ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A RADICAL NEW ADDITION FOR MID-AMERICA ...
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Radical New Addition For Mid-America

NEW HARMONY, Ind.

On the banks of the Wabash River, not far from the corn fields of Indiana, stands a dramatically handsome new building representing architecture's most advanced frontier. This gleaming white structure is as radical an addition to the rural American heartland as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie was to the French countryside at Poissy half-a-century ago.

Called the Atheneum, the building is the just-completed visitors' center for the historic town of New Harmony — the Indiana village which played an important role in 19th-century social idealism, religion and science. It is not, as one would expect, a classical place of learning; the name draws more from New Harmony's intellectual heritage than from the building's present functions. This Atheneum is a reception and orientation center built around a series of exhibits and presentations through which the visitor is channeled. By the time he has made his way from the ground floor to the rooftop terrace for views of the river and town, he has become familiar with the story and spirit of New Harmony. He has also been exposed to an extraordinary series of architectural impressions in which the sense of the past is heightened, both physically and poetically, by the experience of the present.

The Atheneum will be formally dedicated on Oct. 10th, an occasion that is being treated as much as an architectural event as a milestone for New Harmony's restoration program. The building is the work of Richard Meier, an innovative American architect whose subtly complex and formidably elegant structures, with their lovingly and nostalgically evoked Corbusian details, would never qualify for the familiar modernist rubric of "less is more." This particular building — public, open, dealing in movement and process made visible — is the perfect vehicle for Meier's intensely personal, intricate and highly sophisticated style. It carries his rigorous explorations of geometry and space about as far as they can go.

It is safe to say that the Atheneum will be highly controversial. There are those who are already calling it inappropriate for the setting and the purpose, who find its striking forms just as strikingly out of place. But there are also those who consider the building an architectural breakthrough, a significant step beyond the accepted ways of composing and imposing architectural space for a whole new range of perceptions and experiences. It is already attracting the dedicated coterie of architectural professionals who seriously seek out the most avant-garde work internationally.

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The matter of suitability is bound to be an extremely subjective judgement. But I think the nature of the building should be weighed against the history and character of New Harmony, which is a very special kind of American town, and the unconventional approach to preservation that has guided its restoration.

New Harmony was founded, planned and built by a religious sect, the Harmony Society, led by George Rapp from 1814 to 1824. As organized and orderly as its small, straight grid of streets, the community prospered in its industries to become the affluent "wonder of the West." In 1825, Rapp decided to move closer to Eastern markets. The town was sold, lock, stock and barrel, to the Welsh-born social reformer and industrialist Robert Owen. Owen had visions of New Harmony as a Utopian community — one of those admirable 19th-century experiments in social idealism. He brought together a group of eminent naturalists and educators, who were to create a model of egalitarian excellence. The Utopian ideal soon failed, but New Harmony became an important center of scientific research from 1825 to 1860. Owens's descendents were distinguished scientists, active in the geological mapping of the West and the founding of such national institutions as the Smithsonian.

Of the two phases of the town, the spiritual and scientific — both so typical of the 19th-century New World — there are only spotty remains. But the size and configuration have stayed essentially the same. There is no single, cohesive character or style, however, and no richly uniform period architecture. What the town offers is a remarkable, continuous history, with fascinating fragments of each of its phases from its founding to the present, and a sense of the special character of a special place. Its preservation philosophy emphasizes the interpretive presentation of what was once there as well as what has survived, using everything from early 19th-century split-log houses to Victorian ginger-

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The Atheneum Center in New Harmony, Ind.— "advancing conventional modernist practice"

Ezra Stoller / Esto

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bread to re-create a totality of experience, rather than a selective stage set, as at Williamsburg. There is no arbitrary "cut-off date"; there is no attempt to create a magnificent "place museum." To "see" New Harmony properly is to understand a unique chapter in American spiritual, intellectual and urban history.

This challenging concept has been carried out over the last five years under the direction of Ralph G. Schwarz, president of Historic New Harmony, Inc., through a combination of physical rehabilitation and skilled interpretive presentation. The result is a community brought back to life in more ways than one; the past is being preserved as part of a revitalized present with a new economic base of commerce and tourism.

The Atheneum can be seen as New Harmony's 20th-century capstone — designed in the same spirit of creative inquiry and experiment as the town itself. To me, the building is suitable, quite aside from its unusual architectural interest. I see the choice as one between a legitimate building of our own time and a spurious or debatable suitability, since there is no real "New Harmony style" or any overriding vernacular. I do not see the point of inventing one. Given the choice of such a fabrication, and a chance for an outstanding contemporary building of genuine beauty and brilliance, I would opt for the latter.

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Located at the northwest, outer limit of the town, near the curving river's edge, the Atheneum stands on a low, grassy podium above a flat, green field that is flooded yearly by the Wabash. A traditional, split-rail fence separates the site from the older, historic section.

The building is actually a circulation system. It contains a reception and orientation area with computerized tour ticketing facilities, exhibition galleries, a theater and observation terraces. Visitors follow a central ramp that leads up to the theater and exhibition levels within a high, open space that extends from the ground to the skylit roof. Because the ramp winds up on a five-degree diagonal grid, the interior is simultaneously perceived in different ways as the visitor ascends; the twist almost seems to set the building in motion. Everything that does not need to be enclosed, such as the theater, is not only visible, but visible from many levels and points of view. And as one moves, each view yields still more intricate patterns of a staggered and overlapping geometry of floor levels, indoor and outdoor spaces and vistas of the outdoors. There is a constant counterpoint of stairs, with an inner core containing a spiral stair that is clearly a sculptural object, in the one area off-limits to the public.

Surprisingly, there is no sense of disorientation. It soon becomes evident that this striking interior is totally integrated with the purpose of the building — to tell the story of New Harmony. As that story and its artifacts are revealed along the visitor's route, so are corresponding views of the town, through glass walls or between white metal panel screens, or from the outdoor terraces. Standing in front of the model of the first New Harmony, for example, it is possible to see out to the fence-enclosed field of early split-log structures reproduced on the model, which have been moved back to their original site after numerous relocations. Thus they are seen both in the context of the present and the 19th-century town.

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There is a remarkable fusion of architectural means with the programmatic result. But it is not possible, of course, to be aware only of this process. At the same time, one is also intensely aware of the building. It fulfills its purpose while it plays skillfully with a new esthetic, advancing conventional modernist practice provocatively beyond established limits. Richard Meier does not deny or reject modern architecture in any way, as is the fashion now; he uses its vocabulary and achievements to move into a new phase of exploration of those things that architecture has always been about: the controlled and purposeful manipulation of light and space, and the rewarding relationship of pragmatic and sensuous purpose. This is the kind of development that has always marked the change from one period of art to another; it is the way Mannerism and the Baroque grew out of the Renaissance.

One can make the point that the creative spirit of this building is not far from the pioneering heritage of New Harmony. Frontiers are where you find them. ■