



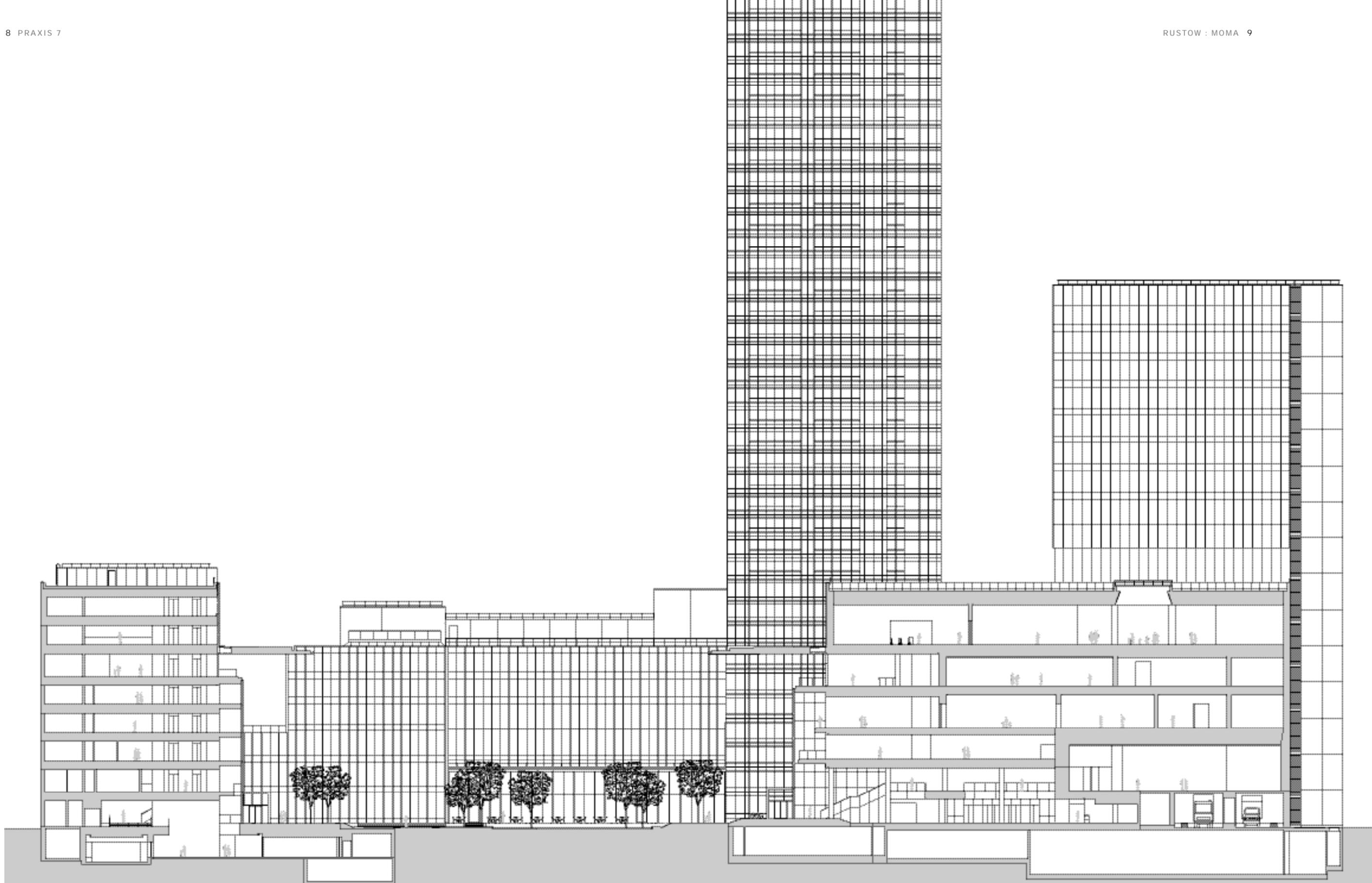
MOMA'S MINIMALIST BAROQUE

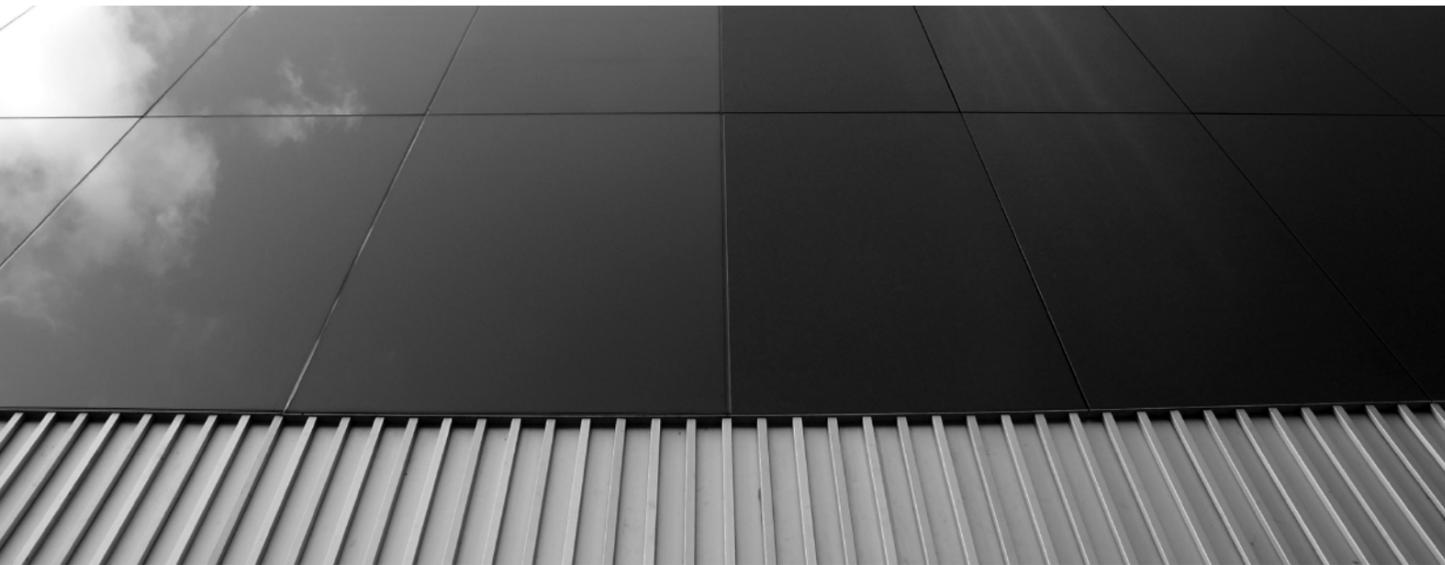
STEPHEN RUSTOW

YOSHIO TANIGUCHI'S PROJECT FOR THE EXPANSION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IS THE FIFTH MAJOR REORGANIZATION OF THE INSTITUTION IN ITS 75-YEAR HISTORY; IT EMBODIES BOTH A DEPARTURE IN SCALE AND AN ORGANIZATIONAL AND STYLISTIC REINVENTION THAT WILL SURELY SET THE CHARACTER OF THE MUSEUM FOR THE NEXT GENERATION. THE ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE TANIGUCHI HAS EMPLOYED AT MOMA IS RESOLUTELY IN KEEPING WITH THE 20TH CENTURY HIGH-MODERNIST AESTHETIC OF WHICH THE MUSEUM HAS LONG BEEN THE CHIEF PROPONENT. THE BUILDING IS SPARE AND COOL, A GRIDDED COMPOSITION OF QUIETLY LUXURIOUS MATERIALS, SEEMINGLY RIGOROUS IN ITS FORMAL DEVELOPMENT AND EXACTING IN ITS EXECUTION. CAREFULLY REFINED IN TANIGUCHI'S EARLIER PROJECTS IN JAPAN, THIS IS AN ARCHITECTURE OF EXTERNAL RESTRAINT AND SOBRIETY WHICH DISSIMULATES THE VOLUMETRIC COMPLEXITIES OF ITS INTERIORS—A FORMALISM THAT WHISPERS LOUDLY.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The façade over the entry reveals many of Taniguchi's concerns: flatness, thinness, and precision. The modular disposition of materials is determined by local conditions with the emphasis on frontal rather than three-dimensional resolution. The misalignment of the joints in perpendicular planes betrays a reliance on two-dimensional grids, as opposed to a fully developed projective system.

LEFT: Taniguchi's reorganized MoMA reconceives the assemblage of buildings around the garden, allowing the Museum Tower to ground itself, lining the interior facades with the same taut silkscreened glass, and reframing the garden with similar formal gestures. The section shows the reframing of the Garden with twinned canopy elements which impose a symmetry on what are in fact dramatically different spatial organizations serving dissimilar programs.





ABOVE: The treatment of surfaces for their material effects is manifested in the articulation of stone and glass panels as modularly equivalent, seemingly supported by the same system, and differing only in their qualities of their material effects.

FACING PAGE: The detailing of open joint stone panels and their transition to glass curtain wall, reveals the use of dissimilar materials articulated as a single system.

