

FRICK MADISON

Marcel Breuer's Iconic Structure Becomes the Temporary Home of The Frick Collection

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Located at 945 Madison Avenue at East 75th Street, just five blocks north of The Frick Collection, is a striking and very different work of art, an architectural masterpiece known as the Breuer building. The structure takes its name from the modernist architect who designed it, Marcel Breuer. Commissioned in the 1960s to house the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, it most recently presented exhibitions by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Marcel Breuer was born in Hungary in 1902. At the age of eighteen he moved to Weimar, Germany, to study with Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus, where he was one of the school's youngest students. His first success came as a furniture designer, and some of the most original furniture made in Germany in the 1920s was envisioned and created by Breuer. Probably his most famous chair, christened the "Wassily" in the 1960s by an Italian manufacturer, took its name from the Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, a friend of Breuer's and the recipient of an early prototype. The Wassily and another popular Breuer chair, the Cesca, are formed from tubes of aluminum, twisted into exciting, floating shapes.

Breuer moved to London in 1936 and then, several years later, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he joined the faculty of Harvard's Graduate School of Design. In 1946, he opened his

own practice in New York City. Many of his buildings in the United States from this period were domestic residences. Of note is the Breuer House in New Canaan, Connecticut, one of the great sites for modernist architecture in this country. It was, however, the architect's series of monumental buildings constructed in the 1950s that prompted the Whitney to commission him to design its new home on Madison Avenue. These buildings included the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, completed in 1958, which Breuer designed in collaboration with the celebrated Italian engineer and architect Pier Luigi Nervi. The UNESCO site is entered through an expansive concrete canopy, which in many ways is a precursor to a similar feature in New York on Madison Avenue. Breuer also designed several monumental religious buildings during this period, including the Benedictine Abbey of Saint John in Collegeville Township, Minnesota, completed in 1954. Like the Frick's temporary new home, the Abbey is constructed of reinforced concrete. These and similar buildings are what we today refer to as Brutalist architecture, a style that became popular in Europe and America in the middle of the twentieth century.

Breuer's modernist masterpiece for the Whitney opened in 1966. Entirely faced in granite, the building plays with what Breuer termed "heavy lightness," the idea of using heavy materials in a way that gives the impression of weightlessness. Unlike more conventional structures, the building is massive at the top and tapers down to its base, which seems to float up from the street, suspended above the sunken garden below. Though it appears incredibly modern, the building, in fact, looks to ancient sources and has often been described as an upside-down ziggurat, one of the earliest architectural forms, found in Mesopotamia and dating to the third millennium B.C. The building also recalls the stepped pyramids of Egypt, particularly

at Saqqara. Breuer's genius is that he literally turned these ancient terraced, tapered structures upside down: The building on Madison Avenue expands out as it rises into the air, giving it an unexpected feeling of gravity-defying balance.

The experience of entering the Breuer building is a remarkable one. Passing underneath a canopy and crossing a bridge above a sunken garden, one emerges into an expansive lobby. These "obstacles" make the museum feel almost like a fortress, a citadel detached from the rest of the city. Breuer brilliantly created this procession, this experience of crossing the bridge to reach the grandiose space of the lobby. One of the most remarkable spaces at the Breuer, the lobby is illuminated by 375 circular discs, with textured concrete walls and half-walls giving it its shape.

When embarking on this project, Breuer was asked a key question by the Whitney: "What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan?" His answer explains so much about this building. "It is easier to say first what it should *not* look like," he offered. "It should not look like a business or office building, nor should it look like a place of light entertainment. Its form and its material should have identity and weight in a neighborhood of fifty-story skyscrapers, of mile-long bridges, in the midst of the dynamic jungle of our colorful city. It should be an independent and self-relying unit, exposed to history, and, at the same time, it should have visual connection to the street, as it seems to be the housing for twentieth-century art. It should transform the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art." Already in this definition, Breuer identifies the importance of this metaphorical transition, this journey from the hustle and bustle of the street to the solemnity of the art safeguarded inside this magnificent fortress-like sanctuary.

Beyond the entryway, the staircase is another space within the Breuer that showcases the architect's careful attention to materials—in this case, concrete with steps of cast terrazzo, landings of bluestone, and railings of bronze and wood. It is while ascending the staircase that one can truly appreciate the elegance of the concrete used prominently in the museum's construction. Here, the material retains the imprint of the wood that encased the wet concrete as it dried, a fossil of its construction history, as it were, a record of its creation in this stone-like structure. Breuer chose to mix the concrete with chunks of obsidian, an addition that gives the material its characteristic texture and color. The walls were then hammered to create a coarse, distressed surface. Brilliant touches like these appear throughout the building, making the structure a poem to surfaces: the smoothness of the wood and the bronze; the shiny, reflective terrazzo and stone; the rougher, almost archeological, appearance of the concrete.

One of the building's most recognizable features is its trapezoidal windows. The largest one, on the fourth floor, looks out across Madison Avenue. When planning the Frick Madison installation, the curatorial team used two of these distinctive windows to their best advantage, displaying some of the Frick's most prominent works nearby.

Marcel Breuer died in New York in 1981, and the Breuer building remains his only commission in Manhattan. I am immensely grateful to have the opportunity to display the masterworks of the Frick in this marvelous space for the next two years. It is remarkable to see the stark yet beautiful modernist architectural features of Breuer's design juxtaposed with the Old Masters of the Frick, and I very much look forward to welcoming you all to Frick Madison soon.

Image: Marcel Breuer in the Whitney Museum of American Art, ca. 1966. Marcel Breuer papers, 1920–1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Marc and Evelyne Bernheim.