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## ENTER THE WHITE CUBE :

### Examining MOMA's 2005 Rehang of the Permanent Collection

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Museum of Modern Art (New York) is reputable for its role in developing and collecting art since the 1900s. It is an institution that encompasses material culture in arenas of modern and contemporary art, architecture and design under one roof. Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the museum once communicated, “*the museum was to be a work in progress, changing and evolving as the world of contemporary art changed and evolved*”.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the architectural construct of the museum has undergone numerous shifts to accommodate MOMA's continually expanding collection. A vital extension to the premise took place in 2004, designed by Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi.<sup>2</sup> Taniguchi, for his alteration of the MOMA appurtenance, proposed a partial replacement of a built-form designed by Argentinian architect Cesar Pelli in 1984.<sup>3</sup> The dominant glass facade of the Pelli structure admitted excessive light in the gallery. The interior space had negligible inclusion of artificial light, and relied heavily on unmanageable natural sunlight, served through the frontage of the building. Modernist ideas of the ‘White Cube’ were prevalent within the gallery as it exhibited art on white, matte-finished walls. The flooring was monochromatic and carpeted with a short life span, high maintenance cost and susceptibility to allergens. Taniguchi was hired in 1997 to uplift the architectonics. This was done to execute considerable changes, for the purpose of modernisation and optimisation of the previously done Pelli facility. The expansion included a facade crafted in water white, fritted and grey glass, black granite and aluminium panels. A restoration of the International Style building was carried out, in addition to an augmentation of Philip Johnson's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden.<sup>4</sup>

Yoshio Taniguchi is essentially a modernist by philosophy. He believes museum architecture is not a product of complex algorithms generated by computer software, associating a skeletal structure with elaborate skins, volumes or shapes.<sup>5</sup> But in fact, is a harmonious relationship between light, materials, proportions and circulatory systems.<sup>6</sup> While designing built forms Taniguchi prioritises the core tenet of the *Vienna Succession* modernists (1897-1905) i.e the German term ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*’. *Gesamtkunstwerk* roughly translates to ‘*total work of art*’. For Taniguchi, the whole and its parts must constantly be in synchrony to create a comprehensive environment for observing art.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Aalst, 2002

<sup>2</sup> *AD Classics: The Museum of Modern Art*, 2013

<sup>3</sup> *AD Classics: The Museum of Modern Art*, 2013

<sup>4</sup> *AD Classics: The Museum of Modern Art*, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:

<sup>6</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:



View of the gallery complex from the Sculpture Garden. Image © Timothy Hursley

Taniguchi explains the primary goal of the MOMA expansion stating, “[*The objective*] is to create an ideal environment for the interaction of people and art. And for that, sometimes the architecture has to go away”.<sup>7</sup> His expansion did not have in view, the grandeur that comes along with museum architecture. Taniguchi, unlike his western contemporaries *Gehry* or *Herzog and de Meuron*, strayed clear from the pomposity of built form to embrace humility.<sup>8</sup> The altered space would necessarily have a simultaneous functional, social and spiritual value. He aimed at creating a scope which not only set out to provide an optimal calm for viewing art but also appropriately enveloped the commotion of New York City.<sup>9</sup> The character of the building is, therefore, porous with ample natural light.<sup>10</sup> He incorporated bridges as means of movement, which also function as ‘*passages of encounter*’ with the garden outside.

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<sup>7</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:

<sup>8</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:

<sup>9</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:

<sup>10</sup> Nakamoto, 2004:



*Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk (1969) and Monet's Waterlilies (1920) at the MOMA atrium*

The 2004 Taniguchi expansion cost \$858 million, to increase its floor area by two-fold.<sup>11</sup> The museum's new expansion accommodated galleries covering 11,612 square metres, around a 33.5-metre atrium.<sup>12</sup> On arriving at the atrium, visitors are welcomed by a soaring space housing *Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk (1969)*, a 7.5-metre corten-steel sculpture.<sup>13</sup> The atrium walls are smooth, matte and painted in sterile white. Following the postulations of exhibiting art by groups like *De Stijl* and the *Bauhaus*, the white walls perform the function of framing the work of art. The image shows the walls to adjudge *Monet's 'Waterlilies (1920)* as sacred framing. It is in a perceptive assembly fabricated by the viewer.

Irish critic, *Brian O'Doherty*, argues against the phenomena of the White Cube to be a spatial arrangement that consumes the works on display, where context becomes content.<sup>14</sup> The planar surface of the wall transforms into dimensional space. The space is a formal one, exuding an aura of

<sup>11</sup> THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART REOPENS ON NOVEMBER 20, 2004 IN EXPANDED AND RENOVATED NEW BUILDING DESIGNED BY YOSHIO TANIGUCHI, 2004

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<sup>14</sup> O'Doherty, 1976



‘do not touch’. It elevates the status of the works on display, imposing a specificity with respect to the interaction with its audience.

Mimicking the *modus operandi*, the ceiling is also a pristine white. Unlike the mechanical vaulting seen at the museum’s collecting compeer, *The Centre Pompidou*, MOMA’s atrium ceiling conceals services floating above the space to avoid distractions. The electrical fittings are tucked away, giving the displayed art autonomy. The lighting condition in the space is a mix of track lights fixed to rails, with sunlight filtering in from monumental windows and curtain walls. There is an equilibrium between the use of artificial and natural light.



