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Frank Gehry, Clearing a Path

Corcoran Design Is Already Restructuring the Way Washington Thinks

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Three and a half years ago, the Corcoran Gallery and College of Art announced Frank Gehry as the winner of the high-profile competition to select an architect for its planned addition.

Since then, Waiting for Gehry has become an unavoidable habit among those who watch Washington architecture for signs of life.

It's a tiresome pastime because the ending is at once uncertain and important. The first question anybody asks about Gehry's Corcoran design is "Will it get built?" The answers are "Hope so" and "Ask David Levy." The Corcoran director definitely needs a phone call from an imaginative patron with \$50 million or so to spare for a very worthy cause.

The building is, of course, eminently worth waiting for. Gehry is one of the top architects of our times and his Washington design is one of his finest, most subtle accomplishments. It'll do wonders for the Corcoran, in particular, and for the Washington cultural scene in general.

But there is a second part to the Waiting for Gehry game, and it consists quite simply of the hope that his Corcoran building will lead Washington architecture, even if kicking and screaming, into the 21st century.

During the late 20th century -- the 1980s in particular -- Washington architects hoisted themselves all too briefly onto center stage by reacting strongly and inventively to the excesses of modernist planning and design. It was a time of regionalism, of rediscovering local roots, of healing wounds caused by urban renewal, wholesale destruction of historic structures, and third-rate modern architecture.

Many Washington architects were at the forefront of this broad movement. The genius of the local response was that, for the most part, it avoided the shallow ironies and showy contortions that came to be associated with postmodernist design (a term that today sounds almost quaint).

With a few rather spirited exceptions, the best of the local work was crisply contextual -- that is, the new buildings fit in with older, existing structures. Rather quietly and respectfully, they improved the settings they were put into. The street, rather than the individual building, was paramount.

But somewhere along the way respectfulness turned into formulaic caution, and many a history-quoting Washington architect got in the habit of looking backward rather than

forward. Architecture was changing dynamically all around the world, but in Washington it seemed trapped in a time warp.

But wait a minute! Something *is* happening. The year that'll soon be ending saw a fresh wind pass through Washington architecture -- not a hurricane-force blast of change, mind you, but enough of a breeze to get your attention.

Just last month the Commission of Fine Arts enthusiastically approved a design for the new Newseum on Pennsylvania Avenue by the Polshek Partnership of New York. With its layered, glass-and-steel design, the building will be a dramatic, and welcome, break from the Washington norm.

At the same meeting the commission approved two designs by Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, both in prominent, "gateway" positions. One design is for a big new federal building at New York and Florida avenues NW, and the other for the U.S. Institute of Peace on Constitution Avenue, not far from the Lincoln Memorial. With their pleasing, bold geometries, these buildings, too, will become refreshing additions to Washington's streetscapes and skylines.

Earlier in the year, Washington architect Shalom Baranes and his colleagues could look proudly on at the dedication of the new Nigerian Embassy, a beautiful building with clean modern lines and a satisfying combination of stone and glass walls. In the fall, Baranes could celebrate the completion of a large new office building on Constitution Avenue near the Capitol, a building whose outstanding feature is a long, grand sun-screen glass wall.

Nor did all the good news come in large packages. In the 1600 block of 16th Street NW, Washington architect William Bonstra inserted a narrow, sharp-edged residential building as a distinctive punctuation mark in a distinctly traditional environment. In the 2100 block of 10th Street NW, the adventurous youngsters of Rockville's Division One design firm did much the same thing with a series of rowhouses. On Seventh Street between R and S streets NW, Maryland architect Suzanne Reatig designed an affordable apartment block with crisp, clean, no-nonsense lines.

This is a diverse group in quality and style, but its very diversity is bracing. None of the buildings bears even the slightest resemblance to what used to be a standard contextual response -- there's no mimicking, no false modesty, no fake history -- yet each contributes a welcome note to its context.

And none, I hasten to point out, owes a stylistic debt to Gehry's effervescent work. (Well, maybe Safdie's Peace Institute, a little.) But all, I submit, owe something to the example of Gehry's Corcoran design. Just having it around as an idea has loosened up the Washington scene in a beneficial way.

Now, if only we could get a fix on the Gehry building as a reality. If somebody out there cares to pick up the phone, Levy's number is 202-639-1736.

