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## IN A FORMER FACTORY, SPACE MEETS ART IN SUPERB CONVERGENCE

**Author(s):** Robert Campbell, Globe Correspondent **Date:** August 3, 2003 **Page:** N1 **Section:** Arts / Entertainment

BEACON, N.Y. - "A good critic is one who describes his adventures among masterpieces," said the French writer Anatole France.

Masterpieces don't come along very often in architecture. Architecture is complicated. Many people and many issues are involved in creating a building. Too many things can go wrong. But now and then, the miracle happens. It's happened again, here in this former industrial town on the banks of the Hudson River. The new **Dia**:Beacon art museum, which opened this spring, is an architectural masterpiece.

Nobody who walks in the front door of this museum is likely ever to forget the experience. From outside, the entry looks like a walled-up tomb. It feels that way inside too, dark and small. You're

pulled through it by a kind of tropism as you move toward a glow of light you see ahead of you. Then, as you enter the museum proper, space and light burst outward and upward in a kind of white explosion. You're in a space the size of a football field with, far in the distance at the end of the building, a single window filled with the greenery of the outdoors. It's magical in a childlike way, as if you have passed through the children's dark closet into the land of Narnia.

The drama of entry is no accident. **Dia**:

Beacon's director, Michael Govan, told his designer he didn't want a messy entry. "No banners, no ticketing, no cafe, no bookstore," Govan recalls saying. Because the entry is so minimal, the outdoors feels like the real lobby. You pass from outdoors to museum space with an unexpected suddenness, almost a shock. (There are a pleasant cafe and shop, but they're in a separate building across a courtyard.)

The museum space itself is amazing. This has to be the only art museum anywhere that has no artificial lighting. None at all. The only light is the light that pours through the skylights. In winter, when days are short, the museum simply closes down at four p.m. As clouds cross the sky, you're aware of slight changes in the color and intensity of the light inside, changes that are noticeable enough to preserve a sense that the light is living, but never so noticeable that they distract you. With the possible exception of two museums by the American architect Louis Kahn, this is the best light I have ever experienced in an art museum. You have to applaud the courage of **Dia**:Beacon in taking such a risk.

What makes the greatness of **Dia**:

Beacon so fascinating is that it's a collaboration over time. The building was originally constructed in 1929 not as a museum but as an industrial plant. It was used for printing boxes for the National Biscuit Company. Abandoned and empty for a dozen years, it was renovated for **Dia** by an artist, Robert Irwin, who worked with some young New York architects who call themselves OpenOffice.

When you stop to think about it, there's not so much difference between a printing plant and an art museum. Both require good light. The original architect, whom nobody has ever heard of, was named Louis N. Wirshing Jr. Wirshing devised a roof made of skylights - 34,000 square feet of skylights - which flood the space with light that feels like a palpable presence. Irwin and Govan had the courage and good sense to leave the building alone. Its purity is unprecedented. Almost everything has been painted in one of three shades of white. There are no visible lights, signs, ducts, sprinkler heads, or other detritus to distract you from the art. Even the guards, for once, are inconspicuous and don't annoy you by barking on their walkie-talkies.

**Dia**:Beacon is different from conventional museums in other ways, too. The **Dia** Art Foundation acts as patron to a small number of artists, all of whom were active in one short period during the 1970s and early 1980s. At the museum, the work of each artist - there are 24 of them - occupies a separate large space. The installations are intended to be permanent. Some were created by the artist especially for this museum, others were put together by the curators, but in both cases they are, in principle, imperishable. Except in a few out-of-the-way areas, there will be no changing exhibits.

The other thing that's different here is scale. **Dia** likes artists who think big. The result is an astonishing interaction between the bigness of the art and the bigness of the space. At **Dia**:Beacon, you don't really, for the most part, look at the art. What you do instead is experience space that has been intensified by the presence of art. The museum and its contents merge to become one single great work of art. Of course, you can walk up to the artworks and enjoy them in detail, too, but the primary experience is spatial.

Everything Irwin and his collaborators have done here is a success. Irwin hasn't always been successful. He designed a garden at the Getty Center in Los Angeles that was accurately described, by a noted landscape architect, as "ignorant and hideous."

But at **Dia**, nothing goes awry. The outdoor areas are as carefully designed as the interior. The parking lot is a delight of hawthorn and crabapple trees. You leave it by driving toward, not away from, the museum, then turning aside as if to wave good-bye while you listen to the rustle of your tires on the elegant pavers. Those pavers are porous, allowing Irwin to bleed the grass into the paved areas in subtle ways. A wooden path leads out through elegant groves of hornbeams to a handsome deck with views of the mountains.

Indoors, Irwin's moves are subtle - as noted, he mostly leaves well enough alone - but they're critical. He deals with the need for emergency egress, for instance, by creating a kind of transept, like that of a cathedral, with glass doors into the landscape at both ends.

It's fun to compare **Dia**:

Beacon with Mass MoCA in North Adams, another huge art museum made from a former industrial complex. Both are good, but in entirely different ways. **Dia**:Beacon is finished, complete, perfect, changeless, with the symmetry and order of a classical building. The same works of art will grace the same spaces far into the future. Mass MoCA, by contrast, is messy, open-ended, and loose. Its exhibits change, its surfaces are rougher, its floor plan is more indeterminate. Its buildings feel as if they're free to grow and change in an organic way. (A metaphor for that organic changeableness is the fact that MoCA's famous upside-down trees, suspended in a courtyard, are gradually reversing themselves and starting to grow upwards.) One museum is timeless; the other will always be a work in progress.

There's one key question you can't avoid at **Dia**:Beacon. It's this: Just how is it that one of the great art museums in the world was created not by a famous signature architect of our own time, with all the resources of today's computers and other technologies, but by the little-known house architect of a biscuit company in the 1920s?

Why can't we, except in the rarest circumstances, do as well? With our sophistication, have we forgotten too many of the simple lessons of architecture?

Whatever the answer to those questions, and whatever your taste in art, **Dia**:

Beacon is a building you don't want to miss.

Robert Campbell can be reached at [camglobe@aol.com](mailto:camglobe@aol.com).