Brownstone That Has Eight Lives To Go

By ROBIN POGREBIN

Call it the little brownstone that could. Or, at least, the little brownstone that dashed the Whitney Museum's hopes of creating a grand new entrance to its planned addition designed by Renzo Piano.

Sensing that preservationists were willing to go to the mat — perhaps derailing the museum's expansion — Mr. Piano recently halved the width of the proposed new entrance so that the brownstone facade at 941 Madison Avenue, between 74th and 75th Streets, would not have to be razed.

His changes reassured the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which voted unanimously to approve the Whitney addition last month.

To the uninitiated, it may have seemed puzzling that this brownstone was spared when the one right next to it, at 943 Madison Avenue, is to be torn down to make way for the expansion.

The answer lies in New York's preservation law, which dates to 1965.

When the boundaries of the Upper East Side Historic District were drawn in 1981, 941 Madison was deemed to be a "contributing" building — that is, a structure of artistic, cultural or historic value in the district; 943 was not. And to date, the commission has never voted to allow the demolition of a contributing brownstone.

A historic facade escapes the Whitney's expansion plan.

The history of No. 941 shows it to be a typical example of the row houses that made Madison Avenue a prime residential street in the late 19th century.

Built in 1876 as part of a row of five-story brownstones, it is among the district's best surviving examples of the neo-Grec style, preservationists say.

The buildings were built speculatively for people of moderate income. Eventually, stoops were removed and replaced by extended shop fronts; the single-family homes were broken up into separate apartments.

The brownstone at 941 Madison was once owned by an Olivia B. Halsey, who, Mary B. Dierickx, an architectural preservation consultant, discovered, was robbed of silverware, bric-a-brac and furs in 1903 by a gang of thieves posing as servants.

In 1910, the interior of 941 Madison was combined with 939 Madison's to create a single house. But to this day, the building — along with 939 and the three next brownstones to the south — have retained their cornices and ornaments in the neo-Grec style, a fashion that was inspired by excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

By contrast, the "noncontributing" brownstone at 943 Madison, which abuts the museum's 1966 Marcel Breuer building, was altered in 1927 by the owner, a Dr. Felix Pfeiffer. Although it retained all five stories, the facade was stripped of its detail, especially around the windows, and the roof cornice removed.

This was done at a period when the storefronts were being altered up and down Madison Avenue, and residential brownstones were being stripped of ornamentation, all in the

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A Brownstone That Has Eight Lives to Go

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name of modernization.

The East Side Historic District runs north from East 59th Street to 79th Street, and eastward from Fifth Avenue more or less to Park Avenue. Declaring some buildings to be noncontributing was partly a concession to developers, who had made the designation of the district "a very heavy lift," said Lisa Kersavage, the director of preservation for the Municipal Art Society.

The brownstones constitute one of only two six-building rows on Madison Avenue, the longest remaining in the district. The row originally continued around the corner with two brownstones on East 74th Street; those were replaced by another building in 1901.

This type of construction, in which a row of houses turns the corner onto a side street, is a distinguishing feature of row house development on the Upper East Side. A few examples remain elsewhere.

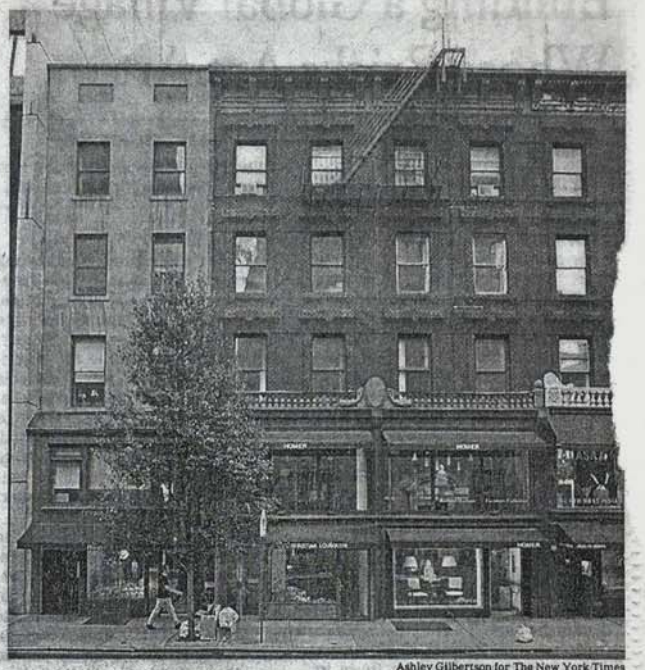
The architect of that row on Madison, Silas M. Styles, built Italianate and neo-Grec style row houses in the Upper East Side district in the 1860's and 1870's, and other residences to the north in the Metropolitan Museum Historic District.

Although its facade will remain, the brownstone at 941 Madison Avenue will not survive intact; its depth will be reduced from 31 to 17 feet. Still, New York City preservationists said the landmarks commission's decision to preserve any part of the building was an important step.

"If they had said, 'What's one more redwood tree?' or, 'We've got plenty of other brownstones,' they would have endangered the whole notion of historic districts," said Peg Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. "It's not just the grand palaces that should be saved. It's the vernacular of the place."

She added, "The intent of the Piano design wasn't significantly diminished by the retention of this brownstone."

But some in architectural circles say the defeat of the original Renzo Piano plan was a setback for bold design. Fredric M. Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, called it "truly disappointing."



Ashley Gilbertson for The New York Times

To create a new entrance for the Whitney Museum, the light-colored Madison Avenue brownstone, left, will be demolished, but the facade of the one next to it, which retains its ornamentation, will be saved.

"It really did matter how wide the entrance was for the Whitney, a major cultural institution in the cultural capital of our country," Mr. Bell said. "That won't happen now, and why? Because of a contributing brownstone that would have been appreciated as much by its absence in the creation of a landmark of the future."

Yet for opponents of the Whitney expansion plan, the survival of the brownstone facade does not go far enough. Some object to the 176-foot height of the nine-story building that is to rise behind the brownstones, connected to the original museum by glass bridges. Others object to any alteration of the street.

Still others take issue with the Whitney's plan to demolish the rear of the preserved brownstone, calling it "facade-ism." The Whitney hopes that a more open interior space will compensate for a more circumscribed doorway and diminish the sense of entering the museum through a tunnel.

"It certainly doesn't amount to preservation," said Elizabeth Ashby, president of the Historic Neighborhood Enhancement Alliance. "It's a phony building behind a facade like a billboard."

But in the view of Mr. Bell and many other architects, the troubling precedent is making preservation the priority. "The goal should be to link the preservation of our city's heritage with the creation of buildings we'll be proud to look back on 100 years from now," he said. "The retention of a contributing brownstone was nowhere near as important as the creation of a superlative and exciting new building."

Landmarks Panel Questions Whitney Plan

By ROBIN POGREBIN

Members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission suggested at a public hearing yesterday that the Whitney Museum of American Art had so far failed to persuade them of the need to demolish two Madison Avenue brownstones to make way for a museum expansion designed by the architect Renzo Piano.

"When we are being asked to demolish a historic building, I think we should be shown that it is really necessary for the programmatic function — not just a design function," Roberta Brandes Gratz, a commission member, said. The Whitney, she added, "doesn't seem to be making a compelling case for the loss."

Mr. Piano's design includes a 172-foot tower that would rise behind a row of six brownstones next to the Whitney's current 1966 Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue and connect to the original with a series of glass bridges. The design would require razing two of the brownstones to make way for a new, 32-foot-wide entrance that would lead to a public piazza. The new entrance is to be used for the general public, and the original one for school groups.

The commission called the hearings because the buildings that would be razed lie within the protected Upper East Side Historic District. One of those brownstones, two doors to the right of the Breuer, is a so-called contributing building: one that has been deemed to be of artistic, historic or cultural importance. Approval of the Whitney plan would mark the first time that the commission had issued a "certificate of appropriateness" allowing the demolition of a contributing brownstone in a historic district.

Robert B. Tierney, the chairman of the commission, said that another public meeting would be held in the next few weeks before the commission votes on whether to approve the expansion.

Commissioners suggest alternatives; the architect rejects them.

Ms. Gratz suggested that the Whitney seek an alternative plan that would preserve the entire street front of brownstones and have visitors pass through one of them to enter the museum.

Visibly agitated, Mr. Piano countered that retaining the brownstones would undermine the essential notion of his design, which is to open the Whitney to the street and invite people into the piazza. "I'm a bit at a loss," he said. "How can you make a piazza — create a sense of connection — if you have to enter through a shop window?"

"It's not going to work," he said. "You need somebody who will invent something else, because I don't see how to solve the problem."

Mr. Piano also argued that retaining the brownstones would disrupt the balance between the Breuer building, the brownstones and his new nine-story addition, making the new tower essentially "disappear."