At first glance, Taniguchi's use of this formal vocabulary seems to be anchored in a completely conventional syntax and a familiar set of modernist tropes, yet it is full of elegant subtleties and unintended contradictions, which render it more complex and ambiguous than the casual viewer might suppose. Indeed, upon careful inspection virtually every element of Taniguchi's architectural language seems to be used à rebours, in ways that are ultimately not at all what they pretend to be. Although the formal attributes of modernism are present throughout the work, there is no systematic reference to modernist spatial precepts; indeed at moments Taniguchi seems to fetishize the vocabulary of classic modernism precisely to subvert its principles. A veneer of rational, ordered composition has been applied to a process that engages very different ends: the results are ultimately much more concerned with pure sensual effect, creating a kind of libertinism of sublime calm – a minimalist baroque.

"Barocco" has a poorly understood etymology but has meant, variously, "odd," "irregular" and "poorly formed." In any baroque architecture, the integrity of the individual unit is subsumed in – or sacri-

ficed to – the larger compositional strategy, one based not on the classic balanced assemblage of discrete parts but rather on a comprehensive modeling designed for overall effect. This is not mere mannerism, in which effect struggles to supplant an underlying rational order, but rather a compositional strategy in which effect is all the order there is: the triumph of the visual is complete. The space that results can not be understood rationally, only grasped in our engaged experience of it, and it is in the implicit conflict between that experience and Taniguchi's formal pretensions that the project's considerable seductiveness and its occasional intellectual disappointments are both to be found.

Taniguchi's building is organized around three major interlocking volumes: Garden, Passage and Atrium. The Garden plays the central role in the compositional strategy, both spatially and symbolically. In a gesture of pious restoration and radical appropriation, the remade Garden is bracketed by two massive new volumes that Taniguchi posits as representing MoMA's two-fold mission: display and education.

These twin blocks create a grandiose new frame that entirely recasts the significance of Philip Johnson's original landscape composition and changes the axis of the visitor's encounter with the Garden by ninety degrees, emphasizing the long, east/west dimension and dramatically altering the formal reading of this, the Museum's iconic space. By contrast, the Passage ties the entire complex to its urban condition, serving as a public concourse connecting large, new entries on 53rd and 54th Streets. As a formal device, it evokes both the 19th century Parisian arcades and their local, pale echo, the "through-block connectors" spawned by the mid-town zoning incentives of the 80s and 90s. Finally, the Atrium is the space around which the entire presentation of MoMA's collections is organized. It can be seen as a kind of metaphoric displacement of the Garden, with sculpture at its base and sky at its summit, forming a strong vertical axis in answer to the Garden's horizontality. It is the light-filled void around which the new galleries are set and the space with which each floor's presentation of art begins and ends. It is intended both as an orientation device and as a space of repose.

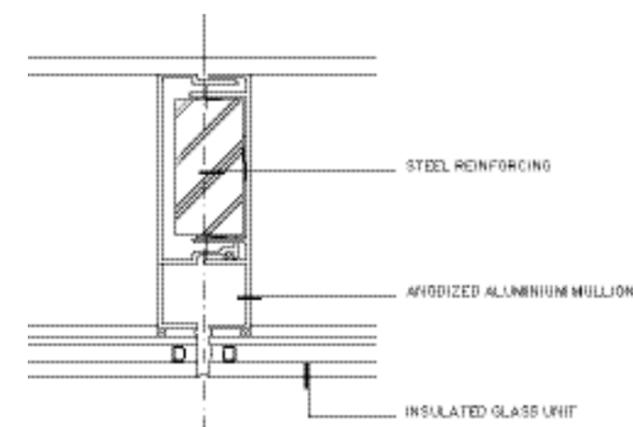
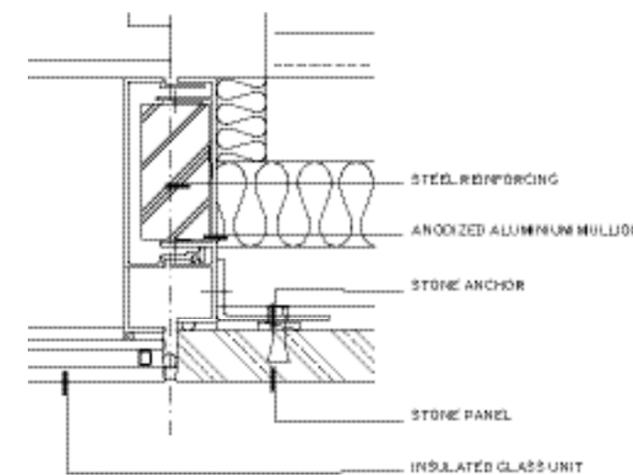
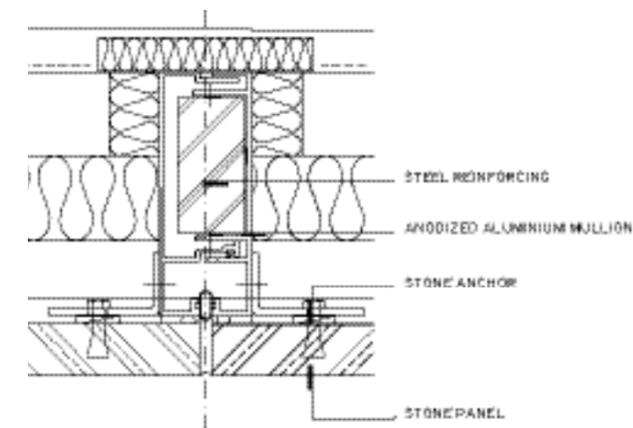
This tri-partite spatial armature is extremely effective at colonizing the site, but as soon as one examines the architectural volumes that bound it a curious set of contradictions begins to appear. Taniguchi's metaphoric twinning of MoMA's education and exhibition activities creates an effective compositional device for reframing the Garden, but formally the new wings pretend to an equivalence that does not in fact exist. The two blocks – identical in height and width – have dramatically different sectional developments: the six floors of the gallery wing on the west face nine levels in the structure to the east, and the gallery wing is nearly twice as deep as its pendant. These are also spaces of very different character: tall, open gallery volumes on the west face relatively low and banal office floors on the east. On close inspection, even the fenestration of these ostensibly identical elements proves to be startlingly different.

