

news & features

COMMENTARY



STEVEN HOLL ARCHITECTS

Lessons in Place-making

What two new public buildings by Steven Holl Architect have to tell Richmond.

by Edwin Slipek

NEW YORK and WASHINGTON — The holidays lured me to points north. I discovered that Christmas came early, both to the banks of the East River in the Hunters Point neighborhood of Queens and to the Potomac shoreline near the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in our nation's capital.

In September, each of these sites saw completion of a spectacular public building designed by Steven Holl Architects. The Manhattan-based firm is recognized, if not celebrated internationally, for thoughtful, poetic and place-making design solutions. The Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University that opened in spring 2018 is a case in point of how the Holl firm elegantly humanized Richmond's frantic,

vehicle-laden intersection of Broad and Belvidere streets.

The Queens branch library and the grand addition to Washington's Kennedy Center are each highly accessible — well, almost — and praiseworthy for how they transform their respective prominent sites. Since both projects were completed in latter half of 2019, after a fraught decade of planning, design and construction, when books are written about American architecture of the 2010s, these projects will surely be documented alongside Holl's contemporaneous Richmond project.

In addition to expanding the collection of esteemed Holl buildings along the East Coast, these two buildings offer

lessons for Richmond as it continues its current building boom.

In New York, residents and city officials had long worked to create a neighborhood library in Hunters Point, a former industrial area of Long Island City that has been dramatically transformed by sleek new residential towers and a re-energized riverfront park that

boasts money-shot vistas of the Manhattan skyline. The sweeping view embraces the United Nations headquarters, the Chrysler Building and the Franklin Roosevelt memorial on an East River island.

The library structure itself is a tight shoe-, no, boot-box-proportioned building that measures 22,000 square feet

Holl on page 5

The new Hunter's Point Library in Queens, New York.

Holl from page 4

and rises 82 feet. Despite its tight urban setting, the \$40 million structure rests so confidently in its gracefully nuanced landscape design by Michael Van Valkenburgh, that it reads as a pavilion in a well-manicured European park. Michael Kimmelman, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, deemed it “a diva parading along the East River in Queens.”

The library’s white concrete, minimalist and brutalist form is broken visually by huge, whimsically shaped windows. But the openings that read as bold sculptural statements from across the river in Manhattan offer views and create architectural magic on the inside. The floor plan is a basic, tiered amphitheater with a side staircase that connects the cascade of terraces. Each tier, or level, offers various library departments — for adults, teens, children or periodicals. Each area is clearly delineated, but visually accessible from multiple points. By the time one ascends to the upper reaches of the mostly open space, the sweeping view of the interior is not only evident, but jaw-droppingly impressive.

But oops, oops and oops. Immediately after the library’s grand opening, it became clear that the building’s single elevator does not stop on every level. Therefore, wheelchair-bound or steps-averse patrons are severely limited.

A similar oversight didn’t occur with Holl’s design for Richmond’s Institute for Contemporary Art. For many decades, the university had contended with the lack of any elevator at its principal,

four-story fine arts exhibition facility, the Anderson Gallery. Therefore, accessibility was a sensitive issue in the overall building design and circulation patterns flow like mountain stream water.

Currently in New York, as library officials and the architect are hustling to mitigate accessibility issues, the shelves on many of the building’s tiers have been emptied of books. Well, at least the dramatic views of Manhattan’s skyline remain spellbinding.

Some of the Hunters Point library’s architectural finesse is due to an initiative of the former city administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the New York City Design Excellence Program. Learning this, it occurred to me that, in Richmond, as the Navy Hill proposal to rebuild blocks of downtown faces increasing bumps in gaining broad public acceptance, any discussion of the project has been devoid of architectural excellence or the presentation of schematic imagery that might excite people. All that Richmonders have been shown are images of generic glass boxes and fuzzy, air-brushed explosions of color suggesting where a new arena would be built. There is no match for strong, tight, imaginative images of good design, and sadly, the NH Corp. developers have not used the power of specific and strong architecture to inspire understanding and excitement.

