THE BECHTLER MUSEUM OF MODERN ART:
THE ARCHITECTURE AND DISCOURSE
OF A SINGLE-DONOR MODERN ART MUSEUM

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History in the Department of Art.

Chapel Hill
2012

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ABSTRACT


A museum is a historically situated institution invested with cultural significance. Taking a case-study approach, this thesis demonstrates the usefulness of certain strands of critical museum studies for sifting through discourses to understand what is at stake in a particular museum at a given time. The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art opened in Charlotte, North Carolina in January 2010, a moment when extravagant museum architecture was expected to serve as brand or icon to increase the prestige of a city. Mario Botta’s design for the Bechtler Museum, however, harkens to an earlier, subtler mode. Likewise, the museum’s single-donor collection of predominantly European, mid-twentieth-century art reinforces a modernist mode of interaction between audience, artist, and patron. This study examines the architecture and discourse of the Bechtler, revealing its operative fictions to be iterations of two well-known museological mythologies: the “vision of the collector” and the “vision of the architect.”
DEDICATION

To Ingrid. We are the ship, all else the sea.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my time as a student at the University of North Carolina, and especially during the preparation of this thesis, I have come to rely heavily on Daniel J. Sherman’s advice and advocacy. Thank you, Dr. Sherman.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The design of a museum is now the most prestigious of architectural projects. The buildings serve as calling cards for their architects and, as the premier public buildings of the age, they seem to change the reputations and influence the economies of the cities that build them. “Bilbao” is as much a byword for the regenerative effect of a new museum on the fortunes of a city—the “Bilbao-effect” brought on by the construction of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim satellite—as it is the name of a city in northern Spain. The attention garnered by the Guggenheim led to a further acceleration of the already quickened pace of museum construction, but this fact gives little insight into any particular museum. The following study takes as its premise that each museum is a historically situated but also historically specific entity, and that, as Daniel J. Sherman argues in a pioneering essay in critical museum studies, "in the process of its construction, the museum invests its constituent elements—art, buildings, administrators, public—with new cultural significances, both particular to its enterprise and more broadly resonant”2 Thus the scope and focus of this thesis is not this museum after Bilbao, but simply one museum.

1 See Andrew McClellan, The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 53-6.

The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art that opened on January 2, 2010 is a far cry from Andreas Bechtler's vision for the gallery that would display his inheritance. Having built an artists' community and studio compound called the Little Italy Peninsula Arts Center on three hundred acres at Mountain Island Lake, just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, Bechtler hoped to also build a gallery there to house his collection of art and his share of his parents’ collection.

This thesis will present the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art in Charlotte, North Carolina as a repetition of a mid-twentieth century mode of museum architecture and museography. It argues that the museum is an attempt to re-enact a moment in the history of the art museum before the dominance of the museum building as brand and icon—and before the rash of extravagant tourism-oriented museum architecture that followed the Guggenheim Bilbao. The Bechtler also harkens back to a moment before the proliferation of critiques of museological display practices were absorbed and integrated into (or rejected from) curatorial practice. The investigation is concerned with the assumptions made by the museum’s founders and backers, the discourse produced by and around the museum, the attitudes of the city, and the responses to the idea of a museum devoted to a single-donor collection of European mid-century modern art in a midsized city in the American Southeast. The thesis will situate the Bechtler within contemporary museum-critical discourse and within museum and collection typologies, taking a case-study approach rather than treating the museum as an instance of a general taxonometric system. It will also investigate the specific character of the museum’s self-created fiction—the Bechtlers as a middle-class family who happen to be art patrons.
The thesis will analyze the architectural and cultural programs of the Bechtler Museum, building upon recent museum-architectural and museum-critical scholarship and contextualizing the new museum in order to reveal the particularities of the museum’s discourse. Taking a cue from Eugenio Donato’s interrogation of Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a deconstructionist intervention that ranges far beyond the text itself to reveal the assumptions upon which the modern concept of the museum is based, this thesis will investigate the “fictions” of the Bechtler Museum. For Donato, the museum is an archaeological fiction of arranged fragments, an institution that seeks to give, by the ordered display of selected artifacts, a total representation of human reality and history. “Museums,” Donato writes, “are taken to exist only inasmuch as they can erase the heterogeneity of the objects displayed in their cases, and it is only the hypothesis of the possibility of homogenizing the diversity of various artifacts which makes them possible in the first place.” The central fictions of the Bechtler Museum are iterations of two well-known discourses: the “vision of the collector” and the “vision of the architect.” In promoting these fictions and selectively rejecting recent trends in museography, museum architecture, and museum criticism, the Bechtler Museum re-enacts aspects of the modern art museum that these developments, whether curatorial or commercial, looked to supplant. This thesis will assess the character of the Bechtler Museum’s repetition and determine its meaning.

If the Bechtler family fictions make up the museum’s presentation of the vision of the collector, and the familiarity of the narrative of a middle-class family helps to integrate the museum into the Charlotte community, the architecture of the museum may be an accomplice

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in this myth-making. Just as comparisons can be made between the varieties of the fiction of the collector that naturalized early collections and the idea of a museum’s educational mission that justified them later, there are also similarities between the fictions of the collector and the discourse that takes as its object the “vision” of the architect. For the new museums, the architect’s vision not only makes the arrangement and presentation possible, it perfects the presentation of the collector’s vision.

The thesis consists of three chapters. In keeping with the case study approach, I organize the chapters around the architectural description and analysis of the Bechtler Museum. The first chapter establishes the role of architecture in the single-donor modern art museum by providing the background of typological thinking about recent art museum architecture against which the particularities of Bechtler Museum can be limned.

The second chapter offers a theory of collecting derived from Susan Stewart’s work on the narratives that accompany and configure cultural forms.4 It follows with a comparison of the Bechtler with two other single-donor museums, both designed by Renzo Piano, and their fictions. If the governing fiction of the Menil Collection in Houston is the “humanism” of the Menils, that of the Fondation Beyeler outside of Basel, Switzerland involves the “connoisseurship” of the Beyelers. These comparisons are pertinent not only because of the typological resemblance to the Bechtler, but also because of certain common architectural features.

In the case of the Bechtler Museum, the vision of the architect that reinforces the vision of the collector can be gleaned from Bechtler architect Mario Botta’s own writings and from various statements Andreas Bechtler has made on the origin of the project. Chapter 3

4 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
relates the history of the Bechtler family’s art collecting and the development of Andreas Bechtler’s plans for the display of his collection from a small gallery outside the city to a museum with a prominent role in Charlotte’s downtown cultural campus, then examines and explains the workings of the museum’s fictions through particular architectural, exhibitionary, and discursive devices. It reveals how the juxtaposed fragments of the Bechtler Museum work in architectural space and public discourse to, in Donato’s phrase, “constitute a coherent representational universe.”

The purpose of this critique is not to expose the Bechtler Museum as something it seeks to deny, nor denigrate its practices, nor pass political or moral judgment on the institution or the city of Charlotte. Instead, I seek to demonstrate how certain strands of critical museum studies can be useful in sifting through discourses in order to understand what is at stake in a particular new museum, in a particular place, at this particular moment. As all theory proves itself in practice, this practice of theory may demonstrate both the continuing value and the limitations of one strand of critical museum theory when fused with some of the methods of architectural critique.

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CHAPTER 2
THE BECHTLER MUSEUM AND MUSEUM TYPOLOGY

That the two gallery buildings Mario Botta designed for Andreas Bechtler have nothing at all in common demonstrates that Botta's oft-repeated insistences on the ways in which a building should relate to its surroundings are more than a set of platitudes for interviewers or students. The design for the Little Italy site called for a climbing spiral clad in horizontal bands of contrasting stone, centered on a low oculus, and reaching toward ever more expansive views of the river and woods (fig. 1). The Charlotte building, on the other hand, is an exercise in hollowing a cube, carving away one bottom corner so that the life of the city seems to be accessible from points well within the museum (fig. 2).

The planes of the building’s exterior elide the distinctions between the floors (fig. 3). The larger planes bear horizontally aligned textural contrasts but no delineation of levels, and even where the façade is articulated, the interior remains illegible. The terra cotta tiles that form the surface appear to float free of any grout or ground (fig. 4). They give the sense of pixelation, each pixel becoming clearer but more separate as the wheel of the mouse zooms in. Or is this the first instant after an explosion, each tile blasted free of the building and each other, frozen in the moment before everything disintegrates? To give what is from a distance a large clay cube with a corner tunnelled out this sense of dematerialization in detail is no mean feat.¹ The entrance to the building seems to be at the very heart of it, a glass-encased

¹ Richard Meier has written on an “intentional process of dematerialization” as “an attempt to subvert the specific character of the architectural surface itself in favor of the context of light and shadow.” Botta’s actions
hollow at the center of a solid block, revealed by an excavation that takes too much material from the front and left side of the cube (southeast and southwest, respectively) to allow the top of the cube to remain in place—it should, like the lid of a box half-lifted and pushed diagonally past one corner, slide, tilt further, lose its equipoise, and tip into the void. And it would if not for a single column apparently bulging in compression (fig. 5).