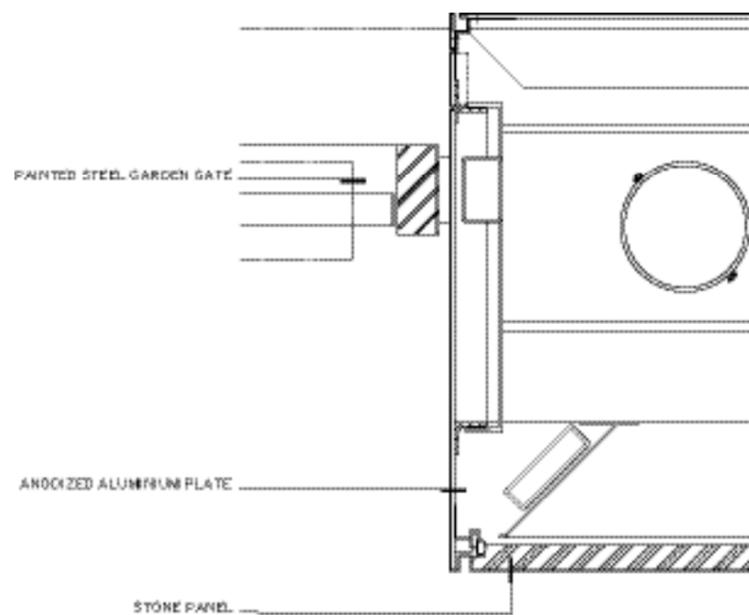
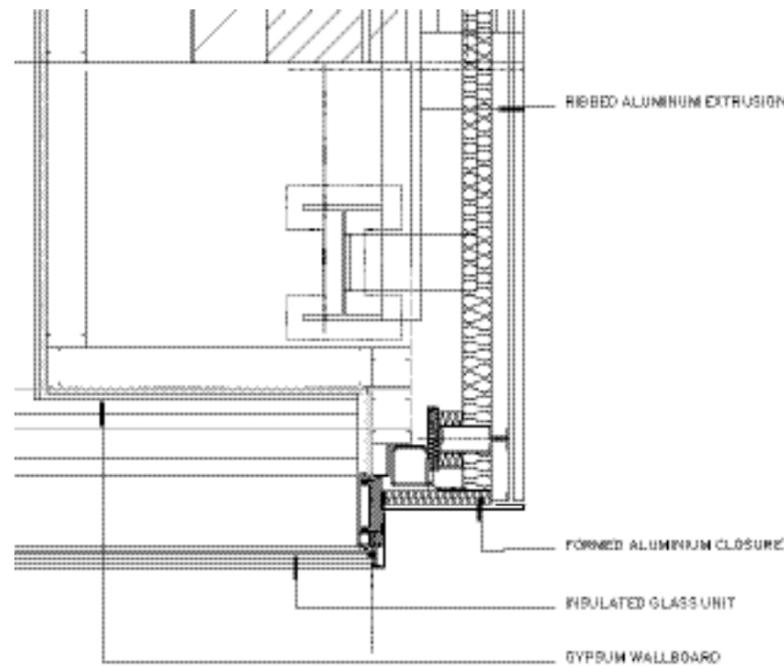
This pairing of unlike elements, the formal insistence on false equivalences, can be found throughout the project, in examples large and small. The full-height, continuous band of horizontal grillage on the north edge of both blocks serves as a blind air intake on the east, whereas on the west it is a translucent screen providing light to a major public elevator lobby. Even the identical canopies are structurally supported in ways that challenge their presumed equivalence: at the Education wing, the entire formal device seems to rest on a single, slender column that soars through a four-story void, while at the Gallery Wing, the full span of the thin horizontal slides into the glazed facade of Cesar Pelli's Museum Tower, with no clear expression of how its support is structurally resolved. Finally, the rigorous duplication of the material vocabulary in the facades of the two wings on 54th Street speaks less to any intrinsic similarity between uses than to a desire to clad the paired walls that make the urban edge in a consistent, limited palette. Clearly the relationship between interior and exterior is posited here in a way that defies the conventional tenets of classic modernism,

