

2006 **URBAN** STORIES
OF PLACE

PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE



Into the Fray: I Travel Back and Forth on Tightrope Strung Without Safety Net above Roiling Public Wordstorm Surrounding Steven Holl's Addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and Squirt Focused Volleys of Man-Words at the Entrenched Opinionholders on Both Sides

Dan Maginn

The renovation of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is anchored by a controversial addition to the museum by the noted firm Steven Holl Architects. Some people are drawn to the new building's luminous presence and lack of nostalgic reference. Some people are repelled by its non-traditional form and are convinced it looks like a collection of shipping containers. Some people, myself included, think that both groups are perhaps rushing to judgment and that valid criticism should occur only after the building is fully commissioned and operational. But because I am human and because you asked (by reading this far, retro-theoretically, you have asked) I have come to certain mid-to-late-stream conclusions, which include but are not limited to, the fact that:

- 1) It looks like the General Contractor hit bedrock higher than expected during excavation. I could be wrong and often am, but at any rate...
- 2) ...the building bumps up a bit along there toward the southeast part, and it looks a little imposing there as experienced from the neighborhood to the north; a little puffy, sure, and that...
- 3) ...there might be some kind of institutional denial concerning this puffiness, because they're not admitting it really, and because the model didn't look that puffy, but, come on...
- 4) ...the model was a model and the real world is the real world and stuff happens, as they say, pardon my French, and some people need to cool out and recognize...
- 5) ...that at least the building has the guts to stand up and confidently declare its relevance and existence in the modern world, and thank God...
- 6) ...the addition doesn't try to "match" the existing building, which of course was built in a different era when people were four feet tall and smelled somewhat beefier and such, and thank God...
- 7) ...Steven Holl Architects broke the rules and designed it to traverse along the East of the site, instead of slapping it on the North side of the building like a slab of pork ribs, although...
- 8) ...I'm not completely digging the Walter De Maria thing yet, but perhaps I will with time, perhaps it's subtle and will sneak up on me like my appreciation of

Cedric the Entertainer has snuck up on me, because...

- 9) ...the Lightning Field that De Maria did in Arizona certainly kicks ass, I think, though I've never been there, but getting back to the matter at hand I can confidently state that...
- 10) ...aside from one or two wee chunks on the southeast part, the rest of Steven Holl's addition to the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art certainly doesn't seem puffy at all. I've toured it a couple of times, and can testify that it is elegant and effortless and flows like a summer breeze, and...
- 11) ...the daylighting inside is extremely well considered and makes one appreciate light as a dynamic building material. The addition helps us to understand that light itself is a gift that we take for granted every day here on the big blue marble, but that, sure...
- 12) ...the building might be a little glowey as perceived by its immediate northern neighbors, toward evening when they're just trying to wind down with a gin and tonic after a long day at the office and...
- 13) ...who's to say that the building won't be attacked by moths. Trillions of moths from Canada, drawn to the glow? And who's to say the attack won't result in a vast quantity of moths smacking themselves to death against the channel glass, which by the way is...
- 14) ...very cool, and will result in a truly engaging nighttime experience for the rest of us, but who's presence still...
- 15) ...might result in an alarming stripe of moth bodies along the perimeter of the building, to be scooped up weekly by disgruntled workers (unless a program was somehow developed to leave the bodies in place to decay and ferment, resulting in...
- 16) ...some kind of "green building" fertilizer moment). But that said, I think that...
- 17) ...its probably best to instruct the disgruntled workers to get rid of the biomass of moth bodies on a weekly basis, perhaps on a Thursday night, and to let the people...

18) ...enjoy the building, which I'm leaning towards being a very good one, probably a really fucking great one, pardon my French...

19) ...even with the glowiness (and...

20) ...even with the moths.)

21) But still: a little puffy there along the southeast part, sure.

Dan Maginn, AIA is the author of *Yes, No, Maybe: I Succumb to Pressure and Publish Thoughts on Whether or Not the New Arena is Going to be Good or Not*. He is an architect and a partner at the Kansas City-based architectural firm **el dorado inc**. He has practiced **architecture** for sixteen years and is keenly interested in the intersection of art and architecture. He has written and sometimes published densely punctuated essays about such matters. He has written **Mittelschmerz: I Hose Down Both Sides in the Verbal Dirt Clod Fight about Whether or Not There Has Been a Colossal Mistake in the Constructed Scale of Three of the Four of the Bartle Hall Sculptures**. He has also written: **Guilty Pleasure: Enjoying the Work of Cedric the Entertainer**. Dan is proud of his accomplishments and those of his firm. That being said, he feels it is important to remain modest. He feels it is unwise to celebrate too much. Dan is no **rookie**: he has been in the **end zone** before, and believes strongly that, while occupying space in the **end zone** one need not **spike the ball**. His award-winning architectural work and the work of his four award-winning partners at **el dorado inc** has won numerous awards. They have been clapped at many times, no problem. That being said, Dan acknowledges that devising criteria to judge quality in architecture is somewhat problematic. What is good? What is bad? And who's keeping score? He feels that's the **bare bodkin**. He feels strongly that, as an architect, concerning oneself with the clapping and nodding of others can result in despair and **spiritual flatulence**. He is firm in his belief that, if unchecked, these approval-seeking impulses lead to a lack of being clapped at and precious little time spent in the **end zone**. He has spoken of this counter-intuitive and ironical notion before, and on numerous

