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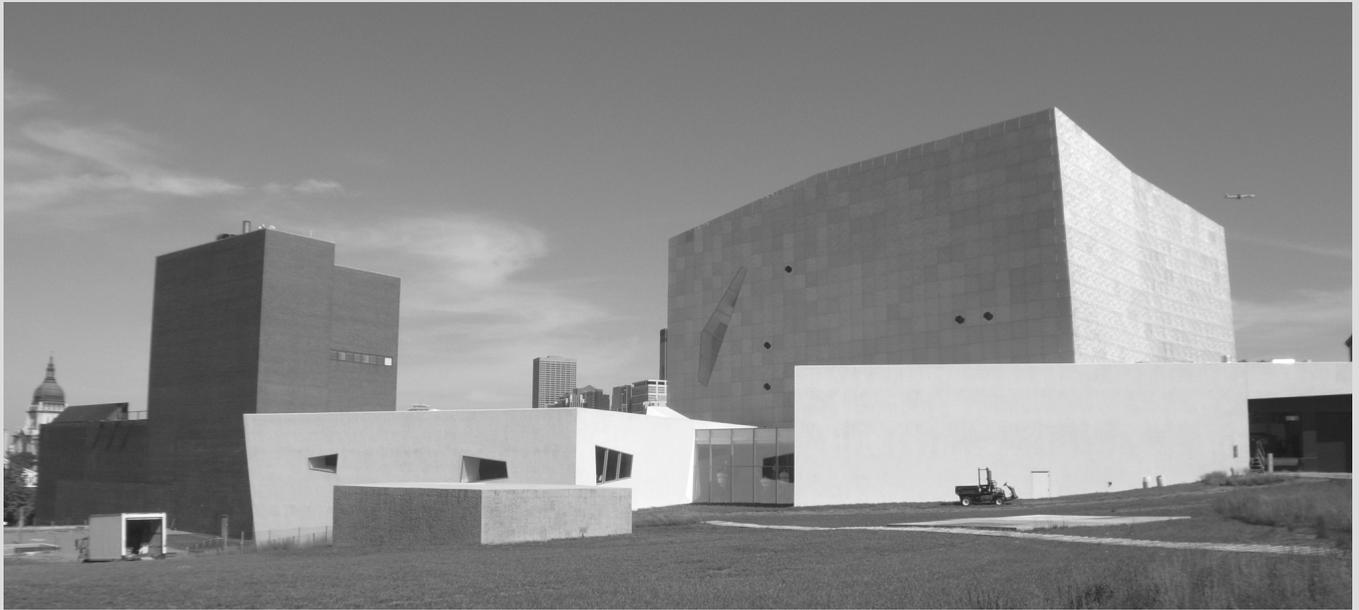
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Thoughts on Place-Making after a Visit to Minneapolis



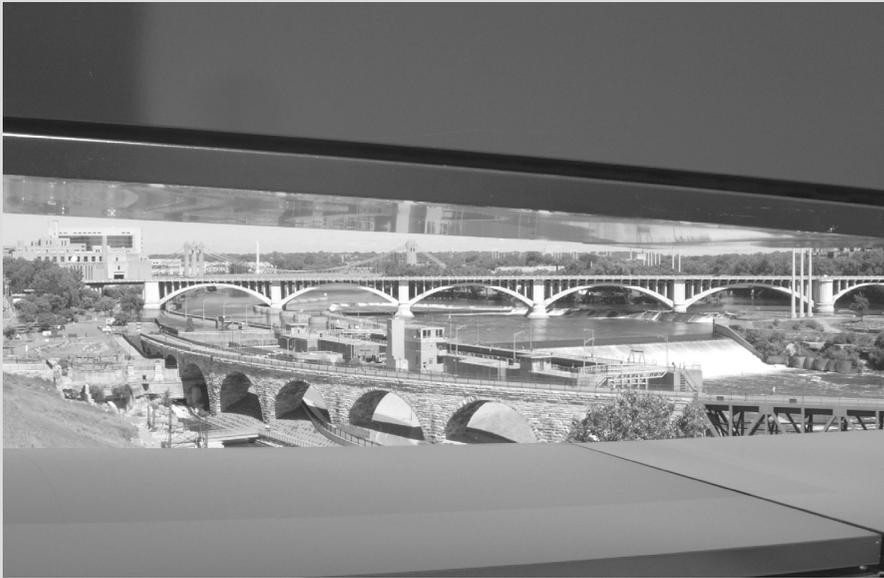
Does it start with architects or our clients? Minneapolis, like most American cities, doesn't evidence much faith in local architects. For major facilities, clients hire designers from the coasts or Europe.¹ For its recent addition, the Walker Art Center brought in Herzog & de Meuron (teamed with Hammel, Green and Abrahamson, Architects of Record, led by John Cook, AIA, Project Architect).

