



STRUCTURAL ASSETS

Architectural exhibits rise in Harrisburg.

BY M. DIANE MCCORMICK

Throughout history, says Carrie Wissler-Thomas, humans have “designed structures to live in and to work in and have always enhanced them with visual arts.”

“Art and architecture,” says the Art Association of Harrisburg president, “flow together.”

This fall, Harrisburg’s art and architecture don’t just flow together but collide in joyous profusion through a groundbreaking partnership among the Central PA Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Art Association of Harrisburg, Historic Harrisburg Association and Susquehanna Art Museum.

Together, the four groups are presenting programs and exhibits showcasing historic and contemporary architecture.

It began when SAM refashioned a classic bank building into its new Midtown home, which opened in January. The project included a large addition, not duplicating the bank design but holding a 21st-century mirror to the original edifice.

That project inspired SAM and AIA to develop “Towards a New/Old Architecture,” the exhibit that has become the four-group collaboration’s centerpiece. It spotlights historic Pennsylvania buildings given new life by contemporary additions.

While developing the exhibit, SAM staff would hold meetings with collaborative members and then head to meetings with architects at the construction site, says Director of Exhibitions Lauren Nye.

“It was very, very fresh in our minds,” Nye says. “We would go from that meeting and put our boots on and come down here with hardhats and talk about what we had just talked about.”

The complicated exhibit—“the most moving parts I have ever planned,” says Nye—features giant, gallery-quality photos of 12 projects, including the instantly iconic Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the revitalization-sparking CODO 241 in York, the apocalyptic Levitt Pavilion at Arts



Quest in Bethlehem, and a cantilevered home hovering over a Pittsburgh art glass factory. In specially designed light tables, photos and images reveal the evolution of each project.

The overall effect spotlights “the inherent art in the architecture,” says Nye.

“It gives people ownership of the spaces they live in,” she says. “It gives you a new reason to visit a space you may not have before, to come to a neighborhood that is growing, and care about not just tearing something down because it’s old but thinking about how you can use what is good there, and use additions to make it a workable space that people will thrive in.”

ON BOARD

Harrisburg architect Chris Dawson, whose own Hershey Fire Station is in the exhibit, worked with SAM to select exhibit-worthy projects and images that tell stories of transformation.

A successful contemporary addition might purposely contrast the historic space, “but that doesn’t mean it’s a free-for all,” says Dawson. “You have to take cues in scale and proportion.” In the Harrisburg area, “we have these beautiful, under-utilized buildings in our midst, and to have people look at them with fresh eyes was part of our intention.”

Historic Harrisburg Association, long known as a bulwark against bulldozers, is all on board with that, says Executive Director David Morrison.

“The SAM exhibit definitely conveys a vivid message about how old buildings can be transformed and added to,” says Morrison. “The SAM building itself is the perfect example, having received HHA’s 2015 Preservation Award, and then adjoined by a 21st-century sleek, modern, state-of-the-art museum.”

HHA is showing its collection of drawings by 20th-century Harrisburg architect Clayton Lappley, designer of such landmarks as Riverview Manor, John Harris High School and the Moose Lodge temple now slated for a mixed-use renovation by WCI Partners. The news that SAM was planning an architectural exhibition inspired HHA to display its Lappley collection, donated after they were found in the basement of Riverview Manor during restoration.

QUIET FASHION

The snowballing of SAM’s exhibit into a four-way collaboration among arts, architecture and history organizations is “unprecedented, completely unprecedented in terms of the scope of the undertaking,” says Morrison.

“By having four organizations simultaneously present architectural-themed exhibits, it has enormous impact on the viewing public to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of art, architecture and the professions of artists and architects,” he says.

The Art Association of Harrisburg’s involvement created a platform for “all kinds of wild and crazy interpretations” of architecture and structure in its exhibit, “Structures II,” says Wissler-Thomas. There



are a whimsical found-objects rendering of the state Capitol, stainless steel sculptures, a “charming” sculpture of two floating squirrels, and a twig-bamboo bird’s nest construction titled “Christopher Wren” (get it? Look it up for a little architectural history).

“Structures II” will be followed by “Architectural Visions,” an invitational exhibit where architects and artists show their skills in sculpture, photography, painting and other media. Wissler-Thomas hopes the shows—AAH’s and the others—open visitors’ eyes to the artistic value of architecture, “one of the highest form of visual arts because it combines the ability to draw and to see spatially and create three-dimensional reality on a huge scale.”

“All these shows really show how artistic, how visually skilled these people are,” she says. “They don’t just work on a computer and come up with some model of blocks you stack up to make some building. They really have a huge visual sense.”

Arts groups frequently collaborate in quiet fashion, but the joint architecture celebration puts “the fruits of our labor” before the public eye, says Wissler-Thomas.

“I would hope that the general public would come out with a more abiding appreciation for the beautiful architecture that surrounds them, and the feeling that it’s not something you just work in and live in,” she says. “It’s something you should look at and appreciate.” **B**



For information on the exhibits and related events, including lectures, classes and walking tours, visit www.sqart.org, www.historicharrisburg.com and www.artassocfhhbg.com. Photos by Elizabeth Stene.