affirming a kind of formal dissimulation in which galleries, research centers, offices, and library stacks all find an identical expression.

A closely related issue is the use of transparency. Taniguchi's design for MoMA employs three distinct kinds of glass in over a dozen curtain wall variants. There are completely transparent walls made of clear, low-iron glass; partially opaque walls, made of fritted glass in which thin white horizontal stripes create a scrim-like effect that obscures half of the glazed area; and glass with reflective coatings which create a homogenous gray surface. Each type of glass is placed systematically within the composition and with rare exceptions, no wall type turns a corner but is rather always used frontally, emphasizing the flat, surface qualities of the building's different sides. The gray glass for example, is used exclusively on the building's street facades, which face the city, whereas the fritted surfaces are used to clad north- and south-facing facades within the interior of the site, unifying the remaining portions of MoMA's existing structures behind a continuous, translucent skin. The same material covers the two broad sides of the small office tower on top of the Gallery wing. Finally, the clear glass surfaces are found only on the interior facades that face east and west toward the Garden. The total compositional effect is inward-turning, moving from opacity to greater transparency as one penetrates the site.

Yet Taniguchi's ostensible use of glass for its various degrees of transparency is problematic. The glazed portions of the street facades are almost entirely doubled by a deep, opaque plaster wall set just two feet behind the interior edge of the glass pane; only 15% of the total surface area provides a view out from the galleries (or in from the street). This curious juxtaposition follows from the simple need for gallery walls on which to hang art and the strict limits on the amount of natural light which that art can tolerate, but the extensive use of glass in a condition that by its very nature contradicts its capacity to transmit light suggests that the material is actually





being manipulated purely for its surface and symbolic qualities.

This focus on surface, and by extension, flatness, informs Taniguchi's treatment and detailing of nearly all the materials used in his composition. Whether glass, stone, metal, wood or plaster, every wall, floor and ceiling is composed as a perfect, isolated surface and detailed to permit no reading of the actual depth of the material itself. Thus, virtually nowhere does a material turn a corner without a frame or a reveal to contain it. The framing devices are typically flat metal plates of extreme thinness; the reveals are carefully controlled gaps that read as shadow, and indeed, often the frame and the reveal are used together. The overall compositional effect is one of pristine, isolated planes chosen for their color and texture or the way in which they reflect light. This disembodied quality, thin, even brittle, is clearly intentional and is used throughout the building with remarkable invention and masterful control.

Yet the emphasis on thinness leads to a curious contradiction between the surface, the sensual qualities of the materials, and their palpable, physical presence. The absence of any expression in the third dimension – be it cut or hewn, folded or formed – leads to a generalized lightness and insubstantiality. Even the columns, those most monolithic and necessarily sculptural elements of the modernist canon, have all been given a smooth plaster and painted finish that undercuts their solidity. Indeed, the only material allowed any real or metaphoric thickness in the composition is the thinnest of all, and the most prevalent: the "sheetrock" wall surfaces of prefabricated gypsum panels secured to hollow metal studs.

This is clearest in Taniguchi's development of the Atrium. While deep windows on each of its four faces suggest an uncharacteristic material thickness, carved to reveal the galleries and circulation spaces beyond, the vast, unarticulated white surface of the atrium walls has a curiously mute quality. The banality of these interior planes, contrasted with the palpable sophistication

of the curtain wall or the glazed skylights, bespeaks a kind of false humility in which the precise assemblage of machined surfaces that characterizes every other wall in the project has been deliberately traded, at this key moment, for simpler, purely sculptural values. But the painted surfaces themselves cannot withstand such formal emphasis, and the intended effect of pure spatial presence is undercut by the flaws of the painted, taped and spackled support; what is intended as essential proves to be merely insubstantial.

