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Frankfurt and Atlanta: Richard Meier as a Designer of Museums

PETER CANNON-BROOKES

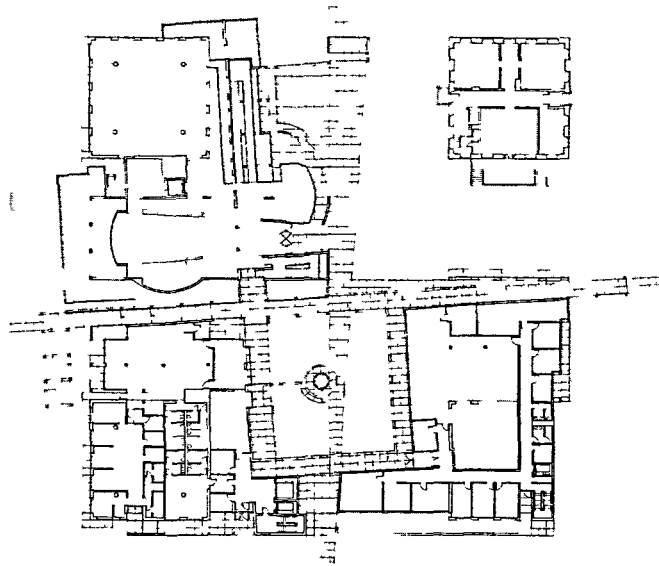
Now that the High Museum, Atlanta, and the Museum für Kunsthandwerk in Frankfurt-am-Main are completed, and plans are well advanced for the J. Paul Getty Fine Arts Centre in Los Angeles, it is an appropriate moment to examine more closely the work of Richard Meier as a designer of museums. Add the recently completed additions to Des Moines Arts Center, Iowa, and it is immediately apparent that museum buildings have become an increasingly important sector of his work. Indeed Richard Meier himself has stated: 'If I had my choice, I would do just museums. You can't make the same kind of spatial explorations elsewhere . . . an office building restricts you to the lobby, a house is totally private', adding subsequently: 'Most museums give you only one way to look at a work of art. Our goal [apropos the High Museum] was to provide an environment where you can see art in different ways.' A visit to a museum designed by Richard Meier is certainly a special experience, and the nature of that experience has a more general significance for museum architecture in the 1980s.

In the final analysis it is the complex triangular pattern of relationships between the work of art on display, the visitor, and the environment within which this confrontation takes place, that depends substantially on the museum designer. Apart from the strictly functional role of the building in providing an appropriate physical environment for the conservation of that work of art and a modicum of bodily comfort for staff and the visitor, the building also prepares the visitor for the intellectual or spiritual experience of confronting that work of art. Furthermore, the relationship established then between the work of art and the visitor depends upon the sum total of all the visual impressions

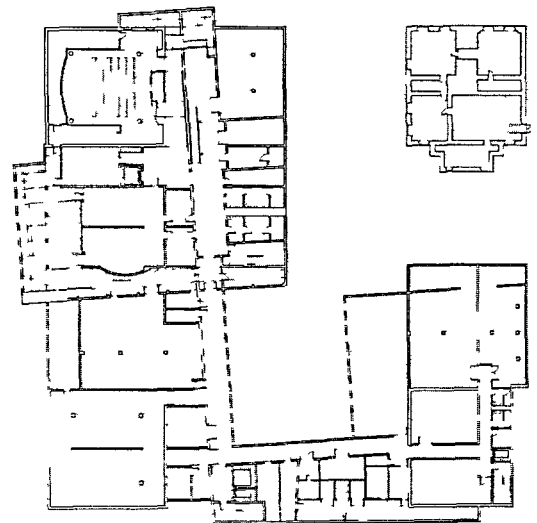


1. The new Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt-am-Main seen across the River Main with the Schaumainkai beneath the trees. The old Villa Metzler on the left and the Museum für Volkerkunde on the right established the axis on which Richard Meier's new building is established

received previously, particularly those received most recently. The style adopted for the framing of a painting or for the display of an object, reflecting faithfully a particular system of values—or lack thereof—influences the response of the visitor, usually unconsciously, just as the character of the lighting, the interior design of the room, the route taken through the building, and the treatment of its exterior all make their impact. The architect designing an art museum is thus in a position of great power, and the intellectual environment which he establishes through his design can provide a fertile seed-bed for a dialogue between the visitor and the individual work of art or, at worst, so impede it as to render the experience virtually meaningless or even false. On this basis the assessment of the quality of a museum design is not merely a question of an individual subjective response but the product of rigorous objective analysis, in which the critic is concerned with the totality of the aesthetic experience as well as the efficient operating of the functional systems.

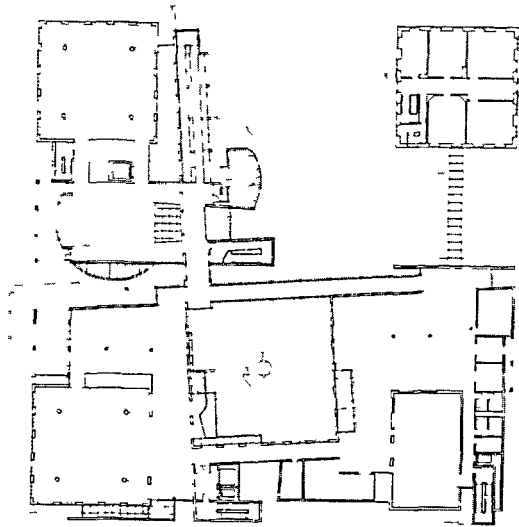


2. Ground plan of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk at ground level, with the Villa Metzler top right. Its square ground plan provides the module for the three quadrants and the open courtyard.

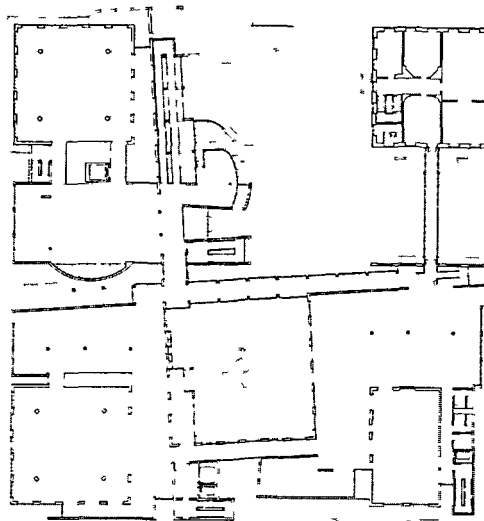


3. Ground plan of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk at basement level revealing very clearly the interaction of the two grids set at a $3\frac{1}{2}$ degree angle to each other.

Richard Meier grew up in New Jersey and studied at Cornell University before working as an apprentice with several New York architectural firms, including Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (1960) and Marcel Breuer (1961–1963). In 1963 he established his own office and attracted attention with a series of distinguished private houses and the highly regarded Bronx Developmental Center (1970–1977). Earlier in his career he had considered taking up painting seriously, but came to the conclusion that de Kooning's influence on him was too great; thus Meier has always felt a special affinity for painting and painters. Apart from renovating a loft to serve as combined living and working area for Frank Stella (1965), and a second loft to accommodate the curator William Rubin and his collection of contemporary paintings and sculpture (1966), he had entered a design for the University Arts Centre at Berkeley (1965, with John Hejduk and Robert Slutzky) which proposed a very different solution from that selected, and proposals for a museum of Modern Art at the Villa Strozzi in Florence (1973). Something



4. Ground plan of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk at second-floor level. The north side of the courtyard is closed in by a bridge at this and first-floor level.



5. Ground plan of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk at first-floor level with the bridge linking the SE quadrant with the Villa Metzler.

of a breakthrough was achieved with the design of the Opening Exhibition of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York in 1976, organized by Hans Hollein under the title of *Man TransForms*, and of the New York School Exhibition in the State Museum, Albany the following year. For the former, Richard Meier created a 10ft cubic lattice from an interlocking metal grid system normally used for shelving, on which visitors hung cardboard alphabet letters, thereby creating new systems of spatial connections. With the virtue of hindsight, this almost *jeu-d'esprit* is revealed as an important forerunner of his more recent designs, whilst the richly varied sequence of spaces created for the New York School Exhibition clearly revealed his talent for the display of large abstract paintings. As Thomas B. Hess remarked:

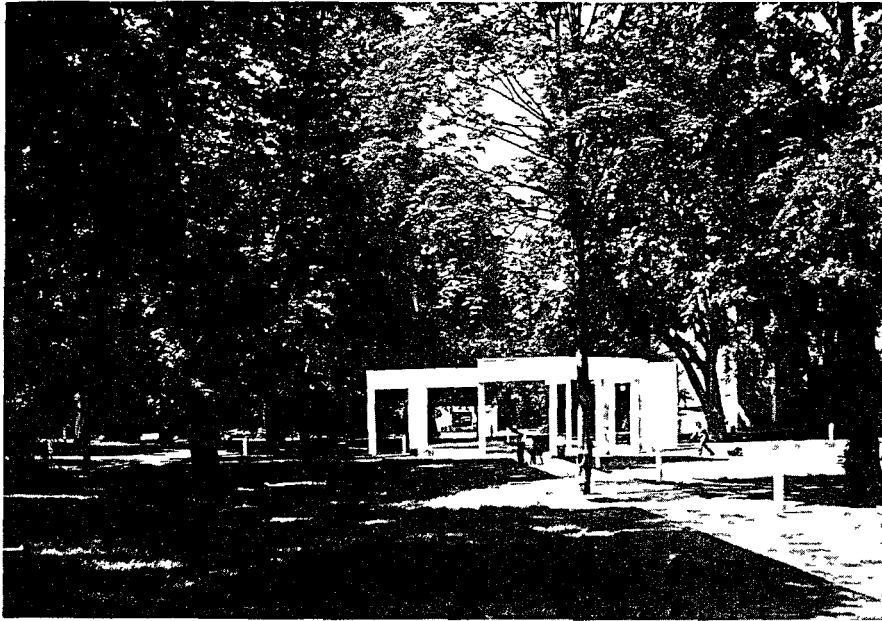
Architect Richard Meier undertook the task of carving some order out of the cavernous area assigned to the moderns. His solution is a grid of windowed rooms, streets, avenues, colonnades, and the long walls which both tie the raw volumes down to human scale and offer a chance to display giant paintings at their best (*New York Magazine*, 4 October 1977).

