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Bentel & Bentel's sleek and luminous café, bar, and restaurant, **THE MODERN**, infuses the Museum of Modern Art with a savory essence

By Suzanne Stephens

For years, New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has been famous for everything but its food. Even after Sette Mezzo took over its restaurant operations, as Sette MoMA, in 1993, the cuisine and the setting verged on the overly quiet. Now with The Modern, operated by acclaimed restaurateur Danny Meyer and designed by architects Bentel & Bentel, MoMA has a real chance at competing with its high-end Midtown Manhattan neighbors.

As you enter The Modern, on the ground floor of the restored 1939 building by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, a bar and café shimmer softly before you in a space originally occupied by a gallery. Here, gleaming wall and ceiling surfaces create a miragelike setting for the bar-and-café area's panoramic end wall, a refulgent photographic mural of a jungly garden. The mural, *The Clearing* (2003), by German artist Thomas Demand, is a life-size depiction of fake leaves made of paper—but never mind. It rivets your attention, almost making you forget that your view of the real thing—the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden—is blocked by a frosted-glass wall. True, the wall is translucent, but you have to be on the *other* side, in The Modern's fine-dining area, to enjoy the famous museum garden with its vines, trees, and sculptures.

Creating an ambitious venue that could offer a choice of casual or formal dining experiences within a tight museum space posed more than a culinary challenge: For starters, Meyer needed a smoothly functioning, soigné restaurant for a clientele who might have a taste for Modernism, but prefer it served with varied and pungent flair (like Meyer's cuisine). MoMA's director, Glenn Lowry, and its chief curator of architecture and design, Terence Riley, wanted to make sure the restaurant would keep the purity and clarity of the Goodwin-Stone architecture, while blending with the recent expansion and renovation by Yoshio Taniguchi with Kohn Pedersen Fox [RECORD, January 2005, page 94].

Although Taniguchi had submitted a restaurant design, Lowry felt that restaurant, retail, and other specialty operations required architects with experience in each particular area—the reason Gluckman Mayner designed the bookshop and Alspector Anderson the conservation spaces. For the restaurant, Lowry and Riley formed their own shortlist of architects, but soon found that Meyer favored the firm of Bentel & Bentel. Although this two-generation architectural practice lacks the high-octane reputation of



The swerving canopy is back on the original Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone portion of the Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53rd Street.

Inside, a restaurant, café, and bar occupy a former gallery space in the 1939 building, which you enter through the adjacent 1964 annex.





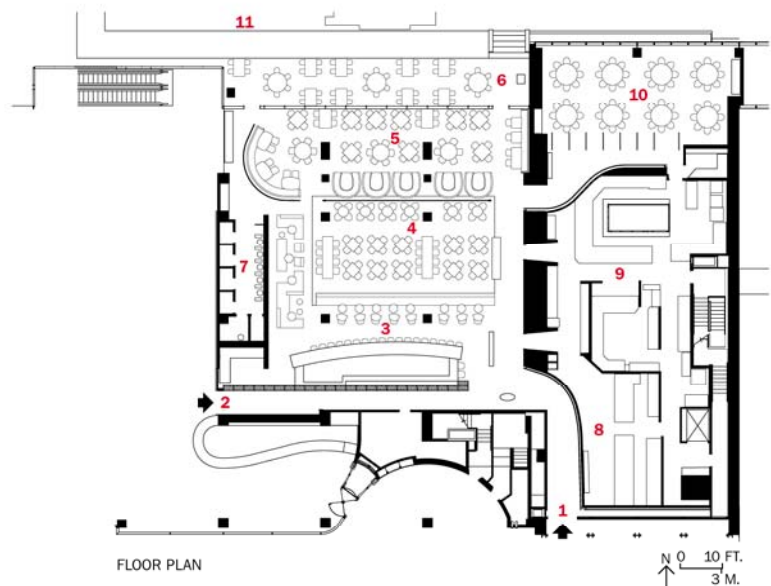
Frosted and bronze-tinted glass—along with the shimmering PVC-over-aluminum-framed ceiling panels and the stainless-steel cladding over the columns—gives the café/bar a dramatic luminosity. The showstopper is the photographic mural, *The Clearing* (2003), by Thomas Demand. The Berlin artist first photographed a park, then created a life-size simulation of the

vegetation with colored paper, lighting it to mimic the sun's rays, and photographed that tableau. The film negative was printed for an 8-foot-long-by-36-foot-high mural, cut in half and inserted between laminated glass panels, 8 by 18 feet in size. Then each 2,500-pound section was flown from Germany and clipped in place on the west wall.



