

The Museum of Modern Art Project

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The Museum of Modern Art Project

An interview with Cesar Pelli

In 1976, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City entered into an unprecedented joint venture with a private developer in which the sale of air rights over part of the museum's property and the construction of an apartment tower thereon would finance a major gallery expansion and provide additional income for the operation of the museum.

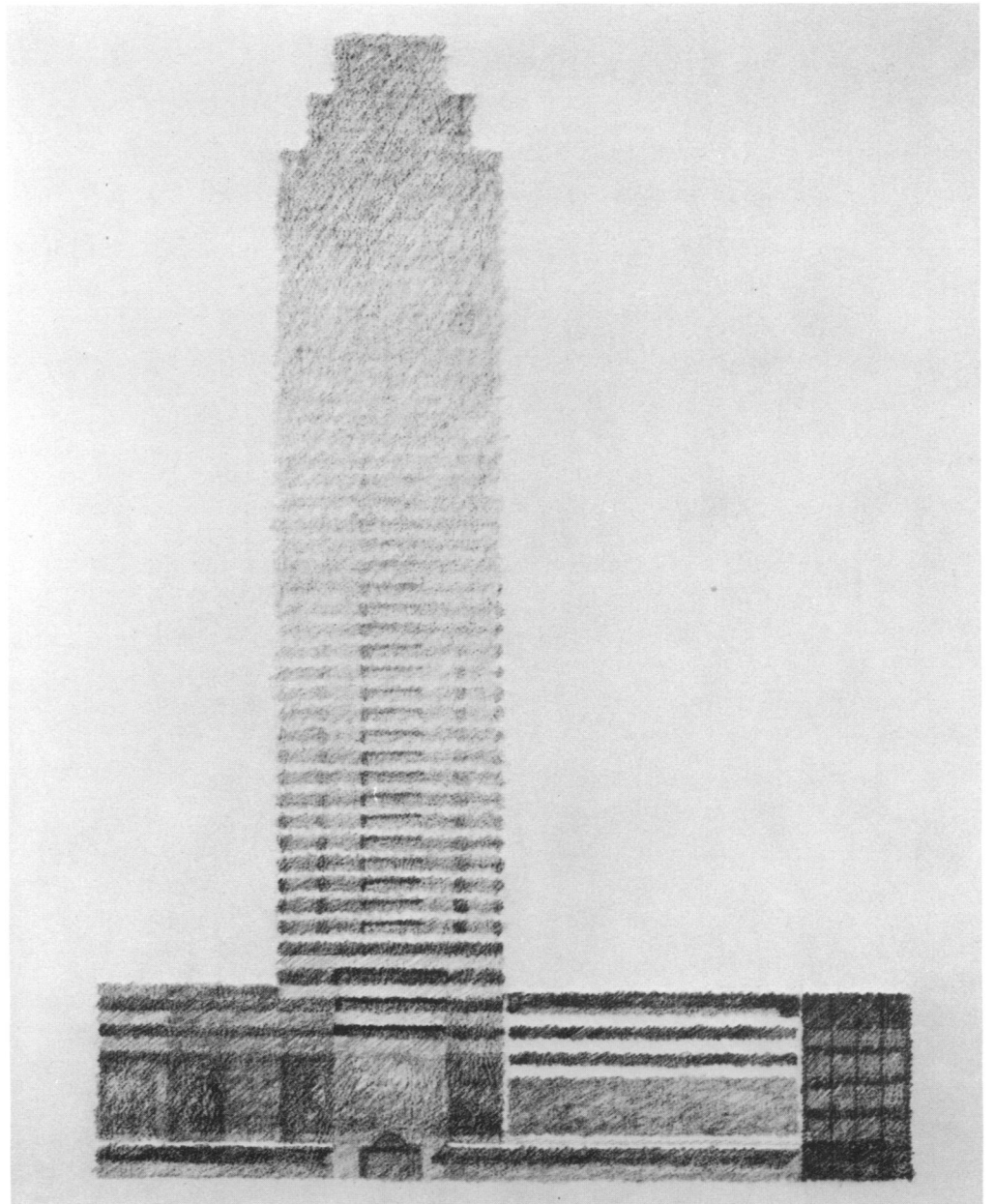
The issues in the project are complex, touching on financial, political, and social concerns. These, however, are ideological problems, and once the idea of the project is accepted—that this is the best way for the Museum of Modern Art to expand and to continue to exist—the issue becomes architectural: *how* should the museum expand. The problem has many classic components: organizational complexity, integration into a highly defined urban context, entrance and image, preservation of the old, and juncture of old and new.

With this building complex, the museum seeks to double its gallery space, expand and reorganize restaurant and meeting room facilities, add a new 250-seat theater/lecture hall, centrally locate its bookstore, and increase the size and improve the organization of its six curatorial departments.

The building project also gives the museum, and its architect, the opportunity to improve the vertical circulation (this is accomplished by an in-line series of escalators enclosed in a glass hall) and to make public spaces larger and more clearly organized.

In this interview *Perspecta* talks with Cesar Pelli and his associates, Fred Clarke and Diana Balmori, about the architectural issues they encountered in developing the final scheme.

Facade study
53rd Street



Perspecta

How did the notion of a polychrome facade originally develop?