In this case, it seems, as has happened in other American cities, a monument has been funded before the beneficiary organization fully knew what it needed. Even great architects benefit from a client that knows its needs. The tension between program and vision nourishes architectural creativity: architecture is not just sculpture. Further, a community rightly expects its leaders to prioritize needs and spend resources accordingly. This Walker addition primarily provides a theater, a sculpture garden, and a parking garage. With everything else going on in Minneapolis, it is hard to imagine these as appropriate priorities.



Since the client did not have heartfelt goals, it appears the architects created their own. In response to the Walker's existing opaque Edward Larrabee Barnes building, they sought transparency—in part by exposing their new corridors. Yet, the wrinkled, perforated metal

portion of the skin (installed like empty gabions about 24 inches proud of the exterior wall) is not transparent at all. Although it presents some arresting visual reflections of the sky and the sun, it also provides a home for birds and insects and seems vulnerable to damage from freeze-thaw



cycles. Birds nesting in the deep recesses required subsequent screening which now makes it impossible to clean the windows.

To deal with the sloping topography, the architects developed the idea of a commons. Galleries would be discrete, expressed masses with level floors, while the commons would fill the interstices, allowing for changes of grade. However, the differentiation between figure and ground did not survive design development: the ink has run on the Nolli map.

Meanwhile, it is hard to understand why the new complex does not strengthen the relationship to the Walker's crown jewel, the existing Minnesota Sculpture Garden across the street. And why doesn't the building provide easy access to the new sculpture garden adjacent to the complex designed by French landscape architect Michel Desvigne

(under construction)? Furthermore, why is the main pedestrian entrance on a street (Hennepin) with 50-mph traffic? Do European architects assume that all Americans arrive by car? Finally, in relation to its ambiguously proportioned and trendily cantilevered younger sibling, the massing of the 1971 Barnes tower stands stuffy and aloof.

The most successful aspect of this project is the galleries themselves. Here instead of making something new, the architects created spaces almost identical to the existing galleries, but improved based on the staff's experience.

The tragedy at the Walker is the demolition of the original Guthrie, designed by Ralph Rapson, FAIA. How can Minneapolis, with more than fifty theater companies, the home of Prince and Garrison Keillor, not find a use for an outdated architectural landmark? It's legitimate to hire nonresident architects when they know something we don't know. Minneapolis should import a few architects from Rome. They know how to remodel.

Above: View of the Minneapolis riverfront through the slit end of the Guthrie Theater's infinite bridge. Photo by Michael Ross, FAIA.

Nouvel and the Guthrie

The story of the Guthrie may not be well known outside the region. In 1959, Sir Tyrone Guthrie, seeking to do noncommercial theater, put out a call for a new home. Seven Midwestern cities responded, but it came down to "Minnie" or "Milly" (Milwaukee). Minneapolis was selected, and the new building, designed by Rapson as an addition to the existing Walker Art Center, opened in 1963.² With Tanya Moiseiwitsch as theater designer, it contained an exposed stage, "thrust" out into the audience.

A number of years ago, the Guthrie was struggling, limited apparently by the aging nature of its building and its lack of a proscenium stage (one with more traditional "wings"). Meanwhile, the Walker, too, was looking to expand. The powers that be decided to move the Guthrie. Inspired, it seems, by characteristically Midwestern frugality and respect for elders, the original Moiseiwitsch thrust stage was then re-created as one of several performance spaces in the new building.

Sir Tyrone had originally wanted his theater to be sited along the Mississippi. The new Guthrie is located there, designed by Jean Nouvel (associated with local architects Architectural Alliance, led by Tom DeAngelo, FAIA). It is a magnificent building, a real presence in the city. The performers and their directors also seem very happy.

The building, along with the adjacent Mill City Museum of 2004 (by local architect Tom Meyer, FAIA, of Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle) also seems to promise a strengthening of the Mississippi River's role in Minneapolis life. If urban life takes hold around the Guthrie, as seems to be happening, the "public" spaces of the building may grow up to be a valuable

community amenity. Minneapolis planners, though, are already struggling with this development. Do they attempt to maintain the gritty run-down industrial feel that was/is the appropriate foil for Nouvel's vision? Or do they give in to the new residents who want street trees?

The curiosity here is not with the building but with its creation story. When Nouvel came to the site, he said he would design the building if he could raise the stages so that theatergoers could see the river. The artistic director of the Guthrie, Joe Dowling, is exceptionally well-spoken, appropriately Irish, and apparently exceedingly competent. A practical man, he imagined the nightmare of lifting scenery and props fifty feet and balked. Nouvel then lifted Dowling into the air in a cherry picker, and Joe saw the light. Never mind that Nouvel had recommended a similar move a year before in Pittsburgh at the Carnegie Science Center. Never mind that the important view in a theater is onstage. Never mind that the rehearsal rooms and costume shops where people work long hours are located on or near the ground, without access to the grand view.