Some 23 years ago Botta's oeuvre, none of which could have predicted quite this shape, was described in terms that seem tailored to fit the Bechtler Museum perfectly:

It is through primary volumes that Botta relates his constructions to the landscape, but it is through the treatment of surfaces, the tactile sense of the walls, and above all, the excavation of volumes, that he establishes the connection with the human scale. Botta avoids treating the problem of the relationship between interior and exterior, limiting himself to designing traditional surfaces punctured by windows, but at the same time he shows that he is opposed to the modern idea of favoring the disappearance of solids in favor of openings...”

Botta himself, in an interview shortly after the museum opened, explained the form of the Bechtler in similar terms. Leaving the top floor gallery as a canopy marking the limits of the envelope of the building, he carved beneath it “a hollow volume, a spiritual space as an integral part of the museum.” The single column is “the static center, the point of concentration that marks the energetic power of the site,” which Botta relates to the “archaism of the new” in the work of Henry Moore and Picasso. The load-bearing column is one of fourteen, each located at an intersection of a 29-foot square grid. With nearly half of the 10,672 square foot fourth-floor gallery cantilevered over this excavation, and six of the here seem to accomplish something similar by modulating the surface itself in order to allow the penetration of surface by light and shadow. See Richard Meier, “Essay,” Perspecta, Vol. 24 (1988): 104.


intersections underneath it left empty, the column must be strong enough to resist the uplift of winds passing beneath it as well as the compression of the gallery's weight. Its exaggerated entasis, swelling from four feet in diameter at the top and bottom to eight feet in the middle, however, is pure representation: the structure is a uniform-thickness concrete core surrounded by a steel armature that holds the terracotta tiles (fig. 6).

The column is the architectonic element that most differentiates the Bechtler design concept from Botta’s unbuilt 2003 design for the New Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia (fig. 7). For that project, Botta had proposed that the top floor be a flat rectangular prism set atop an elliptical mass so that it cantilevered over the streetscape below and defined the limit of the site. While the Mariinsky design establishes a clear precedent for the form of the Bechtler, it is not too much of a stretch to relate the single column to a lone Corbusian piloti. Botta very briefly worked for Le Corbusier's firm, and openly acknowledges the architect's influence on his own work. In fact, Botta's architectural drawings and renderings often use the figure of Corbusier's Modulor, his anthropometric proportioning system, to provide scale. Botta’s Bechtler Museum seems more or less playfully to reference the five Corbusian points of modern architecture. In addition to the piloti, the building has a free façade—here pushed to a new limit of self-referentiality by the “free” cladding that appears to float beyond the building itself. The open floor plan made possible by the grid of structural columns is most visible in the large, fourth-floor gallery, which has the flexibility to be reconfigured as needed for exhibitions; each floor below it differs in size and shape from the others. Instead of ribbon windows, Botta opts for larger, wall-sized expanses of glass, but

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4 Gideon Fink Shapiro, "Structural Column [Bechtler Museum of Modern Art],” *Architect* 99, no. 7 (2010): 21-2. "'It's not just something structural,' Tobia Botta says, 'because we could have made it thinner. It has to represent the whole weight of the building.’” Tobia Botta is Mario Botta's son and a member of his firm.
builds horizontal bands of tile into a brise-soleil across them, giving the appearance of long ribbons (fig. 8). Again in contrast to the Corbusian ideal, there is no garden on the roof—but the fourth floor is skylit, effectively reclaiming the space occupied and shaded by the building. Botta is particularly indebted to Corbusier’s insistence that even a modern building address its latitude and climate. The second-floor sculpture patio and the hollow core of the forecourt, both protected from the sun and rain by the canopy that is the main gallery, if not answers to a particular maxim, easily conjure the formal vocabulary of the Corbusian Villas Cook, Savoye, and Stein.

The entrance of the Bechtler leads into a four-story atrium (fig. 9) that allows a foretaste of the framing effect and the sense of vertical and visual communication between galleries. The effect is similar to that enabled by the central void at the heart of Yoshio Taniguchi's redesign of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (completed 2004). Arrayed around this vertical void, the white-cube-style exhibition spaces are conservative and purpose-built. On the ground floor (fig. 10), opposite the entrance, the Bechtler Museum opens into the Knight Theater. To the right is the reception desk, and beyond that, back toward the street, lies the museum shop. Further ahead to the right are the coatroom and restrooms. Across the atrium from the desk is an open area which converts for use as a café or for entertainments. Between it and the Knight Theater, in the west corner, are the elevator and stairs. From the elevator the second floor opens into a small gallery (fig. 11) between the back of the building and the atrium, here walled off (a Sol LeWitt wall drawing

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5 Mario Botta, "A Concluding Dialog," in Mario Botta, Ethik des Bauens=The Ethics of Building, trans. Stephen Thorne (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1997), 175-7. "Regarding your comment about my buildings being hollowed out inside, I think this is really a way of enhancing intrinsic features of the architecture, of defining the transitional spaces between the inside and the outside … My kind of hollowed-out architecture could be seen as an architecture of protection which creates a microclimate between inside and outside. It enables transitional spaces to be built which mediate the effects of rain and sun."
is on the atrium side, visible from the street). At the time of the museum’s opening the
gallery was devoted to works by Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle. Beyond, in the
north corner, is a darkened room for videos where, at the time of the museum’s opening,
three promotional shorts played in an endless loop: the installation of *Firebird*, interviews
with the shipping company that moved the art from Mountain Island Lake, and the
production of the LeWitt wall drawing. To the right of the elevator a glass door opens onto
the sculpture patio. Offices and classrooms occupy the corner opposite the stairs. On the third
floor (fig. 12) the small gallery outside the elevator displays a mock-up of the Bechtlers’
living room. Beyond the gallery, classrooms and offices occupy the entire northeast side. The
atrium wall is glass here and through it the lobby, the patio, the plaza and the campus are
visible. As is the floor above, the heart of the museum, a configurable gallery space with a
glass void at its core (fig. 13 and 14).

Though it can be read as a playful conceptual gesture to Corbusier when considering
the building as a whole, the diffused top-lighting of the main gallery (fig. 15) is an aspect of
Botta’s inheritance from Louis Kahn, another architect with whom Botta briefly worked.
Kahn famously and influentially used a similar system in the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort
Worth, Texas (completed 1972) and wrote eloquently of the potential for top-lit spaces in
primary volumes.⁶ Here again, Botta has made a signature his own—he frequently designs
top-lit spaces for museums and religious buildings. Museum lighting, as integral to
interaction of the vision of the architect and the vision of the collector, and an indicator of a
museum’s approach to the art it displays, will be addressed in Chapter 2.

⁶ Louis I. Kahn, *Light is the Theme: Louis I. Kahn and the Kimbell Art Museum*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale
228-251 (New York: Norton, 2003.)
One way to approach how this building—a primary shape cut into primary volumes—accomplishes its work as the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art is to situate it within a common discourse of contemporary museum architecture. In 1998, Victoria Newhouse published *Towards a New Museum*, a book that became a touchstone for such studies. A revised and expanded edition appeared in 2006. Newhouse’s analysis of the architecture proceeds typologically, building from the work of Douglas Davis, whose *The Museum Transformed* (1990) recognized that the museum had “become the architect’s paramount vehicle of expression” and that, with the Pompidou Center, the evolution of the museum had digressed from the “serene, uninflected contemplation of works of art” such that the presentation of art was but one purpose among many.\(^7\) The new architectural program called for lecture halls, theaters, restaurants, and bookstores alongside gallery and working spaces; the result was a “museumlike” institution appropriate to the public of its moment.\(^8\) Newhouse’s first analysis elaborated seven types of museum architecture; her revision added a new type, the “virtual museum,” and argued that one of the original types, the “museum as entertainment,” had come to subsume all museum types with the increasing commercialization of the gallery-visiting experience. Two of her types, the museum as “cabinet of curiosities” and as “sacred space,” are particularly relevant to the Bechtler. In view of the Bechtler’s sobriety, the museum as entertainment—oddly for a new museum—does not pertain.

Drawing on Nikolaus Pevsner and other scholars, Newhouse traces the cabinet of curiosities to the early-sixteenth-century Italian *studioso* and the *Wunderkammer* that

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\(^8\) Ibid.
followed it, through the history of the private princely collections that developed into Europe’s great public museums. As these aristocratic collections were becoming public institutions, some of the wealthier bourgeoisie were also collecting art and commissioning buildings to house their collections—a process that continues. Andreas Bechtler’s original plan for a gallery outside of town fits this lineage nicely.

