



The Nelson-Atkins Museum of art in Kansas city was designed by Steven Holl, the architect chosen by the MFA,H, for its expansion.

COUNTERPOINTS

Big Wisdom and Small Wit May Put Houston Back on the World Stage for Architecture

by Ronnie Self

“...SILENCE IS AS FULL OF POTENTIAL WISDOM AND WIT AS THE UNHEWN MARBLE OF GREAT SCULPTURE,” writes Aldous Huxley in *Point Counter Point*. And architectural competitions multiply the potential by three, or four, or more.

Houston’s psyche is that of a city with the promise of a yet hewn stone—or at least a mass of clay. In the last few months Houston has invited twelve architectural teams to propose designs for three significant projects. It is an exciting time.

Morphosis, Snøhetta, and Steven Holl competed for a new building for The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, to be built in the current parking lot just across the street from the Law Building. Holl was chosen, but the project has not yet been made public. Together, the architect and client are now examining program, planning, and phasing.

Interloop, Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, Neil M. Denari, SHoP, and Snøhetta competed for the Metro Central Station-Main, a downtown transfer station. Reportedly, an architect has been selected, but the name will not be announced before a phase of budget verifications and design modifications has been successfully completed.

David Chipperfield, Johnston Marklee, SANAA, and Tatiana Bilbao recently presented designs for the Menil Drawing Institute on the Menil campus. Johnston Marklee were selected for the project.

While the extreme juxtapositions (no zoning, etc.) that characterize Houston can sometimes be exhilarating, much of our everyday architecture inspires less enthusiasm. Occasionally, these more important projects come along to break the silence of the humdrum. More exciting generally hasn’t meant flamboyant, however. Even with our rough-and-tumble reputation, Houston hasn’t taken the path of a more brash architecture and may even be seeking the harmonious. The three MFA,H finalists provided a fairly wide formal variety for consideration for a new addition. In many ways the existing buildings of Mies and Moneo couldn’t be more different: Mies’ transparency versus Moneo’s opacity, Mies’ universal space versus Moneo’s contained rooms. Judging from his previous work, Holl’s project could be the offspring of the two with translucent walls rather than opaque or transparent, and gallery spaces that are not as contained as rooms but more defined than lofts.

The Menil choices seem more focused. The competitors, even with very different backgrounds, are of a similar ilk with a preference for simple forms and a tendency for minimalism. The relatively unknown architects on the list, Johnston Marklee and Tatiana Bilbao, have less of a track record which makes for more risk, but also increased potential. The success of Johnston Marklee’s project will likely depend on a perceptive and compelling interpretation of the context—a fairly unique situation and challenge in Houston and a good example to set.

If both museum projects have a certain gravitas calling for “wisdom,” there seems to be a place for “wit” in the Central Station design. Though there are many constraints and the project has to function well, there isn’t a lot of program. The proposals are more lighthearted. They generally extract a concept from an aspect of context or function, run with it, and translate it into form without agonizing over the architectural gesture. If what results—having navigated through a complex decision making process and a tight budget—is a success, it should be an even more pertinent example for Houston’s more everyday architecture. If museums commonly hold competitions for even the smallest additions, there was no unwritten rule that obliged the Central Station to do the same. In that way our hopes for it are even higher.

Competitions are quickly forgotten, though, and the building itself becomes the seed for the future. I have been told that the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck was contacted as a possible candidate for the Menil Collection. If chosen, Houston would have been a slightly different place. Every competition—and building—opens some doors and closes others. c