

An Utterly Modern MoMA

By Cynthia Lugo

SEVEN YEARS AGO, A DAUNTING CHALLENGE WAS ISSUED FROM FIFTY-THIRD STREET: RENOVATE THE BUILDING that houses the most influential works of art of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Certainly the museum must be a work of art itself, but it must also be a functional space that serves the museum's dual mission: to exhibit its collection and to educate the public. When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) announced this Herculean task, Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi beat out other numerous, other internationally-recognized architects with his unique design for the new MoMA. Widely known in Japan as the architect of the Nagano Prefectural Museum, the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art and the Tokyo National Museum, this is Taniguchi's first structure outside his native country.

The renovation-expansion was commissioned in response to the Museum's need for a fundamentally new space in order to showcase its ever-growing collection. In his design, Taniguchi proposed not so much a solution to the spatial conundrum, but an entirely new articulation of space. Taniguchi's reconfiguration of the structure redefines the museum's identity, while simultaneously crystallizing the meaning of relevant, contemporary urbanism within a discrete architectural object. After two years of holding exhibitions at its temporary home, MoMA Queens, the museum reopened in November, marking the institution's seventy-fifth anniversary.

Glen Lowry, Museum of Modern Art Director, told Tokyo's *Daily Yomiuri*, "I always think of it as a perfectly formed bento box of space." Certainly the qualities for which Taniguchi is revered—an emphasis on light, tranquility, precision and clarity of design—are evident in the new MoMA. Its light tones and enigmatic form unify a Japanese aesthetic with expansive interiors, resulting in an elegantly proportioned yet visually prominent space. The minimalist, loft-like galleries may appear disarmingly simple, but upon closer examination unfold as studied interplays of light, structure and air. The newly modeled exhibition spaces allow for the display of large-scale artworks, such as those by Richard Serra. The locus of the museum is Taniguchi's soaring sky-lit atrium that gathers abundant natural light into the building. For the first time, daylight will filter into the galleries (courtesy of a special UV-resistant glass) and allow museum visitors a glimpse of the city. Ample fenestration expands the sight lines and the volumetric character of the museum. The expansion nearly doubles the capacity of the museum, and there are major entrances on both Fifty-Third and Fifty-Fourth Streets, permitting the public to use the lobby as an accessway, free of charge.

Taniguchi's exceptional incorporation of the existing elements into the aluminum, glass and granite structure initiates a mediation between past and present, juxtaposing old and new in a skillful integration with the surrounding environment. The beloved Abby Aldrich sculpture garden is restored; and the Bauhaus staircase, the Goodwin and Stone façade all remain as a kind of architectural *bricolage*.



Exterior view of the David and Peggy Rockefeller Building from West Fifty-Fourth Street, The Museum of Modern Art, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi. Photograph: Timothy Hursley.

Third floor with view of the David and Peggy Rockefeller Building, The Museum of Modern Art, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi. Photograph: Timothy Hursley.