

Piano plays Harvard

by Peter Pennoyer

After almost twenty years of failed plans and false starts, Harvard University has recently combined the collections of its three museums—the Fogg, the Busch-Reisinger, and the Arthur M. Sackler—into one new building designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop and its local partner, the design firm Payette. The Harvard Art Museums, known as HAM, include ample galleries, studios for the conservation center, auditoriums, classrooms, viewing rooms, and even the Naumburg Room, a hidden-away Jacobean hall reconstructed as a lounge for faculty, staff, and students. HAM’s opening, six years after the doors to the original Fogg were closed, has reunited the University with its treasury of art in a building that fulfills the needs of its programs. This new collection of museums under one glass roof, known as the lantern, will support scholarship, teaching, conservation, and exhibitions for a very long time to come, but its functional success comes in the guise of a building that discloses the influence of ideas that, while accepted as the basis of making museums today, do not always lead to good architecture.

Novel ideas go hand in hand with actual designs as the calling cards of the top echelon of architects today. Museums entrust this level of the profession not just to make buildings that work, but also often to make landmarks that reflect each institution’s quest for that fleeting cutting edge of culture. Other than Frank Gehry, who for better or worse has elevated his brand of intuitive genius to an art form, many top architects today want you to know that their designs are to be judged on an

intellectual plane. As Zaha Hadid, who speaks of “the idea of explosion and fragmentation” and “fluid spatialities,” has said: “Every building must have a central idea.”

These ideas often defy logic. Elizabeth Diller, the renowned architect/artist, speaks of “productive nihilism” in projects “done through a form of subtraction, or obstruction, or interference in a world that we naturally sleepwalk through.” Wolfgang Prix, the celebrated deconstructivist, believes that “the new architecture has to create space for concepts and ideas that haven’t been thought of yet.” Some even suggest that their clients (or museum boards) not try to understand their ideas. Daniel Libeskind’s website once proclaimed, “Architecture is a spiritual domain, a realm that can not be visualized, an area of invisible presence since it deals with the unspeakable.”

In this atmosphere of incoherent, self-proclaimed brilliance, Renzo Piano stands out as an architect who expresses a sound, clear, and almost modest approach to his practice. As an architect who is passionate about construction (his is a family of builders), he has developed a practice that is in equal parts about designing and making. At this intersection of architecture and construction, Piano’s firm is able to achieve ingenious solutions to practical challenges inherent in his designs often relating to the mechanics of bringing light into architecture. In the early and much-heralded Menil Collection in Houston, he devised an elegant system of louvers that modulate daylight and make

the galleries luminous. In Houston and throughout his extensive body of work, the architecture is mostly orthogonal. Structural and expressive elements are often one and the same. Piano's columns and beams are fully exposed—not hidden behind finishes. The resulting simplicity of his buildings—the absence of what one critic has called “the crash-landed-and-about-to-explode look in modern architecture”—makes his work seem calm in an era fraught by willful showmanship. But this simplicity and directness have inherent limitations inasmuch as Piano's work is often based on stock-in-trade formulas and misconceptions about how we experience architecture, which disclose a lack of connection with the essential strand of humanism that underlies great buildings.

One of the formulas that aligns with Piano's approach is the widespread and institutionalized bias against designing to create a meaningful relationship between old and new. This attitude reflects the orthodoxy of preservation policy and practice first expounded in The Venice Charter of 1964 that called for new architecture to “bear a contemporary stamp.” As codified in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and adopted by many preservation agencies, not under Federal control, this approach evolved into a mandate where contrast trumps context. Piano, typically, respects this policy, here making a new building that is explicitly foreign to its context and barely acknowledges its neighbors.

