



I recently visited the New Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the Japanese Architecture firm SANAA. I enjoyed the art. Sadly, I must reject the architecture.

I have lived for over twenty years, six blocks away from where the NMOCA is. I know this neighborhood and this building just does not belong. It lacks a connection with the neighborhood in terms of material, color, texture, shape, light and shade; and above all personality. The building is a minimalist sculpture of metal, grey concrete, white walls and ceilings. It is monotonous.

The NMCOA is a series of stacked boxes that are offset from each other. This is valid in that it breaks down the building into volumes in scale with neighboring structures. But the offsets are too timid and there is no development of the inherent verticality. The building is not dynamic. It just sits there in front of you without activating the street. The boxes are clad in two layers of metal; the inner is smooth and the outer is perforated. This skin covers the building everywhere pretty much the same way, completely ignoring the distinction between street wall and lot wall. I was told by an employee that SANAA saw the skin as a connector to the kitchen equipment stores nearby. I laughed. How cute. How trite.

As for the interior, it is unvarying, though well lit, one white box after another. I am really getting tired of this neutral white box crap. Art needs context, immediate context. WHITE BOXES ARE NOT CONTEXT!!! There are sky lights in the galleries, to introduce natural light and shade. But the bright fluorescents negate any effect. A waste of money. I did like the cracks in the floor concrete due to eliminating control joints. More stuff like this was needed. And the unfinished reveal between the top of the slab and building core is just a messy dirt trap. Why metal stops were not used here is not clear.

Functionally, I cannot argue all that much with the building. The entry level is very open and fluid; with a bookstore, a ticket and coat check area, a small café and a gallery; all flowing together by means of transparent glass or semi-transparent perforated panel. I would have preferred the café to be near the street instead of the center of the floor where it seems forced in. The galleries on floors 2, 3 and 4 are simple flexible tall boxes that will work but that is all they are.

The technology is exposed on the ceiling - I like that. But as with the exterior offsets, there is a lack of boldness. The exposed steel at ceiling slabs is too regular - a few quirky structural moments would have been welcome.

As for the art, which is colorful, edgy, irreverent, FUN; I immediately sensed that it belongs in my neighborhood. IT KNOWS HOW TO ROCK AND ROLL IN NEW YORK. The architecture does not know how to rock and roll, no less in New York.

Martin Filler, in the New York Review of Books, on the other hand, gushes over this building; titling his article, "Miracle on the Bowery". I think he means that the NMOCA bucks the trend of mediocrity in New York architecture generally and exhibitionism in museum architecture more particularly. The building is not mediocre but it is an utterly predictable boho gentrification. I would have liked something funkier - something more like the art inside the museum.

Filler gushes too much at times "...this mesmerizing 174-foot-high tower on the Bowery demonstrates the power of understatement more convincingly than any Manhattan structure since Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building..." Should he not wait a few years before comparing a new work to an established masterpiece? Should he not be less ponderous?

"On Manhattan's still gritty but increasingly fashionable Lower East Side, SANAA has captured a utilitarian spirit..." Really now. The NMOCA is utilitarian in the sense that a MAC is - a machine/fetish/fashion object - but not as well designed as a MAC.

"The shimmering two-ply exterior of the New Museum-metal layered with an outer skin of perforated metal, which can look variously silver, gray, or off-white, depending on the time of day and the weather..." This is more triteness. The overall monotony, in terms of color, is not going to be mitigated by this effect.

"The varied height-and-width proportions of each rectangular component at the New Museum are no mere aesthetic whim, but rather a practical strategy to create setbacks that provide most of the museum's galleries with skylights..." Why does Filler write this, when later on he admits that the skylights have no lighting effect?

I asked three of the employees what they thought of the museum. They were not enthusiastic. One said, "It is not Marcia Tucker's [the deceased founder of the museum] building." Ouch! I think we have a knockout. The people I spoke to agreed that the building would have been better if it had soaked up some of the neighborhood and some of the art too. But what do we know? We just live here.