

Peter Jurzik placing his DIVA model on the downtown site model.



TODD COOPER

Planning for the Future

A Visual Arts Center for Eugene.

New public buildings begin with architects competing for their designs to be chosen, but the public is seldom involved in any part of the selection process. For that matter, many of us are unsure about what designing buildings itself entails. “DIVA 2010: A Visual Arts Center for Eugene” at DIVA offers visitors a unique glimpse into how architects work by displaying the designs of 16 UO senior and graduate students for a Visual Arts Center many hope will be built in downtown Eugene in the coming years. This is an opportunity for the public to consider what final form such an art center would take.

The designs — elaborate projects the result of six months of intense work — are also unusual because UO instructor, architect Otto Poticha, took a realistic approach in his studio class.

To begin with, the students worked on a real project. The DIVA board, with Larry Fong, UO Museum of Art associate director, compiled the building’s specific requirements and designated the site as the so-called butterfly lot between 8th and 7th at Oak.

Within those parameters, students were free to make such decisions as the number of stories, how to address environmental and urban planning concerns, how to balance site, building and what the space should feel like. During first term, they researched precedents and generated their leading concept about the building through drawings and models.

“Our project has helped DIVA think better about what it wants to be,” Poticha noted. “It’s very clear to us that it should be a visual arts center — a hands-on venue — and not a museum.”

Entirely novel was the collaboration between Poticha’s students and five of Janice Rutherford’s graduate students from Arts Administration, who acted as consultants throughout the design process. They told the

architecture students how an art center would be run. During weekly meetings, they made suggestions about adjacency issues such as connecting offices with exhibit preparation spaces. They provided practical information on hanging art. They discussed furnishings for particular spaces.

In turn, the arts admin. students “learned a tremendous amount about what architects do, and that architecture is also art,” Poticha said. “It was a great exposure for both groups. Everyone benefited.”

During second term, Poticha required students to refine their projects. “They would have to build into their schemes the parts they never get to in one-term projects: the refinement phase,” Poticha said. “They had a review with me every Monday night on a specific topic: building codes, structure, mechanical systems like HVAC, natural lighting and illuminations, plumbing. ...This is very unusual at this school and probably in other schools too. The goal was to not fight with these elements but to embrace them so they’d help mold the spaces and refine the design.”

Poticha said he is very pleased with the accomplished work.

Visitors should be prepared to spend plenty of time, as each presentation involves many drawings, which represent different design aspects. It isn’t easy for nonprofessionals to synthesize a lot of information in what may be unfamiliar forms. Future architecture exhibit organizers should be aware that most visitors would appreciate written guidelines.

Statements of purpose should spell out goals and leading concepts. What solutions were favored to integrate the building to its urban environment? What construction materials and interior finish will be used? (Think of twin towers, one sheathed in glass, the other massive concrete: these buildings have little in common

save shape.) How is a particular inside feel to be achieved? One visitor suggested that a single panel showing the various site plans side by side in a unified format would have provided a helpful overview for purpose of comparison.

The drawings and models tell much but not all. Knowing an architect’s intentions is useful to interpret and evaluate her/his design. Architecture is primarily a functional art, meant not merely to be seen but to be lived in. Future users must be given every possible mean to evaluate that crucial dimension.

In this respect, student architect Peter Jurzik’s statement proved useful, although I missed more detailed explanations. The sophisticated way in which his gallery ceilings provide natural light merits specific attention and explication. Julie Rowse’s statement succeeded in evoking what it would be like for people to use the center, which brought it to life. Her description of construction materials also made it easier to visualize the building. Brian Hoeft and Keith Simon also provided useful indications of materials.

Computer-generated drawings figure prominently, although some of the young architects opted for purely hand-drawn designs while others used both. I don’t prefer one over the other, but computer-generated images appeared best and clearest when the designers avoided useless effects. One may compare, for instance, Marzban Irani’s clean perspectives with Seth Bradshaw’s images cluttered with superfluous tonal effects. Similarly, drawings printed on busy backgrounds lost clarity.

Ultimately, a building’s interior matters far more than its exterior, which is not to say we should ignore what a building looks like. Most exhibited designs are based on conventional parallelepiped forms little relieved by superfi-

cial variations. Sheer façades, flat roofs or roofs that slope inwards (never mind our rainy climate) — will we ever be cured of Bauhaus? I’m not faulting the students. They try their best within transmitted orthodoxies. Irani provides variety in the size of his blocks and cubes. Elizabeth Holloway largely eschews a boxy look by creating a step effect from level to level and through irregularly angled walls.

Among the most visually interesting designs, Hoeft’s guiding wall, curvilinear atrium with ample light and well-integrated garden were notable. Rowse’s design consists of a dome rising over a flat plenum. She also created a children’s sculpture garden adjacent to the children’s gallery and classroom. Dustin White followed the structural grid on the street sides and balanced it with a curvy, sculptural façade on the garden side.

Two schools of thought exist on how tall a building to create. Some deduced a new building should keep a low profile to blend in with its surroundings. Others perceive a need to increase density, but even so no design exceeds four stories (five if one counts Rowse’s mezzanines) and most stop at three.

Regarding interior spaces, Jody Bell went for “one large open room that can be divided up by a series of movable walls.” Many designs emphasize natural light. Indeed, natural light and airiness are called for, but so is a feeling of warmth and coziness for our long Northwest winters. For me this means no bare-concrete interior walls such as are visible on some of the drawings.

This show succeeds in revealing the complexity of the design process for public buildings and provides much food for thought. I highly recommend attending and forming your own opinions. **EW**



Interior perspective drawing by Keith Simon.

DISPLAY ELEMENTS

Diagram, Mechanical. Indicates placement of HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning), electrical system and plumbing.

Diagram, Part. Combination of the spatial and programmatic diagrams.

Diagram, Programmatic. Organization of spaces.

Diagram, Spatial. Circulation layout and space division.

Diagram, Structural. Layout of load-carrying structural elements.

Elevation. Shows front, rear and sides of building without use of perspective.

Floor Plan. Shows placement of interior walls, dimensions and locations of rooms, doors, windows, stairways, etc.

Model. Three-dimensional representation to scale.

Perspective. Perspective view of building exterior or interior.

Reflected Ceiling Plan. Shows duct work, structure and lighting on ceiling. What you see when looking up.

Section. Cross-section or vertical slice of the building; specifies structure, lighting, insulation, mechanical, flooring and roofing details.

Site Plan. Shows site, buildings and landscape elements.