A highly developed internal urbanism has remained an important element in Meier's designs.

Richard Meier's selection for the limited competition for the Museum für Kunsthandwerk was consequently based on a solid foundation of achievement in the museum field, and the sophistication of the planning embodied in his entry reinforced the organizers' confidence. Notwithstanding strong competition from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown (also from the USA), Hans Hollein (Austria) and Hölzinger & Goepfert, Heinz Mohl, Novotny & Möhner and Trint & Quast (Federal Republic of Germany), the first prize was awarded to Richard Meier (April 1980), with the second prize shared between the Venturi team and Hans Hollein, and on 28 October 1980 Richard Meier was formally commissioned to proceed with the preparation of his plans. The very detailed brief provided by the curatorial staff and the competition organizers was rooted in the history of the collections and the complex requirements of the site, and both require careful consideration.

The origins of the Frankfurt Museum für Kunsthandwerk are to be found in the Kunstgewerbeverein (Association for the Applied Arts) founded in 1877, whose museum was taken over by the City of Frankfurt in 1921. From the outset the intention was to assemble a representative collection 'to stimulate craftsmen and industry', and this was housed in a purpose-built museum in the Neue Mainzer Strasse which was destroyed in 1944. In 1965 the collections were found a temporary home in the Villa Metzler on the Schaumainkai (built in 1803) and by the time of the competition they amounted to some 30 000 items. Including works in wood, metal, glass, ceramics, textiles, paper and other materials, the collections are divided into four sections—European, Islamic, Eastern Asiatic, and Book Art and Calligraphy. Of these the European section is numerically much the largest, with particularly important collections of 12th–14th century bronze artefacts, 16th and 17th century silver, medals and plaquettes of all periods, exceptionally fine porcelain and Venetian glass, and the finest collection of furniture in the Federal Republic. The remaining three sections, although modest in size, include major groups of works, and the combination of the conservation and display requirements needed for the permanent collections, together with the separate facilities specified for temporary exhibitions and services, provided the functional core of the design by Richard Meier.

Equally important for the evolution of his plans were the particular requirements imposed by the site and the future role to be played by the Villa Metzler, both in relation

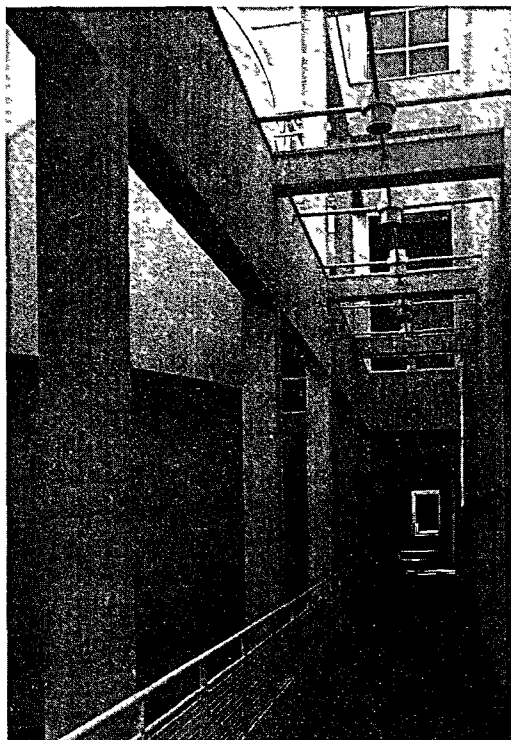


6. Centrally placed on the E–W pedestrian route through the centre of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk to the Museum für Volkerkunde is Richard Meier's elegant feature.

to the new museum to be built in its garden and to the series of museum buildings already in existence or planned for the Schaumainkai. In his *Architect's Statement (Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt am Main, 1985, p. 63)* Meier sets down his belief that:

An architect's preoccupation is not with abstract space, but with space whose order and definition are related to light and, as the great American architect Louis Kahn has said, to 'the meeting with nature in order to be'. In making space, I try to invest each design with a coherent system of values, a reflection of my desire to organize the environment aesthetically . . . My primary ordering principles aspire to this form of purity. I rigorously manipulate forms of light, changes of scale, points of view, movement and statics in search for clarity. Here the role of the architect is to encourage people to use the museum to experience the art of architecture as well as the art displayed. The Museum is committed to cultural education, to a search for 'light'. . . .

In seeking to achieve these ideals, Richard Meier is entirely consistent and the key is the old Villa Metzler which provides the basic modules for the grid of the ground plan and the articulation of the elevations. The cubical Villa Metzler, aligned parallel to the immediately contiguous section of the bank of the River Main, and the location of the mature trees in its garden, provided basic parameters, and in the evolution of the ground plan the square site of the Villa Metzler occupies the north-eastern corner of a grid 4 units wide in each direction (4×17.60 m). Furthermore, this basic module, itself divided into a grid of 16 units square, echoes the basic proportions of the classicizing elevations of the Villa Metzler and its fenestration, whilst $17.60 \text{ m} \div 16$ provides the 1.10 m module of the metal panels cladding the exterior of the extension. Owing to the curve of the river bank and the desirability of aligning the new building with the Museum für Volkerkunde on the western boundary of the garden, as well as with the façade of the Villa Metzler,

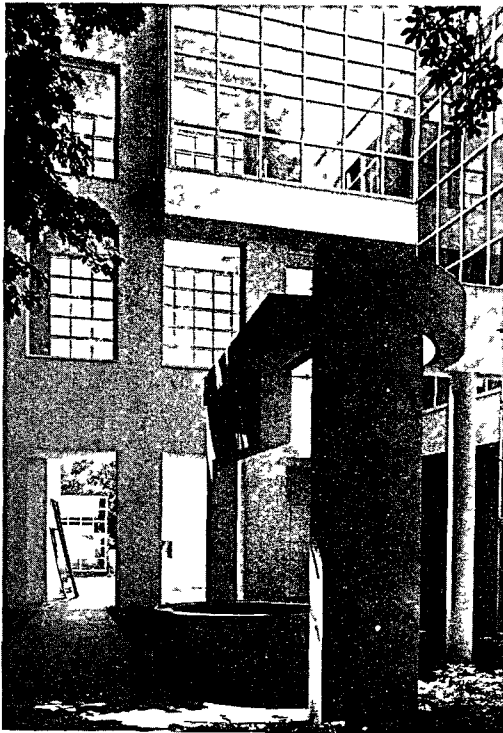


7. The E–W pedestrian route passes at ground level between the NW and SW quadrants of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk and alongside the sunlit courtyard in the heart of the building.

the grid is pivoted on the north-east corner of the Villa Metzler through $3\frac{1}{2}$ degrees. This in turn sets the alignment of an E–W pedestrian route across the site, which provides the main E–W axis through the garden and the feature at its centre to the Museum für Volkerkunde, and, at the heart of the new building, intersects with the N–S route linking the Metzlerstrasse with the Schaumainkai and the Eisernen Steg across the River Main.

Such pedestrian routes, intended to encourage new patterns of movement through city centres, are often included in the specifications for architectural competitions in the Federal Republic, and in the Neue Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, the pedestrian route across the site is a key element in James Stirling's design. The intersections of the two grids and the pedestrian routes establish the principal elements of the ground plan of Meier's new building, with an open courtyard at the centre of the composition. Set at a 3.5 degree angle to the Villa Metzler, it echoes its square plan, and as a cubical 'empty' space open to the sky it establishes a subtle counterpoint with the solid cube of the old building. As 'both a sympathetic and a respectful extension of the existing nineteenth-century Villa and a thoughtful twentieth-century complex' (Richard Meier, 1985, *op.cit.*) the brilliant concept and the elegant ground plan cannot be faulted, and 'the art of architecture' is in these respects displayed with great sophistication.

The very detailed brief for the building had been evolved in 1979 by the museum administration, the architectural office of Heinz Ulrich Krauss and the Grundlagenabteilung (Planning Department) of the Hochbauamt (Constructional Building Department), and approved by the Frankfurt City Council on 21 December 1979. In accordance with the practice adopted in Frankfurt the Hochbauamt formed a project group, with a project leader drawn from its own staff, and a number of other specialists. In the words of Roland Burgard, the Project Supervisor:

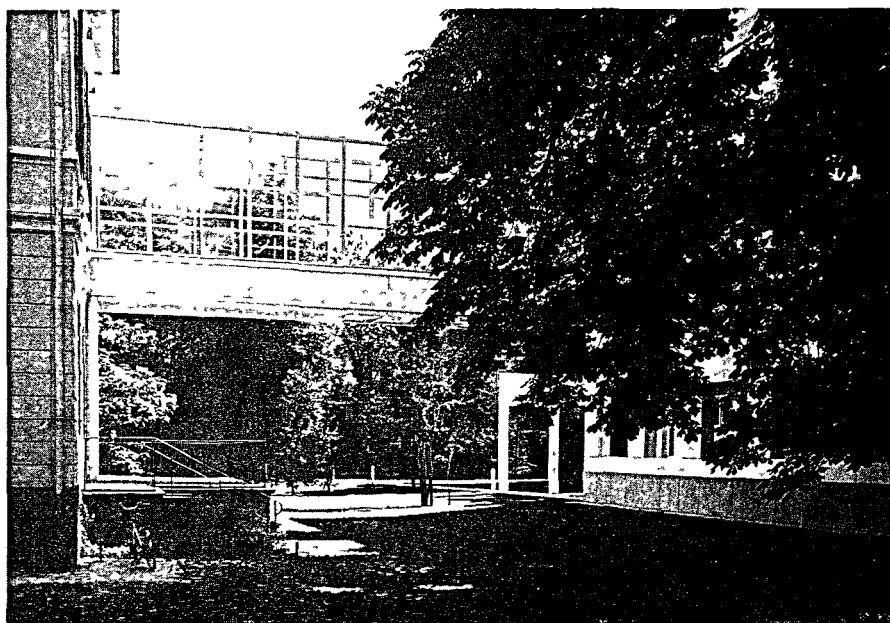


8. The central courtyard of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk echoes the cubical form of the old Villa Metzler, but as a cubical empty space, open to the sky

The tasks of the Project Group are: to guide the progress of the project, supervising adherence to the spatial program (brief), costs, deadlines, structural and technical standards and municipal administrative channels. In short, to 'take over the tasks of the commissioner of a building'. The co-ordination of the various planning stages is left to the architect, and the co-ordination of the various building stages is left to the project supervisor (*Museum für Kunsthandwerk Frankfurt am Main*, 1985, p. 30).

