DESIGNATION REPORT

(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Designation Report
(Former) Whitney
Museum of American Art
May 20, 2025

Designation List 545
LP-2685

DESIGNATION REPORT

(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art

LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan
945 Madison Avenue

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

A Brutalist-style granite and concrete museum building designed by Marcel Breuer and built in 1964-66 that has become an enduring emblem of modern urban architecture.

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Sculpture Courtyard
2024

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(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Designation List 545
LP-2685

Built: 1964-1966
Architect: Marcel Breuer and Associates

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1389, Lot 50
Building Identification Number (BIN): 1041666

Calendared: December 17, 2024
Public Hearing: March 11, 2025

On March 11, 2025, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the (Former) Whitney Museum of American Art as a New York City Individual Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Nine people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of the building owner, Friends of Upper East Side Historic Districts, Docomomo US New York Tristate, Docomomo US, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, and the Victorian Society, and two individuals, including a former Landmarks Preservation Commission Chair. No one spoke in opposition. The commission also received one written submission in support of the designation from a former employee of Marcel Breuer & Associates.

Summary

(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue was home to the Whitney Museum of American Art from its construction in 1966 until 2014. It is a Brutalist-style inverted ziggurat clad in granite and raw concrete situated at the corner of Madison Avenue and East 75th Street on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in stark contrast with the surrounding 19th century rowhouses. The building is defined by its innovative approach maximizing the square footage of a small parcel for a cultural use and has become an enduring emblem of modern urban architecture.

The museum was founded as the Whitney Studio in 1929 by sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney to showcase contemporary American artists. Located in a row of buildings in Greenwich Village and later adjacent to the Museum of Modern Art on West 54th Street, by the 1950s the Whitney Museum needed a permanent home. The museum's trustees acquired property in Manhattan's Upper East Side neighborhood and engaged Marcel Breuer and Associates to design a new museum. Completed in 1966, it was the first new museum built in Manhattan since the Guggenheim opened in 1959, and the first devoted exclusively to American art.

Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer trained as a carpenter at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany between the World Wars, where he designed iconic furniture, including the still-popular Wassily Chair, and subsequently served as a master of the school's carpentry program in Dessau. Breuer left the school in 1929 and relocated to London in 1935, subsequently immigrating to the United States in 1937 to join his mentor, Walter Gropius at Harvard University. In a creative partnership with Gropius, Breuer greatly influenced a group of young architects and by extension, the course of modern American architecture. After breaking with Gropius, he went on to design notable buildings such as the UNESCO headquarters (1958) in Paris and Begrisch Hall (1961, on the campus of the former uptown New York University, now Bronx Community College, a New York City Landmark).

The Whitney Museum's relatively small lot required an innovative approach to space planning. Breuer joined the project after the site was selected and settled on an inverted pyramid form with each level slightly larger than the one it rests upon, creating a stepped cantilever on the primary facade. The heavy masonry building projects permanence and solidity yet appears to float above a transparent glass ground story, revealing open floorplans adorned with cast concrete furnishings, and a ceiling studded with modern lighting. The interior's walls and built-in furnishings are bush-hammered and board-formed concrete, typical of the Brutalist style, interspersed with natural wood and bronze details, including on the stair railings.

By the 1970s, the Whitney Museum found their new home did not offer adequate space to accommodate their extensive collections and rotating exhibitions and relocated to a new building in 2014. After the departure of the Whitney, 945 Madison Avenue temporarily housed collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and subsequently the Frick Museum while their facilities underwent renovation. The auction house Sotheby's acquired the building in 2023 and will repurpose the galleries to display auction items.

The former Whitney Museum of American Art remains as Marcel Breuer envisioned it: a monumental building that stands out against its surroundings both stylistically and in its massing. Its iconoclastic design is unlike anything built in New York City before or since.

Building Description
(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art

Description
The exterior of the (former) Whitney Museum of American Art is clad in vertical slabs of dark granite arranged in a running bond. The plane of the facade is set back from the property line along both street-facing facades, allowing for a sculpture court that is sunken a full story below the grade of the sidewalk. Board-formed cast concrete party walls project to the property lines at the south and east edges of the building, creating a physical barrier separating the building from the neighboring buildings.

Primary (Madison Avenue, West) Facade
The primary facade of the former Whitney Museum of American Art is comprised of a dramatic series of three cantilevered overhangs floating atop a recessed double-story glass facade that reaches one story below the grade of the sidewalk. The facade steps out in progressively larger overhanging stories, acting as a portico to protect the entrance. The entrance is set beyond a moat-like sunken sculpture court, traversed by a board-formed cast concrete bridge resting on a single pier, partially covered by a canopy with attached can light fixtures. A concrete and glass display case is affixed to the right exterior of the bridge. Planting beds line the perimeter of the sunken sculpture court. Beyond this, a 3½ foot high granite parapet wall surrounds the court and wraps the corner to the north facade. Two banner poles are attached to the parapet wall.

