

FT Weekend US edition

Life & Arts Simon Schama on the new Whitney Museum | House & Home Milan's stylish makeover

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FTWeekend

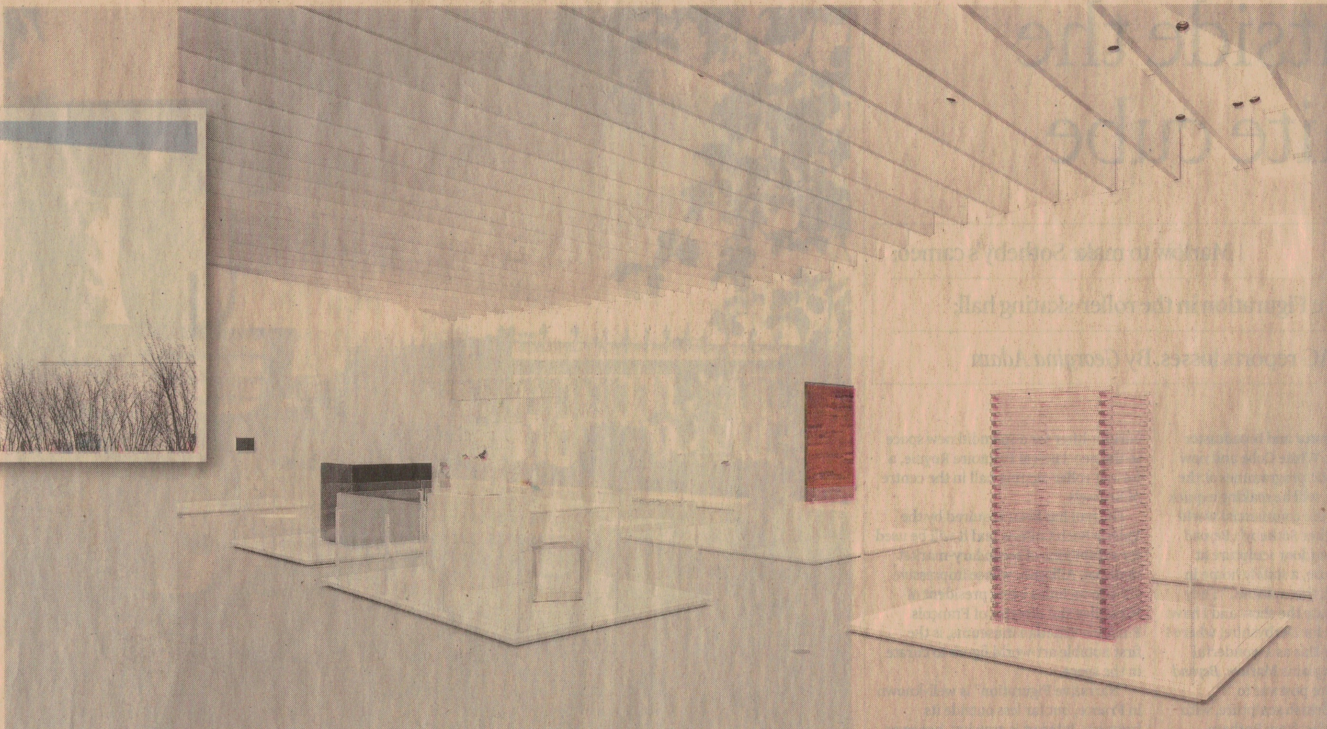
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Collecting



The whole point about glass is the light. It is a solid that allows the passage of rays through it—demanding that they sparkle, reflect and refract. Without glass, there is no contemporary architecture. There are no car windscreens, no TVs, no microscopes or lenses, no smartphones. No modern world.

Because of the interaction between glass and light, a museum of the material can be something very different to a museum of art. Indeed the new wing for the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York is a pure expression of that relationship, an opalescent light box and an elegant new addition to an unusual corporate campus.



House of shards

emerging from a town once dominated by the smoking, cigar-shaped brick chimneys of its old glassworks. Today, the museum is the world's largest institution dedicated to glass.

Though most of the manufacture of the material is now taken care of elsewhere, the company headquarters and adjacent museum have between them become a kind of larger museum of US postwar Modernism.

The history of the buildings begins in 1951 with Wallace Harrison's black, glass-clad headquarters, an almost classical set of façades alongside his new-slung glass-brick museum building, continues with the subsequent addition of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson's transparent research facility in 2001 — the techniques of which would later be applied to the glass stairs now so familiar as the lingua franca of Apple stores.

But the new \$65m building, designed by New York-based Thomas Phifer (and funded by Corning Inc) is something new again. A white glass box punctuated by huge, translucent windows, it has a milky opalescence that is almost the reverse of Harrison's obsidian structure. It is only a single-storey building, but it exerts an enigmatic presence on the landscape, picking up the grey of the clouds and the glint of the sun. The interior, however, is something very different; a curious disavowal of the box in which it sits. The walls wave and curve inside, wrapping themselves around the exhibits — the huge works of art in glass

that had proved so difficult to display in the old building.

