



ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

36th Annual Conference
Grand Hyatt, Denver, Colorado, May 1-5, 2008

Session: Icon or Enclosure? The Architecture of the Denver Art Museum

Sunday, May 4, 2008 4:00-5:30 pm

Moderator: Paul Glassman, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY

Speakers:

Alan Michelson, Head, Architecture & Urban Planning Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

Brit Probst, Principal in Davis Partnership Architects, Denver.

Heather Nielsen, Master Teacher for Native Arts and Head of Community and Family Programs, Denver Art Museum.

Recorder: Susan Chute, Supervising Librarian, Circulating Art and Picture Collections, The New York Public Library.

Introduction

Paul Glassman began this well-attended session by noting that the building addition to the Denver Art Museum would be discussed in both conceptual and physical terms. Citing Stuart Cohen's article "On Adding On" (*Threshold: Journal of the School of Architecture*, University of Illinois at Chicago, Autumn 1985, v.3, p. 75-90), he divided recent museum building additions into two categories: conjunctive or disjunctive. Slides of recent museum projects were shown as examples of one category or the other (differing opinions are likely):

[Akron Art Museum](#): a crystal, gallery box and roof cloud

[Bronx Museum of the Arts](#): a folding screen

[Phoenix Art Museum](#): an accretion

[Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art](#) in Manhattan, Kansas

[Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Overland Park, Kansas

[Ruth & Raymond G. Perelman Building](#), Philadelphia Museum of Art

[Bowdoin College Museum of Art](#) in Brunswick, Maine

[Seattle Art Museum](#)

The *Architectural Record* website provides a comparison of these buildings and others:

<http://archrecord.construction.com/projects/bts/archives/museums/default.asp#2008>

Reception at the Designer Gallery: Four Decades of Architectural Criticism of the Denver Art Museum.

The first speaker, [Alan Michelson](#), Head, Architecture & Urban Planning Library, University of Washington, Seattle, began setting a context by explaining that the Denver Art Museum is comprised of two extraordinary buildings. The earlier, by the architect Gio Ponti, is seven stories and opened in 1971. The newest addition, the Frederick C. Hamilton building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, opened Oct. 7, 2006.

Dr. Lewis Sharp, Director of the Denver Art Museum and present at the opening of the Bilbao in Spain, wanted the new addition to call attention to Denver. One of his stated aims was that the "whole world will begin to take notice."

The Bilbao Effect

The Bilbao, according to the accounting firm KPMG, created \$149 million in gross domestic product in 2001. The Bilbao was the impetus for the successful redevelopment of the city. The DAM is a test of the Bilbao effect--will it lead to the redevelopment of Denver? Libeskind's addition has another echo of the Bilbao--both have spiders out front.

The Ponti Building

Although the Denver Museum began in 1893, it was housed in a number of temporary locations. The prosperity of the 1950s fueled rapid growth; by 1965 the museum could exhibit only 2% of its collections.

Gio Ponti, the Italian architect commissioned to build Denver's Art Museum, had not designed a building in the United States before. As with Libeskind, a local architect (James Sudler Associates) worked with Ponti's firm. The museum construction project was seen as improving the city's ability to compete economically.

The architectural program, for practical reasons, specified a vertical museum. Ponti designed two square towers, each six stories high and joined by a central elevator, encompassing 210,000 square feet. Ponti didn't approve of monolithic skyscraper style; therefore he designed two sections to emphasize the vertical dimension. He also used diamond-shaped ceramic tiles to create a reflective skin.

Although the building got worldwide attention upon its opening in 1971, critical reception was harsh. Comments ranged from "*Alcatraz of the Rockies*" to "*Italian castle covered in aluminum foil*". The public read it as massive and impenetrable.

The Libeskind Building

The oil money of the 1990s again fueled a growth in interest and purchases of contemporary art. A new addition to house these collections would, it was hoped, make Denver a destination city.

The architectural competition of 2000 produced a winner in Daniel Libeskind, an architect becoming known for his buildings in Europe--particularly the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The DAM was his first commission in the United States. The slide shows a man with a BIG smile.