Cesar Pelli

One of our initial intentions was to do a building with windows, not an undifferentiated glass facade. We were given the objectives very early by the developer, who also wanted windows instead of glass walls. Jaque Robertson, as architect for the developer, worked very closely with us from the beginning on the design of this facade. He shared our intentions, and we collaborated very well.

Diana Balmori

We talked about using different densities of windows, of changing the relationships of solid surface to window surface, from the base to the top, so it would not look like an office building.

Cesar Pelli

We were interested in expressing the residential quality of the tower and also the difference between condominiums and rental apartments. And, we have been working with color for quite a while, as you know. Our first idea was to do a facade that would be more syncopated—like a Mondrian; like *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. We did some designs with colors and punch-hole windows that were fairly literal variations on that theme.

I think we agreed very quickly on the concept of a polychrome facade, although we didn't call it polychrome—we talked about Mondrian and a syncopated facade and about fish skin.

Diana Balmori

Fish scales or the effect of fish scales—we even thought of mixing silver mirror glass and color glass panels.

Fred Clarke

The interesting thing is that the strategy grew out of almost purely aesthetic intentions, without any knowledge of what was going behind it.

Cesar Pelli

We knew that there were condominiums on top of apartments, that the condominiums had split levels, and that the developers wanted individual windows. So we knew two or three critical things, but we had no specific knowledge. Besides the syncopated facades, we drew some facades in which the colors changed in two or three larger areas . . .

Diana Balmori

Vertically and horizontally.

Cesar Pelli

. . . in larger compositions, but without windows.

Diana Balmori

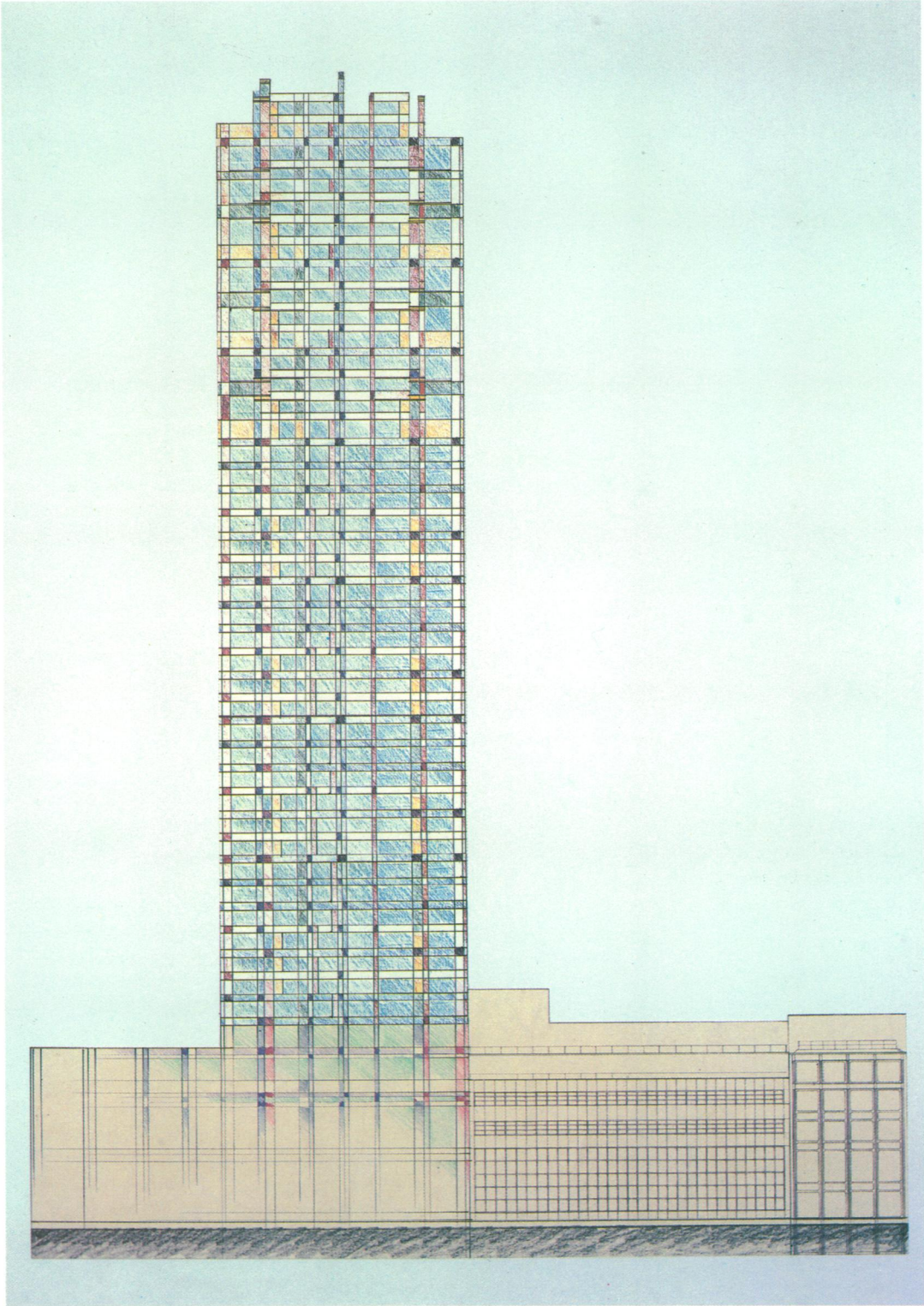
Yes, just colors.

