All the World is a Screen: A Computer Atmosphere for Latter-Day Learning

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All the World is a Screen: A Computer Atmosphere for Latter-Day Learning

Abstract
Even from a distance one senses a crystalline presence about the Pappajohn Education Center. It glows from within—not unlike the way E.T. glowed when emoting, or, one presumes, the way a nuclear reactor glows in production. Photographic images reinforce the building’s luminosity. Its all-glass wrapper, milk-ish and translucent, facilitates it. Had the building been built in Berlin, ca. 1920, its plan would have been either biomorphic or fractured, its gestures greatly exaggerated, and its style unmistakably expressionistic. In 21st century Des Moines, the plan is standard Modernism: L-shaped and undoubtedly economical.

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism

Comments
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All the World is a Screen

A COMPUTER ATMOSPHERE FOR LATTER-DAY LEARNING

JURY COMMENTS: Elegant use of materials, a clearly organized plan and beautifully composed. We liked the way the stair embraces and animates the commons. Beautiful details of concrete structure and windows; the column objectifies itself.

Even from a distance one senses a crystalline presence about the Pappajohn Education Center. It glows from within—not unlike the way E.T. glowed when emoting, or, one presumes, the way a nuclear reactor glows in production. Photographic images reinforce the building’s luminosity. Its all-glass wrapper, milk-ish and translucent, facilitates it. Had the building been built in Berlin, ca. 1920, its plan would have been either biomorphic or fractured, its gestures greatly exaggerated, and its style unmistakably expressionistic. In 21st century Des Moines, the plan is standard Modernism: L-shaped and undoubtedly economical.

The Center facilitates an alliance of education with business. On three levels, its nine standard classrooms open to the urban thoroughfare (north) side of the building, while its two large lecture rooms are stacked above a glass lobby on the park side of the building. Lecture rooms are comprised of three walls of milk-white fritted insulating glass, while standard classrooms have but one wall of this glass, glass that translates street traffic and noise to a blur and a hum. In all these rooms, flip-of-a-switch, roll-down blinds control the abundance of light, while cylindrical metal ducts provide air at the desired temperature.

Not located in downtown Des Moines per se, the center sits remotely to its east, beside the Main Public Library, at a street corner on the north edge of a flat, treeless site. Too small to relate to the big-business buildings in the distance and too elegant to agree with its more immediate three-story neighbors, its loneliness could not be more evident. Yet it occupies a central position in what’s promised to be a kind of miniature Central Park—a “natural amenity” dubbed Gateway Park and intended to be bordered by trees.

One enters the center from its street-shared-by-library side. An all-glass weather lock serves as principle entrance, initiating a circulation axis that services all three levels of classrooms and runs the east-west length of the building to terminate at vending machines and a fritted glass wall. Borrowed-light offices—display cases for human resource—front the primary circulation path, protecting classrooms from the resounding noise of three levels of public movement. Circulation floats in an ether of multiple-level space, from the three-story lobby that houses a metal and concrete...
ornamental stair to a three-story corridor that seeks to unify in a single envelope all that is contained in the glass walls. As a result, one reads classrooms, offices and lecture halls as containers contained within a larger container.

The aesthetic is hardly incidental. The atmosphere is iconic. Underscored by exposed concrete that supports a minimalist palette of industrial materials and neutral tones, it maintains a "building as warehouse for learning" theme. Cool, anonymous, systemic and with few unencumbered views out, the center glows internally. Its light is like that of a backlit computer screen. Its tone is honed to perfection, relentless in its endeavor to unite business and education.

—Daniel Naegele, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University.