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A New Museum Building Goes Up in New York

By Raul Barreneche

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It's not often that a museum has the opportunity to build a brand-new home from the ground up. In Manhattan, a dearth of buildable land and the pressures of a dizzyingly expensive real estate market make such opportunities even rarer. In fact, the last time an entirely new museum building went up in New York City was 1966, when the Whitney Museum of American Art opened the doors of its hulking, elegant Marcel Breuer–designed structure on Madison Avenue. So for the American Folk Art Museum, at the relatively young age of forty, to be unveiling its marvelous new $21 million home on West 53rd Street, in the heart of midtown Manhattan, is nothing short of a landmark event.

Since the museum's board selected award-winning New York architects Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates to design the new building in 1997, the museum has been anticipating the many opportunities its new facility will provide. "Since its founding forty years ago, the museum has recognized the need for adequate space, but until recently this cherished goal eluded us," explains Director Gerard C. Wertkin. "Throughout its history, the museum has been housed in a variety of locations, all of which were 'found' spaces. Still, even these humble homes had the effect of touching people and turning them on to the beauty of folk art. But we always understood that the museum would not be able to present its programs adequately without better space. Now, at last, we will be able to engage the public in a way we have never been able to before, because of the splendid new facilities."

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There will be many public amenities in the 30,000-square-foot, five-story building that the museum has not been able to provide previously, or has provided in only limited ways: an auditorium where lectures and presentations can be held, a classroom, a research library, an expanded shop, and a café. There will also be new, state-of-the art, computer-monitored climate-control systems to protect the art—Registrar Ann-Marie Reilly explained how necessary this is because many of the museum's holding are sensitive textiles and works on paper, all of which are very fragile. But perhaps most important will be the quadrupling of the museum's existing exhibition space, allowing a much greater number of artworks from its 4,000-piece collection to be exhibited, along with temporary shows. The increase in gallery space will allow the museum's newly founded Contemporary Center, headed by Curator Brooke Davis Anderson and dedicated to the work of twentieth- and twenty-first century self-taught artists, to better exhibit its holdings. The museum will maintain the Eva and Morris Feld Gallery across from Lincoln Center as a space for separate exhibitions, as well as for the presentation of more in-depth material related to shows at the new building. Such is the case with the inaugural exhibition of the work of Henry Darger.

The new museum, built on two parcels of land (45 and 47 West 53rd Street) that abut the Museum of Modern Art and which the American Folk Art Museum has owned since 1979, will be a significant addition to its neighborhood and indeed to the city's cultural life. It is fitting that the new museum is opening its doors on West 53rd Street, since it was on that block that the Museum of Early American Folk Arts, as it was then called, first opened its public galleries in 1963. Back then, the galleries consisted of just 1,000 square feet of space on the rented parlor floor of a vintage town house. The museum subsequently moved its exhibition spaces to a former carriage house on West 55th Street, and then to Two Lincoln Square, where it opened the Eva and Morris Feld Gallery.

John D. Rockefeller Jr. once envisioned building a cultural and commercial enclave in the neighborhood near his family's mansion. But in the end, Rockefeller Center wound up focusing more on commerce and less on culture. Now, with the American Folk Art Museum joining MoMA and the American Craft Museum on West 53rd Street and the Museum of Television and Radio a block south, the philanthropist's unrealized dream becomes a reality. The nearby commercial galleries on 57th Street add even more life to this cultural and artistic district, bringing it on par with Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile or the new gallery district in Chelsea. The numbers of visitors who flock to this area—along with the many workers who fill the surrounding office buildings each day—make this a highly trafficked, very highly visible location for the museum's new permanent home. The visibility should help draw new visitors, raising the profile of the institution and indeed of the entire field of folk art.

The architectural world has been eagerly anticipating the museum's opening since the unveiling of Williams and Tsien's design in 1997, which, according to Riccardo Salmona, the museum's deputy director, had been selected from proposals from more than 30 prominent architects from around the world. Salmona, Wertkin, and Trustees Lucy C. Danziger, Samuel Farber, and Ralph Esmerian, who served on the Building Committee, made the recommendation to the full board to hire the architects. Salmona has played an important role in all phases of the project, from raising the funds to build the new facility to seeing it through its construction.

