the 1968 Democratic convention, or the celebratory ones that gathered there to bear witness to Obama’s election victory in 2008, for example, make a marked contrast with those tourists who obsessively flock to Anish Kapoor’s mirrored *Cloud Gate*, the city’s symbolic omphalos, to disappear into the well of their own distorted self-regard. In this context, the museum’s emphasis on integrating itself into the cultural playground of Millennium Park is a revealing, if unsurprising, indication of shifting institutional priorities.

ARRIVING

Alighting from the footbridge onto the museum’s rooftop sculpture terrace – which also houses the museum’s restaurant – one is treated to a panoramic view in which the confusion and noise of the city streets are obscured. Instead, one gazes at the painstakingly ordered park across the way, the bright metallic petals of Gehry’s Jay Pritzker Pavilion arcing from among the greenery, and the city skyline beyond – beautiful, symmetrical, and distant. Surveying the landscape from a carefully modulated remove, one cannot help but feel imbued with a delightful sensation of sovereignty, euphoria,



RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP,
GRIFFIN COURT, LONGITUDINAL
VIEW, MODERN WING, ART
INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. PHOTO:
JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS.

and lightness. It is difficult to refuse the invitation to reproduce the meticulously framed view in miniature; digital cameras click incessantly. Everything seems to be in its proper or correct place – comprehensible, synthesizable, and well-proportioned. Contradictions disappear. As one hovers lightly above the world below, it seems ungenerous but necessary to ask: What is wrong with this picture?

The rooftop terrace and adjacent restaurant are open to the public. To reach the museum proper, however, one must first descend via escalator or elevator to ground level and pass through the glass-enclosed atrium of the wing's Monroe Street entrance. In the liminal space of the atrium, the transparency of the facade, dissolved in lustrous reflection, draws the exterior world into the interior. Importantly, the interior of the wing is, in turn, clearly visible from the park across the street, increasing the sense of permeability between the two spaces. The vocabulary invoked is one of openness, transparency, and accessibility, suggesting a political ideology of democracy, equality, and community. However, this thin veneer of rhetoric cannot mollify the economic reality; in the wake of the new wing's debut, the price of admission has increased by 50 percent, leaping from \$12 to \$18. Paradoxically, openness and accessibility do not come without a price.

Leaving the atrium, one enters the limestone-lined expanse of Griffin Court, a cavernous north-south hallway that, with its vaulted glass roof hovering three stories above, seems a direct echo of the glass-roofed passageways of 19th-century Parisian arcades. The similarity is driven home by the manner in which the galleries themselves – temporary exhibition spaces on one side, photography and new media on the other, and a floating, cantilevered staircase leading to galleries on the second and third floors – are hidden from view on either side of the wide central passage. The mood that the strangely hollow space engenders is akin to the familiar, vaguely pleasant anticipation of the mall shopper. Piano's building is the product of an age in which museums aspire to the clean, commercialized nonspace of airports, which are themselves increasingly indistinguishable from shopping malls, each with their food courts, gift shops, and cafés.

Here, however, this sensation is perhaps attributable less to the presence of the *de rigueur* gift shop, restaurant, and café than it is to the manner in which the art itself is offered as an enticing commodity for visitors' consumption. The pilgrimage that one must make to reach the galleries – having crossed the Nichols Bridgeway, descended from the rooftop



FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES,
UNTITLED (STRANGE MUSIC), 1993,
WITH CHICAGO BEYOND. MODERN
WING, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.
PHOTO: JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS.

terrace, made one's way through the atrium and Griffin Court, and climbed the stairway – is extensive. Piano has spoken of placing the art at a deliberate distance from the entrance in an attempt to increase the sense of sacredness associated with the experience of viewing the object. For the less metaphysically inclined, however, this extended anticipation perhaps bears a closer resemblance to the pleasure of consumption that suffuses the moment before a sale is consummated. It is an axiom that one loses all interest in an object once the purchase has been made; the art here functions ideally in this regard, placed tantalizingly “out of reach.” As material objects, the artworks are vulnerable to deterioration and must be shielded from the ravaging effects of time, light, and temperature. As images and experiences, they remain insubstantial and unobtainable, yet they are sensuously present and subject to desire. Beneath the gentle touch of Piano's filtered sunlight, these pieces are seemingly immune to the material wear and tear that more prosaic commodities are subject to. The Modern Wing functions, in this regard, as an extension of the display case or shop window, a sparkling jewel box to house the city's baubles.

