

By Anna Kats

MUSEUM DESIGN NOW

The possibilities of contemporary architecture: Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, and Moshe Safdie



IN HIS 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, Filippo Marinetti denounced museums as cemeteries of visual culture, reserving particular ire for their physical manifestations: their architecture. Advocating the razing of moribund cultural institutions, he wrote, “Divert the canals to flood the cellars of the museums! Let the glorious canvases swim ashore!” In Marinetti’s view, museums were little more than civic tombs for art.

The century that followed the Italian poet’s call for cultural revolution occasionally responded to his incendiary whoop with interest, and even, on occasion, with genuine ardor, but the 20th century did not treat his proposal for museological overhaul as a blueprint for cultural development: The past century has been witness to a proliferation of museums and an evolution of museum architecture grander in scale than that of any previous period of exhibition-site construction. Today we are witness to a continued boom in museum building that shows few signs of abating.

As ever larger sums of capital are amassed in ever fewer hands, museums are constructed with the money of private patrons to house personal art collections or to contribute conspicuously to the civic mission of a prestigious institution—a practice that determined the civic culture and the construction of cultural institutions in Marinetti’s time. The overwhelming engagement of private wealth in public culture has extended the archetype of monumental museum architecture into the 21st century. While many showpiece museum buildings are now devoid of meaning, engaging the egos of brand-name architects and their patrons more than site or local culture, the museum typology is not bereft of commendable architecture. The luminaries of contemporary architecture—Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, and Moshe Safdie—are accountable on both ends. All three are currently completing major museum commissions—Gehry’s Guggenheim Abu Dhabi,

Piano’s Whitney Museum in New York City, and Safdie’s Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles—that present a sampling of issues in contemporary museum design.

Gehry and Piano confront the aesthetic poles of contemporary museum design. The former has developed a highly specific visual language that determines all of his architecture: Gehry’s façades employ his usual twisting titanium sheets, piled one atop another in a mass of undulating curves and jagged angles. Every Gehry building completed in the past 20 years is executed in the architect’s brand of sculpturalism, defined by a futuristic monumentality that has become programmatic with repetition, and his museum design undertakings are no exception. Gehry’s museum architecture is hardly site-specific—the cultural and historic peculiarities of the settings in which he builds are typically compromised to the aesthetic unity of his oeuvre.

The issue of site specificity comes to a head in Gehry’s Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, currently rising on Saadiyat Island, a cultural hub under development just off the Abu Dhabi coast in the United Arab Emirates. Slated to open in 2014, the Abu Dhabi filial is an iteration of Gehry’s architectural program for his earlier Guggenheim Bilbao: A roof structure of conical titanium planes stacked in purposefully haphazard fashion sits above a cluster of galleries and courtyards. Part of the Emirati government’s efforts to establish a destination for cultural tourism, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is to be owned by the UAE and operated by the Guggenheim Foundation. Gehry’s firm stated that the museum’s design pays homage to traditional Islamic architecture, but the architect’s own words suggest that he brings only his own cultural biases to the Persian Gulf: “I think the best thing is to have a benevolent dictator—who has taste!” he quipped in *Foreign Policy* earlier this year, describing his



funded additions devoid of ornamentation, in rectangular forms whose absence of definitive features is the unifying element of his museum design, which today represents the continued devolution of the architect's formal program since his Centre Pompidou was completed in 1977. Piano and Richard Rogers together designed that structure in reaction to its setting: The exposed-steel framework, combined with trussed girders and traversed by escalators, was both a physical and a symbolic assertion that the aesthetics of technology had arrived in the center of Paris. However, Piano's Whitney Museum, currently under construction in New York's Meatpacking District to replace that institution's present Marcel Breuer-designed uptown home—which is more distinctive than its replacement can ever hope to be—discounts the possibility of museum buildings as artworks comparable in quality and import to the art displayed within them. Its poured-concrete and glass, stepped exterior amounts to an inconspicuous, dull addition to the neighborhood. Whitney director Adam Weinberg explained at a June preview of the new museum that Piano's building “does not dominate art but houses art,” praising the design for being “deferential” to its contents. Piano's Whitney, without definitive façade details or structural complexity, is a featureless container for art—a blank slate with no regard for the neighborhood's industrial history, sitting next to the High Line without engaging pedestrians on the public walkway. Weinberg's comments, in asserting the primacy of art over architecture, suggest the paradox between extreme reduction and extreme expression prevalent in contemporary museum architecture.

