

“Design Parallels”

AIA Committee on Design Debates “Design Parallels” in Detroit

By John Gallagher

AIA’s Committee on Design met in Detroit April 3-6 to consider the question: Does architecture share important parallels with other forms of design, including automotive, landscape, furniture, and crafts? After four days of spirited debate, the question remained open and surprisingly unsettled. There were no easy answers, no politically correct attempt to gather all manner of design into one big happy family. The visiting COD architects debated every point down to the nub.

Certainly there was plenty of inspiration for debate. The visit to Detroit included tours of two of the automotive world’s most significant sites, the Ford Motor Co. Rouge plant in Dearborn and the Eero Saarinen-designed General Motor Technical Center in Warren, Mich. But even after seeing these “best of the best,” many of the architects on the COD tour remained skeptical that automotive design represented anything more than clever marketing or packaging, or, as some said, drawing pretty lines, certainly nothing as probing as good architecture.

Nor did a visit to the legendary Cranbrook campus in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., turn up any obvious parallels between architecture and the crafts that so enriched Cranbrook’s environment. Few if any of the COD visitors acknowledged designing their own furniture, ceramics, or other products that reached an aesthetic height at the Eliel Saarinen-designed Cranbrook.

During a spirited wrap-up session on Sunday, April 6, at the Edsel and Eleanor Ford Home in Grosse Pointe Shores, some of the visitors suggested that younger architects were striving to achieve at least a nodding acquaintance with other design fields in addition to their own. But it seemed at least possible, as Lawrence Technological University Dean of Architecture Glen LeRoy, FAIA, said, that design today has become so compartmentalized, so restricted by budget and other considerations, that architects cannot see the parallels that exist with other design fraternities.

For her part, COD’s national chair, Carol Rusche Bentel, FAIA, was delighted with the level of disputation.

“I think the idea was that we’d challenge everyone to think about what they’re learning,” she said toward the end of the trip. “I think that’s the kind of thing we want to see, because that’s when the learning starts to happen, when there’s a little bit of controversial action going on.”

If no consensus was reached on the issues, everyone agreed that COD could continue the conversation at its next meeting in Copenhagen.

Thursday, April 3 — The Debate Begins

COD’s visit got off to a lively start with a visit to Belle Isle, the large island park in the Detroit River that received its initial design look from Frederick Law Olmsted. Dinner at the historic Detroit Yacht Club (designed by George Mason in the 1920s)

featured a presentation on the basics of automotive design by Peter Horbury, Ford Motor Co.'s executive director of design for the Americas. Horbury used some homey examples to demonstrate the essential nature of all good design, contrasting a man riding a horse (good proportion) versus a man riding a cow (not so good proportion). But even after this initial delving into design parallels, the objections flared. Some contended that automotive design shared none of the restrictions placed on architects but was a market-driven exercise in drawing pretty pictures. Alan Cobb, FAIA, of the Albert Kahn family of companies and local chair of COD, later said he couldn't help thinking that many of the visitors "didn't really get it, and probably never would....Many did not understand, or their objection to the American automobile industry is so fierce that they didn't want to hear."

As throughout the weekend, the visiting architects probed the practical differences in the two design forms. They noted that architects typically design each building unique from any other (a prototype every time, as some said) while automotive designers must design something that will be produced hundreds of thousands of times. The role of engineering in design also came under scrutiny, with at least one visitor noting that engineering often comes second in the process of architecture (after the design) but first in automotive design (setting the technical boundaries that designers must work within).

With this opening taste of the debate that continued in conversations throughout COD's visit, the trip got underway in earnest Friday morning bright and early.

Friday, April 4 – The Auto Day

Ford Rouge Plant

The first stop was Ford's historic but newly remade Rouge plant in Dearborn, just outside Detroit. Designed by Albert Kahn from 1917 to 1925, the Rouge won its place in history as Henry Ford's embodiment of efficient manufacturing. In more recent years, Ford's great-grandson, current company chairman Bill Ford, Jr., led a massive renovation of the site that included building one of the most environmental friendly factories in the world. (Many found it ironic that this most green of factories is home to production of the F-150 pick-up truck, no gas-sipper). A 10-acre green roof, innovative rain-water recovery system, and state-of-the-art lighting and ventilation systems represented the "green" approaches to design here.

