MoMA Reimagined

The museum’s expansion has the potential to transform its galleries, vision and cultural breadth.

EARLY ON, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART developed a snuggly tailored origin myth for modern art itself. This was invented by the museum’s first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., and mapped out in a beguiling chart of labels and directional arrows. The chart had the operational logic of a computer board, but was programmed for limited connectivity, namely between Europe and the United States, more specifically between Paris and New York. Modernism was a hard-wired Western affair.

By the late 20th century, the MoMA myth had lost credibility. Scholars and artists were revealing Modernism to have always been a global phenomenon, emerging across the world in different places, on different schedules. MoMA had an opportunity to acknowledge this reality when it moved into its newly redesigned 53rd Street headquarters in 2004, but chose to preserve, with minor tweaks, the old history that had long been its brand.

Now, however, with the inauguration of a substantial expansion next October, the institutional telling of history seems set to change, along with certain other aspects of MoMA’s patented way of presenting art.

One thing that won’t change is the overall chronological sequencing now in place: early Modernism (roughly 1880s to the 1940s) on the fifth floor, mid-20th-century work (1940s-1970s) on the fourth floor and contemporary work from the 1980s onward.