One concern that Newhouse notes in the establishment of a gallery to house and display a collection is the collector’s attitude towards the institutionalization of art. Whether a collection was donated to an existing institution or a new institution was created, some collectors have maintained that the typical museum setting deadens the impact of art, generally preferring a setting that resembles a home. The Bechtler Museum in no way resembles a home, but does institute a tension between gallery space and family home by means of its displays, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Newhouse’s treatment of museums as sacred spaces is built around an analysis of the history of museums that traces the development of art as a “secular religion” from the pleasures of the private collection, through the didactic function used to validate the opening of aristocratic and state collections to public beginning in the eighteenth century, to the rise of purpose-built museums in the nineteenth. The problem she identifies, as in the cabinet of curiosities, is the decontextualization of art—whether art, removed from its presumed natural setting, maintains its vitality. Again synthesizing commentators, in this case ranging from Quatremère de Quincy to Paul Valéry to contemporaries such as Brian O’Doherty and Carol

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Duncan, she discusses the vicissitudes of the architecturally sympathetic and the architecturally neutral gallery. She accomplishes this primarily through the figure of the original, flexible yet domestically-scaled and treated iteration of New York’s MoMA and the iterations in which it “became a pastiche of itself and the prototype of the deadly white cube.”

In their pioneering essay “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis,” Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach argue that art museums are ceremonial monuments that present works of art as part of an iconographic program in a ritual context. In this view the display of works of art in a museum collection has an ideological message over and above those of the individual works. Their critique, too, focuses on MoMA and positions that museum as something of an ideological apparatus in the Althusserian mode. “More than any other museum, MoMA developed the ritual forms that translated the ideology of late capitalism into immediate and vivid artistic terms—a monument to individualism, understood as subjective freedom.”

Duncan and Wallach, having established MoMA alongside churches, temples, shrines, and certain palace configurations as a type of ceremonial architecture, presented a further taxonomy of museums in their 1980 article “The Universal Survey Museum,” arriving at the “large municipal or national museum devoted to surveys of old masters and monumental art through the ages,” the modern art museum, the specialized regional

12 Ibid., 50.


collection, and the "robber-baron mansion."\textsuperscript{15} Duncan has further pursued taxonomies in her later work, specifically in 1995’s *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, which extends the critique of the museum as a ritual space to other museum types and elaborates the rituals that take place in the “donor memorial” and “modern art museum”.

Whether the taxonomies are based on social and political function, like Duncan and Wallach’s, or theme and institutional self-image, as in Newhouse, the Bechtler Museum can fit, if uneasily into some of the categories. It decidedly doesn't fit into certain thematic typologies, though. It is not a blockbuster museum. It shows its own collection and at present is content to continue doing so. The gallery space is too limited to accommodate larger travelling shows alongside its own collection, and the Mint Museum, its cultural-campus neighbor, is designed to accommodate just that sort of exhibition. It is definitely not a gift shop wagging a gallery. Although the museum shop fronts a large display window onto the street, it does not have its own entrance. In terms of the circulation within the building, the shop is awkwardly placed: to enter and exit one has to pass across the lanes set aside for the ticket counter. Above all it is small—and the majority of the shelf space is devoted to books.

The donor memorial is perhaps the dark side of Newhouse’s cabinet of curiosities become sacred space. Some donor memorials, moreover, might be considered not primarily an act of philanthropy, but rather an attempt to secure social status. The Bechtler family was not, however, at least publicly, a significant force in the Charlotte business community. Nor was Bechtler a name heard alongside Belk, Blumenthal, Knight, Levine, or McColl, when

arts funding was discussed. Rather, Andreas Bechtler had operated on a smaller scale and had, with the Little Italy project, been supporting artists, not “the arts” publically conceived. As a memorial to a not-particularly-prominent, not-particularly-Charlotte family, the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art is an oddity, but the museum's focus on the narrative of a family of collectors forces the problematic fit with the donor memorial type.

The Bechtler Museum is also available for a reading as ritual—particularly relevant are Duncan’s treatments of the ‘donor memorial’ and ‘modern art museum’ rituals—but the critique of a museum’s ritual runs the risk of producing museums as instances of a taxonometric system of rituals, and ultimately creating a totalizing account of the institution as always already a phenomenon of capital. Ritual does not seem to be the appropriate, or only, metaphor for what happens in the Bechtler Museum. The museum is not just an itinerary or text, but a building first. By working from the assumption that a typological argument arises from an architectural analysis (as an architectural design might rise from a typological précis) one can tease out the various discourses embodied in the museum’s fictions and its exhibitionary practices. As Peter Blundell Jones has argued:

Prisons excepted, buildings are seldom coercive, but they can, and often do, imply use in a particular manner, reinforcing particular social customs… If a building is less than a text because the conventions of meaning are less securely established, it is at the same time much more than a text because we inhabit it, and because it gains its meaning in relation to experience of use.¹⁷

Despite the semantic resonance of its name, the Bechtler's fit into the modern art museum typology is even more problematic. In order to critique the Bechtler Museum of

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¹⁶ The Belk family is that of the eponymous department store; the Blumenthal family owns automotive products company RSC Brands; the Knights are of the Knight-Ridder newspapers; Leon Levine founded Family Dollar, a discount retailer; Hugh McColl served as CEO of Bank of America, headquartered in Charlotte.

Modern Art, it is necessary to recognize the Bechtler, not as the latest in a sequence or progression of museums of modern art, but as an iteration of the idea of a museum of modern art in a particular mode, the single-donor museum. Only this conception allows a teasing out of the identity and difference that constitute the repetition of the Bechtler as a museum of modern art. To regard it otherwise is to attribute to the museum its own unwarranted claim to naturalness, to take the self-presentation of the museum as truth.
CHAPTER 3

THE DISCOURSE OF THE SINGLE-DONOR MODERN ART MUSEUM

The single-donor modern art museum gives built form to its two constitutive fictions: the vision of the collector and the vision of the architect. These fictions are so prevalent that Victoria Newhouse’s analysis accepts them not as constructs or contingencies, but as givens. “With a single client and no board of trustees or staff to deal with,” she writes, the architect’s task is simplified; the existence of a strong collection to which the architect can design is also an asset. Where no such collection is in place, museum architecture almost always fails. Clearly formed ideas—usually one person’s—of what and how art should be viewed, and reaction against operational aspects of public museums, have generally resulted in private museums’ matching art and architecture most successfully. In that they are usually produced by a single person, private collections have a strong identity—unlike the more anonymous museum collections amassed by many.¹

She notes that this is especially true for the Menil Collection’s “unorthodox combinations of disparate art objects” and the Fondation Beyeler’s “juxtaposition of tribal and modern art,” but the conjunction of the vision of the architect with the vision of the collector, or at least with the character of the collection, undergirds most of Newhouse’s assessments of individual museums.²

While the concept of the vision of the architect is relatively clear—the architect can sense the appropriate setting for a collection just as he or she can assess the appropriate style and arrangement of a home for a client—the notion of the vision of the collector requires

² Ibid.
further explication before turning to the particular visions embodied in the Menil Collection, the Fondation Beyeler, and the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. The collector’s vision depends upon two things: a theory of collecting and an operative fiction, a thematic device that makes the collector’s selections comprehensible.

Susan Stewart has theorized the selection and gathering of objects (“collecting,” colloquially) as occurring in two modes: the “souvenir” and the “collection.”3 While her model is based on a psychoanalytic conception of desire, it takes much more than desire to collect art on the scale of the Bechtlers, Beyelers, and Menils. Stewart’s analysis (like aspects of Freud’s) is useful for the patterns and relationships it reports, whatever one’s attitude toward psychoanalysis.4 Her theory can be adapted to the present discussion and used to describe the work of an art collector or the work performed by an art collection; to facilitate this I will avoid using “collection” in its normative sense for the remainder of this explication, and will leave that word for Stewart’s more specialized sense. At the heart of the distinction between the souvenir and the collection is a nuanced treatment of temporality. The souvenir works metonymically; it is a sample of the past that figures the present within the past, it “lends authenticity to the past.” The collection, on the other hand, is an example, not a sample, and the past lends authenticity to it. As Stewart renders it: “The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection


4 I argue here for the divestiture of the “psyche” from the “analysis.” To fully accede to psychoanalysis, one must accept that the person has an essence (the unconscious), that this essence has meaning (or, more actively, means), and that this meaning is manifest in actions and repressions. Stewart’s operations, like those of Freud’s dream-work (e.g. displacement, condensation) are valuable not only as diagnoses of this essence, but as interpretive tools and descriptors for any type of narrative. For the dream-work see Chapter 6 of Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (New York: Avon Books, 1965, orig. publ. 1900).
replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality … all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.\(^5\)

In the single-donor modern art museum, a theory of the souvenir and the collection can be seen at work on multiple levels. The collection’s ahistoricism manifests itself in a museum when that museum’s presentation of its holdings obscures the museum’s own historical constructedness and/or the historical context in which an object was produced, leaving the object available for disinterested contemplation or contemplation according to the narrative that configures its exhibition. The souvenir is often a special object, a photograph or personal note, for example, that declares the relationship between the collector and the artist a meeting of equals or a meeting of minds, and not a simply financial transaction; effectively, the souvenir is a special kind of provenance that serves as evidence of the collector’s vision and elevates collecting above mere acquisition. Each of the three museums considered in this chapter deploys souvenirs as reinforcements of its fiction. While an object selected by a collector might be fixed as either type, in accordance with the collector’s intention, it could be argued that any museum’s holdings are made up of both souvenir and “collection” objects, and that it is the exhibition and ordering, curatorially, of the object that determine the object’s function.