Cesar Pelli

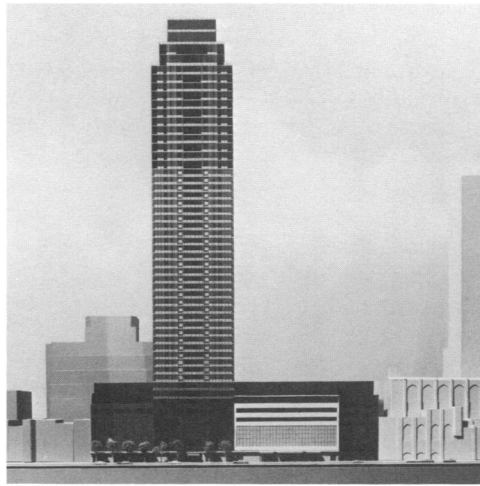
Then we started composing with color and with windows and with solid panels, using them instead of traditional elements to break down the surface. Moldings and cornices, reveals and shadows, and even changes of material are the devices that architects have traditionally used to alter the proportions of the solid surface and to relate the solids to the voids. We started doing the same thing, but with color on the panels and within a grid. One of the reasons we can change the surface quality by changing colors within a grid is that the scale of the building is large enough that the unit of the panel is relatively small and can give us subtle changes.

This is an extension of concerns we have had for a number of years. We have been working, as you know, with opaque color glass—using it as an active material, not only as background or infill. I have never designed a polychrome building such as this is going to be. I have done color buildings, and I have done painted polychrome buildings; but I have never designed a glass polychrome building. I believe nobody has. When we first designed the San Bernardino City Hall I was very interested in the idea of color in glass, and we actually built a model of a red and brown building. It was gorgeous. I felt tempted to propose it to the city. I realized its potential and put the idea in the back of my mind. When we were designing the Pacific Design Center an appropriate opportunity arose to sheath a building in a bright color.

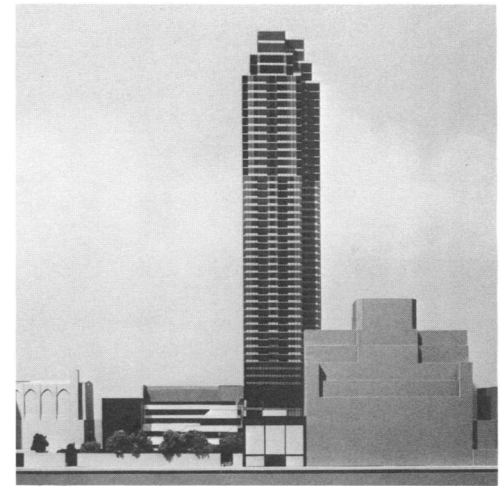
At the same time we were working on a building in Vancouver, designed in a monochromatic dark brown glass, and the client asked us to try to lighten the color. We still had to keep the brown windows so we started our experiments in using different colors within a single composition. Since then I have been very interested in the idea of polychrome glass buildings. I have used two or three colors of glass in one plane and know what happens with them. The museum design will carry that idea, that knowledge, a step further. I have used one dominant color, as in the Pacific Design Center, and also clear glass and brown glass all in the same plane: it is really quite marvelous what happens. Sometimes you are able to read the differences and sometimes you are not. The fact that those differences can disappear I find quite beautiful. This is what we are doing in the MoMA design, but to a greater degree—we will have about sixteen different colors or shades of glass.



Conceptual tower study
Syncopated facade



Museum of Modern Art Project
53rd Street facade
Model



Museum of Modern Art Project
54th Street
Model



The Museum of Modern Art
Goodwin-Stone Building
53rd Street facade
1939

Perspecta

Do you consider your facade more abstract and less indicative of the interior function than the Goodwin-Stone facade where the expression of the plan is more or less clear on the outside?

Cesar Pelli

Our facade is at the same level of expression as the Goodwin-Stone facade. The Goodwin-Stone facade is not entirely indicative of the interior functions—only partially so; two windows on top represent office windows, but then you have what looks like a single window, which in reality has two separate windowless floors inside. And there is a stairway at one end with a large window which has been absorbed in the facade. So their facade is in part a direct explanation of what is going on inside, but it has been corrected for compositional reasons. We are taking the same approach. Two office floors will get an identical treatment as the two office floors of the Goodwin-Stone building with horizontal bands of dark glass. Then, where they have two gallery floors behind a blank curtain wall of opaque glass, we are doing exactly the same thing—there will be gallery floors behind a wall of opaque glass. We also have three levels of recesses in the skin that could look like windows or balconies. These will help bring down the scale and will tie this facade with that of the tower. In addition, our grid recognizes the structural grid behind it. Of the three facades, ours will be perhaps the most transparent, revealing more in terms of both function and structure. So, without getting involved in issues of “honesty,” there will be a comfortable relationship between the facade and what is behind it.

Fred Clarke

Actually there is a major difference, which is that the new elevation includes verticals and the Goodwin-Stone is entirely horizontal. In the Goodwin-Stone there is no tower on top, there is no sense of other things having to be brought to the ground. The new building is responding to a different set of pressures—an interweaving of horizontal and vertical.

