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The framer's art

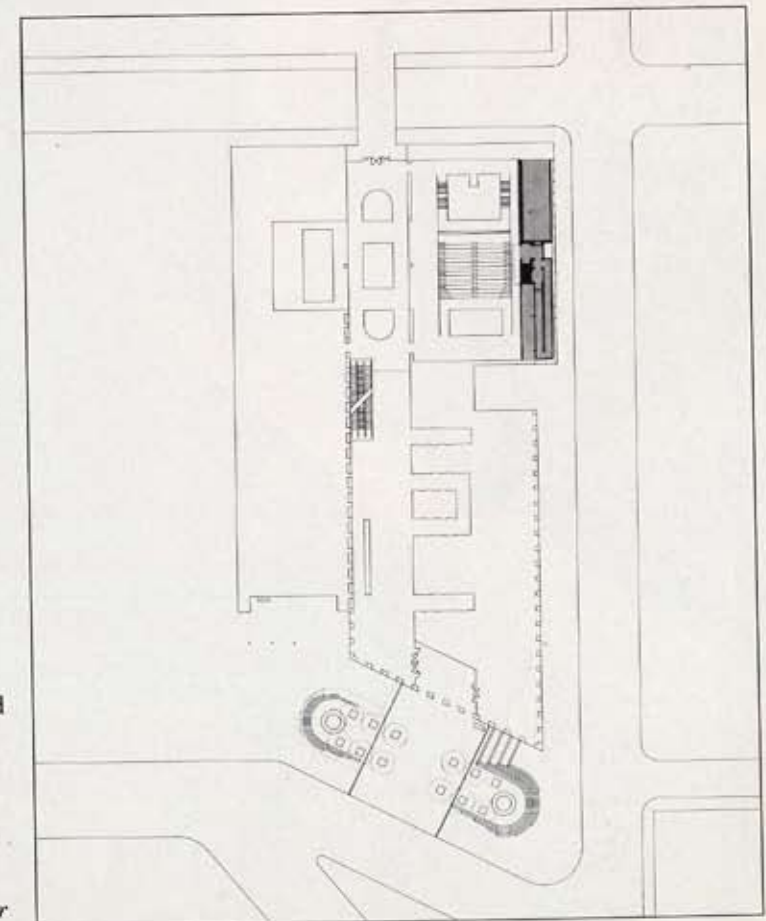
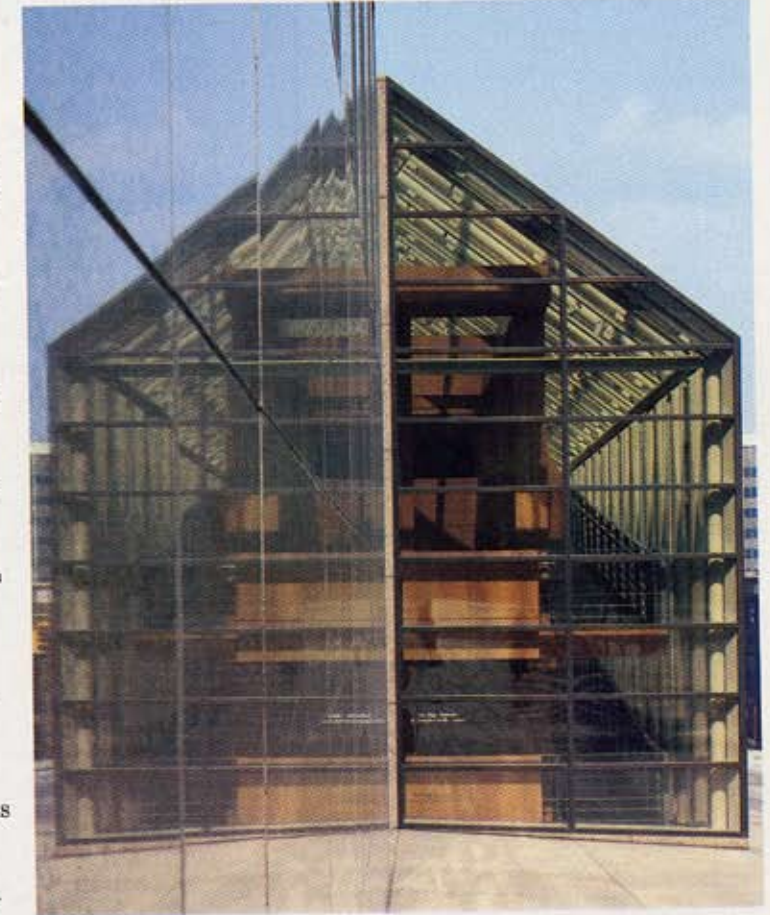
The High Museum
at Georgia-Pacific Center
Atlanta, Georgia
Parker and Scogin Architects, Inc.

