

# UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



## JUST ONE LOOK

### The North Easton railroad station

**Let's start with the arches.** There are five of them—and they make the little railroad station in the village of North Easton, Massachusetts, designed by H.H. Richardson and completed in 1884, one of the most powerful works of architecture in New England. Four big arches puncture the thick granite walls of the building, flooding light into the waiting rooms. The fifth arch stands by itself in front of the station, legs spread, tautly balanced, bearing lightly the high-shouldered roof of the porte cochere.

After the arches, what you remember best is the roof. Richardson loved roofs almost as much as he loved arches. The gray slate roof of the North Easton station folds and refolds itself over the volumes of the building. The slates wrap themselves over long dormer windows; they extend out as wide sheltering eaves, held up by spiky diagonal wood struts.

Richardson's buildings always feel alive in this way, pulsing with energy. The station's walls of pinkish granite are roughly textured and laid in a crazy quilt of large and small rectangular blocks, drawing the eye to trace ever-changing variations of pattern, color, shadow, and light. Underneath the big arched windows, the stone bulges out into broad benches, equally pleasing to look at and to sit on. Some details are ferociously

archaic: the ends of beams carved into snarling wolves' heads. Other details are precociously modern: the ticket taker's window, a doubly curving grid of glass panes that evokes the surging movements of the trains.

Richardson's arches at North Easton are symbolic; the railroad station provides a passage between different worlds. When you stand under the porte cochere, you see a bucolic New England landscape: a meadow and a pond, with thick woods beyond. You are looking at the private estates of Richardson's clients, the Ameses, a family of innovative and successful industrialists. Walk around the station and you'll see, right across the tracks, the source of their money: a complex of granite factory buildings. This is the Ames Shovel Works, where, at the time of the Civil War, 60 percent of the world's shovels were made. Shovels led to trains; the Ameses went on to play a central role in the creation of the transcontinental railroad. In this little building, Richardson aligned his architectural skills with the primal energies of modern society.

Great architecture requires inspired clients. The train station is one of five buildings in North Easton designed by Richardson; they are accompanied by landscapes by Frederick Law Olmsted,

sculptures by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and stained glass by John La Farge. The Ameses' continuing stewardship has helped preserve this remarkable ensemble. When the trains stopped running in the 1960s, a family member bought the disused station and donated it to the local historical society; the society has preserved the building, using it to display paintings, photographs, maps, and other artifacts. In 2008, when there was a threat to demolish the Shovel Works, the entire community, including several Ameses, united around a successful plan to redevelop the complex as mixed-income housing.

The power of the North Easton railroad station goes beyond the quality of its design. The building, and the village around it, are a living reminder of how great architecture gets made, how it can be preserved, and how it can adapt itself to new uses for the future.

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**JAY WICKERSHAM FAIA** is writing a history of the work H.H. Richardson did for the Ames family.

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#### ABOVE

East façade of the Old Colony Railroad Station, North Easton, Massachusetts, by H.H. Richardson. Photo: Daderot/Creative Commons

## The Other Architect

Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

Through April 10, 2016

**Architecture has long been** unable to decide whether it is a technical discipline, concerned with the application of mathematical truths, or an aesthetic discipline, concerned with the evocation of human feelings. *The Other Architect* refreshingly rejects the terms of this debate, defining architecture “as an original site for the production of ideas,” with exhibits that showcase recent instances of such production.

The exhibition comprises 21 case studies in which architects explicitly generated ideas, not buildings. Architectural Detective Agency’s corner displays beautiful sketchbooks, used during its survey of historical buildings in Tokyo. At the next table, recordings of Design-A-Thon’s televised charettes, which broadcast architectural thinking into America’s living rooms. And in the next room copies of Architecture Machine Group’s hierarchical schematics of our concept of *house*, which manage to be both insightful and foolish. If the exhibition is somewhat unfocused, it is also persuasive in arguing for the teeming inventiveness of architects.