Libeskind is an intellectual architect with an extreme deconstructivist bent. From an early age he was haunted by reminders of the holocaust. He moved to Israel, and then to Brooklyn. He graduated summa cum laude from Cooper Union.

The Hamilton Bldg is an exercise in balancing oppositions, with a consistent deconstructivist aesthetic. Walls turn into floors which become roofs. The building is a series of crystals tectonically uplifted, sheathed in titanium.

The critical response has been mixed. The New York Times criticized its "overly aggressive sculptural qualities." The radical nature of the design has led to leakage and condensation problems and raised durability issues. Although the building cost taxpayers \$62.5 million, it has not attracted visitors in the numbers hoped for. In 2007, 14% of the museum's staff was laid off. However, the building can boast good freight elevators & storage space. Because of the public outcry, Libeskind's civic center landscaping plans were scuttled.

Michaelson concluded with an approving nod at the [Glass Pavilion](#) of the Toledo Museum of Art, which he characterized as technologically advanced but "quiet." A museum, he said, should not constantly impose itself upon the art.

No Right Angles: Challenges in Building the Frederick C. Hamilton Building

The next speaker, **Brit Probst**, is a Principal in Davis Partnership Architects, Denver, which collaborated with Daniel Libeskind on the Frederick C. Hamilton Building of the Denver Art Museum.

The building, said Mr. Probst, is fun to talk about because it invites response, and most artists are trying to elicit a response--to cause you to think about something in a way you've never thought before. The building is decidedly on the art side of the art vs. architecture debate. It can be described as a giant piece of urban sculpture.

One of Denver's motivations was to make a difference for the city. The Golden Triangle, an emerging urban neighborhood, lacked connection with downtown. A goal was to connect neighborhoods. The Civic Center was important but "challenged." The building, on a long skinny site, would facilitate a North/South path.

A slide of a marker/watercolor sketch prompted Probst to describe Daniel Libeskind as "poetic" and a "great intellect" who sees dualisms. Most of his buildings have a metaphor behind them. His Jewish Museum in Berlin is a tour de force, with a metaphor of the "great void" represented by those lost in the holocaust.

Conceptual ideas for the DAM include the juxtapositions of a prairie on edge of a mountain; new economy and old economy; one foot in past and one foot in future. The foot image rose to the front. Libeskind quoted Paul Klee describing his artwork as "taking a line for a walk." With the DAM, Libeskind decided to take 2 lines for a walk. Lines become folded planes and wrap around each other. There is a program reason, a formal reason, and structural issues for each compositional aspect.

Probst somewhat reluctantly admitted that the architecture critic Paul Goldberger asked a valid theoretical question: *Is a metaphor a point of departure for architecture?*

Slides of a plan and section aided Probst in describing the center of the building as an atrium, with moving exhibitions mounted on the left side, while the right side holds the permanent collections. There is a bridge to the existing museum (now called the North Building).

Because the building is hard to understand looking at two-dimensional drawings, models became extremely important. It was lots of work to understand the physical form of Libeskind's design, and there was lots of energy in the studio, which built thousands of models.

For the engineering aspects, a computer modeling software program called Form Z was used. The power of this three-dimensional modeling tool was comprehended after they finished the complete process. The structure's complexity required that **three-dimensional** modeling drawings be used to actually build the structure--

because it was the only way to clearly identify the placement of the joints, connections and bolts. The steel structure was done under budget and ahead of schedule. The building has a titanium skin; the owner of the titanium company is a board member, and the titanium was a significant donation, as well as an homage to the Ponti building.

Probst acknowledged criticism that some people get vertigo while walking around the museum, but pointed out its tribute to outdoor canyons, and declared (with tongue in cheek?) that hikers relate instantly to this extraordinary space.

Thinking Outside the Box: Re-defining the Museum Experience.

The last speaker was [Heather Nielsen](#), a Master Teacher for Native Arts and Head of Community and Family Programs, Denver Art Museum, who introduced herself as an educator and museum professional who has spent the last 15 years at the Denver Art Museum collaborating with curators and designers and advocating for visitors and guests.