If New York’s new library is a brilliant, visual beacon, Washington’s Reach, the aspirational name of the \$250-million, 72,000-square-foot addition to the Kennedy Center, is subtle when viewed from



SCOTT ELMQUIST/FILE

The 2018 Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

a distance.

On the exterior of the Reach, a sweeping lawn serves double duty as a green roof. There are also reflecting pools, and importantly, the Bridge, a pedestrian walkway that connects patrons, runners, hikers and cyclists to Rock Creek Parkway. Then, there is the Video Wall Lawn, offering a riverfront venue for simulcasts and screenings. Seldom has the romantic notion of the Lawn been so wedded to the names of a public space for high tech art pieces and projections.

But don’t be fooled by the first views of the Reach. What appear to be boxy, sculpted periscopes projecting from the manicured lawns that front the Potomac on the eastern side of the monolithic Kennedy Center — its lobby is the length of two

football fields — are elegant, irregularly shaped light shafts. These channel natural light into 10 major performance, rehearsal, activity and exhibition spaces below. These facilities, designed to augment the expansive programs of the nation’s largest performing arts center, are linked by a winding underground concourse that welcomes public exploration. Think of it as a well-tailored factory that celebrates, as it perfects, a range of art forms — dance, opera, theater and music.

The walls of most of these high-ceiling rehearsal spaces are lined with acoustic, custom-poured concrete blocks that were made in crinkly molds of distressed aluminum.

The walls of the long, connecting corridor are hung with large and colorful contemporary artworks on long-term loan from Glenstone, a major, privately owned art museum in nearby Potomac, Maryland. The fact that another art institution is collaborating with the federal Kennedy Center speaks to the spirit of partnership and inclusion that permeates the entire complex. The Reach is open to the public daily at no charge.

The original Kennedy Center complex was federally funded, and its Edward Durrell Stone-designed building was opened in 1971 as a memorial to the assassinated president. But construction of the Reach, like VCU’s Institute for Contemporary Art, was funded strictly by private philanthropy.

Now that the bar has been raised with this Steven Holl addition to the Kennedy Center, it’s no surprise that many observers say the original building is looking a little dated.

Similarly, in Richmond, it’s possible that as the Holl-designed contemporary art center settles in, it will continue to raise awareness for architectural excellence not just on the VCU campus, but throughout the city and region. **S**



The new Kennedy Center's Reach in Washington.

RICHARD BARNES

arts & culture

The Robert E. Lee statue on Monument Avenue (designed in 1890 by Parisian artist Antonin Merci) as it appeared earlier this month.

COMMENTARY



SCOTT ELMQUIST

Where Do the Lost Things Go?

How to move the not unimportant statues that have passed their expiration date.

by Edwin Slipek

A perennial argument for retaining Richmond's historically fraught monuments has been that they are essential to tourism, an economic driver here. Some ask how could a town that has long prided itself as the City of Monuments possibly function without a string of Confederate statues along Monument Avenue?

Such a thought is unimaginable to some, while many others find it long overdue and healthy, pointing to a more

inclusive future built on less controversial attractions. The latter stance is true of demonstrators who have demanded the removal of politically incorrect pieces of heavy metal, or devised immediate exit strategies themselves, as with statues of Christopher Columbus and Confederates Williams C. Wickham and Jefferson Davis.

In coming to grips with now empty public spaces long associated with such lightning rods as Columbus and Davis, important questions for our community's

stewards of history should focus on what happens when the winds of daily politics and passions subside? First, where will these debunked sculptures be housed until they can be cleaned (or not), conserved and reinstalled securely for future examination and study? While some people hope they never see the light of day, I suspect that once the considerable dust of the spring of 2020 has settled, they will find an afterlife. The century-old sculptures will no longer proclaim the Lost Cause but serve as passive and invaluable artifacts from painful chapters in our community's history.

While there are logical places for these metal pariahs to be resettled, a vexing question is whether or not local institutions have the will and vision to take them on. There was a resounding silence for the almost two years that have elapsed since a municipal advisory panel suggested that the relatively modest-sized Davis image be removed and contextual enhancements be made to the other pieces on Monument Avenue. On July 1, the law changes allowing localities to decide their fate – not a moment too soon.

