

C O L U M N S



Designing for Children and youth

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A Personal Note

by Anne J. Swager, Hon. AIA



“What you can do, though, is to remember how your designs can add immeasurably to people’s lives...”

To me, the World Trade Center Towers

represented the New York City skyline and a place I wanted to see. They did not represent our capitalistic greed but then I am an American. Skyscrapers, to me, are part of the wonderful density that makes up cities. People pour into them and out of them at predictable times of day. They offer views that you cannot get anywhere else and on rainy and cold days they are cities unto themselves. I am disturbed by the conversations that have followed the multiple tragedies of September 11 about the death of the skyscraper as a building form, and yet I understand why it is unlikely that the World Trade Center Towers will be rebuilt.

On Tuesday, September 11, we closed our offices after the plane crashed in Somerset County. None of us could work and with the enormity of what was happening and what might happen, the best decision was to send everyone home to their families. Mt. Lebanon Schools did not release the children early. This left my husband and I plenty of time to watch history unfold and talk about what we might say to the children. Henry, as a senior in high school is old enough to comprehend the enormity of the events but Ellen, age 5, is blessedly clueless.

Because of a viral infection at 10 days of age, which caused brain damage, Ellen has a variety of special needs. While Ellen’s gross motor skills and speech production have been compromised, she still has many capabilities. She is quite bright and inquisitive. Over the past year and a half, she has learned to walk but she still falls easily with any grade change. Stairs are a challenge and much on play surfaces is barely navigable. More than anything, she wants to be just like every other child and so she practices walking all the time and every place she goes. All of the grammar schools in Mt. Lebanon are identical, a perfect example of *stock school plans*. Ellen loves her special kindergarten class for speech and language delayed children. However, she is the only one in the class with significant mobility

problems. She has to have an aide to go to the restroom because the door is too heavy to open. She can’t wash her hands by herself because she can’t reach the knobs and doesn’t have the strength to turn them. On good days Ellen will tell you she is five and goes to kindergarten. On bad days, when she thinks more about what she can’t do than what she can do, she says she is three. She just wants some extra time to be like everyone else.

There are so many children like Ellen entering the public schools. Contrary to what you might believe, the surge in the special needs population is not due to over-diagnosing syndromes such as ADD. It is because we can save children like Ellen with medicine or techniques that are ever evolving. While she has a number of challenges to overcome, we want her to have the chance to grow up to be a remarkable person.

In this month’s *Columns*, Tracy Certo has written a fascinating story on the designs a number of firms are doing for child specific places. It was uplifting to read about the care and attention the architects are putting into such space and to realize that these new spaces can accommodate a number of different children with a variety of needs. So many of our feelings about ourselves can be tied to the spaces which we have inhabited.

I am sure many of you felt like I did on Wednesday, September 12. So much of what I do immediately felt insignificant. I am not a doctor who can save lives or a fireman who can rescue people from buildings and neither are most of you. What you can do, though, is to remember how your designs can add immeasurably to people’s lives and, when you consider how long most buildings stand, that adds up to a whole lot of people.

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On the cover: Kelly Street Childcare Center in Homewood by EDGE studio.

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In Perspective : An Insider's View of Architecture Exhibitions

By Tracy Myers, Associate Curator, Heinz Architectural Center

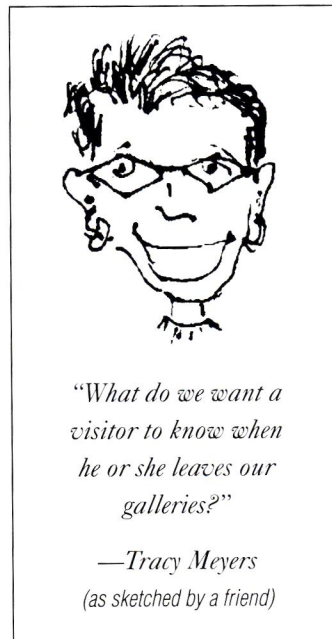
The past summer produced an unusually rich vein of architecture exhibitions in the Northeast. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Robert Venturi, FAIA and Denise Scott Brown were the subject of a retrospective that surveyed their architectural and planning work and their delightfully whimsical designs for the decorative arts. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe — against whose ascetic “less is more” Modernist orthodoxy Venturi very deliberately pitched his ethos of “messy vitality” — was treated to two large exhibitions in New York: *Mies in Berlin*, at the Museum of Modern Art, and *Mies in America*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The spiral ramp galleries of New York’s Guggenheim Museum were given over to a stunning paean to Frank Gehry, FAIA. And on a considerably smaller scale, the Van Alen Institute in New York was the site of *Architecture + Water*, which presented five recent projects that innovatively address the interface between the tectonic and the aquatic.

At the time these exhibitions were on view elsewhere, the Heinz Architectural Center was showing two exhibitions of a very different sort. *Landscapes of Retrospection* featured eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drawings and prints that depicted Britain’s built and natural environments and were made for publication in books that self-consciously championed the nation’s unique heritage. *Still Rooms & Excavations*, an installation of black-and-white photographs by Richard Barnes, documented the 1990s expansion of a San Francisco museum and the excavation of a gold rush-era potter’s field that was discovered beneath the museum during construction.

Collectively, the exhibitions mentioned here, together with HAC’s spring show *Folds Blobs + Boxes: Architecture in the Digital Era* and the current *Perfect Acts of Architecture*, constitute a large portion of what might be thought of as a menu of types of architecture exhibitions. Typically, such shows treat a single architect,

or a period or style of architecture, or a particular building type, or a way of theorizing about or approaching design. Each of these kinds of exhibitions offers the visitor a different way of understanding the broad practice and diverse results of this thing we call “architecture.” A monographic study, for example, allows the visitor to see the evolution of its subject’s sensibility and mastery, while a typological survey offers a cross-section of various architects’ solutions to similar design problems. Often, of course, an exhibition is a hybrid of these: a study of a form-giver like Mies inevitably addresses the “style” (a problematic term for historians) with which the architect is associated. In the case of *Landscapes of Retrospection* and *Still Rooms & Excavations*, the subject is not buildings *per se*, but rather the meanings we project onto them or which they come to embody in the course of their sometimes difficult histories. Although the arsenal of curatorial tools for presenting architecture in a museum or gallery setting has recently expanded to include virtual walk-throughs of buildings and other technology-based media, curators’ principal vehicles continue to be drawings, models, and photographs.

As I dutifully waded through *Mies in America* in August, I was struck by how deeply unsatisfying the show was in comparison to the Gehry exhibition and *Mies in Berlin*. There were several reasons for this, not least of which was that this was the fifth architecture exhibition I had seen in a two-day museum blitz and that I was thus suffering a bit of museum fatigue. But the question it prompted was one with which architecture curators grapple each day: How can we represent something whose most notable feature in the exhibition context is its absence? For me, this question is subsumed by the more fundamental one of exactly what it is that we aim to do in a show about architecture. What do we



(continued on next page)