Diana Balmori

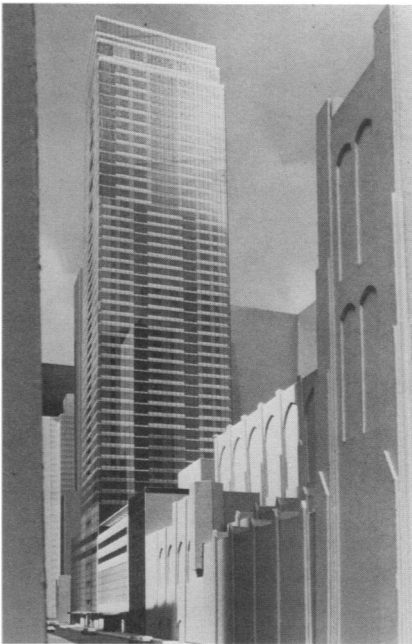
Yes, we were trying to make the tower sit on what was essentially a horizontal element, which is this new gallery space. We had to see if there was some way of interweaving both, and the colors do just that.

Perspecta

How do you think the restrictive site (a narrow side street in Manhattan) will affect your intentions? How will one perceive the gradation of color and the other subtleties of the facade?

Cesar Pelli

We were very aware of that: it is one of the most important factors in the design of the building and a major consideration in how you will see it. Our facade will appear very reflective because it will be seen at a sharp angle most of the time. The other—the Fifth Avenue facade—will be seen more frontally and, therefore, its patterns will be read more clearly, as in our color diagrams.



Museum of Modern Art Tower
(View from Fifth Avenue)
Model

Perspecta

On the 53rd Street facade you had large bays of color that were also graduated from light to dark. Is that still in the scheme?

Cesar Pelli

The scheme has changed some. The color has become less saturated, and the rhythm is simpler. The design of this facade tries to respond to a number of pressures and very specific circumstances and to gain life from them. First, the space requirements for the galleries do not allow any major play—the facade has to be a tight wall on the property line. We believe this is also best for the street: to strengthen its form. Second, the new facade has to reconcile itself with the Goodwin-Stone and the Philip Johnson facades and try to achieve some unity while preserving them. Third, it has to resolve the visual weight of the tower sitting on it while maintaining the separate identity of the museum. Fourth, it has to relate to the other buildings on the street. Clearly, some of these objectives conflict with each other. The weight of the tower is visually brought down through the museum floors by extending its axis downward with balcony forms and by bringing down the edges of the tower with changes in color. The museum continues horizontally because it is one tight surface, because the scale of the color panels is of a different magnitude than in the tower, and because of the horizontal windows. The primary reading of the new west wing will be a shiny dark wall, in the same relation to and contrast with the Goodwin-Stone facade as Johnson's east wing. The Goodwin-Stone building will continue being the symbol and entrance of the Museum of Modern Art and will maintain its now-historical relationship with the rest of the block as a white medallion on a dark background. The different stages of expansion of the museum will be clearly identifiable.

Perspecta

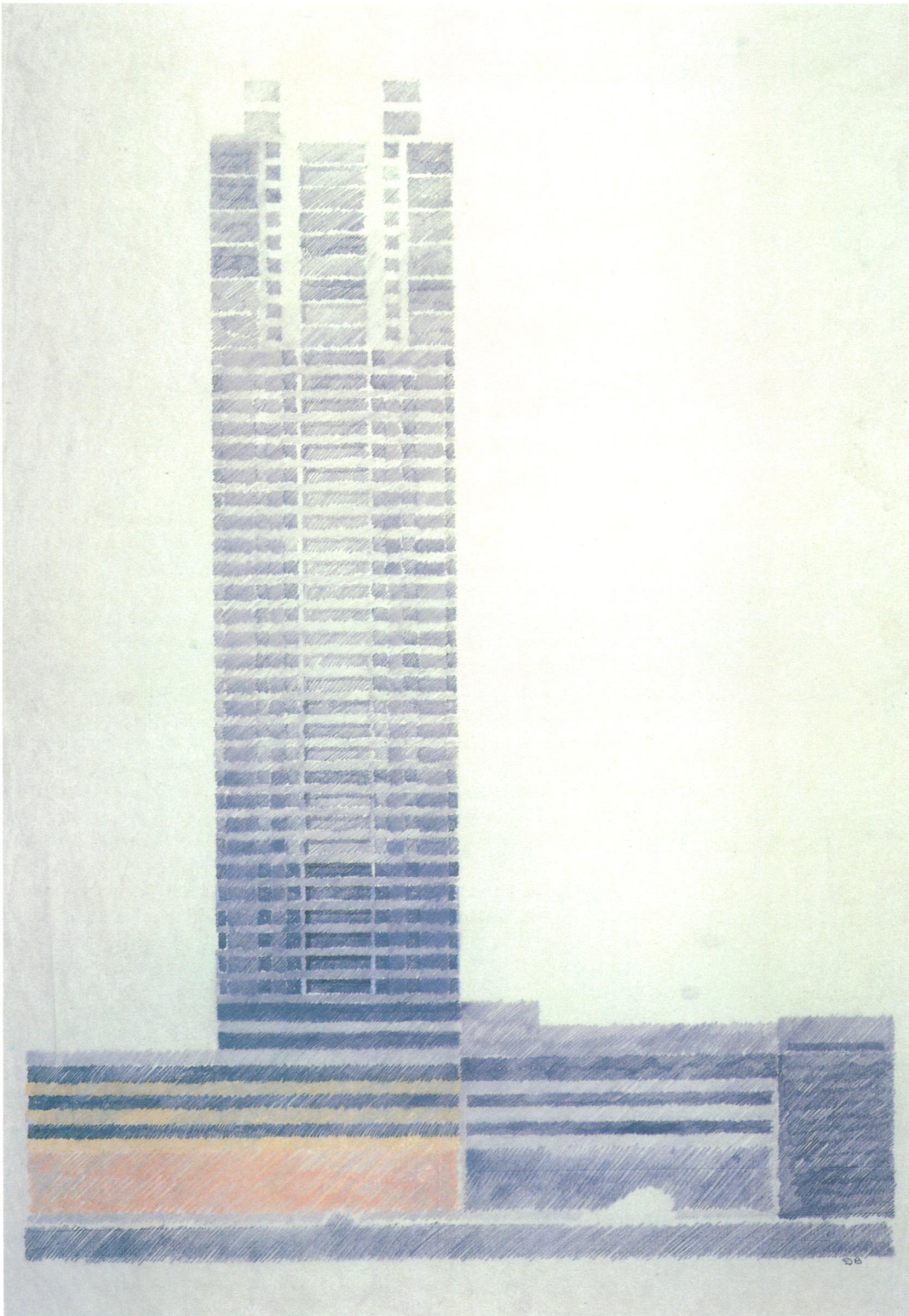
Do the gradations of the tower facade (from light to dark) signify specific architectural notions, or are they purely abstractions?