The Valentine, a center long-dedicated to Richmond history, would be a logical space for Davis since the studio of its sculptor, Edward Valentine, is a major installation on the institution's tightly configured Court End campus.

In contrast, the grounds of The Virginia Museum of History & Culture and the American Civil War Museum, both private institutions, are large enough to serve as repositories for the equestrian Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart sculptures. They would require enclosed facilities, for a variety of reasons. The Civil War museum, however, has already begged off citing lack of funds and space. And the argument could be made that interpreting the post-Civil War era is not its institutional mission. The Virginia Museum of History & Culture, however, already possesses one of the most famous Lost Cause artworks, "The Four Seasons of the Confederacy," paintings made in the same time and spirit of the Monument Avenue statues. The museum, which recently signaled that it might accession fragments of a GRTC bus see **Monuments** on page 8

Monuments from page 7

destroyed by protesters, has been quiet on the fate of the historic statues.

As for the J.E.B. Stuart monument at Monument and Lombardy: In light of the positive reception given the Kehinde Wiley sculpture, "Rumors of War" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, would this contemporary work lose any of its highly charged power if its aesthetic inspiration/counterpart were far removed? It's a question worth asking when deciding Stuart's fate.

The Lee statue, complete with pedestal, might find refuge at Stratford, a not-for-profit museum complex on the Northern Neck in Westmoreland County. This was the Confederate general's ancestral home and birthplace. Richmond, however, the former capital of the Confederacy, would lose an important artifact.

Leaving empty pedestals, while making a bold statement that their occupants have fallen from grace, is ultimately unsatisfactory. Recently, I visited the German city of Weimar and came upon an empty pedestal in the center of a prominent town square. While I was curious, I didn't inquire as to the identity of the missing figure. With Germany's often checkered history, I could only imagine.

In Rome there are a number of colos-

sal columns, 60 to 100 feet tall, that once supported statues of ancient rulers. With the rise of Christianity and the Vatican, these pagan rulers were replaced by holy figures. St. Paul, for instance, now lords over the neighborhood from the perch that Marcus Aurelius once occupied.

Another option might be for the statues and their bases to be moved to a neutral, privately owned site off the beaten path.

A number of years ago in Budapest, Hungary, I came upon an intriguing solution to resettling banished monuments. As I wandered through the stately city with its crisscrossing and majestic boulevards, there were numerous empty traffic circles or plazas with paved areas that had obviously once held sculptures. When I inquired as to where the figures had been taken, a few locals explained they were in Memento Park. Few knew its whereabouts.

Eventually, an elderly woman explained that a train and two buses would take me to an open field some 12 miles beyond the city. Here, private investors had moved 42 mostly huge – no, make that overwhelming – statues to leaders of Hungary's Communist era, which lasted from 1949 to 1989. Upon arriving, the only other folks my brother and I found were a hunched woman selling Soviet era souvenirs and an attractive young family from Califor-