Williams and Tsien have earned a loyal following in the design community for buildings that revel in a richness of craft, following in the footsteps of modern masters such as Louis I. Kahn, the architect of the hallowed Salk Institute in La Jolla,

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California, and the Italian modernist Carlo Scarpa. As Williams explains, "We appreciate common materials as well as uncommon materials. It's a visceral appreciation as well as an intellectual one." Their impressive portfolio includes the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, across the street from the Salk Institute; a major expansion of the Phoenix Art Museum; several buildings at the University of Virginia; and a town house on New York's Upper East Side for developer and art collector Jerry Speyer. These buildings hold a strong appeal because they are powerful yet subtle, monumental but lovingly crafted.

Williams and Tsien have also won a prestigious Chrysler Award in Design Innovation, handed out annually to the nation's top creative talents. Their test panels for the museum's metallic facade were displayed in the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum "Design Triennial" exhibition last year and drawings of the new museum have been acquired by Cooper-Hewitt for its permanent collection. The American Folk Art Museum is a particularly important commission for the architects because it marks their first large-scale public project in their hometown. (The commission to build an entirely new museum in any city would be sufficiently prestigious for any architect; it is even more rewarding to do so as hometown architects.) And as many critics would agree, the building is one of the best modern buildings, big or small, to be built in New York in recent years.

By any measure, the new museum is not a large structure. Rising only five stories above the ground and measuring just 40 feet wide, the building has a relatively modest silhouette on the streetscape; and like many mid-block buildings along city streets, only the front of the building will be visible once the planned MoMA expansion rises on both sides of it. But what the museum building lacks in size, it more than makes up for in the subtle complexity of its principal facade. That facade is composed of gently angled panels of cast tombasil, a whitish-bronze alloy typically used to make boat propellers and other industrial objects, set between concrete side walls that will separate the American Folk Art Museum from the new MoMA wings on either side. Tsien refers to the metallic panels as a "mask" held between the concrete side walls.

About two-thirds of the tombasil panels were poured in molds cast from smooth steel, and so have a smooth sheen; the remaining panels have a rougher texture, having been cast against molds taken of irregular concrete. The result, as Billie Tsien explains, is that the facade will catch the sun differently in different light. She says "It's a very moody material. Sometimes, when you see the sunlight on it, it seems very warm and almost glowing and golden. Other times, it's very subdued. We like how it will change during the course of the day, and that it's so mysterious." The tombasil panels, fabricated at the same foundry in Beacon, New York, where artists such as Claes Oldenberg and Frank Stella have their metalwork crafted, impart to the entire facade a handsome, handcrafted

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quality that harmonizes with the artworks on display beyond it. Bands of angled, floor-to-ceiling windows extending up the facade provide glimpses of the urban landscape from the various galleries and spaces behind the street wall.

Both outside and in, the new building will be intimate and personal in scale and demeanor. Williams recalls that the American Folk Art Museum's Board of Trustees was particularly impressed with the Speyer house because it is virtually a small, domestic museum. He and Tsien capitalized on the analogy of making the museum a "house of folk art," designing a building that combines the comfortable scale of a home with the power, institutional polish, and functional necessities of a state-of-the-art museum. "The building may have more floors, but it's not that different from a very large town house," says Tsien. "It's a small building, but in many ways it suits folk art well: it's small, made by individuals, and is domestic in scale. We wanted to make the museum personal."

Stacy C. Hollander, the museum's senior curator and director of exhibitions, agrees. "We didn't want the feeling of a historical society. We wanted a building in scale with and sympathetic to the art. It was important to provide an abstraction of how folk art is made, used, and seen within this scale."

Visitors enter the ground floor of the museum through a pair of doors hidden from view on the outside by a wall of tombasil and immediately pass into a soaring, 23-foot-tall lobby filled with natural light that enters through a large skylight crowning the building. Daylight filters down into the lobby through a light well that extends down the entire height of the museum and provides carefully controlled amounts of natural light to the galleries on each floor. Immediately to the right of the reception desk is a spacious gift and bookshop that will have its own separate entrance from the street. At the rear of the ground floor is another tall, dramatic open space where selected pieces of art will be displayed in wall-mounted vitrines.

