



ARCHITECTURE

Next to MoMA, a Tower Will Reach for the Stars

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF
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Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building, William Van Alen's Chrysler Building, Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building.



Jean Nouvel

A rendering of the Jean Nouvel-designed tower to be built adjacent to the Museum of Modern Art.



Jean Nouvel

The interior of Jean Nouvel's building, which is to include a hotel and luxury apartments.

New Neighbor For the Modern

MoMA plans to extend its galleries into part of a new 75-story tower.

Chrysler New

If New Yorkers once saw their skyline as the great citadel of capitalism, who could blame them? We had the best toys of all.

But for the last few decades or so, that honor has shifted to places like Singapore, Beijing and Dubai, while Manhattan settled for the predictable.

Perhaps that's about to change.

A new 75-story tower designed by the architect Jean Nouvel for a site next to the Museum of Modern Art in Midtown promises to be the most exhilarating addition to the skyline in a generation. Its faceted exterior, tapering to a series of crystalline peaks, suggests an atavistic preoccupation with celestial heights. It brings to mind John Ruskin's praise for the irrationality of Gothic architecture: "It not only dared, but delighted in, the infringement of every servile principle."

Commissioned by Hines, an international real estate developer, the tower will house a hotel, luxury apartments and three floors that will be used by MoMA to expand its exhibition space. The melding of cultural and commercial worlds offers further proof, if any were needed, that Mr. Nouvel is a master at balancing conflicting urban forces.

Yet the building raises a question: How did a profit-driven developer become more adventurous architecturally than MoMA, which has tended to make cautious choices in recent years?

Like many of Manhattan's major architectural accomplishments, the tower is the result of a Byzantine real estate deal. Although MoMA completed an \$858 million expansion three years ago, it sold the Midtown lot to Hines for \$125 million earlier this year as part of an elaborate plan to grow still further.

Hines would benefit from the museum's prestige; MoMA would get roughly 40,000 square feet of additional gallery space in the new tower, which will connect to its second-, fourth- and fifth-floor galleries just to the east. The \$125 million would go toward its endowment.

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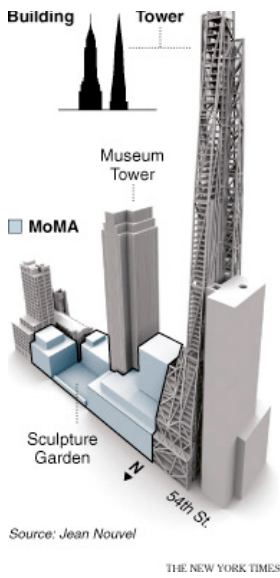
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To its credit the Modern pressed for a talented architect, insisting on veto power over the selection. Still, the sale seems shortsighted on the museum's part. A 17,000-square-foot vacant lot next door to a renowned institution and tourist draw in Midtown is a rarity. And who knows what expansion needs MoMA may have in the distant future?

By contrast the developer seems remarkably astute. Hines asked Mr. Nouvel to come up with two possible designs for the site. A decade ago anyone who was about to invest hundreds of millions on a building would inevitably have chosen the more conservative of the two. But times have changed. Architecture is a form of marketing now, and Hines made the bolder choice.

Set on a narrow lot where the old City Athletic Club and some brownstones once stood, the soaring tower is rooted in the mythology of New York, in particular the work of Hugh Ferriss, whose dark, haunting renderings of an

imaginary Manhattan helped define its dreamlike image as the early-20th-century metropolis.

But if Ferriss's designs were expressionistic, Mr. Nouvel's contorted forms are driven by their own peculiar logic. By pushing the structural frame to the exterior, for example, he was able to create big open floor plates for the museum's second-, fourth- and fifth-floor galleries. The tower's form slopes back on one side to yield views past the residential Museum Tower; its northeast corner is cut away to conform to zoning regulations.

The irregular structural pattern is intended to bear the strains of the tower's contortions. Mr. Nouvel echoes the pattern of crisscrossing beams on the building's facade, giving the skin a taut, muscular look. A secondary system of mullions housing the ventilation system adds richness to the facade.

Mr. Nouvel anchors these soaring forms in Manhattan bedrock. The restaurant and lounge are submerged one level below ground, with the top sheathed entirely in glass so that pedestrians can peer downward into the belly of the building. A bridge on one side of the lobby links the 53rd and 54th Street entrances. Big concrete columns crisscross the spaces, their tilted forms rooting the structure deep into the ground.

As you ascend through the building, the floor plates shrink in size, which should give the upper stories an increasingly precarious feel. The top-floor apartment is arranged around such a massive elevator core that its inhabitants will feel pressed up against the glass exterior walls. (Mr. Nouvel compared the apartment to the pied-à-terre at the top of the Eiffel Tower from which Gustave Eiffel used to survey his handiwork below.)

The building's brash forms are a sly commentary on the rationalist geometries of [Edward Durell Stone](#) and Philip L. Goodwin's 1939 building for the Museum of Modern Art and [Yoshio Taniguchi](#)'s 2004 addition. Like many contemporary architects Mr. Nouvel sees the modern grid as confining and dogmatic. His tower's contorted forms are a scream for freedom.

And what of the Modern? For some, the appearance of yet another luxury tower stamped with the museum's imprimatur will induce wincing. But the more immediate issue is how it will affect the organization of the Modern's vast collections.

The museum is only now beginning to come to grips with the strengths and weaknesses of Mr. Taniguchi's addition. Many feel that the arrangement of the fourth- and fifth-floor galleries housing the permanent collection is confusing, and that the double-height second-floor galleries for contemporary art are too unwieldy. The architecture galleries, by comparison, are small and inflexible. There is no room for the medium-size exhibitions that were a staple of the architecture and design department in its heyday.

The additional gallery space is a chance for MoMA to rethink many of these spaces, by reordering the sequence of its permanent collection, for example, or considering how it

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might resituate the contemporary galleries in the new tower and gain more space for architecture shows in the old.

But to embark on such an ambitious undertaking the museum would first have to acknowledge that its Taniguchi-designed complex has posed new challenges. In short, it would have to embrace a fearlessness that it hasn't shown in decades.

MoMA would do well to take a cue from Ruskin, who wrote that great art, whether expressed in "words, colors or stones, does not say the same thing over and over again."

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