The most compelling case studies feature original graphic representations, whether sketches, diagrams, matrices, or maps. Giving an implicit nod to the derivation of the English word *design* from the Italian word *disegno* (“drawing”), the exhibition suggests that the skill of drawing is the great engine of architectural thinking. The most consequential ideas on display incline strongly toward the civic, so that the exhibition argues for the public quality of architectural thinking. If our increasingly image-obsessed and private-minded culture desperately needs more big thinking, *The Other Architect* makes out architecture to be just the kind we need.

**JONATHAN POWERS** holds a PhD in architectural history and theory from McGill University and teaches humanities at Champlain College in St-Lambert, Quebec.



### THIS PAGE

Installation views of *The Other Architect*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, 2015. Photo: © CCA

## MATTER OF COURSE

## “Women in Design” fall lecture series

University of Massachusetts

**It’s an interesting question:** How are women faring in architecture after successive waves of supposed workplace upheavals? The lecture series “Women in Design,” sponsored by the architecture department of the University of Massachusetts (UMass), Amherst, took a few steps toward an answer.

First, some facts. “Architecture is a man’s game,” *Architect* magazine wrote in late 2012. At that time, only 16 percent of the American Institute of Architects’ membership was female. (The number is slightly higher now.) Women make up about half of enrolled architecture students but account for fewer than 20 percent of firms’ principals and partners.

“Out in the field there is a huge gap” between men and women, according to professor Caryn Brause, who organized the series. “Even lining up eight speakers for the series—four in the fall and four in the spring—has proved something of a challenge.”

Brause could have recruited all the speakers from her own campus. Eight of the department’s 11 full-time faculty members are women. It is no accident, as the Marxists used to say, that the all-girl band in the architecture department has commissioned an innovative Design Building from the Boston firm Leers Weinzapfel Associates, whose two founding principals are women.

But I digress. I heard two of UMass’ four fall speakers in this series. In addition, Karrie Jacobs, the founding editor of *Dwell*, sent me a copy of her lecture, “What Is a House?” based in part on editing the magazine; partly on material from her 2006 book, *The Perfect \$100,000 House*; and also from her role as a residential client. Jacobs and her husband commissioned a home from architect Mark Sofield, whom *Dwell* had lionized in a famous 2002 cover story, “America’s Coolest Neighborhood,” about Sofield’s work in the planned community of Prospect, Colorado.

Jacobs waxed sardonic about being on the receiving end of the architect-client relationship, noting that she and her husband are “building a house that is twice as big as my perfect \$100,000 and roughly five times as expensive.”

What about women in design? Jacobs’ talk included shout-outs to architect Yumiko Foust, kit home constructor Rocio Romero, and Alabama housing activist Pam Dorr, who figured out how to provide \$20,000 homes for impoverished widows living on Social Security.

UMass architecture professor Sigrid Miller Pollin FAIA, the series’ third lecturer, manages her own studio, with a significant track record in residential and commercial projects on both the West and East coasts. Miller Pollin is also an accomplished artist and interior designer. Her residential work, which seemed self-consciously “Modern” rather than original, didn’t blow me away. But then again, I’m the lecture critic, not the architecture critic.

Some of Miller Pollin’s most interesting work has sprung up on the UMass campus: the cedar-side Gordon Hall, built in 2003, and Crotty Hall, now being built across the street from



Gordon. The Crotty site is extraordinarily narrow and long—Miller Pollin called it a “Slim Jim” profile—raising the bar for creating academic office spaces and meeting areas inside.

Victoria Rospond AIA and Lea Cloud AIA, founders and principals of New York City–based CDR Studio Architects, delivered the final lecture of the fall, joking that their third partner, Jon Dreyfous AIA, couldn’t participate “because of the chromosomal imperatives of this lecture series.” Dreyfous was in Hawaii instead of frigid Granola Valley, so no one felt sorry for him.