Given the number of important buildings in the Federal Republic which are the subject of competitions, often international, such a system is essential, and Roland Burgard adds: 'One of the decisive functions of the Constructional Building Department's Project Leader is thus the task of smoothing the way for architects and engineers unfamiliar with Frankfurt's administrative "red tape", so that their creative powers can bear fruit with as little friction as possible'. With the approval of the City Council, the architectural plans were produced in Richard Meier's New York office (a new departure for Frankfurt) under his personal supervision, whilst all technical services, etc., were designed in Frankfurt, with project meetings held every three weeks. The design phase was completed in March 1981 and the City Council decided formally in November 1981 to let contracts.

From this moment onwards strict cost control took priority over time, and the target was that the main carcass and roofing should be completed within one calendar year. The reasoning was that the foundations could be dug before the maximum ground-water level was reached in early summer, and the reinforced concrete work could be completed quickly during the warm weather, whilst, once the roof structure had been completed in December, the services could be installed after the onset of the coldest winter weather. By means of this strategy all the remaining carcass work could be completed before the



9. The old Villa Metzler is linked to the SE quadrant of the new Museum für Kunsthandwerk by a simple glazed bridge at first-floor level only.

next round of wage negotiations the following May and, with costs held tightly under control, 18 months would be available for fitting out the new museum. At the time of the competition DM40 million were allocated to the project, but this budget was raised to DM43.7 million on the basis of approved plans, and it is a tribute to all concerned that the final costs were kept within the revised budget. However, to achieve this result very close cooperation was required so that each phase of planning was accompanied by strict cost analysis and controls. Contracts were let only if the cost was within that budgeted for the specific item, and when tenders exceeded the sums budgeted either further tenders were sought or the item was redesigned with a view to lowering the cost. No mutual balancing out between items above and below budget cost was permitted, and thus a modest net underspend was ultimately achieved. This system of project planning and financial control was unusually tight, and in itself is of considerable interest to museum managers.

The exterior of the building has the intellectual clarity, if not austerity, to be expected by those familiar with Richard Meier's work, together with a certain lack of specificity. The white enamelled steel cladding panels, 1.1 m square, establish the module for the elevations, and they are carried round the entire exterior with 55 cm square panels on the link to the Villa Metzler. Comparison with Meier's Hartford Seminary (1978–1981) is most revealing in that the exterior of neither building provides any clue as to its function. Consequently the architect's desire 'to encourage people to use the museum to experience the art of architecture as well as the art displayed' is the cause of some unease, since the curator of an art museum cannot in his displays attempt to separate his collections entirely from the building created to enclose them. It could be argued, however, that the visitor gaining access to the collections of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk has had the advantage of reaching the works of art with a minimum of preconceptions; but that analysis would fall into the trap of seeing only the apparently

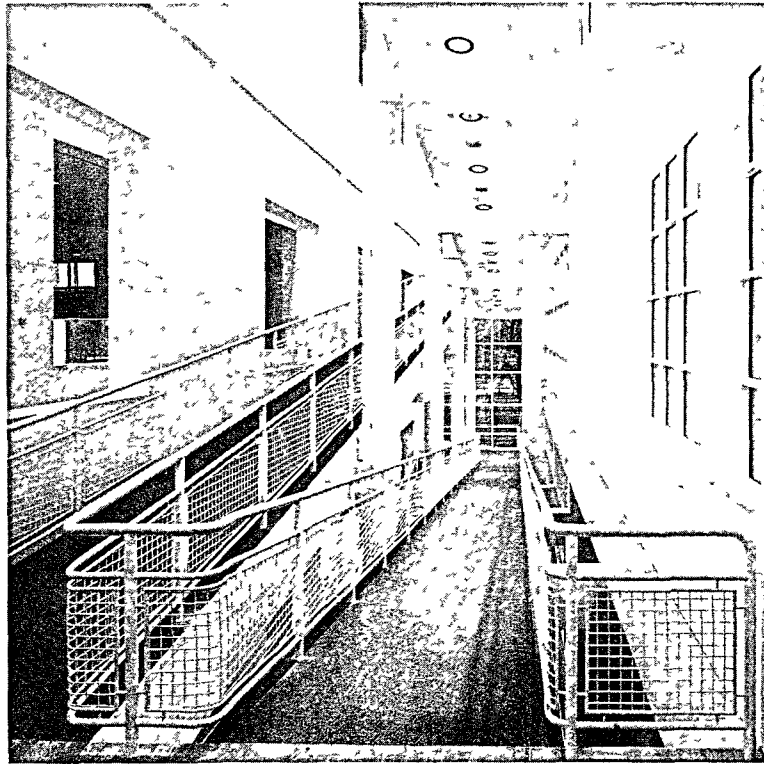
bland external forms of Richard Meier's architecture whilst remaining blind to the strength of his intellectual discipline. The latter pervades the whole structure, including the display fittings, whilst the subtle changes in interior spaces, stemming from the 3.5 degree rotation of the grid, are rarely immediately apparent and tend instead to be slowly experienced.

On the ground floor the new building comprises three separate blocks or quadrants, divided by the E-W pedestrian way through the centre of the site, parallel with the river bank, and by that running N-S from the river to the Metzlerstrasse. The Entry Foyer opens off the latter into the NW quadrant and the Temporary Exhibitions Gallery opens in turn directly out of it. Most of the ground floor of the SW quadrant is occupied by the Café-Restaurant with generous access directly into the gardens but very limited access to the floor above. This effectively isolates it functionally, and from a security viewpoint, whilst the SE quadrant houses the Library and Administration, with again limited access to the floors above. Thus the functions of temporary exhibitions, restaurant, and library plus administration can be operated, individually or severally, in isolation from the permanent collections above, and an exceptionally high degree of flexibility has been achieved with a very efficient utilization of both space and costly staffing.

However, the key element for circulation round the building is the main ramp which gives access, by means of long, gentle slopes, from the Entry Foyer to all floor levels. Seen from the River Main, this glazed structure would appear to be separated from the body of the NW quadrant by a high spine wall, but on entering the building it is realized that the latter is penetrated by large square apertures which provide seductive glimpses of the collections beyond on the second and third floors. Of these the European collections



10. Access to the Entry Foyer of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk is from the N-S pedestrian route and thence into the NW quadrant. The structure housing the ramps forms the middle plane.



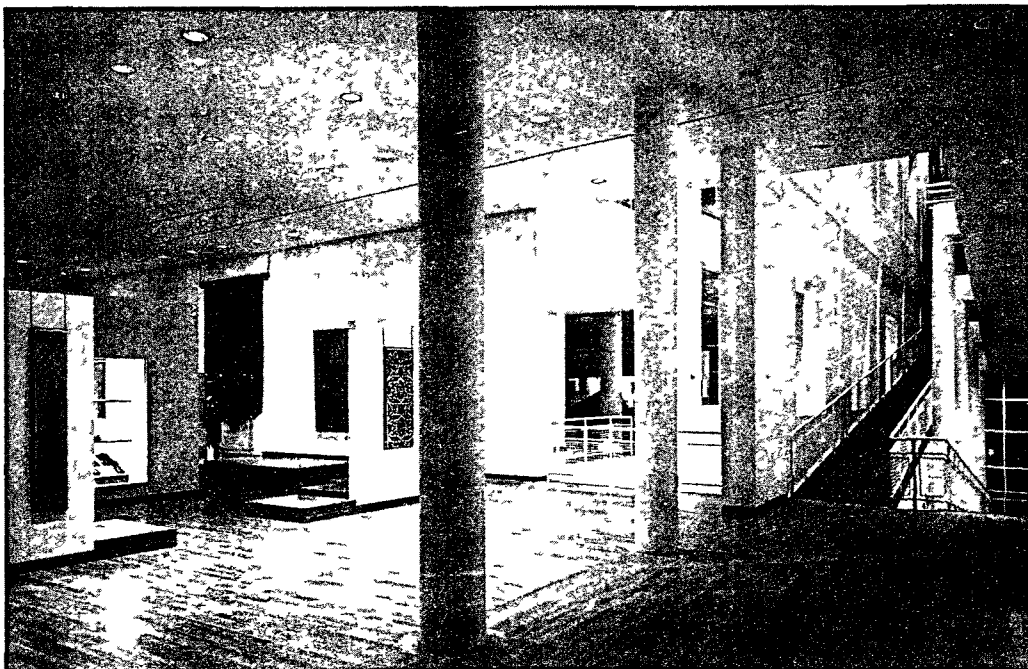
11. Richard Meier's system of gently sloping ramps provides easy access to all four floors of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, and the square openings allow tempting distant views of the collections displayed in the gallery spaces.

are displayed on the first floor, with the Islamic, Eastern Asiatic and Book Art plus Calligraphy collections on the second floor. Skirting the displays of 19th century material, the visitor gaining access to the European collections by way of the ramp enters a series of spaces displaying in sequence Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Applied Art, with a small area devoted to a didactic display of craft techniques, before crossing the bridge to the Villa Metzler. The ground and first floors of this building are used for the display of the Rococo collections, whilst the top floor is devoted to Classicism, thus taking advantage of the classical proportions of the rooms in the old building.