Cesar Pelli

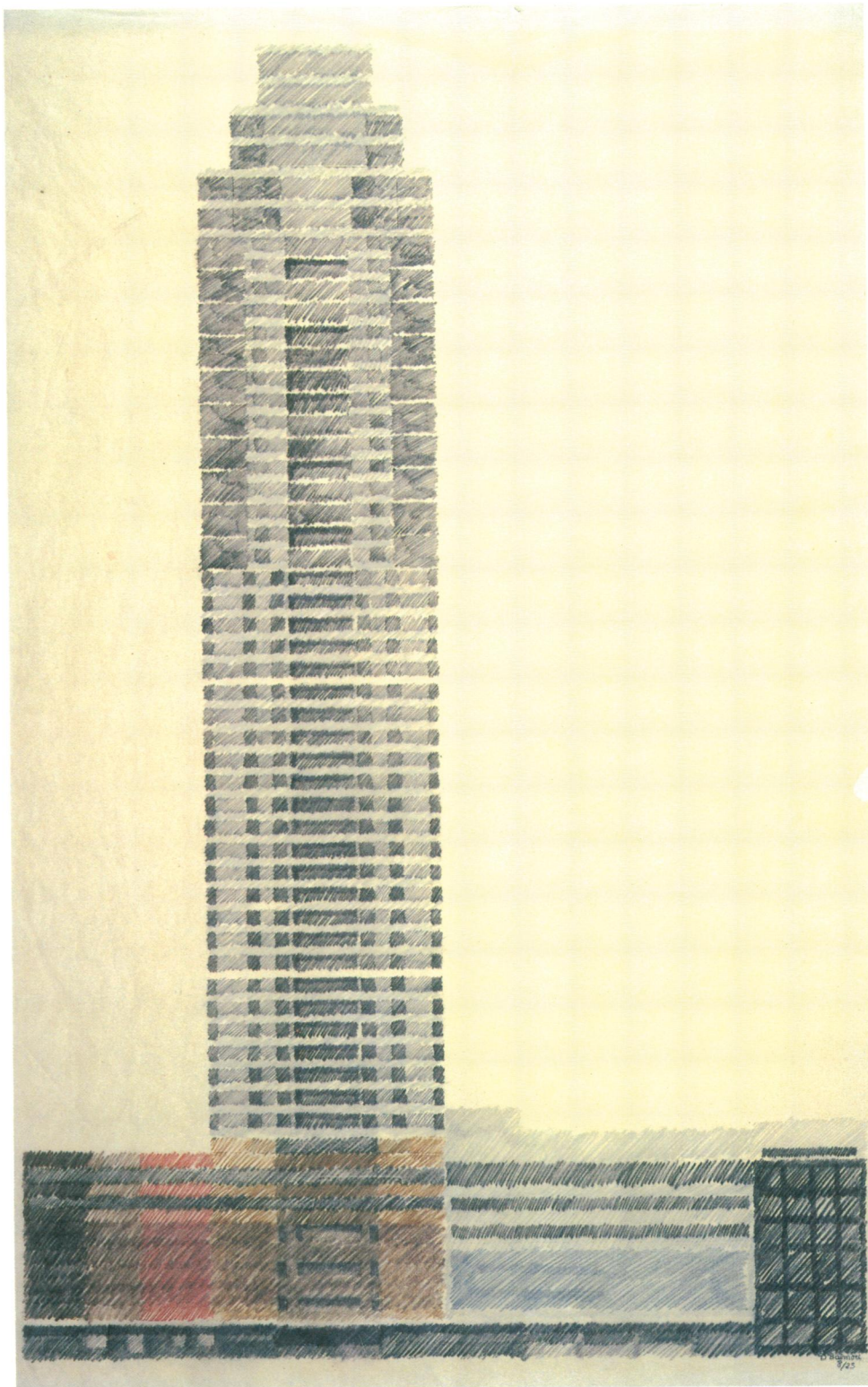
They are both. They are aesthetical abstractions, and they signify architectural notions because they change from light to dark as a way of representing and emphasizing the changes in the tower from apartments to condominiums, and because they contribute to the composition of the tower with a bottom, middle, and top. The middle part is a shaft with a change in scale and character on its upper third, very much like in the apartment towers of the twenties and thirties. The facades are symmetrical, with balconies and a stepped top, and they are broken down into elements the size of an apartment or a room. This will be a differentiated building with many of the traditional elements of an apartment tower, but reinterpreted and contained in a tight skin.

