

The Museum of Modern Art

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A MODERN MUSEUM: THE 1939 GOODWIN/STONE BUILDING

May 11 - August 22, 1989

May 10, 1989, marks the fiftieth year since The Museum of Modern Art opened in its permanent home at 11 West 53 Street. A MODERN MUSEUM: THE 1939 GOODWIN/STONE BUILDING, on view from May 11 through August 22, 1989, celebrates the building as a public symbol of the Museum's commitment to its modernist aims and ideals. Organized by Matilda McQuaid, curatorial assistant in the Department of Architecture and Design, this small exhibition presents drawings and photographs documenting the design's development, as well as the original model by architects Philip Goodwin (1885-1958) and Edward Durell Stone (1902-78).

The Museum's early commitment to architecture was articulated by founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who envisioned a modern art museum where architecture, industrial and graphic design, photography, and film would be represented commensurately with the traditional fine arts. An early example of the International Style in this country, the Goodwin/Stone building based its aesthetic principles on the use of modern materials and structure and modern requirements in interior planning. The new building's distinctive facade has become an integral part of the Museum's collection--the only part permanently on display.

The design of the Museum and the selection of its location underwent many changes before a final scheme was approved in November 1937. The earliest versions represented in the exhibition include six skyscraper proposals

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designed in 1930 by George Howe and William Lescaze. Commissioned for a typical city lot, these plans were later abandoned when the architects dissolved their partnership. By February 1936, the Museum had chosen a site on the south side of West 53 Street, directly opposite the Rockefeller townhouse it was leasing. The location was moved across the street to its current address when a new scheme proposed placing the Museum at the head of a five-block Municipal Art Center, incorporating Rockefeller Center, a symphony hall, an opera house, and a music library.

Philip Goodwin, a Museum trustee, was named as architect. Trained in the Beaux-Arts style, Goodwin's initial drawings for the site adhere to a more classical tradition; some of his early schemes indicate masonry construction, a symmetrical arrangement of the facade, and the application of ornamental medallions. Barr recommended commissioning as collaborator the great European modernist Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who had been featured in the Museum's landmark exhibition MODERN ARCHITECTURE: INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION (1932). The Building Committee chose instead the young American architect Edward Durell Stone as Goodwin's assistant.

The final version for Goodwin and Stone's facade was only resolved in the summer of 1938; several of their studies are included in the exhibition. The introduction of Thermolux, an experimental glass that allowed diffused sunlight to enter the galleries, replaced a proposed broad expanse of marble and formed in effect a glass curtain wall. The six-story building, elongated by two horizontal strips of windows, was decidedly modern while harmonizing with the residential street. One of the facade's most striking characteristics was its "nautical" roof, a concrete cantilever perforated by large "portholes" that was inspired by Le Corbusier's pavilion at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

The 1939 Goodwin/Stone building introduced a fundamentally new kind of museum architecture. Its loft-like galleries incorporated such innovative details as track lighting, movable partitions, and white walls that eventually became standard for displaying art. Rendered in dark marble, blond woodwork, and glass brick, the interiors adapted "functionalism" to a more intimate scale. The exhibition concludes with several early photographs of the building's public and administrative spaces, including the Bauhaus-inspired stairway, still existing, and the Member's Penthouse, a sixth floor lounge and terrace furnished with the finest examples of contemporary design.

The sculpture garden was a remarkable feature of Goodwin and Stone's plan, although it was greatly simplified due to financial constraints. In 1953 Philip Johnson transformed the garden into what is now one of the most valued settings in New York City. Goodwin's 1943 proposed extension to the Museum was never realized; subsequent expansions were executed by Johnson in 1951 and 1964. In May 1984, the Museum completed its most ambitious expansion, designed by Cesar Pelli, which doubled its exhibition space.

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