

The Whitney Museum at Gansevoort
2007 – 2015 New York, USA

In 1914 the sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney opened the Whitney Studio in Greenwich Village. This was a space where American artists could meet and exhibit their works. When the Metropolitan Museum refused a donation of 500 works from her collection, Gertrude decided to create a museum of her own in 1931. In 1954 the premises were moved to 54th Street, and, twelve years later, to Madison Avenue, in the famous building designed by Marcel Breuer. Some decades later this proved to be too small for a collection that meanwhile had grown out of all proportion, and the galleries were too cramped to exhibit many of the more monumental sculptures. As space ran short, the museum hived off various functions into other nearby buildings over the years.

The new home of the Whitney Museum designed by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop brings together all the spaces of the museum in the new building, equipped with numerous, flexible galleries that for the first time make it possible to exhibit many items of the collection that were previously kept in storage.

The original commission received in 2003 envisaged an extension Breuer's museum. However, lack of space and planning restrictions led in 2006 to the radical decision to construct a new building. The choice fell on a site in the Meatpacking District that still retains an industrial character, not far from Greenwich Village and the High Line. This was to be a homecoming for the Whitney, not far from where the museum was founded.

The site is bounded on the west by the Hudson River and on the east by the start of the High Line. On the ground floor the mass of the complex is raised up off the ground and set back from the street. Tall windows screen a public "plaza": the urban heart of the project. It is fully open to the public and the teeming life of the district, enlivened by the museum's reception areas, an open gallery and restaurant.

Above, laid out on eight levels, are the 200 000 square feet of the museum space. The plan of the building is divided into two parts, distributed on either side of the central spine that houses the stairs, elevators and utilities. The part to the north contains the spaces used for the preparation of exhibitions and workshops, the part to the south houses the exhibition spaces.

Laid out on the second and third floors, with scenic windows overlooking the river, is a multifunctional theater seating 170: a space that was never available to the Whitney in its previous locations. Thanks to the fully retractable seats, the theater can also be converted into a cinema, exhibition gallery and a space for dance and artistic performances.

The external form of the building – with large volumes set side by side, cut with sharp edges, with a more imposing mass towards the river and irregular and stepped down towards the city – interprets the imperfect and variegated character of the Meatpacking District where the dockside and industrial atmosphere of old New York still lives on.

From the fifth to the eighth level the great galleries open out, offering twofold views across the city and river. The largest gallery, on the fifth floor, is a rectangular space covering approximately 18 000 square feet unobstructed with pillars: 81 m long and 22.5 wide. To the east each gallery opens onto a terrace, which doubles as outdoor exhibition space.

The gallery on the top floor, the eighth, is naturally lit by a shed roof that captures light from the north: the best for works of art. The external staircase that relegates the terraces and cooling towers that soar over the rooftop are reinterpretations of the fire stairs and tanks characteristic of buildings in New York. They further disarticulate the mass of the museum, integrating it into the texture of the district and mediating the transition between the building and the sky.