I believe the facade will be quite beautiful and will allow a multiplicity of readings that will keep it alive and interesting. Besides the qualities I have already described, it represents an interweaving of color panels similar to those of the tower but at a much larger scale related to the functional scale change from apartment to museum gallery. This wall will be seen sometimes as a surface painted on a large-scale composition, sometimes as a rippled surface of distortions.

We have been discussing only what happens from the second floor up. At the ground floor—that is, the sidewalk facade—the character will be completely different. It will be primarily a facade of stone with large openings for windows and doors and topped by what can be described either as a shallow canopy or a deep molding. It should feel very comfortable, very urbane.



Facade study
53rd Street



Facade study
53rd Street



The Museum of Modern Art
Sculpture Garden
1939

Perspecta

Could you discuss your design intentions for the winter garden (or glass hall) and the kind of character you feel it will have.

Cesar Pelli

The glass hall, like many of the design decisions that were made in this project, was not considered as an object—not as a thing in itself—but as an element of architecture responding to a great number of other architectural realities that are there and will remain there. So we see this piece not as an imposition of our artistic will but as a careful response to what is already there. Half of our architecture has already been designed by other people. Therefore we see the winter garden as closely responding to those elements but trying to gain energy out of the new condition. The major new function is a vertical system of movement based on escalators—vertical movement but also diagonal, which suggested the diagonal form of the glass hall. The glass hall is also being designed so that it will be seen or read as single pyramidal form or as horizontal layers, as one-story-high little greenhouses. It will be possible to see its scale as either large or small. The forms coincide with and extend the floors of the Goodwin-Stone building. It will be pulling things together while adding a new element. We think these forms, their transparency, and their crystalline nature will be exciting there. The inclined planes are going to reflect the sky, and because the winter garden slopes back, it will be receding, moving away from the garden. We hope it will add a whole new dimension to the garden, extending its views into the museum and superimposing on them the reflections of clouds, and buildings, and trees.

But what is really important about this element is the space that it will create: a vertical space that will open all floors of the museum to views of the garden.

Perspecta

The glass appears to be used differently on the winter garden than on the front of the building.

Cesar Pelli

Yes, because in the front the glass is a very tight facade, primarily in response to the street. And the glass is an opaque cladding. In the back it is an extension of the garden. The building has a front and a back which are very different.

Perspecta

What will the new restaurant be like, and how will it relate to the end of the building?

Cesar Pelli

The restaurant has been a difficult problem because it is an attachment, both in terms of volume and function, and it is being designed with much of the character of a garden pavilion.

Perspecta

What is the predominant material? Is it going to be masonry or . . .

Cesar Pelli

Yes.

Perspecta

Not glass?

Cesar Pelli

No, that is an area that is in the process of being determined, but the garden wing restaurant will be a solid masonry form ending the garden.

Perspecta

The winter garden will offer views into and out of the museum. Does the restaurant offer a different point of view—a face, in fact, rather than a wall that is transparent?

Cesar Pelli

That is correct. It definitely offers a face. I think it is necessary to have an intermediate plane between the garden and Canada House. As long as we have to have it, that is the function it should fulfill.

Perspecta

How will the 54th Street facade relate to the existing wall?

Cesar Pelli

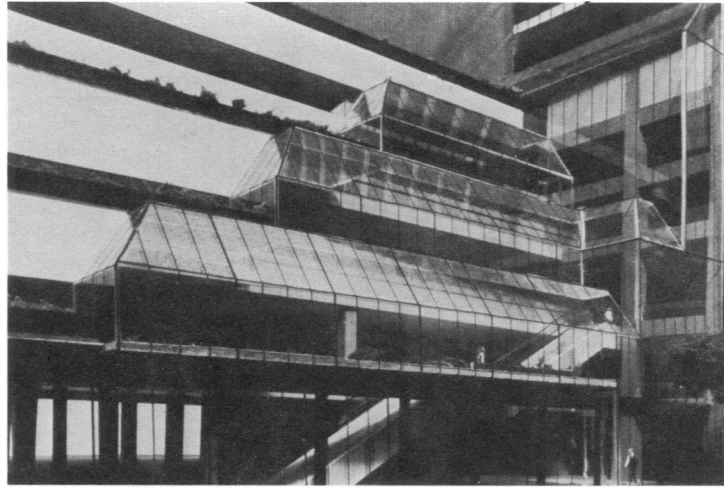
54th Street has also been a difficult design problem because we want it to be many things at the same time. We want it to relate to the existing wall, to the scale of 54th Street, and in general to the scale of the townhouses on the street. We want it to be a simple and unobtrusive plane and still make an entrance, still be seen as the museum.