**The Menil Collection**

The Menil Collection is a portion of the art collected by Dominique de Menil, heiress to the Schlumberger fortune, and her husband Jean de Menil, the scion of a family of the

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\(^5\) Stewart, *On Longing*, 151. Italics in the original. The art-historical arrangement of galleries could be said to, at least in part, have been a critical reaction to such a sense of the collection.
Napoleonic minor aristocracy. In 1941, the Menils fled Europe for Houston, Texas, where the Schlumberger firm, a provider of oilfield services, had established new headquarters. The Menils then took a leading, if somewhat peripatetic role in developing the arts in Houston. Their first association was with the fledging Contemporary Arts Association of Houston, which had been established to counter the lack of interest in contemporary art and design evinced by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). The Menils then turned to the MFAH when administrative changes allowed the developments that the Menils had hoped for, enlivened the museum, and saw it push toward its new, Mies van der Rohe-designed building. The largesse of the Menils was then lavished on the University of St. Thomas, a small, Catholic university for which they were major benefactors, establishing the art department, purchasing the land required for the university’s expansion, and paying the design fees for new buildings by Philip Johnson, the architect they had commissioned to design their Houston home. The involvement went beyond finances, though. The Menils hand-selected arts faculty, and Dominique de Menil began curating exhibitions at the university in 1964. Following disagreements with the school’s administrators over what was perceived to be the Menils’ push towards a “secularization or ecumenization” of the university, the Menils shifted their support to Rice University. The Menil arrangement with Rice involved not only the withdrawal of their art collection and its installation at Rice, but

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6 The Menil Collection is a “portion” because the Menils gave gifts to many other museum collections. Like Andreas Bechtler, Dominique is the child of a man, Conrad Schlumberger, who founded an engineering-based company with his brother. Her family however, did not collect art; she began collecting only after her marriage.


8 Ibid., 60.

9 Ibid., 64-5.
included what amounted to the insertion of the St. Thomas art department into the Rice academic structure and the creation of the Institute for the Arts at Rice, to be directed by Dominique.\textsuperscript{10} Motivating all of this investment was the idea of turning Houston into an international center for art—a commitment that saw the Menils bring a who’s-who of artists and art historians to the city.\textsuperscript{11}

With the help of Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a Dominican priest and a friend since 1931, who lived in New York City as a war exile, the Menils began collecting art during the 1940s, and their collecting soon took on a spiritual complexion.\textsuperscript{12} By the time Dominique left off working to strengthen other institutions to establish her own, the Menils’ collecting was motivated by a “moral duty to buy good paintings”\textsuperscript{13} and the idea that art was a “basic human necessity—if not fully on par with food, water, and shelter, then certainly a vital complement to these essentials.”\textsuperscript{14} 

\textit{Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil} (2010), a Menil Collection publication edited by Joseph Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi, provides a comprehensive treatment of the Menils’ collecting, described as instinctive and as a vocation

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 65-70.

\textsuperscript{11} Among these are Henri-Cartier Bresson, David Coffin, Marcel Duchamp, Buckminster Fuller, Clement Greenberg, Louis Kahn, René Magritte, Roberto Matta, Claes Oldenburg, Mark Rothko, Meyer Schapiro, James Johnson Sweeney, and Jean Tinguely. William Camfield’s previously-cited essay provides many other names.

\textsuperscript{12} The construction of the Rothko Chapel (1971), designed to house a series of paintings by Mark Rothko in a contemplative, semi-religious setting, can be seen as a built commitment to Couturier’s vision of a “living art” as a spiritual force. See Pia Gottschaller, “The Rothko Chapel: Toward the Infinite,” in Helfenstein and Schipsi, eds., \textit{Art and Activism}, 140. See also Pamela G. Smart, \textit{Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). Father Couturier was also involved in Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp and Matisse’s Vence Chapel.

\textsuperscript{13} Kristina Van Dyke, “Losing One’s Head: John and Dominique de Menil as Collectors,” in Helfenstein and Schipsi, eds., \textit{Art and Activism}, 124.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 119.
nurtured by Couturier, and generally referred to as their “humanism.” It also invests in and reinforces the fiction of their vision as collectors by including souvenirs as evidence: a section titled “Mixed Masters: Correspondence with Artists,” twenty-six pages of full-color plates of letters and sketches.

Between 1971 and 1974 the Menils purchased seventy-one lots in the 1920s residential neighborhood near the St. Thomas campus and the Rothko Chapel with the intention of building a facility to house their collection. With Barnstone guiding the project, they renovated some of the bungalows for offices and developed other buildings as rental properties. On Barnstone’s advice, nearly all the buildings were painted gray with white trim. They began discussions with Louis Kahn over a design for a building to house their collection in 1973, a year after his Kimbell Art Museum opened in Fort Worth, but when both Kahn and John de Menil died in 1974, the project was shelved. Dominique de Menil chose to resume the building project in 1979 and hired Renzo Piano to design the project in 1980. Though Piano’s building bears no resemblance to the design Kahn had only begun to generate for Menil Collection, it does take cues from the Kimbell, particularly in its plan and the arrangement of the main entrance (figs. 16 and 17). The connection to Kahn may come from Piano having interned with Kahn’s office in the late 1960s—and it is a connection remade with Piano’s design for the current expansion of the Kimbell.

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Stephen Fox, in an essay on the Menils’ patronage of architects, develops a version of the vision of the architect myth with respect to the expression of the Menils’ character and shepherds it through their involvement with Johnson, Howard Barnstone, Louis Kahn, and Renzo Piano.\footnote{Fox, “John and Dominique de Menil,” 203-12.} Fox claims that the Menils, especially Dominique, seemed to have very different expectations of artists and architects: “Architects were expected to resolve practical problems with rigor and precision, while artists were geniuses who worked from inspiration.”\footnote{Ibid., 203.} This means the architect is primarily a facilitator, whether for the art or for the client. Another source for a sense of the interaction of the visions of the collector and the architect in Piano’s Menil Collection building is Piano’s own essay on working with Dominique. Arguing that “a good project requires a good client,” Piano calls the building a “portrait of Dominique de Menil.”\footnote{Piano, “Working with Light: A Portrait of Dominique de Menil,” 218.} He attributes the building’s famous “treasure chamber” art storage and its “living light” to her. Piano described his goals thus: “You do not want to compete with art, and you still want to give character to a museum; you have to work on the immateriality of the museum—light, vibration, proportion.”\footnote{Ingersoll, “The Porosity of the Menil Collection,” 227.}

The light is created by a roof system in which a glass skin covers a system of parallel louvers Piano called “leaves” (figs. 18 and 19). Constructed of ferroconcrete with an applied coating of marble powder, a concave surface on the top of each leaf bounces light at an angle towards a convex surface on the bottom of the adjacent leaf, which in turn reflects the diffused light into the galleries. The leaves are articulated, but immobile; thanks to the

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\footnote{Fox, “John and Dominique de Menil,” 203-12.}
\footnote{Ibid., 203.}
\footnote{Piano, “Working with Light: A Portrait of Dominique de Menil,” 218.}
\footnote{Ingersoll, “The Porosity of the Menil Collection,” 227.}
building’s alignment to the neighborhood’s grid of streets and the grid’s orientation to true north and south, the leaves need not be repositioned to accommodate seasonal changes in the aspect of sunlight. The leaves allow the play of daylight over four of the six flexible gallery spaces’ black stained pine floors and smooth sixteen-foot-high white walls so that the weather and time of day modulate the appearance of the displayed works of twentieth-century western art and non-western sculptural artifacts. Adding to the sense of connection with the outside are glass-enclosed atria akin to those of the Kimbell Art Museum and the atrium at the center of the Menils’ own Houston home. The atria, planted with broadleaf evergreens, usually serve as backdrops for the tribal artifacts (fig. 20). Oddly, Newhouse and others have claimed that “the glass-enclosed garden courts … give [the art of tribal cultures] the right context”; this conjunction of tropical plants and sculptural artifacts is a thinly-veiled primitivism that Newhouse assimilates without questioning. I have yet to find examples of similar glass architecture or houseplants in my review of these cultures’ architecture. The two remaining galleries house other types of objects under artificial light.

Though 320 feet long, the building seems to fit the scale of the neighborhood. This is due in part to the gray and white color scheme of the cypress siding and white-painted steel, and in part to the ten-foot-wide white portico that articulates the façades and horizontally breaks the mass of the two-story portion (fig. 21). Newhouse points out that the building uses “vernacular scale and materials” but bears formal similarities to the Miesian architecture of Johnson’s St. Thomas buildings and Mies’s own MFAH in the nearby museum district. A large picture window from the conservation facilities to the exterior make visible Menil’s


22 Newhouse, 21.
wish that hers be a “working museum,” as does the plan, which includes space for curatorial functions alongside gallery spaces while administrative and commercial functions are housed in the surrounding bungalows. Art storage is upstairs, in the so-called “treasure chamber” upstairs, which covers part of one of the three parallel rows of spaces that make up the building’s plan. The treasure chamber concept, paired with the flexible gallery spaces (fig. 22), was intended to allow an ever changing juxtaposition of art pieces in a non-art-historical order so that new adjacencies would reveal new aspects of the work. It was a mode of display akin to the way art and furnishing were arranged and rearranged in the Menil home, but over time the “operational realities” of a museum have kept certain works in place. The treasure chamber itself is open only for scholarly visits.