The upper stories of this facade are minimally decorated, aside from a large trapezoidal window centered on the topmost story, angled to the north.

The southernmost corner of the facade sits further back and does not follow the cantilevered form of the facade. Service doors are nestled in the southwestern corner, at the bottom of a short staircase. This set back section of the facade retains the plane of the lowest level until it reaches the height of the topmost cantilever, whereupon it steps out. This topmost section contains two sets of windows and cants backwards. Unlike the other portions of the facade, it is clad in board-formed concrete.

Alterations
Conduit and security cameras installed on the party wall. A standpipe is built into the west parapet wall. Landmarks Preservation Commission permits were approved in February 2025 for the installation of illuminated signage (“Sotheby’s”) at the poster box; and installation of light fixtures at select locations.[1]

Secondary (East 75th Street, North) Facade
The north facade is a rough-faced, granite-clad wall, adorned with six trapezoidal windows of various sizes arranged in an irregular pattern at the second through fifth stories, all angled to the west. Like the primary facade, the building is set back from the street wall. A service staircase descends west from the midpoint of the north wall to the lower-level sculpture court. At the east corner, the wall is perforated by a recessed loading dock opening and adjacent service entrance, and a narrow metal mesh screen spans the opening between the facade and the party wall, concealing mechanical equipment. The west corner progressively steps out to the west at each story, creating an overhang. While it is this view of the side facade that most clearly expresses the arrangement of the setbacks, the full impact is felt by viewing the building facing the primary facade.

Alterations

Mounted letters reading “30 East 75” adjacent to loading dock.

Secondary (East) Facade

The east facade is a blank concrete wall. The topmost portion is visible above the adjacent row house.

Alterations

LPC permits were issued in February 2025 for work including constructing an elevator bulkhead clad in board-formed concrete at the east lot-line.[2]

Secondary (South) Facade

The south facade is a blank concrete wall. A small portion of the concrete party wall extends beyond the plane of the front facade of the adjacent row house. The party wall also extends above the adjacent row house. The side of the topmost cantilever is also visible.

Upper East Side Development and History[3]

Prior to European settlement and up until the mid-seventeenth century when the area was overtaken by Dutch settlers, the neighborhood now known as the Upper East Side was home to several Munsee-speaking Indigenous communities. Communities located near the site of the (Former) Whitney Museum of American Art included *Coneykeest* and *Konaande Kongh* to the north. Along the shoreline to the east there was an abundant and popular fishing site. The immediate area was traversed by the *Wickquasqeck* trail that connected Indigenous communities at the southern tip of Manhattan and continued to the northernmost part of the island.[4]

The area remained rural in character through the first half of the 19th century. Most of the area was originally owned by the City of New York, which had been granted "all the waste, vacant, unpatented, and unappropriated land" under the Dongan Charter of 1686. The city maintained possession of these Common Lands for over a century, occasionally selling off small parcels to raise funds for the municipality.

Only as horsecar lines and street railroads were extended northward along the avenues did real estate development in previously unsettled areas became an attractive proposition. Construction of the Third Avenue and the Second Avenue Els were completed by 1880. Within the next five years, the population of the area greatly increased, and the streets located in the vicinity of the (Former) Whitney Museum were almost completely built up with brownstone-fronted houses. Most of the early residents of the area were middle-class merchants and professionals. During the late 1870s and early 1880s, some of the wealthy members of New York society purchased property north of 59th Street and built grand residences.

When the New York Central Railroad tracks were completely covered over shortly after the turn of the century, Fourth Avenue became much more desirable for residential development. The name Park Avenue came into general use, and landscaped malls were placed down the middle of the road in the area which previously had been left partially open for ventilation above the railroad tracks. Park Avenue quickly became lined with the same type of luxury apartment buildings which were rising on Fifth Avenue; these replaced earlier rowhouses, French flats, and tenements. Madison Avenue also began to undergo changes during this period. Not only were some rowhouses replaced by apartment buildings, but commercial shops were placed in the first two floors of many of the rowhouses. By the late 1920s, Madison Avenue had assumed a largely commercial character even though the residential characteristics of the rowhouses were retained on the upper floors.