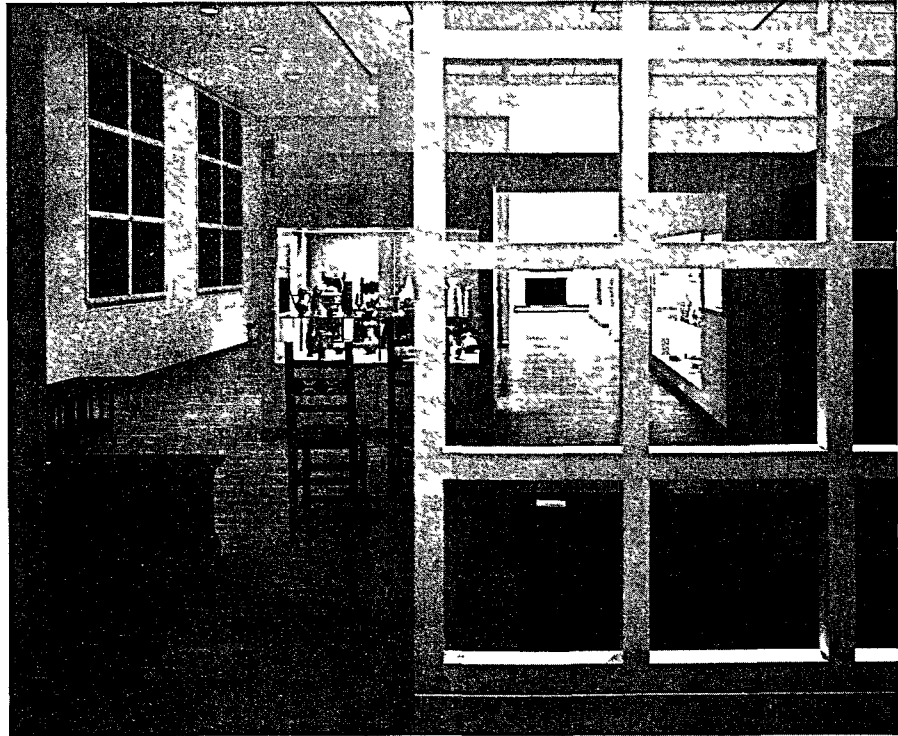
Returning across the bridge to the SE, and then across the second bridge which at first- and second-floor levels forms the north side of the open court, the visitor gains access again to the 19th century collections, and beyond them the room devoted to the 20th century. Although on this floor the three quadrants are integrated into a single L-shaped sequence of spaces, the feeling of the separate quadrants is preserved in the large, square galleries in the NW and SW corners, which are exactly the same size as the ground plan of the Villa Metzler, and the half-square gallery in the SE corner. This system of mathematical relationships is maintained in the second-floor galleries, whilst from the garden the organization of the interior spaces finds a clear expression in the identical elevations of the blocks flanking the Café-Restaurant and the E-W pedestrian way. The sidelit display areas so provided are fresh and clean in their lines, even if on occasion it is not immediately obvious which elements are display fittings and which are exhibits. Great use is made of simple tungsten lighting after dark, and this assists in maintaining the uncluttered appearance, though there are those who find the displays rather sparse and excessively subordinated to the 'internal urbanism' of the show-cases and screening elements.

In evolving this design Richard Meier had to work within a very detailed brief, and precise specifications were laid down for the space to be allocated to specific groups of items, whilst some are exceptionally large, important or fragile. The overall balance of the collections is unlikely to change greatly in the foreseeable future and it has thus been possible to fit the new building closely to the collections with considerable confidence. However, one of the most remarkable features of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk is the exceptionally high percentage of the building which is available for display purposes—over 50 per cent. Indeed, including the rehabilitated rooms of the Villa Metzler, no less than 7200m² of display space is claimed by Hilmar Hoffmann (Kulturdezernent), as compared to 4360m² in the High Museum with a total of some 12800m². The display areas in Frankfurt combine sidelight (daylight through energy-conserving triple glazing) with overhead tungsten lighting, and wherever possible the same combination is used for all other public areas including the ramp. Controlling so much daylight inevitably presents difficulties, with considerable solar gain, whilst the relatively low colour temperature of the tungsten lamps is inevitably the source of colour distortion, even if they do have the welcome effect of adding warmth to the starkly intellectual interiors. The honey-coloured quarter-sawn white oak flooring throughout the galleries provides a pleasant contrast to the white plastered walls, and the grey carpeting of the ramp keeps the noise problem there under control. On the other hand, for the exterior of the building, the only relief from the brilliant white of the porcelain-enamelled metal panels and white-painted stucco is provided by the grey Sarizzo-Antigorio granite from Italy used for the façade panels and certain areas of the external paving, including the terraces.

As a working machine, the circulation system of the museum and the overall strategic plan for the displays are based on an analysis of the anticipated requirements of visitors



12. The ramps lead directly into the display galleries of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, and the main lines of the structure are maintained by the prominent pillars.



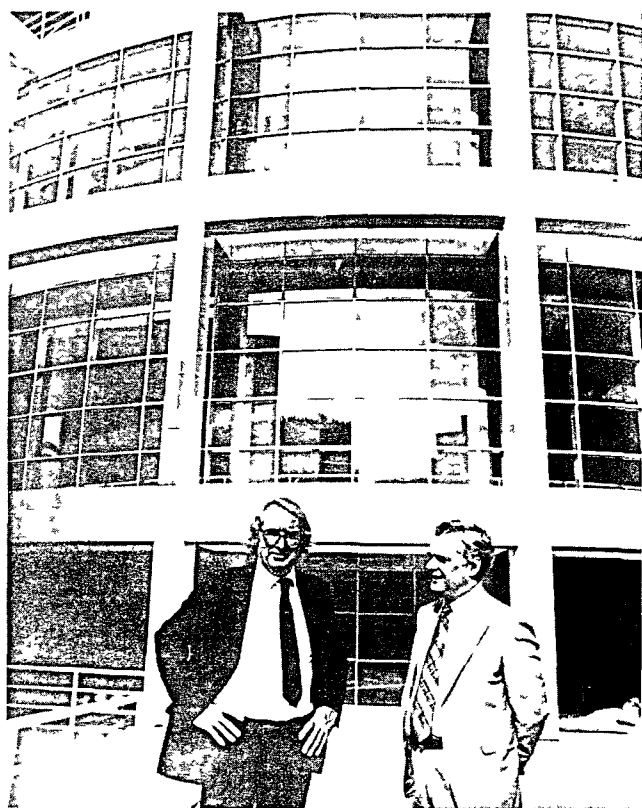
13. Lit throughout by tungsten lamps, Richard Meier's show-cases and other display fittings extend the intellectual discipline of the building to its smallest details.

and the different levels of experience sought by them. Thus on a first visit it is anticipated that a visitor will wish to walk through all the displays and thereby 'get the feel of the collections', whilst on subsequent visits one floor only of a quadrant might be the goal—to examine, for example, exhibits of the Renaissance period—and eventually those in a single case or group. Such an educational process demands a number of visits, and for the inhabitants of Frankfurt who crowd into this area of the city on Saturdays and Sundays the strategy is not unreasonable given the very high quality of the exhibits. The intention of the displays is to teach people to read objects in the language of those objects, but from an intellectual and stylistic viewpoint, not that of handcraft. Consequently, although the teacher employed in the education department is both an experienced craftsperson and qualified in art history, those taking advantage of the educational services offered are taught to use their eyes and, unlike many American museum services, there are no 'hands on' facilities.

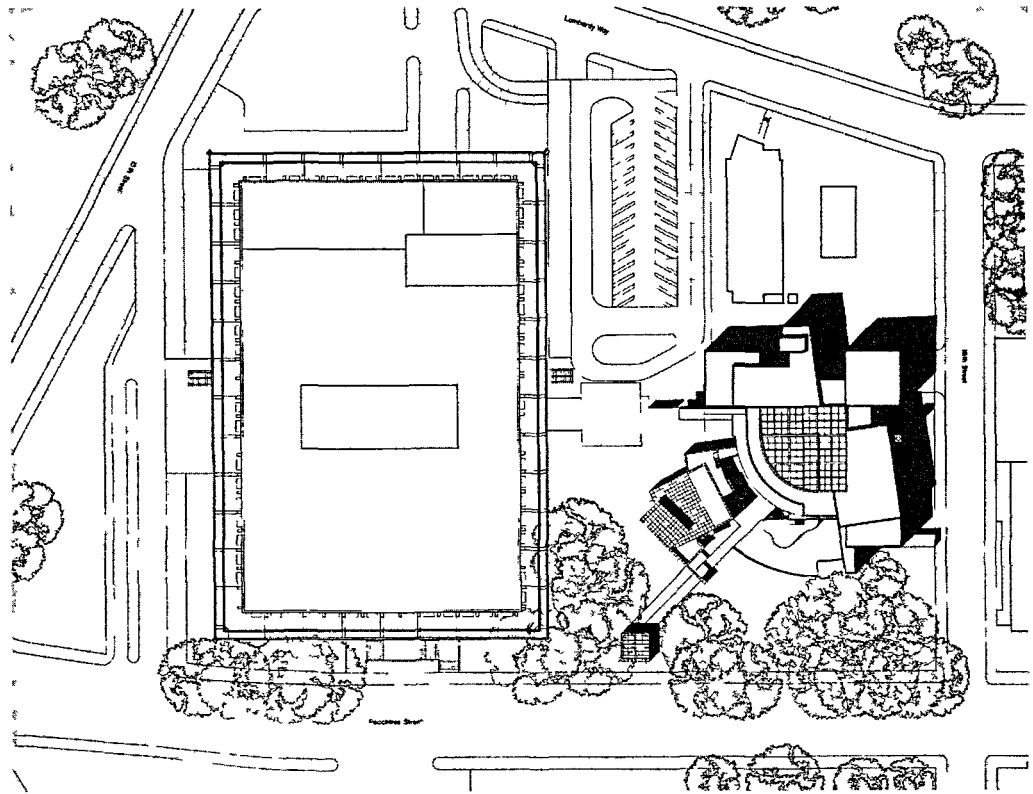
The layout of the labelling reflects this strategy, and the three levels of experience intended, but the direct screenprinting system is to be replaced in the immediate future because the public has already developed a tendency to scratch away part of the lettering. However, the programmes of audiovisual displays in the galleries and of guided tours are closely linked to the strategic plan, and although the architecture and the internal urbanism represented by the show-cases and plinths tend at first sight to dominate the exhibits, the latter fall into place as the visitor concentrates on smaller groups of objects and the whole environment becomes more familiar. Furthermore, the generous size of the building vis-à-vis the collections ensures that ample internal space is available for new

acquisitions and future developments without alterations to the structure, once the outstanding lighting problems are sorted out. During the first seven months (May–November 1985) the new museum attracted approximately 300 000 visitors, with some 1500 on weekdays, 2500 on Saturdays and 3000–5000 each Sunday, though the entire museum had to be closed to the public for nine days at the end of the *Ottoman* exhibition because of the inadequate staffing levels.

