

The New R E P U B L I C

SARAH WILLIAMS GOLDHAGEN ON ARCHITECTURE

Dorm Art

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Post date: 11.15.06
Issue date: 11.13.06

A handful of contemporary architects, some widely known and others less so, are challenging the profession's penchant to prize the practice of architecture away from both landscape architecture and urban design. The three professions require different (if overlapping) bodies of knowledge: architects must account for structural dynamics, while landscape architects and urban designers need not; landscape architects should understand plant materials and regional ecologies, while architects need not (at least not necessarily); urban designers need a better grasp of how land-use laws and municipal policy constrain design possibilities than do architects or landscape architects. Still, in spite of these and other obstacles on the path of broad vistas, some architects, through collaboration, self-education, or simply force of will, are determinedly pressing beyond conventional boundaries to learn from their professional kin.

Campus Recreation Centers



UC Campus Recreation Center, junc...

For evidence of this intermeshing of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design, consider the college student or recreation center. An ever more frequent and prominent addition to American institutions, the architectural and functional merit of these new student centers obviously varies. Two recently completed ones stand out: the Campus Recreation Center at the University of Cincinnati, by Thom Mayne of the Santa Monica-based firm Morphosis, and the Lulu Chow Wang Campus Center at Wellesley College, by the Atlanta-based Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam.

A student center, even sometimes a student recreation center, is almost by definition a grab bag of a building. In addition to its core functions, which typically include some sort of eating establishment, offices for student-run organizations, and areas for study, administrators toss in functions that do not quite fit elsewhere on campus, which might include any combination of bookstore, post office, gymnasium, conference rooms or



Campus Recreation Center, University of Cincinnati

classrooms, and other large spaces for campus events. This typical agglomeration of uses can militate against a sculptural or monumental design--what architects call an "object in a field," a striking and easily identifiable building, usually distinct from its surroundings. The object-in-a-field approach very often drives the design of museums, opera houses, city halls, and the like--more established building types that, not by coincidence, tend to dominate public discussions of architecture and the city.

In the student centers recently completed by Mayne and by Scogin and Elam, the architects grappled with this building type's sometimes contradictory and indisputably complex demands by eschewing the object in a field. These architects have shaped their designs less around the built object and more around their building's users: people, sentient beings who are at times stationary (lying, sitting, standing), at times ambulatory or even circumlocutory, who move through and use interior and exterior spaces while prospecting others inside and out.

Most architects seek and sometimes struggle in the design of a project to integrate the exterior image with the internal functions. Usually one or the other set of concerns predominates. Though the Cincinnati and Wellesley Centers vary greatly in budget, context, and design sensibility, considered together they demonstrate the virtues of resolving internal and external demands by giving utmost priority in design to the experiential perspective of a building's users. These buildings heighten their users' awareness of sensory impressions as well as spatial sequences and prospective views--what the American architect George Howe called the path of the feet and the eyes. Even in their large spaces, these buildings celebrate small-scale incident, quotidian human experience.

Mayne's Recreation Center is one of the latest projects to be completed in the University of Cincinnati's Extreme Makeover, which began in 1989 and continues seventeen years and more than \$1 billion later. The university's administrators, hoping to urbanize and to attract boarders to a largely commuter campus, first adopted a curatorial approach, collecting edifices by signature architects such as Harry Cobb, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, and Michael Graves. In 1991, George Hargreaves, a talented, internationally known landscape architect based in San Francisco, was brought in to rationalize this piecemeal strategy with a new campus master plan. Hargreaves developed a superbly counterintuitive long-term strategy, proposing that a centrally located but underused part of the suburban campus would become a contemporary improvisation of an Italian hill town, a dense nexus of constant pedestrian activity.

Hargreaves's master plan centered on the tight packing of three buildings--the existing Tangeman University Center and Lab, which contains the campus cafeteria and bookstore (renovated by Charles Gwathmey of Gwathmey Siegel of New York City); a Student Life

Center (eventually designed by Buzz Yudell of Moore Ruble Yudell of Santa Monica), which houses offices for student organizations; and Mayne's Campus Recreation Center--on an unprepossessing, sloping plane of parking lots surrounding the concrete monolith of a football stadium. The three buildings would create a central "Main Street"-like spine, a steep terraced paved walkway that terminates in a large open courtyard, of which one corner is Hargreaves's Sigma Sigma Commons, a mannered garden of terraced planes onto which an intriguing collection of differently sloping grass- and step-covered pyramids appear to have erupted.

