Structural Assets

Architectural exhibits rise in Harrisburg.

BY M. DIANE MCCORMICK

Thoughout history, says Cami Wissler-Thomas, humans have "designed structures to live in and to work in and have always enhanced them with visual arts." "Art and architecture," says the Art Association of Harrisburg president, "flow together."

This fall, Harrisburg’s art and architecture don’t just flow together but collide in joyful profusion through a groundbreaking partnership among the Central PA Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Art Association of Harrisburg, Historic Harrisburg Association and Susquehanna Art Museum.

Together, the four groups are presenting programs and exhibits showcasing historic and contemporary architecture. It began when SAM refurbished a classic bank building into its new Midtown home, which opened in January. The project included a large addition, not duplicating the bank design but building a 21st-century mirror to the original edifice.

"The SAM exhibit definitely conveys a vivid message about how old buildings can be transformed and may not have before, to come to a neighborhood that is growing, and care about not just tearing something down because it’s old but thinking about how you can use what is good there, and use additions to make it a workable space that people will thrive in."

“Art and architecture,” says the Art Association of Harrisburg’s involvement created a platform for “all kinds of wild and crazy interpretations” of architecture and structure in its exhibit, “Structures II,” says Wissler-Thomas. There are a whimsical found-objects rendering of the state Capitol, stainless steel sculptures, a “charming” sculpture of two floating squirrels, and a ming-hanbool’s nest construction titled “Christopher Wren” (get it? Look up for a little architectural history).

“Structures II” will be followed by “Architectural Visions,” an invitational exhibit where architects and artists show their skills in sculpture, photography, painting and other media. Wissler-Thomas hopes the shows—SAM and the others—open visitors’ eyes to the artistic value of architecture, "one of the highest forms of visual art because it combines the ability to draw and to see spatially and create three-dimensional reality on a huge scale."

“All these shows really show how artistic, how visually skilled these people are,” she says. “They don’t just work on a computer and come up with some model of blocks you stack up to make some building. They really have a huge visual sense.”

Any groups frequently collaborate in quiet fashion, but the joint architecture celebration puts “the fruits of our labor” before the public eye, says Wissler-Thomas.

“I would hope that the general public would come out with a more abiding appreciation for the beautiful architecture that surrounds them, and the feeling that it’s not something you just work in and live in,” she says. “It’s something you should look at and appreciate.”

For information on the exhibits and related events, including lectures, classes and walking tours, visit www.sqart.org, www.historicharrisburg.com and www.artmuseumhbg.org. Photos by Elizabeth Sox.