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The Frick's Renovation Is a Subtle Revelation

Remodeled by Selldorf Architects, the New York museum has gained space and free-flowing paths of movement through a series of humble but imaginative interventions.

By Michael J. Lewis

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Some aspects of architecture are noticed only if done badly. If a building's system of circulation—its paths of movement—is handled poorly, it becomes painfully obvious in the form of physical obstacles, such as confusing forks and dead ends. But when well handled, it is invisible. And so it must vex Annabelle Selldorf that the best part of her remodeling of the Frick Collection, and the most imaginative, will go unrecognized.

New staircase in the the Frick's reception hall. PHOTO: NICHOLAS VENEZIA

The Frick has long wanted to open the whole of Henry Clay Frick's Fifth Avenue mansion to the public but hesitated to evict the administrative staff from its comfortable second-story nests. This was but one item on the ever-growing institutional wish list, which included a public auditorium, a café, special exhibition galleries, and much more—none of which could be easily fitted onto the Frick's cramped site. With most of its footprint taken up by the original mansion and the nine-story library wing on 71st Street, the only speck of open space remaining was the elegant pool and garden on 70th Street. In 2014, the Frick proposed to replace them with a six-story building, an idea that aroused so much opposition that it was forced to scrap the plan and start over.

Out of the debacle came an inspiring idea: perhaps a series of judicious, small-scale interventions might achieve what a major addition could not. In 2016 Selldorf Architects was engaged as design architect, with Beyer Blinder Belle later signing on as executive architect. On April 17 their remodeled museum reopens, having cost \$330 million (much of which was spent on temporarily moving the collection to the former Whitney Museum).

Ms. Selldorf has previously shown a high degree of imagination and sensitivity when remodeling museum buildings—including, less than a mile north, the Neue Galerie. Here she had to work with tweezers, so to speak. Space had to be won grudgingly, a room at a time, either by modest additions or by reconfiguring existing space. The storage vaults beneath the 70th Street garden gave way to a 218-seat auditorium, a gem of a space with hand-finished plaster walls and marvelous acoustics. Curiously shaped, it is a German Expressionist's dream of the inside of an egg. Meanwhile the circular music room was sacrificed in favor of three new galleries for temporary exhibitions. Above these, two stories were added to accommodate the administrative offices and an unusually cheerful conservation studio. In all, only 27,000 square feet of new construction were added, not all that much in relation to what had been a 178,000-square-foot complex.



The new auditorium. PHOTO: NICHOLAS VENEZIA

It is one thing to create new spaces and quite another to make them work together smoothly. The Frick had grown incrementally, acquiring properties to the east as it expanded, without any comprehensive plan. This made for comically awkward circulation. Members of the public who wanted to go from the museum to the library were told to go outside and walk around the block. Staff members could thread their way through the circuitous labyrinth of the basement.

Less absurd but still cumbersome was the plan of the Frick mansion itself. Arriving and departing groups jostled in the bottleneck of the reception hall, which was clogged with the ticketing, information and coat-check desks. But such was to be expected in a building that Thomas Hastings had designed in 1913 as a private house, never meant for the surge of crowds.

Ms. Selldorf addressed this with an adroit feat of spatial legerdemain. Reconfiguring the stately reception hall of 1977, she turned what had been a cul-de-sac into a lively intersection. A passage at the rear now lets you go to the library without a stroll around the block. Meanwhile, an inviting open stair lifts you above the tumult of the entrance and presents you with multiple attractions: a café to the east, special exhibition galleries to the north, and entrance to the second story of

the Frick to the west. The stair, and its nearby elevators, connect all levels of the museum, and for the first time the Frick has a circulation system that matches the elegant clarity of its classical facades.

None of this is visible from the exterior, which shows only one significant change, the southward extension of the entire library tower. At every level it accommodates new functions, most notably the new café on the second floor, which looks down pleasantly onto the 70th Street garden and pool. The extension is a lofty but skinny slab—about 110 feet high yet just 22 feet deep, the proportions of a Pop-Tart—and its most remarkable feature is its restraint. Concerned that the massive stone cliff not overwhelm the domestic scale of the original mansion, the architects treated its facade as simply as possible, an essay in stripped classicism that relies on the rhythm and proportion of the windows rather than ornamental detail for its effect. It is a decided improvement over the strictly utilitarian facade it replaces.

In this, and elsewhere in the remodeled Frick, we find a quality that is in short supply in contemporary architecture: humility. All this, and on a site shackled with enough constraints to have challenged Houdini.