Mayne, Gwathmey, and Yudell, together with Hargreaves, hammered out a unity-within-heterogeneity concept for their designs, whereby each architect would employ a common geometry and palette of materials but was otherwise free to individuate his project, including its style. For Mayne's Campus Recreation Center, the program included a 112-suite dormitory, a ground-level convenience store, a 160-seat stadium-side restaurant, additional grandstands for the stadium, the stadium scoreboard, a 400-seat cafeteria, classrooms, rest areas, and extensive athletic facilities: six basketball courts, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a leisure pool, a 17,000-square-foot fitness center, a four-lane running track, and only the campus jocks know what else.

Mayne asserts that the Recreation Center is "the most complicated building" he has ever designed. Coming from a long-practicing architect known for the complexity of his buildings, that is saying something. Even more intriguing is that Mayne decided that the Center should be what architects call a "background" or "fabric" building, which is the antithesis of the object in a field. In this modest aspiration to create a building deferential to its surroundings, Mayne succeeded, which is an extraordinary accomplishment given the project's astonishing 1,000-foot-long, 350,000-square-foot heft. He realized that the site's highly various exterior aspects--the all-American football stadium to the south; the Americanized Italian hill town to the east; and the urbane contemporary garden to the north--as well as the program's functional groupings made it prudent to regard the enormous project as five distinct but interwoven buildings under an only figuratively single roof. (Breaking up the program also helped Mayne to establish a human scale for the project.) Working within the budgetary constraints, Mayne created a low-slung, wavy-roofed polygon that combines projecting volumes supported by concrete-clad columns with large expanses of metal-panel and plate-glass walls, which are compositionally contained within the curving, tilted, projecting planes of the perforated metal sunscreens.

Aesthetically, most of the materials are unfinished inside and out, and the structural system, comprising a succession of massive steel trusses, is exposed. The atmosphere is gritty, tough, and urban. Outside, muted grays predominate: soft bluish-gray metal, light-reflecting aluminum, tannish-gray concrete. Inside, purplish-black finishes in the dining and athletic facilities create the unexpectedly chic atmosphere of a goth-inspired health club. This is a skillful, tough-as-nails composition of muscular volumes and planes, some curving, some angular, often colliding one against the other.

Such formal collisions are common in high-end contemporary design (works by Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind come to mind); but unlike the colliding, angular, muscular forms by these and other architects, Mayne's chaos is controlled not by the composition of the exterior or by some private conceptual system, but by his projections of how people perceive, move through, and use the building's exterior and interior spaces, and how his building relates to the nearby structures and the natural circumstances of their shared site. Thus the stadium-side restaurant and grandstands, used primarily during football games, are seemingly disconnected from the complex curves and projecting sunscreens of the recreation center, dormitory, and classrooms. The "Main Street" façade, which opens into the recreation center and cafeteria, differ in color and form from the dormitory block, which is an aluminum-clad rectangular prism raised off the ground and skewed off axis to offer inhabitants views onto the garden below.

The Center's curving façade presses toward Yudell's Student Life Center, dynamically compressing Hargreaves's multi-level, semi-sheltered pedestrian Main Street. Both Mayne's and Yudell's buildings offer protected outdoor spaces: Yudell opted for a traditional arcade, while Mayne offers users a wider and more unusual range of experiences. The building's projecting metal screens and cantilevered portions work in synergy with the pedestrian walkway onto which it faces to create articulated eddies of entryways, covered seating, and larger gathering areas. In Main Street, architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design intermesh to create multiple passages of generously proportioned steps that double as outdoor areas for lazing about. Resting places are also scattered over embankments and retaining walls.

Mayne's decision to think of the Center as five interconnected buildings enabled him to distribute its internal functions so that the building offers all the variety and provocation of serendipitous social encounters offered in the best urban public spaces. Programmatic elements butt up against and sometimes ram into one another, or are so loosely distributed as to open up amorphous, plaza-like spaces for meeting or rest. In the cafeteria, one canted, glazed wall projects the user midair into the multi-story basketball court arena, itself as large as a football field, with a four-lane track suspended from its ceiling. In some of the building's smaller spaces, ceilings swoop down to a polite single story. Entering the area devoted to aquatics, one comes upon a swishing water wall that introduces a skylit interior plaza. In one direction lie the swimming pools; in the other direction is a daylight-filled glazed shaft protecting a forty-foot-high climbing wall. Swimming and climbing become the spectacles that they in fact are, but the swimmers and climbers are afforded enough separation that they will not feel like animals in a circus ring. Walking into these and other such areas in the Center, one can imagine students checking each other out as they swim, shoot hoops, eat, work, relax, or work on their abs.

