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## It's Just Daylight, but It Has Endless Shades



Richard Barnes

Dia:Beacon overlooking the Hudson River in Dutchess County, N.Y., around the time it opened in May 2003.

By **CAROL KINO**

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**W**HEN the Dia Art Foundation opened its new branch last year in an old factory overlooking the Hudson River in Beacon, N.Y., critics oohed and aahed over its rich, deep holdings of work by Minimalists like Richard Serra and Donald Judd, and by earthworks artists like Michael Heizer. But just as gasp-worthy was the museum itself: 240,000 square feet of white, spare, brilliantly lighted exhibition space in what was once a Nabisco Company printing plant.

Remarkably, 95 percent of the galleries are lighted by nothing fancier than natural light, thanks to 34,000 square feet of skylights designed in 1929 by Louis Wirsching Jr., Nabisco's in-house architect. Michael Govan, Dia's director, first saw the disused factory in winter and noticed immediately that it seemed brighter indoors than out. On a cloudy day the space "actually has this uplifting feeling because of the volume and evenness of the light," he said recently.

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"On a sunny day," he added, "you feel the brightness of the sun in an extreme way."

Because of the skylights, the look of the galleries and the art fluctuates not just seasonally but by the moment as well. While this adds immeasurably to the experience of visiting the museum, it also means opening hours must be keyed to the sun's arc. So on Oct. 14 Dia switched to its so-called winter schedule, shutting at 4 p.m. instead of its 6 p.m. summer time. "I don't know if any other museums do that," Mr. Govan said, "and if they do, it's probably to save on staff."

At first glance, Dia's approach seems a radical departure from the streamlined, consistently lighted "white cube," as the critic Brian O'Doherty famously described the stereotypical Modernist exhibition space. But in fact, many lighting experts say, it is not so much radical as it is a regrouping of sorts - a return to early-19th-century museum lighting practice, when the sole medium available was daylight, and the lighting "fixtures" had to be built into the architecture - as doors, windows and skylights.

After decades of artificial lighting innovation, a hot topic in the museum design world again is the integration of natural light and dealing with its assets and challenges.

In the last two centuries, explained the lighting sage Paul Marantz, a principal at the design consultancy Fisher Marantz Stone, "museums have gone from a room filled with pictures to a much more theatrical approach - spotlighting objects in space. With the ascendance of museum architecture again in the last two decades, we've returned to the idea of presenting art in a room. And nothing lights the volume of a room quite the same as natural light."

The first purpose-built art museum, the Dulwich Picture Gallery, opened in London in 1814 with a lighting plan devised by its architect, Sir John Soane. John Walsh, director emeritus of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, said that Soane had to confront the perennial problem of lighting pictures: "getting a good light without glare and without having the person looking at the painting distracted by the source."

His influential solution was to capture daylight with what is called a monitor: a lighthouse-like skylight placed so high that it didn't intrude on the field of vision. Beneath this, a gently sloping ceiling, known as a cove, reflected and diffused the light down onto the gallery walls.

By midcentury architects had added the lay light: a milky glass ceiling laid beneath the skylight, which made a glow like a lantern's. Lay lights could also camouflage supplementary artificial sources; in 1857, the South Kensington Museum (now known as the Victoria and Albert) became the first museum to install gaslight so that working people could visit at night.

When New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, designed by Calvert Vaux, opened

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John Hammond

The Dulwich Picture Gallery, which opened in 1814 in London.

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its current Fifth Avenue building in 1880, its lighting came from gas lamps and huge peaked skylights, remnants of which still illuminate the 1888 European paintings galleries. The Met went electric in 1890, and by the early 20th century, like most museums, it had installed chandeliers with standard A-lamps - the equivalent of today's 60-watt incandescent bulbs. "When you wanted more light, you just added more chandeliers," said Zack Zanolli of Fisher Marantz Stone, who was the Met's lighting designer until last year. After that, nothing much except chandelier styles changed until the 1950's, when the balance suddenly tipped toward artificial light.