The exchange suggested that the Whitney faces a tougher battle than it had expected in gaining the commission's approval for the design, the third expansion plan it has commissioned since the 1980's. The museum previously abandoned two other plans, one by Michael Graves and another by Rem Koolhaas.

The Whitney addition would give the cramped museum more space to display its collection and to provide education programs.

Members of the commission questioned the advisability of creating a second entrance, suggesting that the new one would compete with the old one.

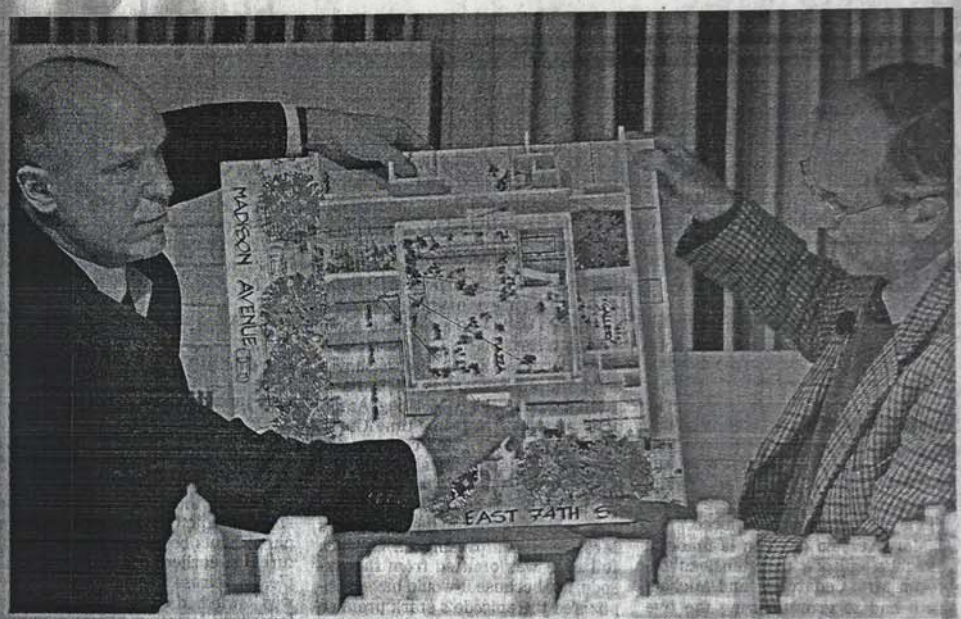
"I'm concerned that the iconographic entrance will be a relic that will not be functional," Pablo E. Vengoechea, the commission's vice chairman, said of the Breuer entrance.

Rather than building a new entrance, Christopher Moore, another commission member, asked whether adjustments could be made to the original to better accommodate crowds. "I'm not convinced you really have explained how to make the Breuer entrance useful," he said.

Adam D. Weinberg, the director of the museum, said that the Breuer entrance, roughly six feet wide, was routinely congested by the mix of large school groups and the general public, and that he did not feel the new entrance would undermine the original. "I don't think people are going to say, 'Gee, this one is the busy entrance and this is the lonely entrance,' " he said.

When Mr. Piano first drafted plans for the Whitney's two entrances, Mr. Weinberg said, he drew an apple and a pear side by side, with a space between them. "The idea was, let Breuer be Breuer," Mr. Weinberg said. "It doesn't lessen one or the other. It just gives them two different functions. It lets the apple be the apple and the pear be the pear."

Mr. Piano's current projects in Manhattan also include a new building for the New York Times Company, an expansion of the Columbia University campus and an addition to the Pierpont Morgan Library.



Marvi Lacar for The New York Times

Renzo Piano, right, and a partner, Mark Carroll, at a hearing yesterday of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Another meeting will be held before the commission votes on the proposed expansion.

Whitney Wants Plan A, but Says It Has Plan B

By ROBIN POGREBIN

The Whitney Museum of American Art, heading into a Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing today, will be armed with an alternative design for its proposed addition by Renzo Piano that would not involve the controversial demolition of a brownstone, museum officials confirmed yesterday.

It was unclear whether the Whitney would present the alternative design at the hearing, which is at the Hunter College School of Social Work on East 79th Street. Museum officials said they were still hoping that the Landmarks Commission will vote to approve Mr. Piano's original design, which calls for eliminating two brownstones adjacent to the Whitney to make way for a broad entrance leading to a central court.

One of those brownstones, 941 Madison Avenue, is considered a "contributing" building — one that is deemed to have artistic, cultural or historic value in a designated historic district. The other, 943 Madison, is not. If the commission were to approval the Whitney plan, it would be the first time that the commission had allowed the demolition of a contributing brownstone in a historic district.

The first expansion design demolishes two brownstones.

The Whitney owns both brownstones, in addition to four others on Madison Avenue. Mr. Piano's expansion is to include a 172-foot tower that would rise behind these brownstones and connect by glass bridges to the original 1966 museum on Madison Avenue at 75th Street, designed by Marcel Breuer.

The original design would require razing the two brownstones that are closest to the Breuer building. The current entrance would be maintained for school groups; the rest of the public would enter through a new 32-foot entrance that would lead through a passageway into a public piazza.

Mr. Piano has prepared a more refined and detailed design of the 32-foot entrance to present this morning to the commission in response to questions it has posed about what the front door would look like. Mr. Piano has also revised plans for a rooftop

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Falco for The New York Times

The brownstones next to the Whitney [illegible]adison.

The Whitney Prefers Plan A, But Says It Has a Plan B

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addition to the Breuer building to make it less visible from the street in response to preservationist concerns.

The alternative design would require only the demolition of the noncontributing brownstone — the one closest to the Breuer building — and would create a narrower entrance of about 16 feet.

The Whitney declined yesterday to provide images of the alternative design. A museum spokesman, Jan Rothschild, said the museum's board had yet to approve it.

Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney's director, has been quoted as saying that a 16-foot walkway next to the Breuer building would be unattractive and would pose wheelchair-accessibility and security problems.

At the last Landmarks hearing on the design, on March 15, Mr. Piano argued forcefully for removing both brownstones, saying that the new Whitney deserved a strong street presence that would be welcoming to the public.

When one member of the commission suggested that Mr. Piano consider creating the entrance through the brownstones without taking any down, Mr. Piano dismissed the idea. "The first result is, I will jump in the river," he said at the time. "It is the opposite of the idea of creating a welcoming entrance."

The architect also argued then that retaining the brownstones would "disappear" and disrupt the balance between the Breuer building, the brownstones and the tower.

Mr. Piano will not attend this morning's hearing, his office said.

At a Feb. 1 commission hearing, many neighborhood residents voiced opposition to the Whitney plan on the ground that it would compromise the character of the surrounding Upper East Side Historic District. Some preservationists expressed concern that Landmark Commission approval of the Whitney proposal would set a precedent for the demolition of contributing brownstones.

In a March 26 letter to the Landmarks Commission, for example, Elizabeth Ashby, president of the Historic Neighborhood Enhancement Alliance, wrote: "The proposed entrance alley will certainly dominate and diminish Breuer's entrance. To the extent that it doesn't, it will add confusion to the whole composition, leaving visitors wondering where the museum is and how to get into it."

But several prominent artists and architects have come out in support of Mr. Piano's original design for the Whitney addition, calling it subtle and appropriate.

The museum is seeking more space to display its expanding collection and to accommodate its visitors and education programs. This is the third expansion the Whitney has commissioned since the 1980's. The museum abandoned two earlier plans, one by Michael Graves and another by Rem Koolhaas.

NYT 2/10/05

The Whitney Expansion

Sometimes it seems as if every major museum in America has expanded or been reconfigured in the past few years. The reasons are obvious: bigger audiences, expanded collections, new marketing plans and, often, a feeling that can be summed up as "grow or die." Growth belongs to the very logic of a museum, and in some cases, plans for future growth have been designed right into a museum's original blueprint. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York is a good example.

Marcel Breuer's design for the building we all know as the current Whitney included enormous knockout panels that would allow expansion without damaging the structural stability of his creation. Elegant as the Breuer building is, the museum almost immediately outgrew it. As long as there has been a Whitney, the museum has been looking forward to a day when it could expand. To that end, it began buying adjacent buildings — brownstones and row houses — to make room.

Advancing the Whitney expansion has not been easy. A striking plan by Rem Koolhaas was set aside two years ago. And now a restrained but pleasing design by Renzo Piano, who has also designed The Times's new headquarters, is under fire because it requires the demolition of two buildings on Madison Avenue and the partial removal of a third. The Whitney and the buildings around it fall within the Upper East Side Historic District, a landmark neighborhood. There has been real and sometimes vociferous concern that destroying landmark buildings would set a precedent leading us back to the evil days when the original Pennsylvania Station was demolished — the act that gave birth to New York's preservation movement.

Given the context of the neighborhood, where there are much taller buildings within a few blocks, Mr. Piano's tower seems restrained. The likelihood of a precedent emerging from the loss of two row houses seems almost nonexistent, especially since the circumstances are very unusual.

