

## **The New Whitney Museum of American Art**

**By Chris Banuelos 05/13/12**

The Whitney Museum of American Art is a contemporary art museum located on the Upper East Side Manhattan, New York City. Soon, within the next three years, it will be moving to a new location. This move offers a window into the behind-the-scenes politics that go on in the infrastructure of an organization undergoing a dramatic change. In the case of the Whitney, as it is generally referred to, the process started over a year ago and is continuing to be a source of confusion and speculation within the myriad departments of which the museum comprises. This essay will trace the history of the Whitney in order to provide context to its current situation, will explore the new location and shed some light on how it is perceived within the institution, and will examine two other museums which have undergone successful transformations which the Whitney hopes to emulate.

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, born into the Vanderbilt family and married into the Whitney family, is the namesake of the Whitney Museum. Born in New York City on January 9, 1875, she eventually married a wealthy sportsman and inheritor of a tobacco and oil fortune, Harry Payne Whitney. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Gertrude became attracted to the art world and pursued a career in sculpting. She studied at the Art Students League in New York, as well as with Hendrick C. Andersen and James Earle Fraser, and was talented enough to be commissioned to do several works. These include the *Women's Titanic Memorial* in Washington, D.C., the *Victory Arch* in Madison Square Park in New York City, and the *Aztec Fountain*, also located in Washington (Vanderbilt, 1989). Her burgeoning fame as an artist coupled with her vast financial resources allowed her to begin to collect American art on a large scale. By 1904, she began to organize exhibitions of fellow American artists, such as at the "Colony Club."

These exhibitions, featuring works by artists such as Ernest Lawson and Jerome Myers, also became opportunities for Gertrude to purchase more art to add to her collection. Along with her business partner, Juliana Force, they established one of their most influential exhibition spaces in New York City's Greenwich Village named the "Whitney Studio Club" (Hills and Tarbell, 1980).

The club, which started in 1918, was the forerunner of the Whitney in a few ways. Right from the start, it became a showcase for the American avant-garde. Artists included Peggy Bacon, Alexander Brooks, and Kenneth Hayes Miller, who was also one of Gertrude's instructors at the Art Students League. The building itself housed an art library on one of its floors for the artists and other scholars to use. It also began to install exhibitions and select works for a yearly show (Hills and Tarbell, 1980). These traditions are carried on today at the Whitney, particularly in the case of the museum's renowned Biennial.

By 1929, Gertrude had begun to require a larger space for all of the works she had collected. She inquired as to whether or not the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) would like to take her collection, however, they declined. Also in 1929, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened and achieved some fame for the European Modernist works it was exhibiting. Realizing that the exclusively American art she had collected might strike a similar chord coupled with the fact that the Met refused her collection, Gertrude began to plan on opening her own museum. In 1931, architect Noel L. Miller converted the "Whitney Studio Club" and its adjacent buildings into the first incarnation of the Whitney Museum. This location on West 8<sup>th</sup> St. in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan not only served as a museum, but was the Whitney's residence, as well (Postal and Dolkart, 2009) .

On April 18, 1942, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney passed away due to complications from bacterial endocarditis, a bacterial infection of the inner surface of the heart (Kosovych, 2001). At this time, her daughter, Flora Payne Whitney, took over as the director of the museum (Biddle, 2001). By 1954, the new Whitney Museum space had become too small. It was moved to a space on West Fifty-Fourth Street in Mid-town Manhattan behind MoMA. This space proved once again to be too small and by 1961, plans were begun to build a larger museum space at 951 Madison Avenue, on Manhattan's swanky Upper East Side. The building was designed by Marcel Breuer, a Hungarian architect trained in the Bauhaus. Between 1963 and 1966, construction at the new site took place (Gray, 2010).

This current location was not without its share of issues upon completion. The Breuer Building, as it has come to be known, is situated among a neighborhood of brownstones and townhouses. Since the modern design of the granite façade clashes with the architecture of the surrounding buildings, some doubts were cast by critics as to the aesthetic merits of the site. Furthermore, it was felt that the Breuer was already too cramped to house the ever-growing collection. Within fifteen years of the new location's opening, suggestions regarding expansion were already circulating. One idea swirling around was that the Whitney could purchase and demolish the neighboring brownstones in order to build a new structure. This idea, however, could not be fulfilled since the entire neighborhood had been designated as an historical landmark, rendering the buildings untouchable (Gray, 2010).

Over the years, the reputation of the Museum as a showcase for contemporary art grew and in so doing, the unique design of the Breuer Building became synonymous with the museum itself. In other words, it has become difficult to dissociate the Whitney Museum with the image

of the Breuer Building. Yet, the need for expansion continued to pervade the museum's ability to collect and exhibit art and it was finally decided to purchase only a few of the adjacent brownstones and convert their interiors, rather than their exteriors. The brownstones were turned into office spaces and an annex which housed the art library. But by 2010, the museum had outgrown this expansion as well. Several of its departments, such as Copyrights or Publications, as well as the library, were moved to the Bulwark Building on 26<sup>th</sup> Street in West Chelsea Manhattan (Rusk, 2011). Thus began the development of yet another larger site for the Whitney.

