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## Rise of hospitable architecture

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# The Rise of Hospitable Architecture

by BILL M. LACY/F.A.I.A.

*You don't have to be an architect to notice that something peculiar has been happening to architecture. Something that people find very agreeable.*

*More and more buildings, especially in our major urban centers, are making a big play for the crowd. Instead of just standing around with a blank look on their facade, they are seeking to ingratiate themselves with prospective patrons by flaunting design factors that appeal to their senses. Architecturally speaking, they are making a spectacle of themselves.*

*This trend is in marked contrast to the cold, sterile architecture that has characterized much of our urban design over the past two decades, a style that has contributed to the exodus of people and tax dollars to suburban shopping malls, civic centers, and cultural/entertainment complexes. Now, corporations are turning to lively, innovative, often breathtaking new designs to bring the crowds back—to enliven the cities where they do business, and to make their buildings enjoyable for*

*employees as well as the general public.*

*These crowd-pleasing buildings are the product of what might be called hospitable architecture. And in the same way that a birthday party cannot be considered a celebration without guests, a building does not qualify as hospitable architecture unless a flock of people are swirling in, around, through, and possibly over it—by design.*

*At first glance, hospitable architecture may not look all that different from regular architecture. Both types may take the same basic forms: e.g., low-rise, high-rise, small-scale, large-scale. Nor need a hospitably designed building be new; it can be rehabbed Victorian pile, or a complex of converted factory buildings. In fact, hospitable architecture can be incorporated in a non-building.*

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So how is the uninitiated to tell the difference between hospitable and regular architecture? The best way is simply to look at how two examples of the same building type construe their responsibility, so to say, to the public.

Everyone is familiar with the ubiquitous high-rise office building. An example of the regularly designed high-rise might be almost any stereotypical office tower in any major American city. On entering such a building, you are apt to be, as Red Smith might say, completely underwhelmed. You are struck by the absence of anything notable. The presence, however, of several stock features can be anticipated. They include a barren lobby, banks of elevators clad in glacial slabs of stone or masonry, canned music, and uniformed security guards. A newsstand might be tucked minimally in a corner niche, and, budget permitting, a metal sculpture or macrame hanging might adorn one cold wall. If there is anywhere to go besides upstairs in an elevator, it will surely be through a doorway to a branch of a major bank in the same building.

Should you visit our stereotypical tower at any hour other than when the scurrying denizens are going to work, to lunch, or home, you would be conspicuously out of place. For those who enter a stereotypical office tower do so for a narrow purpose: delivery boys come to supply pastrami on rye to middle managers, account executives to placate clients, technicians to fix photocopiers. At all other times—indeed, most of the time when you total nights, weekends, and holidays—the entire building is devoid of human stirrings, save for the occasional workaholic sequestered in his

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executive suite. The unoccupied office tower is not only useless; it is ominous.

One of America's best architects, Harry Weese, whose firm received an American Institute of Architects Gold Medal last year, expressed his professional exasperation with the stereotypical glass box some time ago. Whereupon, he articulated a radical proposal. Why not settle on a standard blueprint for all such buildings? Weese reasoned that if all glass boxes could be cookie-cut from the same plan, then a redundant building type would cease to be confused with what it is not: namely, architecture.

Small wonder that a splendid example of a hospitably designed office tower is the work of another of our best architects, Philip Johnson, who received the profession's supreme award last year—the AIA Gold Medal for individual achievement. Among Johnson's many notable buildings, none better embodies the basics of hospitable architecture than the IDS Center in downtown Minneapolis.

Visually, the IDS Center is everything that the stereotypical office building is not. Entering the IDS Center is rather like experiencing an ethnic street fair on New York's lower East Side, except that the setting itself is infinitely more spectacular. The base of the building is dominated by an enormous, multi-story expanse of space that is both enclosed and defined by great intersecting, prism-like planes of glass. Standing beneath this transparent geometric pyramid, you feel that you've somehow happened into the underside of a gargantuan crystal chandelier.

In contrast to the pointlessness of public space in most office

buildings, the IDS Center goes to extraordinary lengths to solicit the public's interest. Its accessibility to anyone in the downtown area has been enhanced, not only by its design but also by public policy decisions. The center is comprehensively linked to—indeed, it has become the nucleus of—the city's famous pedestrian skyway system, which enables a person to move about on foot via climate-controlled glass passageways above street level from hotel to center to department store to center, and so on.