Set between a street of low-scale brick apartment houses and the east edge of Harvard Yard, HAM's highly constrained site contained the Fogg, built in 1927 by Shepley Bulfinch, a 1991 addition by Gwathmey Siegel (which was judged expendable), and, to the south, the 1963 Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Le Corbusier's only built work in America. In this dense setting, Piano incorporated the shell of the Fogg and its internal Calderwood Courtyard, which was based on the façade of the canon's house of the sixteenth-century church of San Biagio in Montepulciano. His design was then negotiated with the Cambridge Historical Commission, the lo-

cal agency that fiercely protects existing historical Cambridge but for much of its life has endorsed modernism for new buildings and additions.

The preservation of the shell of the Fogg is a fundamental strength of the project. The main façade on Quincy Street is centered on Sever Quadrangle on the east side of Harvard Yard directly facing H. H. Richardson's Sever Hall. This axial arrangement made the Fogg a significant extension of the Georgian Revival brick architecture that became the lingua franca of the Harvard campus with McKim, Mead & White's designs for thirteen of the Harvard Yard gates, the Harvard Union, and Robinson Hall. Shepley Bulfinch were following a style that is still the indelible architectural emblem of Harvard University and doing so just ten years before Walter Gropius descended on the Graduate School of Design to take his place in the struggle to purge history from the curriculum.

Despite the fact that the original entrance maintains its purpose, an increasingly rare outcome in contemporary museum additions, how Piano treats the Fogg suggests that preservation was not completely welcome. From inside Harvard Yard, standing on the steps of Sever Hall, the façade appears untouched and the large glass roof, a truncated hipped form, makes a pleasantly diaphanous appearance at a comfortable scale, but a closer view reveals the conflict between old and new: the steps to the entrance remain, but Piano compromises the relationship of the Fogg to the ground, defacing the building with a vast, triangular ramp that cuts across the façade, slicing through original details in one stroke. This brutal shift of grade against the old brick wall brings the ramp perilously close to the base of one of the Fogg's exquisitely detailed stone aedicule balconies, rendering it an obstacle. What was once an elegant emblem of classical design is now a forlorn fragment, sequestered behind a paltry modernist fence. In this instance, accessibility has become an excuse for a messy design.

On the north and south ends of the building, Piano has juxtaposed the Fogg with expanses of windowless façade. The meticu-

lously detailed slots that divide old and new feature svelte bands of glass that emphasize the disjunction between the Piano structure and its host. This high level of technical skill in sealing the gap between two incompatible buildings is only admirable if one accepts that disjunction is desirable. On the Broadway side, a service ramp and two additional entrances puncture the base giving the impression of a perfunctory design.

Facing Prescott Street, the gallery floors are wrapped in a windowless, building-wide box that is cantilevered ominously two levels above the sidewalk. The slats that cover the box appear to be aluminum but are actually Alaskan yellow cedar. Though the wood is intended to echo the clapboard found on some of the older houses in Cambridge, its perfectly even tone and spaced mounting makes it feel completely foreign to New England. In the depth of the open base, Piano has slid what must be the largest and most unwelcoming ramp in Massachusetts, which spans the entire building, intercepting and fusing with Le Corbusier's ramp from the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. This implausible connection has shocked Le Corbusier partisans, one of whom called it "a crime against humanity," and indeed it reflects badly on both buildings, reducing the great modernist master's ramp to a role in a museum-scale Rube Goldberg moment.

Further complicating the architecture, the ramp and the stairs share a landing that pushes the actual entrance deep under the looming gallery wing where it is barely visible above layers of rock-faced granite retaining walls and a virtual carapace of steel guardrails. Piano's goal, "to bring change to the spirit of the relationship between Harvard and the Cambridge community," is laudable, but his notion that this cantilever would make the building "float" is simply a self-delusion, and the idea that raising the galleries would allow the community to flow in is a misconception exposed by its overbearing, almost intimidating presence on Prescott Street. The fact that the Georgian Revival side of this building is more welcoming suggests that the community and even the University might have been better served by a more unified, contextual design.

