



Left: *John Hancock Tower*, 2006. Right: *The Reverend Professor Peter J. Gomes*, 2008. Both photos © Peter Vanderwarker.

Vanderwarker’s Pantheon: Minds and Matter in Boston

Boston Athenæum
February 11–May 2, 2009

Sometimes the essential is revealed in something as secondary as a subtitle. Juxtaposing his long-time subject — the buildings that give form to Boston — with a new one — the people who are giving form to Boston — architectural photographer Peter Vanderwarker reminds us that extraordinary people create extraordinary places: the “minds and matter” of Boston.

In his current exhibition at the Boston Athenæum, brilliant, large-format images of buildings and people are intermingled and hung at eye-level. A statement by the sitter accompanies each portrait. The adjacency of buildings to humans brings each to greater life than if they were shown apart from one another.

Among the “matter,” we find a series of images of the John Hancock tower. Seen in slender profile at different times of day,

it’s an ode to a building that transcends its architecture. Among the “minds” we find: James Carroll, who looks us in the eye, saying “I am a writer . . . to be a servant of the word is an honor.” Renata von Tscherner, shown swimming in the Charles River she has worked so hard to restore. John Sears, surrounded by his books, who says, “I have tried to find and promote quality, excellence, and beauty.” Vanderwarker invites his human subjects to be fully present, much as he has learned to capture the essence of a building.

In this time of enormous uncertainty, Vanderwarker presents us with a vision of a city, human and built, that can elevate and inspire us to demand the best of architecture and to work for the best as citizens.

[Brigid Williams AIA](#) is a principal of [Hickox Williams Architects](#) in Boston.

Detour: Architecture and Design along 18 National Tourist Routes in Norway

National Building Museum
Washington, DC
January 28–May 25, 2009

Ah, to be Norwegian. It’s a bit like being Swedish, but with scads of North Sea oil money. Those geographically gifted Norse, with their national design policy advocating Modernism, know how to furnish a scenic highway for the 21st century: Think WPA as administered by Sverre Fehn, a remarkable juxtaposition of the rural and the urbane, informed by an overriding love of honest materiality.

This distinctive, diminutive show serves as an ideal palate cleanser between some of the Building Museum’s more substantive offerings. Photographs and models document overlooks, bridges, benches, observation decks, and lavatories that contribute minimally and gracefully to their breathtaking surroundings, some more successfully than others, but all in ways that make you wish you were there. That wish becomes an empty-chested longing as you watch, through brass binoculars, the artfully edited introductory film. The terrible beauty of the landscape almost immediately eclipses the architecture. And that’s precisely the point.

[Jeff Speck AICP, LEED AP](#) is the principal of [Speck & Associates](#) in Washington, DC, and the former director of design at the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).

Photo courtesy [Todd Saunders/Tommie Wilhelmsen, Vegar Moen](#), and the [National Tourist Routes Project](#).





< Archisuit, Los Angeles, 2005. © Sarah Ross. Action no. 38: Foamy Velour Suits Challenge Authority.

Actions: What You Can Do With the City

Canadian Centre for Architecture

Montreal

November 26, 2008–April 19, 2009

www.cca-actions.org

If many Modernist buildings are now literally crumbling, the reputation of Modernism generally has proved less friable. With its splendid hubris, Modernism remains a popular target for architectural polemic. The exhibition *Actions: What You Can Do With the City* positions itself squarely against — if not architectural Modernism *per se* — what Modernism has come to represent. The declaration of war comes in the exhibition's introduction: "We

can no longer rely on the canonical tools of 'Modern' planning when designing and managing our urban space." In response to this putative failure, *Actions* presents "99 actions that instigate positive change in contemporary cities around the world."


In addition to six galleries, the exhibition comprises a multimedia website and a catalogue. The gallery space attempts to organize the *Wunderkammer* diversity of the "actions" into eight quixotic categories: Choose, Clue, Friction, Go, Guerilla, Plan Smarter, Share, and Low Effort. The exhibition deploys an impressive array of media, including videos, drawings, photographs, sound recordings, and objects; each "action" is accompanied by a brochure resembling an underground newspaper. The website allows visitors to participate by submitting their own "actions." The catalogue offers a number of interpretive essays. As a group, the essays offer unflagging optimism, but no original insights into the political dimension of architecture; they also show an unfortunate inclination toward the tendentious and self-congratulatory.


Notwithstanding the attempt to frame

the exhibition as a report from the front of design's guerilla war against Modernism, the "actions" themselves exude a spirit of exuberant whimsy rather than earnest idealism. It is difficult to see, for example, how wearing or using a "Roller Suit" (basically a plastic-and-steel exoskeleton covered with roller-skate wheels) will "instigate positive change" in the sense implied. Still, in turning all hard urban surfaces into runways, the suit provides élan for any imagination willing to see possibility rather than imprisonment in our Modern concrete jungles. *Actions* showcases the power of design to unleash imagination, thereby revealing the profound truth that our cities contain untapped potential for play, work, and justice. Despite the curators' activist rhetoric and emphasis on planning, the exhibition itself suggests that our Modern cities may be fine as they are — it may be our own habits of thought that most urgently need reinvention.


Jonathan Powers is a PhD candidate in the history and theory of architecture at McGill University.

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