At Wellesley College, Scogin and Elam, like Mayne, collaborated with one of the nation's leading landscape architects, in this case Michael van Valkenburgh, a gifted practitioner based in New York City who is in the prime of his career. Wellesley, an elite, all-female college in Massachusetts, hired van Valkenburgh in 1998 to devise a new campus master plan. He suggested overhauling the campus' neglected northwestern

portion, which required renovating more than thirteen acres of soil, restoring a wetlands that had run dry, and redesigning this large expanse of land stretching from the main entrance to the prominently situated Lake Waban below. He also recommended adding a student center, a much-needed parking garage, a small shop, and a headquarters for the campus police.

Arguably, Wellesley's main architectural attraction is not architecture at all, but its hundreds of acres of sublimely bucolic, historically resonant park-like landscape featuring forested hills, manicured gardens, rolling lawns, meadows, pastures, a botanic garden, and the lake, designed, among others, by Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. A hundred-year succession of distinguished architects, including Ralph Adams Cram, Paul Rudolph, and Raphael Moneo, designed the campus's buildings, which, albeit of high quality, sit in demure quietude, often simply punctuating critical moments on the land.

In this blue-chip elysian setting, Scogin and Elam, with van Valkenburgh, selected a site directly facing the campus's main public entrance. In less skilled hands, or in the hands of practitioners with minds less open to intense collaboration, this choice could have proved highly problematic: its main prospect was a matter-of-fact paved road leading to the main campus, and it abuts a large and noisy chilled-water plant. The program made the task still more complicated. Wellesley sought, in addition to its checklist of functions (gathering spaces of various size and disposition, cafeteria, post office, bar, and so on), an eye-catching landmark that would become the community's center--yet the college insistently conceives of its community, Emersonian-style, as composed of self-defining individualists. This commission was perhaps the greatest challenge of the architects' career (though the budget was very generous), and it brought out the best in Scogin and Elam, who are widely respected in professional circles but, unlike the Pritzker Prize-winning Mayne, not architectural household names. Or not yet. The Wellesley Center is spectacular, and more.

Scogin and Elam's Campus Center proliferates with front doors. One faces the campus auto entrance and parking garage; another opens onto the path toward main campus; a third offers a slow, winding procession from Lake Waban through van Valkenburgh's massively reworked, quietly monumentalized landscape. The building is clad in large expanses of plate glass and an earthy combination of copper plates and layered tiers of bluish-gray, maroonish-red, and grayish-black slate. This rich but muted palette compliments, without mimicry, the nearby brick-clad Gothic revival buildings.

The Center's north façade is slung low, largely opaque, and oriented horizontally (a couple of set-back elements on the roof project vertically), while the southeast campus-side façade stretches skyward in a glass display of the building's four stories. From the top floor, one narrow, angling volume projects over a ground-level courtyard, as if the building were craning its neck to offer users the very best of its many excellent views. On the opposite side of this craggy projection, a concrete staircase ambles in wide platforms and low-slung risers down four stories toward Lake Waban--a perfect spot on a warm day for reading, sunning, or simply watching trees.



*Lulu Chow Wang Campus Center,
Wellesley College*

A long bridge threads through two of the Center's main entrances, both on the second floor. This processional sequence establishes a human scale to the building while revealing its four-story heft: underneath the bridges, at ground level, is a sloping, bamboo-filled courtyard by van Valkenburgh. Inside the north entrance, one faces a short, dark corridor offering an enjoyably tangled variety of possibilities: the user may move up, down, frontally, or diagonally, or pivot sharply to the left. The last choice leads through a short passageway edged in wooden lockers polka-dotted with circular lights; the ceiling at the end of this passageway stretches up to an angular arrangement of partially glazed spaces on the building's fourth floor. Here, one is again offered choices as to where next to proceed (post office, seating area, outdoors), all pivoting around a staircase, which is enclosed in glass on all sides as it wraps around an open lightwell that allows rain and snow to fall inside. An adjacent glass-clad foyer deposits one back outside onto the bridge, which

ramps down toward the main campus. This outside-inside-outside sequence is just one of the many light and witty touches one finds at the Center, in this case a playful allusion to the far more heroic ramp bisecting Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at nearby Harvard.

Up, down, across, in, around: one is offered many colorful, different, and sometimes amusing choices about where and how to proceed while at the same time visually prospecting still other spaces. The building is a large four stories of exuberantly composed, liberally glazed, small- and medium-scale, indoor and outdoor, compressed and soaring moments and pathways. It equals and perhaps surpasses some of Koolhaas's projects in sectional complexity, but here the tone is more buoyant than ironic. The project offers a range of spaces, some serene (views onto the lake, wood-veneered walls, a large fireplace, a grand piano), others playful (amoeba-shaped seating in a high-traffic area, as if to suggest that in the society of others one's identity becomes fluid). In a womb-like bar on the ground floor, walls, ceilings, floors, bar, furniture are all a high-gloss, pulsating red (this is a women's college, after all). From most places in the building one catches glimpses of other parts of the building, inside and out, or bamboo-filled gardens, or pastoral vistas beyond.