The Whitney owns those row houses, and it has worked carefully to preserve all the buildings that would surround the new addition, on Madison Avenue and 74th Street. It purchased these buildings, with the intent of expanding, before the historic district was established.

Critics often charge the preservation movement with an almost puritanical reverence for the past, and preservationists often charge proponents of contemporary architecture with willfully disregarding it. The Whitney Museum's expansion seems like the best of both worlds: a much-needed expansion that is deeply respectful of history.

Once Again, The Whitney Is Planning To Expand

5/19/04

By CAROL VOGEL

Little more than a year after the Whitney Museum of American Art scrapped its plans for a $200 million expansion designed by the Rotterdam architect Rem Koolhaas, its board has started the process all over again. A building committee has been interviewing other architects, including the Italian Renzo Piano, who is considered the favorite, people in architectural circles said.

Mr. Piano has had considerable experience designing museums, including the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Menil Collection in Houston and the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Among his current museum projects are a $100 million expansion and renovation of the Morgan Library. About half of the Morgan's new design is to be underground, minimizing its interference with the existing buildings. He is also designing a 220,000-square-foot-wing of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Mr. Piano's other projects include a new West Harlem campus for Columbia University and a 52-story tower to be built by The New York Times Company and Forest City Ratner Companies at Eighth Avenue and 40th Street.

"Our committee has met with a number of people, and we're still deliberating," said Leonard A. Lauder, the Whitney's chairman who heads its building committee.

Expansion of the museum presents particularly tricky design problems. Its current home at Madison Avenue and 75th Street, a cantilevered granite fortress designed by Marcel Breuer in 1966, is increasingly cramped, with little room to display its growing permanent collection. It has no auditorium or other appropriate space for public programs. The building has such a distinctive profile that it is difficult to add to. It is also in a landmark district that has its own restrictions on building.

Four adjacent brownstones on Madison, now used as commercial space, were bought years ago for the Whitney to grow into. Those buildings would probably be demolished to make way for the new design.

For decades unhappy neighbors as well as architects and civic groups have voiced opposition to a Whitney expansion. In 1985 such pressure forced the museum to abandon plans to build a $37.5 million 134,000-square-foot addition designed by the Princeton, N.J., architect Michael Graves. Mr. Graves's postmodern design would have radically altered the facade of the Breuer building.

Since then the Whitney has proceeded timidly. Six years ago it expanded f within, gaining 30 percent more exhi space by moving its library, archiv offices from the fifth floor of the building to an adjoining brownstone East 74th Street. Mr. Koolhaas'

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Once Again, the Whitney Museum Is Planning to Expand

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was scrapped because it was deemed too expensive to build and operate.

"We're terribly overcrowded," said Adam D. Weinberg, the new director of the Whitney, which will celebrate its 75th anniversary in 2006. "Something will happen sooner rather than later." He said the architecture committee had had discussions with Mr. Piano, as well as with other architects. "But no formal agreement has been made with anyone," he said.

Since coming to the museum on Nov. 1 from the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., where he was director, Mr. Weinberg has been restructuring its curatorial staff. Even before he arrived he said one of his first acts would be to abolish the curatorial system created by his predecessor, Maxwell L. Anderson, who resigned under fire a year ago. Under Mr. Anderson's direction, curators were each assigned to portfolios or specialized areas, organized chronologically. Now curators will have areas of expertise but will be expected to work in other areas, too.

Mr. Weinberg is putting his own team in place. He has just hired three new curators: Elisabeth Sussman, a former Whitney curator from 1991 to 1998; Donna De Salvo, who has organized shows at the Whitney and who has most recently been a senior curator at the Tate Modern in London; and Joan Simon, an independent curator in Paris. One slot still open, Mr. Weinberg said, is that of a drawing curator.

The appointments do not necessarily signal a major increase in the Whitney's staff. Marla Prather, curator of postwar art, was dismissed in January, and Lawrence R. Rinder, its curator of contemporary art, is leaving to become dean of graduate studies at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. (Mr. Rinder will continue as an adjunct curator at the Whitney, working on the many exhibitions he has initiated, like the midcareer survey of the Los Angeles artist Tim Hawkinson, which is to open in February.)

Meanwhile, Mr. Weinberg will act as the museum's chief curator. "I've been a curator for so many years, I want to keep my fingers in things," he said. "I want my imprint on collections and exhibitions, and not work through an intermediary."

How to deal with a distinctive facade and a landmark district.

Once Again, the Whitney Museum Is Planning to Expand

Continued From First Arts Page

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5/19/02

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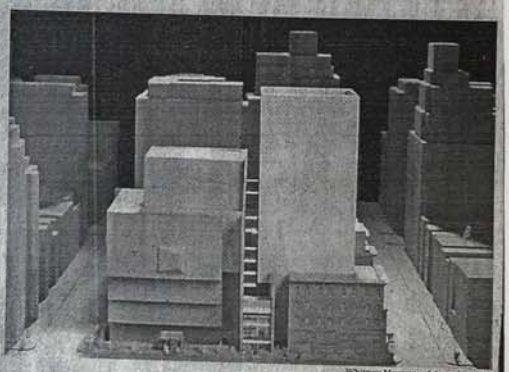
Fierce Battle Over Plan To Expand The Whitney

By ROBIN POGREBIN

An expansion plan for the Whitney Museum of American Art ran into fierce opposition yesterday from neighborhood residents and preservation groups at a public hearing, with the angriest objections focusing on a move to demolish two brownstones next to the museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

A well-organized contingent of artists, architects and museum directors who support the expansion, designed by the architect Renzo Piano, countered their arguments. Among them were the painter Chuck Close, the sculptor Mark di Suvero, architects like Maya Lin, and museum directors including Philippe de Monte-

Shannon Stapleton for The New York Times



Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney as it is today, left. A model of the proposed expansion, designed by Renzo Piano, right, showing the new nine-story building (in white, at right), rising just south and behind the current museum, left front.

home since 1966.

Mr. Piano's design includes a 172-foot tower that would rise behind the row of brownstones on Madison Avenue and connect to the Breuer building with a series of glass bridges. Replacing the demolished brownstones would be a new main entrance, 32

issues. In prepared comments read into the record yesterday, it asked the Landmarks Commission to require that "an alternatives study be prepared and presented to the commission that would illustrate the options available to the museum other than complete demolition."

daughter of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who founded the museum, also offered support for the expansion. "It's elegant, it's modest," she said. "I can imagine how happy my mother and my grandmother would be to see it."

Several neighborhood residents

MATTHEW GRACE 1/31/05

Whitney Shakes Up East Side With Piano-Designed Expansion

bello of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Glenn D. Lowry of the Museum of Modern Art.

Gary Chinn, a 25-year resident of a brownstone at 34 East 75th Street, said the Whitney could not "be allowed to run roughshod over the character of the neighborhood that it chose to be part of with its demolition."

The hearing, which was moved from the commission's headquarters to Pace University to accommodate the approximately 200 who attended, was required because the two 1876 brownstone buildings that would be razed lie within the Upper East Side Historic District. One of those brownstones is a so-called contributing building: one that has been deemed of artistic, historic or cultural importance.

The Landmarks Commission has never issued a "certificate of appropriateness" allowing the demolition of a contributing brownstone in a historic district.

Those supporting the expansion plan argued that the Piano proposal would not necessarily set a precedent, because the Landmarks Commission rules on a case-by-case basis. They also commended Mr. Piano for preserving the three other remaining brownstones on Madison Avenue in his plan and for respecting the pink granite Marcel Breuer building that has been the Whitney's

feet wide, leading to a public piazza; the current Breuer entrance would be used by school groups and as a point of access to the bookstore.

Speaking in support of the plan, Mr. Close, a Whitney board trustee, said, "The artists are the ultimate clients of the architecture."

He said that Mr. Piano designed "buildings that artists want to be shown in."

"His use of natural light," he continued, "makes the visitor experience one of serene joy."

But Lisa Kersavage, a member of the Municipal Art Society's preservation committee, said Mr. Piano should revise the design to preserve the brownstones.

"The Whitney has not yet crossed the threshold in their argument for demolition of the contributing building, based on appropriateness," she said. "We are confident that this very talented architect could develop a very satisfactory solution that both retains the contributing buildings and provides for the museum's programmatic needs."

And Robert Lang, the director of community programs and services at the Landmarks Conservancy, argued that granting the Whitney's request would set "an adverse precedent."

The American Institute of Architects New York Chapter, while supporting the addition in principle, raised questions about preservation

The museum said it needed more space to display its collection (which has grown to 16,000 works from 2,000 over the last four decades), to manage visitors moving through its cramped lobby (now 577,000 a year) and to accommodate education pro-

Renzo Piano's design would demolish two brownstones.

grams. (It has no auditorium or classrooms.) The museum had previously selected and then rejected two other architectural expansion plans, one by Michael Graves and another by Rem Koolhaas.