occasions he has concluded that the tendency to concern oneself with the **clapping** and "the nodding" ultimately leads to the consumption of alcohol and ridiculously flavored tortilla-type **snack chips**. Recitations of this belief have resulted in the nodding of heads and further pre-award laudations. Many have read and enjoyed his layered and complex essays on the subject. Many have read and enjoyed **Cold Cock: I Take Numerous Public Chops to the Face By Expressing Thoughts about the Liberty Memorial Renovation**. Dan is not afraid of controversy. He has been in the end zone before, no problem. In addition to his childlike fascination in the boundaries shared by art and architecture, he is dedicated to the study of human interaction as a generator of architectural form. He has said this before in word-based essays comprised of numerous complex sentences. And the **People** have understood, for the most part, and a number of them have nodded with some vigor. (On this specific point, this "human interaction / form" point, he admits that his award-winning partners at **el dorado inc** are not in complete agreement.) Dan works a lot. He's probably working right now. He is **steadfast** in the belief that One must not stop working lest One drop to knee and grab chest. He feels that in Architecture one must not stop stirring, lest One's Building stick to the bottom of the **Suck-Pan**. It is his closely-held notion that buildings tolerate inhabitation by us humans but are largely disinterested in our ideas and actions. Although he is highly intelligent and motivated, he doesn't understand what Building Integrated Modeling (BIM) is, or why we might need it. He promises to read up on this. In addition, he doesn't understand what the **New Urbanism** is but thinks that if Zona Rosa is an example of the **New Urbanism** then he is indeed baffled by the whole thing, and he thinks that the waking world might just be a dream. This he has said to nodding and clapping of bandy-eyed student groups, including not a small number of female hotties. Dan is a sometimes-personifier of inanimate objects, although he eschews metaphor as a valid generator of architectural form. He does not believe that a building necessarily needs to look like, nor express, something other than itself. Dan feels that those architects who

disagree with him to be the **cloven-hooved brood** of the Dark Lord. His emotion on this subject runs deep and cold. Case in point: as a child, Dan became understandably attached to a well-designed and lifelike stuffed animal that was purchased by his parents at a motel gift shop — a tiger, named **Tiger**. He loved **Tiger**. This being said, he has never designed a building that looks like **Tiger**. (It is noted for the record that this stuffed animal was "accidentally" misplaced by his brother-in-law during the family's recent move from their ancestral home. A move that, for the record, was completed without Dan's full consent and input, though he is an award-winning **end-zone** occupying architect.) Though understandably devastated, Dan has steadfastly refused to honor **Tiger** by designing a building whose form is generated literally by the shape of a tiger. Nor has he chosen to lash out against his oddly uncaring family by designing a building anchored in the metaphoric spirit of **Tiger** through some sort of convoluted **ferro-sylvanic internal healing process**. He believes the tendency of some architects to succumb to such **metaphorical-oriented formmaking** to be proof of the proximity of the **Dread Beast** and his **Unholy Alliance**. Dan feels strongly that **one cannot unremember that which one has experienced** nor take back that which has been proffered and been psychically accepted. Who can bring back **Tiger**, he asks? It is his belief that no one can bring back **Tiger**. One cannot just buy another **Tiger**, as was suggested by his nicotine-stained and halitotic brother-in-law, though one has certainly tried to do so. One has certainly gone to Dillards, for instance, and to Toys R Us. One has searched on Ebay and Googled away **countless goddamn hours**, for instance, trying to find out **the name of the goddamn motel where Tiger was originally procured some 25 goddamn years ago**. **What else can one do?** Dan feels finally that one has done enough. **He feels a cathartic resolution is nigh**. He understands that one cannot find that which is truly lost. **He feels that, regardless of the marvelous potential of the space-time continuum, one cannot un-ring a wrong-rung bell**. Dan feels strongly that such a bell, once wrong-rung, stays wrong-rung forever.