A Landscape Designed to be Viewed, Not Experienced

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A Landscape Designed to be Viewed, Not Experienced

Abstract
Everyone is Impressed when This Old House transforms a tired bungalow into an elegant new residence, and that’s the way oslund.and.assoc. has reinvented the competent Modernism of the General Mills Corporate Headquarters. With fine materials and design elan, the new addition updates and improves the sit’s old vocabulary of rolling green lawns, minimalist buildings, scattered abstract sculptures, and amoeba-shaped ponds, making Modernism relevant again for a whole new era of corporate citizens.

Disciplines
Historic Preservation and Conservation | Landscape Architecture | Other Architecture | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments
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EVERYONE IS IMPRESSED when This Old House transforms a tired bungalow into an elegant new residence, and that’s the way oslund.and.assoc. has reinvented the concept of modernism for the General Mills Corporate Headquarters. With fine materials and design details, the new addition updates and improves the site’s old vocabulary of rolling green lawns, minimalist buildings, scattered abstract sculptures, and amoeba-shaped ponds, making Modernism relevant again for a whole new era of corporate citizens.

The seamless blending of old and new Modernism sought by the design team is perhaps most apparent in the upper courtyard, created when new buildings were joined to old. Here, the new, dark glass buildings complement and play off the old Modern cubes. A seating terrace—a portion of the old building—steps down in bands of juniper, bunched grass, and blue/grey landscape rock to a flat verdant plane, whose central feature is a linear bed of Siberian iris planted in Mexican beach pebbles. In the afternoon light of my visit, the space was all blue and grey, granite and steel, sun and shadow, but with windowed offices and halls on all sides, the effect was something like being in an aquarium.

Although the upper courtyard is, in plan, a definite spatial center of the design, it is clearly less popular and inhabited than interior spaces of the new campus’s apparent jewel, the employee services center. This building, which might be considered a twenty-first-century company town, houses handy employee amenities, including a cafeteria, a D’Amico and Sons takeout outlet, a Caribou Coffee shop, and an Aveda hair salon, as well as a convenience store, dry cleaning drop-off, and gym—all in a three-story glass box. All this commercial activity might evoke an airport mall if not for the two stories of panoramic views to the rolling, verdant Oslund landscape beyond, views that terminate an axial hallway from the headquarters’ main entrance in a grand crescendo of light and open space. As I wandered along the giant plate-glass windows, with glass panes and building columns framing changing compositions of sky and grass, water and trees before me, it seemed as though the building walls in front of me had dematerialized. The panorama is a little overwhelming—the Modernist idea of blurring interior and exterior space taken to a two-story extreme.

The blurring of interior and exterior space continues on the ground floor, where the cafeteria floor slips underneath the glass wall to become the bluestone terrace. The terrace, sandwiched between the service center and the office building, seems to float atop a pool that floods out into the landscape beyond. The source of the water is a fountain wall at the back of the terrace, reminiscent of Paley Park in both form and location. But this is Paley Park writ large and luxuriously, with a Darth Vader edge to it, all black granite and clean, hard, smooth lines. The sternness of the area is relieved by the play of reflections in the glass walls, the sun glinting off the tables, and the yellow honey locust leaves floating on the surface of the water channel that bisects the terrace.

The water channel is remarkable for its precise and beautiful detailing, particularly in the way the metal mesh bridges hover just above the water and the way the water seethes up in the larger pool beyond. The view over the stream and terrace to the pool, land bridge, and “valley” in the distance is magnificently composed. Yet I question whether anyone will enjoy the view other than during lunch and corporate cocktail parties; on a beautiful, 70-degree September afternoon, only two employees with a stack of manila folders used the terrace as an alternative workspace.

Because there’s no path to access the landscape beyond the terrace, I set off across the perfect lawn, my feet leaving footprints in the manicured turf behind me. In full view of all those office windows, I felt a little guilty, as you do when walking across a golf course. It’s clear this is a landscape meant primarily to be viewed from a distance and not to be engaged physically. That’s a shame because the space is if not welcoming, then pleasurable. There was a sense of open prospect as I stood at the base of the Jonathan Borofsky sculpture, and a feeling of quiet refuge in the “valley,” where landform and clumps of trees offer enclosure and screening from the noise and sight of the adjacent highway. These subspaces are created with masterful grading that transitions from sleek terraces near the building to more sensuous forms in the distance.

Familiar Modern landscapes are also evoked in the design: As I looked back across the water to the building, I was reminded of the way the Sasaki Associates’ John Deere headquarters building in Moline, Illinois, floats above its entry pool, and the line of trees along the parking lot sidewalk that disintegrates into groves as the land rolls down to the shoreline somehow recalls Dan Kiley’s Miller Garden in Columbus, Indiana.

This Modernist sense of design control also extends to smaller details. In view of the building, the pool edge is composed of more Mexican beach pebbles, cleverly updating the vocabulary of the campus’s earlier riprapped pool edges while recalling the stones from the iris bed in the courtyard “upstream.” Behind the lean land bridge, where the design becomes more naturalistic, the stones transform into less regularly shaped blue/grey landscape rock. The shoreline eventually changes into a band of native grasses and cattails—a more ecologically sensitive approach, and one that discourages the ubiquitous Canada goose on site. But, as a smattering of native aspens and oaks are the only nods to ecology.

Indeed, oslund.and.assoc.’s control of design—of details, of grading, of composition—is compelling and uncommon. But this is corporate design: There are larger budgets and no messy public process, and if your client is sympathetic, design excellence should be within reach. And oslund.and.assoc. has, based on its web site, chosen to specialize in this kind of private work.

Such design control is enviable, but I also wonder if it isn’t representative of something more. In my most cynical moods, I would assert that this is not only a controlled design but also a controlling design. The landscape here is a visual amenity but not something to be fully enjoyed and completely experienced. In this way, it’s not unlike the Caribou Coffee outlet. By providing access to the outdoors, the landscape enhances employees’ days in the same way the coffee shop or dry cleaner’s makes them more efficient. The aim is to keep employees on time, on task, and fulfilling corporate mandates. Is this bad? Not really, but the resultant landscape strikes me as commodified and, in places, even cold. And if lack of warmth was an issue with Modernism to begin with, then this is one area where the oslund.and.assoc.’s landscape is not an improvement.