Art galleries followed their wealthy clientele uptown, from Greenwich Village to an area north of the Ladies' Mile shopping district, and eventually to the Upper East Side. Following World War II, modern apartment houses continued to be built along the avenues, and many 19th century mansions became United Nations missions and consulates, which have helped to maintain the elegant character of the Upper East Side. Included among the many prestigious private institutions that have brought new life to the Gilded Age mansions, is the Frick Collection in the former Henry Clay and Adelaide Childs Frick House (1913-1914, 1 East 70th Street, a New York City Landmark and located within the Upper East Side Historic District), and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in the former Andrew and Louise

Carnegie House (1899-1903, 2 East 91st Street, a New York City Landmark and located within the Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District). Other museums are in purpose-built buildings, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1880, Fifth Avenue and East 82nd Street, a New York City Landmark), and the Guggenheim Museum (1959, 1070-1076 Fifth Avenue, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark, and located within the Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District), which preceded the Whitney Museum of American Art by seven years.

Madison Avenue became one of the most vibrant commercial streets in the city, becoming associated with the advertising industry. It is now characterized by its stylish storefronts, undergoing regular change to keep up with contemporary design trends and by its many fine art galleries. Today the area also retains the attractive residential qualities which originally made it the most fashionable section of the city.

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942) and the Formation of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney was born into great wealth and privilege as the daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt II. At age 18, she married businessman Harry Payne Whitney, who had his own fortune. As a young woman, she was intrigued by the art scene she encountered during her voyages to France. She pursued study in studio art at both the Art Students League in New York and under the instruction of Andrew O'Connor in Paris.[5] She emerged as a particular talent in sculpting, becoming known for her monumental public sculptures, such as the Titanic Memorial (1931) in Washington, D.C. In New York City, Whitney contributed two reliefs (1918-1919) on the victory arch that once stood in Madison Square, and also the Peter Stuyvesant Monument (1936-1939, located within the Stuyvesant Square Historic District).

Whitney's wealth allowed her to create a community art space that would evolve into the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1907, she moved her own sculpture studio into a renovated stable located on MacDougal Alley, and in 1914 opened the Whitney Studio in an adjoining building on West 8th Street (both located within the Greenwich Village Historic District). She soon thereafter opened the Whitney Studio Club nearby in order to create a community space for artists. She supported emerging artists and notably, advocated for women in the arts. She supported shows that featured only women artists and the consequential 1913 Armory Show that showcased independent artists, many of whom were women.

Whitney amassed a substantial contemporary art collection, and endeavored to use her wealth and influence to create an institution devoted to American art.[6] In 1931, she donated 500 paintings and sculptures to form the permanent collection of the new Whitney Museum of American Art. The original Whitney Studio and the two adjacent buildings were combined into, "a building whose interior had intimacy, warmth and decorative beauty quite unlike the impersonal coldness of most museums of that time."[7]

By the time of Whitney's death in 1942, the West 8th Street facility was proving to be too small to fulfill the museum's mission, so the institution was relocated to West 54th Street, adjacent to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1949. By 1961, this too proved inadequate, and the museum trustees sought to move into a home that would be an architectural statement ranking the Whitney among the great museums of New York. Eschewing more traditional architects, the trustees selected the architect Marcel Breuer to design the building.

Marcel Breuer (1902-1981)[8]

The (Former) Whitney Museum of American Art was designed by Marcel (Lajos) Breuer, one of the mid-twentieth century's leading architects. Born in Pécs, Hungary in 1902, he attended the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany from 1920-24, and subsequently served as master of the school's carpentry workshop in Dessau until 1928.[9] The school focused on design, building and craftsmanship, and emphasized *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the total work of art. Underpinning the school's teachings was a philosophy that functional design could be scaled for mass production.[10]

During the first decade of his career, Breuer was a leading innovator in furniture design. Many of his best-known pieces were executed in bent tubular steel, juxtaposed against leather, canvas, and woven rattan. These daring cantilevered works became classics, and various models, such as the Wassily chair, continue to be manufactured. Breuer received his first architectural commission, the Hamismacher House, in 1932. Located on a sloping garden site in Weisbaden, Germany, the stuccoed concrete structure recalled projects by his Bauhaus professor and colleague Walter Gropius and the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, whose designs were the cornerstone for modern architecture in the 20th century.[11]

The Bauhaus was closed in 1933 under pressure from the Nazi government, and Breuer, along with many other members of the Bauhaus faculty emigrated to the United States. Breuer arrived in 1937 and joined Gropius in the architecture department at Harvard University. He and Gropius also partnered in an architectural practice. Between 1937 and 1940, they collaborated on a series of notable residences, combining local and modern materials. In 1946, he left Harvard and moved his architectural practice to New York City. One of his first projects was an exhibition house, presented by the Museum of Modern Art in 1949. This exhibit was enormously popular and enhanced his reputation.

In the decade that followed, Breuer's practice flourished, resulting in numerous designs for private and institutional clients, including the UNESCO Headquarters (1958) in Paris, France, Saint John's Abbey and University Church (1953-61) in Collegeville, Minnesota, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development Headquarters (1963-68) in Washington, D.C. He received many awards during his career, including the AIA Gold Medal (1968) and the Grande Médaille d'Or from the French Academy of Architecture (1976).[12] The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City acknowledged his achievements in 1973, holding a solo architectural exhibition of his work.

