

LEFT Nottingham Contemporary by Caruso St John, 2009 – inspired by the city's lacemaking heritage

BELOW 'Rooted in its place': Weston Visitor Centre at Yorkshire Sculpture Park by Feilden Fowles, 2018

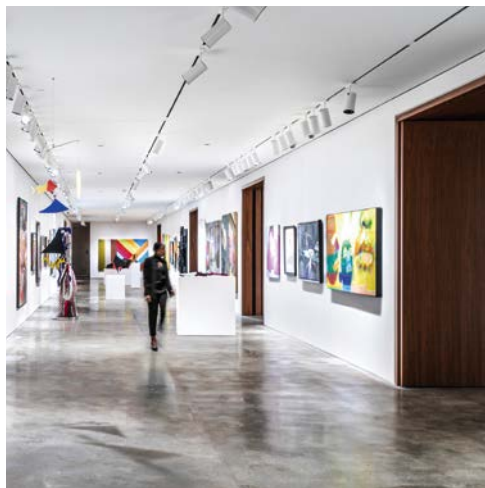


Cracks in the white cube

The days are gone when gallery design could be summarised in two words. Now a new generation of exhibition spaces are celebrating the specific

By Joe Lloyd

IMAGES: HELENE BINET / PETER COOK



LEFT Sotherby's New York by OMA, 2019. The revamp echoes the wood-panelled aesthetic of the original London branch

BELOW The former tobacco factory's existing concrete columns now take centre stage in the gallery spaces

There are few architectural typologies as performative as the art gallery. A gallery's walls are akin to a stage set, its ceiling a proscenium arch. It accompanies and makes

sense of the artistic drama played within. Visitors themselves become actors, performing various roles associated with the gallery-goer as they move from work to work. Above all, though, galleries perform cultural values. The 19th century saw the development of the grandiose neo-classical hulks still common in museums today: palatial halls with a hint of the ballroom, windowless but skylit, a magnificence that aimed to inspire lofty thoughts. Paintings covered every inch of the wall in an overwhelming tableau.

In 1883, the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler covered the walls of London's Fine Art Society with white felt and spaced his paintings out across them at equal height and divided by equal distance. By doing so, he hoped to encourage viewers to see his works as distinct entities, to be scrutinised from different perspectives. Over half a century later, Whistler was posthumously vindicated with the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's 53rd Street building in New York in 1939. Designed in the international style, it favoured domestically sized rooms and clear white walls.

The white cube, or cuboid, as a gallery space quickly became a dominant model the world over, penetrating through public museums, private galleries and auction houses. It is now so entrenched as a typology that one of London's private galleries is named for it; and the White



Cube's Bermondsey branch includes a space wryly dubbed 9x9x9. The cube, its adherents argue, eliminates all distractions and focuses attention on the art itself, placing the viewer in a sanctified zone for serious engagement.

In his 1986 lecture *The Art Museum of My Dreams*, the Swiss painter Rémy Zaugg – who later worked with Herzog & de Meuron on Tate Modern – mounted a mesmerising case for the white walls. ▶

‘White is a symbol of emptiness,’ he said. ‘Compared to a wall of any other colour, the white wall is not only the one least expressively charged, but also the one that is the most present, because it is the least cluttered and most free of subjective intentions.’ The cube is also efficient: by diminishing decoration it allows for adaptability. ‘Flexibility,’ says Shohei Shigematsu, head of OMA’s New York office and designer of several museums, ‘pushes art institutions to create galleries that maybe don’t really have a character.’

Yet the white cube has a diverse chorus of detractors. The Irish art critic Brian O’Doherty’s book *Inside the White Cube* diagnosed some maladies as early as 1976. For O’Doherty, the white cube had become a scene-stealer: ‘We have reached a point,’ he wrote, ‘where we see not the art but the space first.’ According to David Fleming, former president of the Museums Association, ‘Nothing could be worse than museums all looking and feeling the same, based on a misconceived notion that there is a model for which to strive.’ By removing specificity – of the space itself and of its context – the white cube threatens to deaden the experience of art. Often windowless and lit by electric light, it can stifle and create a sense of isolation.

Those who would design a museum today thus find themselves with a long list of pros and cons. When it comes to interior space, there have been bold attempts at restoring theatricality to galleries. Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao (1997) is as complex within as without, contrasting conventional white cubes with expressionistically curved showpieces. Peter Zumthor’s breathtaking Kolumba in Cologne (2007) has pearl-grey walls and soft spotlights, which grant its millennia-▶



“Flexibility pushes art institutions to create galleries that maybe don’t really have a character”

LEFT Annabelle Seedorf’s gallery for Thaddaeus Ropac in Ely House, London, celebrates the building’s original features

ABOVE Turner Contemporary, Margate, by David Chipperfield Architects, 2011 – a design shaped by its coastal location

IMAGES: PETER COOK, COURTESY GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, LONDON · PARIS · SALZBURG / SIMON MENGES

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spanning collection a numinous aura. Free from many of the restrictions that others face, however, these projects are outliers.