A Minneapolis staple, a sky bridge, facilitates the real benefit of Nouvel's strategy. Most companies build sets in a shop, take them apart, cart them to the stage, and reconstruct them. At the Guthrie, the sky bridge allows the sets to be constructed just once and rolled into place on both main stages. Lifting the stages made it possible for the scene shop to be above the parking garage across the street. This saved the rest of the riverfront property for more appropriate uses.³

The new Guthrie sits at one end of a line of old millworks (factories and silos) that have a certain scale, mass and geometry. The raised stages also



foster an urbane contextualism. The expressed form of the thrust theater mimics the silos, and the mass of the new building fits right in. Nouvel could have chosen to punctuate the line. Instead, his building seems to suggest another facility, someday, south of the Guthrie.

From the west, the Guthrie is a wonderful presence, its dark, shiny skin and vertical billboards creating an exuberant new urban presence. It will be good if this presence remains visible from points on the city's new light rail line. On the east it shows off another example of unleashed structural engineering. Like the thrust stage on the inside, Nouvel thrusts a dramatic cantilever out into the public view—what he calls the “infinite bridge.”⁴

Shopping with Mary Tyler Moore

There is a sense that things move more slowly in the middle of the country, and Minneapolis reflects this. Hardly anyone lives in the city center—yet. Light rail will probably change that (just when it becomes reasonable to live in the suburbs, every-

one will move into town).

Beginning forty-five years ago, Minneapolis became the first city to skywalk itself to death, connecting downtown buildings at the second floor with enclosed pedestrian bridges. That pretty much killed commerce (and life) on the street. Today, however, a rebirth is underway as the result of new pedestrian-friendly streets, farmer's markets, professional sports, and conventioners. But the street-level shopping all seems aimed at Mary Tyler Moore—Macy's, Saks, Nieman Marcus, but not much else. It feels like an old-fashioned downtown where dad works and mom shops. Except that now mom works too.

When New York was building Woolworth and Chrysler, and Chicago the Wrigley Building, Minneapolis was building the Foshay Tower (designed in 1929 by Léon Eugène Arnal, chief designer for the

Above: The Guthrie Theater thrusts a cantilever, its infinite bridge, out into the public view. Photo by Louis Pounders, FAIA.



architects Magney & Tusler). People don't put their names on their own buildings much anymore. Nowadays the rich fund libraries and theaters, and corporations put their names on ball fields. With the public realm ravaged by the anti-tax tsunami, it's surprising how often we demolish and rebuild hundred-million-dollar facilities.

In an apparent attempt to spur downtown domesticity (and catch up with the coasts), Minneapolis has just built a new headquarters library. Pelli Clarke Pelli were brought in from New Haven to do the design (teamed with local architects Architectural Alliance, Tom Hysell, AIA, Project Architect). The building consists of two very simple boxes connected by an atrium—think Johnson at IDS

Above: The two main pieces of the Minneapolis central library align to different grids, reflecting the unseen curve of the river. Photo by Tom Holden, AIA.

or more thoroughly Meier in The Hague. This is Pelli taking it easy.

The curve of the river occasionally reorients the Minneapolis street grid. The library site is at such a point, so that the two boxes align with separate grids, creating the forced perspective of the atrium. In a deep way, this is the river informing the architecture.

The architects and the librarians are very proud of the transparency of the building (glass skins being one of the fashions of the moment), but in daylight, this skin is as opaque as stone. And from a distance, the building looks like books on shelves, layer-cake architecture with no expressed structure. Maybe this avoidance of visible structure is a form of homage to the wildly attenuated columns of the original Reliastar building designed by Minoru Yamasaki in 1964 a few blocks away.

Inside, a forest of mushrooms holds up the painted concrete slabs. The

greatest success of this building is the clarity of these slabs and the resolution of the consequently exposed utilities. With all the interior and exterior glass and reflective surfaces, however, the sad thing about this building is that Minneapolis probably traded some librarians for window washers.

Notes

1. The coasts needn't be smug about this. Frank Gehry had to design the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis (1994, with Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, Executive Architects; John Cook, AIA, Project Architect) to make his name before receiving a major commission in Los Angeles.

2. Ralph Rapson, a Michigan boy schooled by Eliel Saarinen at Cranbrook, went on to become the great-grandfather of Minnesota architecture through his own practice and his contributions at the University of Minnesota School of Architecture. Architects of a certain age in Minneapolis are frustrated with Rapson. They want to retire, but they are not about to quit before Rapson. At age ninety-three, he continues to churn out the work. Speaking to us early on a Sunday morning, Rapson suggested that we would be much better off if we were in church.

3. During our visit, the collapsed remains of the I-35W bridge were visible from this site. It will be interesting to see if the rebuilt bridge contributes or detracts from the community's rediscovery of the river.

4. When Will Bruder pulled off a fancy cantilever at the Central Library in Phoenix, it was what it was. Now you make a big box and give the structural engineer an inappropriate portion of the owner's budget to fill that box with steel, and you get an entry in the world's-most-audacious-cantilever contest. It does seem, though, that with Polshek's Clinton Library, this contest is appropriately over.

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