Breuer's daring designs reflect his life-long interest in functionalism. During the first decades of the twentieth century, many architects embraced a stylistic philosophy in which structure, plan, and materials are directly expressed. This approach flourished in Europe and the United States after the World War II, re-shaping the design of humble domestic objects, low-cost housing developments, as well as office and civic structures. This is reflected in Breuer's early furniture, where he exploited such industrial materials as steel and plywood, as well as in his later architectural projects.

Concrete and "Brutalism"[13]

Reinforced concrete entered the architectural mainstream during the mid-1950s. In contrast to earlier decades when it was used primarily for industrial structures and clad in brick or terra cotta, during this period it was frequently left exposed. It became an extremely popular and versatile material, touted in the architectural press and visible in many prominent commissions. This development occurred, in part, due to restrictions on the use of steel during the Korean War, but also because architects were

receptive to this material as a way to expand the modern aesthetic and still express their functional philosophy. One of the first architects to recognize the "rugged grandeur" of exposed concrete was Le Corbusier. In the *Unite d'Habitation* (1947-52), an apartment building in Marseilles, France, he celebrated the exterior's surface imperfections, leaving knots, blemishes and formboard patterning visible. This sensibility became known as "Brutalism" in the 1950s. British architects Allison and Peter Smithson first used the term "new brutalism (from the Swedish *nybrutalism*). They promoted the style, along with the critic Reyner Banham who associated the movement with the French phrases *béton brut* ("raw concrete") and *art brut* ("raw art").[14] It was promoted as an honest and ethical style, appropriate to public buildings and for use in institutional settings.

A pioneering example of an exposed concrete structure in New York City is the Municipal Asphalt Plant (now Asphalt Green Recreational Center, 1941-44, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive at East 90th Street, a New York City Landmark).[15] Featuring a dramatic parabolic arch, the plant was notable for its soaring sculptural form and unobstructed interior space. Similar ideas were explored by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, first proposed in 1943. Unprecedented in form and technique, the spiraling design was executed primarily in poured and sprayed reinforced concrete. Built 1956-59, this building generated considerable discussion, paving the way for such non-traditional structures as the TWA Flight Center (1958-62, John F. Kennedy International Airport, a New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark) and the Civic Center Synagogue (now TriBeCa Synagogue, 1965-67, 49 White Street, located within the Tribeca East Historic District).

In his work, Breuer preferred to leave the various surfaces bare, allowing the color and texture of the raw concrete to define his aesthetic.[16] It became his signature material, and he stated:

> I like to use concrete because it has a rugged quality. It is not a sweet material. It is a relief in modern architecture from all that glass and steel. Also concrete can do almost anything in a building. It represents both structure and enclosure and per consequence it expresses structure more directly than any other material . . . Flowing forces can be expressed in the exterior of a building, giving it an organic character.[17]

Nevertheless, associates of Breuer posthumously questioned the moniker of Brutalist. Robert Gatje, who, starting in 1953 worked in Breuer's firm for more than twenty years stated, "Breuer was not known as a Brutalist architect. For one thing, the term was not used at the time—certainly not by us in the office." He went on to point out that Breuer's obituary, penned by Paul Goldberger, referred to him as a "Bauhaus architect", but not a Brutalist architect.[18]

Design and Construction of the Whitney Museum of American Art

By 1961, the inadequacies of the building on West 54th Street became more apparent, including its small size. Additionally, due to its proximity to the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney struggled to develop an independent identity. Thus, the Whitney Museum's trustees decided that a substantially larger facility was necessary. If the new building made a daring statement, so much the better. The Whitney's building committee set out in search of a suitable site and found one in the already-excavated 100' by 125' site at the corner of Madison Avenue and East 75th Street that had once held six rowhouses. Its owner, Ian Woodner, had intended to develop the parcel into

an apartment house but was forced to sell because of looming debts and was willing to part with the land for an attractive price.[19] The building committee then arranged to meet with prominent Modernist architects I.M. Pei, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Marcel Breuer. For his part, Kahn was shocked and offended to learn that he was not the sole architect under consideration. During his meeting, Breuer sketched a concept for the cantilevered building and won over the committee.[20]

"What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan? Surely it should work, it should house its requirements, but what is its relationship to the New York landscape? What does it express, what is its architectural message?"[21] Breuer queried. The type of museum building he envisioned lacked precedent. He deliberately sought to create a design that would contrast with the glass office towers of Madison Avenue. He decided that it should be "independent" and be made of "durable" and "serene" materials, settling on unpolished granite for the primary exterior material. Rather than simply maximizing the space by designing a more uniformly rectilinear building, Breuer chose to balance galleries of increasing size atop a base that is set back from the lot lines, and to segregate it from its surroundings with projecting concrete party walls. Robert McCarter observed, "More than any other of Breuer's multistory buildings, the space of the Whitney Museum is determined not by its plan, but by its east-west section."[22] The resulting design exudes permanence and monumentality.