The Fondation Beyeler

At the Fondation Beyeler, hanging the galleries in an art-historical order is out of the question. The overwhelming majority of the approximately 200 objects collected by art dealers Ernst and Hildy Beyeler are modern paintings; the larger part of the remainder is made up of “strictly ‘Cubist’ African art and ‘Surrealist’ art from Oceania,” and is displayed as counterpoint within the same galleries. Nor do the works present a comprehensive view of modern painting. As Newhouse quips, the Beyelers’ “modernism begins with Monet and

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23 This arrangement is attributed to Menil with input from Walter Hopps, then founding director of the Menil Collection, and Paul Winkler, then overseeing the design and construction of the Menil collection building and later, director of the Collection from 1991-99, in Ingersoll, “The Porosity of the Menil Collection,” 228-9.

24 Ibid., 225, 227.

ends with Warhol” and excludes German expressionism. If, as Gottfried Boehm wrote in an essay on the Fondation, “Internal coherence and external chronological limits are characteristics of convincing collections,” then the Beyelers’ collection is very convincing.

The museum, which opened in 1997, generally devotes two-thirds of its 29,000 square feet of display space to the collection, and the other one-third to two or three temporary exhibitions each year, but this is not always the case. These temporary exhibitions at times range well beyond the collection in content, and may on occasion displace it: the current Jeff Koons temporary exhibition is large enough that the permanent collection is in storage. Still, this is the exception to the rule. The museum depends upon the presentation of Ernst Beyeler’s connoisseurship—its version of the vision of the collector myth is based on selectivity—and if the Beyelers were selective in the kinds of works they kept, they were also selecting from among the best works available. Beyeler was perhaps responsible for placing more modern works with museums than any of his dealer contemporaries. William Rubin, who served as director of the department of painting and sculpture at MoMA from 1973 to 1988, called Ernst Beyeler a “curator-in-dealers-clothing” whose decision to build a museum at his own expense suggested his desire that “these objects, which he has long studied and interrogated, will be presented so that those interconnections he sees between them will be made manifest.

26 Newhouse, Toward a New Museum, 24.

27 Gottfried Boehm, “The Triumph of Painting” In Fondation Beyeler, The Other Collection, 11.


30 Ibid., 9-10. Italics in the original.
Beyeler’s autobiography establishes the myth of connoisseurship that enables the Beyeler collection just as it had his career as an art dealer. Beyeler’s father worked for the railroad, his life “entirely taken up with the task of feeding his five children,” and collecting art was not an important part of his family life as a child. Shortly before World War Two, and after the first steps toward a career in business, Beyeler went to work for an antiquarian, the German Jewish exile Oskar Schloss, who had established a business called La Librairie du Château d’Art selling books, prints, and drawings in Basel. Beyeler also began to visit exhibitions and attend lectures, and between stints in the Swiss military studied art history and economics at the University of Basel, but did not take a degree. Finding it “rather too cerebral and dry,” Beyeler explains that he “could never become that enthusiastic about [academic study]. At the time I did not know Seneca’s words to the effect that the man who does is wiser than the man who knows.” Schloss died in 1945, and Beyeler bought the business from Schloss’s heirs. Realizing that he would not succeed by selling things he knew very little about, he focused on art, and specifically modern art, which he felt he understood.

Beyeler’s exhibitions were very ambitious for a gallery in a provincial town and with no international clientele, but he advertised internationally and, very unusually for the 1950s, published museum-quality catalogs to promote his exhibitions. He continued this practice

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32 Ibid., 15-7.

33 Ibid., 18-9; Annemarie Monteil, “A Lifelong Conversation with Art: A Tribute to Ernst and Hildy Beyeler,” in Fondation Beyeler, The Other Collection, 54.
throughout his career; there are more than 200 such catalogs.\textsuperscript{34} The Galerie Beyeler shows usually included 50-70 works, often including many borrowed from acquaintances and clients and not for sale, but rather included to cast the best light on the assembled works.\textsuperscript{35} In this way the museum continues the gallery’s project; as Boehm writes, “The Fondation transforms the transitoriness of commercial gallery transactions into a place of memory, with public effect and for the long term.”\textsuperscript{36}

Ernst Beyeler chose Renzo Piano to design his museum, this “place of memory,” because he liked the design of the Menil Collection.\textsuperscript{37} His description of the Fondation building—“There it lies like an aircraft carrier” moored alongside Baselstrasse in Riehen looking over agricultural fields toward Germany—is accurate for the long low building with its flat overhanging roof, but does not call to mind the Houston museum (fig. 23).\textsuperscript{38} The similarity to the Menil is borne out by the plan of parallel gallery enfilades and the treatment of the gallery spaces.

While Beyeler defines his architectural intention as “a museum where one can find \textit{luxe, calme, et volupté},”\textsuperscript{39} Markus Brüderlin, writing in the museum’s guidebook and catalog, provides a perfect example of the integration of the myths of the collector and the architect; the museum is

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{36} Boehm, “Proven Works,” 10.
\textsuperscript{37} Newhouse, 23. Ingersoll claims that Beyeler asked for an identical building, in Ingersoll, “Porosity,” 225.
\textsuperscript{39} Newhouse, 23.
the answer to repeated calls for an exhibition architecture worthy of the arts. For more than forty years, gallery owners Hildy and Ernst Beyeler have employed their unique sense of quality to amass an outstanding collection of classic modern art. In Renzo Piano they found a designer who could create a building in which these works would be displayed and perceived in the best possible way . . . Piano described the task as follows: ‘A museum must try to interpret the quality of the collection and define its relationship to the outside world. This implies an active, but not aggressive role.’ The result is an architecture of timeless, modest elegance that forms a harmonious relationship between nature, space, light and art.40

The three rows of exhibition space, each over 400 feet long, are twenty-three feet wide and sixteen feet tall; flexible partitions divide the galleries (fig. 24).41 A shorter row parallels these on the street side and accommodates the services and entrance; another on the field side serves as a winter garden. Offices, a library, and a restaurant are in the adjacent eighteenth-century Villa Berower.

Dividing modern art in two, a “utopia of the visual” and a second, more contestatory or irreverent Duchampian strain, Brüderlin situates the works in the collection within the first group. These “painterly” works, he argues, are well suited to their galleries because the atmospheric changes visible through the museum’s glass roof structure cast on them an appropriate, changing light42 Unlike the system of leaves at the Menil, this structure of electronically operated louvers sandwiched between white steel screens and tilted, silkscreened glass brise-soleils, is adjustable—a necessity due to the off-orthogonal siting of the building and the greater seasonal variation in the aspect of sunlight so much farther from


42 Brüderlin, “The Fondation Beyeler,” 292. Calling something “timeless” is one standard way to “transform history into nature”—this naturalization being the principle of myth in the Barthesian sense; see Roland Barthes, Mythologies (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 129.
the tropics. The steel screens however, hide the system, so, rather than the sculptural effect of the Menil’s leaves, so much a part of the interior design, the effect, at least in photographs, is of a gridded, drop-panel ceiling (fig. 25). It is an unfortunate resemblance, because once recognized, it is not difficult to imagine the light as coming from fluorescent fixtures. Each gallery is under the same system; only the basement exhibition spaces can be darkened to accommodate art made in newer, light-based media.

Plate glass walls cap either end of the long enfilade of galleries (fig. 26). These picture windows draw on the Miesian effect of extending walls and ceilings beyond a window to frame views and to enhance a sense of perspective (fig. 27). They are the most commonly photographed parts of the building. There is a restful calm about them, perhaps because they give a sense of respite from compartment after compartment filled with powerful works of art, as Brüderlin claims for the winter garden, but likely so because the galleries are otherwise undifferentiated, identical but for the length of the rooms and the location of the openings to the parallel galleries.

If the foregoing addresses the museum’s functional program, Piano taxes the museum with a much more metaphorical program. He calls the area between the exterior wall of the entry hall (itself essentially a retaining wall that allows the floor elevation to remain constant throughout) and the wall that seals the museum off from the street, the “formation zone.” The exterior walls, clad in porphyry, and the interior walls that parallel it, also clad in porphyry where they extend beyond the galleries, bear the load of the roof and divide the enfilades from one another; Piano thinks of them as a “static geological element.” By this geologic

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43 Brüderlin, 293.
entity the building and its site are to be seen as unified.\textsuperscript{44} The walls, however, also have a symbolic weight for Piano: they are a “mechanism to produce difference,” defining the museum and collection’s relationship to the world. They respond to a simplified history of the museum, which Piano drew from Henri Pierre Jeudy’s \textit{The World as Museum}: the 1970s saw an attempt to bring art out from the museums into life and the 1980s the contrary, with museums trying to bring life in. This resulted in the “cancellation of difference” between the world and the museum. The difference mechanism of the walls was neither to keep the art in nor the world out, but to mark the museum as a place and simultaneously divide and unite the quotidian and the rarified.