CDR has an impressive track record. Rospond and Cloud designed the famous Hook and Ladder 8 in Tribeca, better known as the *Ghostbusters* firehouse for its role in the 1984 movie. More recently, they built a fireboat house on the Hudson for the Fire Department of New York, and Audi commissioned them to design a series of showroom-warehouses across the United States. “Does that deal include free cars?” I asked. Apparently not.

Their lecture focused on their Governor’s Cup Pavilion, installed on New York’s Governor’s Island during the summer of 2014. More art installation than building, the gossamer shelter was assembled using 30,000 (disposed) plastic cups, with the help of more than a hundred volunteers who sewed the cups together, and \$20,000 of crowdsourced funding. The core building unit was a six-cup cell, which proved to be surprisingly strong. The Pavilion included a plastic cup-constructed bench, which easily handled the weight of the visitors who chose to sit on it.

Rospond and Cloud showed pictures of children yanking at the Pavilion’s “pillars” and gamboling under its transparent overhang. “This is an example of a piece of artwork that became a community of interaction,” Cloud said. “It was a community created by art.”

Women in design? Whatever the question is, the answer is yes. Now it’s time for the architecture profession to catch up.

**ALEX BEAM** writes a column for *The Boston Globe* and is working on a book about Vladimir Nabokov. “Matter of course” visits exceptional architecture classes at New England schools.

**ABOVE**

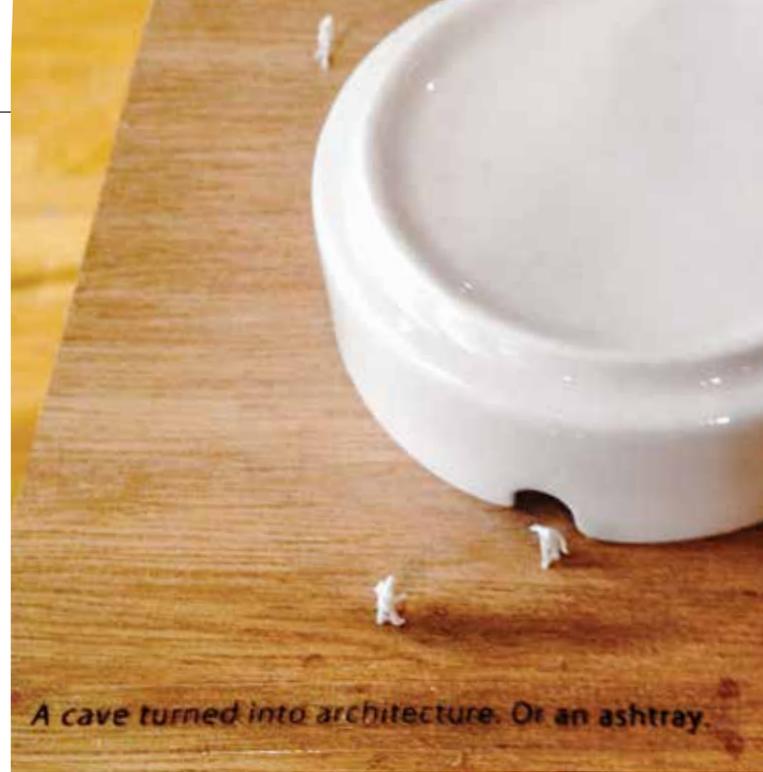
A tape-measure beam loops around trees, forming a serpentine canopy filled with lacy constellations of cups, at the Governor’s Cup Pavilion in New York, by CDR Studio Architects. Photo: John Muggenborg

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**CONSIDERED**

## **Chicago Architecture Biennial**

As 2015 drew to a close, the energy in Chicago was palpable. Everywhere you glanced, there were stark reminders of the city's seat as the capital of American architecture: Thousands streamed in and out of the Cultural Center, where Norman Kelley adorned windows with vinyls depicting glazing patterns and window styles; teenagers studied Jeanne Gang's proposed community policing through design; millennials giggled as they located the mini figure entering the archway of an overturned ashtray as if it were a Roman stadium; and families explored a prototype of a house clad in nipa palm leaves that can be built in three hours. This past fall, the birthplace of the skyscraper reignited optimism in the transformative power of architecture—shades of 1885.