The design of the building changed in subtle ways over time, including details such as the replacement of a planned central spiral staircase to the lower level with a more compact straight staircase situated along the south elevation, and the addition of a canopy to the entrance bridge, but Breuer's overall concept was borne out in the monumental structure. The museum building was dedicated on September 27, 1966.[23]

Hamilton Smith (b. 1925), who assisted on the design of the museum, worked with Breuer from the opening of his New York practice in 1963 until Breuer's death in 1981. In addition to the Whitney Museum, they collaborated on a wide range of designs, including the Abbey Church and Library at St. John's University in Minnesota, the Grand Coulee Dam Visitors Center, New York University's former Bronx campus buildings, and public libraries in West Virginia and Georgia.[24]

Critical Reception

Response to the new building was mixed, with broad reaction to Breuer's unconventional approach to museum design. The popular press offered some praise, albeit reserved. *Life Magazine* called the concrete walls of the lobby "severe".[25] *Time Magazine* referred to the museum as a "Cliffhanger on Madison Avenue."[26] *The National Review*'s critic was turned off by the new museum, describing it as "a $4-million rebellion by Marcel Breuer against the prevailing architecture of Madison Avenue—his bid to surpass the apocalyptic excesses of the late Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum; and a closet in which the emperor's new clothes, and on occasion, the emperor, will hang with sublime familiarity." He also expressed a general disdain for the Whitney's modern art collection, stating, "While American art has never been great in the sense that Flemish or Italian or French art have been great, it certainly has never been as bad as it is today."[27]

The critic Peter Blake from *Art In America* provided a more positive, nuanced view and noted that, "It is a wonderful beast, as incomprehensible to the hucksters as it is to the architectural Establishment at Ivy League colleges." He praised the building as distinctive, "establish[ing] the museum's own independent identity." Blake further analyzed the building through the lenses of

symbolism, streetscape, urban planning, and functionality, finding that it achieved its goals in each of these areas.[28]

On the whole, the new building was respected by architecture critics, even if it was less beloved by the casual observer. Looking back in 2010, the *New York Times* architecture writer Christopher Gray reflected, "it may be New York's most bellicose work of architecture."[29]

Later History

By the 1970s, the Whitney Museum found the Breuer-designed building, like its previous homes, to be inadequate for its permanent collection and rotating exhibitions, a problem that the trustees initially sought to rectify by expanding the existing structure. The museum owned several rowhouses adjacent to the Breuer building, allowing space for a significant expansion. In 1985, Michael Graves was selected for the task of designing an addition. Graves was associated with the Memphis Group, known for the use of bright, bold colors applied to classical forms, in startling juxtaposition to the more constrained palette and aesthetic of Brutalism. It was a surprising choice, since Graves' design aesthetic generally contrasted with the existing structure.

Initially, Graves proposed to more than double the size of the museum, to be achieved by building a large adjacent structure that would overhang the Breuer building. The proposal was whimsical and colorful, in stark contrast to the existing structure. Hamilton Smith who had worked with Breuer on the building's design, in a strongly worded opinion piece in the *New York Times* stated, "A sensitivity to the restraint that is shown in the Breuer design is absent from the expansion plan. Indeed, the plan reduces the Breuer building to one of several components of an assemblage wrought by seemingly piling toy blocks on each other." He goes on to say, "Rather than see his museum invaded and disfigured as is proposed, Mr. Breuer, I believe, would have strongly preferred to have it completely torn down."[30] The Graves design went through three iterations, each more restrained and with less exuberant decorative detail than its predecessor. Ultimately, the approach proposed by Graves was abandoned due to its controversy.[31]

In 1998, Richard Gluckman (Gluckman Maynard Architects) undertook the job of designing a more nuanced expansion that was successfully implemented. Gluckman's plan incorporated the adjacent townhouses to the east and south. The library, offices, and archives were moved from the topmost floor to the adjacent buildings, thereby expanding the gallery space by 30%.[32] The party wall was breached to create a connection between the museum and the new offices in the adjacent buildings. Additionally, an underutilized balcony was enclosed, and mechanical equipment was relocated to the rooftop. A two-story library addition was set in the rear yard. This restrained approach preserved the Breuer building as a solitary sculptural building, drawing impact from its contrast with its surroundings.

