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"Changes in Latitudes"
Terence Riley talks with Jeff Stein AIA

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Changes in Latitudes

From New York to Miami, one man's adventures in the museum trade **Terence Riley** talks with **Jeff Stein AIA**



Terence Riley is the director of the Miami Art Museum, and was previously the Philip Johnson chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.



Jeff Stein AIA is the director of the architecture program at the Boston Architectural Center and is the architecture critic for *Banker & Tradesman*.

Jeff Stein: People frequently refer to you as a tastemaker. What is your reaction to that?

Terence Riley: I think tastemaking is no sin, as long as that's not what you're trying to do.

Jeff Stein: Meaning that deliberate tastemaking becomes too political?

Terence Riley: Meaning that the politics and intrigue of purposeful tastemaking can obscure the quest to identify excellence.

Jeff Stein: You seem to think a lot about certain results as byproducts of other intentions. You once said that trying to solve a technical problem in the most innovative way often creates something beautiful.

Terence Riley: The flip side of that observation is that whenever you set out to make something beautiful, you usually don't.

Opposite: Images from the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *On-Site: New Architecture in Spain*, curated by Terence Riley (on view, February 12–May 1, 2006).



It comes down to the essence of good design: something beautiful derives from the elegance of the solution. It's a much better approach than endlessly chasing around the question of what constitutes beauty.

Jeff Stein: You have arrived at a bridging moment in your career. The Japanese have a word for it: *hashi*, meaning “the end of one thing and the beginning of another.” You're coming from New York, from one of the most venerable of museums, and going to what is the capital of the Caribbean and maybe soon of the whole Western Hemisphere, Miami, to become part of a relatively young institution.

Terence Riley: It's a change in a number of ways. It's a change in scale; a change in attitude; and a change in terms of a perceived future. The Museum of Modern Art has well over 100,000 objects in its collection. Miami Art Museum has 300. MoMA has 800 employees and MAM has about 80. MoMA occupies 630,000 square feet of space; MAM has 35,000 square feet at the moment, but is on the verge of building a 125,000-square-foot museum on a new site. MoMA is 75 years old and everything I did there was building upon layers of achievement by illustrious predecessors; MAM's history is much more compressed. What's interesting is that both institutions have offered me an incredible opportunity to play a role in building not only a great work of architecture but also a device for transforming an institution.

Jeff Stein: You had a significant role to play in MoMA's expansion, which was enormous, not only in square feet but also in dollars — \$350 million worth of construction. It has come together in a way that makes it an integral part of New York and New York an integral part of it.

Terence Riley: Yes, and yet the collection itself doesn't really belong to New York. It doesn't really even belong to the United States. It's an international asset. Whatever the Uffizi is to the Renaissance, MoMA is to Modernism. Still, MoMA is a forward-looking institution. It will continue to collect. But the center of gravity of MoMA, even as it moves forward in time, is pre-World War II. It's no longer the new kid on the block, but that can be a tremendous asset. Seeing the “*Demoiselles d'Avignon*” next to Andy Warhol's “*Marilyn*” next to Cindy Sherman's portraits gives you a ripple through history that is incredibly profound; all of those paintings and photographs are made richer by the comprehensiveness of that experience. Comparatively, MAM has a rather small collection, from post-World War II forward; its center of gravity is actually right now, which offers an incredible opportunity as far as the architecture is concerned.

It relates to the concept of *hashi* that you described. We are all definitely in a *hashi* moment right now, if you assume that *hashi* is not tied to a time interval. What happens when *hashi* lasts 20 or 25 years? Italo Calvino remarked in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* that the age of the heavy machines still exists, but they now obey the commands of weightless bits. With all our millennial haste to leave the 20th century behind and rush toward the digital future, some people thought that the *hashi* moment was simply a

Lines of Influence

After 15 years in the Museum of Modern Art's architecture and design department, Terence Riley is leaving an institution that has shaped design sensibilities since the genesis of the Modern Movement



1932 Department of architecture established; Philip Johnson, chairman. First show, **Modern Architecture, International Exhibition**, tours the country (1932-38); related book, *Modern Architects*, by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, and Lewis Mumford.