Calling his building "a little tower," Mr. Piano pointed out at the hearing that his plan would add just 35 percent more space to the current museum. "Two things I love and respect" are the Breuer building and the brownstones, he said. "The idea is just to find the right balance."

Hamilton Smith, Breuer's associate architect on the Whitney, also testified in support of the Piano plan. "Mr. Piano's design concept neither engulfs nor overshadows the original Breuer building," he said.

Flora Miller Biddle, the grand-

seemed distressed that the landmarks commission would even consider the demolition. "If Landmarks permits the Whitney's expansion, where will it end?" said Edward Kilmerman, the president of the co-op board at 14 East 75th Street. "Everyone should be obligated to follow the rules."

Calvert Moore, another resident, suggested yesterday that the Whitney relocate. "The Whitney in its history has moved on every prior occasion when it needed to grow," she said. "It is appropriate at this juncture that the Whitney move again to a more commercial or industrial neighborhood where it won't be restricted by the historic district or ruin the character of its surroundings, and where people would welcome Mr. Piano's ultra-modern, commercial design."

"When you buy or rent your home in a historic district that is protected by the Landmarks Preservation Commission," Ms. Moore added, "you expect your neighborhood to remain the same."

Few at the hearing disputed that the Whitney's request posed an important debate. "Is it worthwhile to allow the well-being of an entire complex to be diminished by the preservation of a single brownstone?" asked Bill Higgins, the Whitney's historical preservation consultant, in his testimony. "It is not an easy question, but I think it is a crucial one."

MATTHEW GRACE

1/31/05

Whitney Shakes Up East Side With Piano-Designed Expansion

NY Observer

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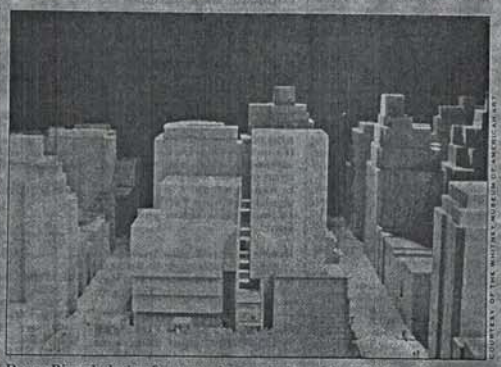

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THE Arts

The New York Times

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

Whitney's New Plan: A Respectful Approach

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF

The Whitney Museum of American Art's on-again, off-again expansion plan has been lurching along for more than two decades now. In that time, the museum has gone through four directors and flirted with ill-fated designs ranging from the bold to the grotesque. The worst, a 1985 proposal by Michael Graves, would have smothered the existing building in a pastiche of pseudoclassical references. A more promising proposal by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas was dropped a year and a half ago amid post-9/11 uncertainty and a growing sense that the design was inappropriately aggressive. To many, it seemed as if the museum had simply lost its nerve.

Now the Whitney is trying a gentler approach. A new design by the Italian architect Renzo Piano, approved last week by the museum's board, is conceived as a stoical nine-story tower that would rise alongside the existing 1966 landmark. The tower's simple form and silvery copper-and-aluminum-alloy skin would be a dignified counterpoint to Marcel Breuer's brutal dark granite masterpiece. Respectful of its context, the proposal is about incremental progress, not radical change.

The design, which would double the size of the museum, is still in its earliest stages; the Whitney plans to present a refined version to the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission in January. The aim clearly is to placate the preservationists and community leaders who have stymied the Whitney's expansion plans in the past.

Renzo Piano Building Workshop

Whitney Museum

The Renzo Piano Version

Such humility may seem laudable. Who doesn't want to preserve the city's architectural legacy? But great design is never cautious; it cannot arise amid a climate of fear. The risk is that the building will ultimately be too subdued, as if it is trying too hard to fit in. If the city is to get the full benefit of Mr. Piano's talent, the Whitney will have to grant him the freedom to follow his ideas, wherever they lead.

The design starts confidently enough. Breuer's Whitney, with its inverted ziggurat-shaped facade and moatlike sculpture garden, is a portrait of monastic seclusion. Mr. Piano seeks to open the museum up to the surrounding street life by demolishing two town houses just to the south on Madison Avenue and replacing them with a glass-covered entry vestibule and a small garden. From here visitors will slip under the cantilevered corner of the new building before turning into a new lobby and cafe area. The addition rises above

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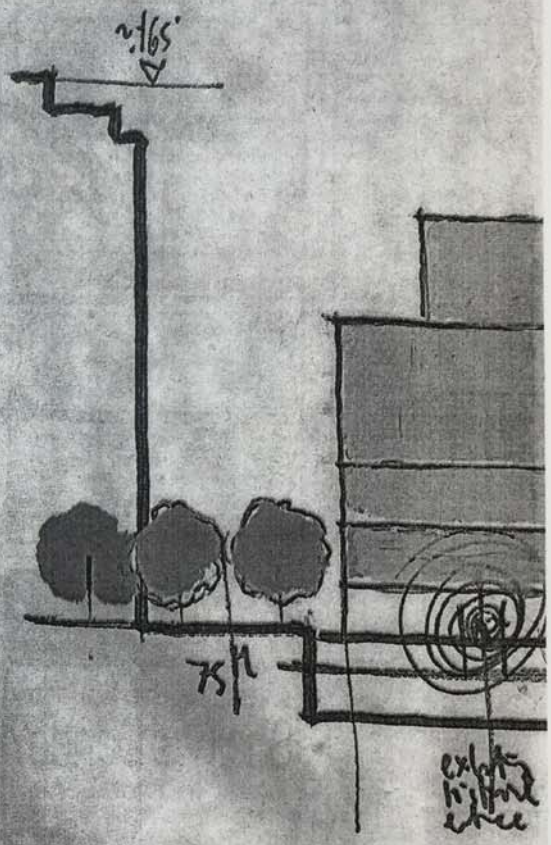
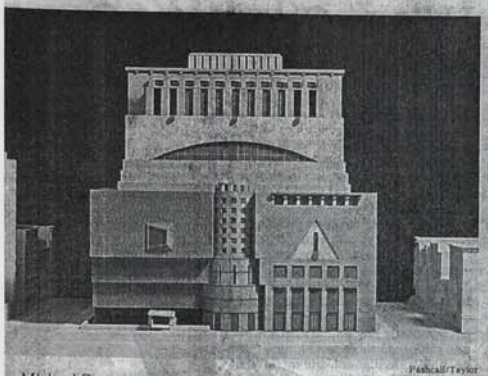


The Renzo Piano model of an addition to the Whitney Museum of American Art, above left, and his drawing of it, as viewed from Madison Avenue with the current building on the left.



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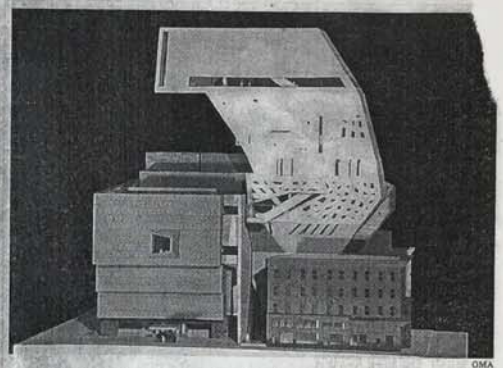

OMA

The Michael Graves version of an addition to the Whitney Museum, left, from 1985, and the proposal of Rem Koolhaas, dropped last year.

CHITECTURE REVIEW

The Whitney's New Plan: A Respectful Approach

Continued From First Arts Page

space behind the remaining wnstones on Madison.

Mr. Piano, whose New York jects also include additions to the rpont Morgan Library and a new dquarters for The New York es, has always brought a re-rkable sense of clarity to his k. The son of a Genovese builder, is a master of structural detail, ch in his hands typically has a n modern sensibility. But his ur- approach is also classically hu- nist, a combination that has made a favorite of museum curators. ering the Whitney would be a lit- ike arriving at a medieval piazza, the gradual transition from the row alleylike vestibule to the vast y, yielding an explosive sense of f. Like a piazza, the lobby will function as a public gathering e, an acknowledgement of the eum's expanding role in the s social fabric.

o extend that sense of communal rgy, Mr. Piano creates a 10-foot slot between the addition and the old building bridged by a series of glass walkways that connect the old and new galleries. Suspended between the massive forms of the two buildings, the crystalline bridges — bathed in light and swarming with people — will vibrate with energy.

The galleries, by contrast, are intentionally more tranquil. Most are essentially an updated version of the existing galleries: large flexible loft-like spaces that should be ideal for displaying the Whitney's modern collection. The most promising are the top-floor temporary exhibition spaces, where Mr. Piano is able to experiment with the flow of natural light. He is famous for such spaces: in his 1986 Menil Collection building in Houston, a system of exquisite winglike louvers are used to filter a soft, natural light down into the galleries. The louvers cast a subtle shadow on the upper portion of the gallery walls, but the light evens out as it reaches the paintings. You retain a faint awareness of the world outside, which makes the paintings feel particularly alive.

