Putting the House in Order

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At least twice in the last forty years, I have heard serious-minded people, sympathetic to the Museum and familiar with its problems, suggest abandoning the building at Eighty-second Street and starting anew. In 1933 Solomon R. Guggenheim asked me, both as a Museum staff member and friend, what might happen if he were to make a sizable donation toward a new building for the Metropolitan in another location. We went so far as to make rough sketches, little more than doodles, of a vast new complex in the southeast corner of Central Park, opposite the Plaza Hotel. There would be a place for everything and room for everything. A central tower would contain offices, workshops, an auditorium, educational facilities, and space for all the other services required by an encyclopedic museum, and from the tower would extend tangent wings displaying the art of every major civilization. We even talked of spending thirty million dollars for such a new structure. It was not long, however, before a non-responsive statement by a weary Museum official brought our daydreaming to a close.

A decade later, during World War II, the Museum administration itself, exasperated by the deficiencies of the existing plant, also suggested abandoning the building. But Robert Moses, then Commissioner of Parks, put just as quick a stop to this plan. Speaking for the city government, he pointed out that New York had too great an investment in the building to justify starting over, and that, moreover, it could serve no other useful purpose if the Museum moved out of it. It was made clear that we had to stay where we were, and as new solutions to our difficulties have been developed, staying put was probably all for the best.

The war years, with their enforced moratorium on all improvements, brought the problems of the Museum into sharp relief. The building itself, mainly constructed before the First World War, was in many respects already outmoded. To name just a
The model of the Parthenon in the Hall of Casts in 1910 and 1931, and outside the Junior Museum today
few symptomatic difficulties, electricity was supplied in the form of direct current, whereas modern motors and lights require alternating current. Protection from fire was far less than up to date: among other hazards, many of the galleries still had wood-sheathed walls and even wood-framed skylights. Although a large steam boiler occupied much space in the heart of the building, the availability of steam from city mains made it unnecessary for us to continue to provide our own heat. As attendance increased there weren't enough elevators, or stairways, or rest rooms (there never are). More serious, even though the Museum was the largest art museum in the country and one of the largest in the world, it had never been equipped for its own growth. Crowded, overlapping displays had become a hodgepodge, cumbersome for visitors and awkward for management. Not only did more room have to be found for the works of art, but also for the services attending them. During the first half century or so of operation, for instance, the Museum's collections had been guided and watched over by a relatively small curatorial staff. As the years passed, however, the largest department, Decorative Arts, had to be gradually subdivided into more manageable entities. The Department of Far Eastern Art was the first result of this dismemberment, in 1915, followed in 1932 by the Department of Near Eastern Art (recently divided in turn into Ancient Near Eastern Art and Islamic Art). In 1934 what remained was divided into three new departments: Medieval Art, American Art, and what is now known as Western European Arts. New galleries and working areas were imperative for these departments, and yet offices and shops had already spread into some of the most useful exhibition spaces.

I myself became deeply involved with these problems upon my return from the war, when the director, Francis Henry Taylor, asked me to serve as chairman of the Staff Architectural Committee. I have been grappling with them ever since, in collaboration with my colleagues, and with such architects as Robert O'Connor, former staff architect, and Geoffry Lawford, of Brown, Lawford, and Forbes. The difficulties in planning a reconstruction program for the Museum were not—and are not—confined to finding current solutions to current problems; one must take into consideration what will happen years ahead, and make present decisions with future needs in mind. Moreover, every change that is made has consequences far beyond the change itself. To close, say, a few galleries for construction means finding space elsewhere for their contents, and probably relocating several service facilities as well. The interlocking relationship of
The Morgan Wing, used as a gallery for the Morgan collection in 1918 and now as the Equestrian Court of the armor galleries
The reading room of the Library in 1920 and 1965
space and activity within the Museum makes planning all the more difficult, and scheduling, very often, a nightmare.

Five years of study preceded the first major period of reconstruction, extending from 1950 to 1955. The most important new structure was the badly needed and eminently successful Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium, designed by Frank Voorhees and Ralph Walker, opened in 1954; other prominent changes included the reconstruction of the old Roman Court into a restaurant, the building of galleries linking the Morgan Wing with the northern wing on Fifth Avenue, and the installation of several period rooms. Even more significant, in its long-term consequences, was the thorough, general renovation of many of the other galleries to fit modern conditions and requirements.

During the last decade, there has been no slackening in our program. Although there have been new thoughts as our plans matured, we are still benefiting from earlier planning. Some of our recent achievements, and some of our projects for the future, represent the fruition of the long-range modernization program conceived in the years right after the war. There has, however, been one significant change in our approach. During the first stage of reconstruction, large areas of the Museum and several of the collections were simply closed to the public. But since many of our undertakings require a long time to complete, it is our present policy that, whenever possible, the collections should remain on exhibition and public services in operation. No major shutdown has been made, although it certainly would have facilitated our work to have done so. Sometimes it has been necessary to relocate: European paintings were kept on view in the Special Exhibition Galleries while their own were being air-conditioned, and the library reading rooms and offices were moved to the ground floor while new quarters were being built. In some instances—specifically the Islamic and Far East collections—it has been necessary to limit the number of visitors to the galleries. But every effort has been made to keep as much of the Museum open as possible, and this has affected both our present activities and our future plans.