From this point, visitors will decide how they want to proceed through the museum's galleries. They may take the elevator up to the fifth floor and wind down the various staircases, the architects have provided, somewhat like descending the spiraling ramp of the New York Guggenheim Museum, or they may ascend the grand concrete stair at the rear of the building. This marvelous staircase, highlighted with built-in wall niches in which a rotating roster of art objects from the museum's collection will be displayed, is the spiritual kin of Marcel Breuer's dark concrete stair at the Whitney Museum. The architects' focus was not on designing a precise circulation system, but on providing multiple paths to wander through the building, thus creating a surprisingly rich journey despite the building's relatively small size. "We made the building clear, so you don't get lost, but at the same time we made lots of different ways up and down, like an old town house with a smaller private stair and a bigger public stair. We didn't want you to feel like once you'd visited the museum you didn't need to go back," explains Tsien.

In addition to the main stair, surrounded by railings of luminous pale green fiberglass, the architects also designed a narrow wooden staircase along the building's southern wall, connecting galleries on the fourth and fifth floors. A third staircase at the center of the building connects the third- and fourth-floor galleries. Again, this variety of differently sized stairs reinforces the architect's vision of the idea of the museum as a "house of folk art."

In addition to the four levels dedicated to gallery space, the

museum features several areas offering public amenities. A mezzanine level houses a café where patrons can dine at counters overlooking the soaring lobby or with views of a small park next to the CBS building across 53rd Street. One level below the lobby is a classroom and auditorium where lectures and classes for the Folk Art Institute will be held, and where introductory videos on folk art for children or the general public will be viewed. There is also an alcove at the rear of the floor where school groups can gather before tours or educational programs. A skylight above the alcove ensures that daylight filters down into this subterranean level; a heavy glass floor beneath the alcove brings natural light even further underground, into a second basement level that houses offices and a conference room for some of the museum staff. At the front of this second underground floor is a library and rare book room that will be accessible to visiting scholars, students, collectors, and dealers.

As one would expect in a building designed by Williams and Tsien, the museum's interiors feature a rich mix of bold but simple materials. Among the materials are pale green fiberglass panels; wooden and ground-concrete floors; sandblasted or hammered concrete walls, left exposed to reveal the building's "bones" and impart a sense of substance; and surfaces of *pietra piesantina,* a rough, brownish Italian stone that closely matches the hues of the roughly textured concrete. The combination of materials gives the building a warmth and a handcrafted feeling, and keeps the spaces from feeling cold and overly neutral, as happens in so many exhibition spaces and commercial galleries. Tsien says that the project's limited scale helped her and Williams focus very intensely on the detailing of materials.

Carefully and very consciously integrated into the powerful architecture is what is at the heart of the museum: art. In this case, the architects worked closely with curators Hollander and Anderson to integrate pieces from the museum's collections beyond the galleries, to take full advantage of every square inch of space. The main stairwell at the rear of the building is filled with built-in niches that will display a changing selection of art, including painted tinware and wooden decoys. "In placing art in the stairwell," says Anderson, "we tried to marry all of the museum's interests, keeping it upbeat and whimsical. We tried to pick work that would make people smile."