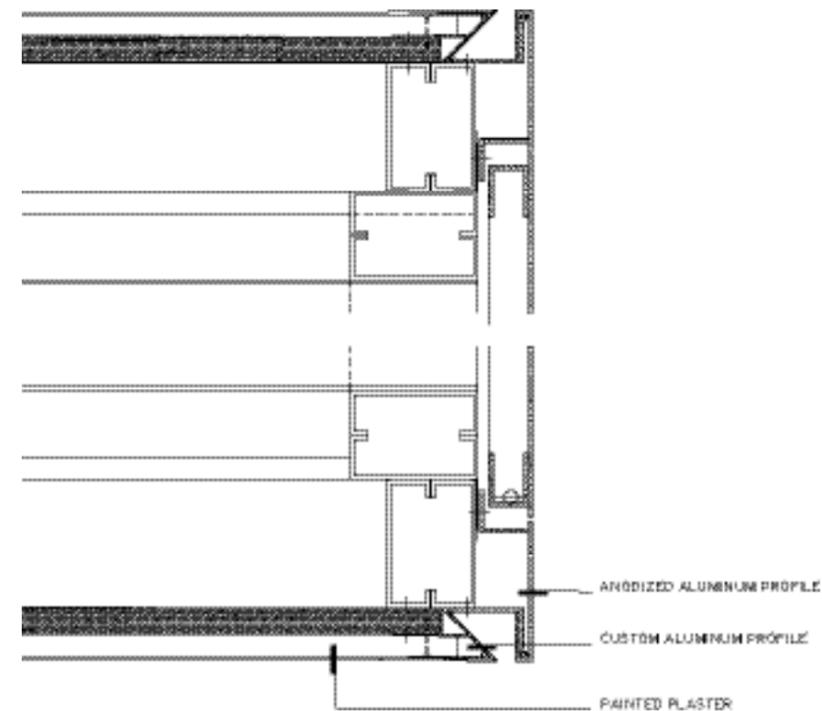
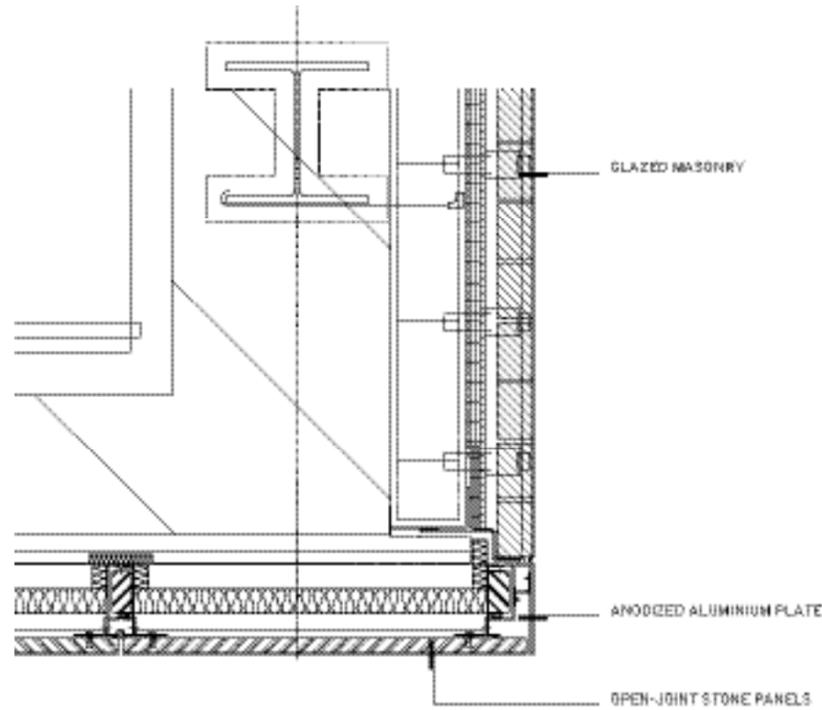
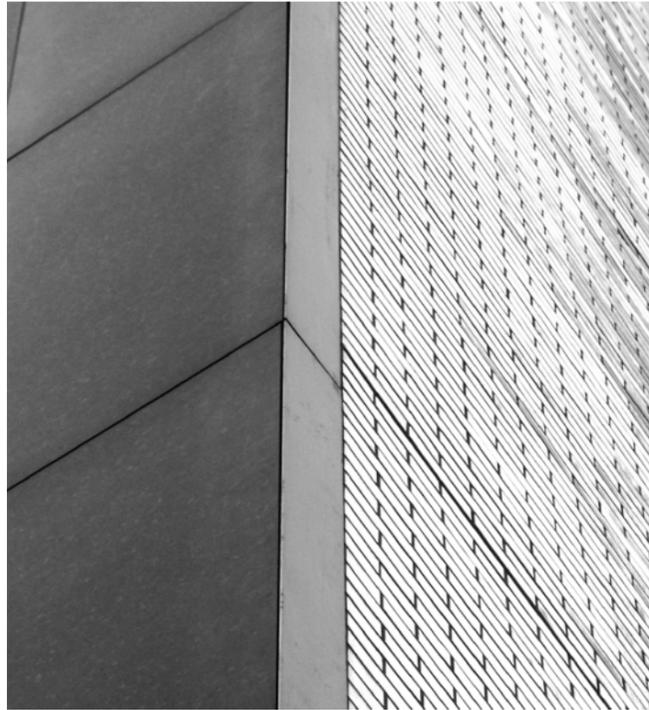
Most intriguing is Taniguchi's strong and explicit use of grids, a compositional device found in all of his architecture. Everywhere, regardless of the specific material qualities of any given surface, Taniguchi emphasizes the assembly of rectangular units into orthogonal planes. Walls, floors and ceilings all seem to participate in a relentless two-dimensional ordering system that ties them together in carefully calculated proportions. Indeed, the insistency of the grid seems fundamental to the entire compositional strategy and perfectly compliments Taniguchi's sense of materiality, suggesting that the palette of diverse materials – stone, glass and metal panels – may be used almost interchangeably to fill in any portion of the autonomous rectilinear network. The clear implication is that there exists a consistent, rational module throughout the building that determines the interplay between surfaces and imposes on the many parts of the composition one overarching system of rigorous relationships. Complimenting this strategy is Taniguchi's obsession with reducing the joints between units to the absolute practical minimum. Large blocks of stone meet one another with but the slightest of gaps; metal panels clad full stories with scarcely a reveal. Indeed, the reduction of the dimensions of the expansion joints on all of the curtain wall systems has been carried to the extreme of creating a second, autonomous tubular structure that spans between the vertical supports in order to isolate the walls from any deflection on the floors. Few buildings in New York, or anywhere else for that matter, have