1934 **Machine Art**, a pioneer presentation of machine-produced objects initiates the design collection, followed in 1935 by exhibition *New Acquisitions from the Exhibition of Machine Art*.

1938 **Bauhaus: 1919-1928**, an exhibition and major book edited by Herbert Bayer and Ise and Walter Gropius; related traveling exhibition, *The Bauhaus: How It Worked* (1939-40).

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



1941 *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*, a competition, publication, and exhibition directed by Eliot Noyes, leads to manufacture of prize-winning designs, including chairs by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen; related traveling exhibition, *Manufacturing Modern Furniture and Furniture Design Today*.

1948 *The House in the Museum Garden* by Marcel Breuer, an actual house in outdoor exhibition area, with accompanying publication by Peter Blake and Marcel Breuer.

1950-1955 *Good Design*, a series organized by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., intended to influence wholesale furnishings buyers as well as to convince manufacturers of the market for well-designed objects; held biannually at Chicago Merchandise Mart in conjunction with Furniture Show and yearly in New York.

1960 *Visionary Architecture*, later tours United States and, under auspices of United States Information Service, the world.

1964 *Architecture Without Architects*, exhibition with book by Bernard Rudofsky; later travels internationally.

1966 *Louis I. Kahn*, comprehensive retrospective traveling exhibition.

matter of turning the calendar over. But as Calvino suggests, we're in a moment that is still very much influenced by the 20th century, even as it's now being transformed day by day by this new digital technology. Conceivably, this transitional moment might last as long as most people's working lives. But this is the moment that Miami is poised to capture.

Jeff Stein: One could argue that Miami's growth in recent years has been due less to its climate, as in its early years, and due more to its geography, its relationship with Latin America. As you think about collecting for MAM, do you find that your sense of the relationship between collecting and geography is changing?

Terence Riley: I have always felt that, while East-West collections make an incredible amount of sense historically, they've often been at the expense of a positive understanding of North-South connections. And no matter where we came from, whether it's North America, Central America, or South America, the phrase "the New World" links us indelibly in terms of a common experience. I've always had as a goal the reinforcement of that North-South axis without the sort of condescension or paternalism that seemed to characterize much of the European approach to Latin American art.

Jeff Stein: In fact, some of your recent work at MoMA has been about Latin American design.

Terence Riley: MoMA might be said to have been founded on the New York/Paris axis of the Cubist moment — Picasso, Braque and, later, figures like Man Ray and Mondrian. MoMA was unquestionably wedded to a vision of Modernism that was very European. But it has long been home to a respected Latin American collection, although the collection itself was always seen as a kind of subset.

Jeff Stein: How would you characterize Miami at this moment? How does MAM fit into that picture?

Terence Riley: What's interesting is how quickly Miamians, not satisfied with the notion of Miami as America's playground, have pushed the envelope of cosmopolitan life. This has all happened in just the last few years. For instance, the University of Miami has a billion-dollar capital campaign underway, and it's meeting its goals year by year. Miami is one of the fastest-growing philanthropic markets — third largest in the country. That has a lot to do with a growing self-awareness and a desire by Miamians to define themselves. And this means museums, auditoriums, and those kinds of civic structures that represent a — I hate to use the term — "world-class" city. It's gone from an architecture-free zone dominated by commercial interests to a place with plans for buildings by Enrique Norten, Herzog and de Meuron, and Frank Gehry.

Jeff Stein: You've done some design work in Miami, including a house for yourself. I've read that your contract with MAM precludes you from practicing architecture now.

Terence Riley: Freud says there are no coincidences, but I in fact did not have a grand plan to move fulltime to Miami, even though I did build a house there. After doing the Mies van der Rohe show at MoMA, I became fascinated by his notion of the courtyard house. It's a house that I'm not sure I could have built in the Hamptons, which in any case is very expensive; I needed to go someplace that was more welcoming of innovation and experimentation. Now, all of a sudden, I'll be living there fulltime. The museum and I agreed that I will remain a partner in my firm, Keenan Riley, but, as at MoMA, my priority, to the virtual exclusion of anything else, is building the museum. So even though I am taking another hiatus from the practice of architecture, I fully expect to be back at the drawing board at some point.

