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The Best Architecture of 2023: Solving Problems in Imaginative Style

Building projects always come with untold hurdles, but the year's most impressive feats of design—including additions to New York's American Museum of Natural History and the Buffalo AKG Art Museum—cleared them in creative ways.

By Michael J. Lewis

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Atrium of the Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education and Innovation PHOTO: IWAN BAAN

The Great American Building, like the Great American Novel, is a phrase that can scarcely be uttered today without irony.

The problem is that if you do not believe in greatness, you do not strive for it, which may explain why today we no longer seem able to make universally acknowledged masterpieces such as Fallingwater or the Chrysler Building. But if we no longer think in terms of greatness, the past year has given us some very good buildings. Imaginative problem-solving, masterly use of innovative technology, and concern for the human experience of a building: All are there in abundance.

Two museum projects offer instructive lessons in problem-solving. In each case the task was to graft a daringly contemporary addition onto a beloved historical

building without compromising its traditional character. The **Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education and Innovation**, Studio Gang's addition to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, is a free-form composition with hardly a straight line in it except for the floors, and yet it manages to respect both the original building and its urban context. Its pink granite facade billows and ripples, as if struggling to restrain some mighty force within, and yet its materials and mighty scale comport well with the Romanesque brawn of the original building.

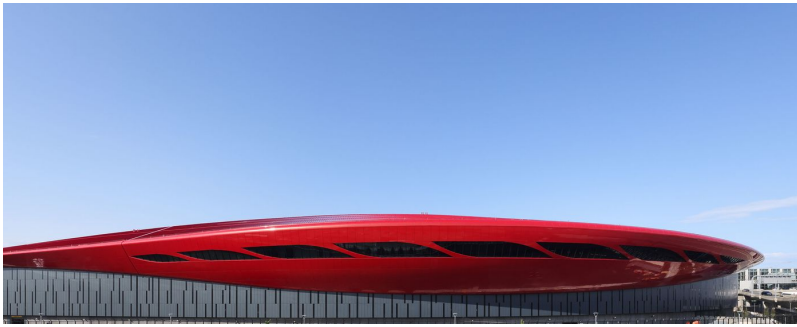


The Gundlach Building, the Albright Bridge, and the Wilmers Building of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum
PHOTO: MARCO CAPPELLETTI

More remarkable yet is the interior, which has the character of a natural geological formation, not quite canyon and not quite cavern, suggesting the patient sculpting action of sand and wind. It invites us to approach nature with awe but also with intrigue. It would not be nearly as effective if it were suspended from hidden architecture, in the manner of stage scenery. But what we see is the load-bearing architecture itself, reinforced concrete consisting of shotcrete sprayed onto a steel rebar cage and given a coarse texture to express the mineral quality of the outer material. It is poetic but also has a satisfying sense of reality, which is precisely what one should have when confronting nature.

The task of the **Buffalo AKG Art Museum**, the new name of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, was easier. The original building, a dignified neoclassical temple of the arts, had already been extended to the south by Gordon Bunshaft, and the architects of the new wing, the Jeffrey E. Gundlach Building, had the opportunity to make something that spoke of the present moment just as the Bunshaft addition spoke of the 1960s. The designer—Shohei Shigematsu of OMA, working

in association with Cooper Robertson—must have startled the client with his call for a “radically transparent” building; a museum, after all, is not a greenhouse. But his solution was ingenious: a double-shell form with a glazed outer wall surrounding the 13 galleries within, comprising over 27,000 square feet, and a pleasantly airy circulation space between the two. All that was expressed as a freestanding polygonal pavilion, rigorously symmetrical in plan, and attached to the original museum by a 300-foot-long serpentine bridge.



Terminal E at Boston's Logan International Airport PHOTO: EMA PETER

Terminal E, the newly enlarged and renovated international terminal at Logan Airport near Boston, will be discussed in due course. But there is no question that it stands among the exceptional buildings of 2023. The commission was handled by AECOM, a firm with considerable expertise in infrastructure, while its formal and expressive aspects were handled by Luis Vidal, serving as “vision architect” (a term that is new to me but which I expect will spread).

No airport terminal will ever fill us with joy; all an architect can do is lessen its indignities. One of the worst is the sense of being cut off from the world outside, without familiar points of reference. Mr. Vidal determined to make Boston visible from the terminal, and vice versa. He gave the terminal the sleek aerodynamic lines of a boomerang, whose sweeping windows offer the international traveler a last wistful look at Boston. Its distinct red hue is meant to salute the city's palette, a conflation of its brick and university colors (not to mention the Red Sox). Created by the Swiss firm Monopol, the paint is prismatic, so it shimmers and changes color as you move around it. Used on automobiles, it has never been used before on an airport terminal.



The mezzanine level at Grand Central Madison PHOTO: TAIDGH BARRON/ZUMA PRESS

AECOM was also responsible for New York's **Grand Central Madison**, the new \$11 billion extension of Grand Central Terminal that services the Long Island Rail Road. A paragon of efficient planning, it comprises 700,000 square feet, all of it underground. A five-block concourse runs beneath Park Avenue from 43rd to 48th streets, its train platforms burrowing deeper yet as they dip under the tracks of Metro North. Even at its lowest point, a full 150 feet below street level, it feels cheerful and spacious. (It is depressing to think Penn Station once inspired similar feelings.)

One need not spend \$11 billion to make a city more gracious. One can reuse defunct industrial facilities. Philadelphia has finally caught up with London in seeing the potential of its old waterfront powerplants. Its burly Delaware Power Station, built in 1923, has now been converted into **The Battery**, "a new 500,000+-square-foot residential and lifestyle campus." That language does not suggest inordinate respect for history but Strada, the architects of the project, has faithfully maintained the elements that give the plant its industrial character, particularly its 167-foot smokestacks and the coal pier that once fed its furnaces.



Interior corridor of the Perelman Performing Arts Center PHOTO: IWAN BAAN

The biggest surprise of 2023 is the **Perelman Performing Arts Center** at Ground Zero, a building that by all rights should not be good. A responsible client would not normally place a festive, flexible performance space across from a mournful national monument nor set it atop a 21-foot platform of loading docks and ventilation shafts. Yet Joshua Ramus of REX architects has pulled it off. It cannot be appreciated from photographs, and all the critic can say is *go and see it*.

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