A more widely applicable route to revitalising the white cube lies in variance. This May, Shigematsu completed work on the first phase of a comprehensible refashioning of the Manhattan headquarters of Sotheby's, one of the leading art auction houses. Based within a 1920s four-storey cigar factory that in the 1990s was appended with a six-storey glass-and-steel extension, it previously featured an obtuse array of galleries spread around the building. Already based in a part of the city not especially trodden by its client base, Sotheby's required a more open, public-facing form.

OMA rationalised the internal layout by designating the original factory space for exhibition, visible from the street. 'The programme stack was clarified,' explains Shigematsu, 'so that a domain of public-facing function is much clearer, and circulation is rationalised.' Forty public galleries were created in 20 different specifications, from the intimate to the double-height. Clusters of rooms are arranged along corridors, with wooden portals leading to individual galleries that serve as routes for visitors and art handlers alike, provide security and draw on the wood-panelled aesthetic of the auction house's original London branch. This connection to history is continued by the embrace of the factory's surviving ▶

ABOVE Feilden Fowles' use of locally quarried aggregate roots the Weston Visitor Centre in its landscape

RIGHT The Weston's inaugural exhibition by Thukral and Tagra, 2019. The sawtooth roof allows natural light to stream in



IMAGES: PETER COOK

concrete columns. 'At one point we thought that the column was the enemy of the art space,' says Shigematsu, 'but then we thought: what if it's not?' OMA placed these columns at the core of several gallery spaces, punctuating the purity of white walls with an earthy grey.

The restoration of the specific into galleries has become a new norm, both in external architecture and interior design. When the British architect Caruso St John designed Nottingham Contemporary in 2009, it clad it in panels cast with a traditional lace pattern, referencing its location in the former lacemaking quarter. David Chipperfield's Turner Contemporary (2011) in Margate, meanwhile, was designed so that visitors can gaze out into the North Sea, as JMW Turner himself famously did.

Practitioners such as Annabelle Selldorf have developed an elegant interior idiom that mingles the temporalised white with the imprint of the past. When the Austrian gallerist Thaddaeus Ropac opened a London branch of his commercial gallery in 2017, he chose as its location Ely House, a magnificent 1772 townhouse that variously served as a bishop's residence and as the first private club to be open to women members. Selldorf acted with fidelity to the site's historical features. There are columned portals, extant fireplaces and decorative plasterwork. Chandeliers were restored, an iron filigree cupola was uncovered, and new furniture – such as a black marble front desk – was designed to correspond with the palette of the townhouse.

Another path comes in fostering a connection with a gallery's geographic context. The Weston Visitor Centre at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), which opened in March, is an exceptional

BOTTOM LEFT Caruso St John's Nottingham Contemporary makes use of conventional white cube spaces

BELOW But externally, the lace-patterned concrete cladding panels impart a strong sense of place



IMAGES: HELENE BINET

"We thought that the column was the enemy of the art space, but then we thought: what if it's not?"

BELOW Tŷ Pawb in Wrexham, by Featherstone Young, 2018. Space for art is created within an existing covered market

RIGHT The model offers a looser, more experimental space rooted in the 'messy rhythms' of everyday life



"At certain times of day you get a really dramatic light, but at other times it's very calm"

example. Built in what YSP's director of programme Clare Lilley describes as the 'unprepossessing depression' that was once a disused quarry, it serves to enliven a lesser-visited section of the 500-acre site. From the east the new structure, which includes a gallery cafe and shop, appears to nestle itself in its landscape, while from the west a glass-and-timber fronted facade opens itself to the surrounding nature. 'We didn't want it to be a white box,' says

Ed Fowles, one of architect Feilden Fowles' two founders. 'We wanted it to have a personality and be rooted in its place. And we wanted it to be knitted, really enveloped in the land.'

Working in close communication with Lilley, the architects created an aggregate structure comprising minerals once quarried locally, so that the very walls of the building would belong to its region. 'The whole building feels crafted, as though made by hand,' explains Lilley. The gallery has a saw-toothed concrete ceiling, cast on site, that allows natural light to stream in, while a windowed door provides a visual connection to the parkland outside. These subtle disruptions of the white cube's preference for artificial lighting has a profound effect on the art held within. 'At certain times of day you get a really dramatic light on the back wall,' says Fowles, 'but at other times it's very calm, and on an overcast day you've got this lovely, diffuse, even light.'

The Weston Visitor Centre moves the gallery from hermetic cave to open parkland, cracking the white cube's strictures by embracing the world around it. Certain approaches shatter it completely. At Tŷ Pawb in Wrexham, which was completed last year, architect Featherstone Young worked within an existing covered market to create hanging and performance spaces interspersed with stalls, cultivating a sort of indoor forum. Art is placed among the messy rhythms of everyday life, the rarefied and the quotidian pressed cheek by jowl, in a near-complete subversion of conventional galleries. By proving that art can thrive in such an environment, Tŷ Pawb offers a radical rebuttal to the white cube – and a potential blueprint for the future. ♦

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