Jeff Stein: You were educated as an architect at Notre Dame and Columbia. How did you get to MoMA from there?

Terence Riley: The first thing I did after Notre Dame was to get a job overseas; I lived in Athens for three years, working mostly on projects in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. In some ways, I'm glad I didn't go straight into an American corporate practice but instead found my way into an international practice where things had to be thought through from the beginning all the time. There weren't many models for what we were doing, working in many different countries and different cultures at the same time; we were inventing it as we went along.

Then I came back to Columbia, after which I had a succession of short-term positions with Rafael Viñoly, Marcel Breuer and Associates, and James Polshek. I wasn't finding what I was looking for. No slander to any of those people — I enjoyed working on the projects there; it was just that the large-office culture wasn't a good fit for me. I was enjoying the freelance work that I was doing more than the big corporate jobs. Part of that had to do with needing to start from the beginning, needing to do something by myself and complete it in a relatively short time. This might have come from the fact that the first project I had worked on in Greece was a billion-dollar project — a whole city. And the next project I worked on was Lincoln West in New York City, another billion-dollar project. Huge projects. Whatever I'd learned about design I felt was lost in these unbelievably large structures and processes.

When I started my firm with John Keenan, we were incredibly excited about the romance of having our own studio and being responsible for everything: the budget; the design; the schedule; the permits. At the same time, we never lost the romantic notion of the architect as an intellectual who could write articles, publish, and teach from time to time.

I got involved in curating largely because of Robert Stern. When I was at Columbia, I told him about my great uncle, Paul Nelson, who was an architect. He had known Nelson, and said it would be great to do an exhibition of his work, if I could assemble any of his drawings. Bob literally bought me a plane ticket to go and put together a small exhibition. Philip Johnson came to the Nelson show. I remember giving him a tour — it was the first time I'd ever met him. We got all the way through the show and he said, in typical Philip fashion, "Well, I learned a few things, but in my opinion Paul Nelson is not a very good architect. But it's a good

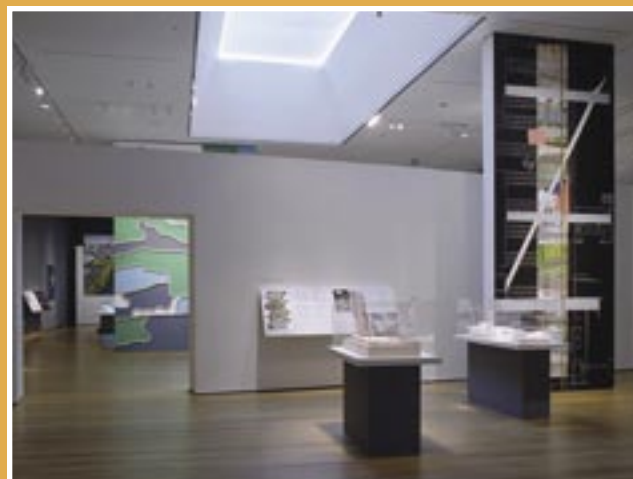


1972 *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, exhibition and publication edited by Emilio Ambasz.

1975 *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, major exhibition and publication by Arthur Drexler, examining the architectural theory and practice against which the Modern Movement rebelled; participants in related seminal symposia included: Richard Chafee; Henry-Russell Hitchcock; Neil Levine; Vincent Scully; David Van Zanten; George Baird; Colin Rowe; Carl Schorske; and Anthony Vidler.

1988 *Deconstructivist Architecture*, exhibition guest-directed by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, with the assistance of Frederieke Taylor, presenting work by Frank Gehry; Daniel Libeskind; Rem Koolhaas; Peter Eisenman; Zaha Hadid; Bernard Tschumi; and Coop Himmelb(l)au.

1994 *Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect*, exhibition organized by Terence Riley and Peter Reed.



1995 *Mutant Materials in Contemporary Design*, exhibition organized by Paola Antonelli.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

1995 *Light Construction*, exhibition organized by Terence Riley, featuring more than 30 architects and artists from 10 countries, defining a new architecture of transparency and translucency.

