

# The Frick Glows With a Poetic, \$220 Million Renovation

The museum, based in Henry Clay Frick's 1914 Fifth Avenue mansion, reopens with a deft expansion worthy of a New York treasure.

**By Michael Kimmelman** Photographs and Video by Lila Barth

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A corner of New York hasn't seemed quite itself since the Frick Collection shuttered during Covid for the architectural equivalent of a full-body spa treatment.

For a while the museum that luxuriates in Henry Clay Frick's Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue decamped with its old masters and other art to Marcel Breuer's former Whitney Museum a few blocks away. Seeing Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" in a Brutalist building felt like coming across your high school chemistry teacher on spring break in Cocoa Beach.

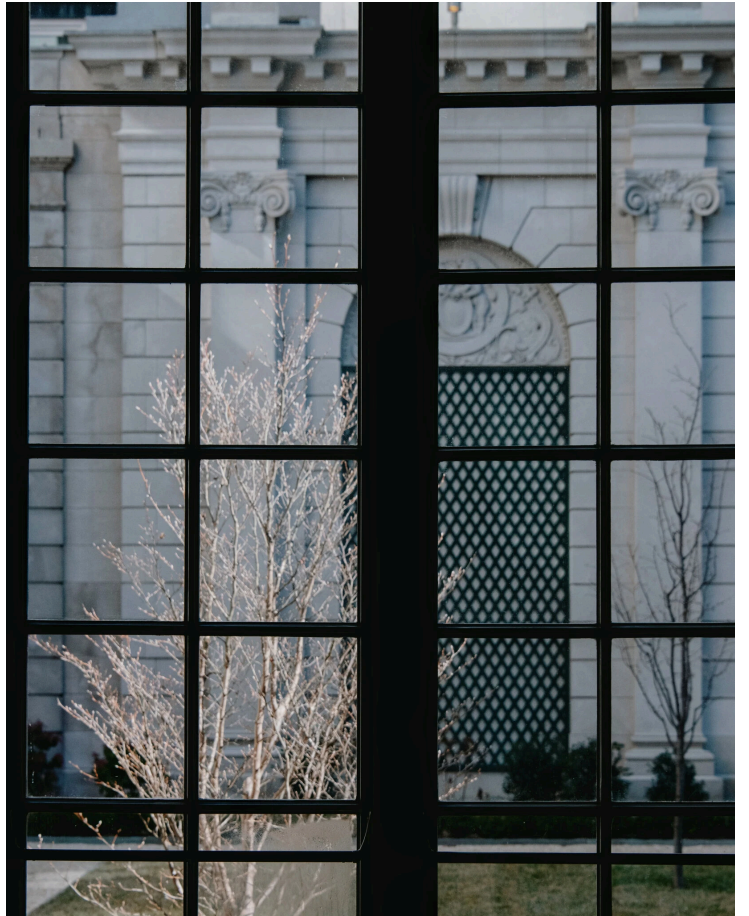
Next month the Frick reopens after its \$220 million expansion and refurbishment. Fretful preservationists have been pinging my inbox for years, venting their anxieties about tampering with one of the city's architectural treasures.



The new limestone-clad addition, left, overlooking the garden, steps back for a row of hornbeams.

I bear good tidings. The expansion is about as sensitive and deft as one could hope for. At moments, as in a voluptuous new marble staircase and airy auditorium, it approximates poetry. It probably won't quiet all the critics. Grumblers will be grumblers. But it does what was intended. It moves the Frick squarely into the 21st century and seamlessly solves multifarious problems. And where it counts, it leaves well enough alone.





The architect is the German-born, New York-based Annabelle Selldorf. She and her colleagues at Selldorf Architects paired with Beyer Blinder Belle, another New York firm, and with the garden designer Lynden B. Miller. These days, Selldorf is a go-to architect for thorny projects like this. In London she is updating a hotly contested wing of the National Gallery designed in the 1990s by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Frick's mansion, completed in 1914, was designed by the firm of Carrère and Hastings, which gave New York the 42nd Street Library. In 2001, Selldorf made her bones converting another Carrère and Hastings landmark from 1914, the onetime Vanderbilt mansion, further up Fifth Avenue. With care and creativity, she morphed it into Ronald Lauder's state-of-the-art Neue Galerie.

Expanding the Frick was a trickier task. It necessitated sacrifice. For starters, Selldorf has demolished the Frick's beloved music room that John Russell Pope, the august architect for the Jefferson Memorial, added when he oversaw the Frick's mansion-to-museum transformation during the 1930s. Pope doubled the building's footprint.





In the late 1970s, a carriage passes by the Frick, the museum that luxuriates in Henry Clay Frick's Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue. Designed by the firm of Carrère and Hastings, the mansion was finished in 1914. Edmund Vincent Gillon/Museum of the City of New York, via Getty Images

Like others, I'm sad to lose the music room. Over the years, as opponents of its loss have taken to pointing out, it had become New York's version of a 19th-century salon. Truth be told, with 149 seats it was too small for many events, and its acoustics were mediocre. It also occupied the ideal spot to put new galleries for temporary exhibitions, which the Frick needed and were crucial to Selldorf's plan.