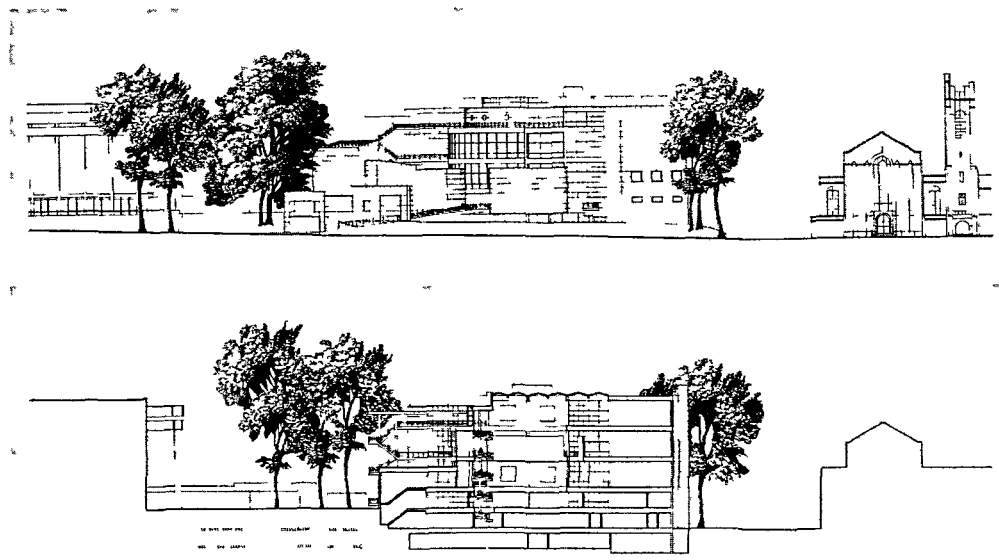
Between the High Museum, Atlanta and the Museum für Kunsthandwerk there are almost as many differences as parallels, and although they are virtually coeval Richard Meier was working under substantially different conditions. Whereas at Frankfurt his building was to house a large existing collection of international stature which was unlikely to grow substantially, the Atlanta collection is at a much earlier stage in its development, and many see the new building as much as a symbol of its brilliant future as reflecting its present strengths and weaknesses. For Frankfurt an international public competition was held under the rules which have proved so effective in the Federal Republic, whilst in Atlanta the commission was awarded to Richard Meier after exhaustive consultations and visits to other new museum buildings by the specially selected Building Committee during 1979–1980. Meier received the commission in June 1980, groundbreaking took place on 30 July 1981, some seven months before the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, and the new building was opened on 15 October 1983. The slogan used by the fundraisers—Help Build a Museum Big Enough for Atlanta—expresses well the very different background to the Atlanta commission, and a brief historical resumé is again essential.



14. Richard Meier (left) and Gudmund Vigtel, Director of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, as the new building neared completion (1983).



15. Site plan of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, alongside the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center completed in 1968.



16. East elevation of High Museum of Art, seen from Peachtree Street without the screen of trees, and, below, section N-S through the atrium, looking west

The Atlanta Art Association was incorporated in 1905, but not until Mrs Joseph H. High donated her house and property on Peachtree Street in 1926 did it find a home in which to develop its museum and art school. A new facility, the product of a successful fundraising drive which raised \$675 000, opened in 1955, and in 1962 there were plans for a considerably larger museum. Disaster struck in June 1962 when 122 Atlanta art patrons on a European tour sponsored by the High Museum were killed in the airplane crash at Orly, but a major arts complex was proposed as a memorial to those who died there. The Atlanta Arts Alliance was formed, and after raising \$14 million the Memorial Arts Centre was dedicated in October 1968. Gudmund Vigtel had been appointed Director in May 1963 and subsequently played a key role in the fundraising campaign leading to the new building. In December 1979 the High Museum received a challenge grant of \$7.5 million from Robert W. Woodruff, the principal shareholder and former chief executive of the Coca-Cola Company, to build a new art museum, on condition that by December 1982 the sum was matched by other funds. During the initial phase of the campaign in fact over \$9.8 million funds were raised, almost one year before the deadline, and a second challenge grant of \$900 000 was offered in August 1982 by the Callaway Foundation of LaGrange, Georgia, which had to be matched on a two-to-one basis. This brought the total up to the \$20 million sought, and at the time of opening in 1983 the building had been entirely paid for. Fortunately Robert Woodruff also had had the foresight to help acquire the land needed, alongside the Atlanta Memorial Arts Building on Peachtree Street, long in advance, and this 2 acre site has been a key element in the evolution of Richard Meier's designs.

Whereas the Museum für Kunsthandwerk required almost 6 years of effort from the inception of the competition to its opening, the new High Museum was conceived, researched, designed and built in just 4 years—a remarkable achievement by any standard. This does not, however, in any way imply that the interrelationships with existing buildings are not taken fully into account—in Richard Meier's own words:

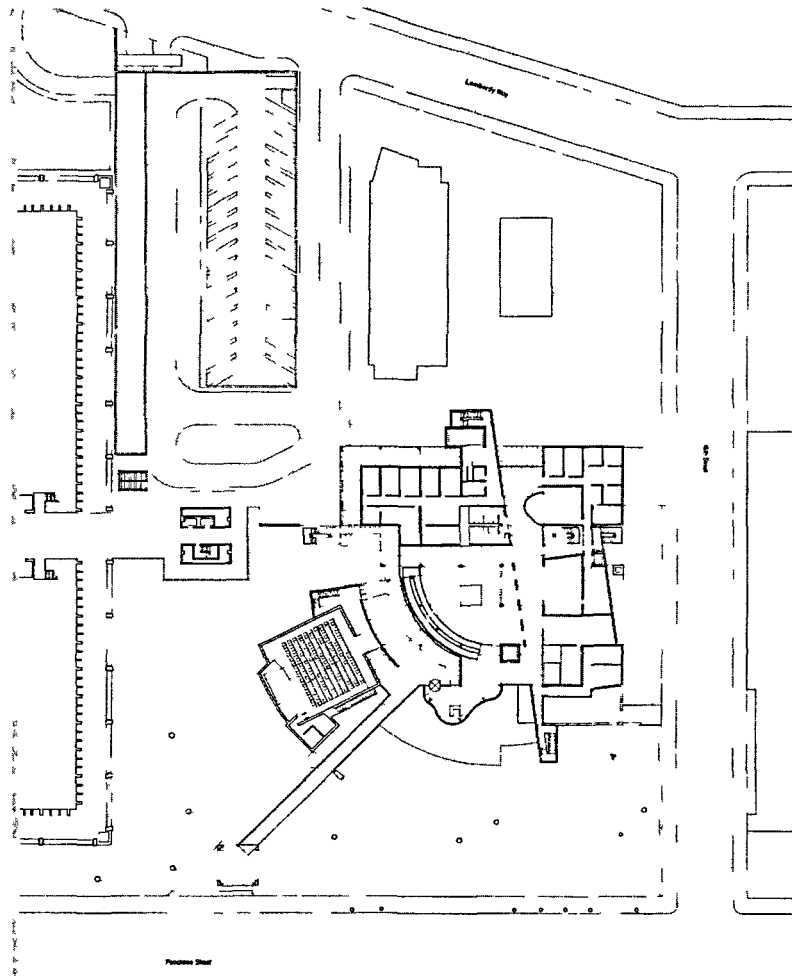
On one side of the building there is a church, a stone building, and on the other side the Memorial Arts Building. It seemed that the building had to relate not only in scale to the Memorial Arts Building, but also to the stone building, the church. The height of the new High Museum is exactly the same as the height of the Memorial Arts Building. So that datum, that roof line, is consistent. Neither dwarfs one another; it is sympathetic in that way. The combination of the metal panels and the granite base of the building on one side gives a tactile relationship with the church, that feeling of stone, even though it is not the same colour as the church.

The points of contact with the Frankfurt design are not limited to the cladding of the exterior in square white porcelain-enamelled steel panels, and the plan of the High Museum reveals another variation on the theme of three quadrants with the fourth removed. This time the ramp structure is moved into a central position in the composition so that its curved form constitutes the wall of a quarter-rotunda and encloses a grand central open space or atrium which extends from the main/ground-floor level to the glazed roof structure.