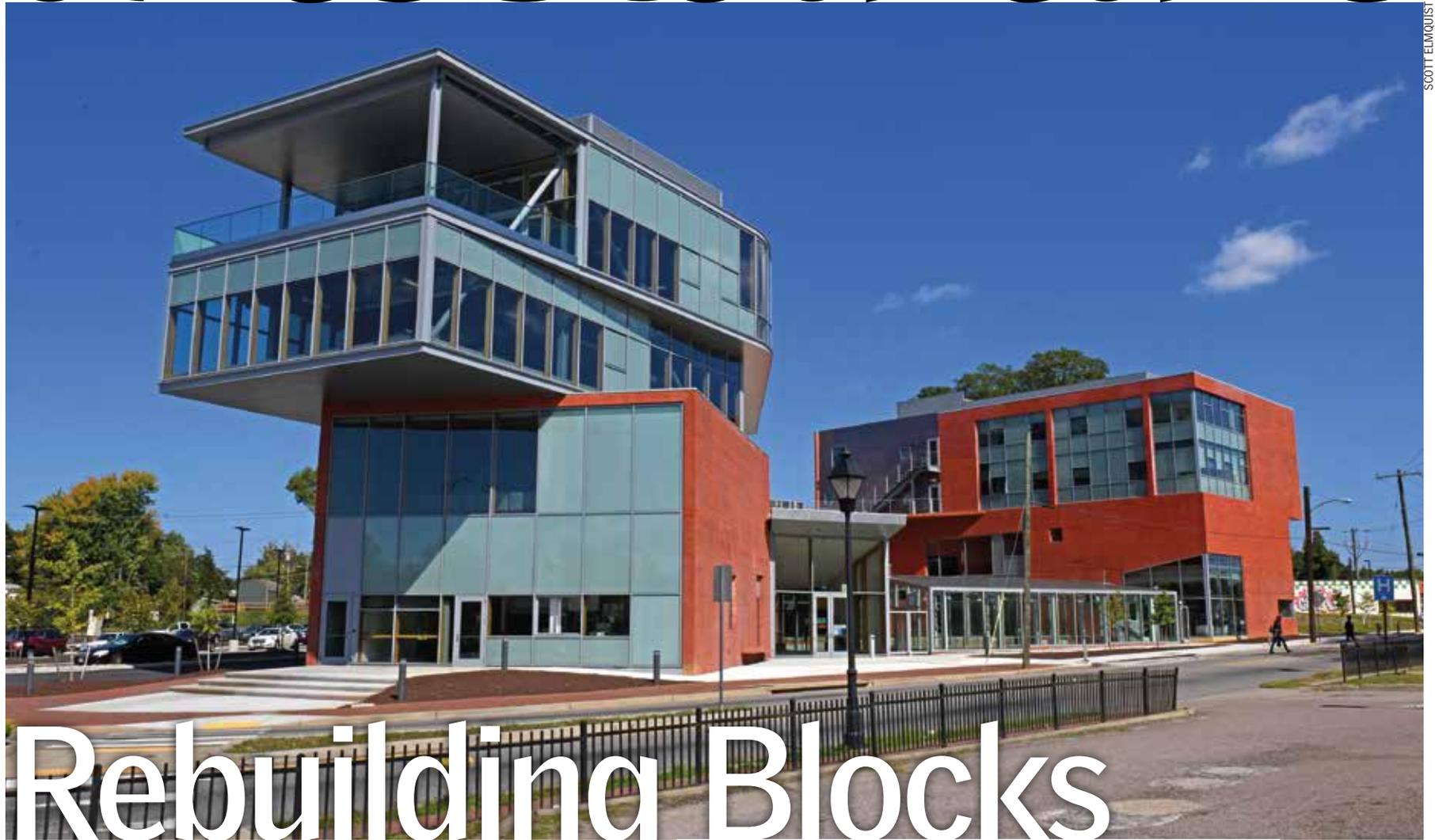
nia. It was an otherwise dispiriting and forlorn place.

But Budapest's Memento Park sparked a question: Are 50 acres available along U.S. Route 360 in Amelia County? **S**

Edwin Slipek, Style Weekly's senior contributing editor and architecture critic, is an adjunct instructor in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

The "Workers' Movement Memorial" (foreground, designed by Kiss Istvan in 1975) and the "Captain Miklos Steinmetz Statue" (sculpted by Mikus Sandor in 1958 to honor a Hungarian-born Soviet Red Army officer) are among 42 heroic sculptures that were removed from prominent Budapest sites after the fall of communism in 1989 and reinstalled in Memento Park on the city's outskirts .

arts & culture



SCOTT LUCAS

Rebuilding Blocks

The architecturally splendid Kitchens at Reynolds engages its North Church Hill environs.

by Edwin Slipek

On a sunny afternoon in June 2014, hundreds gathered in a vacant lot at West Broad and Belvidere streets. They'd come to celebrate the start of construction for the Markel Center to house the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. Six years later, an architecturally striking cultural complex, designed by Steven Holl Architects of New York, has transformed that busy crossroads.

