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Bell's Hell



Gong show: The Liberty Bell's new home won't be as viewer-friendly for passersby as the old one. Photo

By: Michael T. Regan

The new home of the world's most famous gong is a blow to liberty.

by **John Andrew Gallery**

allows me to observe the Liberty Bell pavilion in a way I couldn't before.

For the past four years I've spent an hour almost every Sunday afternoon standing on Independence Mall as part of a Quaker-sponsored prayer vigil for peace. Most of this time I have stood on the south side of Market Street looking north. This has allowed me to watch the new Visitors Center and the Constitution Center rise from nothing. Recently, construction on the south side of Market Street required us to move to the north side of the street. The view south is very different; it is more enclosed, framed by solid walls of buildings on all three sides. However, this view

Mitchell/Giurgola Architects' design for the pavilion has been debated over the years. Some people love it, some hate it. I think Romaldo Giurgola was one of Philadelphia's great late-20th-century architects. The buildings he designed in partnership with Ehrman Mitchell are, in my view, still striking today even though most are 30 years old. They combine a deceptive simplicity with an innovative response to their urban and environmental context. Two great examples are the United Way building on the Parkway and the Insurance Co. of North America office building addition at 17th and Arch streets -- the latter being one of the most under-appreciated office buildings in Center City. Notwithstanding my appreciation of M/G's work I've always had mixed feelings about the Liberty Bell pavilion -- until I had this recent opportunity to observe it more closely and to compare it with the new home for the bell rising nearby.

It is tempting to want to make an architectural shrine for a symbol like the bell. This is something M/G tried hard to avoid and it is one of the reasons why the building is so successful. M/G's design was guided by three ideas: 1. Make it a simple cover 2. Allow maximum visibility of the bell by the public, especially when the building isn't open, and 3. Create a building that is clearly not an historic element, but a functional necessity of the 20th century.

As a cover for the bell, the building succeeds in its simplicity. It's just a roof with a few solid walls and many large glass areas that make the building so transparent that it seems to disappear. The side entrance allows a view of the bell, but then makes you turn your back to the bell to enter the building. Inside you turn again and then proceed down a narrow passageway into the larger area around bell with Independence Hall dramatically visible through huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows. This pattern of movement gives the bell a more profound impact once you reach it.

But it is the second idea (transparency) that makes the building so extraordinary. The huge glass windows facing both Market and Chestnut streets allow people to see the bell day or night, whether the pavilion is open or not. I see this constantly: Drivers slow down and point out the bell to their passengers; visitors press their noses to the glass; and, in the days before excessive security, cars and taxis would stop on Market Street to allow people to dash out and take a quick look. At night, the lighting makes the bell easily visible from both Market and Chestnut.

By contrast, the new building for the bell, not quite complete, is almost the opposite with respect to all these qualities. It is, in my view, an overly elaborate attempt to make an architectural shrine that will overwhelm the modest bell. More



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ent visibility the public now enjoys. The bell cannot be seen from Sixth Street were closed to traffic, the bell would be totally hidden and ver, within the building the bell is to be enclosed by what can only be (Although the building was designed prior to the current Homeland to me.) The loss of openness and transparency -- the public visual

accessibility -- is the key difference between the old and new and why, by comparison, the old is such an exceptionally right approach.

Moving the bell from its present highly visible setting to the new one is a tragedy in my view. In some respects, the difference between the two settings seems symbolic of the current attitude of our government to the values of liberty and freedom the bell represents. The current setting personifies openness, unconstrained access, equality to all, transparency, freedom. Its new setting is one of limitation and constraint so severe as to make the bell almost invisible. It can only be viewed in one prescribed view, an approach symbolic of our government's attitude that there is only one proper view of the world, and liberty and freedom must be severely constrained to preserve the dominance of that view. This change in symbolic meaning, represented by this change in the physical setting, is, of course, the greater tragedy.

John Andrew Gallery is an urban planner and editor of Philadelphia Architecture: A Guide to the City.



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