An additional attempt to expand the building was made in 2001, with a proposed 11-story tower addition designed by Rem Koolhaas (Office for Metropolitan Architecture). As with the Graves design, the plan was revised multiple times before being abandoned in 2003.[33] Renzo Piano subsequently proposed a tower addition for the Whitney in 2004 that like several of the earlier proposals, would have required the demolition of multiple buildings on Madison Avenue.[34] The proposal generated praise from architectural critics, but resistance from neighboring property owners.[35] Although the design was approved by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 2006, the museum instead decided to engage Piano to design a new facility in a location downtown, ending

the years-long struggle to enact an appropriate expansion plan for the Whitney Museum at this location.

After the departure of the Whitney in 2014, 945 Madison Avenue temporarily housed collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and subsequently the Frick Museum while their facilities underwent renovation. The auction house Sotheby's acquired the building in 2023 and will repurpose the galleries to exhibit auction items.[36]

Conclusion

The former Whitney Museum of American Art was one of pioneering architect Marcel Breuer's most prestigious commissions and is his only built work in Manhattan. The bold inverted ziggurat not only broke with expected museum design, it also established the identity of the Whitney Museum of American Art as one of the major and forward-thinking arts institutions in New York.

As architect and critic Robert McCarter noted, the former Whitney Museum "attained the scale of infrastructure."[37] It is unchanged from how Marcel Breuer envisioned it: a monumental building that contrasts with but does not dominate its surroundings both stylistically and in its massing. The museum's iconoclastic design is unlike anything built in New York City before or since.

Endnotes

[1] Modification of the signage and lighting at the entrance was approved per LPC Certificate of Appropriateness 25-07539, issued 2/26/2025.

[2] Addition of the freight elevator bulkhead was approved per LPC Certificate of Appropriateness 25-07539, issued 2/26/2025.

[3] Information about the development of the Upper East Side was adapted from the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1051) (New York: City of New York, 1981), edited by Marjorie Pearson, pages 7-12.

[4] Information about Indigenous Peoples in Manhattan was drawn from Historical Perspectives, "Second Avenue Subway Phase 1A Archaeological Assessment" (Westport, 2003), and AKRF, "Supplemental Archaeological Assessment, Second Avenue Subway: 72nd and 86th Street Stations" (New York, 2009).

[5] Flora Miller Biddle, *The Whitney Women and the Museum They Made: A Family Memoir* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999).

[6] Christopher Gray, "The 1931 Whitney Museum; 'Rebels on Eight Street' Redux," *The New York Times*, September 12, 1993.

[7] Lloyd Goodrich, "Past Present and Future," *Art in America,* Sept-Oct 1966, p. 30.

[8] Information about Marcel Breuer was adapted from the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Begrisch Hall at Bronx Community College Designation Report* (LP-2110) (New York: City of New York, 2002), p. 2.

[9] Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 32.

[10] Patrick Nuttgens, *The Story of Architecture* (New York/London: Phaidon, 1997), p. 272-273.

[11] Wilk, p. 110-112.

[12] Donald I. Johnson and Donald Langmead, *Makers of Modern Architecture: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook,* 1977.

[13] Information about Brutalism was adapted from the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Begrisch Hall at Bronx Community College Designation Report (LP-2110)* (New York: City of New York, 2002), p. 5-6.

[14] Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism* (Architectural Press, London 1966), p. 10.

[15] Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Municipal Asphalt Plant Designation Report* (LP-905) (New York: City of New York, 1976).

[16] Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Solomon Guggenheim Museum Designation Report* (LP-1774) (New York: City of New York, 1990).

[17] Quoted in Isabelle Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect: The Career and the Buildings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 157.

[18] William Richard, "What the Hell is That?: A Breuer veteran looks back on the Modernist master's material choices," *Architect Magazine*, May 28, 2015.

[19] Biddle, p. 119.

[20] Ibid, p. 120.

[21] Marcel Breuer, "Architect's Statement", included in *Whiney Museum of American Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), p. 81.

[22] Robert McCarter, *Breuer* (New York: Phaidon, 2016), p. 317.

[23] Ibid, p. 3.

[24] Biographical Data for Mr. Hamilton P. Smith. Undated. The Marcel Breuer Digital Archive, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. https://breuer.syr.edu/Documents/Detail/biographical-data-for-mr.hamilton-p.-smith/280128, 15 May 2025.

[25] "Ziggurat for Whitney's Art," *Life Magazine,* 1966.

[26] "Cliffhanger on Madison Avenue," *Time*, October 7, 1966.

[27] Peter P. Witonski, "The New Whitney," *The National Review,* December 27, 1966.

[28] Peter Blake, "How the Museum Works," *Art In America,* September-October 1966.

[29] Christopher Gray, "The Controversial Whitney Museum," *New York Times,* November 11, 2010.