On April 30, 2008, designs for a new building were released in a public community board hearing. A week later, the city of New York had begun the formal zoning process and thus the new Whitney Museum of American Art was born. By May 24, 2011, ground was finally broken on the construction site, located in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan at the entrance to the High Line Park. The new building was designed by the noted Italian architect Renzo Piano. He is famous for working on such structures as the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Shard London Bridge which will be Europe's tallest skyscraper at over one thousand feet, the new modern art wing in the Art Institute in Chicago, and the still underway transformation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Whitney New Building Project, 2012).

Between 2008 and the beginning of construction, several issues needed to be taken care of first. For example, money needed to be raised. Also, what was going to happen to the Breuer Building? Adam D. Weinberg, the museum's director initially wanted to expand at the Madison Avenue location. Despite the fact that they had already built an annex and offices into the adjacent brownstones, this proved to be an insufficient amount of space. Without being able to demolish or purchase the remaining brownstones on the street, expansion was impossible.

Instead, Weinberg sold the brownstones they occupied. That, coupled with a fundraising campaign, raised approximately Five Hundred Million Dollars of the proposed Seven Hundred and Twenty Million Dollars it would take to build and endow the new building. Furthermore, a collaborative agreement was reached between the Whitney and, ironically enough, the Met, who initially refused Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's collection in 1929. The basic premise of this agreement is that the Met will take over the Breuer Building and assume its Three Million Dollar yearly operating expense. This will allow the Met to expand their modern art collection into the Breuer. At the same time, the Whitney will be allowed to store some art at the location while sharing in some of the revenue with the Met from tickets and memberships sold. The exact details of the financial aspect of the agreement are not clear as they are not published on either institution's websites. This agreement will begin in 2012 and will extend until 2023 (Vogel, 2011).

Since the Whitney has decided to change locations yet again in its storied history, the question arises, is something wrong with the Breuer Building? Because the Met will continue to use the site as an exhibition space, the answer is no, nothing is wrong with the building. The Whitney has continued to grow as an institution and needed more room for expansion. For example, an 18,000 square foot gallery for temporary exhibitions will be built that will become the largest column-free gallery in New York City. The building will include a ground-floor exhibition space that is free of charge to enter; two floors will house the permanent collection, and artist projects that will comprise the top floor, adding up to approximately 32,000 square feet of exhibition space. Furthermore, Piano's design calls for an Education Center, which will offer dedicated classroom space; a multi-use black box theater for film, video, and performance art; an art conservation lab, a Works on Paper Study Center, and a library reading room. The

classrooms, theater, and study center will be new on-site amenities for the museum (Whitney New Building Project, 2012).

While the new location promises to offer new opportunities as a space for artists, visitors, and researchers, its effects on the institution's departments is unclear. For example, within the last year, as mentioned above, several departments and the library moved to the Bulwark Building. In the case of the library, the Bulwark location has proven to be smaller than what was offered at the Breuer. Currently, there are no plans to include a library at the new location despite the advertised benefit of a new library reading room. Furthermore, it has been rumored that other departments housed at the Bulwark will move to the new location upon its completion. However, at this time, no one knows for sure. These intra-institutional developments are curious in that they expose a lack of communication between the Whitney's leadership and its labor force. Since the portion of the endowment that covers the annual operational cost of the library is continuing to be cut each fiscal year, how will the museum be able to fund potentially two libraries?

The fact is that the museum will not house two libraries. Although no one is clear as to how the reading room will work in the near future, what is clear is that the current library will stay put in the Bulwark. By April of 2012, all of the libraries holdings were finally transferred from off-site storage locations to the Bulwark Building, marking the first time in over a year that the library had complete access to it. Researchers have experienced delays on their requests due to the inaccessibility of materials in the library and continue to do so as items are being accounted for and re-shelved. Furthermore, due to the disparate locations of the Bulwark, the Breuer, and eventually the new location, communication, library visibility, mobility between the spaces, and even mail and deliveries have all experienced disruptions (Rusk, 2012). Nowhere in

the literature regarding the new building are these issues addressed. At the same time, hopes run high that the new building will attract more visitors than the Whitney previously had. Since the building is situated at the entrance of the High Line Park, and since the park has generated thousands of visitors a day to its shops and restaurants, the new Whitney stands a very good chance of attracting visitors. Also, the free exhibition space and planned restaurant at the museum will also attract foot traffic.