*Visitors in the MOMA atrium space*

The track lights allow for flexibility with regards to aesthetics and movability. They are capable of accommodating a plurality in materiality and style, as well as have the means to be directed to highlight certain parts of the exhibit with particular intensity. They are advantageous options while illuminating large areas while considering sustainable energy consumption. An essential feature to note is the strategised shadow cast by *Newman’s Broken Obelisk*. Due to the suitable equipoise of the lighting condition, the shadow cast by the 7.5-metre sculpture does not hinder the eye of the viewer. With a fixture placed right above the sculpture, the shadow does not take from the works on display. Rather the resultant is projected as a short, diffused shadow, formed away from the placed artworks. The fenestrations which glaze the facade along with the vast skylight, permit a sufficient amount of natural light, complimenting the artificial units. The atrium floor is polished in a neutral grey. Its functional and cosmetic shape encourages a warm and inviting atmosphere, without

digressing attention from the exhibition. The matte-finished surface of the concrete flooring maximises visual comfort as it grants even light distribution without producing glare, encouraging a skid-free texture. Additionally, for the atrium space, a pronounced attribute of the new design is the unassertive black leather bench added within the atrium space. As seen in the image, the seating is used placed at an optimum distance from *Monet's 'Waterlilies (1920)'*, allowing for ease of observation. A visitor comfortably may take a break from the formality of their surroundings and didactics of the exhibit, as a means to snack while studying the *Monet*, use their device or simply stare at the disarray of the crowds that pass by.

There is a drastic change of setting when a visitor moves from the atrium to the gallery space. The scale dramatically decreases by five times. The audience moves from a 33.5 metered atrium to a 6.4-metre gallery, immediately increasing the intimacy between the artwork and its viewer. There is also a closeness between one visitor and another. The spatial configuration concerning proxemics undergoes a shift. Similar to the atrium, the gallery walls are finished in a white, smooth textured paint coat. A prime advantage of these walls is that it is capable of incorporating a variety of media. Exhibitions are easily substituted. Their character allows for the reflection of light, thus enabling the gallery to appear bright, spacious and sophisticated.



*Visitors in the MOMA gallery space*

Admittedly, prolonged exhibitions on white walls have a tend to get monotonous. This is especially the case, in current times where social media acts as a dictating factor for footfall within museums. Contemporary exhibition design aims to be Instagram-friendly, attracting and entertaining a novel

audience which expands the reach of the museum. On comparing the walls seen in the image above to the walls of the atrium space, it is seen that there is a horizontal and vertical occupation of space, due to the shorter height of the walls. The artworks are placed next to each other, drawing a viewers eye equally in both directions, to study from afar the entirety of the hang on each surface. This is different from the hang in the atrium space, as *Monet's 'Waterlilies (1920)'* covers 1276 cm, predominantly horizontally. The placement of the artworks in the gallery space, lead to a sequential analysis of the composition. It is not a salon-style hang, whereby multiple pieces of art are hung extending beyond the eye level. The display is minimal and contiguous. Every artwork has a dedicated capacity on the wall for the audience to view individually. Another instant spatial transposition distinguishing the gallery from the atrium is the wooden flooring. The move from a sizeable cavity to a smaller one promptly draws the eye to the darker floor, shifting initial focus from the artwork. The high-gloss laminated floor seems disconcerting, while its sheen suggests that it may be slippery. Albeit, pragmatically, they are easy to clean and successfully reflect light within the gallery space. The black leather seating is repeated in the gallery space. On comparing the two images, atrium versus gallery, it is evident that the distance between the seating and artworks are divergent. In case of the gallery, it is seen that the seats are placed in the middle, as a break in circulation. It is used as a resting point where visitors unwind from the kinesis of the exhibition, examining the crowd or indulging in their gadgets. The gallery also uses a combination of both, natural and artificial light. It receives natural light from the full-height fixed windows, while the track lights are used as a source of artificial light. The apertures successfully comply with Taniguchi's design strategy of *engulfing the bustle of the city*, as they allow views to the Sculpture Garden and the sensational New York cityscape.



*Sculptures by Constantin Brâncuși in the MOMA gallery*

The type of exhibition seen in these images is an *object-oriented* one. The chronology of the objects on display is a consequence of a pre-existing art historical narrative. The visual treatment is a result of a curatorial strategy in which the contents of the exhibit are scheduled according to a set, linear



specification. Although this didactical intent while exhibition-making may be informational to the viewer, in most cases it may serve to be a prolonged showcase of dogmatic academia. One can notice the plentiful use of the seating in the gallery space. It hints at the exhaustion a viewer may face while visiting an exhibition structure such as this one. Moreover, if one examines the congregation of sculptures by Romanian artist, *Constantin Brâncuși*, it is seen to be a repercussion of having, merely, the maker of the objects in common i.e the artist. There is an absence of interpretive or interactive viewpoint. The audience has at hand a direct setup, that needs no scrutinising. Furthermore, sculptures can not be looked at on round as they are stacked peculiarly. They are of different heights and contrasting materiality, placed in a cluttered fashion. Each one can not be examined individually. One can look at the composition as a whole as it is anchored by a single wall at its rear. The assembly is conflicting, confusing and visually overwhelming.



*Black Box at the MOMA gallery*

A more suitable presentation approach was taken by the 'Black Box' space within the Taniguchi complex. As seen in the image, adequate room was left between works on display. Each installation or screen presenting video works could be experienced thoroughly. In the early 2000s, MOMA acquired and exhibited works of moving images. Taniguchi incorporated dark coloured walls i.e a 'Black Box' where new-age artists could explore experimental works including performance and film. This inclusion was economical and needed minimal technical intervention. Lighting was given special consideration, as its mechanics affected the notion of the space. For the 2005 Rehang, this was the most effective approach which catered specifically to the need at the time. The absence of

colour in a formal museum space was an innovative concept introduced as a part of the Taniguchi extension.



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