In the 1980s, Piano seemed to be less involved in the idea that a building had to be generated conceptually rather than programmatically—even the high-concept design of the Pompidou Center (completed 1977), on which he worked with Richard Rogers, had been an expression of the building’s program. Nonetheless, the greatest difference between Piano’s Menil and Beyeler buildings, opened ten years apart, is not their conceptual generation, but that the architect of the Menil seemed less self-conscious of that building’s place in history. Mario Botta’s Bechtler Museum, in this light, has more in common with the Menil Collection than with the Beyeler.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 294.
CHAPTER 4

BECOMING THE BECHTLER MUSEUM

In Zurich in 1935 Hans C. Bechtler and his brother Walter founded an engineering company to provide air conditioning and filtration plants to textile factories. The Bechtler family business was one of the small, family-owned concerns of the Swiss Mittelstand—H. C. Bechtler and Co. ultimately developed into Luwa Air Engineering AG—but is now held by private equity firm Grunwald Equity Management GmbH. The current family company is the holding company Hesta AG, which in addition to investing, owns knit underwear manufacturers.

As the engineering business grew, Hans and his wife Bessie bought a vacation home in Ascona, where they met and befriended local artists including Ben Nicholson and, later, Jean Tinguely, the Giacometti brothers Alberto and Diego, Joan Miró, Alfred Manessier, and others. In 1965 Hans and Walter Bechtler founded the Alberto Giacometti Foundation in Zurich to secure a collection of the artist's work for his native Switzerland. It purchased many Giacometti works abroad, including those owned by American collector David Thompson, in a deal brokered by Ernst Beyeler.¹ The Foundation eventually established the

¹ Hans-Joachim Müller, “From Gallery to Museum,” in Markus Brüderlin, ed., Fondation Beyeler (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 27-29. Ernst Beyeler provides an account of this deal in a conversation published in the catalog accompanying the 1997 opening of the Fondation Beyeler museum: “I have intentionally described this at such length because events were not quite as Willy Rotzler recounts them in his Giacometti book: it is true that the Bechtlers saved the collection for Zurich, but I was the one who had bought it in the first place, otherwise it would most likely have been auctioned off (Thompson later confirmed this) and dispersed around the world.” See also Christian Klemm, “Ernst Beyeler and the Alberto Giacometti Foundation,” in Fondation Beyeler, ed. The Other Collection: Homage to Ernst and Hildy Beyeler (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007),
world's largest collection of Giacometti sculpture. Hans and Walter also served on the board of the Kunsthau in Zurich; in 1982 the museum curated an exhibition from the Bechtler family collections. Both brothers were collectors who became patrons of artists, but Walter created an institutional context for his patronage, the Walter Bechtler Stiftung, which continues to fund artists’ projects.²

In 1979, after earning a doctorate in economics at the University of Fribourg, Andreas Bechtler, the son of Hans and Bessie, moved to the United States to run Pneumafil, a Charlotte-based firm in which the family held an interest. Pneumafil provided services and equipment to textile factories, a then-important part of the manufacturing sector of the economy of the Carolinas now in decline. In keeping with his family’s interest in the arts, he joined the board of Charlotte’s Mint Museum. Hesta AG developed an office tower called the Carillon Building in Charlotte, completed in 1991, to take advantage of the city's explosive growth during the late 1980s. The Carillon housed the Hans and Walter Bechtler Gallery, showing works commissioned from Jean Tinguely and Sol LeWitt.³

Andreas Bechtler retired from Pneumafil to the life of an artist and musician and in 1999 founded the Little Italy Peninsula Art Center, an artists' community and studio compound, just northwest of Charlotte on the Catawba River. In 2002, he contracted Mario Botta, who had worked on projects with Bechtler’s artist friends Niki de Saint Phalle and her

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² See Curiger Bice, ed. Before the Sun Rises: Walter A. Bechtler Stiftung (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2005). Recently the Stiftung has funded projects by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Thomas Hirschhorn, Martin Kippenberger, Pipilotti Rist, and James Turrell.

³ A 1993 show at the gallery, on public art in Charlotte, was reviewed in Art Newspaper—the city's public art legacy was found to be weak. Linda L. Brown, "Our public image [Hans and Walter Bechtler Gallery, Charlotte, N.C]." Art Papers 18 (January/February 1994): 51.
husband Jean Tinguely, to draw the plans for a gallery on that site. Botta, by that point having been in practice nearly forty years, had in the previous decade become a designer of art museums, including the Tinguely Museum in Basel (completed 1996) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (completed 1995). This gallery, however, would be only Botta's second project in the United States, and by 2004 was near to realization: with Bechtler having approved the design and selected the materials and finishes, the project was put out to contractors for bids.⁴

Meanwhile, officials of Wachovia, a bank headquartered in the city (since purchased by the San Francisco-based Wells Fargo), were planning a cultural campus as an adjunct to a real estate development at the southern edge of Uptown, the city's somewhat paradoxically-named downtown business district. The plans had grown in concert with the city's 2004 twenty-five-year plan to revitalize and expand its cultural presence and build or renovate facilities for several arts and cultural groups.⁵ Eventually, the plans were merged and the cultural campus came to encompass a new building for Charlotte's Mint Museum, named for the disused federal mint building east of the city center, a new building for the African-American arts and culture center named after Charlotte's first black mayor, Harvey B. Gantt, and a new 1,200-seat performing arts theater, sized to fit between the city's two other performance venues. The site chosen was connected by an existing one-and-one-half-acre public park to the Charlotte Convention Center and the site of the planned NASCAR Hall of


⁵ Ibid., 28. The city dedicated $158 million for capital investment in the effort. The Arts and Sciences Council raised $38 million in private funds for new and ongoing endowments for the arts and cultural groups funded.
Fame. The cultural campus, now known as the Levine Center for the Arts, would promote a cosmopolitan image and boost tourism.

When word of Bechtler's gallery and collection reached those planning the cultural campus, they proposed that he display the collection there. Two options were presented—to house the collection in the new Mint Museum, or to build an entirely new museum. For the Mint, which had opened in 1936 as a building without a collection to speak of, and had developed strengths in several areas, particularly contemporary craft, despite having only a $1,000,000 acquisition endowment, the donation would be a windfall.\(^6\) Bechtler's attorney rejected the Mint proposal: “We don't want the Bechtler collection to be in competition with those other pulls and tugs and it would be inherently if it were part of the Mint,” adding that “any future financial difficulties at the Mint could jeopardize exhibiting the collection and that with three or four members on the approximately 30-member Mint board, [Bechtler's] group would not have much say.”\(^7\) Bechtler and the city reached an agreement whereby he would give the collection to a foundation that would administer it as long as Charlotte provided it a building.

Plans for the campus, both physical and fiscal, were modified, and Botta was sent back to the drawing board. Despite the relocation and an entirely new design scaled-up to accommodate larger numbers of visitors and staff, the curatorial program of the gallery remained the kernel of the architectural program: to display the collection as the work of a collector rather than an accumulation of disparate pieces. “It's not just a collection where someone went to Sotheby's and, like you buy a Coke, said, ‘Give me one of these and one of

\(^6\) Kathleen Jamison, Interview by Julie Rose. WFAE 90.7FM, 27 September 2010.

that.”” Bechtler told a reporter. “What I have is an assemblage of work put together over 50 years that was collected out of love.” The change of context and mission, from private gallery to public institution, however, demanded the creation of a fiction, or in conventional institutional parlance a cultural program, that would complement the curatorial and architectural: a narrative, a way of communicating itself and its intentions to the city, to patrons, and to visitors.

In presenting its collection, the Bechtler Museum reinscribes the history of modern art in the tastes of a Swiss family. The juxtaposition of this distinctive presentation with the role the museum plays for the city aligns the growth of Charlotte from a town of textile mills to a major financial center with the narrative of a successful bourgeois nuclear family who also moved from textiles to finance. “Let’s put something on our walls, we have nothing” is Andreas Bechtler's description of the motivation of his father and mother to begin collecting art when the engineering company began to generate profits. The Bechtler Museum is the merger of two myths written as museological fact. The two tales fuse almost seamlessly: that of the new bourgeoisie, who collect rather than inherit art, and the myth of Charlotte as a self-made city of the New South, successful by dint of hard work, business innovation, and looking after its own.

The collection and the building play out the personal connections Bechtler hints at. Saint Phalle’s Firebird ties the plaza outside to the second floor gallery exhibiting works by

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9 Andreas Bechtler, Interview by Julie Rose. WFAE 90.7FM, 29 December 2009. "It's actually 70 years of collecting art. When my parents married, they lived in an apartment in Switzerland and as business-wise my dad got very successful, they decorated their home. You know, that was the first, you know, order of the day was let's put something on our walls, we have nothing."
Saint Phalle and Tinguely, who, having ransacked Hans and Bessie's attic for hunting trophies to use in his sculptures, gave many of his works to Andreas Bechtler. In addition to designing the Tinguely Museum in Basel, Botta collaborated with Saint Phalle on her *Tarot Garden* in Italy and *Noah's Ark* in Israel. Indexing Hans Bechtler’s close connections to the Giacometti brothers, the third floor gallery displays the furniture Diego Giacometti designed for the Bechtler's living room in the midst of Alberto's drawings and vitrines containing smaller sculptural works. The guidebook *Bechtler Museum of Modern Art* documents several similar connections between the collectors and artists.

