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Out With the Not-So-Old

By Michael Lewis



Oceanfront view of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. PHOTO: BREADTRUCK FILMS.

Annabelle Selldorf's revamped project for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego adds spectacular gallery space, but sadly excises elements from Robert Venturi's previous design.

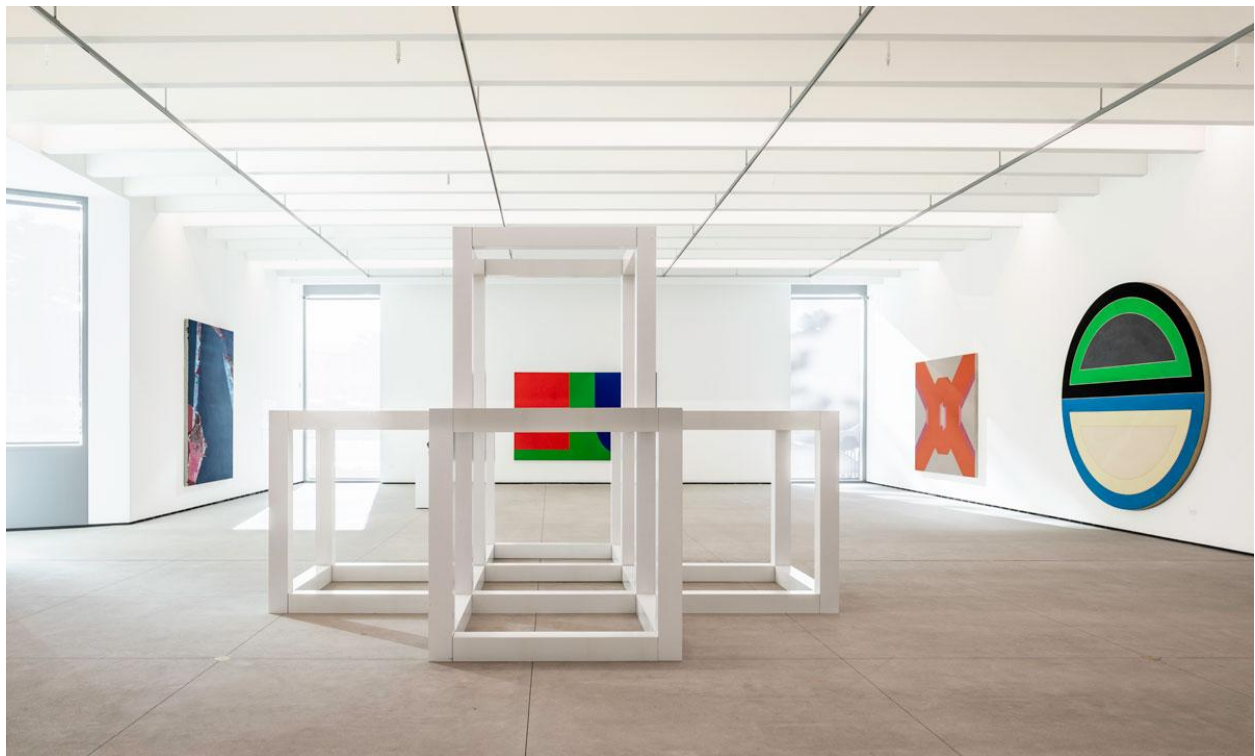
Playwrights, painters and composers cannot efface the work of their predecessors, much as they might like to. Of all the arts, it is only in architecture where the creation of one masterpiece can demand the destruction of another. So it is with the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, whose postmodern design by Robert Venturi, barely 25 years old, now gives way to the ambitious expansion project of Selldorf Architects.