To catalogue all that has been accomplished in the past ten years would be both difficult and dull. Some forty-two per cent has been added to the exhibition areas, and twenty-one per cent to the service areas. Public and staff alike have borne with admirable patience the many inconveniences involved in the reconstruction of old sections (such as the inadequately supported floors above the Egyptian galleries) and in the excavation of New York stone adjacent to Museum objects. Here let it suffice to mention in chronological order a few of our recent projects to suggest what our objectives are and how we have pursued them.

We are always striving for greater unity and continuity in the presentation of the collections, and a major step was made with the relocation of Arms and Armor in 1956. European pieces were moved to the Morgan Wing, and armor of the Eastern world was established in the newly built galleries linking the Morgan Wing and the north end of the Museum. The large gallery they vacated became the Medieval Sculpture Hall, and permitted a far more logical arrangement both of the medieval collection and Renaissance and later decorative arts. (In the early years of the Museum, incidentally, this great hall and its adjacent galleries had been devoted to casts of great sculptural and
Modern sculpture, 1907

architectural masterpieces. Some of these are on display now in the Junior Museum, but it is the hope of many that more of this collection will one day be brought back from their long “temporary” storage. Possibly they should be placed for the use of students and the general public in some suitable and accessible area outside the Museum itself.)

Those who observe the Junior Museum in action can well wonder how we managed before its completion in 1957. Its comfortable auditorium, its library scaled to young readers, its work and exhibition rooms have made a notable contribution to the life of the city and its children. From its inception, in 1941, the Junior Museum had been something of a stepchild, shifted from one set of galleries to another. The present facilities form a convenient, flexible, well-equipped nucleus for its many educational services.

The constant removal of existing collections for the exceptional or temporary was distracting to staff and public alike. Only those who experienced evacuating the Far East and Islamic galleries can appreciate what a sacrifice it was to hang in that space even so pre-eminently important an exhibition as the great loan of French tapestries in 1947. We decided that special exhibitions should no longer be held at the expense of the permanent collections, and the result was thirteen galleries constructed and reserved for
temporary shows: the Harry Payne Bingham Special Exhibition Galleries, completed in 1957.

The art of the Ancient Near East was reinstalled in 1959. The great bearded bulls that formerly loomed in the Main Hall were moved so that they could be surrounded by reliefs of the courtyard from which they had originally come. Here they form a magnificent gateway as of old, and lead to an inner room rich in related treasures.

There have been delays in our building operations. Funds, both from the city and from private sources, were not always available – indeed, the need for money in a time of rising costs is a continuing and constant concern. There have been postponements in construction. But during the past year alone we opened the Blumenthal Patio from Vélez Blanco and the Thomas J. Watson Library, splendidly equipped to serve as the Museum’s nerve center. The new library wing also contains the Departments of Prints and Drawings, and provides the first permanent exhibition galleries for these forms of art. Almost simultaneously the air-conditioned and refurbished galleries for European paintings were reopened. These were followed by two permanent Far East sculpture galleries and temporary galleries of Islamic art, suggesting what is to come when more areas are prepared to receive our vast collections of Oriental art.

Among the promises for fall are a new elevator and escalator near the Main Hall and a new Room of Recent Accessions. Galleries of Western European Arts are being reinstalled one by one. Ahead lie the complete reconstruction of the Costume Institute and the rearrangement of the remaining Egyptian galleries. There are many changes – and, we hope, pleasant surprises – in store for our visitors.

Our efforts to modernize the Museum have not been limited to the use of bricks and mortar. In every new gallery, in every new installation, we have attempted to provide

Far Eastern sculpture, 1965
The Hall of Casts in 1907, and now as the Medieval Sculpture Hall
for human perceptions and human convenience. This has meant considering vistas and circulation, and providing occasional relaxation for the eye. Sometimes it has meant resisting the temptation to lower a ceiling (so convenient for modern plumbing and wiring and ventilation) and raising it instead. We have used large objects and architectural elements to provide logical boundaries between one area and another, and to serve, as it were, as intermediaries between the scale of the building and the scale of the smaller objects in it. Thus the Sardis column separates the restaurant from the Greek and Roman galleries, and the Valladolid screen makes more comprehensible the overwhelming scale of the Medieval Sculpture Hall, where very small sculptures are often as important as larger ones. And what a fine transition the beautiful sixteenth-century patio makes between the populous bustle of the galleries and the tranquility of the Library! We have endeavored, moreover, not to violate the essential integrity of the building itself. We have not broken the galleries into a maze of temporary partitions, nor covered the massive structure with pseudo-architectural decorative ensembles. All in all, we have tried to bring out the best in the Museum building – its monumentality and noble proportions – and to accept its limitations even as we have to surmount them. In this way we hope to achieve a setting for our collections that is both appropriate and enjoyable. A recent headline in The New York Times stated, “Very Often, There’s No Place Like Home Except the Metropolitan Museum.” The Museum has long tried to anticipate the needs of a growing population and a growing interest in the arts. As we look toward the future, we recognize that although the results of our activity have been well received, much thinking and work lie ahead.

Prints and drawings gallery in the new Thomas J. Watson Library