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***Josef Paul Kleihues***  
***Museum of Contemporary Art***  
***Chicago, 1991-1996***

**Franz Schulze**

Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art is the first and thus far the only building produced in America by the Berlin architect Josef Paul Kleihues. To those familiar with his efforts both earlier and later, it is easily recognizable as his own. Elements as large as his customary square modules and as small as the steel screw-head that normally fastens each panel to his building frames are much in evidence in Chicago. In view of this, and recalling statements Kleihues has made about the museum, the viewer is likely to ask to what extent the work is uniquely responsive to its specific setting.

Kleihues has said that his design was greatly influenced by the architecture of Chicago, a city he also affirms as having affected his thinking more than any other except Rome. There is some merit in that claim, which nonetheless warrants further examination. Simply described, the building is sternly symmetrical, with its west, or main, façade reached via a tall, one-story high stair and flanked by two three-story wings. The prevailing color is the gray of the two top cast-aluminum-clad floors that perch on a white limestone base. While such an account suggests the classical tradition, the style is clearly modernist in its simplicity and lack of period decoration. The square is the dominant and uniformly readable shape, governing those parts of the building that are fenestrated and those that are not.

Does this description accord with "Chicago-type" architecture? Not especially. The most notable classicist associated with the town is Mies van der Rohe, who happens also to have been the most famous modernist in the city's history.

Kleihues's museum does bear some similarity with Mies's well-known rectilinearity, but it is noticeably more opaque than the vitreous towers for which Mies is best known in Chicago and the rest of the United States. To the degree that Chicago architecture is reputedly pragmatic and functional as opposed to historicistic and decorative - a generalization open to question in its own right - there is nothing strikingly pragmatic or functional about the museum, either in its exterior or interior. The attribute that most attaches it to Chicago is its modular grid, a bow to the layout of the city streets, which is notable for its consistent reliance on squares and rectangles. Indeed that fidelity is not only the most perceptibly Chicago-like trait about the museum but perhaps the museum's most winning feature.

That is to say, Kleihues's chief success is urbanistic. The building occupies an uncommonly splendid space in one of the choice neighborhoods in the city, the glittering residential and shopping area east of North Michigan Avenue that Chicagoans call the Gold Coast. The land, owned by the State of Illinois but leased for \$1 a year to the museum, extends east to Lake Shore Drive. It is flanked to the south by the Collegiate Gothic structures of the Northwestern University Chicago campus, to the north by a row of buildings - mostly apartment blocks - of varied use and roughly

equal height. Into this area the museum fits comfortably and unobtrusively, reminding the viewer of the statement made by the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the museum, Allan M. Turner, "We did not want to drop a spaceship on that wonderful piece of land." Kleihues succeeded in avoiding any hint of self-referential arrogance in his building. There is nothing startling about the museum in its setting, although some of the notions he toyed with during the planning process, including a ramp that would have extended east from the site, literally above Lake Shore Drive and ending at the edge of the lake, would have been not only exotic by Chicago standards but probably impossible to achieve, since the city has historically, jealously - and successfully - guarded its spectacular lakefront against nearly all architectural intrusions.

If the building is at home in its neighborhood, it has nonetheless been greeted by more than occasional criticism. Many visitors have seen it as cold and severe, so ruthless in its symmetrical massing that one searches in vain for any sign of warmth, especially on the western front. The single exterior passage of relief is the sculpture garden, which lies just to the east of the main block. Here Kleihues wisely granted the overall design a kind of informal freedom of plan and terraced elevation. As one surveys it, the easy descent to a lower level is animated by sculptural objects that, together with the vista toward the lake, add up to a fetching panorama.

Local response to the interior has been decidedly more favorable. In the parlance of the profession, the museum is an "inside" rather than an "outside" building. Once visitors have climbed the slightly intimidating front stair and entered the foyer, they are struck by the brilliance of the light, by the high, wide, and deep sense of space all around them, and by the use of bone-white paint on all the walls, a device that only adds to a quality of chaste luxury. Turning around and glancing back through the entry and its immense, persistently square-shaped windows yields a view of a small park beyond which stands the city's historic and much beloved nineteenth-century Gothicized folly, the water tower. There again one appreciates Kleihues's thoughtful reaction to the special site he built upon. The sensation provided is pure Chicago, with the aforementioned walls of buildings flanking the park and the museum underscoring the city's consistent rectilinearity of plan and elevation. Kleihues's geometry also seems appropriate in the light-drenched foyer. He has relaxed the dominant symmetry somewhat, adding a two-story museum store to the south-west, and opposite it, to the northwest, a rather handsome stair, the plan of which is shaped like a mandorla.

Before one follows it, however, a long corridor to the east beckons, tracing the museum's longitudinal axis and serving to bifurcate the main space into two huge galleries that are meant to accommodate temporary exhibitions. The decision to separate these areas has led to more criticism, chiefly by those who find the division not only arbitrary but spatially dis-unifying. Kleihues's purpose was, of course, not only to reinforce the symmetry of the plan but to provide an inviting view toward the lake beyond, which is visible again through more of those vast modular windows. Before visitors get that far, they have entered the museum refectory, well sited, since the long, wide vista can be not only enjoyed but studied at length over the boon of food and drink.

The museum's permanent collection occupies the top floor, a space given over mostly to two pairs of barrel-vaulted galleries laid out parallel to each other and separated by the two-story-high central corridor. Skylights illuminate both exhibition areas, which are connected by a particularly winning small gallery that looks east to the lake, west to the hall below. This may be the most exhilarating passage in the museum, as light, airy, and spatially expansive as the building's exterior (which a visitor may almost have forgotten by now) is glum.

The ground floor comprises for the most part the education center and the auditorium. The emphasis there is perceptibly functional but effective. A parking garage is attached to the building at this level. Since it descends below grade, curving past uncomfortably narrow parking spaces, the viewer may wonder why none of the main parts of the building is underground. Had it been so designed,

the exterior entry stair might have been less austere steep and the whole structure correspondingly more ingratiating. By the time this thought occurs, it is purely idle speculation; the building would have borne an altogether different character and scale. As it stands now, some three years old, it adds up to a formidable work, but one of mixed blessings, which on balance Chicago seems gradually to be learning to accept, if not - at least not yet - to love.