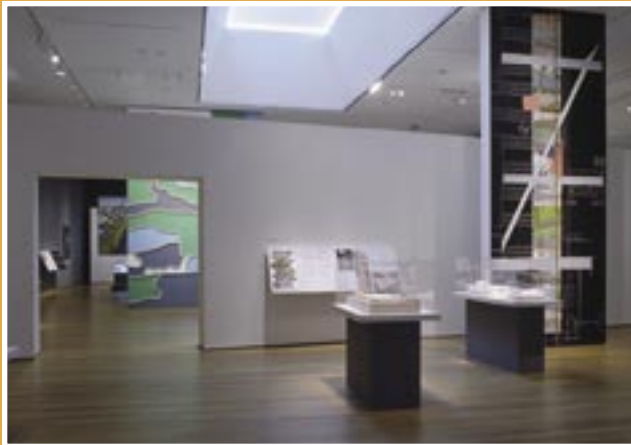
1999 *The Un-Private House*, an exhibition of houses by international architects, organized by Terence Riley.

2001 *Mies in Berlin*, a major scholarly exhibition and publication focusing on 30 projects by Mies van der Rohe (traveled to Berlin and Barcelona, 2002); organized by Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll.

2002 *AUTObodies: Speed, Sport, Transport*, organized by Peter Reed, featuring six automobiles from MoMA's collection.

2003 *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection*, organized by Terence Riley, Bevin Cline, and Tina di Carlo.

2004 *Tall Buildings*, an exhibition organized by Terence Riley and Guy Nordenson, featuring 25 high-rise projects around the world.



2005 *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape*, featuring 23 recently design public spaces from around the world, organized by Peter Reed.

2006 *Safe: Design Takes on Risk*, organized by Paola Antonelli, presenting more than 300 contemporary products and prototypes designed to protect body and mind from dangerous or stressful circumstances.

2006 *On-Site: New Architecture in Spain*, organized by Terence Riley, documenting emergence of Spain as international center for design innovation.

show.” Then he said, “So, you want to be a museum man?” And without any kind of thought, I said no.

Jeff Stein: What did it mean to you then?

Terence Riley: I thought what I was doing was part of being an architect. I didn't quite think through what he was saying. That first hubristic response was, no, I'm an architect. When I was offered the MoMA position in 1991, as with MAM, the one thing I couldn't agree to was giving up my practice. I could agree to becoming inactive. I don't think of myself as an arts administrator, or an architectural historian, or a professional fundraiser, or a management type. I'm an architect. That's the only reason I know how to do these things. How did I know how to do an exhibition on Paul Nelson? There was nothing in that show that I didn't learn in architecture school. I've jealously retained the title, and it has served me well.

Jeff Stein: You're teaching at Harvard this semester. Are you conscious of passing on that notion of generalism?

Terence Riley: The phrase I like is “generic intellectual.” There is something about architectural education that I find extremely effective. Think about parallel educations — city planning, urban design, landscape design, product design; if you put five people in the five different design disciplines together in a room and tell them to work together on a project, nine times out of ten, if you come back in an hour, the architect will be leading the discussion. It will be extremely annoying sometimes, and sometimes a disaster, but I am always amazed at the empowerment of architectural education. It leads people, sometimes foolishly, to believe that they can do anything. It's one of the last Enlightenment-based education programs.

Jeff Stein: I agree. And yet it is an education that is having a hard time finding its relevance, its fit, in the culture right now. The profession of architecture, which has about 100,000 registered architects, is actually shrinking because, of the 5,000 people who graduate from American architecture schools every year, only 1,500 decide to become registered architects and go into the corporate world of making buildings.

Terence Riley: In this country, people seem to believe that getting a law degree is a good basis for whatever you want to do, whether you go into politics, business, law, or anything else. It says something about our culture that it rewards people who have that kind of education. By way of comparison, Italy has 40,000 architecture students, relatively few of whom go into practice. The assumption is that an architectural education will give you the skills you need to succeed in that culture. Studying the law is a very good education, of course, but an education about identifying problems, breaking them down to their constituent parts, and envisioning solutions, working through trial and error and refinement, can lead to success in any line of work.