So what drove daylight from galleries? Though Mr. Walsh cites conservation concerns as well as changing aesthetic tastes, Mr. Marantz offered a more prosaic rationale: "All those skylights had started to leak at around the time of the Second World War, and then they had to be covered with blackout curtains."

Then, said Jeffrey Daly, the Met's chief designer, "MoMA burst onto the scene." When the Museum of Modern Art's International Style extension by Philip Johnson opened in 1964, "everybody was hit with the revelation of lighting systems," he said. "There were so many great people working on it, inventing new solutions."

The man behind many of those solutions was Edison Avery Price, a fixtures manufacturer who cannily adapted industrial technology to create the first museum-quality track lights. Price also pioneered the use of the PAR 38 floodlight (originally invented for frozen food displays, Mr. Zanolli said). Used together - initially with a blue filter on every other bulb to emulate daylight - the two provided an even wash of light that defined the Modern's exhibition look.

But in the late 1960's, the model for museum lighting gradually metamorphosed into a dark, mysterious cavern pierced by dramatic pin spotlights. For this was, as Mr. Zanolli put it, "the golden age of special exhibitions, where museums tarted everything up." That trend culminated in shows like the traveling "Treasures of Tutankhamen," which reached the Met in 1978.

Yet the same era produced Louis I. Kahn's 1972 Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, whose top-lighted, barrel-vaulted galleries hark back to early-19th-century museum rooms. In the years since, more and more projects have incorporated naturally lighted galleries, including, most recently, the Audrey Jones Beck Building at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts (2000), designed by Rafael Viñoly; Tadao Ando's new building for the Fort Worth Museum (2002); Renzo Piano's addition to the High Museum in Atlanta (2005); Herzog and de Meuron's rebuilt de Young Museum in San Francisco (2005); and Brad Cloepfil's reinvention of 2 Columbus Circle (2007).

Many of the skylights and slanted glass walls in the Met expansions carried out by Kevin Roche over the last three decades use what are called "passive" daylighting systems: they are glazed with ultraviolet-light-filtering films to protect the works they light, and sometimes outfitted with louvers or screens or tinted to reduce light levels. Today, designers are using computers to create "active" systems. One example is Mr. Walsh's baby, the 1997 Getty Museum, designed by Richard Meier, whose top-lighted paintings galleries, full of Titians, Monets and other masters, were inspired by those at the Dulwich. Light levels are modulated with computer-controlled louvers programmed to respond to photocells in the walls. As the sun rises and falls, the louvers readjust themselves. (Mr. Marantz masterminded this project.)

Today, a lighting consultant usually comes on board with the architect for a new museum. At the Modern, whose expanded 53rd Street building opens on Nov. 20, that consultant was George Sexton. "There's certainly the desire to have natural light because of its temperature, its variability and the sense of access to the outside," he said. But "it's a complicated question," he added, "because most cultural institutions have to be very careful with their budgets."

Still, daylight will be an obvious presence throughout the new building; indeed, the use of natural light is the signature of the architect, Yoshio Taniguchi. The intention, Glenn D. Lowry, the Modern's director, said recently, is "to create a building that feels suffused with light and that feels very open to the city and the beat of the street." In contrast to the old galleries, which usually had just one windowed wall in use, the new galleries will have windows throughout that look onto the street or into a soaring atrium. One offers a glass wall that shows off a spectacular view of the buildings of Midtown Manhattan.

The top-floor temporary exhibition space will have two skylights whose exposure can be modified with shades and panels. "Sometimes you'll never know they're there," Mr. Sexton said. "Other times they'll be this wonderful aperture to the sky, and everything in between." For the primary gallery lighting, however, he has created a miniaturized halogen track system.

"Natural light never behaves exactly the way you want it to," Mr. Lowry said, "because it's too sunny, or there are intermittent clouds, or it's raining. But it's precisely its serendipity and inconsistency that makes it so interesting."

*Carol Kino, a contributing editor at Art & Auction magazine, is writing a monograph on the work of the Op artist Bridget Riley.*

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