The Bechtler Museum is unique among the institutions of the Charlotte cultural campus in that it is not merely named for, but represents the accomplishments of a single family, the mythical building block of the community. Because its collection is the lifework and remainder of the Bechtler family, it is the manifestation or trace of their material progress relative to that community. The Bechtler Museum's website provides the museum's self-definition in its listing of the strengths of the collection: "The holdings of the Bechtler reveal principally the tastes and opportunities of a family of collectors based in Zurich, Switzerland. Nonetheless, the works they acquired were by artists from throughout Europe, Britain and America, but all seen through their own personal lens." After positioning the centrality of the family's tastes under the heading "European Perspectives," the website lists "School of Paris" and "American and British Artists." The museum describes the former as "a term that has unusually broad applications but generally is meant to embrace the modern..."

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works in Europe during the years after World War II. Most often defined by various approaches to abstraction, the School of Paris is seen as flexible enough to embrace certain explorations in figural subjects." The works in the museum’s first thematic exhibition, *School of Paris: European Abstraction Post World War II* [sic], are defined elsewhere with the less general terms lyrical abstraction, Tachisme, and the Second School of Paris. "American and British Artists" is elaborated on thus:

In addition to a focus on European artists, the Bechtler collection is also rich in American and British artists, often as a result of personal relationships. American Mark Tobey, for example, practiced for many years in Zurich, Switzerland and was acquainted with the Bechtler family. A cluster of British artists formed relationships with the Bechtlers, especially Ben Nicholson who often spent his summers in Ascona, the Italian region of Switzerland, and served as an artistic mentor to a teenage Andreas Bechtler.13

The museum reinforces the elevation of its collection above simple acquisition by organizing exhibitions around similar relationships. In 2011, *Four Artists in Ascona: Benazzi, Bissier, Nicholson and Valenti* exhibited twenty-five works that “embody the connection the Bechtler family had with some of the artists whose work they collected.” The Bechtler website describes Bissier, Nicholson, and Valenti as “close friends” of the family and artistic mentors to Andreas.14 This links between the family and the artists are remarked upon, not to debunk or cast doubt on the character of the Bechtler family’s patronage, but because such linkage is part of the museum’s self-presentation.

The Bechtler Museum also uses souvenirs to establish relationships between collector and artist—as did the Menil Collection in *Art and Activism: The Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (discussed in Chapter 2) and the Fondation Beyeler in *The Other*.

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13 Ibid.

Collection: Homage to Ernst and Hildy Beyeler (2007). The latter publication compiled homages from clients, other dealers, and curators alongside a musée imaginaire of works the Beyelers had placed in international collections.\textsuperscript{15} The exhibition and festschrift celebrated the Beyeler museum’s first ten years. The Bechtler, in 2012, displayed a festschrift of its own, Hans Bechtler’s “Birthday Book” (fig. 28). Edited by Hans’s sister and niece, the “Birthday Book” is a portfolio of 27 works on nine by twelve inch paper, each executed by a different artist in honor of his sixtieth birthday in 1964.\textsuperscript{16} Among the artists were Alberto Giacometti, Hans Hartung, Barbara Hepworth, Alfred Manessier, Marino Marini, and Mark Tobey, each presented by the museum as part of a grand comparison, “a rare glimpse into the approaches that such a distinguished field of artists would take for the same commission, executed on the same paper, in honor of the same patron and all at the same moment.” The similarities, the shared mode, even, of the three museums’ self-presentation in the period from 2007 to the present are quite striking. This self-presentation may in fact be possible only in the single-donor modern art museum, in that it celebrates a past recent enough that, if not in living memory, is easily enough imagined, through display strategies that allow the museum-goers of the present to identify with the collecting family.

If the narrative of the Bechtlers as a family combines with Andreas Bechtler’s good citizenship to become the Bechtler Museum's way of being in the world, then the museum, as at once a repetition of the idea of a modern art museum and a single-donor collection, is able to establish an institutional prehistory. This story unifies the moment of the autonomous art

\textsuperscript{15} Fondation Beyeler, The Other Museum: Homage to Ernst and Hildy Beyeler (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007).

\textsuperscript{16} Fourteen of the works are in the collection of the Bechtler Museum, the others are part of the collection of Andreas Bechtler’s sister, Dany Bechtler Bucher, of Switzerland.
object and the disinterested contemplation of the formalist modernism of the 1950s and 60s into a family idyll that elides intervening difficulties, effectively restoring a halcyon past that never truly existed. Although the catalog and wall labels point out the disruptions and dislocations that the First and Second World Wars, or in one instance the Russian Revolution, caused in the lives of the artists collected, the Bechtlers’ collection was enabled by the continuity of neutral Switzerland and the triumph of the Allies. The family narrative and the tight focus of the collection may ensure that the museum never is asked to address questions of multiculturalism, universalism, or difference relative to the artists that the Bechtlers chose to collect. Neither will it be asked to address difficulties or inequities within the Charlotte community—it has, by virtue of its location, the option to defer that prerogative to its campus neighbors, the survey museum and the minority cultural center.

Despite the museum’s internal coherence, the way it all makes “sense,” the press coverage of the Bechtler's opening more often than not remarked on the oddity of such a museum collection, predominantly of mid-century European modern art, in Charlotte. The coverage has, however, been uniformly positive. Even a condescending New York Times article, which gleefully conflated Charlotte with every other mid-tier American city with an NFL franchise, praised the new museum.17 The better-informed local press asks “So, again: Is Charlotte ready for this?” “I think it’s very much ready,” Andreas Bechtler replies. “We are new, and it will take a lot of effort to build a base … but this is my gut feeling. This is not contemporary art. It’s modern art, and these are very proven artists, and I think it’s overdue

that we have this here.”

Behind Bechtler’s answer seem to lie two points far more interesting than the fact that the museum is in close proximity to a football stadium: the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art is the only museum in the Southeast devoted to twentieth-century modern art, and modern art does not threaten the tastes of the community.

“Proven” is perhaps the key to understanding what Bechtler is arguing and what the continuing relevance of modern art is—and there is more than one way to understand the word in his answer. Taken to distinguish between modern art as something of the past and contemporary art as something of the present, “proven” points to the general feeling that much of contemporary art is either unintelligible or a provocation, navel-gazing for a self-selecting few or an affront to concepts of quality. On the other hand, “proven” is also the word that Ernst Beyeler uses to describe the works in his collection. It seems quite likely that Bechtler would be familiar, not only with Beyeler and his museum, but with the catalog published at the time of the museum’s opening in 1997, either in German or in English translation. The catalog’s essay, “Proven Works: A Journey through Modern Art,” by Gottfried Boehm, situates the Beyeler collection and provides a nuanced reading of the role of modern art in the contemporary moment and in the gallery space.

According to Boehm, the Fondation Beyeler, as a museum, reflects the Beyelers’ type of collecting—a mode of thinking about art based on making distinctions and with a “single

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20 Ibid.
criterion: the singularity and enduring appeal of the individual work.”21 The process by which the Beyelers chose these works, the process of their connoisseurship, was an “intuitive appraisal” of each, made by judges “who had seen a great deal [of art] and paid conscious attention over many years,” that resulted in “proven works.”22 The works are thus “proven” by more than the fact of their having been selected from the larger stock of pictures the Beyelers speculated in. The Beyeler collection, Boehm notes, is lent the feel of a retrospective by its attention to quality and its chronological limits. Retrospection is also the way that we view modern art today, with a kind of hindsight that sets aside the idea of its “innovatory pathos,” Boehm’s term for the succession of proclamations of a new art by modernist artists.23 For Boehm, writing in riposte to those who think of works of modern art as aesthetically self-absorbed, autonomous objects, our retrospective sense of the art and its placement in the spare, white galleries of the Beyeler allow the works to serve as opportunities for trying out new points of view. The pluralism embodied in the works make a new set of possibilities, “opportunities of adopting different attitudes, of trying out different points of view of reality which would remain closed to us if it were not for art”—the gallery is “a laboratory for potential experiences.”24

Boehm’s description of the possibilities available within a gallery space that is particularly “white cube” in style runs counter to the “white cube” described by Brian O’Doherty in Inside the White Cube. O’Doherty, too, noticed the whiff of the “mystique of

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. Boehm also argues that this did not occur in a vacuum, and mentions parallels with the collecting of the Kunstmuseum Basel and the development of the Beyelers attention to various artists and movements over time.