During the day, the galleries on the north side of the building are flooded with light from windows that stretch from floor to ceiling, and in the evening the glass facade radiates the teal of an aquarium. As the window screens are raised and lowered in response to automated light sensors, they intermittently unveil views of the city in the near distance, with pedestrians visible in the streets below. The vistas are striking. With its windows, the building frames views of the lakefront skyline and the park, but it serves, as well, to bracket the visitor's view of the museum's collection. Seeing one's image reflected both in the iridescent mirror of the city skyline and the imagined eyes of the passersby triggers sensations of one's own experiences at a second remove, as if from outside of one's self. Unfortunately, this all too often subsumes the art in the overall spectacle. The world beyond the museum insinuates itself between the viewer and the art, diminishing the possibility for intimacy. Dangling a string-of-lights sculpture by Felix Gonzalez-Torres in front of a floor-to-ceiling window, for example, makes for a striking view but deprives the work entirely of its elegiac tone. Even when the art is shown to greater effect, the implications are troubling. Standing in one of the broad-windowed galleries that overlook the park and taking in at a single glance the sunlight catching on both the Gehry band shell without and a brightly polished Brancusi within, it is difficult to escape



RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP, FLYING CARPET (INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR VIEWS), MODERN WING, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. PHOTO ABOVE: JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS. PHOTO RIGHT: DAVE JORDANO. COURTESY OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

the impression that the art is simply another glossy advertisement for Chicago's wealth and power. By deploying the city skyline as a ubiquitous picture-postcard backdrop for the art, Piano's building effectively reinforces this reading.

One explicit motivation for Piano's design was to bring a degree of lucidity and precision to what has, over the years since the Art Institute first opened in 1893, become a perplexing warren of disparate additions. Applying this principle of clarity and order has its virtues, and yet the possibility of getting lost brings with it the opportunity for discovery, mystery, and surprise, and a large measure of the charm of the Art Institute's older buildings is found in their occasionally frustrating, but ultimately endearing labyrinthine quality. This is supplanted, in Piano's wing, by a slightly oppressive lucidity. Here, the visitors scroll through the art as if through an iPod playlist, their passage facilitated by the ever-present sheen. Piano's building is less a maze for capturing the imagination than it is a circulatory system for smoothly processing visitors, money, light, and affect with as little friction as possible. Toward that end, the endless transformations of light and shadow and the delicate sensitivity to varying meteorological conditions create an atmosphere that is both in perpetual flux and relentlessly uniform.

Light is in many ways the *raison d'être* of the entire project, its guiding logic, and the source of its greatest technological challenge. The "flying carpet" – Piano's pet name for the array of light baffles and screens that hovers above the building – is, in its own right, a visually stunning work of art. Its white canopy of broad, smooth blades – like the wing flaps of an airplane in perpetual flight – has a beauty and elegance that is inseparable from its utility. An intricate system of automatically controlled dimmers, fabric scrims,

and translucent window shades assists in integrating natural and artificial illumination, capturing the soft northern light and adjusting in response to changes in the surrounding environment. Not coincidentally, in a city that has increasingly placed a premium on environmental sustainability, the design is also energy efficient and ecologically sound – the building has earned a silver LEED certification. Perhaps even more important, the system is finely calibrated to allow the artworks to luxuriate in sunlight while nonetheless remaining insulated from its deleterious effects. The manner in which the museum’s design reconciles this contradiction between deterioration and display – as it attempts to negotiate parallel tensions between exterior and interior, public and private, natural and artificial – is perhaps its most interesting achievement. Paradoxically, the “natural” light itself becomes the explicit object of technological reinvention and the building’s most rarified and expensive material. The building functions, in effect, as a vast lens, a tool for sculpting, filtering, and refining the light to a sublime, harmless essence.

In the luminous upper galleries, a strange reversal takes place; one develops the suspicion that it is not so much the light that is in service to the art as it is the art that is in service to the light, deployed to make its beauty manifest. Inverting the impressionist strategy of taking painting out of the studio into the natural world, the Modern Wing incorporates the landscape, the changing skies, and the gradations of shifting light into the museum itself. Largely denuded of color and mass, the building aspires to the condition of the light that it captures, vanishing into an ephemeral shimmer. This aspiration is understandable in an architect well acquainted with the cerulean skies of Italy and the rose-tinted hues of Paris. The light of the American Midwest, however, is not the light of Italy. As the summer skies give way to the dense, leaden clouds that are the hallmark of Chicago’s autumn and seemingly interminable winter, one anticipates that the building will undergo a corresponding transformation. Billowing snows, icy winds, and deserted streets will perhaps impart a measure of solemnity and intimacy that is thus far lacking, and it is to be hoped that the new structure’s openness to its surroundings will take on a very different quality when the world that is framed in its panoramic views is a tableau of bleakness and vulnerability.

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