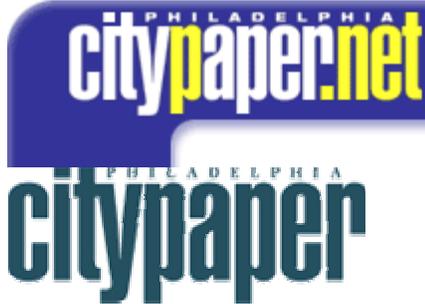




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Head of the glass: Cultural institutions are leading the way toward change. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

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Cultural institutions and universities are giving us the most new landmarks.

by **Steve Conn**

It is not saying anything profound to observe that the private real estate market in Philadelphia does not generate new, high-profile construction at the same rate as it does in New York, or even in Chicago, which was a forest of construction cranes last time I visited.

There is doubtless a confluence of reasons for this -- local economics, slow and slowing; local bureaucracies, also slow and slowing; local unions, which have strangled the construction business nearly to death; and a local conservatism that kept buildings under William Penn's hat for nearly a century. Several big projects have been proposed recently, but the tenacity of the Bush recession -- and the administration's indifference to it -- makes me wonder how many of them will actually get built.

Whatever the reason, however, one consequence of this is that we must rely disproportionately on the city's cultural and educational institutions to give us new landmarks on the cityscape. A quick survey of new and recent projects done by those institutions yields decidedly mixed results.

Certainly the Kimmel Center stands preeminent among buildings to hit Philadelphia's streets in a long time. Love it, just like it or hate it, the Kimmel is a building worth visiting, talking about and even if you don't like it, it is the sort of building you take out-of-town visitors to see all the same.

Once we leave the corner of Broad and Spruce, things get downright disappointing. Up on North Broad, Temple University has built some new residence halls and a student center in the past several years, which are more playful and fun than the brutal modernism that characterizes so much of the campus. Sadly, however, these buildings are tucked deep into Temple's campus, and thus none makes a big statement to the rest of the city.

Unlike Temple's new buildings, Drexel chose a design for its new business school extension that fits right in with the rest of campus. Those who are familiar with the orange brick of Drexel's modernist buildings know that this was probably a mistake. Located on Market Street between 32nd and 33rd, this new building is bland and bulky, but the worst part about it is the way it quite literally turns its back on the east-west thoroughfare. The presentation this building makes to Market Street is blank brick wall, interrupted in the middle by an equally blank wall of blue glass windows so dark and opaque, I have yet to see any light come from them.

This building, however, looks positively homey when compared to the Wharton School's new monster at the corner of 38th and Walnut. Bloated and overblown, Huntsman Hall is already a finalist for the Worst Building of the 21st Century. Its immense drum, which can be seen from some distance in all directions, doesn't add to the skyline so much as loom



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...ing me of nothing so much as the first time I saw Darth Vader's Death
...ney came to give the place its official opening.

...all will get for the Worst Building of the 21st Century comes from
...ed to occupy an entire block of Chestnut Street. As a piece of urban
design this nuik is inexcusable, and much has already been written condemning it. I won't rehash it all here, save to
say that Jefferson seems to believe that by chanting "ground-floor retail" like a mantra we won't notice the nine stories
of cars and concrete above.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, in a town so steeped in the juices of its own history, the most interesting projects undertaken
by local cultural and educational institutions are rehabs of older buildings. Drexel brought back its Frank Furness bank
building on Market a few years ago, after years of neglect, and it sparkles. It is now restoring a stunning mansion at the
corner of 34th and Powelton as a student center. High time, too, given the way Drexel's frat boys have ruined the
buildings and the neighborhood that surrounds that corner of Powelton.

While nearly every other art museum in the nation has built new additions in the last generation, the Pennsylvania
Academy and Philadelphia Museum are both -- finally -- expanding by renovating old buildings rather than building
something new.

What goes on inside our museums, performance spaces, colleges and universities contributes immeasurably to the life
of the city. Yet one wishes that what they presented to us on the outside matched the dynamism of what goes on inside
them. The design choices these institutions make about their new buildings matter to us all. Cities, after all, are the
great stages upon which the human drama is acted; great buildings provide the sets for that drama. Philadelphia needs
more buildings that inspire and excite us, that make us aspire and dream.

*Steve Conn is a member of the Design Advocacy Group and is teaching in the history department at Temple University
this year.*



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