



Entertainment

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On Architecture: AIA slams Seattle, but we pretty much deserve it

By LAWRENCE W. CHEEK
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Last month, an out-of-town jury spent a whirlwind weekend reviewing new Seattle buildings for the local American Institute of Architects' annual honor awards. They delivered some sobering judgments:

"For a city with such strengths -- education, culture, natural environment, wealth -- the jury hoped to see more evidence of leadership and risk, and less comfort with an already well-digested regional design language. Great architecture occurs when a great designer creates new opportunity."

Well, first, consider the source: one of the three jurors was Joshua Prince-Ramus, who in concert with Rem Koolhaas co-designed our dysfunctional Central Library. It certainly bristles with leadership and risk, but the more we use the building, the more obvious its deficiencies and perversities become.

But if you take your own year's-end tour of new buildings in Seattle and its environs, it's hard to argue with the jurors' harsh assessment. While some good and interesting buildings are rising, one comes away with the feeling that architects are indeed failing to risk and lead.



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It's not that we need innovation for entertainment or notoriety -- we have the library and EMP for that -- but for the sake of solving real problems, such as unaffordable housing. And for shaping the city's identity in a distinctive and environmentally appropriate way, so we don't just look like a watery Dallas.

Belltown's Mosler Lofts is the most provocative residential high-rise in Seattle since WWII.

Let's take a survey of what architects -- locals and outsiders -- have wrought in the past year: Downtown Bellevue growing new high-rises like bamboo on steroids perfectly illustrates the regional architectural doldrums. Every example in Bellevue's new crop, whether just completed or in progress, seems to have rolled out of the same skyscraper factory: a sleek glass-and-steel skin, a flat top and a rustle of slightly off-square angles or nips and tucks to create a little tension with the street grid.

They're all vastly better than the concrete file cabinets of the '60s and '70s (Bellevue's Paccar Building and Seattle's Safeco Plaza, for example), but not as good as the best of the art deco age (Seattle Tower). Their greatest failing, however, is that they don't establish any meaningful identity for their city -- they don't signal anything except a generic prosperity.

Cynics might say that's all Bellevue itself is about. You didn't read it here first.

Mosler Lofts, the newest of the Belltown condo crop, points in a more engaging direction. In fact, it's the most interesting and provocative residential high-rise to appear in Seattle since World War II.



zoom

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The architecture firm Mithun appears to have taken the feel of the original urban loft idea -- the gritty old warehouse transformed into high-end living quarters -- and applied it to a new building with the advantage of big windows, which are structurally impossible in most renovations. Its mood, as seen from the street, is dark, tough and industrial. But on the north side, it meets Clay Street with a three-story brick facade that could almost be a cluster of family-friendly row houses.

Kirkland's Heathman Hotel is the year's silliest example of haute-bourgeois retrotecture.

Urban life is all about ambiguity and complexity, and this building reflects it better than any of the slicker, more overtly luxurious towers around it.

The Heathman Hotel, which just opened in downtown Kirkland, is the year's silliest example of haute-bourgeois retrotecture.

The justification for this vaguely Italianate Victorian villa, executed by Jensen/Fey Architecture & Planning of Redmond, was to be "consistent with the city's elegant and historic buildings." But Kirkland's scattered Victoriana isn't nearly as compelling a context as its stock of late 20th-century architecture downtown and along the lakefront. That would have been worthwhile to build on.

Architectural nostalgia is essentially a developer-driven marketing ploy, a way to drape the overwhelming complexity of contemporary life in costumes suggesting 19th-century family values and small-town simplicity. It doesn't do any great aesthetic harm, but it suggests a retreat from the realities of the 21st century, a kind of denial.

A new Interstate 405 pedestrian bridge, of all things, shows a good try at humanizing the most inhumane urban environment of modern times -- the freeway.

The three-story stair and elevator tower, just south of the state Route 527 exit in Bothell, is topped with an airfoil-like rain shield that gives it an intriguing profile whether approaching by car or on foot. The concrete pylons raising the bridge over the freeway look like art deco flower abstractions: tough, but graceful, too. The long tunnel-in-the-air over the freeway is as drab as an alley on the inside, but with eight lanes of traffic roaring underneath, it doesn't seem like a place where anyone would be tempted to linger.



 zoom

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This pedestrian tower in Bothell is a noble attempt at humanizing a freeway view. The concrete pylons look like art deco flower abstractions.

The Olympic Sculpture Park by Weiss/Manfredi of New York is easily the best new public venue of the year, a park that redeems a former downtown wasteland with a synergy of art, architecture and nature. The architects took a big risk here, and pulled it off. The Seattle Art Museum's other blockbuster, the 16-story museum addition, demonstrates innovative leadership in sharing the new tower with WaMu, but Brad Cloepfil's design is as risk-free as a Brooks Brothers overcoat.

The thorniest issue that developers and architects face is the widening chasm between income and housing affordability in the region. Dreary \$500,000 tract houses in the 'burbs are yesterday's solution, just bulked up and priced ever more out of line with value. And the mid- and high-rise condos mainly address the needs of singles with Microsoft paychecks, with a going rate of about \$650,000 for 1,000 square feet.

Finally, considered as a piece of kinetic architecture, the South Lake Union Streetcar adds a new note of cachet to the downtown streetscape. The tracks are unobtrusive (except to bicyclists), and the Czech-made cars have an impassive, dignified look (aside from the one with the purple paint) that helps calm the nagging feeling that they're not really doing anything.

It's probably worth asking why downtown Seattle now has two toy train sets, and why the one we unwrapped under the 1962 tree is so much faster than the new one.

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