Moshe Safdie, though less known for his museum design than either Gehry or Piano, suggests a middle ground between the bombastic museums of the former and the flavorless variety of the latter. Balancing the demands of site, locale, and client, Safdie builds museums of a distinct aesthetic character that neither overwhelms nor is overwhelmed by surrounding architecture. The symbiosis of content and context is the central tenet of Safdie's

museum design practice: “To me, the interesting thing in a museum is its unique program, its unique site, and how to find an expression for these two subjects,” remarks the architect. His numerous museums—including the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, and the Khalsa Heritage Centre in Punjab—all feature curvilinear and rectangular forms that manipulate light, balancing Safdie's dedication to the

modernist tradition with extensive study of a museum's program and its significance for local society.

The Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, the final phase of which was just completed in October, is Safdie's most comprehensive museum project. He began to develop the institution's master plan in 1975 and has since overseen the design and construction of the museum's architecture over four phases. “The most powerful generator of form is the site,” Safdie says of the Skirball: Arranged longitudinally between the 405 Freeway and the base of the Santa Monica Mountains that rise behind it, the museum complex is housed in four pavilions linked by outdoor courtyards, arcades, and amphitheatres. The architect worked closely with Skirball director Uri Herscher to design a master plan and buildings that simultaneously serve and represent the museum's mission, the secular exploration of both Jewish and American traditions, whose “hospitable, welcoming, and inclusive” characteristics Herscher hoped to emphasize. Safdie chose to articulate the Skirball in concrete inlaid with stone for buildings

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ideal client. However, working with the Emirati government makes Gehry complicit in its abuses. In Abu Dhabi the Guggenheim museum is being constructed by migrant workers who are “deeply indebted, poorly paid, and unable to defend their rights or even quit their jobs,” according to the human-rights coalition Gulf Labor. Gehry, in working with the UAE authorities responsible for prevailing conditions, lends the prestige associated with his aesthetic brand to a morally bankrupt patron—joining the ranks of Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster, who likewise design major cultural institutions for autocrats. Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is merely the latest major museum construction project to bring Western architecture to distant locales.

Renzo Piano, yet another brand-name architect known for large cultural institutions, pursues an aesthetic program that eschews Gehry's conspicuous flourishes of material and scope in favor of a modernist visual language repeated the world over in sweeping planes of glass, limestone, and concrete. Time and again, Piano designs large-scale museums and lavishly



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
The Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, a five-phase, 38-year project designed by Moshe Safdie; Safdie's Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem; a view of the Taper Courtyard at Skirball.

OPPOSITE:
A rendering of Renzo Piano's new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

OPENING SPREAD:
A rendering of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry.

that contrast with the dark soil and foliage of the surrounding mountains, selecting triangular steel rooftops, he notes, "to capture the clouds and the blue of the sky in California." The combination of indoor and outdoor spaces embraces the locale's temperate climate, while generating a horizontal distribution of buildings harmonious with the adjoining mountainside. In fund-raising the construction budget, Herscher made the unorthodox decision to warn donors that a financial contribution in no way entitled them to influence the institution's architecture or programming.

The resulting museum is both local and international in its architecture and spatial organization, which respond to the specific site and program of the Skirball Cultural Center by accommodating Safdie's modernist geometry to the Californian landscape. Indeed, the Skirball may well represent the variety of museum that perhaps even Marinetti could appreciate: a complex whose architecture encourages sensual perception and critical thinking rather than merely the veneration of wealthy patrons and their pet architects. MP