After those ceremonies, Holl, benefactors Steven and Kathie Markel, and Pamela and William Royall, also major donors, and a few others repaired to a nearby restaurant. Over dessert, Mr. Mar-

kel, chairman of Markel Corp., was asked if his architectural patronage of the institute put him on par with the generation of his family that commissioned the Markel Building, the round and crinkled aluminum, 1960s office structure near Willow Lawn that is now a historic landmark.

His response? The ICA wouldn't be his last foray into adventurous architecture.

Markel and his wife have fulfilled that promise with a high-spirited building recently completed at the busy crossroads where the street grid at North

25th Street gives way to once-rural Nine Mile Road. Things are ready to cook at the Kitchens at Reynolds, where a

The concrete, glass and copper-sided complex housing apartments and the Reynolds Community College culinary program transform the intersection of Nine Mile Road, North 25th Street and Fairfield Avenue.

50,000-square-foot, four-story multipurpose structure houses the culinary program of J.S. Reynolds Community College. Among the facilities are four teaching kitchens, space for two restaurants and a demonstration theater. There are also 12 affordable apartments. When combined with the Market@25th Street, a new full-service grocery store across the street, also develop-

see **Kitchens at Reynolds** on page 32

October 21, 2020 STYLE WEEKLY

Kitchens at Reynolds *from page 31*

oped by the Markels, this former North Church Hill food desert has the ingredients to become a healthful food oasis.

O'Neill McVoy Architects of Brooklyn, New York, the design architect, and Quinn Evans, associate architect, have delivered a U-shaped complex that establishes urban street walls along North 25th Street and Nine Mile Road. Hourigan was contractor. The striking structure projects a residential scale in how the architect has distributed the building mass through a few, stacked and masterfully placed 40-foot-wide blocks. And the combination of building elements is also thrilling. The walls of the first and second floors are supported by poured-in-place concrete that was infused with red pigment (with a dash of yellow), a hue that visually connects this aggressively modernist building with the brick surfaces of many neighboring buildings. Further, the concrete was poured into molds formed by 3-inch boards cut from soft wood. The subtle lines in the concrete add texture to the walls while suggesting the scale of standard brick courses.

Contrasting with the rusticated solidity of the concrete are the crisp glass walls on the upper two floors. The transparency here is further enlivened with contrasting fenestration of greenish-gray panels. The architect also has placed industrial-grade copper sheeting, aged to a pleasant dark hue, strategically on the top levels.

Despite the liberal use of poured concrete, the building isn't brutalist but highly welcoming. On the Nine Mile Road front a main building entrance is next to a glass and metal greenhouse that will be cultivated by horticulture students.

Once planted, this low-lying conservatory will provide a refreshing green screen between the sidewalk and an open-air, multipurpose atrium. Also, large plate glass windows on the first level encourage passersby to observe students at work in the large kitchens – and even glimpse a dishwashing area.

Inside the culinary program areas, stairwells and passages double as student lounges. Some of these social spaces have built-in benches fashioned from light-colored wood. Upstairs, the 78-seat theater includes a demonstration kitchen. On the top floor, a dramatically lofty space opens onto a balcony facing 25th Street that awaits transformation to a restaurant. Another eatery is slated for the ground level, also with outdoor dining.

And there is room to grow. The grassy and hilly open space to the east of the building awaits additional apartment buildings. Happily, a huge willow oak tree on the site will be retained.

A striking feature of this carefully planned complex is the paucity of off-street parking. Perhaps this is intentional, encouraging folks to walk, cycle or take public transportation to the complex. Shuttle buses will connect this facility with the college's downtown campus.

At a fraught time both nationally and locally, when many people are contemplating economic and racial inequalities, reworking historical narratives, and enhancing environmental and outdoor options, the arrival of the Kitchens at Reynolds delivers a new kind of monument where brilliant, smart and highly practical architecture is a tool for enhancing community engagement and inspiring an optimistic future. **S**



A cyclist passes the new culinary school at 2500 Nine Mile Road. The Market@25th Street in the distance is a key component of the emerging North Church Hill food oasis.