Jeff Stein: Alfred Barr, the founding director of MoMA, was described as a hunter-gatherer for his collecting abilities, but also

“Postmodernism was the product of the world’s impatience with Modernism. But once the disaffection with it happened, people started to swing back to a retooled Modernism that was not so full of itself.” — Terence Riley

as a teacher. His work at MoMA was really teaching an entire culture about the history of modern art. I imagine you’re going to take a similar approach in Miami.

Terence Riley: I would like to. Alfred Barr was given an extraordinary opportunity to characterize what was happening around him. You have to remember that most of the time he was right in the middle of it; nobody has the benefit of living outside his own time. So his achievement in being able to build that collection and to understand what was really relevant in the 20th century is in some ways more apparent now. Of course, since his time, we’ve had the intervening Postmodern years. I felt most Postmodern architecture was a big yawn, but I can’t deny that it was an extraordinarily useful exercise, especially in architecture, but also in art. The Postmodern polemicists turned the world upside-down and gave credence to the development of alternate histories, histories that are richer and more subtle. Ironically, of course, Postmodernism eventually led to a renewed interest in Modernism.

Jeff Stein: We’ve moved away from thinking of Modernism as a moment in history.

Terence Riley: The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston was actually the first institution to employ the term “contemporary art,” specifically to distinguish itself from MoMA by suggesting that Modernism was something in the past. Postmodernism made a sharper distinction. It was the product of the world’s unhappiness, or maybe impatience, with Modernism. And I think the reason it got so much attention was that it promised to undo the evils of Modernism by saying we can put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. We can make this all make sense. We can make our cities whole and therefore make our lives whole and return to a more traditional pace and pattern of life. It showed that the general public is not as ideological as architects are. But skyscrapers with Palladian windows demonstrated that, although you can return to old forms, you really can’t reproduce the coherent urban scale and fabric of traditional cities. Not with

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a car around. Once that disaffection happened, in the late '80s, a lot of people started to swing back to what might be called a kind of retooled Modernism that was conscious of its roots, but not so full of itself.

Jeff Stein: Yoshio Taniguchi's work at MoMA represents this new wave of Modernism. According to an apocryphal story, he once said, "Raise me a lot of money and I'll give you great architecture; raise even more money, and I'll make the architecture disappear."

Terence Riley: It's not apocryphal. I was on the receiving end of that comment.

Jeff Stein: Apparently it worked. While the architecture doesn't disappear, it did allow Glenn Lowry, the director of MoMA, to say, "This isn't a destination, it's a museum." It's a refreshing shift from the dominance of the Bilbao model.

Terence Riley: There's an old argument that you only have two choices — a boring white box with great art, or a Guggenheim where it's all about the building. I really think Taniguchi has shown there are more than two ways to do it.

Jeff Stein: What do you, as an architect yourself, hope to accomplish with the new building for the Miami Art Museum?

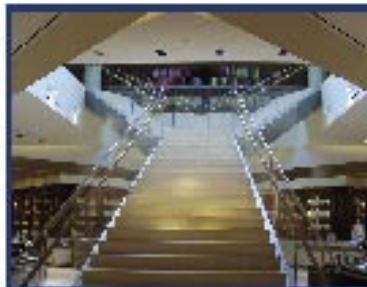
Terence Riley: I think it will be a tremendous success if it can accomplish two things: One, give Miamians an image of themselves that is both appropriate and unexpected — that, like Bilbao, transforms the people as much as the institution. The second is to help these same people understand how art fits into that redefined vision of themselves.

Jeff Stein: The art dealer David Zwirner said, "Artists are usually most interesting in mid-career, in their 40s and 50s." So, there you are.

Terence Riley: It certainly applies to architects. Even more so now, because an architect is required to learn more. When you graduate from architecture school, you think you pretty much know everything. And then you spend your first decade apprenticing, realizing how much you don't know. By your third decade, the feeling that you will never learn everything becomes a certainty. But that's also the point where really good architects get going, because they begin not only to understand that things continue to change, but also to perceive patterns in change. And so the future becomes less murky. Technology, society, and culture are all in flux, but they all have patterns and you start to understand the way things ebb and flow. And then you can start doing buildings that are truly of their moment, simply because you've become a master of so many disciplines. To be a master means to accept that nothing that has come before will last. ■



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