

## LEISURE &amp; ARTS

## Architecture's Best-Kept Secrets

An A-List of Celebrities Gets All Of the Attention, but Others Are Doing Daring Work, Too

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**A**RCHITECTURE IS HOT, hot, hot, its international stars pursued by the leaders of fashion and culture, its buildings hyped as settings of status and style. In a phenomenon known as the "Bilbao effect," for Frank Gehry's wildly popular Spanish branch of the Guggenheim Museum, older cities are seeking iconic architectural images for identity and renewal. People are flocking to places that few would have visited before.

The trouble is that everyone wants the same architects and the same buildings. For those of us who have spent a good part of our lives telling anyone who will listen that architecture is the mother of the arts, the one art we can't escape and which affects us all, its emergence into fashionable world prominence evokes mixed feelings. It proves the old adage that you shouldn't wish for anything too hard or you may get it. "Trophy buildings" by "signature architects" are today's status items, a cynical diminution of a great art, coined, no doubt, by some upscale real-estate developer.

From my point of view there is a lot wrong with this picture. I admire these buildings, and their architects, as much as anyone. I have worked hard for their recognition in the civilian world. And while there's not yet one of these eye-catching structures on every block (a bad idea, anyway), many are landmark designs by exceptional architects who have waited a long time for recognition and success.

But there is something missing here, and it is an entire generation. The blind reliance on a restricted and redundant A-list forfeits the talents of a bumper crop of brilliant younger architects pushing the creative edge. Admired and closely watched by their colleagues, they are the best-kept secret in the profession. Those in their 30s and 40s, deep into computerized design, are working with new forms and ideas. There are some already in their 50s, unsung but with impressive construction records. All are involved in a revolution in theory and practice.

It is a truism that architecture is not a young man's game. Clients who invest large amounts of money want a track record and a proven product, preferably from someone who has done the same thing before. The young and the challenging, with demonstrated ability but lesser star power, are not called or commissioned by those who, ironically, fancy themselves poised on architecture's cutting edge. (Listing them here would suggest outrageous favoritism and take up the rest of this column. Believe me, it's not hard to find out if you don't play the celebrity-dart board game; there are professional sources.)

The chosen few everyone has heard about must meet themselves coming and going around the world. One hopes and expects that, like Frank Lloyd Wright, they will still be shaking new designs out of their sleeves in their 90s. The leaders have moved from being the young Turks of the avant garde to *un certain âge*: Frank Gehry is 72, and Richard Meier, Norman Foster and Richard Rogers have all passed the mid-60s mark. Tadao Ando is 60; Rem Koolhaas is catching up at 57.

Members of a younger group—Santiago Calatrava, Zaha Hadid and Steven Holl—have entered their 50s. Mr. Holl is a growing presence, and Mr. Calatrava, like

his spectacular buildings, is flying high, but Ms. Hadid's equally stunning but more subtly and artfully complex work has been disgracefully undercommissioned. This is also true of Thom Mayne, already 57. The building committees of major institutions either cannot visualize the more daring and difficult work (a genuine problem, since computer imaging makes drawings increasingly hard to read) or are just too cautious for the leap of faith true patronage requires. Ultimately, our proud patrons are a pretty conservative lot.

Fortunately, there is an occasional breakthrough. The venerable Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Conn., has leapt into the 21st century with the Dutch firm of UN Studio Van Berkel and Bos, best known for buildings that resemble twists on a Möbius strip, as part of its planning team. The Brooklyn Academy of Music has commissioned Mr. Koolhaas—whom neither age nor outrageous success will tame or

Office dA of Boston was established 10 years ago by Monica Ponce de Leon, from Venezuela, and Nader Tehrani, from Iran, both Harvard architecture graduates; experimenting with computer-expanded design possibilities of materials and structure, they have transformed a small interior into a luminous sacred space for a chapel at Northeastern University. Studic Granda of Reykjavic—founded in 1987 by Icelander Margrét Hardardóttir and Steve Christer, a Brit—has built that capital's suave (dare one say cool?) City Hall and art museum. Fifty-eight-year-old Peter Zumthor of Switzerland has been practicing longer; although he cultivates the disarming role of simple artisan-architect, he is responsible for some of the most radical buildings of our time. His sophisticated, demanding, exquisite structures of rigidly reductive minimalism, in which every detail has enormous aesthetic and emotional power, create their own world of Zen-like,

concentrated beauty—an immutable perfectionism that probably scares off as many clients as it attracts.

In other words, the ICA is a risk-taker; the museum is putting its money where its contemporary art interests logically lead. And that is where changes are taking place that are redefining how we build. It is no accident, then, that the ICA's decision, announced recently with remarkable dispatch, gave the commission to the fourth contenders, the wife-husband team of Elizabeth Diller, 46, and Ricardo Scofidio, 66—not the youngest, but the most unconventional of the group. Their original, witty, provocative work exploits computer and video technology and incorporates elements of conceptual and performance art for solutions of seductive visual and intellectual appeal. It's not that they haven't been around; clients have just been slow on the learning curve.



The wife-and-husband team of Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio designed this housing complex in Gifu, Japan.

stale—along with Diller+Scofidio, architects who cross the boundaries of theory, technology and several of the arts; one would expect no less from Harvey Lichtenstein, who, until his recent retirement, led an institution that consistently endorsed the new and experimental.

The Museum of Modern Art has jumped boldly into the future with Michael Maltzan and Lindy Roy for special projects in its Queens location, while its tortured 53rd Street landmark is being thoughtfully reinvented by Yoshio Taniguchi.

But perhaps the most assured move has been made by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which is planning that city's first new art museum in almost a century, to be built on a spectacular waterfront site in a critical development area. Under director Jill Medvedow, the ICA put together a short list mercifully free of most of the usual suspects. Of the four competing firms, two were unfamiliar even to many of the professionals attending the presentations.

Their "Blur Building," a temporary exhibition structure to be built on a lake in Switzerland, is an oval enclosure of mist formed by a system of pipes on a metal frame. Visitors will fill out a questionnaire and be given computer-primed white raincoats that blush a rosy pink as programmed mutual interests are revealed; their wearers can then proceed together to an international "water bar" to drink the waters of the world. In the real world, Ms. Diller and Mr. Scofidio are responsible for the freshest design on the New York scene; the Brasserie in the Seagram Building makes the latest restaurant overreachers look distinctly old hat.

Today's museum does more than attract tourists and raise the tax base. It is a center of city life that also functions as a setting for a global cultural exchange and expanded experiences above and beyond its traditional role as a container for art. Young architects at home in a virtual new world understand this. So does the ICA. The freshness of the Diller-Scofidio vision can add surprise and delight to Boston's venerable charms.