Visitors enter the restaurant (above) from the lobby of the building originally designed by Goodwin and Stone. Perforated stainless-steel doors (opposite) close behind them as they walk along a hall past the bronze-glass wine rack behind the bar, into the café. A separate entrance opens from 53rd Street at the end of the Philip Johnson–designed annex.

1. 53rd Street entrance
2. Entrance from museum
3. Bar and lounge
4. Café
5. Restaurant
6. Garden dining
7. Restrooms
8. Café kitchen
9. Restaurant kitchen
10. Private dining room
11. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden





global design luminaries, it had created well-regarded, atmospheric interiors for Meyer's Gramercy Tavern and 11 Madison Park, as well as the separately owned Craft—all thronged by New York's restaurant cognoscenti.

Bentel & Bentel won over the museum officials with a design that deftly combines frosted and tinted glass planes, changing ceiling heights, and a range of floor textures (including black terrazzo, white oak, and dark carpet) to differentiate the various programmatic areas of the 14,400-square-foot restaurant. Against the stringently planar rectilinearity of these elements, the architects introduced such streamlined counterpoints as sinuously curved, frosted-glass walls and a gently arcing marble bar, which refer adroitly to the Goodwin-Stone restored canopy and lobby counter and Taniguchi's fritted glass. Besides the 112-seat space for fine dining, 110-seat café, and 18-seat bar, the brief called for two kitchens and a private dining room in the 1964 Philip Johnson–designed annex next door.

To compensate for the bar and café's less-than-soaring ceiling (at only 10 feet 6 inches high), Bentel & Bentel selected low-slung, spare Danish furniture (per a discount arrangement with the Danish government) along with the firm's own custom designs, and covered the ceiling in

a glossy PVC membrane stretched over an aluminum frame. To further dematerialize the structure, accentuating the mirage effect, the architects clad the existing columns in stainless-steel plates with a hand-polished ripple finish, and created a lighted glass wall of liquor bottles and wine racks as a glowing, vitreous backdrop to the bar.

While the café and bar areas provide the gleaming frame for Demand's showstopping photomural, which museum curator-at-large Kynaston McShine selected, a problem remains. The mural is a meta-experience. As stunning (and ironic) as it is, you still want to see the garden beyond the north-facing frosted-glass wall. One solution might have been to provide a translucent glass partition, which gradually becomes transparent as it rises, giving a sense of privacy to those seated in the fine-dining area, while opening up views of the garden and sky.

For its part, the fine-dining room, in a long, narrow, 23-foot-high slot defined by Taniguchi's glazed curtain wall and skylit ceiling, appears dramatic. To give the space some intimacy, Bentel & Bentel designed horse-shoe-shaped booths, terminated one end of the room with a bowed, frosted-glass, freestanding partition, and hung acoustical panels from the



The elegant facade overlooking MoMA's famous sculpture garden was designed by Taniguchi with space under the portico reserved for a terrace café (above). The dining room of The Modern soars to a 23-foot-height (opposite). The communal lavatory features porcelain bowls (right).



ceiling. The effect is calm if a bit corporate. By night, however, with candles indoors and lighting in the garden, a more glamorous ambience prevails.

The outdoor terrace, edging the upscale dining area, entices, but when does the restaurant ever use it? Lowry insists it will be up and running in time. But if it is reserved for the fine-dining crowd (the nearest kitchen is for the priciest menu), then the casual garden café—where museumgoers in the old days could sit for hours sipping coffee—would be lost.

Cavils aside, The Modern merits its front-and-center position within the museum. Well deserving of its name, the space evokes a 1930s sensibility without being too austere—or, on the other hand, too themed. It forms a compelling insertion into a historic building. And best, it's a place where you'd want to hang out. Now when you say, "Meet me at The Modern," you might mean for a drink or food, as well as art. ■

Project: *The Modern, New York City*
Architects: *Bentel & Bentel—Paul Bentel, FAIA, Peter Bentel, AIA, Carol Bentel, FAIA, Susan Nagle, Frederick Bentel, FAIA, collaborating principals*
Lighting: *George Sexton Associates*

Sources
Acoustical plaster ceiling: *Baswaphon*
Terrazzo flooring: *Krisstone*
Furniture: *Fritz Hansen; Erik Jorgensen; Kobenhavn Design; Albrecht Studio; Globe Furniture; R. Randers; M. Cohen & Sons*

