

Commerce Joins Art To Train Yale Architects

New York Times May 4, 2005

By ROBIN POGREBIN

NEW HAVEN, April 29 — The tension was palpable on Friday as Jennifer Newsom pinned her drawings to the wall and set out her architectural models under the formidable gaze of a row of accomplished architects. Gesturing toward the curvilinear complex that she had designed for a school and fashion museum in Milan, she likened its podlike classrooms and studios to "bubble gum pulling apart."

The architects at the session, a year-end review for 10 architecture students about to graduate from Yale University, were as tough on her design as on the three that had come before and the three that would follow. Rafael Vinoly complained that Ms. Newsom's plans looked "completely different" from her model. Henry N. Cobb said the architecture "isn't rich enough to fulfill your intentions." Robert A. M. Stern, the school dean, lamented the "bad color choice" for her plastic-foam model: pink.

But for the moment, Jay S. Wyper Jr. of the Hines Real Estate Development Company, had more practical concerns. "I would love to see one square room," he said.

Mr. Stern responded: "You can build round rooms. It's the 21st century."

Mr. Wyper said, "You can build round-cornered rooms, yes."

The developer's presence constitutes an experiment for the architecture school: to incorporate the client, and his real-world demands, into the design curriculum. Typically, architecture students' projects are assessed by architects — although the students may consult with engineers and construction companies — not by developers, with their concerns about costs, loading docks and maintenance.

Still, young architects who want their designs built will have to face those clients once they are out working. So this semester Mr. Stern brought developers into the classroom, injecting a dose of reality into the graduate students' architectural design education.

"Architecture students have a terrible fear of developers," Mr. Stern said in an interview. This way, "the student begins to realize how architecture is practiced in the modern world," he continued, adding, "To cut them off from the professional client is to cut them off from a significant aspect of their education."

Gerald D. Hines, the real estate company's chairman and founder, was appointed the first Edward P. Bass Distinguished Visiting Architecture Fellow at Yale and taught the studio class with Stefan Behnisch, a visiting professor from Stuttgart, Germany. Each of the 10 students was asked to design a fashion museum and school in Milan that Mr. Hines is actually developing near the Piazza della Repubblica.

Architectural year-end reviews are known to be tough, and for some students, humiliating. Although students may collaborate on their projects, competition is always in the air, since the judges are open with their praise or criticism. The results are factored into the final pass/fail grades. And only one project is selected for the school's year-end design prize.

Adding two developers to the line of fire only ratcheted up the pressure. "They were very quickly asked the questions that hurt the most," said Markus Dochantschi, an assistant professor in the studio, "because they have done it so many times."

Yet Mr. Hines and Mr. Wyper, his company's managing director, said that they learned a great deal from the students and that the ideas each put forth had advanced their own thinking about the Milan project. "They've asked some very penetrating questions," Mr. Hines said.

Mr. Wyper said: "It's so compelling to give students in their final semester the chance to work with a real client on a real site. It's the sort of challenge they're about to step out into as they graduate."

The architect Cesar Pelli, who has designed the broader master plan for the Milan project and was part of the review, said he agreed that developers should have a place in architecture education. "It's impossible to design a process like this without their input," he said. "They are the ones that guide us about what kind of things are necessary. Otherwise, you are designing in thin air."

At the Friday review, Mr. Hines commended Ceren Bingol, one of the students, for her design, in which two connected undulating buildings were sheathed in a reflective lizardlike skin. "The animation of the spaces is what we're trying to achieve — and how do you make it exciting for people to go through," he said.

But Mr. Wyper was leery. "I'm not sure I'm willing to take the risk to build this," he said.

The architects at the session also suggested that while Ms. Bingol's ideas were provocative, her design was a bit over the top. "I don't think you have to keep your foot on the gas so much," said Tod Williams, whose firm, Tod Williams Billie Tsien & Associates, designed the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, among other projects.

"The developers brought a very different perspective," said Jonah Gamblin, a student. "They were very concerned with the pragmatic aspects of making the building work — circulation, access, security."

("Where's the front door?" Mr. Wyper kept asking.)

Mr. Gamblin said the Hines Company's involvement helped the students "not just to get comfortable with developers and to start to understand the culture, but to position their own work and communicate what its value is — not just to other architects, but to a larger public."

Mr. Hines, whose international company is based in Houston, was an easy choice, Mr. Stern said, because he has a reputation for being sympathetic to serious architects, having built Philip Johnson's Lipstick Building on Third Avenue and Pennzoil Place in Houston; I.M. Pei's Texas Commerce Tower; and Frank Gehry's DG Bank in Berlin. He is currently building a condominium at 40 Mercer Street designed by Jean Nouvel.

Mr. Stern said, "He's always believed in architecture as part of the development process."

Mr. Hines said he had long believed that good architecture adds value, making his buildings "more dynamic, less sterile, more innovative and more lasting."

Before starting on their designs, the Yale students traveled to Milan to tour the future site of the school and museum and to meet with fashion industry and civic officials. Students at Milan Polytechnic were given the same assignment, and the city plans to conduct an international design competition for the project.

The architects' reactions to the students' models were mixed. One student's plans seemed "too linear"; another's was found to be underdeveloped. A pair of students who collaborated on the assignment were heartened by the enthusiastic response to a jutting design that paid tribute to the Flatiron Building.

All of the students had to wrestle with the buildings' relationship to a surrounding public park planned for the site.

Throughout the review, the developers remained the voice of reason. "You never convinced me that the cinema works with glass walls," Mr. Wyper said in response to one proposal, "but it's creative."

In the outside world, he said, this back-and-forth is part of his daily routine. "What we do with architects is challenge them on their design," he said. "In commercial development today, there is a lot of debate. It's not the developer dictating."