Perspecta

The garden itself will be . . .

Cesar Pelli

The garden itself will remain as unchanged as possible. It will require some restitching at the edges and adjustment to circulation changes. But it will remain very much as it is now.



Museum of Modern Art Project
Winter Garden
(View from sculpture garden)
Model

Perspecta

What are your intentions in the new galleries? Will they become extensions of the existing galleries? Will they be of the same type or not?

Cesar Pelli

Yes, in this case our primary effort went into understanding clearly what the museum wanted, trying to give them a building which fulfilled, as closely as possible, their hopes and aspirations. What they wanted was basically an extension of gallery space on the same levels and of the same type they have today. And this is what we have done. The excitement in the new building is not being created by forcing the museum functions but by attached elements—like the glass hall, which will provide a vertical space with sculpture galleries open to the light and with views. Moving up and down the escalators should be a delight.

Perspecta

What about the office space and other functions?

Cesar Pelli

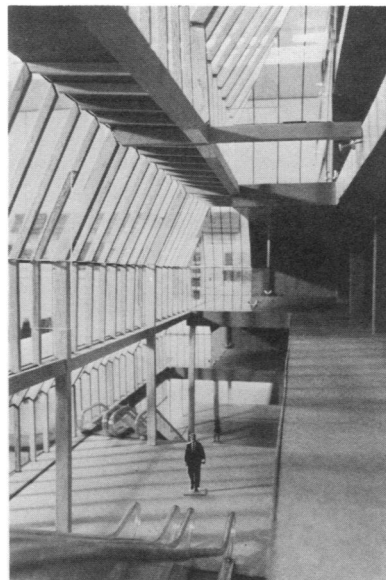
Once again, we were working very closely with the museum, and they are very simple, straightforward extensions.

Fred Clarke

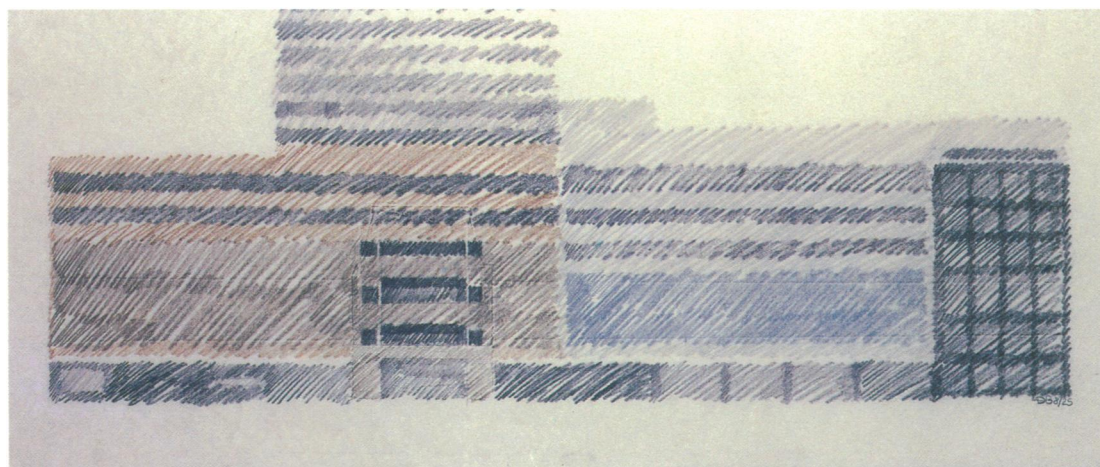
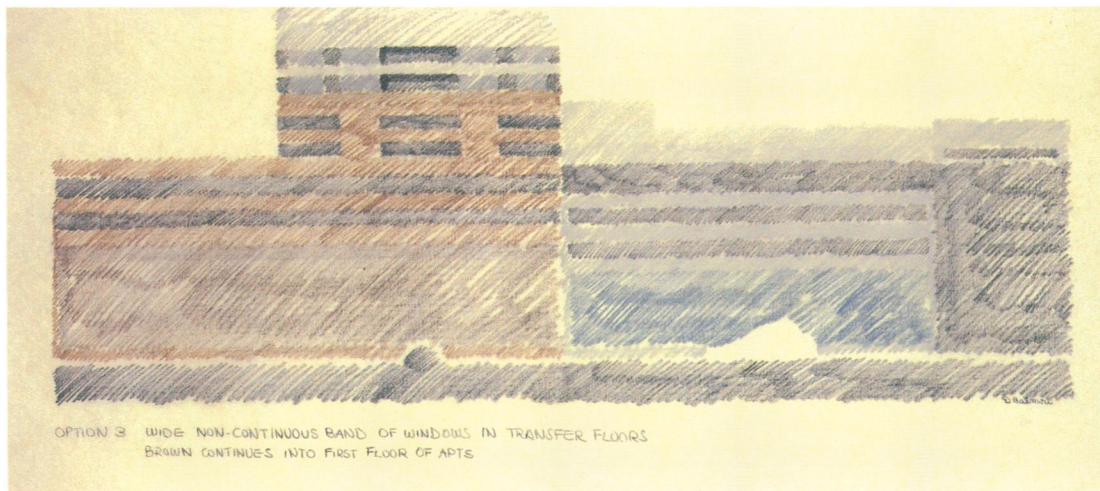
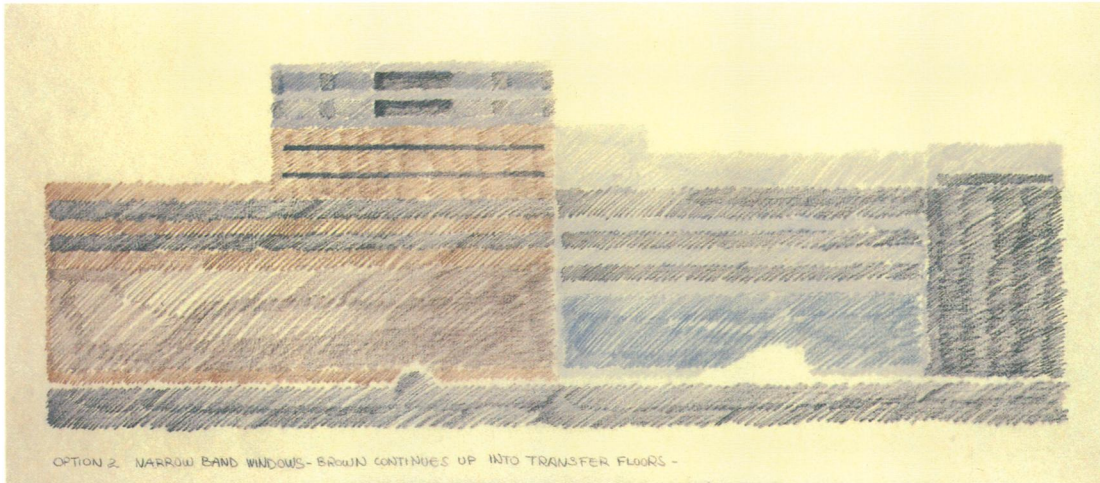
In terms of proportions it is interesting to note that the addition is primarily a gallery extension. The gallery space is almost doubled, and the office space is increased very little.