The MCASD opened in 1941 in the house of Ellen B. Scripps, the progressive newspaper magnate and philanthropist who had died a decade earlier. Her house was just as progressive, an early example of Irving Gill's revolutionary tilt-up construction, in which concrete slabs were poured on the ground and "tilted up" to become walls. Because of the restricted site—a bluff dropping steeply to the Pacific—the

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/museum-of-contemporary-art-san-diego-selldorf-architects-annabelle-selldorf-ellen-b-scripps-robert-venturi-venturi-scott-brown-and-associates-irving-gill-tilt-up-construction-ellsworth-kelly-helen-frankenthaler-mark-rothko-11654295239>

museum could expand only southward, and it did so over the decades with a series of fitful additions. In 1986 Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates was asked to unify the straggling ensemble, and to enlarge its exhibition space. Venturi proposed four new exhibition galleries, but local officials wanted no encroachments on the oceanfront garden and denied permission to build. The result, a decade in the making, was a sumptuous false front, stretched across a museum whose gallery space was a pitiful 10,000 square feet.

This has now been remedied by Annabelle Selldorf, whose transformed museum, enlarged at a cost of \$105 million, opened earlier this spring. Her new galleries have belatedly given it exhibition space befitting its exceptional collection, a lavish 40,000 square feet. Other additions, including a new entrance, loading dock and underground parking, have effectively doubled it in size. This has shifted the center of gravity to the south, and in the process the heroically oversize columns that Venturi placed in front of the original Scripps building to mark the entrance have been removed—a decision that prominent architects protested.



Interior of the MCASD. PHOTO: NICHOLAS VENEZIA/SELLDORF ARCHITECTS.

But there is no question that the new galleries are a triumph. The MCASD collection is exceptionally strong on postwar American art, including large abstractions by Willem de Kooning, Ellsworth Kelly, Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko, paintings that require room to breathe. This is Ms. Selldorf's strong suit, and she has created a series of spacious and well-lighted galleries, all of them characteristic white boxes but no two of them alike—varying in size, shape and ceiling height.

They are also exceptionally well detailed. The HVAC ductwork that invariably bedevils museums has been placed underground, leaving the ceilings unencumbered and subtly giving each gallery a slightly different character according to its respective roof truss or baffled ceiling. Visitors might notice how the walls are minutely raised from the floor, letting air pass into the galleries without visible grillwork.

Largest of all is the gallery that has been created by eliminating the former auditorium; this is an exemplary gallery, 7,000 square feet under a 20-foot ceiling, made to serve traveling exhibitions. It is very fine but would have been finer still with a skylight; where museums once heedlessly subjected their fragile works on paper to destructive sunlight, they have gone too far in the other direction.

In general, however, the use of light is masterly, especially to the west where the site falls away in a series of stepped terraces above the sculpture garden. The view of the Pacific, though spectacular, also brings in the afternoon sun, and Ms. Selldorf has placed her windows adroitly to let you see just enough without being blinded. This is wayfinding at its best, drawing the visitor through the building to the west by that powerful but unconscious instinct that moves us toward water and light.

Ms. Selldorf's work is generally characterized by a white weightlessness, not by sculptural richness. But she has never used materials more effectively, or more robustly, than here. Her additions form an essay in tectonics, a post-and-lintel frame of gray cast-in-place concrete, clasping travertine panels of an exorbitant thickness. It is immensely attractive, and one only regrets that the sculptural expression of the exterior is not integrated with the spatial experience of the interior.

Given that this new facade is as much a decorative screen as that of Robert Venturi, it is not clear why his had to be sacrificed. Of course, postmodern architecture is deeply unfashionable these days, and for good reason: its glibness, the cut-out thinness of its forms, its habit of mistaking irony for humanism. But it offered one enduring insight, and that is that a building ought to be a good citizen and respect its context.

And surely Venturi was never better at contextual architecture than at the MCASD. After all, the entire neighborhood was shaped by the progressive Ellen Scripps: Across the street are the La Jolla Women's Club and La Jolla Recreation center, both funded by Scripps and designed by Gill; it is the finest ensemble of his buildings. Venturi's design could only exist in this context. Ms. Selldorf's superb building, by contrast, would look snazzy anywhere. Isn't that a problem?