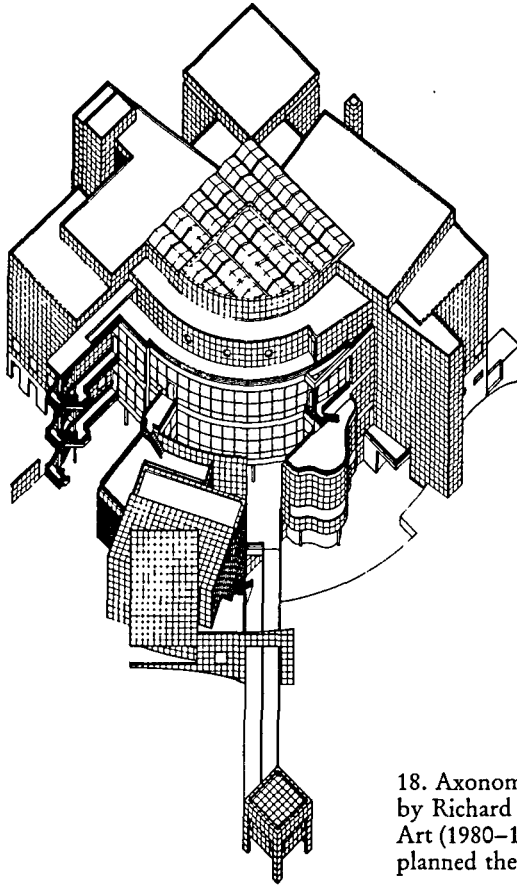
Notwithstanding the claims of certain architectural critics and the use here of curved ramps as a central feature, this extravagant use of space is better compared to I.M. Pei's East Building of the National Gallery in Washington than to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. To the latter it bears only a passing resemblance in terms of either structure or function, whilst the original design of the glazed roof structure was even closer to I.M. Pei's building. However, the closest parallel to Richard Meier's ramp

structures is provided by Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert's contemporaneous designs for Museum Bochum in the Ruhr (1979–1984). There the ramp structure is free-standing except at the points where it provides access to the three floors of public spaces and the vast wall surface facing it on the opposite side is decorated with a vigorous abstract composition executed in ceramic tiles. What differentiates Meier's use of the ramp structure at Atlanta from the solutions adopted at Frankfurt and Bochum has been the deliberate change in strategic intent from a fundamentally functional device to a dominant architectural feature. In 1983 he stated:

I have always talked about this Museum in relationship to the Guggenheim Museum, because I guess of the obvious similarity in terms of ramps within the central space. But in thinking about that I almost think it is more akin, conceptually, to the Frick Museum, which is organized around a garden courtyard in which the galleries open to that skylit garden. You can see from the galleries into the courtyard, in which that main space is the focal point of the building. And that's really what is happening here in the High Museum. That main space, the atrium space, the social space, the public space, is the center, the core.



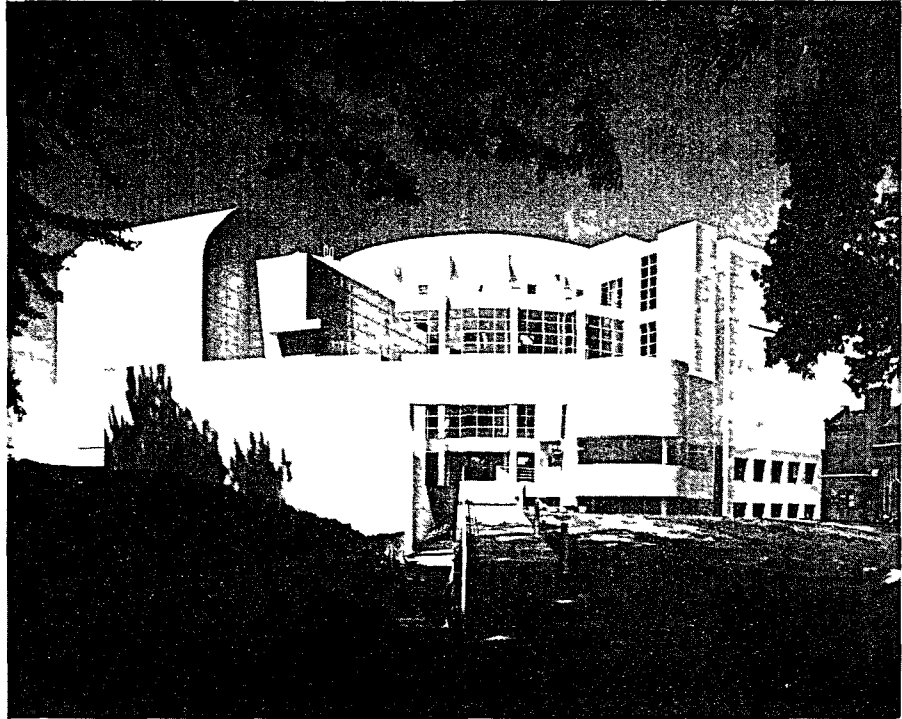
17. Ground plan of High Museum of Art at Entry/Main-Floor Level The diagonal entry ramp crosses the site at 45 degrees to the grid structure of the building, and the auditorium is set at 15 degrees to it



18. Axonometric view of the original design by Richard Meier for the High Museum of Art (1980–1981) showing the roof structure planned then.

This dominance of the central concourse, experienced also in Washington, is crucial to any functional analysis of Richard Meier's design.

Given the limited size and awkward shape of the site alongside the Memorial Arts Building, made even more cramped by the mature trees along Peachtree Street which Meier insisted on retaining, and the parameters derived from the adjacent buildings, he was faced with a complex series of design problems if he was to develop again a variation on the three-quadrant plan. Peachtree Street is aligned almost exactly N–S and it is one of the prestigious streets of Atlanta, whilst it would be unthinkable for such an important new building to face north into 16th Street and the very uninteresting side elevation of the church, or west into Lombardy Way and a jumble of service roads. On the other hand, the mature trees on Peachtree Street provide a screen broken only towards the SE corner of the site, and the whole slopes towards the north-east. Meier's basic strategy has been to square up the eastern area of the site using its full frontage onto Peachtree Street to establish the basic module, and then locate his three quadrants in an L-shaped formation close to the NW corner of the square thereby created. Thus the open area to be closed by the ramp structure faces south-east, towards the slight gap in the trees, and by utilising a diagonal approach to the new building a relatively spacious composition is achieved. In practice this is enhanced by the diagonal entry ramp, parallel to the diagonal axis of the square, rising gently to the main floor level and thence into the core of the building. The disadvantages of a vast glazed wall, in Georgia, facing south-east, are those



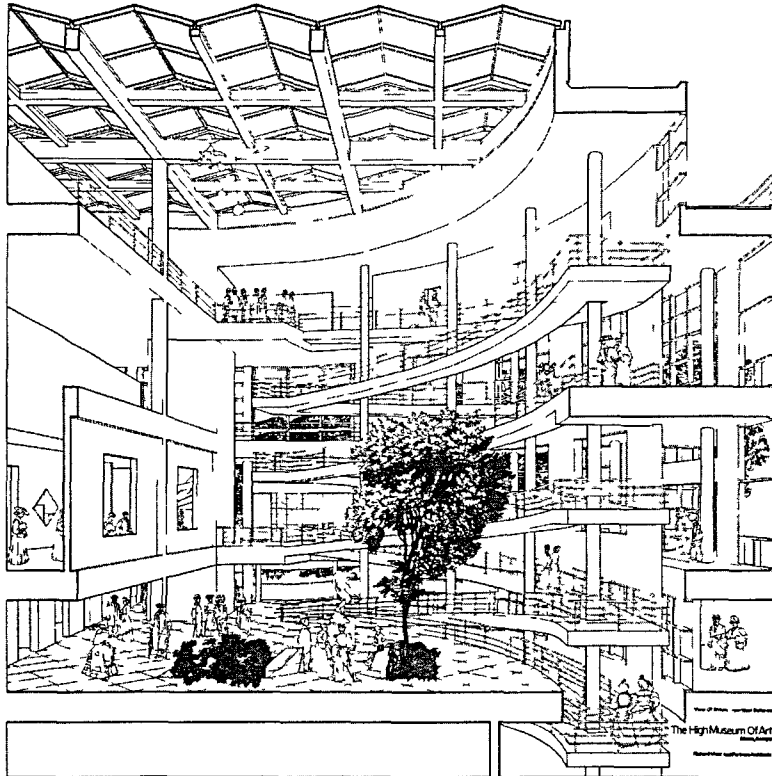
19. Exterior of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, after its completion in 1983, seen from the south-east and the trees lining Peachtree Street.

of exceptionally high light levels and solar gain at a time when the importance of energy conservation has become immense. However, once the basic strategy had been accepted Meier developed the design with a series of radial axes pivoting about a point in the angle of the quadrants, and these were used to establish the orientation of the subsidiary units in the composition, not least the auditorium which is set on its own diagonal some 15 degrees from the alignment of the entry ramp.

The new High Museum is constructed of steel and concrete, with load-bearing columns carried up through the full height of the building, and the exterior clad in 3 ft square panels of either white porcelain-enameled steel or silver-grey granite. In theory, the granite cladding relates to the plinth which is intended to act as a horizontal datum for the ramps, and, in elevation, 'as an anchor for the white porcelain-enameled steel panels cladding the galleries above', but in practice the relationships are much more complex and the alternation of the cladding material adds to the intellectual diversity of the building without expressing any particular functional elements. Light, for Richard Meier, 'whether direct or filtered, admitted through skylights, ribbon glazing, clerestory strips, or minimal perforations in the panel wall, is a constant preoccupation throughout: apart from its functional aspect, it is a symbol of the museum's role as a place of aesthetic illumination and enlightened cultural values', and light there is in abundance in the atrium space. At the time Meier's designs for the building were published he intended to glaze the atrium and immediately adjacent gallery spaces with a series of simple pitched roofs carried on a grid of concrete beams continuing the pattern of the three quadrants. During the course of detailed design work he instead chose to stress the radial elements of the design, and replaced the earlier roof structure with a radial grid of concrete beams

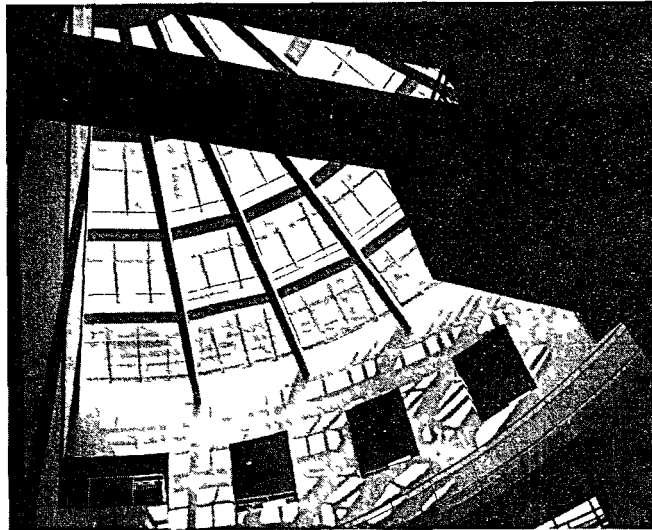
carrying a conical glazed roof instead. The reduction of the intensity of light penetrating into the display galleries, as well as the need to reduce the air-conditioning load, has dictated the insertion of filters and other equipment, as well as the addition of large wall panels on the third and fourth floors to block most of the daylight in the atrium space from the gallery spaces beyond. These modifications have substantially altered the character of the atrium space, strengthening its individual identity whilst relegating the gallery spaces to a supporting role.

