

Die Another Day
Philip Nobel

The cycle of codependence between critics and stars does a disservice to both public and profession alike. Here we go again. A celebrated firm, in a cloud of blinding stardust, completes a long anticipated project. In early photos it looks as if it has fallen short of the claims made by the architects and the promises implied by their renderings, both published everywhere years ago to great advance acclaim. The firm has been floating along on the power of such words and images for longer than anyone cares to remember and it hasn't built much, so it should be no surprise that the building is not perfect. Architecture is hard—they'll do better next time. Right?

But as the ribbon is cut, the critics report: everyone agrees it is a success, possibly a triumph. Paradigms have been rocked, stasis shaken. For the fortunate city a new day is proclaimed; for its citizens, the building is a gift. At some point I make my way to see the new paragon—keeping my mind, as much as possible, clinically open—and it's a mess, even an embarrassment. Thoughts turn to naked emperors and their court. Again.

What's going on here? The short answer, a second question, is: "Who cares?" Architects with skills unworthy of their hype have been stealing the limelight for so long now, and with so little complaint from the press, that we can't possibly be asked to get exercised over another example of this everyday deception: a glowing critical response to a so-so building. This is our world (we made it with our silence), so suck it up. Stroll down to Diller Scofidio + Renfro's (DS+R) new building for Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), ignore your qualms, and enjoy your time spent in proximity to—no, surrounded by, exalted by—architectural genius.

The long answer to the question—and I think, as responsible citizens, we should contemplate the long answer—is "business as usual." Business as usual has transpired again, and that business is the perpetuation of a destructive cycle of codependence between the critical establishment and the architects we've all come to think of as stars. To dispatch with the obvious, the ICA's new home is disappointing. It has been held up as an icon for the city—first by the clients and the architects, now by the critics—and is intended to anchor with culture a new quarter to be constructed on Boston's long empty Fan Pier. Where that new zone will eventually be there is a field of parking lots and fences; but even if the city is patched, the direction of approach will remain. The museum sits on the edge of the water, and reaches toward it with a deep cantilever, but to the land it shows only its back—and not a particularly well-groomed one at that. Anthony's Pier 4, the adjacent eatery famous for its wonderful popovers, mediates better between the city and the harbor. It's clear from the first glance at that poorly detailed, almost accidental rear facade that the experience of tourists on tour boats and the views of residents of gentrifying East Boston on the opposite shore have been privileged over those of future neighbors and those actually entering the thing. But the grand gesture to the sea looks great in pictures, and that serves architects and critics (and their photo editors) alike.

A big attention-grabbing move is absolutely necessary in an age when, to succeed in mass-market terms, buildings must be reducible to arresting images that can be sold to clients and resold to the consumers of media. That way stardom lies. But the big move chosen

by DS+R (from a series of varied but equally strident early studies) results only in spatial confusion. The cantilever covers a much lauded waterfront plaza with bleacher seating—a stop on a harborside promenade that Elizabeth Diller once referred to as Boston’s only viable civic space—shading it miserably. The same photo-ready overhang necessitates the placement of the galleries, which take no chances in cleaving to the white-walled and black-boxed norm, way up high. DS+R then solved that problem of its own making with the same big-elevator-and-narrow-stair combination that works so badly at the Whitney.

Circulation is correspondingly poor; details are sloppy throughout. One room, the Media Center, is cool and earns its raves: it steps down from the trouble-making cantilever to a truly inspired and well-controlled view of the water. If there were equal and consistent experiential payoffs throughout, I’d be the first to say, To hell with the mundane—endure the circulatory games, ignore the material realm, and transcend. But early praise notwithstanding, there isn’t. So I won’t. And you can’t. Not in this botched box.

For those willing to look past the myth—and when green architects are given a major museum retrospective (however panned) and a genius grant from the MacArthur Foundation (however undeserved), that myth is substantial—the firm has been telegraphing for years, in renderings of un-built and forthcoming work, that its finished buildings would take their cues from things we’ve already seen. The image of a folding plane that becomes floor, wall, and ceiling—only an image, because when built it is always a fake—has been a staple of “edgy” work for more than a decade. At the ICA, one winds its turgid way throughout. Neil Denari, who may have been the first to popularize the motif, called his version a “worldsheet,” but the same empty form has been used by Lindy Roy in a house in the Hamptons and, most famously, by Rem Koolhaas in his Educatorium, in Utrecht. If spades were indeed going to be called spades, the ICA would be dismissed, instantly and wholesale, as a startlingly ham-fisted homage to OMA—one, moreover, nearly bare of the transient joys that Rem regularly works into his buildings.

It’s all in plain sight, standing alone beside Boston Harbor. But consider the pressures to write a positive review. Most American architecture critics have built their careers in part by reflexively championing the new. It’s likely they’ve been promoting just this sort of thing for years against a perception of local inertia. When it’s made real, or close enough: two thumbs up. Critics being people too, there may also be a wish to be on the winning team. I’ve felt that pull; some stars are enchanting. Certainly there’s more power in constructing fame than in questioning it. Or is it that such critics think that star-crafted buildings, even if derivative and poorly realized, are inherently better than the alternative? Do they fear that by challenging these architects they might discourage innovation? Do they imagine that promoting innovation—even just the look of innovation—is such a pure good that the defense of all other values must be suspended along with our disbelief?

I think they might. Or maybe I’m way off base. But the pattern is real, and its effects are clear. Bad buildings by big names get a regular pass. Favorable coverage ensues for the client. Though no connection between high-glamour architects and high-quality buildings is ever demonstrated, the client class learns anew that it pays to gamble on the stars. Other architects retool their practices to get in the game (first stop: drinks with the local critic). Students take note (fledgling critics too &). Mediocrity goes unchecked. The public gets shafted. The cycle repeats. The planet spins. Architecture lives to die another day.