[30] Hamilton Smith, "Architecture that Disserves New York," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1985.

[31] Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Whitney's New Plan: A

Respectful Approach," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2004.

[32] Joseph Giovanni, "The Whitney's Modest Expansion," *Art In America,* September 1998.

[33] Carol Vogel, "Whitney Scraps Expansion Plans," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2003.

[34] The New York Times Editorial Board, "The Whitney Expansion," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2005.

[35] Ouroussoff, November 9, 2004.

[36] Robin Pogrebin, "Whitney Museum Sells Breuer Building to Sotheby's for About $100 Million," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2023.

[37] McCarter, p. 317.

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the (Former) Whitney Museum of American Art has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, state, and the nation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the (Former) Whitney Museum of American Art and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1389, Lot 50 as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.

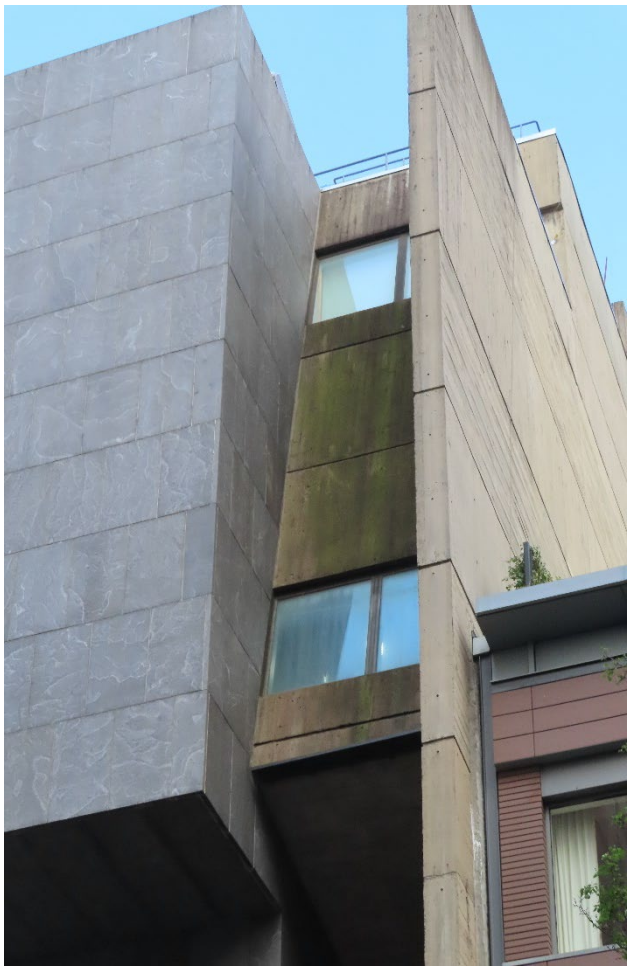
North and West facades, 945 Madison Avenue
Bilge Kose, May 2025

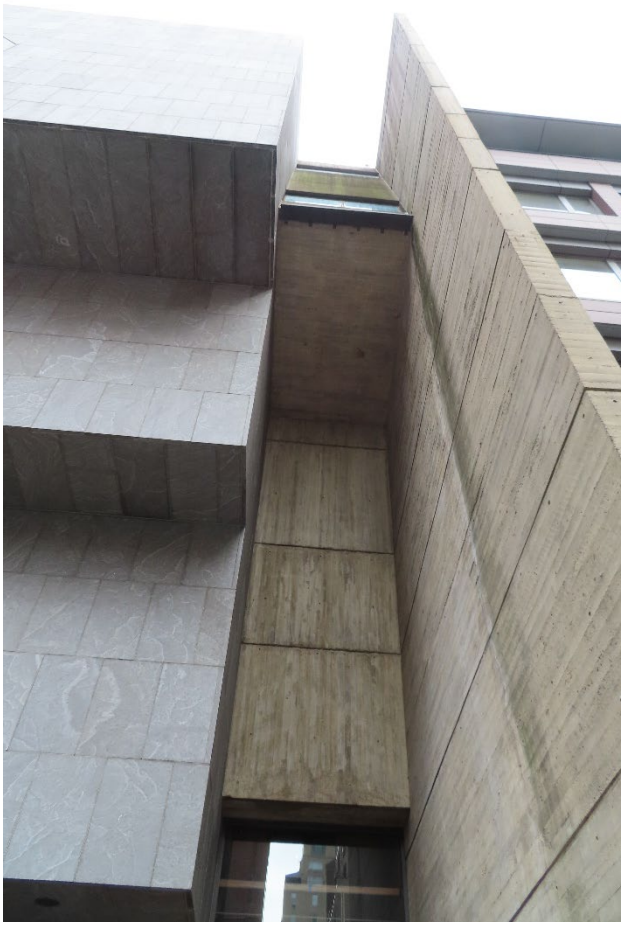
West facade, 945 Madison Avenue
Bilge Kose, May 2025