Here a grid of aluminum panels pierced by small eye-shaped apertures will permanently block the harshest southern light; a second system of mechanical louvers will allow curators to regulate the remaining light as it flows into the gallery. The entire apparatus rests atop a six-foot-deep steelframe that is hidden by a final layer of translucent fabric panels. The light could be beautiful; it's hard to quibble with Mr. Piano's skill in this regard. But the fabric panels could also be overkill. They are there to hide the structure, which curators feel may distract viewers from the art, but they may also mask the design's beauty.

The biggest problems, however, arise when you sense that Mr. Piano is deferring to Breuer — for example, with the aluminum-and-copper-alloy panels that would clad the addition. Mr. Piano compares the panels' silvery overlapping forms to textured fish scales that are meant to play off the smooth, polished granite panels of Breuer's façade. But the contrast doesn't feel strong enough. Because the panels are roughly of the same size and proportions as Breuer's, they risk making the addition look like a towering shingle-style barn.

Another issue is how you enter the museum. In creating his new entry point, Mr. Piano has made Breuer's existing entry bridge over the Whitney's sculpture court somewhat redundant. In truth, the bridge has never worked. Its heavy concrete form casts a dark shadow across the court below, making it an oppressive place to view sculpture; its concrete canopy blocks the view from the bridge to the main facade so that you never feel the full force of its weight.

Mr. Piano has toyed with the idea of tearing out the bridge and replacing it with a narrower lightweight structure. The solution — an obvious one — would help shift the focus to the new entry and open up the glorious view to Breuer's facade. It would also go a long way in tying the two buildings together into a cohesive composition. But so far the museum's board has refused to even discuss the idea for fear of incurring the wrath of preservationists.

In struggling with such decisions, the museum may want to draw inspiration from its own past experiences. Breuer's building is no shrinking flower. The building's aggressive forms capture the museum's ethos as a place for creative expression — it acknowledges that most new ideas are by nature impolite. In its time, it was also a slap, conscious or not, against the confining traditions of polite Upper East Side society.

It was that sense of irreverence that Mr. Koolhaas sought to tap into. His design — a bold composition of faceted concrete forms that loomed over the Whitney as if it were about to devour it — was brash, playful and bizarre. It was too much for the Whitney to swallow.

Mr. Piano is more cautious by nature, but his work, at its best, has a wonderfully human quality. To stand up to Breuer, he will have to show a bit more bravado. He should respect the past, but he should challenge it, too.

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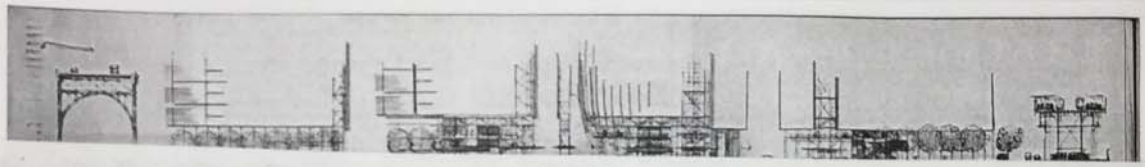


Arts Groups Learning to Look Gift Horses in the Mouth

Continued From First Arts Page

ter it," Kenneth T. Jackson, a professor of history at Columbia University and a scholar of New York history, said Mr. Vilar's impact, however short-lived, was a positive sign of meritocracy. "There are cities where the old money does have a kind of lock on who's accepted socially and who's on the board of leading institutions," he said. "In New York City, it's all about money. And that's awful in some ways, but it's also liberating."

"It's less about who your grandparents were and more about who you are and what you do," he added.

Still, as corporations come under greater scrutiny as a result of problematic accounting incidents, cultural groups say they have grown more conscious of whose money they are taking and the importance of board oversight.

After two trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art fell from grace — Jean-Marie Messier was ousted as chairman of Vivendi Universal, and L. Dennis Kozlowski, the former chairman and chief executive of Tyco International, has been indicted — the museum started a legal and ethics committee to screen potential board members.

"We don't have the F.B.I. do an investigation," Arthur Fleischer Jr., the chairman of the committee, said dryly. "Most new trustees are known to at least one member of the board."

Herbert R. Axelrod, a New Jersey philanthropist whose gift of rare string instruments to the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra raised suspicions of a tax dodge, is serving a prison sentence for unrelated tax fraud. The instruments' value is still being resolved.

Bruce Crawford, the chairman of Lincoln Center, said: "Governance in nonprofit cultural institutions has improved a lot in the last two to three years. When you make a pledge over five years and you aren't paying, you can't hide this stuff anymore."

At the Boston Symphony Orchestra — which Mr. Vilar regularly attended but did not support — Mark Volpe, the managing director, said he reviewed pledges regularly with his chief operating officer. "There is more and more scrutiny," he said, "not just in reviewing donor rosters but in testing the collectibility."

Michael Margitich, the Museum of Modern Art's senior deputy director for external affairs, said: "Everyone's being much tougher these days. In general institutions are working more carefully, reviewing legal documents and dotting every 'i.' "

Mr. Margitich said the Modern's board "likes people to go through a long courtship" before enlisting trustees. First, donors tend to join a committee — say, a curatorial or education panel — and then they gradually become involved with the institution before being asked to join the board. This process can take anywhere from two to five years. "It's a getting-to-know-you process," he said.

These relationships serve as a kind of insurance for the gifts, arts executives say; the longer you know prospective donors, the more you can rely on their pledges. "Most of the operating and capital gifts are from people we know pretty well," Mr. Volpe said.

Similarly, the more extensive the history, the more forgiving institutions can be if donors' fortunes take a turn for the worst. "If the I.R.S. can work out with citizens a payment plan or time to make good on their legal obligations to the government, then surely a nonprofit institution can be at least as patient and understanding when a philanthropist gets into trouble," said Reynold Levy, president of Lincoln Center.

Still, institutions say they are not shy about nudging contributors when necessary. Conrad M. Black, the embattled former chief executive of Hollinger International, took months to pay a $100,000 pledge he made as a chairman of the New York Public Library's fund-raiser, the Literary Lions dinner, in November 2003.

L. Dennis Kozlowski, a former Whitney trustee, was indicted.

"We remind them of their schedules," said Gail Scovell, general counsel at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. "It's much higher on our list than it is on theirs."

Cultural groups say legal action is a last resort. "Suing donors is not something we would ever do lightly," said Mr. Volpe, of the Boston Symphony. "We've never initiated an action against a donor."

Legal recourse is also of limited value. "A gift is not an enforceable thing," Ms. Scovell said. "What you need to show is you relied on it."

The Metropolitan Opera relied on a $4 million pledge from Mr. Vilar to underwrite two of its most extravagant productions, Prokofiev's "War and Peace" and Beethoven's "Fidelio." When Mr. Vilar's money failed to come through, the Met created, in September 2002, a bad debt reserve to cover it.

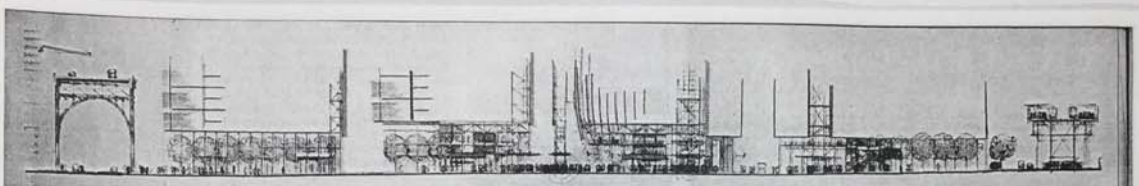
Mr. Vilar's experience with the Met offers an important lesson for institutions everywhere, arts executives say: Wait until you have the cash before you spend it. Under 1995 accounting rules, Ms. Scovell said, pledges have been counted as income, so institutions must be careful not to spend ahead of cash flow.

Michael M. Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center, to which Mr. Vilar pledged $50 million, declined to discuss the specifics of Mr. Vilar's gift. But he said the Kennedy Center creates an account each year containing a "percentage of contributions that we expect not to receive." Given the center's large donor pool of 30,000, he added, there are always going to be defaults. "We overraise," he said, "because we know a certain proportion of our donors won't come through."

But donors generally do come through, arts executives say, and defaults are rare. If the defaults have been getting more attention, they say, it is because the money is bigger and more quickly acquired than it was in the past. "You've got a generation of people who made money real, real fast," Mr. Volpe said, adding that this has led to a kind of "venture philanthropy."

Dorothy Cullman, a longtime arts patron, says the old guard, to the extent that one still exists, does not resent the new donors, but the rush to sign up new rich givers is perhaps precipitous. "I think boards are too quick to get people who they think have money," she said.