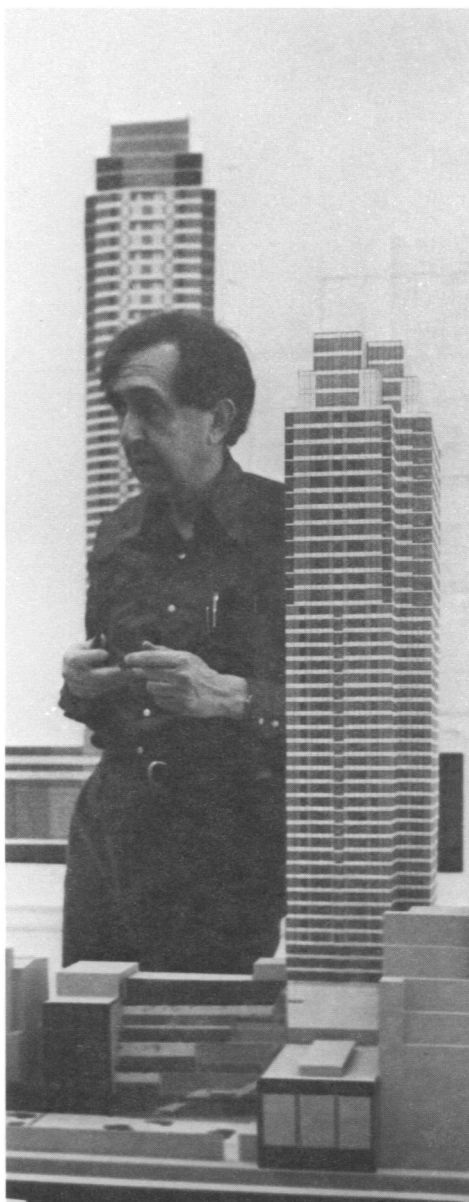
The Museum of Modern Art
Sculpture Garden
1963



Museum of Modern Art Project
Winter Garden
Model



Gallery facade studies
53rd Street



Perspecta

This project differs from most of your well-known buildings in that it is not a free-standing object in space. Could you talk about the pressures exerted by this unique situation.

Cesar Pelli

What I find most interesting and most characteristic about this project is that so much of it is being designed in response to context, and by this I mean not only physical context. We are dealing with a building that already has several layers—like geological layers—of design. And those layers are

important and of the relatively recent past. So we cannot consider a major transformation, as when remodeling an older, pre-modern building. In such cases one deals with issues of transformation or respect and preservation, and you have a rather simple choice. But when you are working on a building designed by Goodwin and Stone, that has already been changed and added to by Philip Johnson, the issue is very different; the functions, the ideas, the beliefs that

shaped those buildings are still present today. Transformation is not possible. There has been some change: the function has altered because of the growth of the permanent collection, and during the past few years architectural beliefs have also changed, but neither has been transformed. And because the existing building is not large enough to work within, or small enough to be absorbed in the new, we are designing parts—integrating, composing, reusing, and ending up with a new total. This is not a composition but an aggregation, a new entity, respectful of its own past, with all the intermediate stages remaining apparent.