managed to achieve such a consistent uniformity of surface; one is left with the conviction that Taniguchi's ultimate desire is to make the joints disappear altogether and thus render his surfaces perfectly homogenous, monolithic and limitless. But the paradoxical result of this painstaking minimizing of the joints is to call greater attention to subtle variations within and between the units themselves, so that the qualities which betray the assemblage of each surface are unintentionally affirmed, not by the grid which subdivides it, but by the idiosyncrasies of the pieces of which it is made.

This use of the grid has, of course, a very long precedence in modern architecture and would seem to anchor Taniguchi in the tradition in which grid, module and multiple are the primary heuristic devices both for composing and for reading a building's architecture. This embraces an epistemological conviction wherein the grid and its tectonic development in repeated, proportional modules is taken as the essential means of connecting what is perceived to an absolute set of arithmetic relationships, of relating what is seen to what is known.

In fact, however, there is no projective compositional use of grid and module in Taniguchi's building but rather a fixed set of imposed alignments between vertical and horizontal planes that mask dozens of slight dimensional variations in the units that comprise each surface. These are not mere expedients to accommodate existing conditions or sloppy workmanship but deliberately designed adjustments intended to suggest modular correlations between systems that in fact have no true proportional relationships. Thus, the green slate floor used in the public spaces on the ground and second levels is subdivided to align perfectly with both the mullions of the curtain wall and all of the major edges of the interior volumes, establishing seemingly rigorous relationships between the plan and the elevations, and yet it is comprised of over fifty distinct, slightly differently sized stones, some varying as little as 3/16th of

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 TOP LEFT: The outside corner between the fritted glass curtain wall system and the ribbed aluminum textured panels.
 TOP RIGHT: The plan detail at the reentrant corner between glass curtain wall and textured panels is the result of the curtain wall module on the column grid center line, and a panel system accommodating the dimension of the structure.
 BOTTOM LEFT: The outside corner between stone panels and aluminum plate return articulates the refusal of material thickness. The details conceal the dimensional qualities of the stone, allowing only the material effect.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: The plan detail illustrates the transition from stone to aluminum.



an inch from their neighbors. The same myriad minute adjustments can be found in the grid of the Garden's marble paving blocks that extend the apparent rigor of the orthogonal facades into the planted exterior court, unifying the outdoor space seamlessly with its new glass surround. In fact, even the unit dimensions of the facades themselves have been carefully adjusted in width and height from one wall to the next, sometimes within the same wall, to create continuous lines that imply a consistent order that does not quite exist. Far from following a logical process of proportional composition, throughout the project Taniguchi has simply imposed the critical formal alignments and then subdivided the surfaces between the points.