Entering from the Harvard side, the disjunction of the exterior fades, and HAM becomes one building. The arcades of the courtyard and its central axis organize the entire plan on every level, and abundant daylight admitted through the glass roof floods the surrounding spaces and reorients the visitor emerging from the surrounding galleries. Because the admissions desk, the gift shop, and the cloakroom are pushed to the outside of the arcade, the courtyard is free of the clutter that is so often imposed in museums as part of the "visitor experience." The extension of the volume of the courtyard in glass provides welcome views of the conservation studios and study rooms above and a glimpse of an entire wall of glass-fronted cabinets displaying a library of pigments, paints, glues, and other archived materials central to the work of the conservators and scholars.

The Prescott Street lobby contains the stair and the elevators that, like many aspects of this building, have been detailed to be functional but not aesthetically pleasing. Piano is consistent in refusing to exploit any of the exposed nuts and bolts of his buildings for expressive value. The stair itself, given its prominent position, is uncomfortably narrow, and its placement, straddling and partially obscuring the view from the entrance, is the very definition of an anti-humanist approach. This is stair as equipment, not as architecture. In the humanist tradition, the stair would be centered on the axis. When a stair is treated as a piece of equipment, the human element is relegated to second place. Likewise, the cramped relationship of the galleries to the openings where they connect to the arcades suggests that Piano found the original dimensions confining and that he treated the architecture as an inelastic matrix that had to be worked around.

The galleries are that unremarkable and ubiquitous style of sheetrock partitions and ceilings where each plane floats mysteriously apart from the next, leaving gaping reveals at the edges of each room that seem to say that this is not architecture and these are not walls, but all is simply a vaguely modernist stage set. The bland result points to an anxiety that even

a hint of architectural character might diminish the art, or worse: make viewing the art seem less serious. The standard white box galleries we see here find a corollary in the perennial curatorial impulse—that is rarely acted upon—to strip certain twentieth-century paintings of their frames on the grounds that the decoration might domesticate what should be seen as serious and radical.

In at least two places, Piano makes an effort to enrich the architecture of the interiors. On two levels, the galleries have shallow barrel vaults that run the short direction of the room. This serves to improve the perceived proportions of the space and makes a subtle reference to the vaults of the original courtyard. Unfortunately the vaults, like Piano's ceilings, are detached from the walls and from each other, demonstrating that they are vestigial elements that have neither structural nor decorative integrity but are closer to acoustic baffles in a concert hall.

At the north and south ends of the building, Piano cantilevers a small, daylit gallery beyond the façade. These abrupt protrusions, called "winter gardens," are bathed in natural light, a welcome counterpoint to the adjacent galleries that must be windowless. The south winter garden contains fifteen Bernini bozzetti or "clay sketches," one of the great treasures of the Fogg. To see these exquisite models made by Bernini's hand in full daylight is extraordinary and an example of Piano's masterful use of light, but the glass walls are partially masked

by a sliding slab of façade, mounted on tracks outside the building, to shade the adjacent galleries. So standing next to a Bernini, one is confronted by the view of the inside of a wall with its nuts, bolts, welds, and straps—an unwelcome distraction.

In the top floors of the HAM, Piano's skill at designing the high-tech mechanisms for filtering light are on full display. Continuing the volume of the courtyard in walls of glass, Piano places an entire floor of viewing rooms where students and visitors can examine works of art in person. Above, the three divisions of the conservation center—paper, materials, and paint—have adjacent studios with glass ceilings providing the direct daylight that is a requirement for this kind of work. These spaces are exhilarating to be in and function perfectly for HAM.

So it is at the crown of HAM where Piano's skills in designing systems to modulate light are in harmony with the institution and the building. At this level, we realize that we are in a working attic. Here, beauty doesn't matter. Grids and ladders and exhaust fans are on display as cogs in Piano's "light machine." Below, in the stairs, the halls, and on the exterior, we realize that Renzo Piano is not particularly interested, despite his claim to be a producer of beauty, in aesthetic achievement. Even the detailing of the kit of parts, which is what makes this building seem half-hearted, suggests a design process closed within a hermetic mindset that doesn't admit the relevance of history and context.