North facade, 945 Madison Avenue
Lisa Buckley, May 2025

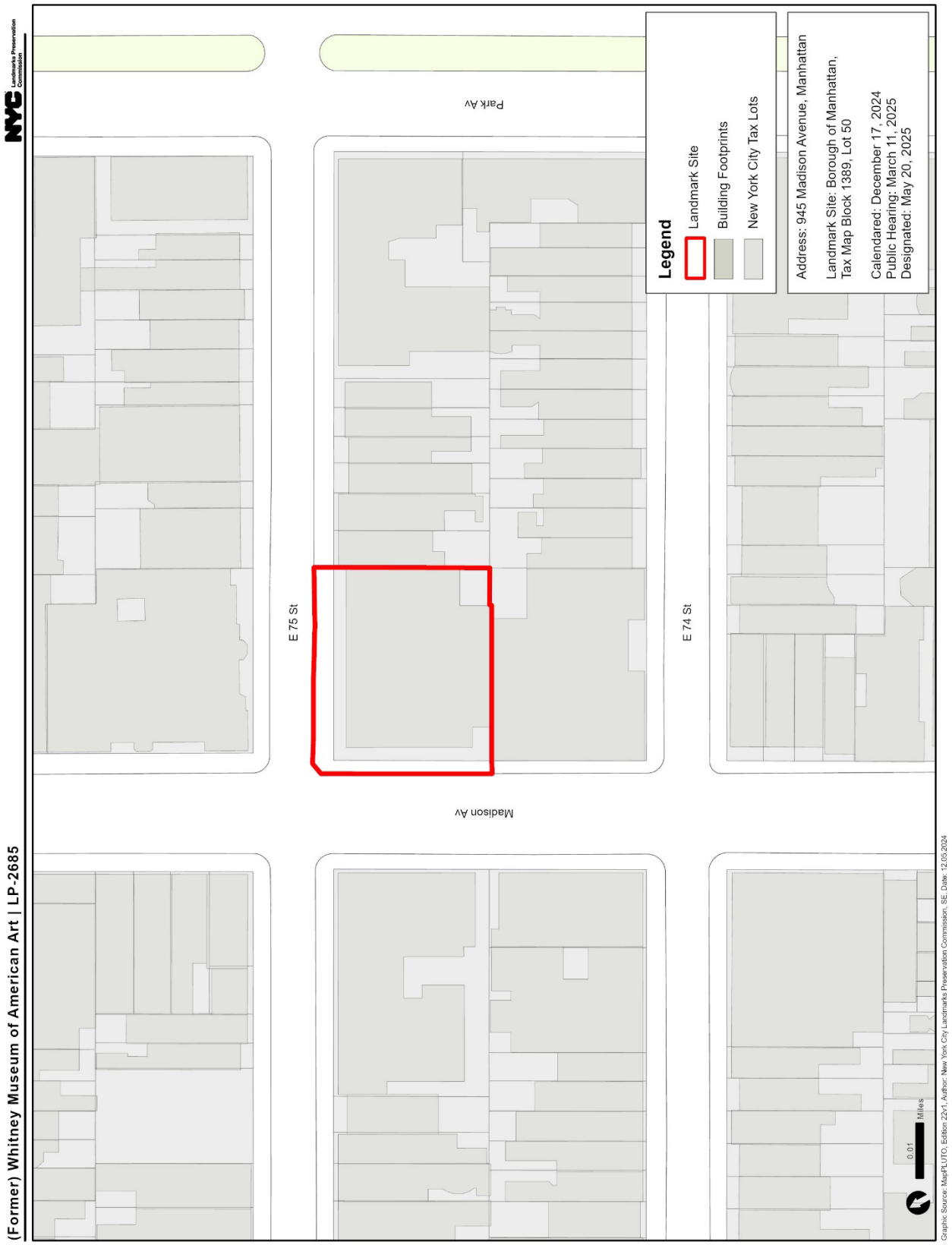
Entrance bridge, 945 Madison Avenue
Lisa Buckley, May 2025

Entrance bridge, 945 Madison Avenue
Lisa Buckley, May 2025





West facade, 945 Madison Avenue
Lisa Buckley, May 2025


(Former) Whitney Museum of American Art | LP-2685
Park Av
E 75 St
E 74 St
Madison Av
Legend
Landmark Site
Building Footprints
New York City Tax Lots
Address: 945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1389, Lot 50
Calendared: December 17, 2024
Public Hearing: March 11, 2025
Designated: May 20, 2025
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Miles
Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22v1, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, SE_Date: 12/05/2024