What you know, she said, when looking at the DAM, is the story of an architect & his building. What I want to talk about is experiences: I see the museum as a place where inspiration matters, where the visitor can separate from the everyday. We must grab visitors. Architecture has everything to do with this. The building structure and form is a catalyst to think differently about how we engage. We embrace architecture as engaging with the art. The DAM challenges us to display art differently.

In conceiving the museum experience, two things matter:

Space matters

Experience matters

Space matters

One outcome of the Bilbao effect was to draw visitors that otherwise would not come to the museum. A key question became: Who were we designing for?

The space allows for a different kind of museum behavior. Corner spaces with angled walls became places for projections. Getting inside the artist's head is something visitors want, and we try to help them. We tried to think how we could use the space to encourage uncommon behaviors in museums. Museums should get civic, becoming not just nice to have but essential.

On Friday nights, "de-tours" are offered for young adults. We encourage people to share their insights. To extend museum behavior, the museum interiors are designed to evoke powerful other behaviors like dancing, stretching, lounging, and dynamic conversations. Seating pods are scattered, encouraging activities like writing poetry inspired by the architecture. African art is placed on a landscape of forms intended to move people through the gallery. Another carved out space consists of "light bubbles" with which families can interact and play.

Experiences matter:

Traditionally museums are designed with the objective of evoking cognitive, introspective and social experiences. We also want to encourage experiences usually left out: imagination, fantasies, and creative response. Learning is only one of the motivating factors in museums. Relaxation is equally important.

In the African Gallery corner, the museum has developed interpretive experiences that involve the MAKING of art. In the Western gallery there is a studio space with artistic implements that encourage visitors to discover the artists secrets. Also there is a place where the visitor can make customized postcards and mail them to family and friends. In the Eastern Galleries, a visitor is encouraged to "tell your Pacific story."

An aim of the curators and educators at the DAM is to ask: What does the West mean to you? Museums have too often limited themselves to Big C creativity: the art on the wall. What's needed Little C creativity--centering the museum experience in the context of personal frameworks. With an atmosphere promising that "Your experiences matter," the DAM tries to fashion a new kind of museum experience.

Heather ended with a quote from Daniel Libeskind: "A good building begins its life when it's finished being built, because the audience really makes it live in its own way." To illustrate the life of the DAM, she showed a series of slides of drawings by visitors.

Select Questions and Answers:

To Mr. Probst: What was the biggest challenge of working with noted architect?

Probst comments: He wasn't a household name yet. It was his first building in the U.S.; he won the World Trade Center commission in 2003. He is an optimistic, gifted, bright person grounded in the academic world. During that project, Probst's firm was more like a grad studio than an architectural office. Libeskind, Probst said, was very warm, and to Libeskind, there was no such thing as a bad idea. One of the reasons why he was chosen was that his personality showed love for people and was a signal that he would listen.

To Mr. Probst and Ms. Nielson (?): What do the artists who exhibit at the DAM think?

Comments: Some works were commissioned specifically to go on specific walls. While some artists may feel compromised, the curators and designers create opportunities for the art to work. The Hamilton building is about 40% of the total gallery space. Modern & contemporary works are a great fit in the Hamilton building. Some lower galleries have fairly neutral geometries. There are many options to situate things.

To Mr. Probst: Will you have to (or have you already) compromised the design to correct leakage & other problems?

Comments: Leaking problems are solved. But it is a complex building no doubt.

To Ms. Nielson: How many staff members are educators?

Comments: Teams of people create the exhibitions, led by an Educator, a Curator and a Designer. Outside consultants were hired to conduct visitor evaluations. The internal staff is very strong. [Implication: not a large staff.]

To Mr. Michaelson: How would you compare Ponti building response to the Libeskind building response?

Comments: Given the culture of "starchitects," and the economics of the art world, for Libeskind the stage is much bigger and the stakes are much higher. But both buildings evoked a similar sense of puzzlement and excitement. From both critics and the general public, both buildings generated an intense response.