There followed a quick stop at the Wayne State University campus in downtown Detroit so COD visitors could see Minoru Yamasaki's McGregor Memorial Conference Center, considered by many to be Yama's best building. The architects walked across to the newly reopened Detroit Institute of Arts (remade by a Michael Graves design) to the College for Creative Studies, where the debate on automotive design flared anew. The school's dean of design, Imre Molnar, engagingly illustrated the way students become auto designers working with pencil, clay models, computer-aided design, and sometimes even modifying production vehicles to come up with something new. A question from the audience illustrated how few of the visitors drive American-made vehicles, and some Detroit-based architects took that as proof that COD visitors were closed to the merits of automotive design, at least to the U.S. variety represented by Detroit.

The next stop was GM's Technical Center in Warren, where visitors heard from Ed Welburn, GM's chief of design, on the merits of both Eero Saarinen's pathbreaking (and still beautiful) architecture for the center and how it continues to inspire a sense of

engineering excellence among GM designers. There was a final stop hosted by Edward Francis, FAIA, at Lafayette Park to visit the Mies van der Rohe-designed townhouses, one of the post-World War II's most successful and still graceful urban renewal projects.

Despite the day's panoply of automotive design, Mike Mense, FAIA, was among those who remained unconvinced. "My impression is that they're really decorators," he said of auto designers. "It's not really design like we in architecture think about it, because (architecture) mixes programmatic issues and aesthetic issues, whereas these guys are just purely, it's just all aesthetics... color and trim." Noting the huge design staffs at auto companies that break down a problem into tiny parts, Mense continued, "It's like, nobody really designs a car. It's all these little pieces, and that's totally different, and so it is so much more about marketing, so much more about fashion."

Listening to Mense's comments, Charles E. Dagit, Jr., FAIA, agreed, offering that automotive design "is really packaging." But perhaps the most scathing comment came during a tour of the student automotive design studios at CCS, where sketches adorned the walls of vehicles bearing obvious resemblances to those seen in futuristic video games or Batman movies. One architect quipped, "They all read the same comic books."

Saturday, April 5 – The Cranbrook Day

Saturday began with a bus trip to Bloomfield Hills to visit the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Affleck House, now owned by Lawrence Technological University. This was a later Wright home, built in 1941, and its out-thrust deck drew obvious comparisons to Fallingwater. Some visitors said later this was the highlight of the many stops on COD's tour.

Then the buses took the COD visitors to Cranbrook a short distance away. Walking tours visited all the classic Eliel Saarinen buildings, including the Cranbrook School for boys, the Kingswood school for girls, Saarinen House, and the Museum and Library, as well as the newer buildings that Cranbrook added in a burst of expansion in the 1990s. Highlights there included the Natatorium, or swimming facility, by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. Lunch included a presentation by Betty Hase of Herman Miller Co., who emphasized the company's credo that good design is about the people in a room, not the furniture.

Certainly the case for design parallels was evident at Cranbrook as nowhere else, with every element, from entire buildings to individual components including light fixtures, furniture, rugs, and art work, contributing to the harmonious whole.

"We're better when we actually cross disciplines," LTU Dean LeRoy said at Cranbrook. "Design is design, and no one discipline can own that. To the degree that we learn from other disciplines, I think it makes all of us better. To the degree that we collaborate together among disciplines, it makes our projects better."

The final road stop was the Kresge Foundation in nearby Troy, which combined some preserved 1850's farm buildings with a sleek and environmentally sensitive addition by Valerio Dewalt Train, acclaimed by many as the best new building in Detroit in recent years. Joe Valerio was on hand to lead the tours. A reception at downtown's famed Guardian Building, an Art Deco masterpiece of the 1920s, followed, then dinner at the Renaissance Center.

Sunday, April 6 – The Wrap-Up

Sunday morning, COD spent an hour at the Marcel Breuer-designed Grosse Pointe Central Library, recently saved from the wrecking ball and now the subject of a thoughtful expansion by Bob Miklos of designLAB, who was on hand. A tour followed of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House (probably the best of Detroit's many auto-baron mansions, designed by Albert Kahn). There, waiting for the bus rides to hotel and airport, the visitors took up the challenge to state what if any design parallels they had found between their art and all the others illustrated during the visit. As stated, no consensus was reached, but no one doubted that minds had been opened and thoughts provoked.

Detroit, as it turned out, had been an ideal location to pose the question of design parallels, offering not only the important example of automotive design for comparison, but numerous historic sites crafted by the likes of Wright, Eliel and Eero Saarinen, Yamasaki, Albert Kahn, and many others. It was, one might say, an elegant and profusely illustrated venue to debate the question of design parallels.

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