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“Been There”

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Been There

One year later, four views of the Institute of Contemporary Art

Edward Lifson

Yes, I've been there. But only twice. Once last winter as a tourist, and once now that I've moved to Boston. Since I didn't live here when it opened, I missed most of the brouhaha. Perhaps I come to it with less baggage.

The first time I visited, I put less pressure on the building. I probably thought a little less about how it might function as a museum that I would visit regularly. I wanted an exciting architectural experience — a tourist's entertainment — something that would communicate to me in broad strokes about museums and cities and art.

It offers polite views of an already polite city. And maybe that's what makes it a Boston building.

That first time, I was somewhat disappointed. Anybody who works at a museum knows it's hard to get people in; the building can help seduce them. But as you approach the ICA through the parking lots — at least until the neighborhood is developed — you're met with a façade that belongs on an alley.

The large glass elevator, which could be a signature for the place, is hard to find and presents little drama. The “mediatheque” is a room of quiet contemplation, a sort of seaman's chapel. But its view down to the water — no earth or sky, no beginning or end, just “nothingness” — is so forced it makes you miss your freedom to explore. The concept is better than the experience. It's a strait-jacket of a room.

I barely remember the galleries from that first visit. They are plain, serviceable enough, but the spaces seem small, particularly for viewing contemporary art. I was gratified that the gift shop seemed almost hidden and that the café was not overdone. I loved the theater, with two glass walls featuring views of the sea and sky that connect performances to the life of the city. And I

loved the outside seating, under the cantilever, making nature and Boston the spectacle, open around the clock.

So now I am living here. I intend to visit the ICA often. I now need this same building to do more work for me — to work well as a museum. On my first visit as a resident, I was at once more pleased, and more disappointed.

Even with its curving contemporary form, the building still feels subdued. The wood that wraps around the building is purposely faded, like pre-washed denim. Nearly all surfaces are muted. Little inside the building sharpens my vision or my senses. Bland artificial light is cast too evenly in the galleries. Outside, the milky glass around the gallery level looks more like Target than like Cartier.

But I like the solidity of the place and its lack of arrogant geometries; the calmness of its few materials is handled well. This allows you to see art in a peaceful setting, even if it's not an exhilarating one. You can visit often and enjoy the ICA without being irritated. It offers polite views of an already polite city. And maybe that's what makes it a Boston building. ■

A former NPR correspondent and host of a Chicago Public Radio program on architecture and design, Edward Lifson is a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He blogs on architecture at www.edwardlifson.com.

Ross Miller

Are artists just big complainers? Ask local artists what they think about the ICA — as I did recently — and you'll get similar responses: great appreciation that this wonderful building exists, followed by gripes about the institution's current relationship to the local community.

Consider this context: the act of looking at artwork has been blown open by postmodernism and cultural relativism. The viewer is free to interpret meaning, independent of the original artist's intentions. Practicing artists similarly feel empowered to

look through their particular lens, then to scavenge and steal from current artmaking practices for their own work. This promotes feisty independence and strong opinions about artwork and any institution that displays it. This context is further shaped locally by the fact that many artists here make an active choice to live in Boston rather than New York. That decision may also contain a commitment to create work informed by a regional understanding of place, intellectual values, political ideals, even New England individuality. Artists also want relationships, connections, and personal interactions with critical local institutions.

The question becomes whether the ICA wants to be that institution for local artists. It's a question on the mind of many artists: "The ICA has never made much effort to engage with artists living in Boston. It has a reputation for showing work that might well be ordered off the pages of *Artforum* magazine." "The ICA went to Fort Point Channel never acknowledging that it was about to be neighbor to artists who had been there for years." "Most artists in the area think they have been 'cut out' again." "The opening event for artists was great. I have had no reason to go there since." "If the ICA can't really do more than it has in the past, it will remain marginal in the lives of the artists in the city. It is possible to exhibit work being made in this area along with national and the international stars... I'd like to see that happen."

Even with this desire for more engagement, most artists praise the gift that is the ICA building: "The building is magical: being in the overhanging video room feels like being inside a three-dimensional Edward Hopper painting, careening into the sea without proper grounding. Breathtaking." "The long seaward corridor is a wonderful respite from hard looking." "The building brings attention and excitement to contemporary art in Boston." "The achievement of raising funds and building a truly noteworthy building is a major accomplishment."

So desire is here, potential exists. An exquisite building sited near New England's largest working artist community is a start. In the past, through Vita Brevis and other programs, the ICA has demonstrated its commitment to local places and artists. Understandably, much of the new ICA's first year was devoted to stewarding its benefactors. At the beginning of its second year, many are wondering if the ICA will expand its commitment to

local and regional artists and find new and unexpected ways to engage them. Its choices now will influence the institution it will become and the degree to which it can become a catalyst that sparks a new level of excitement about creating and collecting contemporary art in Boston. ■

Ross Miller is a visual artist who creates art in public spaces and is currently designing a series of outdoor classrooms with the Boston Schoolyard Initiative. Quoted comments are from conversations with a number of artists and gallery owners.

Deborah Weisgall

The ICA hunkers down at the edge of the harbor. A cube of opaque panels, translucent panels, glimmers of clear glass, it invites simile. It looks like a sleek electronic toy, or an alien's dwelling. But it turned its back on the parking lot — and on my husband and me — like a stuck-up kid who thinks he's much cooler than you are. It put us off; it put us on edge.

