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Gehry Leaves the Risks to the Kids

By JULIE V. IOVINE

Miami Beach, Fla.

The words "art" and "precious" tend to find each other once a work by a recognized talent lands in the world—often regardless of the artist's own intentions. But doing something precious was clearly beside the point for world-renowned architect Frank Gehry when he designed the first purpose-built home for the New World Symphony, America's Orchestral Academy, which opens here on Tuesday. The academy—founded in 1988 and sometimes called "America's training orchestra"—had spent the past 22 years in a retrofitted Miami Deco movie palace a block away on Lincoln Road, a thriving outdoor pedestrian mall in South Beach.



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Ruder Finn/New World Symphony

The new home of the New World Symphony, designed by Frank Gehry.

The new six-story, glass and stucco-clad building fits into its immediate neighborhood, not that the surrounding parking lots have much personality. And nothing shouts "This way to the Gehry!"—although there are sculptural flourishes to be glimpsed on the structure's front and back, visible along a busy thoroughfare to the west and a now-closed side street to the east that passes directly in front. The best spot to view the New World Symphony structure will be from a city park also making its debut Tuesday, designed by Dutch landscape architects West 8. (The block-size park replaces a parking lot with a slightly rolling lawn of built-in seating and shapely trellises for bougainvillea.)

From there, the \$154 million building reveals itself to be a straightforward box faced with a heavy lattice of glass alongside a blank stretch of white. A wavy bit of sculpture and a box-shaped box office mark the entrance.

The clarity of the glass is meant to give views of all the action inside, both human and architectural—but on a clear afternoon, it was pretty hard to get a sense of the inside without pressing nose to glass; and even at night, at least from close up, the fancy awning interrupted views of the interior that may be best

enjoyed from somewhere midpark, as long as one of the newly installed full-grown trees doesn't stand in the way.

That slight opacity translates into more visual impact for visitors once they step inside. There, the atrium is crowded with a cacophony of shapes, a moment imaginatively akin—for this reporter, at least—to when Maurice Sendak's Max arrives among the riotously stomping Wild Things. There's a swoop of a white wall going up, hugged by a spiraling stair. A glimpse beyond shows a bridge crossing and more swoops, like echoes diminishing in scale. Closer by, a toque-shape bursts upward. It houses rehearsal space, and the expansive height is necessary to acoustically accommodate the sounds of instruments during practice.

In short, the entire jumble serves a lot of very practical purposes. Even the blue swish of titanium in the lobby that is a canopy for a long, glass-topped bar signals the central gathering space. "I wanted to put the money into the interior because it's a teaching building. It wasn't anything precious," said Mr. Gehry in a phone conversation last week. "The sculptural pieces inside are all stage sets; they can be changed over time. It's like a big warehouse. We took the first shot at it, but over the years they'd have the opportunity to knock out walls and do things." But while concrete floors (already scuffed), painted sheetrock, off-the-shelf hardware and some very Gehryesque plywood lockers all attest to the architect's sturdy pragmatism, chances are that the interior will be attentively preserved in the future.

Michael Tilson Thomas, founder and artistic director, asked Mr. Gehry to create an environment not only for the academy's highly selective fellowship program, which provides professional training for some 35 musicians selected annually out of about 1,000 applicants. Outreach to the community and classical-music lovers everywhere was of equal importance.

Thus the emphasis on transparency, from the facade to another glass wall just inside the atrium for viewing the doings in a large double-height space that is the primary teaching room for the orchestra as well as a place to invite the public for films, lectures and casual recitals. Students here will learn fast not to be shy about performing, no matter the stage of their proficiency. (On a recent visit, a French horn player sat huddled against a back wall practicing before a night rehearsal.)

Access to the main performance hall from an adjacent parking lot is via a second-level bridge that allows views of performers leaving the locker room and going backstage. Here and there, locked glass doors cut off passages so that it's possible to watch students, for instance, picking up their mail.

For the New World Symphony, technology has always been key to its educational reach. Mr. Thomas and musicians from afar have long taught via video-conferencing on a small television monitor set up on the stage of the old movie house. Now students will be able to interact by means of the most sophisticated webcasting available thanks to 17 miles of high-speed fiber-optic cable. Video monitors, editing suites, plasma screens and control panels abound and attest to the building's superior high-tech capabilities, but it all comes together most impressively in the main performance hall, a steep theater in the round—everyone is within 13 rows of the stage—with four satellite stages perched around the edges and 10 fixed and moveable robotic HD cameras.

Collaborating with Nagata Acoustics, which also worked on the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, Mr. Gehry draped the ceiling in curvilinear acoustical sails ready to catch a varied blast of projections, from commissioned videos and theatrical light shows to master-class lectures. Fourteen stage configurations are possible, and 247 of the 756 seats are retractable—making it possible to go from a full amphitheater-style orchestra stage to piano soloist or disco dance floor with relative ease.

The most daring technology is also the most public. A 7,000-square-foot projection field covers the stucco half of the front facade so that outdoor audiences can enjoy performances from the park, with sound transmitted through long, albeit clunky-looking speaker "arms" reaching deep into the grounds. It's a vast improvement over the jerry-built box speakers through which the New World Symphony used to pipe its concerts to the Lincoln Road Mall.

With such hardworking but generous gestures, Mr. Gehry underscores his intention to play to the occupants and frequenters of the New World Symphony campus rather than to architecture-gawkers. He has made certain that engaging with the building is an immersive experience and that regarding it just visually clearly misses much of the point.

Did Mr. Gehry take exciting risks at the New World Symphony? Not really. Has he created an environment where a new generation of musicians can take such chances? Absolutely.

Ms. Iovine is executive editor of the Architect's Newspaper.

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