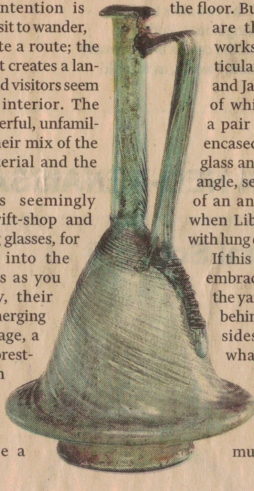
The architect's intention is clearly to allow the visit to wander, rather than to dictate a route; the internal arrangement creates a languorous looseness, and visitors seem to dissipate in the interior. The works here are wonderful, unfamiliar and moving in their mix of the delicacy of the material and the intensity of purpose.

Katherine Gray's seemingly oddly-arranged, thrift-shop and flea-market drinking glasses, for example, coalesce into the shape of three trees as you move further away, their browns and greens merging into trunks and foliage, a comment on the deforestation associated with the glass industry.

A mile-long black rope by Liza Lou reveals itself to be a

meticulously beaded work of almost fanatical density, coiled like a snake on the floor. But most powerful of all are the monumental cast works by Czech artists, particularly Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová, one of which appears to depict a pair of grey human lungs encased in a massive block of glass and which, from another angle, seems to form the wings of an angel — a work crafted when Libenský was diagnosed with lung cancer.

If this ethereal space, with its embrace of soft white walls, is the yang, its yin appears right behind it. One of the gallery's sides is characterised by what has been called the "promenade", a broad internal avenue that provides a way through to one of the museum's star attractions,



the hot glass shows where glassmakers demonstrate their techniques. Huge, dark and resolutely industrial, this space is continued within the bones of the former Steuben Glass Works, an art glassmaker that was once a competitor of Tiffany and which was acquired by Corning in 1918.

With raked seating and dramatic glass processes, it makes clear the closeness of contemporary theatre to industrial space. It is an imposing space made yet more surprising by its following on from such a white, pure approach. From the outside, the contrast is clearer, the black, corrugated metal-clad surfaces of the former Steuben works recalling its smoke-stained industrial past.

In the midst of the museum's collection is a curious object, a window shutter in which the slats are made of yellow and green glass. This had been the big idea, the product on which the glass company's move to Corning in the mid-19th century was predicated.

It was a complete failure (presumably

Clockwise from main image: the interior of the new contemporary art and design wing of the Corning Museum of Glass, New York, designed by Thomas Phifer; a glass pitcher (c25-125AD) displayed in the museum; the exterior of the building's new wing

Iwan Baan/Corning Museum of Glass

because it didn't stop the light coming in — the one thing blinds are supposed to do). Yet Corning did subsequently make its reputation with everything from Pyrex to Gorilla Glass (now used on iPhones), and the town, with its wonderfully preserved main street, was formed and shaped by it.

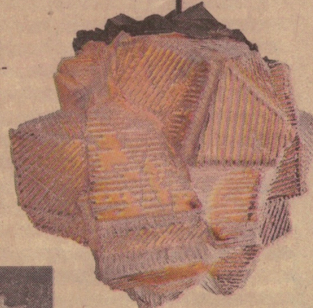
This is a very particular institution, one that unifies the concerns of contemporary museology, enveloping in one place art, craft, science, popular culture, manufacture, and the biggest, kitschiest museum store I have ever seen. In uniting populism (and genuine popularity) and deep scholarly engagement, it achieves the ultimate aim of the modern museum. Antique glass of the most exquisite quality appears under one roof with a 21-tonne casting for the lens of the Hale telescope.

And all this is encapsulated by an architecture of glass, which captures the essence of the material of modernity.

cmog.org

Glass for sale

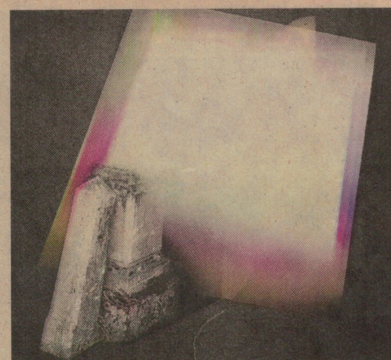
► Unique Assemblage pendant lamp by Thaddeus Wolfe (2014-15), available from R & Company at Collective design



▼ Unique Assemblage vessel by Thaddeus Wolfe, R & Company at Collective



▲ 'Adaptation' (2014) by Ayala Serfaty, Maison Gerard at Collective



◀ 'Malevich Variations' by Lital Lev Cohen, Tempo Rubato gallery at Frieze New York