MoMA, New York
Architect, Yoshio Taniguchi
Reopened 20 November 2004

‘MoMA the Magnificent’. It’s the only way to describe the recently reopened home of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, designed by Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi. Well, perhaps not the only way: dazzling, spectacular, stunning, or any number of other accolades would also do. The museum — all 630,000 square feet (58,527 sq metres) of it — reopened on 20 November. The queue to get in, even at the controversial entry fee of US$20, the highest museum ticket price in the city, still stretches down the block. Let’s end all suspense right here: it’s worth every penny/cent/dollar/pound/euro.

Six floors of vast, light-filled galleries and public spaces, including cinemas, a restaurant, cafes, a sculpture garden, and shops, exude a wonderfully spacious and open feeling, aided by enormous windows, high ceilings, and a 110-foot (33.53 metres) central atrium. Like the intriguing as the art it showcases.

Taniguchi is well known in Japan for elegant, sleek structures that are the apotheosis of minimalism. Basically unknown in the West before this commission, he was chosen to provide a building that exhibits the art to best effect and does not compete with it. Such an attitude is a rarity in contemporary museum design, in which architects strive to provide the most outlandish and attention-getting designs; witness Daniel Libeskind’s proposal (recently cancelled) for the V&A addition or Frank Gehry’s famous Guggenheim project in Bilbao, Spain. Taniguchi won the commission over a number of highly regarded and better known competitors.

By all accounts the architecture lives up to expectations and is a great success. The soaring spaces give large-scale art room to breathe. And, importantly, the design knits together previous generations of MoMA additions: a virtual architectural collection in its own right, comprising buildings by Edward Durell Stone, Philip Johnson, and Cesar Pelli.

As to the contents, here are a few personal, no doubt unrepresentative highlights: first, Damien Hirst’s Methamphetamine, which bears a striking resemblance to polka-dot wrapping paper. (Later on in our visit, it had become the centrepiece of an interesting tableau. A group of obviously tired people, looking very much in need of some sort of stimulant, were sprawled out beneath it. Let’s hope they roused themselves in one of the cafes.) An 8-minute silent film, created by Hollis Frampton, of a lemon. Just a lemon. Lemon alone. Just sitting there. Or so we think, having admittedly not watched the entire thing. A helicopter, officially known as Bell-47D1 Helicopter by Arthur Young, is suspended in midair. (How does one hang such a thing?) One photolithograph, by the Cuban-born American artist Félix González-Torres,Untitled (Death by Gun), is available in an edition of ‘endless copies’, which museum-goers can take away from two...
large stacks on the floor. More cheerful and familiar works include the gorgeous 42-foot-long Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond by Monet. And rooms full of Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, and Jackson Pollock. Too pedestrian for you? How about two ordinary wall clocks, side by side, set to the same (actual) time?

Next, a work that would make our collecting — we did not say packrat — mothers proud: Charles LeDray’s Oasis, a display of perhaps hundreds of tiny glazed ceramic pitchers, vases, and bowls, set on six glass shelves in a large vitrine. Each little object is delightful, and the effect of so many of them grouped together is dramatic. And speaking of multiples, Josiah McElheny’s Modernity Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely is simply mesmerising. Stoppered bottles made of mirrored blown glass are set in a aluminium metal display case with lighting and two-way mirrors, such that they are endlessly reflected — in the bottles, in the mirrors, row upon row, extending, well, infinitely. Innovative and stunning.

One of the things that makes modern art so intriguing is its range of materials. Canvas, paint, ink, and paper constitute a small and quiet beginning. After that, there is a veritable flood of increasingly odd items: wood, cement, leather, string, neon tubing, transformers, wire, maps, gelatine silver prints, board, porcelain, beads, pillows, quilts, sheets, grease, staples, sand, two ears of corn, a baguette, and, memorably, a hare. Unlike the roomful of live pigeons that were a part of a recent Matthew Barney exhibition, this bit of inspiration appeared to have met with a taxidermist.

You know those great lines Frank Sinatra sang in New York, New York — ‘New York, New York, it’s a wonderful town/The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down’? All of that is still true, but right now, there’s even more to celebrate: the pound is up and the dollar is down! The new MoMA is so bold, audacious, and exuberant, you really can’t afford to miss it.

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