

2006

Conflict and the Shaping of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)

Lynn Paxson

Iowa State University, lpaxson@iastate.edu

Joseph B. Juhasz

University of Colorado Boulder

Rubén Martínez

University of Texas, San Antonio

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paxson, Lynn; Juhasz, Joseph B.; and Martínez, Rubén, "Conflict and the Shaping of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)" (2006). *Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations*. 98.

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf/98

This Abstract is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Conflict and the Shaping of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)

Abstract

On September 21, 2004 after more than a decade of planning, preparation and design, marked along the way with a number of very public conflicts, the Smithsonian NMAI (National Museum of the American Indian) opened its doors. While the opening was perhaps not as marked by conflict as it might have been - it did generate a certain amount of controversy, some of which is ongoing. The story of the events and process(s) that led to this point an interesting and instructive.

Keywords

Art, Urban design/scale, Architecture, Landscape architecture, Case study, Qualitative, Culture, Communication

Disciplines

Architecture

Comments

This abstract is from *EDRA37, Beyond Conflict: Proceedings of the 37th Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association*, ed. Meldrena K. Chapin (Edmond, OK: Environmental Design Research Association, 2006). Posted with permission.

BETWEEN VEILS AND REVELATIONS: THE INTERIOR LIFE OF (WOMEN IN) THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

El Kharbawy, A. Sameh (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) [Paper]

THEMATIC ABSTRACTS

Culture & Environment

Since September 11, 2001 the question of Islam has been thrust into world consciousness with amazing insistence. Media propaganda and official discourse in the U.S. have convinced far too many that large swaths of the Muslim world are occupied by underdeveloped, incompetent, and doomed peoples whose cultures and civilizations are deeply opposed to the modern world and to 'our' values: namely democracy, freedom and human rights. Added to this is the appallingly abstract proposition that a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable. Arabs and Muslims around the world are also reassessing their culture and religious practices; rituals that were previously followed blindly are now being questioned and understood for their spiritual significance and purpose. This paper consists of two complementary and loosely related parts. The first section, which I will entitle "Islam and Modernity", consists of a few observations and a hypothesis about the interrelation between modernity and Islam. This hypothesis will serve as a theoretical framework for the second part which tells the story of a small community of Muslim women in Matariyah, a lower-middle class neighborhood in the Eastern part of Cairo, Egypt, and their means of creating modern homes and workplaces while challenging the paternal traditions of local culture. My primary objective is to draw from the Matariyah experience lessons for understanding the relationship between (Western) modernity and a rapidly developing Middle East, and for sustaining human creativity in the context of the design and development processes. A secondary objective is to draw scholarly and

professional attention to the complex (yet habitually abstracted and simplified) human reality of women in Egypt, and their contributions to a more modern Middle East.

Keywords: theory/criticism, design, culture, cultural politics, modernity

CONFLICT AND THE SHAPING OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN (NMAI)

Organizer: Paxson, Lynn (Iowa State University, Ames) Presenters: Paxson, Lynn (Iowa State University, Ames), Juhasz, Joseph (University of Colorado, Boulder). Discussants: Martinez, Rubén O. (University of Texas, San Antonio) [Symposium]

On September 21, 2004 after more than a decade of planning, preparation and design, marked along the way with a number of very public conflicts, the Smithsonian NMAI (National Museum of the American Indian) opened its doors. While the opening was perhaps not as marked by conflict as it might have been – it did generate a certain amount of controversy, some of which is ongoing. The story of the events and process(s) that led to this point are interesting and instructive. There was controversy about changing the location of the collection, about transferring the ownership and control, and controversy over the design and designers of the museum. Although there was some controversy over the building design itself, there has been greater controversy over the content of the museum – the displays, the choice of objects and the interpretation provided. Design professionals and environmental social scientists understand the human modified environment as a material production of cultures. As a result, we also support the idea of spaces as

communicative. The contextually defined relations between objects, places, and people communicate the values, decisions, and choices made throughout a broadly defined process of placemaking. Places have meanings, they tell stories. The new Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian located on the Mall in Washington D.C. sought to be an example of creating a very different and unique sense or spirit of place (or recreating an older or former sense of place) in this heavily colonized and transformed place. Sensitivity is required to produce successful designs for native communities that meet the challenge of interpreting and reflecting appropriate cultural qualities and values of place into these new architectural expressions. The NMAI project has been approached holistically considering carefully the issues of the site through to the objects in the exhibits. The intent was to make a place, that although part of the Mall and meeting all the Mall restrictions/guidelines, was recognizably a different kind of place, a different set of experiences from the moment you stepped onto the grounds – to make a native place. Lynn Paxson and Joe Juhasz will discuss the controversy over the interpretation and presentation in the recently opened Smithsonian NMAI. These controversies swirl around the differences in worldviews (epistemologies) between Native Americans or First Peoples and Mainstream or Non-Indigenous people as well as around the diversity among American Indians or First Nations groups. They reflect traditions, cultures and identities that are always evolving, that refuse to be frozen in an anthropological past, and that have maintained their identities, colonized peoples who may struggle to control assimilation and acculturation in an increasingly globalized world. These controversies raise at some level the question of who will tell the 'stories' in this museum as well as whose 'stories' will be told. The two presenters will take rather different positions on these controversial issues and aspects allowing the 'conflict' of their dialogue to help illustrate the value of 'conflict' in revealing diverse interpretations. Ruben Martinez will act as a discussant reflecting on their dialogue to pose evocative issues and provide additional points of

discussion. The session will examine the power relationships inherent in choosing narratives and methods of interpretation. Who gets to decide whose story is told? Can the narrating of stories be negotiated by multiple factions and if so, how? What methods have been used to express multiple stories in a single space and which of these have been most successful? This symposium will examine, these and other questions, and encourage audience participation and discussion in looking for understanding.

Keywords: art, urban design/scale, architecture, landscape architecture, case study, qualitative, culture, communication

THEMATIC
ABSTRACTS

Culture &
Environment

DESIGN, MEANINGS AND SYMBOLISM OF THE AMERICAN MOSQUE

Amor, Cherif (Texas Tech University) [Paper]

While it is very well documented that Islam was in practice in the United States before the American civil war (Kahera, 1999), there is a substantial lack of studies pertaining to American Muslim physical environments, specifically the mosque environment from an environmental behavioral perspective. Several reasons justify this lack. First, the mosque is a recent architectural artifact within the American urban fabric. Art historians believe that the establishment of the first mosque in America was in 1926 in Highland Park (a city within the boundaries of Detroit) where the first Ford Motor Co. plant was located. The second reason behind this lack is that early Muslim immigrants, unlike recent immigrants, perceived America as a transitory economic station in their lives. This transient attitude yielded a passive lifestyle that limited Muslims architectural contribution to the host culture. The third reason is that art historians prefer to study traditional models in the Muslim world that virtually produced an abundant body of literature regarding the architecture of the mosque in the Muslim world. Likewise, the fourth reason revolves around the fact that the majority of mosques (55%) were existing