On the other hand, she reflected, "It's awfully hard to say, 'I won't take their money.' "



Sketches and photograph by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects

Renzo Piano's Manhattan projects include a complex for Columbia, above; additions to the Whitney Museum of American Art, below left, and the Morgan Library, below right.

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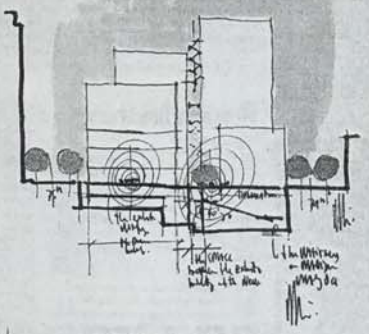
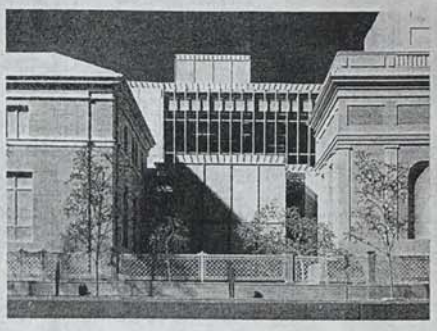
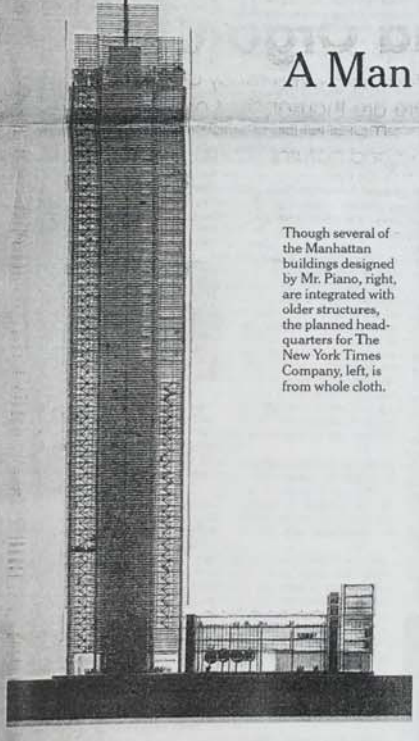




A Man About Town, in Glass and Steel

By ROBIN POGREBIN



Though several of the Manhattan buildings designed by Mr. Piano, right, are integrated with older structures, the planned headquarters for The New York Times Company, left, is from whole cloth.

The elegant, graying man in the tweed jacket and lime-green V-neck sweater looked as if he had lost his way while window-shopping on Madison Avenue and accidentally wandered onto the construction site at East 36th Street without a hard hat.

But Renzo Piano was utterly in his element amid the planks, cranes and dust.

On that morning, Mr. Piano, the Italian-born architect, was overseeing work on the expansion of the Pierpont Morgan Library, which is scheduled to reopen in the first quarter of 2006. Where passers-by in Manhattan see little more than rubble and steel, Mr. Piano pictures a new, naturally lighted reading room, a 280-seat auditorium and underground vaults for the library's rare books.

These days, you might also spot Mr. Piano about 40 blocks up Madison Avenue, where he is working on a design for an expanded Whitney Museum of American Art; across town on West 125th Street, where he is designing a satellite campus for Columbia University; or on Eighth Avenue across from the Port Authority, where ground has broken on a glass tower for the new headquarters of The New York Times Company.

For an architect who had never designed a building in New York before these projects emerged, Mr. Piano is suddenly spending a lot of time here.

So why is an architect celebrated for three decades, starting with his collaboration with Richard Rogers on the Pompidou Center in Paris, finally having his New York moment?

The answer may well lie in the nature of the projects: three of the four commissions (the Times tower excluded) call on Mr. Piano to marry his 21st-century design with one or more existing buildings.

In the case of the Morgan Library, "one of our charges to him was not only to integrate things on the outside," said Charles E. Pierce Jr., the director, "but also to find a modern intellectual idiom that would make the ethos of the interior harmonize with the beauty that was created at the start of the 20th century."

Famous architects have their signatures, of course, and residents might well wonder whether Manhattan will end up with a string of disconcertingly similar Piano designs.

Yet Adam D. Weinberg, director of the Whitney, said that while clear themes run through Mr. Piano's work — public plazas and exterior elevators, escalators or staircases — his buildings are not repetitive.

"There are certain continuities between things, absolutely," he said. "How you get from building to building has been a leitmotif in his work."

He cited three Piano buildings at the Pompidou Center — the museum itself, with its colorful exposed guts, from plumbing to escalators (1977); his reconstruction of Brancusi's spare and pristine white-walled atelier (1996), true to the spirit of that sculptor's original studio, demolished in the late 1950's; and a nine-story extension for Pierre Boulez's Ircam music institute (1990). "Most people wouldn't know they were designed by the same person," Mr. Weinberg said.

If the New York projects have anything in common, it is their direct engagement with the streets around

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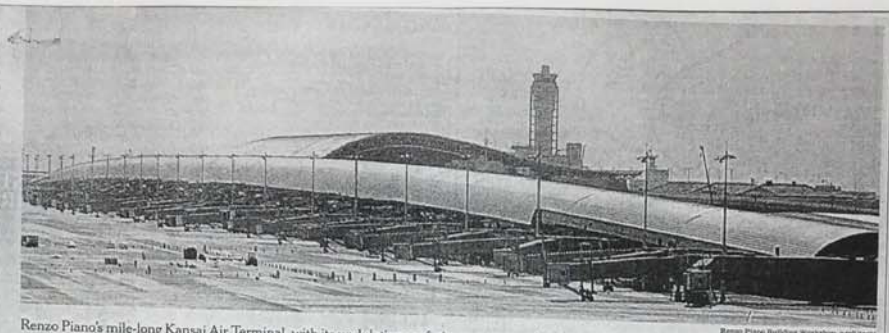
Librado Romero/The New York Times



Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects

Renzo Piano's mile-long Kansai Air Terminal, with its undulating roof, sits on a manmade island in Osaka Bay, Japan, and was completed in 1994.

A Man About Town, Wearing Glass and Steel

Continued From First Arts Page

them."The little red line linking all these schemes is the urbanity, trying to build a sense of participation between the street and the building," Mr. Piano said in an interview at the Morgan.

"Buildings normally touch ground in a very hard way and there's very little sense of permeability," he said. "All those schemes are trying to create more of a sense of transparency, a place where people feel part of the community, a sense of participation and interconnection. Taking people inside the institution, enjoying space, making it more public."

The Times building, designed with Fox & Fowle Architects, is clad in glass and features a courtyard. Michael Golden, the vice chairman of The New York Times Company who oversees the project, said Mr. Piano's skyscraper captured the transparency the newspaper wanted to convey. "It's accessible, it's open, you can see what's happening inside," he said.

The $102 million reconstruction of the Morgan, the project that is furthest along, will have a Madison Avenue entrance into a large central court that leads to all other museum and library spaces. "It's going to be like a little town," Mr. Piano said of the new complex, which includes the original 1906 library, designed by Charles McKim as an Italian Renaissance palazzo; a 1928 annex; and the 19th-century Morgan house. The addition will be constructed of glass and steel and scaled to the historic buildings.

When a design competition failed to produce an architect who satisfied the Morgan, it turned to Mr. Piano, whose museums in Houston and in Basel, Switzerland, and his Brancusi atelier had won the admiration of Mr. Pierce.

"He's not a Johnny One Note," Mr. Pierce said. "Yes, there are some similarities. But each is very different, each is very sensitive to the landscape, so I felt he would be able to deal with the challenge we at the Morgan had — three historic buildings with a lot of additions over the years.

"We were looking for someone who would be able to recreate in a modern idiom the elegance of the Morgan," he said.

Fredric M. Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, said that without resorting to "fireworks," Mr. Piano's many projects had "come up with a way of satisfying very different museum directors, boards and curators."

At the Whitney, Mr. Piano's addition pays respects to Marcel Breuer's hulking cantilevered granite building at Madison and 75th Street, built in 1966, and to the landmarked brownstones nearby. "The Breuer building is a monument to modern architecture," Mr. Piano said. "The brownstones set proportion, they set character."

He designed a modest nine-story tower linked to the current building by a plaza that creates what he likened to "a magnetic field." The design, still in its early stages, will double the museum's space for art, curating and conservation, storage, education and performances.

The Piano plan supplanted a brash design by Rem Koolhaas that the museum had jettisoned in 2003, citing its $200 million cost. Because the Whitney has made two false starts at an addition — it also canceled a Michael Graves expansion in the 1980's — the museum has a lot riding on the project's success.

Some architecture critics saw the Whitney's choice as risk-averse — as a sign that Mr. Piano had cemented a reputation as a safe architect. Writing in The New York Times, the critic Nicolai Ouroussoff offered guarded praise for the piazza, the simple form of the Whitney tower, and the lighting in the top-floor galleries, but added, "The risk is that the building will ultimately be too subdued, as if it is trying too hard to fit in."

