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Arata Isozaki has stripped his architecture of symbolism to expose the bare essentials of Platonic form.

By Aaron Betsky

ARATA ISOZAKI

Bass Museum of Art
Miami Beach, Florida

Arata Isozaki always returns to the solace of good form. From his fascination with a fragmented classicism in the 1980s, to his current desire to rescue some sense of monumental place-making from the maws of an increasingly virtual reality, the Japanese master has depended on forms that resonate with the historical elements of architecture to anchor his work. After almost half a century of practice, he has refined his search to the composition of a few delicately posed and perfectly proportioned objects. His addition to the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, Florida, shows how effective this strategy can be.



With Isozaki's addition, the Bass has reoriented itself toward the street (the original entrance opened onto a park), though it is still a somewhat reserved presence. The sculpture terrace (top) is visible from the sidewalk, but separated from it by a shallow pool; the three doors of the main entrance (above, and facing page) are marked by a long blue canopy and shielded by a coral-stone wall.

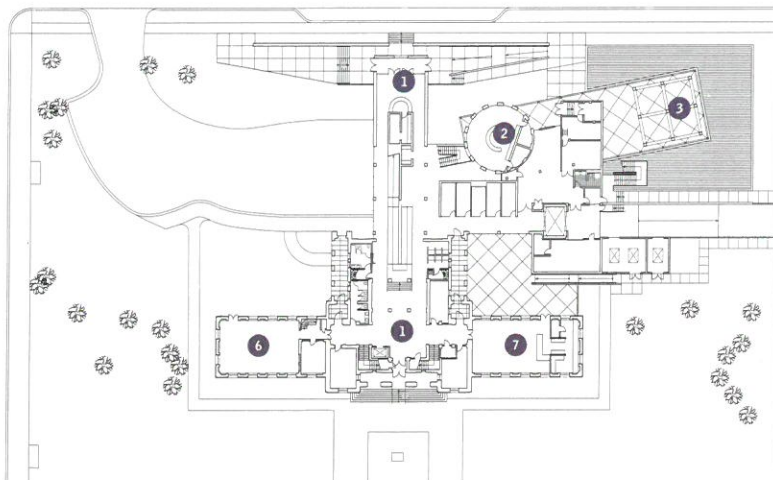
TODAY'S MUSEUMS ARE A CONFLUENCE OF CIVIC FUNCTIONS, OF WHICH EXHIBITIONS ARE THE MOST RARIFIED.

"Architecture has always been conceived as, or has been based on, Platonic solids," Isozaki has said, and his 20,000-square-foot addition to the 1935 Russell Pancoast-designed museum accordingly consists of two rectangular volumes posed at an angle to each other. One contains a new circulation spine that extrudes perpendicularly from the center of the old building, and the other holds a single skewed gallery. Eventually, a second gallery will mirror the first one on the other side of the circulation spine, completing the addition's symmetrical composition in an open-armed gesture of entry.

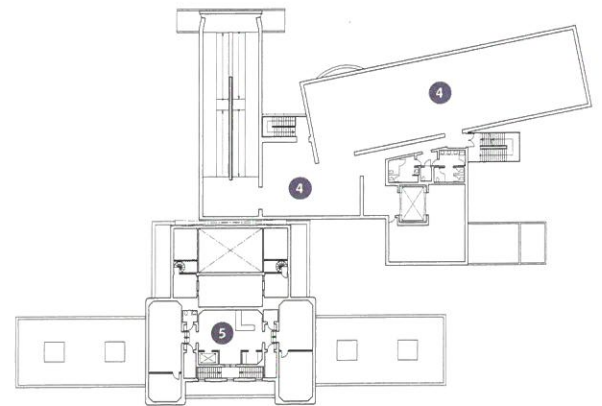
This seeming simplicity hides a few drastic strategies. The first is that the original coral-stone building is now, for all its monumental symmetry, an empty shell housing a café, a lecture hall, and some offices. The spaces that perform the work we associate with a museum—exhibiting art—are in the addition. This new museum faces away from a park that will soon, with the elimination of a 1960s library, reach all the way to the beach two blocks away. However, the new wing and entry turn away from this public space. Today's museums are a confluence of civic functions, of which exhibitions are the most rarified. The work of communication, through architecture as well as through education and entertainment, takes place up front and in the public realm.



- 1 lobby
- 2 museum store
- 3 sculpture terrace
- 4 gallery
- 5 offices
- 6 multipurpose room
- 7 café



Site plan 139' >



Second-floor plan



The Bass Museum's main gallery sits above an open-air sculpture terrace set slightly askew in a moat-like pool.