As in Frankfurt, the artificial lighting throughout the gallery spaces is by means of simple tungsten lamps, and the contrast between the brilliantly lit atrium space, flooded with sunlight, and the warm subdued tungsten lighting in the displays is not entirely happy. Indeed such is the domination of the atrium space that the galleries inevitably come as something of an anticlimax—a fundamental problem with this type of design. However, the visitor enters the building from Peachtree Street, via the long ramp leading up to the Entry/Main Floor Level and the granite paved area which, in psychological terms at least, forms the top of the podium. After passing into the atrium space with its floor of polished granite slabs, the visitor can pass on to the Café, Museum Shop, Director's and Curator's offices and Boardroom, all housed on this level, or use the ramp to gain access to the Education Level below or the three Gallery Levels above. The

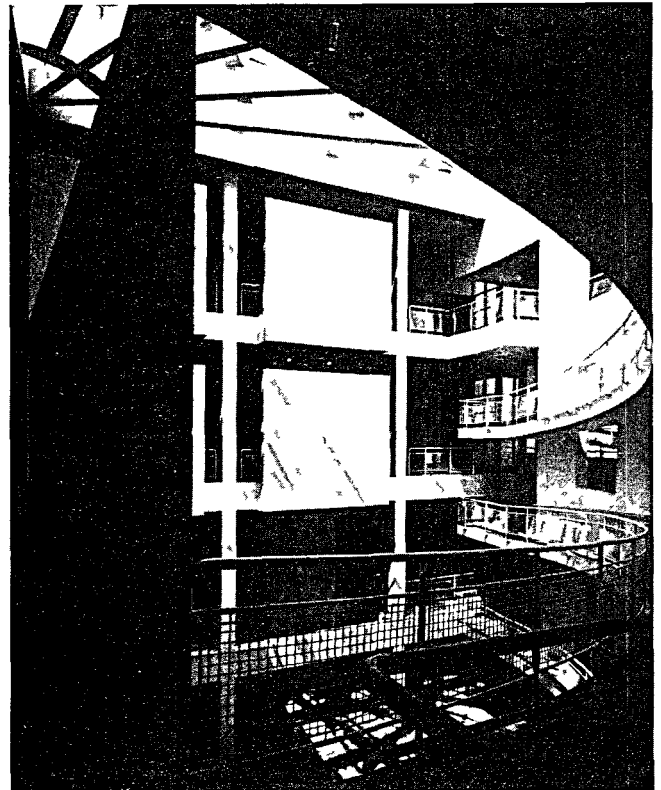


20. Interior of the atrium space of the High Museum of Arts as originally designed by Richard Meier in 1980–1981. At this stage this space was to be glazed with a series of simple pitched roofs carried on a grid of concrete beams framing part of the grid of quadrants, and this system of daylighting was to extend continuously into the adjacent galleries.

educational facilities include junior galleries, lecture rooms, workshops and departmental office accommodation, and the whole has its own entrance from 16th Street so that school buses can be unloaded under cover. The ramp provides easy access for groups from this level to the gallery levels above, and easy access for disabled persons between



21. The interior of the atrium of the High Museum of Art is intensely dramatic with powerful patterns of shadows cast by the roof structure and glazing bars.

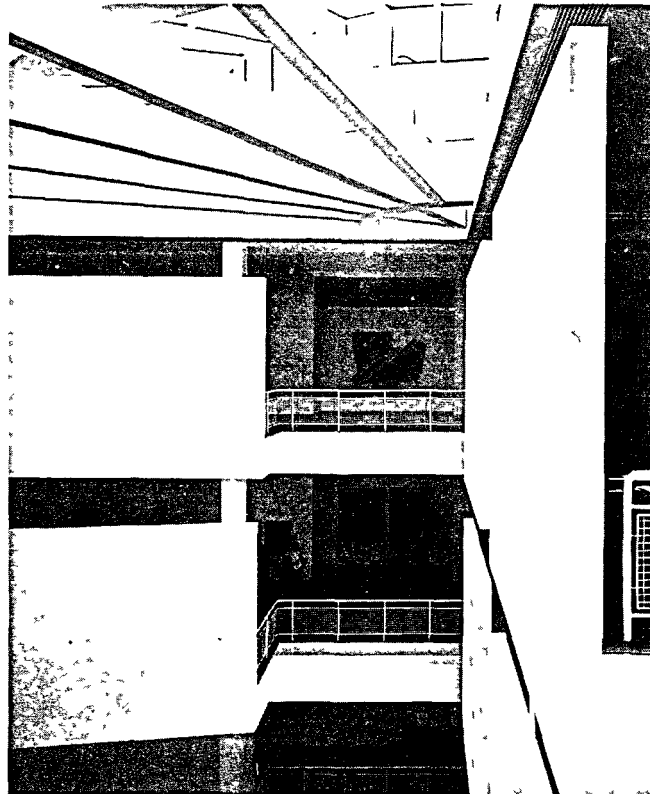


22. Interior of the atrium of the High Museum of Art as built. A radial structure of concrete beams carries the conical roof, and wall panels have been inserted in the two upper floors to limit the penetration of daylight into the gallery spaces beyond.

levels is provided by both the ramp and lifts. The Second Level is devoted to the collection of Decorative Arts and non-Western material, and in particular the Virginia Carroll Crawford Collection of American Decorative Arts, whilst the Third Level is devoted to the Fine Arts pre-1900, including 30 Italian paintings and sculptures from the Kress Collection. Apart from the lighting problems previously referred to, the principal difficulty experienced on the Third Level is that posed by the obtrusive columns in the display areas and the design of these spaces, so that instead of being discreetly masked by the display screens they are often the strongest visual elements in any particular area. Richard Meier is particularly proud of his exploitation of vistas and views through framing openings, but all too often those views are dominated by columns and design features rather than works of art.

The ideal way of viewing art [says Richard Meier] is not always on a one-to-one relationship. It is important to be able to see a work of art close up. But it is also important to be able to get away from it to see it from a different perspective. Viewing art in this building is a constantly changing experience. From one level to another, one will be able to look across the atrium space, see a work on a level below that you may have just seen, see works of art in relation to other works of art—again close up, but then moving away from them and seeing them from the ramp through openings into the gallery spaces.

Such an approach to display owes much to the world of film-making, though to be fully effective it presumes a considerable degree of familiarity with the collections in question,

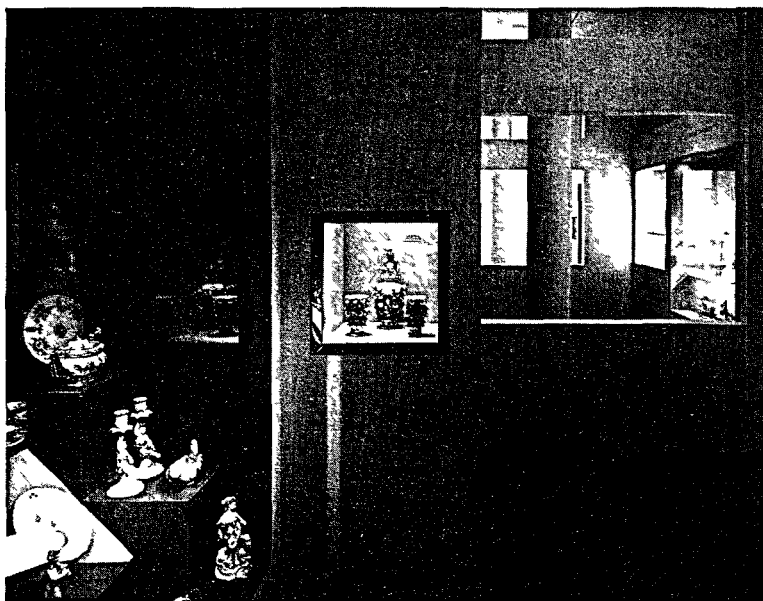


23. From the curved ramp structure of the High Museum of Art there are glimpses of the paintings in the mysterious depths of the galleries.

24. Within the gallery spaces of the High Museum of Art all the lighting is by means of tungsten lamps which give warmth to the white walls. The prominence of the pillars within the display areas draws attention away from the sculpture and other three-dimensional exhibits.

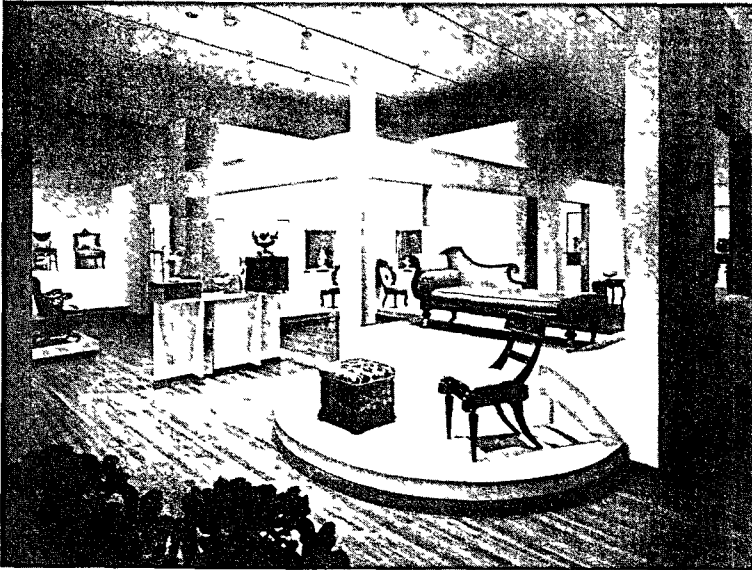


25. Broad chromium-plated frames are a feature of Richard Meier's show-cases in the High Museum of Art, as is his exploitation of vistas and views through framed openings.



and works of art in general, and it is arguable how high a proportion of the visitors expected are so equipped. The concept of rooms within rooms in permanent collection galleries is well tried, and has in many museums proved to be highly successful, but the primary reason for placing a work of art on display is to enable it to be seen. In the Decorative Arts displays all too many objects are either subjected to dramatic lighting so that much is lost in deep shadows, or incarcerated in deep show-cases with barely one-third visible. The broad chromium-plated frames of the show-cases add a

particularly harsh discordant note. These display problems are less in evidence in Frankfurt, and the curator–architect relationship there has been on a rather different basis.