23 Ibid., 39.

24 Ibid., 41, 40. Italics in the original.
an experimental laboratory” about the stripped-down ideal of a gallery space’s “unique chamber of esthetics.” For O’Doherty, the scrubbed-clean space is about the eradication of time, so that the art always already exists and, in the concise description of Thomas McEvilley, a critic close to Dominique de Menil, suggests the “eternal ratification of a certain sensibility” that in turn ratifies “the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility.” While Boehm does not address the idea that a gallery like the Beyeler’s might serve to maintain the political status quo, his attention to context is attuned to something that O’Doherty is not: Boehm has not fallen into line with the idea that the work of art must be allowed to come into its own—to “take on its own life” in the words quoted by O’Doherty. Rather he assumes that the historical knowledge the viewer brings into the gallery will inflect the space rather than be eradicated by it; the context inflects the art, but is in turn inflected by the viewer. Boehm’s essay provides a concept of the white-cube-style gallery space that is neither ritualized nor coercive. Instead, the gallery recedes. According to such a reading the white cube is not a prison, or a place for ritualized self-effacement; it screens out the world to allow critical distance. In the end, Boehm’s essay’s attention to the art avoids attributing one cause or effect to a thing, a single purpose or lone affect to a space.

The distinction can be seen in a comparison of the treatment of tribal sculptural works in the Beyeler and the Menil. In the Beyeler, the works do not bear a one-to-one relationship

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27 Ibid., 15.

28 In this sense, Boehm’s thinking on the gallery is equivalent to Peter Blundell Jones’s thinking on architecture as a whole, cited in Chapter 1 of this thesis.
with any of the collected paintings, but their inclusion alongside the paintings makes them, in Boehm’s estimation, historical context for a mode of thinking that lay behind innovations in modern art. These objects originated outside European art’s defining “antiquity” and “Christianity,” and were as such a “significant expansion of the European experience.” They were what the Western artists hoped they themselves could make—the products of a different way of seeing the world.  

In the Menil, tribal art is “contextualized”—by a primitizing connection to “nature” in the guise of broadleaf tropical plants in an atrium—because the sculptures are made to serve as markers of the universality of art. In both cases the tribal works are instrumentalized, but in the Beyeler to serve as a marker of the European works’ history, in the Menil, to serve as a marker of the presentness of their own spiritual concerns.

In the Bechtler collection there are no tribal artifacts, and the contextualization that occurs is generally one that brings the artists into the family, effectively eliminating their social difference from the collectors, but urging reflection about “art.” One could argue that the single-donor modern art museum elevates the art it contains, and in its presentation of the narrative of its collection it elevates the collector, but the proliferation of discourses within the gallery space introduces cues making clear that the art is, in fact, art, and that it needs narrative to produce its value. The desired conversation works best for the acculturated museum-visiting interlocutor—the one for whom looking at art is part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls his habitus.  

29 Whether or not this profoundly amoral and only partially historicized conception of the works is upheld by the Fondation’s display and educational apparatus is an important consideration, but one for another investigation. For Boehm’s discussion of the desire to move beyond the European and the role of tribal objects in this, see Boehm, “Proven Works,” 47-8.

30 For a discussion of how the metaphor of “conversation” and its exclusion of references to the world beyond the museum—the work “speaks” for itself, for example—serves to ratify the museum’s autonomy, see Daniel J. Sherman, “Art History and Art Politics: The Museum According to Orsay,” *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2
them—middle-class and family-oriented. The Bechtler’s gallery arrangements pay very little attention to didactic approaches or to trends that lie outside the range, remarkably self-contained, of the single-donor modern art museum. There is no attempt to tell an audience what the works do and do not reveal about the world in which they were created; this information would distract from their availability and presentness.

The Bechtler Museum building, on the other hand, in its architectural difference—it is clearly not an exercise in civic branding or “starchitecture” on the Bilbao model—does address the world and the context of its making. Botta is seen, and sees himself, as "a builder—a practical site-man rather than a theorist" committed to the urban fabric and the continuation of architecture as conceived between tradition and modernism, rather than of the sculptural objects currently fashionable.31 He argues that the architects producing such work have lost the plot, that they “have other concerns, which no longer address the constructed work but focus above all on virtual aspects and comparisons.”32


32 Mario Botta, “Light and Gravity,” in Gabrielle Cappellato, ed., *Mario Botta: Light and Gravity: Architecture 1993-2003* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2004), 10-1. A longer excerpt is appropriate to situate Botta’s architecture against the likes of Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Liebskind, or Peter Eisenman:

Through experimentation, current trends or cultural approaches, the culture of contemporary architecture seems to move away from examining these primary aspects of building (light and gravity), almost as if the architectural work can forgo them. Indeed, one gets the impression that those working in this field today have other concerns, which no longer address the constructed work but focus above all on virtual aspects and comparisons, fleeting moments, surface component and playful aspects, seemingly the only ones still capable of galvanizing any interest in debate in this discipline. … It seems that the civic and social commitment that has sustained the hopes of this discipline for thousands of years has vanished. New forms of expression stoop to the laws suggested by standardisation [sic] to the dictates of the vogue and the market, in which everything—and anything—is reduced to merchandise to be embraced and appraised solely on economic interests. In the face of this disarming portrait, I can discern that there nevertheless remain margins for contributing to works that can emerge as positive expressions and take on the responsibilities and enormous potential of our era.
Despite Botta's rhetoric about urban life, his preference for solid planes and spiritual affect at times presents blank walls to the city rather than the communitarian eyes on the street favored by most contemporary urban planners. Yet this is not the case with the Bechtler Museum. With its piloti, canopy, and sculpture patio, it engages the street life of the campus. Though not a signature building that the city can use as an icon in promoting itself and only modestly contextual—Botta used terra cotta tile because he felt it related to a small red-brick Gothic Revival church across the street—the Bechtler sits tastefully within itself and its surroundings. It is a "jewel box," a description that indicates that the value is to be found within. The building is a container, but a particularly elegant and human-scaled one. In what is perhaps the kernel of the debate over the architecture of museums—whether the building should be a more-or-less neutral backdrop for art or a work of art in itself—the Bechtler is a striking building that defers to art. It is also one voice inserted into a proposed conversation between buildings, institutions, and the city of Charlotte in the Levine Center for the Arts. From the sculpture patio on the second floor, under the overhang of the fourth-floor galleries, the view connects the new cultural campus: from the Bechtler's lone column to a new building for an African-American cultural center, to a new Machado and Silvetti-designed home for the Mint, back to Firebird and a plaza full of citizens presumably filled with civic pride. Out of sight, too large to comprehend within the view, behind and towering over the Mint, stands the 48-story office block that made the campus possible, and that may, in the end, define the limits of its possibilities.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This thesis has taken as its starting point the idea that there is nothing “natural” about
the art museum, as architecture, as institution, or as repository and theater for the, equally
non-natural, collection of art. Instead the museum is a cultural form, and as such produces
and is produced by discourse. To make the museum cohere requires work—but that work
must not be understood as a to-do list of tasks for curators and administrators, but rather as
the group of ideas, actions, and events that surround each museum. While there are many
commonalities amongst the work of institutions, the particular nexus is distinct for each
museum. Each museum is a historically situated but also historically specific entity; therefore
an examination of one museum requires a combination of historic, comparative, and
expository research.

Each of the three chapters of this thesis has worked to interpret the discourse
surrounding the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art. The thesis’s case study approach situated
the architecture of the Bechtler museum against a background of typological thinking about
museum architecture that has been useful for critical museum studies. In light of this context,
the single-donor modern art museum was taken to be part of a discourse in which such a
museum is to embody both a collector’s vision and the vision of the architect that presents
and perfects the collector’s vision. These visions are part of the single-donor modern art
museum’s self-generated fiction, the narrative under which the institution operates.
Fiction and narrative are not intrinsic to structures or institutions, but are cultural forms, and can be discerned by comparison. The comparanda, the Menil Collection and the Fondation Beyeler, were chosen for their institutional similarities to the Bechtler. Their juxtaposition has shown the three museums to be iterations of a particular idea of the museum in which the meaning of the art collected, and of the collection of art as an action, is defined by the intentions of the collector. The comparanda have also allowed an investigation of the specific character of the Bechtler’s fiction: it is the collection of a middle-class family of art patrons. The three museums repeat a mid-twentieth century mode of museum architecture and museography. With their bare “white cube”-inflected galleries, each of the three buildings provides a “neutral” setting for the display of art and each continues to treat art as the object of disinterested contemplation, maintaining an historically bourgeois definition of the role and purpose of art. As a building, each museum defers to the art collected and displayed within.

In the case of the Bechtler, and to a lesser extent, the earlier Beyeler, the supposed deferral of the building to the collection re-enacts a moment in the history of the art museum before the dominance of the museum building as brand and icon for marketing a city. Mario Botta was Andreas Bechtler’s choice to design the building housing his collection, and the city of Charlotte went along with him, rather than grasping for a “signature” or “statement” building like Santiago Calatrava’s 2001 addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum or Daniel Liebeskind’s 2006 addition to the Denver Art Museum. In a moment when a new museum building is expected to change perceptions of a city for the trendier, if not the better, the Bechtler Museum and the Levine Center for the Arts, the cultural campus of which it is a part, seem not so much conservative as remarkably self-assured.
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