



Theodore Dalrymple

A Monument to Tastelessness

The new Whitney Museum looks like a torture chamber.

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On a recent visit to New York City, I had the opportunity to walk around the exterior of the new Whitney Museum, built at a cost of \$442 million. It is a monument of a kind: to the vanity, egotism, and aesthetic incompetence of celebrity architects such as Renzo Piano, and to the complete loss of judgment and taste of modern patrons.

If it were not a tragic lost opportunity (how often do architects have the chance to build an art gallery at such cost?), it would be comic. I asked the person with whom I was walking what he would think the building was for if he didn't know. The façade—practically without windows—looked as if it could be the central torture chambers of the secret police, from which one half expects the screams of the tortured to emerge. Certainly, it was a façade for those with something to hide: perhaps appropriately so, given the state of so much modern art.

The building was a perfect place from which to commit suicide, with what looked like large diving boards emerging from the top of the building, leading straight to the ground far below. Looking up at them, one could almost hear in one's mind's ear the terrible sound of the bodies as they landed on the ground below. There were also some (for now) silvery industrial chimneys, leading presumably from the incinerators so necessary for the disposal of rubbishy art. The whole building lacked harmony, as if struck already by an earthquake and in a half-collapsed state; it's a tribute to the imagination of the architect that something so expensive should be made to look so cheap. It is certain to be shabby within a decade.

Almost as interesting to me as the building itself was Michael Kimmelman's "criticism" of it in the *New York Times*. I have seldom read [a piece of criticism](#) in which the fundamental question was avoided in so pusillanimous a fashion, and in which the writer so delicately refrained from passing aesthetic judgment, presumably from fear of disagreement or appearing reactionary.

At no point did Kimmelman offer a clear indication of whether he considered the building good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Instead, he used locutions such as the following, compatible with any value judgment whatever: "It ratifies Chelsea;" "The museum becomes . . . an outdoor perch to see and be seen;" "Mr. Piano's galleries borrow from the old downtown loft aesthetic;" "They're nonprescriptive places . . . that may prove to be the ticket."

Or, of course, "they may end up a headache." "But it is a deft, serious achievement, a signal contribution to downtown and the city's changing cultural landscape;" though, on the other hand, "The new museum isn't a masterpiece." But it's an "eager neighbor;" and "it also exudes a genteel eccentricity that plays off the rationalism of Mr. Piano, and of Manhattan's street grid."

All this makes [Buridan's ass](#) seem positively decisive. Kimmelman continues: "I'm reminded of the Pompidou Center in Paris, which Mr. Piano designed with Richard Rogers. The breakthrough there was not just the inside-out factory aesthetic but the development of a populist hangout . . ." Not only does Kimmelman make the building sound like new, but unpleasant, cancer therapy, he also forgets

that public executions were also “a populist [or is it popular?] hangout,” and probably would be still if carried out.

With architectural critics like this, no wonder celebrity architects get away with it.

[Theodore Dalrymple](#) is a contributing editor of City Journal and the Dietrich Weismann Fellow at the Manhattan Institute.