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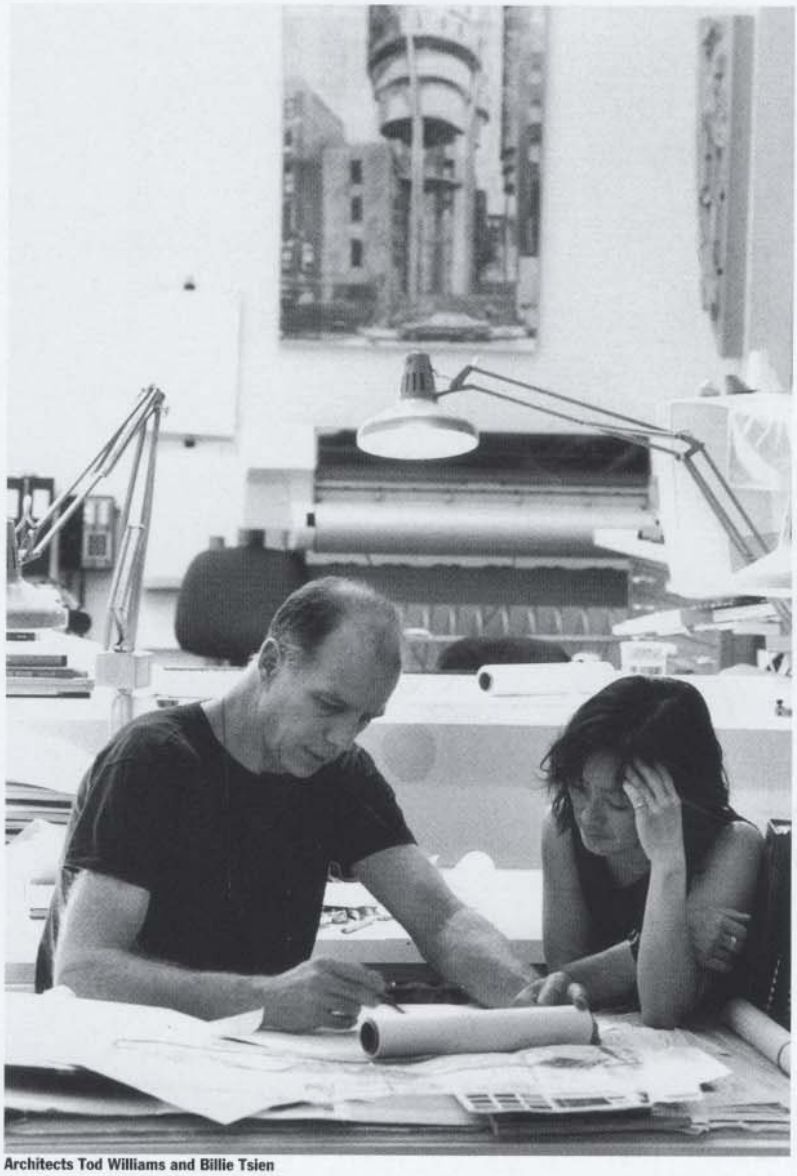
As soon as one enters the museum, one will be confronted with the art. Mounted on the west wall of the lobby space will be a monumental, eight-foot wide curlew weathervane (c. 1874). The installation plans include an eight-foot-tall wooden sculpture of the Empire State Building (c. 1931), mounted on the mezzanine level. Further back in the large atrium space one will encounter other signature pieces from the museum's holdings: a bicycle-shop trade sign by Amedé T. Thibault (1865–1961), an indigo calimanco quilt (1800–1820), and the Thornton Dial canvas *The Man Rode Past His Barn to Another New Day* (1994–1995). Two artworks will be displayed on the landing to the mezzanine level: *Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog,* by Ammi Phillips (1788–1865), and *Tigress,* by New Mexico artist Felipe Benito Archuleta. On a wall spanning the second and third floors, visible across the light well above the lobby, will be a series of metal weathervanes,

including the iconic *Angel Gabriel* (c. 1840). Beyond simply filling blank wall space, these installations will act as visual cues that will help visitors orient themselves, even though the specific installations will change.

Other design elements have been carefully integrated into the architecture. The highly regarded design firm Pentagram created the overall signage and the museum's new graphic identity, while the presentations for the opening exhibitions and installations of permanent artifacts were designed by the award-winning Ralph Appelbaum Associates, also responsible for exhibit design at many of the country's top institutions. One of the most innovative installations designed for the museum's inaugural exhibition is a 50-foot-long cross-shaped steel structure holding two-sided works by Henry Darger between double panes of Plexiglas. Visitors will be able to walk into the structure to see one side of the paintings, and walk around the outside to see the other.

The new museum reveals much about the institution's present as well as its future. Director Gerard C. Wertkin summarizes what the facility represents, "The building is an indication that the museum is not stuck in the past, although it remains true to our founding vision. The building represents, a broadening of purview, a willingness to explore and to present new and challenging material to our audiences. The building is fresh, but has in its simplicity, in its respect for materials, in its welcoming nature to the public, a sense of timelessness. It salutes the outside as well as the inside, and it speaks to craftsmanship, and gives one a sense of being enveloped in a timeless atmosphere. It will be as valid a structure 100 years from now as it is today." ★



Architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

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