The merits of the Whitney's new location remain to be seen. There is a great potential for increased visitation, while at the same time, the institution's departments are in a state of flux. On an administrative level, disruption continues to occur as staff is constantly being shuffled from space to space. The Breuer is undergoing some reconstruction in order to comply with the Met's wishes that it be in complete and updated working order. The fear is that the perpetual office disruption caused by the updating of the Breuer's systems will continue until such time that the offices will move to the new location. Meaning that it is going to literally be a number of years before the staff are finally able to settle down in one location. Furthermore, the Whitney owns the right of first refusal on a city-owned parcel of land across the street from the new location. If they decide that they need to expand from the new location, they may purchase and build on this other property, which may also cause the further shuffling of staff. Until the new site is up and running, these issues will remain unclear (Rusk, 2012). Weinberg, the Director, has clearly stated that his concern is primarily with opening the new building and maintaining the partnership with the Met until at least the year 2023. What happens beyond that will, according to Weinberg, will be up to the discretion of the next director (Vogel, 2011).

Although the change in the Whitney's location has the potential to be challenging, precedents have been set in the successful move or expansion of an institution. The New Museum in New York offers insight into how an art museum can successfully change locations. In 2007, the New Museum moved from its location in the SoHo neighborhood to its current location on the Bowery. The building which houses the museum contains 60,000 square feet and was built for approximately fifty million dollars by the Japanese architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (New Museum New building, 2008). The design of the new building, much like the Whitney, contrasts with the architecture of the surrounding Lower East Side neighborhood in which it is situated. However, this was done specifically in order to signify the museum's ties to the Downtown art scene for which the neighborhood is known. In other words, the building itself represents the cultural and artistic legacy of the neighborhood. Because of this, some of the fifty million dollar construction cost was raised through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation (Saltz, 2007). The New Museum has proven successful not only in cultural terms but by the fact that their exhibitions are drawing many visitors. The Whitney's Breuer Building, as mentioned above, has become a landmark of New York City's architectural heritage, however; whether or not the new building will be perceived in the same way remains to be seen. In the case of the New Museum, the building's design and its relation to the community in which it sits was one way to attract people to visit.

Museum expansion, such as that proposed by the Tate Modern art gallery in London, England, is another way to attract visitors. Opened in the year 2000, the Tate Modern is the most visited modern art gallery in the world with over four-and-a-half million visitors per year. The building itself is built into an old power station that runs alongside the River Thames, and represents an architectural link to the city's past. However, with the unprecedented and



unexpected amount of visitors who pass through the doors, coupled with the anticipated influx of tourists due to the 2012 Summer Olympics, plans were put in motion to create an extension (Serota, 2010). The Bankside, as the extension will be called, offers sixty percent more floor space than the current gallery and is budgeted at Two Hundred and Fifteen Million Pounds. The building is scheduled to be completed in time for the Olympics, but it appears extremely unlikely that this will happen. Despite this minor setback, the project was easily funded as it was a political “sure thing.” In other words, considering that the amount of visitors more than doubled what was expected and with the notion of tourist influx due to the Olympics, it became popular politically to support the museum’s expansion. Because of this, the process of fund-raising, zoning, and design selection has run smoothly (Ellis, 2010).

The Whitney Museum of American art is moving and is keeping open the option to expand. The two above mentioned examples were achieved for a fraction of the cost of what the Whitney is spending and have received political and critical support. Despite the astronomical price tag, the staff believes that the museum stands a good chance of becoming a tourist destination. The collaborative efforts between the Met and the Whitney may eventually turn out to be beneficial for both institutions since the former can use the recognizability of the Breuer Building as a selling point, while the latter is relinquishing millions of dollars a year in operating costs while at the same time collecting a share of revenues. Furthermore, the institutions will be in a unique position where they can share digital assets, metadata practices, or collections policies ( Zorich, 2008).

The day-to-day working environment at the Whitney is currently in a state of disruption. While the move and the potential for expansion is a useful tool for increasing revenue from

visitor ticket sales, the reality for the museum's staff is that any benefit for them is pure speculation at this point. Unfortunately, communication between the institution's leadership and its myriad departments is reaching an all-time low due to the disparate locations of several of its departments and the museum itself. Plus, with the construction having begun and fund-raising still underway, communication will not get better any time soon. Furthermore, employee morale is also suffering since 2023 is as far into the future as the current leadership is willing to take the organization.

The Whitney Museum has succeeded as an exhibition and performance space for distinctly American art and artists for decades. There have been demonstrable cases where museums have moved or expanded that have proven to be wildly successful politically, critically, and to the public as well. There is no reason to believe that the Whitney will fail at its new location. Situated in a revived neighborhood, the new building will stand as a featured attraction and will generate visitation to the area and to the city on the whole. At the same time, will increased revenues trickle down to the departments which form the infrastructure of the organization? Only time will tell and the bureaucratic, corporate mode of operation under which the organization currently runs may very well prove to be the one obstacle in its path to success. The departments housed within the Bulwark Building have already experienced a disconnect from the "face" of the museum at the Breuer. The new building will not rectify this situation. This is problematic, particularly considering the publicity surrounding the new locations library reading room, because the infrastructure forms the body of work, research, and knowledge; dare we say memory, of what the museum has produced over the course of almost a century. Ultimately, the move will prove financially successful. That financial success must be used as a

resource for improving the organization's communication between departments and departmental visibility in order to sustain the institution for the next century.

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