So that's what has happened. Selldorf installed three new galleries.



A new underground auditorium is shaped like the inside of a clamshell and seats 218 people.



To replace the music room she excavated underneath the Frick's 70th Street garden, designing a technologically up-to-date, 218-seat auditorium, shaped a little like the inside of a clamshell. Past the new lobby, through a low vestibule, around a curved wood wall made of fluted walnut, you suddenly enter a surprisingly light and roomy hall, as white as an operating theater, mildly erotic with its curvaceous plaster walls.

She then turned to the Frick's reception hall from the 1970s, which never quite worked. On crowded days, gaining entry to the museum could put you in mind of LaGuardia Airport on Thanksgiving eve. A convoluted ticket and coat check arrangement created logjams and funneled visitors into dead ends.

Like a cardiologist, Selldorf has unclogged passageways, invented cunning lines of circulation and improved the reception hall.



A view of the Garden Court from the new halls. Selldorf has unclogged passageways and invented cunning lines of circulation between the expansion and the old parts of the museum.

Its centerpiece is a showstopper: a new, cantilevered stairway, voluptuous and clad in veined, Breccia Aurora marble, decadent in a dolce vita sort of way. It nods to the grand staircase in the mansion. And it leads to a new second floor that Selldorf has surgically inserted above the hall to fit in a new connection with the mansion, a shop and a 60-seat cafe (the Frick may be the last museum on earth that lacked one) overlooking the gated, 70th Street garden.

In 2014, the museum floated an earlier expansion proposal by a different architecture firm that imagined a blocky extension replacing the garden, which the British landscape architect Russell Page designed when the reception hall was built during the 1970s. The Frick assumed at the time that the garden would only be temporary, replaced when the museum needed to grow again.

But with its reflecting pool, shaded pea gravel paths and wisteria, it was a Zenlike pause along the street and came to be prized by New Yorkers as one of those pocket-size serendipities of life in the city. Preservationists were aghast about the proposal to destroy it.

The Frick backed off. Two years later it hired Selldorf and committed to keeping the garden.

That proved easier said than done. Building the underground auditorium required ripping the garden up, then replanting it. It's still growing back. Selldorf treats the garden with deference, organizing her biggest, bulkiest addition — two new floors above where the music room used to be, adjoining an extension of Pope's nine-floor library at 71st Street — to carefully skirt the garden's north end.

The addition repurposes a narrow yard, formerly hidden behind a garden wall, where the Frick stashed its lawn mowers and air conditioning units. A new education center (another first for the museum) occupies that space today, with the cafe above.





Facing the garden, the education center, a first for the Frick, occupies what used to be a yard for lawn mowers and air conditioning units.

Selldorf has then clad the whole puzzle-like addition in Indiana limestone, to match the mansion's exterior and unify an ultimately anodyne facade. The addition steps a couple of feet back where the cafe overlooks the garden, finessing room for a row of hornbeams.

I was among those who urged the Frick back in 2014 to ditch the plan to demolish the garden, and I wrote a column that passed along some alternative ideas then making the rounds among New York architects. These included swapping Pope's music room for temporary exhibition spaces, excavating beneath the garden to construct another auditorium and redoing the reception hall by adding another floor.

Sharing vague thoughts from the peanut gallery in the end resolves none of the challenges of redesigning 87,000 square feet of intricate space. Ideas can be realized differently and badly. Architecture happens in the trenches. Getting the Frick expansion right demanded a million complex decisions, as mundane but meaningful as choosing which varieties of marble, among the 138 different types already in the building, should tile the reception hall, and in which precise block pattern. And it is felt in gestures like that ledge for the hornbeams, whose subtle depth lends the garden a crucial whisper of breathing room.

It entails connoisseurship, in other words, the stock in trade of the Frick. Buying art is one thing. Building a collection like the Frick's is another.

Credit also goes to Ian Wardropper, the Frick director who oversaw the whole expansion and just retired last month. He was a steady hand at the heart of the museum. I mentioned earlier that the renovation knows when to leave well enough alone. The joy of visiting the Frick remains intact. The frisson of prowling around a robber baron's stuffy house is unchanged.

Nothing is altered in the great rooms of Titians and Fragonards, save for wall coverings of hand-woven French silk damask and velvet, which have been scrupulously, and at formidable cost, replaced. The Garden Court is the same but with cleaned skylights and a fountain that now works as Pope intended for the first time in living memory.

What's new is that visitors can, for the first time, wander up the mansion's grand staircase to the second floor and nose around the Frick family's former bedrooms, repurposed as galleries for Chinese porcelain, Renaissance medals, Bouchers and



Constables. What used to be a bathroom is hung with French Rococo pictures. The number of objects on view from the permanent collection has doubled.

I look forward to when the garden blooms.

Good news is in short supply these days. The Frick reopens in mid-April. The city already feels lighter.

**Michael Kimmelman** is The Times's architecture critic and the founder and editor-at-large of Headway, a team of journalists focused on large global challenges and paths to progress. He has reported from more than 40 countries and was previously chief art critic. [More about Michael Kimmelman](#)

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