© Timothy Hursley/The Arkansas Office

As art objects in their own right, some modern museums almost steal the show from the collections they house. No architectural star turn exemplifies this phenomenon more brilliantly than Richard Meier's High Museum in Atlanta (RECORD, January 1984). Regardless of whether one judges it successful as a place in which to view art, the High is a tough act to follow. Such, at least, is the predictably skeptical response to news that another architect, the Atlanta firm of Parker and Scogin, has designed satellite galleries for Meier's great white mother ship, and installed them in the base of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Georgia-Pacific Center, a pink granite office tower. There is no mystery to the rationale for establishing this cultural outpost, whose existence relies on the collaboration of corporate, public, and institutional sponsors: the main museum is nearly two miles north on Peachtree Street, beyond the pale of Atlanta's traditional business center, and the downtown "branch" represents a brave incursion of art into a district till now devoted wholly to commerce. Appropriately, the new galleries (which are intended for loan exhibitions and selections from the High's own holdings) occupy space originally set aside for a public exhibit of Georgia-Pacific's industrial wood processes (colored area in plan).

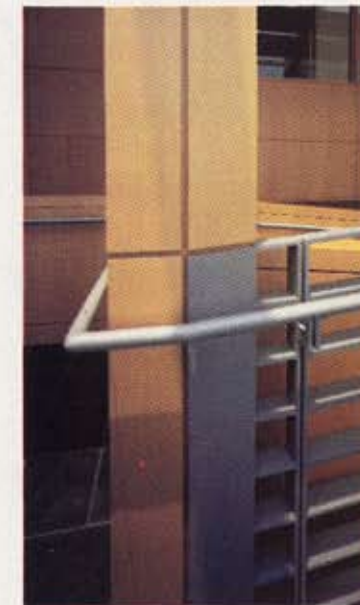
A tall, narrow, greenhouse-like shed, directly exposed to the southern sun and linked to the front lobby by the foyer of a glass-walled auditorium, the extant shell was a singularly inhospitable place for displaying or conserving art. With hindsight, it might seem inevitable that the need to install adequate hanging surfaces, protection against natural light, an independent climate-control system, and security barriers would require the museum to take the form of a building within a building. That these practical demands should inspire a coherent architectural composition was, on the other hand, by no means self-evident; but Parker and Scogin's scheme plays up the ambiguous autonomy of the galleries within a larger surround as an organizing esthetic idea. Happily, one can overlook the trivial games with nesting-box or Russian doll motifs this strategy might have prompted and admire instead a structure whose beauty is both intrinsic and *substantial*—an "interior" architecture seemingly more solid than many freestanding buildings. This effect of palpable substance does not depend on literal-minded use of materials and ornament—faux or genuine—conventionally associated with exterior construction. On the contrary, Parker and Scogin clad the outer surfaces of the galleries in exotic wood veneer, announcing frankly that, in physical reality, the museum is as much an indoor artifact as any fine piece of furniture.

The abstract configuration of walls, volumes, and passageways within the existing transparent envelope is nonetheless emphatically architectural, with a "facade" that separates the museum from the Georgia-Pacific Center lobby and auditorium, a portal that gives onto a clearly articulated processional route, and a sequence of rooms defined as worthy destinations. How to insert display spaces flexible enough to accommodate a changing array of art works in various sizes and diverse media was a multidimensional puzzle; bringing people to them was another challenge. Fortunately, as it turned out, strict limits on manageable program area set by museum administrators left ample room for circulation. Beginning with the orientation of the museum entrance to a cross-axis through the Georgia-Pacific auditorium, a series of intersecting enfilades directs the visitor beyond existing concrete columns and down switchback ramps into galleries on two lower levels. The resulting parti is inherently symmetrical and orderly in spite of sudden turns, dramatic vistas up and down an open core, and unexpected views of city streets that confound too easy an understanding of the museum as a simple, self-contained geometric figure—too easy, that is, if one conceives such a building as a metaphoric invitation to discovery. If this emblematic role is subtler here than at Meier's High, it is no less effective in conveying its message: art can command attention with sheer virtuosity, but it is sometimes more compelling when it beckons quietly. *Douglas Brenner*





Because the new High was built on the south side of the Georgia-Pacific Center, where the tower's base steps down from the main entrance on Peachtree Street to the west, lobby access conducts visitors to the uppermost of the museum's three tiers (plans overleaf). Fully glazed windows in the museum entry "facade," a necessary barrier for security and climate control (top right, this page), overlook the roof and interior of a barrel-vaulted gallery as well as the ramps that lead to lower levels. A landing and balconies beyond the threshold offer more dramatic views indoors and through the glass shed to downtown Atlanta (opening page, opposite, and this page, middle right and below). Sightlines not only help to connect different strata within a compact vertical layout, but also reinforce the museum's presence in the downtown business center.