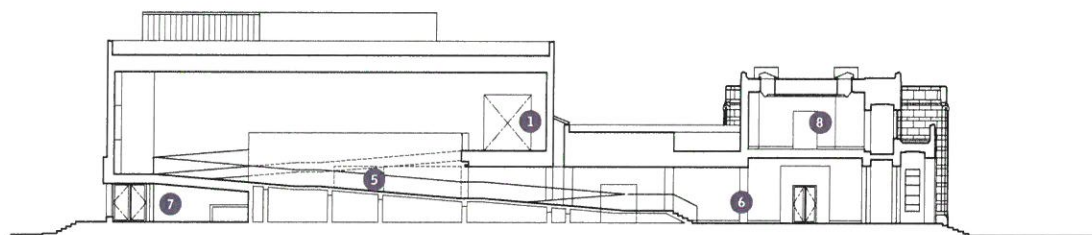


The gap between the original, coral-stone building and Isozaki's stuccoed addition is bridged by a thin ribbon of glass (above left) in addition to being marked by the material shift. Inside (above right), the glazing illuminates the ramp as one walks up to the galleries.

- 1 gallery
- 2 courtyard
- 3 museum store
- 4 multipurpose room
- 5 ramp
- 6 lobby
- 7 main entry
- 8 office



North-south section through galleries 17'



North-south section through ramp 17'

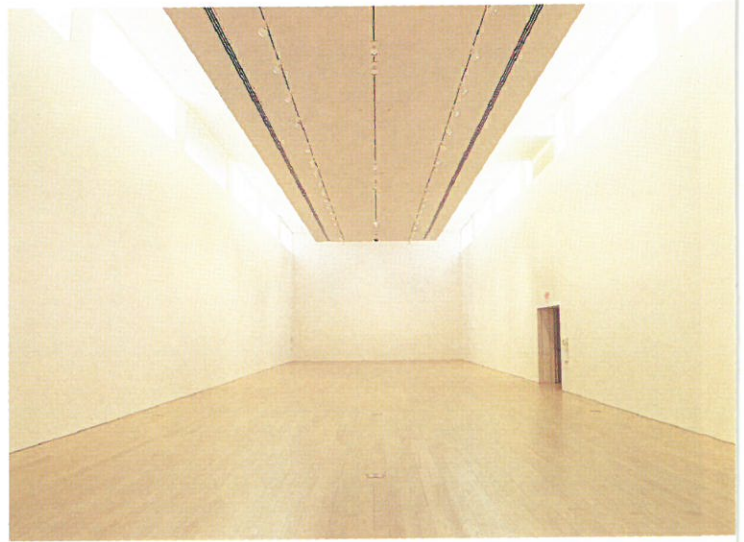
BASS MUSEUM OF ART. MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA

CLIENT: City of Miami Beach, Bass Museum of Art Board of Trustees and Building Committee; Miami Beach, Florida **ARCHITECT:** Arata Isozaki & Associates, Tokyo—Arata Isozaki (principal-in-charge); Yasuyori Yada (design team project director); David Gauld, Howon Kang, Rokuro Muramatsu, John O'Reily, Michie Yahagi (project team) **ARCHITECT OF RECORD:** Spillis Candela DJMJ—Michael Kerwin (partner-in-charge); Charles Crain (project manager); Steve Berler (project team) **ASSOCIATE ARCHITECTS:** Renovation area: Frankel & Associates—Markus Frankel (principal); Fitting work: Zyscovich—Bernard Zyscovich (principal) **ENGINEER:** Spillis Candela DJMJ (structural, mechanical, electrical) **CONSULTANT:** Fisher Marantz Stone (lighting) **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Danvill Findorff **COST:** \$8.4 million **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Simon Hare

The second deformation of what one might expect from a small art museum's plan is the disproportionately large size of a switchback ramp that penetrates into the old building's very heart. It suggests that museums are places to promenade, places that exhibit people as well as art. Isozaki has stretched the experience of ascent into what, since the 1970s, we have come to think of as an "event:" the act of museum-going.

Isozaki uses subtle moves to make his forms work. The ramp starts from a landing at the head of a set of steps, which spill out around two columns marking the old building's perimeter, underscoring the transition from old to new. The ceiling in the main gallery seems to hover in space, surrounded by clerestory windows that bathe the beautifully proportioned, 22-by-36-by-126-foot space with a softened version of Miami Beach's nearly eternal sunlight. Rotated toward the surrounding neighborhood, the gallery block hovers on a grid of columns on a platform set in a shallow pool of water; the circular museum store adjacent to the lobby acts as the pivot point.

Bass Museum director Diane Camber, one of the pioneers in preserving and popularizing Miami Beach's art deco district, sees the building as "abstracting and refining the forms" of that neighborhood. In so doing, Isozaki has found the basic building blocks inherent in the indigenous mixture of pared-down classicism and streamlined modernism. Perhaps this is the core of at least one kind of postmodernism: Le Corbusier's "clear play of forms in sunlight"—fragmented, stretched, carefully detailed, and responsive to the ways in which we experience and use space. It responds too to the complexities of a modern world which does not rebuild itself so much as it layers and adds new forms onto what already exists. ■



Visitors now enter in the new wing and ascend to the galleries via a long switchback ramp (sections, previous page). The ramp begins in the original building before flipping back on itself (bottom) and arriving in the new (center). The main gallery space is a simple rectangular volume lit by clerestory windows (top) that temper Miami's strong sunlight.