The absence of any systematic modular development in Taniguchi's project contradicts the appearance of a rationally assembled, finely machined fabrication that the insistent gridding seems to suggest and reveals the building for the highly idiosyncratic, hand-crafted object it is. But this contradiction is key to reading the project and to a full understanding of its intentions. The ultimate formal values of Taniguchi's architecture reside in the tension between the proportions of the volumes and the elaboration of the surfaces that define them. It is, in that sense, a profoundly superficial architecture in which the taut surfaces are asked to carry whatever meaning is proposed. Yet their disposition in space adheres to no obvious rule, no discernable method. There are no systematic convictions affirmed in the plans, no geometric under-girding of the spatial development. So too with the planes themselves – one is tempted to call them screens they are so insubstantial; they are disembodied, scrimms. One is left to believe that some unexpressed, haptic sense informs the creation of the volumes and sets the position of the screens, that their placement is finally contingent, intuitive and, at moments, accidental.

What Taniguchi has created, then, is a sequence of sets designed to invite and to frame movement. The great strengths, and

pleasures, of Taniguchi's composition are finally experiential: the complexity of spatial interpenetration; the insistence at each turn that the space from which one has just come be seen again at a distance or from a different vantage point; and that the spaces to which one is moving be revealed against or through a dense layering of still others that one has not yet reached. What is remarkable and deft is the economy of means: simple rectangular openings in floors or separations between walls that are staggered and slipped so that any long view is developed diagonally; and the visual route to each point of reference in the middle or far distance leads the eye through a series of spaces that are ambiguously defined in plan and section – a static collection of points from which a line of movement is implied or invited, but never completely defined. Put another way, it is an architecture of spectacle.

The spectacular first emerged in museum design in the decade that saw the completion of Wright's Guggenheim in N.Y. and Mies' National Gallery at Berlin. In two dramatically dissimilar buildings a genuinely new idea was fully expressed for the first time. Each project was based on a parti that separated the tectonic expression of the museum's public and symbolic functions from the space of the actual confrontation with works of art. Both represented a radical rethinking of museum prototypes almost unchanged from the earliest theoretical projects of Boullée and Durand; taken together, they set us firmly on the road to Bilbao.

Bilbao, of course, is the specter that has haunted MoMA's expansion from the outset, with the opening of the Guggenheim's outpost nearly contemporaneous with MoMA's competition and selection process. Reinvigorating traditional rivalries, MoMA's project was deliberately posed as a kind of moral corrective to Bilbao's enormously successful spectacle, and in the elaborately documented self-critique that preceded its programming,

along with such fashionable concepts as "heterotopia" and "interiority," one can read a steady, implicit theme of the anti-spectacular. Cast as an extended meditation on the appropriate balance between architecture and the content of its spaces, several assumptions are clear in these texts. First, that a museum architecture should respect a certain inviolable degree of separation between content and container. Second, that the "experience of art" can, to some degree, be protected from the patterns of cultural consumption that determine the museum's role in society. And finally, that a museum project might evoke and treat these issues critically without itself falling prey to the imperatives of spectacle.

With hindsight it makes fascinating reading, and in one sense, Taniguchi has satisfied this complex charge. The studied neutrality of his elegant, traditional galleries gives the curators a greatly expanded but largely familiar context in which to reinterpret the multiple narratives of modernism. And, indeed, the gallery sequence is almost entirely divorced from the public and symbolic spaces that truly organize the building. But in the baroque tectonics of these latter elements Taniguchi has fashioned an architecture that embraces the spectacular as thoroughly as any of Gehry's sculptural extravaganzas: only the rhetoric has changed. ●

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TOP LEFT: The outside corner between open joint stone panels and glazed masonry. The inherent dimensions of each system necessitates the introduction of the aluminum trim to allow for a dimensionless corner.

TOP RIGHT: The plan detail reveals the supports for each system required to produce the dimensionless effect.

BOTTOM LEFT: The typical corner detail in the gallery portals, where the gallery wall transitions to the bronze portal frame without allowing the drywall to express its dimension.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The plan detail shows the tapered reveal between drywall and frame. The tapered bead on the drywall produces the illusion of a material without dimension. It also allows for the gallery walls to be repainted without masking.