**POLLY CARPENTER FAIA** is a senior program manager and director of Learning by Design at the BSA Foundation.

**LEFT**

Norman Kelley's *Chicago, How Do You See?* used large vinyls pasted over the Cultural Center's windows to suggest the city's architectural heritage.

**ABOVE**

Sou Fujimoto's *Architecture is Everywhere* featured a collection of found objects that were turned into representations of larger ideas with the inclusion of scale figures and accompanying enigmatic statements. Photos: Polly Carpenter FAIA



SEEN

## MBTA Train 163, Lynn Marsh, Massachusetts

**All the photographs** in my “No Transfer” gallery were made from the window of a bus or train. Starting out of frustration with working on the street in Boston—a difficult place for a street photographer—the bus series grew into an absorbing project. Working from a moving bus or train offered new challenges, how quickly I needed to work, the right seat, dirty and tinted windows. And I really liked the challenge. Almost immediately something different began to happen; I was responding to the first impulse before my mind started to run the process of “making a good picture.” The images in the series were made mostly in the Boston area and more recently in Los Angeles. They happen in a fraction of a moment. I see something and respond; there is no thinking involved. Making pictures in this way offers no second chances or time to consider anything, only perception followed by a response with a camera. Photographer Henry Wessel described this quality as being “outside your mind, your eyes far ahead of your thoughts.”

I am still learning.

**MICHAEL HINTLIAN** heads the documentary photography department at the New England School of Photography in Boston. *Digging: The Workers of Boston's Big Dig*, his photo documentary of the Central Artery/Tunnel Project in Boston, was published in 2004.

## Black in Design

Harvard Graduate School of Design  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
October 9 and 10, 2015

**Whose role is it to build** “just and equitable spaces at every scale,” and how do you do it?

In 2015, a year in which a national conversation on race was reignited with renewed urgency, the African American Student Union at the Harvard Graduate School of Design provided a platform for a dialogue on race and design that was decades overdue. Designers working at every scale—from beds to buildings to cities—highlighted the contributions of black architects, urban planners, and interior designers, and they created a vibrant portrait of contemporary design practice. The vibe in the standing-room-only auditorium transcended identity politics.

Perhaps more important than product and place were discussions of process. American cities face enduring, extraordinary tensions around who has access to power and who is making what decisions and for whom. Even in cities like Boston—cities with enlightened, open leadership—there is a residue of distrust and fear, hardened by years of neighborhoods or audiences being ignored, misunderstood, or feeling excluded entirely from the planning process. These tensions become especially acute today as housing costs soar.

This sense of alienation was underscored two months later at a daylong discussion “Design, Development, and Democracy,” which dove headlong into these tensions. Architects and planners, community advocates and activists, and academics and city officials focused a series of discussions on how we might drive a more inclusive development process in our city.

“I’ve been fighting the [Boston Redevelopment Authority] for 30 years,” charged Chinese Progressive Association’s Lydia Lowe, by means of introduction. The longtime Chinatown organizer shared the stage at the Bruce C. Bolling Municipal Building in Roxbury with BRA board member Ted Landsmark ASSOC. AIA and South End Technology Center’s Mel King, frequent collaborators who have tackled equity issues for decades but who found themselves on opposite sides of the current power equation.

