

PRESSRELEASE

Architecture in Golden Gate Park: A Matter of Life and Lifeless

New York, NY, July 14, 2009 – During a recent trip to San Francisco I had the pleasure of visiting Golden Gate Park, which has undergone a wonderful transformation since my last visit almost ten years ago. I had planned to spend the day there and was pleased to see that I was not alone. The park was packed and so was my agenda. I wanted to visit both the de Young Museum designed by Herzog & de Meuron that opened in 2005 and the recently debuted California Academy of Sciences by Renzo Piano. I had seen press coverage of both and was anticipating a delicious serving of world-class architecture.

I was not disappointed. However, what I didn't expect was the dueling perspective on contemporary architecture one can enjoy while experiencing these two buildings.

I began my tour in the de Young Museum, which seemed surprisingly empty for a Sunday. It has a solid collection, select masterpieces and an outstanding exhibition of artifacts from the Pacific Islands.

This is a museum only a designer could love. It is beautifully architectonic, like a gigantic work of sculpture. For this, I'll forgive some of its flaws such as the ramps and stairways that seem to be more about excess than access and an interior courtyard that feels like something from a gulag. However, most of the gallery spaces were comfortably scaled and the art well exhibited.

Its signature feature, a torqued observation tower, offers spectacular views of the Bay area. The puckered, perforated and patinated copper façade is so richly detailed that I assume it shimmers on a sunny day. Alas, San Francisco doesn't have many of these and this day was no different. The façade looked lifeless, making the building, a menacing hulk, a kind of industrial fossil. More formidable than friendly, the building is however, very cool in a heavy metal sense.

In contrast the California Academy of Sciences (CAS) is a celebration of life. It was jammed with visitors. Even on an overcast day the interior was filled with light from its multiple skylights and glass façade. Its "greenness" is apparent, reflecting its core mission to explore, explain and protect the natural world. It is

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the largest museum in the world to receive a Platinum LEED award. (Note: in the spirit of full disclosure, our firm was part of an international design team that worked on an early strategic phase of this project.)

Even in these crowded conditions there was sense of joy as families patiently waited in long lines to visit the spherical planetarium and other major exhibits.

The aquarium, on the lower level, is dark and mysterious, like the abyss. Most of the light is from the specimen tanks. There were many interactive displays that, unfortunately, were largely ignored by children and parents. These just couldn't compete with the multiple "live" exhibits such as an aquarium full of moon jellies.

A giant spherical "terrarium," that houses an exhibit about the rainforest, was swarming with visitors who ascended its spiral ramp while dodging fluttering butterflies.

The reinstallation of CAS's original African Hall with its newly refurbished dioramas is welcoming and brightly lit. This is a break from the conventional approach of dark paneled rooms, that populate many natural history museums. Its "living roof" exhibit of indigenous plants, punctuated with porthole skylights is still a work in process that I imagine will only get better over time.

This building is not without programmatic challenges. Just inside the main entrance is Piano's "piazza" which serves as a large, makeshift cafeteria. This is not a warm reception. It is instead spectacularly dulling to the senses. This space would be better used as a stage for some dynamic specimen installation or sculpture. A missed opportunity for sure. Adjacent to the large spherical structures, additional exhibits on Madagascar and climate change in California, seem marginalized and temporary.

The aesthetic battle of architectural styles between these two museums is wonderful to observe and study. I can't help but appreciate the de Young's bold attempt to be brash and aggressive. The California Academy of Science's success is in being correct, like a well-tailored suit, with technical innovations built into the very fabric of the building.

The real winner is Golden Gate Park. I particularly liked the Music Concourse because it provides a neutral DMZ between the two institutional combatants. Its knobby trees, which my San Franciscan friends say, are London Planes, have been "pollarded", a type of pruning used to develop a lower canopy. These are beautifully bizarre and add real charm of this public space.

Although my visit to San Francisco was all too brief, my spectacular Sunday in the park reminded me that contemporary architecture for cultural institutions remains an open playing field with plenty of room for stylistic and philosophical conflict. I will not wait another ten years before I return.

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