Interior of the Mercer Museum, Doylestown, Penn. Photo Kristen Mills.

The Mercer Museum

by Dona Nelson

The building was designed from the inside out. "It was made for the collection," he said, "while the collection was not made for it."
—Helen Hartman Gemmill, *The Mercer Mile*

BETWEEN 1908 AND 1916, Henry Mercer (1856-1930) built three large concrete buildings in Doylestown, Penn., where he was born, lived and died. The buildings are his house, Fonthill; the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, where he developed a successful business making decorative and narrative glazed tiles; and the Mercer Museum, which he built to display the 15,000-plus preindustrial tools that he had amassed to preserve the implements of crafts that were disappearing or already gone. Mercer's concrete buildings all have castlelike facades and organically developed interiors; they are related to the turn-of-the-century Arts & Crafts movement and are forerunners of 1950s Brutalist architecture. In 1921, Mercer wrote, "My subjects are Archaeology and History with a little Art thrown in."[1] Henry Mercer was an extraordinary artist and builder, but he lived in a place and time in which even he did not recognize the nature of his artistry, and in many ways his accomplishments have yet to be widely acknowledged.

In the Mercer Museum, as in New York's Guggenheim Museum, you look up and the entire building is above you. There is no wasted interior space. Twenty years ago, my first impression of the museum was of a structure with a distinctive quality of internalized scale, a tight concrete fortress with windows scattered here and there, rising straight up from a grassy hill. However, in 2011, a modern structure with a sales shop and reception area was added to the museum, which lamentably has destroyed the scale and unity of the building's original facade.

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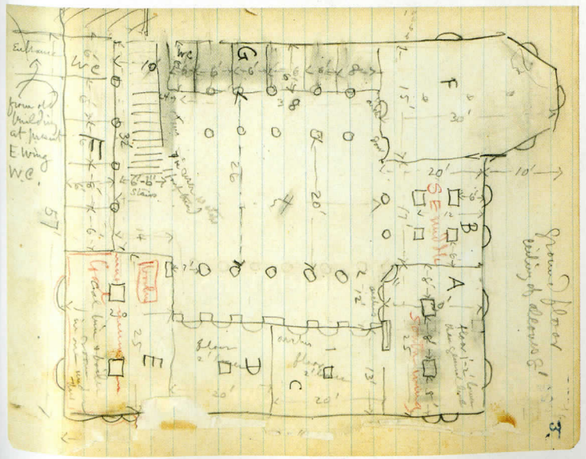
In the museum's library, one of Mercer's small notebooks contains his drawings and notes planning the day-by-day construction of the museum. Looking at some of his little drawings, I can see that his plans were completely realized in the finished building. No blueprints or models existed for the museum, just the drawings and penciled notes for the construction as it was intended for each day—interspersed with Mercer's musings on a variety of topics, including the death of his dog and home remedies for health problems. The museum was constructed over three years, from 1913 to 1916, under Mercer's direction by six or seven workers with the help of a horse and a cement mixer. Mercer would bicycle over every morning and tell the workers what they would be doing that day. Each of his buildings has widely diverse interior spaces flowing one into the other that are completely unique to the structure.

Mercer's notebook documents varying ratios of cement to sand to stone. The walls have a rich array of surface and material density. As in Brutalist buildings, the interior walls of all of Mercer's buildings record the wood grain of the unsanded boards that were used to form the poured concrete. The window frames and mullions of the museum's unmatched, asymmetrical windows are also concrete, which contributes to a sense of connection between the exterior and interior walls. Large items such as a whaling boat, a cider press and wagons hang from the balconies surrounding the central hall, which is seven stories high; as the museum was being built, steel rods were fixed into the concrete for the purpose of presenting such things. Mercer appears to have planned where every item would be displayed. Wired to the ceiling are baskets as well as cradles and rocking chairs. A walkway lined with windowed rooms winds around the central hall. Each room features tools of a different preindustrial trade. The number and variety of tools is dizzying.

Above the central hall, at the top of the museum, is a two-story room, devoted to 18th- and 19th-century German and American stove plates, stacked against the walls and displayed on movable steel rods like posters. The experience of this room is one of light, surfaces and a complex play of narrow walkways, shaped holes and stairways going down to the central hall and up to yet another room, in which the architectural space

View of Dona Nelson's 2015 exhibition, showing (foreground) her two-sided painting *Ribbed Red*, 2015, acrylic and acrylic mediums on canvas, 78 by 83 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.



One of Henry Mercer's drawings of the Mercer Museum. Courtesy Spruance Library, Doylestown, Penn.

and the objects on view are mutually animated. This top room is long and narrow; a walkway encircles a two-tier concrete platform that is rounded, rather than flat, at the top. The upper tier of the platform displays large rough 19th-century wooden implements, such as a box mangle for washing hotel linens and an immensely long rig for pulling logs out of the water. Thick lengths of wood arch up into the high space above. Odd-shaped windows cut into the irregular concrete ceiling light the room. The curved blade of a steel plow is suspended between concrete alcoves that are part of the ceiling's structure. Small iron stoves, with a wealth of narrative and decorative detail, are displayed on the concrete platform's lower tier.

I am particularly interested in the Mercer Museum because it is so different in concept and feeling from contemporary art spaces. The big white box model, at least in New York City, proliferated in the late 1960s, when SoHo manufacturing warehouses were turned into art galleries. These spaces tended to be much larger than the New York galleries of the 1950s and early 1960s, both those on 57th Street, which were often office-size, and those further uptown in townhouses, where the rooms had defined proportions and human scale. Huge white gallery space is an aesthetic in and of itself, independent of art. In the past 45 years, the big white box has greatly impacted what art gets made and how it gets made, as well as how it is displayed. For instance, excess floor space tends to place people at a distance from paintings, and the intimacy and complexity of the surface is lost. In turn, other characteristics of paintings, such as overall design, become more important. Isolating art pieces in immense white spaces imbues the art with a quality of hierarchical value, relative to other objects. I have seldom seen an art installation as beautiful, on an abstract level, as Mercer's handmade concrete museum, where everything from the smallest object to the largest object seems to be considered equally important and inseparable from the space in which it is displayed. ○

1. Linda F. Dyke, *Henry Chapman Mercer: An Annotated Chronology*, Doylestown, Penn., Bucks County Historical Society, 2009, p. 1.