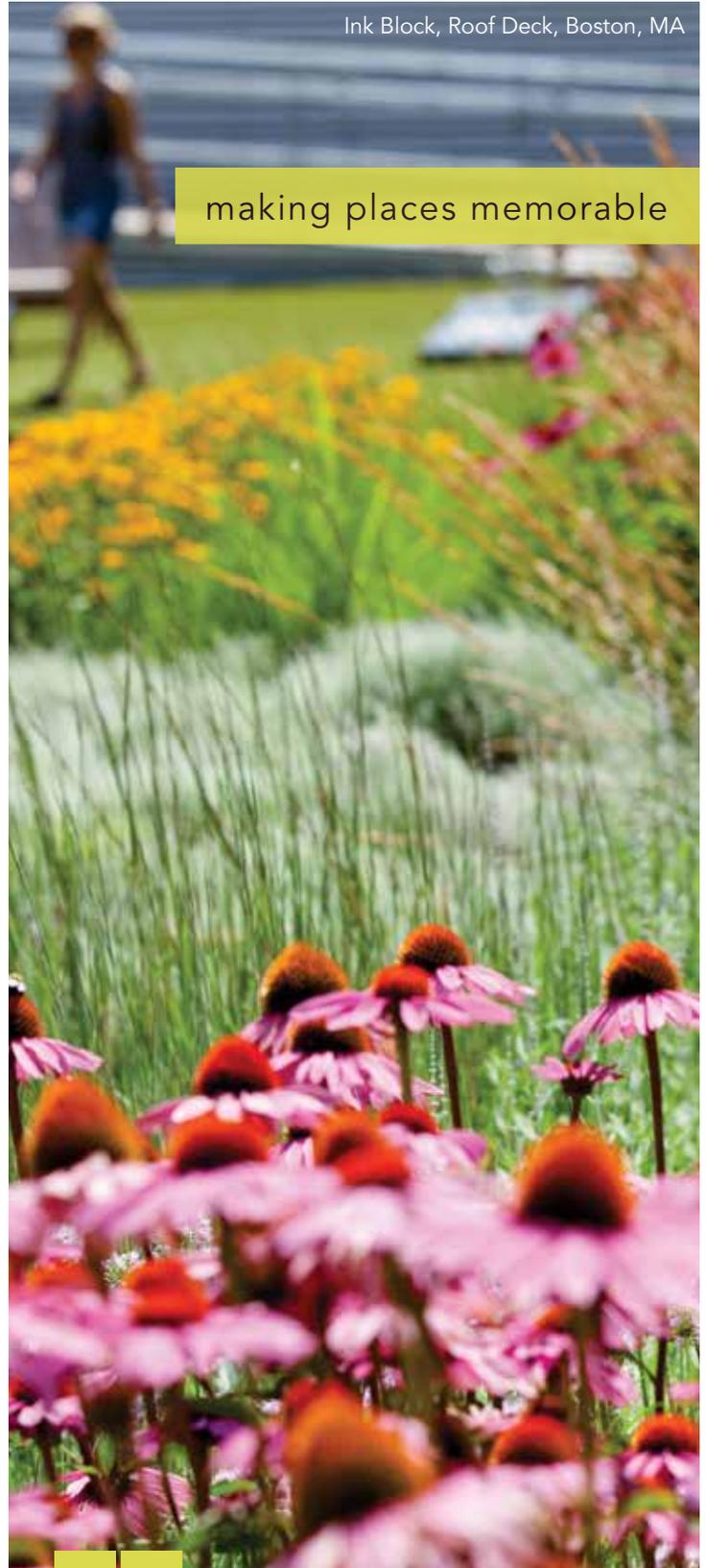
In a heated discussion, at times raw and deeply felt, the vast gap between decision makers in power positions who are striving to do well and the on-the-street activists who feel that their voices are muted and their concerns are ignored, was palpably evident.

If we hope to shape an equitable city, what will it take to change both reality and perception, especially attitudes several generations in the making?

**GRETCHEN RABINKIN AIA** leads the Community Design Resource Center at the BSA Foundation and is civic design director at the Boston Society of Architects.

 **MORE ONLINE**

The Black in Design conference is posted on YouTube.



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