Renzo Piano marries past elegance with a modern idiom.

Mr. Piano said that he did not feel constrained by the buildings already on the site. "Respect doesn't imply that you don't have courage," he said. "You can have courage in what you make, even as you respect what is already there."

"It's part of my history as a European, as an Italian-born," he added. "I love historical cities. I love those layers of history and modernity coming together. I like complexity."

Mr. Piano was born in Genoa in 1937 into a building family; his grandfather, his father, four uncles and a brother were all contractors. He graduated from the architecture school of the Milan Polytechnic in 1964. As a student he regularly visited his father's building sites, and worked under the architect Franco Albini. During his travels in the late 1960's, Mr. Piano met Jean Prouvé, the French furniture designer and architect, whose emphasis on the link between art and industrial technology profoundly influenced him.

In 1971 he founded a firm with Richard Rogers; in 1977 he joined forces with the engineer Peter Rice. In 1980 he struck out on his own. Among his best-known projects are his museum for the Menil Collection in Houston, a building made of steel, glass and gray cypress into which natural light enters from leafy courtyards and though a louvered ceiling (1982-86); the mile-long Kansai Air Terminal on Osaka Bay in Japan, with its undulating roof and earthquake-proof sliding joints (1988-94); and his reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, in which he used glass and terra cotta to give a unified look to the buildings (1992-2000); and the Beyeler Foundation Museum in Basel, with its heavy stone-clad walls and diaphanous glass roof (1992-97).

Clients describe Mr. Piano as warm and likable, a winning blend of urban-planning acumen and artistic exuberance. His English is good, but far from perfect, and his occasionally unorthodox sentence structure is endearing.

"People find him irresistible and want to engage him," said Lee C. Bollinger, Columbia's president. Mr. Pierce said: "He is fun to be with. He's fun to argue with."

The multibillion-dollar Columbia University project — no price tag has been set — spans a 17-acre stretch of Morningside Heights and West Harlem, from Broadway to 12th Avenue and from 125th Street to 133rd Street. The plan, designed in partnership with Skidmore Owings & Merrill, includes a major science lab, a new School of the Arts, and the renovation of the 1907 Prentis Hall, a former factory on 125th Street, and the Studebaker Building on 131st Street. The project, expected to take two decades, could become what the university regards as a link to its health-sciences complex in Washington Heights.

Mr. Piano has set up an office in Prentis Hall, with preliminary models and drawings on display so that visitors from the community can stop by and see what he is up to.

"I love the idea of being in a place because you have to capture things," he said, "to understand the breeze, the wind, the sun and noise and, of course, to understand the people."

"It's an urban university," he explained. "It's not a campus in the middle of nowhere. It's a campus in the middle of the city."

Columbia's expansion has stirred some trepidation in Harlem, where community leaders worry that it may erase some of the neighborhood's history, cut off the light or views from housing projects or lead to the kind of gentrification that prices out longtime residents. To many, it is an unnerving reminder of 1968, when Columbia's doomed plan to build a gymnasium in Morningside Park touched off protests.

"The idea there is not to make a citadel," Mr. Piano said. "One century ago, the only way to design a campus was monumental architecture, giving a sense of security. Today the university is in communication with life, so the story to tell today is completely different. It's more about permeability, more about participation. The model of the university today is more related to reality."

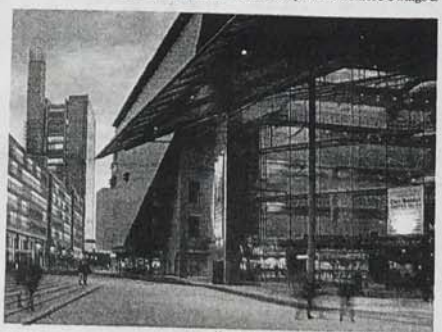
The project is under environmental review and Mr. Piano said that he expected the first phase of the project to begin in about a year.

Mr. Bollinger said that he tapped Mr. Piano for the project because he was an architect who thought about buildings philosophically as well as structurally. "He has very much a tactile sense of building materials," he said. "On the other end is this kind of dreamer who thinks about how communities interact through spaces."

Given that Mr. Piano maintains offices in Paris and Genoa and has so many projects going on at once — he was also recently selected to design a new building for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston — any of these New York clients might worry that Mr. Piano is overextended. But so far, all said, this has not been a concern.

"I've met with him no fewer than 10 times in the last six months," Mr. Weinberg of the Whitney said.

Mr. Pierce said: "He is a highly organized and disciplined man, and he doesn't undertake more than he can produce."



Vincent Monch/Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architects

Mr. Piano used glass and terra cotta in the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin.

COALITION OF CONCERNED WHITNEY NEIGHBORS

14 East 75th Street
New York, NY 10021

July 2005

Dear Neighbor:

On May 24, 2005, the Landmarks Preservation Commission after a three- month deliberation approved a modified ...

THE BIG TEASE

WHITNEY LEADS ARCHITECTS ON, THEN DUMPS THEM


Richard Gluckman's proposal of Whitney expansion

JOCK POTTLE © ESTO

THE BIG TEASE

The twists and turns in the Whitney Museum of American Art's seemingly endless search for an architect is a practitioner's worst nightmare. In "On Again?" (Issue 10_6.8.2004), David D'arcy reported that the museum jettisoned its original and amended shortlists to extend the job to Renzo Piano last month.

Richard Gluckman, one of the six architects involved in the Whitney's first interview process in 2001 that led to Rem Koolhaas' selection, has spoken out about what he considers the confused manner in which the Whitney conducted its search. (Others on the first list were Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel, Peter Eisenman, and Steven Holl.) According to Gluckman, who completed an extensive renovation of the Whitney in 1998, the museum asked him to submit a detailed design in 2003 when it became apparent that Koolhaas' $400 million project was far more than it wanted to pay.

Gluckman was asked to design a more realistically priced alternative that met several criteria. The museum wanted the addition to maximize gallery space while respecting the height of the Marcel Breuer–designed building and preserving the facades of the adjacent

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THE BIG TEA... continued fr... Madison Av... stones, whi... claimed in... The new d... maintain... space wh... proper th... Gluck... detailed... these re... about 6... space. promi... group... from... wou... pate...

Renzo Piano, study for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), 2004.

... the Whitney and the LACMA ... OMA, his design for the expansion of the ... Library is under construction, and the Harvard ...

Calvin Tomkins
NEW YORKER
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NEW YORK, NY 10036-6592
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Permit #1926
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The Architects Newspaper 7/27/04

Attention: Mee...

To continue to have our voices heard, we need additional funds for ou... mailings to you, our elected officials and influential civic and governmental agencies. ... deduction, please make your check ($1,000, $500, $250, $100, $50…..) payable to **DEFENDERS OF ... HISTORIC UPPER EAST SIDE** and mail it to us in the enclosed envelope. **Also, please sign the enclosed Petition and return it to us**.

To keep up to date regarding the Whitney expansion, visit our website at **www.whitneyneighbors.com.**

You can also write to us at the above address or call 212-726-1396.

Sincerely,

COALITION OF CONCERNED WHITNEY NEIGHBORS

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continued on page 4

THE BIG TEASE
continued from front page

Madison Avenue brownstones, which would be claimed in the expansion. The new design should also maintain the existing retail space while incorporating a proper theater.

Gluckman developed a detailed proposal addressing these requirements, adding about 65,000 square feet of space. Whitney officials promised him inclusion in a group of up to ten architects, from which two or three would be invited to participate in design charrettes before the museum would make its final selection. This was the last word he heard on the subject until the press announced that Piano was given the job.

The second shortlist was never made fully public, though it was rumored to include David Chipperfield, Herzog & de Meuron, Tod Williams Billie Tsien, and Smith-Miller + Hawkinson.

"Losing to Renzo is nothing to be ashamed of," Gluckman declared, but he is nevertheless unhappy with how he was treated by the museum. He believes Piano was hired not necessarily because he could do the best job but because he is an easier sell to funders. Though Gluckman was paid for his work, he is understandably upset that he was bypassed without having had the opportunity to present his designs to the museum or its board of directors.

But remember, the Whitney previously commissioned Michael Graves and Koolhaas to develop designs, only to drop them. Will Piano see the project through? Stay tuned.