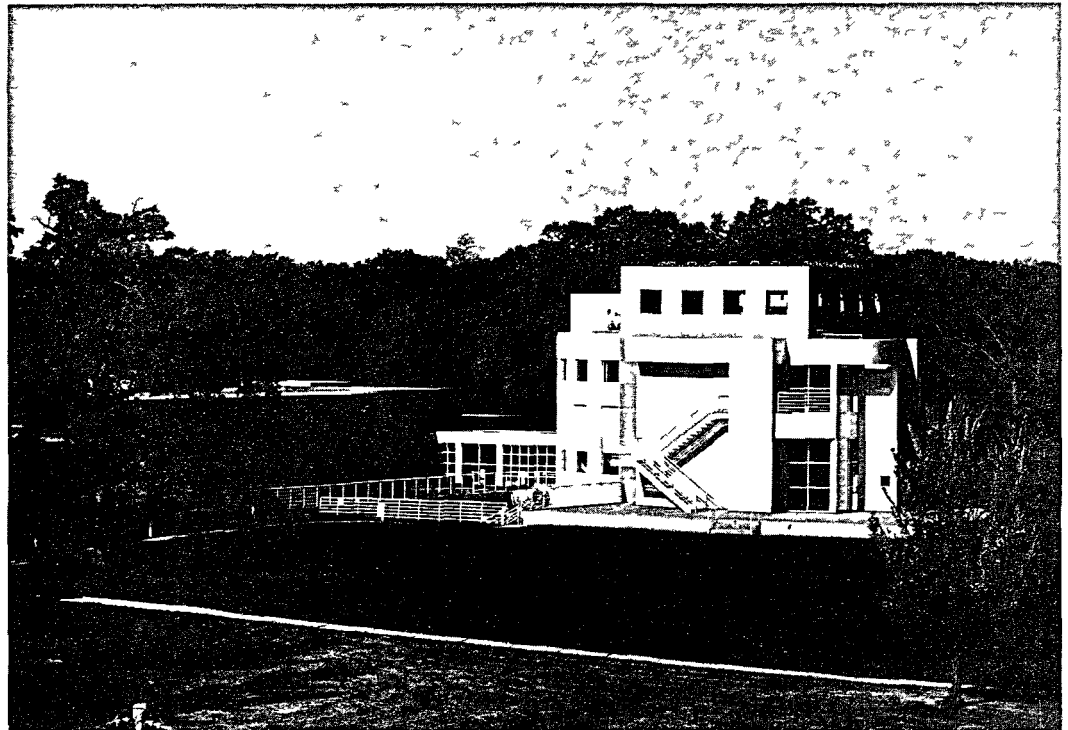
26. The Virginia Carroll Crawford Collection of American decorative arts is amongst the most important possessions of the High Museum of Art, and Richard Meier's design team has created a number of particularly dramatic displays.

For the Fourth and Top Level, devoted to 20th Century Art and temporary exhibitions, a different solution has been sought, and the whole has been designed so that for very large temporary exhibitions the entire space can be utilised, totalling some 1420m². Furthermore this level is able to enjoy limited daylight entering through adjustable parametal skylights as well as totally controllable tungsten lighting. The intention is that this level is to be redecorated for each major exhibition, though it remains to be seen whether this will continue to be financially acceptable in perpetuity; but only here are substantial areas of strong colour envisaged, albeit on a temporary basis. Apart from limited areas of colour in the show-cases on Level Two the polished wood floors throughout provide the main contrast to the crisp white surface finishes.

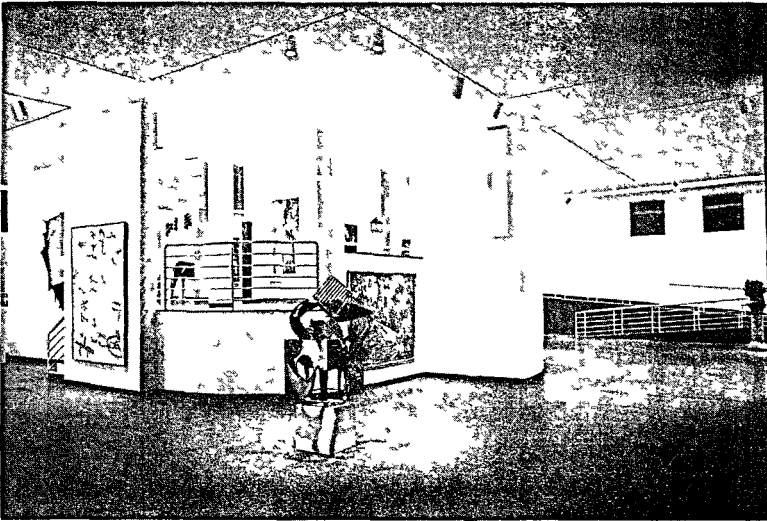
It is, however, at night that the full drama of the High Museum unfolds and the brilliantly lit atrium space becomes a lighthouse radiating its message down Peachtree Street. The effect is stunning, and the answer to the implied question in the fundraising slogan 'Help Build a Museum *Big Enough* for Atlanta' is a triumphant 'Yes'. Nevertheless, it was said, in another context and concerning the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, that it was magnificent but it was not war! In Atlanta the new High Museum has attracted over 1 million visitors between the opening in October 1983 and the end of May 1985, and what is that if it is not success? Furthermore, membership has risen to more than 19 000 giving the institution the financial strength to consolidate further its collections and cultural activities. In Frankfurt the building has been tailored to fit the existing collections, whilst in Atlanta the building is playing a key role in attracting the additional visitors and members who will in turn create the cash flow and positive environment needed for further growth of the collections, and Richard Meier has responded brilliantly to the very different spiritual environments.

Postscript

Eliel Saarinen completed his U-shaped Des Moines Art Center in 1948 and this quietly distinguished building in local stone was mostly single-storied. I.M. Pei, in 1968, closed the rectangle with a new wing constructed of reinforced concrete with an aggregate which tones in with Saarinen's stonework. Although much tougher, if not brutal in its effect, this extension, facing the public park on the south side of the site, created a sculpture court and, because of the slope of the site, this block could be two stories high without unduly adversely affecting the long, low lines of Saarinen's design. However, in the early 1980s, some 12 architects with international reputations were invited to submit schemes for the further enlargement of the Des Moines Art Center, and, in the words of the President, Robert E. Helmick (*Architecture*, October 1985, p. 34) 'Des Moines museum should be a good example of the best architecture of the period in which it was built. We wanted a series of architectural monuments and we selected our architect on that basis.' Consequently, when Richard Meier received the commission to design some 28 000 ft² of new facilities in 1982, he was given almost total freedom, and instead of the obvious solution of filling in the courtyard he chose to design three additional units, attached to the existing building at different points, to cater for the specific requirements of the brief. The new development was to provide substantial gallery areas for displays of the permanent collection as well as for large temporary exhibitions, together with service areas and a new loading dock which were also to be linked to the existing art storage areas. A new public restaurant which could double up with a meeting room was also specified. Richard Meier developed the ideas evolved for Frankfurt and Atlanta, with the

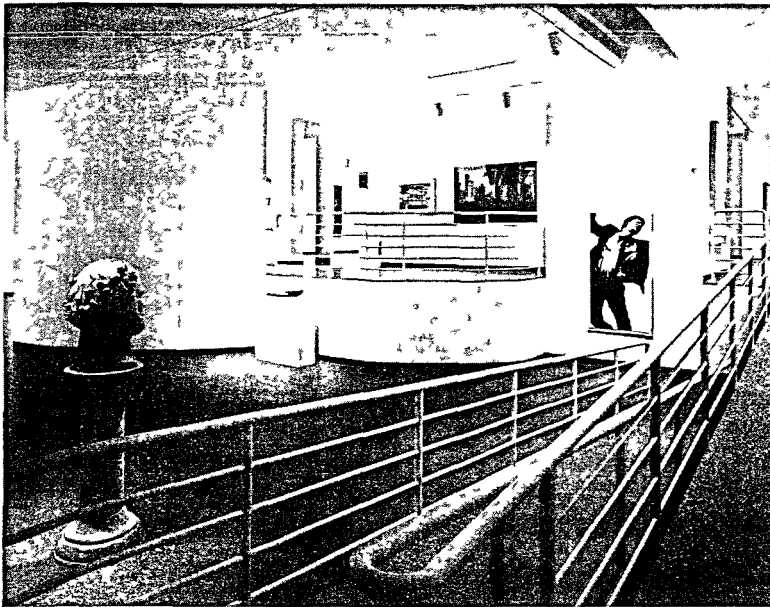


27. Exterior of Richard Meier's north addition to the Des Moines Art Center (completed in 1984)



28. Interior of Richard Meier's largest extension to the Des Moines Art Center.

encouragement of the Des Moines trustees, and the brilliant white square panels that clad most of his additions contrast with the pinkish granite cladding the core unit of the largest unit. This is a three-storey complex designed to house the collection of 20th Century Art and the temporary exhibitions. With some 20 000 ft² of space this sophisticated multifunction building echoes in its positioning and role the Villa Metzler in Frankfurt, whilst the exterior recalls his earlier private house commissions. Indeed Richard Meier has described this unit as 'an attached villa' and sees its design as closely linked to the other two commissions. Local critics complain that it is excessively self-assertive, and that the contrast in colour and texture to Saarinen's and Pei's contributions is too strong; but all are agreed that this new addition certainly maintains the Des Moines tradition of seeking out architectural monuments.



29. Interior of the north block of the Des Moines Art Center. The brief called for additional permanent display spaces as well as facilities for large temporary exhibitions.

Acknowledgements

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30. Two views of Richard Meier's Hartford Seminary, 1978–1981, in Hartford, Connecticut. As with Meier's treatment of the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt, the exterior provides few clues as to its function.