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By Standing Out, It's A Perfect Fit

New ICA shows that Boston has become more accepting of contemporary ideas

By Robert Campbell, Boston Globe Correspondent

Everyone seemed to be saying the same thing last week at the party that inaugurated the Institute of Contemporary Art's new building on the waterfront.

The party itself was spectacular. More than a thousand invited guests swarmed over the ICA's many levels. They gathered on the outdoor deck to savor the fantastic view of Boston Harbor at night. They were awed by the powerful surge of the top-floor galleries, which hang out over the deck as if by magic, without visible support. They explored the theater, the glass elevator, the size of a bedroom, the tiny Mediatheque where kids will call up images on computers. And, of course, they checked out the art in those flying galleries, which are lit, in daytime, by a translucent roof.

What people are saying was that they couldn't believe a building so audacious, so venturesome, could be built in of all places – Boston. They were asking whether the ICA marked a watershed in the history of local architectural taste.

Boston underwent a long depression in the middle of the last century. Its industries moved south in search of bigger space and cheaper labor. Its harbor, the reason Boston existed in the first place, was abandoned for deeper ports elsewhere. Boston politics was a legend of corruption and class conflict.



Boston's great depression lasted from the late 1920's to about 1960. To get a handle on how much the city has changed since then, consider the Back Bay. In the 1960's, almost none of the dwellings in the Back Bay were owner occupied. That neighborhood's great cityscape of townhouses was chopped up into tiny cheap apartments, largely occupied by students or low-income singles.

Except for the John Hancock Tower, the one with the weather beacon, not the glass skyscraper, no significant new building appeared in Boston over a period of more than 30 years.

That's why. When the local depression finally ended, Boston was eager to welcome new development. Too eager. Any development. Good, bad or indifferent.

Hideously aggressive new office towers, scarily out of scale with their surroundings and surrounded by windy plazas that felt like defensive moats, began to sprout. A whole living neighborhood, the West End, was bulldozed flat, to be replaced by apartment houses that looked like they belonged in Miami Beach. Seedy but humane Scollay Square became the urban Sahara that is now Government Center. The Massachusetts Turnpike marched like an invading army, leaving a swath of destruction in its path. Mayor John Collins promised a high-rise on every corner of the Back Bay.

After years of that kind of redevelopment, in the mid 70's Boston citizens rose in wrath. They established a landmarks law, to protect the architecture not only

of individual buildings but also of whole neighborhoods. Advocates for architectural preservation learned to play politics. They became a powerful force.

This was a huge countermove to the forces of development. On the whole, it was healthy and necessary. But there was, and is a downside.

The downside is the belief, which a lot of people quite understandably arrived at that anything old is good and anything new bad. And that, therefore, new buildings should be faked to look like old ones. Or else not built at all.

Everyone loves old Boston. But phony architecture is not old Boston. They weren't doing it back then.

It's quite true that modern architecture is often disruptive to a historic setting. Modernism as a philosophy wasn't particularly responsive to context.

But that doesn't have to be true. A contemporary building, even a large one, can fit its setting perfectly while, at the same time, injecting some invention and energy. And there are times and circumstances when disruptive is exactly what a new building ought to be, just as we treasure music or literature that shakes us up a little.

Most buildings should be modest background structures, quietly shaping our streets without shouting for attention. But there is a place for the performer building too. And even the background ones can be marvelously inventive in detail, as they so often are in the older Boston, and as they never are in today's imitations.

So, to come back to the ICA, has Boston turned a corner? Is it going to be more accepting of the new, the provocative in architecture? I hope so.

Because of its many schools, Boston is continually renewed with a fresh tide of youth. And the current generation of younger people seems to be far more accepting of contemporary ideas than their recent forebears. They didn't have to live through the period of bad development, or the reaction to it.

So let's applaud the ICA and, of course, its nifty and creative architects, Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio, and Charles Renfro of New York. Let's hope they've broken through to an era of Boston architecture that will be just as exciting as it is thoughtful, responsible, and courteous to its surroundings. We can have it both ways.