Like Mayne's Cincinnati Center, the Wellesley Center is an enormously complex building. Deciphering its plans would make almost anybody feel directionally challenged. But as in the Cincinnati Center, the Wellesley Center's apparent lack of system is only skin deep, because people inhabit not architectural plans or digital environments but spaces. Scogin and Elam's dazzlingly complex arrangement of varied views and spaces opens the building up to all manner of clerestories, skylights, lightwells, and windows of varied shapes, types, and sizes. Natural light falls into every one of its four floors. The architects modulate, control, and intelligently manage this brilliant abundance of natural light; it is another compositional tool by which they shape their highly particularized and

variable spaces. To move through the Center is to explore a world of possible landscapes. One needs to discover this building slowly and repeatedly, over seasons, days, and hours.

Neither building is without flaws. Mayne chose, inexplicably, to differentiate the dormitory from the rest of the complex by using slit-like windows that are far too narrow and ill-placed to offer anything more than badly skewed glimpses of the commons outside. In places, Mayne's dark interiors become too dark, engendering a lugubrious atmosphere that is out of keeping with the building's bustling, urban tone. This somberness is neither overcome by the cool fluorescent lighting nor alleviated by occasional skylights, which are haphazardly placed. Mayne's office reports that the staff put roof plans down on the floor and splattered them, Pollock-style, with paint to determine the skylights' locations. (To members of the design team this may indicate a design process of playful abandon, but to me it sounds like a sophomoric and perhaps sleep-deprived act of desperation wrought by an impending deadline.) Whereas elsewhere the Cincinnati Center's design only appears random, here it really is random, and the building suffers for it. And Scogin and Elam's building is at times overwrought, its surfeit of high-end materials and precious details so lavish that one nearly blushes at its extravagance. Its plans are so complex that navigating the building, which is relatively small, can be confusing. This is a building in which it is too easy to get lost.

Some people will not like Mayne's and Scogin and Elam's buildings for another reason, which is that they seem so compositionally uncontrolled. Their forms and their volumes do not emerge either from classicism or from one of the more familiar, more abstract systems by which contemporary architects tend to manage form: structural expression (Norman Foster's Hearst Tower), the exigencies of building construction (Renzo Piano's Whitney Museum project), conventional geometries (SANAA's glass pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art), or the bending, folding volumes made possible by computer-aided design and manufacturing (nearly anything by Frank Gehry or Foreign Office Architects). Owing to the apparent lack of a system guiding, controlling, and managing the Cincinnati and Wellesley Centers' formal compositions, what many architects will see when they look at either of these two buildings is a mess.

The buildings differ greatly in their physical surroundings, styles, and aesthetic sensibilities, but they rely on a common conceptual system. The system is invisible. It can neither be mapped in two dimensions nor captured in a photograph. It is an experiential approach to design whereby the architect assumes the point of view not only of the project's specified users but, more generally, of any individual, imagining how he or she stands and moves on the ground; perceives and experiences landscape, space and prospective views; and registers materials and compositions through the filter of sensory and visual associations and memories. And the architect does this for the landscape and the building, and then for the building and the landscape as they are integrated, intermeshed, and in tension with each other.

In itself, this approach is not new. It originated in a phenomenologically informed strain of modernism that was developed by some of the twentieth-century's greatest architects, including Alvar Aalto, a Finn who died in 1976, and Hans Scharoun, a German who died in 1972. (Mayne's approach is deeply reminiscent of Aalto's buildings for the Polytechnic Institute in Otaniemi, and Scogin and Elam's largest gathering space recalls Scharoun's celebrated Berlin Philharmonie.) Aalto and probably Scharoun (and, at least indirectly, their many successors) were influenced by early twentieth-century experimental psychology, which posited that human experience and cognition, including one's experience and perception of one's environment, is radically embodied and cannot be understood outside that cognitive frame.

Mayne and Scogin and Elam work from this strain of modernism, developing and deepening it by integrating their buildings with the surrounding environment, natural and social. Their projects, taken together, suggest the dazzlingly multifarious possibilities open to contemporary architects who adopt this embodied perspective of the user in a genuinely collaborative, interdisciplinary method of design. Architects who hear the call of these buildings, who either already are exploring or will come to explore the possibilities inherent in such an approach, will not produce a recognizable new style. It is unlikely that they will even become an identifiable "school." But they might make some more buildings as unusual, humane, and good as these.

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