We couldn't figure out how to get in. The entrance off to the left lacked even the romance of a stage door, so we walked around the building to the water side, to the wide boardwalk, the bleachers rising beside the harbor, the great cantilevered roof, the glass walls.

The architecture had opened up and became eloquent and wise, surprising and poetical. A cold front was blowing over; the edge of clouds cut diagonally across the view framed by the building. A sloop out for a late sail heeled in the wind. A plane took off, a plane landed, and the airport ferry crossed the gray harbor. On the far shore, Winthrop's small hill bristling with triple-deckers appeared to be a Cubist landscape. We saw familiar Boston with new clarity, aware of changing light across the sky and water, aware of geography: exposed to setting and place, marveling at it. The ICA building has elevated its site to art.

And maybe that was why it was still so difficult to find a way inside. We headed for a door set in the glass wall of the restaurant. With lingering resentment, I was sure that it would be locked, but it wasn't. We had something to eat, admired the view some more, and headed in. We came at the big art wall from the wrong angle, so it didn't make much of an impression, but the elevator to the fourth floor gallery was worth the journey. A glass rectangle, it rose through its own mechanics while revealing views of both the

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There was a time when Boston was abuzz about City Hall, too.

— Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA

inside of the building and the harbor outside; in a way it seemed a short tour of the building's core idea: a play on transparency. The galleries, with their concrete floors and moveable walls, were the only places you couldn't see through to the waterfront; they had the feeling of a garage, of a staging area, a temporary shifting space that freed us to take the ICA's collection as part of the flux, too. Quite an achievement: the architecture had jolted us and made us receptive; it lifted a barrier of reticence between viewer and art, a barrier that we might not have been aware of until it was gone.

Transparency leads to immediacy, and the building constantly reminded us of the site. The water was everywhere we looked. It had a gallery of its own, lined with benches on which to sit and look out at the harbor. The computer room tapered into a long window framing the infinite patterns of waves: a screen-saver — or a work of art.

We stayed all afternoon. The ICA exudes an active intelligence; it's much the coolest building around. It frames possibility and change; it's a study in scale, in presence and reticence, balancing bravado and decorum. And it has strong ideas about how we should see. Of course it would refuse to pay attention to a parking lot. ■

Deborah Weisgall writes about the arts for *The New York Times* and other publications. Her novel *The World Before Her* will be published by Houghton Mifflin in 2008.

Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA

It's 8PM on a dark October night. The Red Sox, playing tonight, are down 3-1 in the American League playoffs and *still* the ICA is alive with people. The energy is palpable, and I actually overhear teenagers asking each other out loud: "What do you think that means?" If a museum does no more than this, it has succeeded.

It's exciting to have a building that people are excited about.

Standing out there on that deck with the big gallery cantilevered over my head, I feel the building reaching out to the harbor. The gesture is wonderful and extraordinary enough that you don't need to be fluent in contemporary architectural discourse or even an architect to appreciate this building. And for the current case of Modern architecture in Boston, that's a refreshing change.

Think about it: How many Boston buildings do we have — really — that acknowledge the water in a big way? The New

England Aquarium was first, in the 1960s; as it put the fish in tanks (instead of nets), it established the waterfront as a public destination and place for dramatic architectural expression. Similarly the JFK Library in the 1970s, Rowes Wharf in the 1980s, and the Moakley Courthouse in the 1990s each demonstrated an increasingly civic attitude towards Boston's evolving waterfront while declaring Boston's place in the contemporary architectural scene. As part of the ICA's lineage, each of these projects expresses an architectural and urban vitality, albeit one cloaked in increasingly conservative garments. Until the ICA.

What's distressing about the ICA is how fleeting its vital moment may be. I can't help but wonder what will happen when the city grows up around this building.

On the harbor side, there's a certain contemplative magic that will be lost when, instead of peering down through the giant oculus of the "mediatheque" onto water, we instead have a direct line on big snazzy yachts in an exclusive marina. Which, if the renderings featured in the Fallon Company's website and ads are to be believed, is exactly what's on its way.

On the land side, the illuminated channel glass looks sexy, especially at night, hovering four stories above the half-empty parking lots. But as hip as it is, it's really little more than an elegant billboard. Unlike other museums in North Atlantic cities (such as Steven Holl's Kiasma in Helsinki), here the institution does not benefit from the material's properties: the translucent glass wall neither filters light into the space nor reflects interior activity out toward the city. Even as a billboard, it's already been upstaged by WGBH's new, ever-changing digital face to the Mass Pike. Regardless, it'll be hard to see once it's hidden by the tall new buildings now on their way.

As the parking lots give way to buildings, the focus will shift to the sidewalk experience, and that, sadly, is the most bleak. Soon the ICA's back side will be the front wall of a sidewalk, defining the pedestrian experience of a new neighborhood. Though the materials are finely detailed and definitely of our time, are the metal panels, opaque glass, stairway-to-nowhere, and one-way exit doors all that different from the blank face at the base of City Hall?

There was a time when Boston was abuzz about City Hall, too. ■

Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA, is the principal of Schneider Studio in Boston.