Color, texture, and geometry articulate and enrich the otherwise undecorated building-within-a-building. Parker and Scogin coordinated its scheme to preexisting structural columns, but painted them white to stand apart from the museum's paneled "exterior" walls and loggia-like central circulation spine. These architectural elements are veneered in African anigre, a wood remarkable for the fineness of its grain and golden-tawny hue, qualities that subtly contrast with the bolder markings and deeper tones of mahogany and teak woodwork in the Georgia-Pacific lobby. Anigre's close grain also minimized the complications of matching pattern and color in three dimensions—around window frames, soffits, even the convex top of the barrel vault. Parker and Scogin personally selected some 80,000 square feet of fitches, of which approximately 30,000 square feet found their way into book- and slip-matched surfaces. Woodwork was assembled in traditional fashion, with panels indented to overlap recessed splines, from which they hang on metal clips. Painted and welded steel railings differentiate ramps outside the central spine from the axial passageway with its wooden parapets. Floors are hand-chiseled slate.

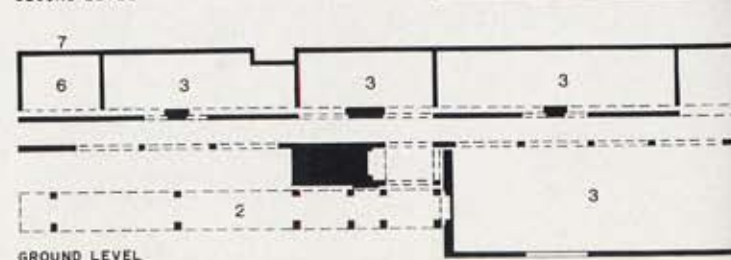
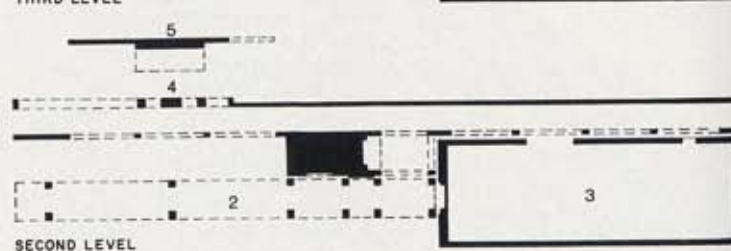
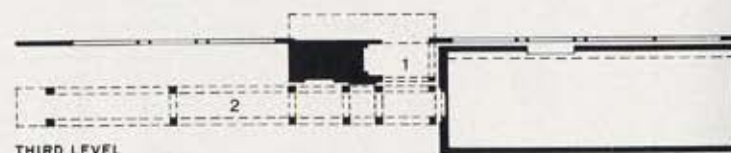
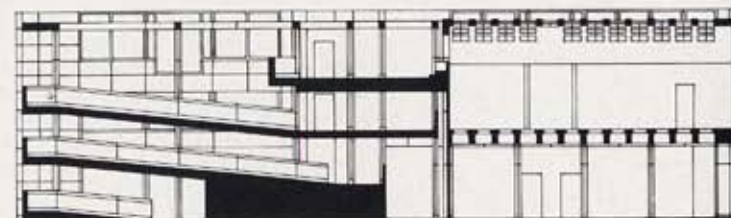
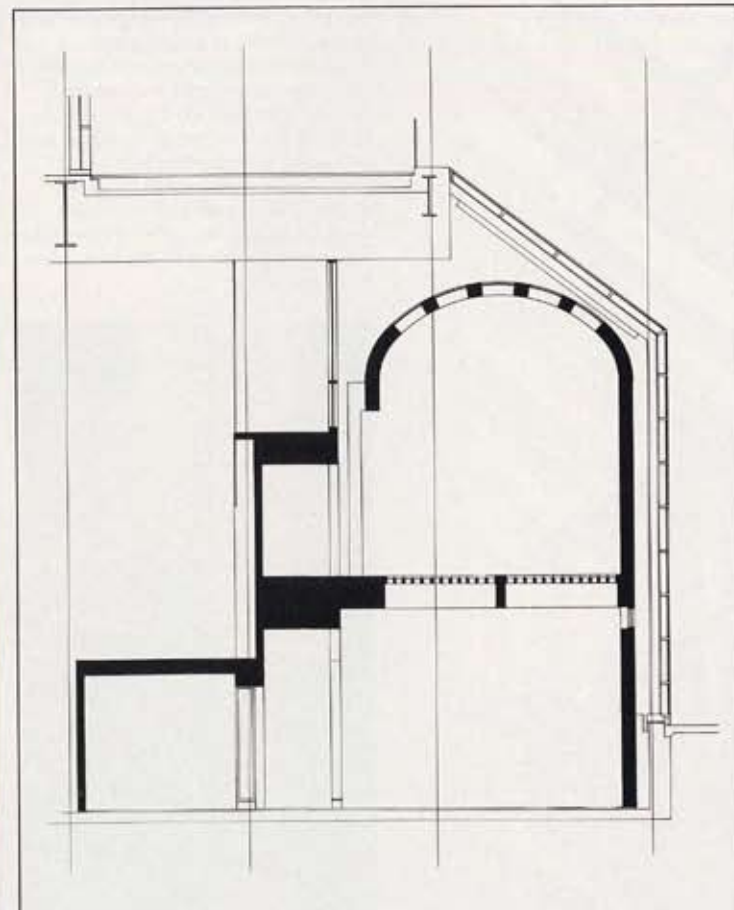