People use the center's spacious, shop-ringed street level as they would a public square. Senior citizens, Cub Scout troops, farmers in striped bib overalls, smart-looking suburban matrons, teenagers in backpacks—everybody converges there: some to sit on low walls bordering planted areas to people-watch or eat a Baskin-Robbins cone, others to meet someone, to buy flowers from a cart, cheese from a shop, whatever.

The IDS Center warrants elaboration not only because it embodies many of the tangible features of hospitably designed environments, but also because it typifies what all such environments have, philosophically, in common. And that is an intuitive understanding that

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*if people could verbalize their innate feelings about what type of setting would best gratify their material and sensory needs, they would specify exactly such places. Given such a magical prerogative, in fact, most people would doubtless have also encouraged the kind of design talent and tenacity that has transformed Boston's Faneuil Hall from a mournful 18th-century derelict to a magnet of socio-economic vitality. Or they would have gone head over heels for the idea of a recycled chocolate factory overlooking Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay—a place such as Ghirardelli Square, which has set a standard for the application of hospitable architecture to mini-neighborhood commercial enterprises.*

*Some say that it was an architectural maverick named John Portman who discovered the secret of successfully mixing commercial and people-pleasing values when he designed the Regency Hyatt Hotel in Atlanta. To the horror of orthodox developers and regular architects, Portman willfully "threw away" an awesome amount of revenue-producing space—and for what? Why, for the sake of an immense hole right in the middle of where a row of deluxe rooms should be. Portman's 14-story atrium in the Regency Hyatt—its unwallied, light-twinkling elevators yielding more yipes than a roller coaster, its indoor sidewalk cafe, revolving top o' the restaurant, and elevated cocktail lounge all evoking giggles of delight—this hotel touched off a quiet revolution in the world of real property.*

*Of course, there is nothing new in the architectural firmament. In Denver, nearly a hundred years before the Atlanta Regency Hyatt was built, the Brown Palace Hotel introduced the atrium as a canny*

The Brown Palace Hotel, Denver Colo.  
Architect: Frank E. Edbrooke

*architectural ploy. It was, and remains, an outstanding exercise in the profligate use of space. But John Portman deserves full credit for precipitating what some have called the "Oh, my gosh!" look in contemporary buildings. Other Portman spectacles have been fashioned in numerous urban centers—Chicago, San Francisco and Detroit, to name three—and derivatives of the throw-away strategy are sprouting everywhere.*

*In other places the "galleria" has taken hold. Houston was the first in this country to combine such anomalous facilities as public ice skating and fast foods with chic shops, as a luxury hotel and a private health club with a rooftop jogging track. Such an example effectively states the basic premise for hospita-*

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Atlanta, Ga.  
Architect: John Portman & Associates

*ble architecture: namely, that quality architecture can function as a catalyst to accommodate an almost limitless range of social and cultural values—and can do so profitably and unconditionally.*

*The new Air and Space Museum designed by Hellmuth Obata & Kassabaum, for example, is now sponging up the legions of visitors to Washington and doing an admirable job of entertaining them, educating them, feeding them from an innovative carousel dispenser, and sending them home exhilarated by the experience. The same signal success is being logged a couple of blocks away, where the crowds at I.M. Pei's East Wing of the National Gallery are enjoying not only some of the world's great art but also one of the most beautiful examples of hospitable architecture ever created in America.*

*And in Kansas City, a remarkable man, the late Joyce Hall, and his family must be recognized*

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National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.  
Architect: Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum

for having stuck their necks out to prove that Hallmark cared enough to promote the very best urban redevelopment project money and design talent could buy. The result is, of course, Crown Center, a self-contained community-within-a-community, boasting apartments, stores, shops, restaurants, a conference center, and a hotel with a forty-foot waterfall cascading over a mini-mountain in the lobby.

The thought may occur that an architecture whose doors, and sometimes walls, are open to all corners cannot be utilized for any but relatively frivolous purposes: sports, dining, concerts, and such. But the empirical evidence in our

democratic society argues to the contrary. Not least of the reasons why our center cities stand empty and menacing after sundown is the fortress mentality reflected in both our public and commercial buildings. Why, indeed should anyone choose to venture into the dark and unpeopled canyons of our major urban centers?

No, it is time for greater hospitality. It is time for our drawing boards to reflect the need for public drawing rooms.

Let the buildings make spectacles of themselves, and perhaps we can replace the pistol-packing security guards with strolling musicians.

**BILL LACY, an architect, is presently president of the American Academy in Rome. Prior to that, he was Director of the Architecture and Environment Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts.**

Crown Center Hotel, Kansas City, Mo.  
Architect: Harry Weese