WILLIAM MENKING

US NEWS

PLAYER PIANO

Kevin Pratt on Museum Design

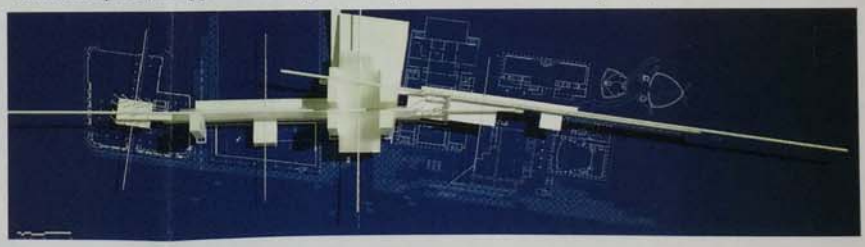
WHILE ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS AT THE Harvard Design School are hardly shouting "The king is dead, long live the king!" a recent readjustment of architectural priorities within the tightly knit world of museum trustees and directors has had one obvious consequence: Rem Koolhaas is out; Renzo Piano is in. Just a few short years ago Koolhaas and his right-brain/left-brain sister offices OMA and AMO, backed by the critical muscle of the *New York Times*, were picking up American commissions at a prodigious rate. Alongside commissions for the new Central Library in Seattle, a campus center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and multiple stores for Prada, Koolhaas proposed grandiose, expensive, and now-defunct schemes for expanding both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Working with Thomas Krens, he also made a quixotic attempt to catch the eye of Middle America by designing two Guggenheim satellites in Las Vegas, one of which closed in less than two years.

Gone, however, are the easy-money days of the millennium's turning, and with them (for the moment) the museum world's struggle to secure a place in the spectacular firmament of popular culture. To Koolhaas's detriment, the great beneficiary of this shift has been Piano. His firm, the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, is currently working on no fewer than six major museum projects in the United States. He has snatched both the Whitney and the LACMA commissions from OMA, his design for the expansion of the Morgan Library is under construction, and the Harvard University Art Museums, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Atlanta's Robert W. Woodruff Arts Centre (which includes the High Museum of Art) have all hired him to renovate and expand their campuses. While this may be evidence of little more than a herd mentality among museum patrons, the result will be Piano putting more art under a roof of his own design than anyone since I.M. Pei was the establishment's architect of the moment in the late '70s and early '80s.

Piano has long been a favorite of wealthy collectors wanting exquisite jewel boxes for their small and distinctive collections. Two of his previous museums, the Menil Collection in Houston and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, are held in high regard by both architects and curators. Although Piano began his career by exploding the traditional relationship between the museum's box and its contents with the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, in recent years he has built a portfolio of buildings that use technology in the service of exhibition spaces, as opposed to using technology as a means to augment the external spectacle of the buildings themselves. Unlike Yoshio Taniguchi, who has embraced a neohistorical modernism for his renovation of the Museum of Modern Art, Piano, in recent commissions like the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, has employed subtle natural lighting and simple materials to dramatic effect without falling into an easily definable stylistic box. His attention to the traditional issues of museum design—lighting, circulation, appropriately scaled galleries—may mark him as a conservative at a time when the baroque fantasies of Gehry and Libeskind dominate architectural headlines, but these interests dovetail nicely with those of museum directors hoping for a *rappel à l'ordre* after the excesses of the '90s. With the failures of the Guggenheim Las Vegas and Steven Holl's Bellevue Art Museum in Washington State (both victims of architectural and institutional overreach) hanging heavy over the heads of trustees, Piano has become a kind of safe bet while still providing a bit of contemporary flair. Although his work promises little hope of replicating the now-famous Bilbao Effect, it is also unlikely to leave a client the bankrupt owner of an unusable white elephant.

Nevertheless, logic dictates that the Piano middle ground can't be a universal solution. All the institutions now flocking to him have established collections, and none are dedicated exclusively to contemporary art. For unlucky museum directors without a distinctive collection or for those promoting new art, the spectacular may remain the only means of expanding their audience in the face of competition from casinos, theme parks, and tarted-up historical kitsch. The inevitability of such a "grow or die" mentality may be both clichéd and unfortunate, but recent work by the architectural avant-garde proves that the dream of high-impact architecture still lingers. Peter Cook and Colin Fournier's new Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, which resembles a neon-strangled stomach, and Zaha Hadid's design for a mobilized (literally) Guggenheim in Taiwan suggest that museum design will continue to develop along lines laid down by the contingent demands of a neoliberal economy. Urban planners and local politicians hoping to revitalize failing industrial cities with a flood of tourist dollars realize that the subtle charms of Piano's understated spaces offer little advantage in the noisy global market for luxury experience. But Koolhaas, who has devoted more energy than any other living architect to dissecting the minutiae of our consumerist ideology and its material consequences, remains well positioned to produce the next blockbuster building. He may be down, but barring worldwide social revolution, he won't stay there for long. □

Kevin Pratt is a London-based architect and critic.



Renzo Piano, study for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), 2004.

With no fewer than six museum projects in the US, Renzo Piano may be putting more art under a roof of his own design than anyone since I.M. Pei was the establishment's architect of the moment.

HELP SAVE OUR HISTORIC DISTRICT!

STOP THE TOWER!

Please make a tax deductible check payable to:

Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side

and send to:

Concerned Whitney Neighbors
14 E. 75th St.
New York, NY 10021

$500 ____$250____$100____$50____Other_____

Funds are needed for legal and mailing expenses. Please sign the petition on the reverse side and mail it to the above address.

For more information:
Check out **www.whitneyneighbors.com**
or call us at 212-726-1396

COALITION OF CONCERNED WHITNEY NEIGHBORS PETITION: STOP THE TOWER!

The Whitney Museum is planning a major expansion out of scale with the rest of our neighborhood. Under this plan, the Whitney would:

- Add the equivalent of an 18-story tower just south of the museum and behind a row of 1876 brownstones. The tower, 70 feet higher than the landmark Breuer Building, dwarfs the brownstones and the row houses on East 74th and 75th Streets;
- Demolish an 1876 brownstone and substantially demolish 6 other historic row houses, destroying and making them lose their original individual identity;
- Double the size of the museum, causing more crowds, traffic, garbage, parties in the evening, and noisy night-time loading of exhibitions;
- Enlarge the East 75th Street loading dock for huge 18-wheel tractor-trailers.

WE THE UNDERSIGNED are deeply concerned about the permanent visual damage that the tower would create and about the adverse environmental impact on our densely populated, residential neighborhood.

While proud to have this extraordinary museum as a neighbor, we want it to act responsibly. Any expansion plan must consider the historic quality and residential nature of the area, which this plan fails to do.

In addition, if past experience with the Whitney is any guide, this plan would add to the well-documented unfortunate impacts on this area of some Whitney operations—exhibits broken down and carted away in the middle of the night, late parties bringing excessive noise and traffic, 24-hour deliveries that often block traffic, and early morning refuse hauling.

FOR THESE REASONS, WE HEREBY ASK THE BOARD OF STANDARDS AND APPEALS AND COMMUNITY BOARD 8 TO REJECT THIS PROPOSED WHITNEY EXPANSION.

Please sign and return to:
Concerned Whitney Neighbors
14 E. 75th St.
New York, NY 10021

Signature	_____	Signature	_____
Print name	_____	Print name	_____
Address	_____	Address	_____
	_____		_____

COALITION OF CONCERNED WHITNEY NEIGHBORS

14 East 75th Street
New York, NY 10021

July 2005

Dear Neighbor:

On May 24, 2005, the Landmarks Preservation Commission after a three- month deliberation approved a modified expansion plan for the Whitney. We objected to the original plan which called for the demolition of the two Madison Avenue brownstones immediately south of the Breuer Building to create a 32-foot entrance to a new 180-foot metal-clad Tower. As approved -- in part due to our efforts -- the plan permits the demolition of only the Madison Avenue brownstone of lesser historic significance to create a 16-foot entrance to the 180-foot Tower. However, the revised plan continues to allow:

- Building a 180-foot metal-clad Tower (equal to an 18-story building).
- Cutting off more than half of the six other historic row houses on Madison and 74th Street, which would make them lose their original individual identities.
- Doubling the size of the Whitney, causing more crowds, traffic, garbage, noisy parties, and night-time loading of exhibitions.
- Increasing the depth of the loading dock to accept huge 18-wheel tractors.

The enclosed picture is a rendering of what the Tower will look like. The view is from the southwest corner of 74th Street and Madison Avenue. As is clear from the picture, the Tower is totally out of scale in our historic neighborhood.

While we, together with others, were able to stop the destruction of one historic Madison Avenue brownstone, we were not able to protect the other historic row houses or decrease the size of the Tower.

To build the Tower, the Whitney needs a zoning variance from the New York City Board of Standards and Appeals. Among other things, the Whitney has to show that the variance "will not alter the essential character of the neighborhood…and will not be detrimental to the public welfare." **We will continue our fight at the BSA**. Please express your opposition to the Tower by writing to the BSA at:

Board of Standards and Appeals
40 Rector Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10006
Attention: Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chairman

To continue to have our voices heard, we need additional funds for our legal expenses and to continue to send mailings to you, our elected officials and influential civic and governmental agencies. To obtain a tax deduction, please make your check ($1,000, $500, $250, $100, $50…..) payable to **DEFENDERS OF THE HISTORIC UPPER EAST SIDE** and mail it to us in the enclosed envelope. **Also, please sign the enclosed Petition and return it to us**.

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