Provided with its own art-handling area, offices, bookstore, and some 4,200 square feet of gallery space, as well as access to restaurant and conference facilities in the Georgia-Pacific Center, the High's downtown satellite enjoys nearly all of the perquisites of many independent museums. The two grandest galleries stacked under the glass-shed roof combine with more intimate rooms carved out of the base of the tower,



and a complement of niches and multistory open wells, to create an adaptable exhibition environment. Individual spaces can be closed to the public while displays are installed or dismantled without interrupting circulation through the rest of the museum. The contrast of wood paneling outside the galleries with gypsum-board walls inside (specified to meet curatorial standards set at the parent High) intensifies the particularity of each room. Following generally accepted conservation guidelines, direct exposure to sunlight was avoided wherever art might be shown. Indirect illumination, however, safely infuses a daylit ambience. Translucent panes overhead in the vaulted upper gallery (these pages) can be dimmed with fabric filters or opaque shutters inserted above the coffers. Floor-mounted glass blocks transmit light to (or from) the gallery downstairs.

1. Entry
2. Ramp
3. Gallery
4. Shop
5. Offices
6. Art handling
7. Shipping/receiving





The play of daylight admitted through the glass shed animates a constantly changing show of chromatic and plastic effects. Such ephemeral beauty is thematically appropriate to a museum amid the corporate world, where brief moments for connoisseurship may have to be seized from a crowded agenda. The busy urban milieu also encourages experimental ventures, for which the new High affords a congenial setting: the possibility for installing large sculpture or environmental constructions in the full-height areas alongside the ramps remains to be investigated, as does the potential for the vaulted gallery. As a background to art in other media, the museum is suitably deferential without sacrificing its own esthetic integrity. Precise geometry, definite juxtapositions of materials, and clear spatial intervals accentuate the discrete tectonic identity of every element in Parker and Scogin's composition. Narrow slits between the towerlike elevator housing and the open framework of the central ramp, for example, separate different esthetic and functional entities (top left and opposite). Vertical extension of the wood-paneled "facade" downward among the painted walls of lower-level galleries demarcates the theoretical boundary of the building-within-a-greenhouse, beyond which the museum has annexed basement space inside the office building proper (bottom left). The museum's steel-frame structure rises above the mechanical room for the entire Georgia-Pacific Center, a location that precluded laying new foundations. New beams below the slab carry columns for the galleries and central ramp framework, from which the outer ramp is cantilevered. Because the High requires its own museum-standard hvac, fire-control, and security systems, it actually operates as a self-sufficient environment.

The High Museum
at Georgia-Pacific Center
Atlanta, Georgia
Owner:
GA-MET, a Joint Venture of Georgia-Pacific Corporation and
The Metropolitan Life Insurance
Company
Architects:
Parker and Scogin Architects, Inc.—
Mack Scogin with Merrill Elam,
Lloyd Bray, Dick Spangler, Gil
Rampy, Isabelle Millet, George
Johnston, John Lauer, design;
W. Ennis Parker, project director
Engineers:
Browder & Guizamon and
Associates, Inc. (structural);
Jones, Nall and Davis (mechanical/
electrical)
Woodwork:
Woodwork Corporation of America
Consultants:
Ramon Luminance Design
(lighting); Costing Services Group
General contractor:
The Winter Construction Company

