

Have Architects Gone Mad?

JOHN SILBER CASTS A CRITICAL EYE ON
EGO-DRIVEN DESIGN BY CALEB DANILOFF

DURING HIS twenty-five years at the helm of Boston University and his seven years as chancellor, John Silber oversaw the transformation of BU's campuses. He led a robust building program that generated 13.7 million square feet of new, renovated, and remodeled space: classroom buildings, research and medical centers, a boathouse, a field house, residence halls, a 6,500-seat arena, and a fitness center. The son of an architect, Silber took a hands-on approach to all construction projects; he often surprised the architects and builders by reading specs and blueprints, he says, and at times challenging their plans. In 2002, he was named an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects.

In his new book, *Archi-*

itecture of the Absurd: How "Genius" Disfigured a Practical Art (Quantuck Lane, 2007), Silber (HON.'95) squares off against ego-driven architects who bust budgets and schedules and who place their artistic vision above the needs of clients and the people who will live and work in or near their creations. He points to Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles as an example: sunlight glinting off its steel curves has raised temperatures in nearby apartments by fifteen degrees. And just as Silber's book appeared last November, another Gehry building, the acclaimed Stata Center at MIT, became the subject of a lawsuit, with MIT charging that design flaws are to blame for cracks, leaks, and mold that began to

appear soon after the building's completion in 2004. (In an interview conducted shortly after the suit was filed, Gehry told the *New York Times* that some construction problems are inevitable in a complex design and that he believed the problems at the Stata Center were "fairly minor.")

YOU ADDRESSED THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS ON ART AND ARCHITECTURE SEVERAL YEARS AGO. WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO TURN THE TALK INTO A BOOK?

I thought the issues I raised were really important — to address the profession of architecture and remind architects it is a practical art and they are not pure artists. They are not sculptors or painters. They are architects, who use sculpture and painting, but it has to be for the interests and needs of the client.

The book is also directed to those who are responsible for hiring such architects, and it argues that they have a fiduciary responsibility to the institution for which they work. Nearly all of these celebrated architects have done their more outrageous work for 501(c)(3) corporations — for universities, for museums, for symphony orchestras, for performing arts centers. Trustees and administrators of such institutions need to keep in mind that if they're not spending their own money, they must be particularly certain that what they engage to do fulfills the interests of the institutions they presumably serve.



John Silber

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE MIT LAWSUIT? DO YOU ANTICIPATE MORE OF THESE KINDS OF LAWSUITS?

It's a confirmation of what I've said about Gehry's work. It was not satisfactory, and now the people at MIT have acknowledged this in a very spectacular and public way by suing him. I'm not sure what the outcome of that suit will be. I wouldn't speculate on that. I haven't read the answer of Gehry's lawyers. But off the top of my head, I think Gehry

In a lawsuit filed last year, MIT charged that architect Frank Gehry is responsible for problems at the Stata Center, which opened in 2004.



has a pretty strong defense in the fact that he was hired. If MIT had studied his work, knowing it was habitual for him to overrun budgets and design a building that was very late in construction, I think a lawyer can make a good case for saying, "You get what you pay for."

TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU RUN UP AGAINST "ARCHITECTS OF THE ABSURD" WHEN YOU WERE PRESIDENT OF BU?

I had one or two architects who would come up with what I refer to as "theoryspeak," using Tom Wolfe's phrase. They would talk about the very important element of some outrageous design that would cost more money but had the effect of accomplishing some aesthetic goal. I reminded more than one of them that I wasn't interested in their philosophical theories. I was interested in their work as architects.

ARE THERE BUILDINGS ON THE BU CAMPUS THAT FALL UNDER THE CATEGORY OF WHAT YOU CALL ABSURDIST ARCHITECTURE?

The Mugar Memorial Library, the law school building, the student union. Spanish architect Josep Lluís Sert put a patio in the middle of the student union, where Metcalf Hall now stands. It was absolutely useless space, could never be used. It was hot as the devil in the summer because of the high walls around it. There was no breeze. And at other times of the year, it was filled with water or snow. It was a swimming pool. It would cost us \$100,000 a year just to stop the leaks. We put a roof over it and made it into the Metcalf Hall ballroom. It cost about a million dollars to out-engineer Sert on that building. But over a ten-year period, we saved a million dollars in repairs.

WHAT IS YOUR IDEA OF A PERFECT BUILDING? IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE WHIMSICAL AND PRACTICAL AT THE SAME TIME?

Sure. Look at Antonio Gaudí's work. Güell Park in Barcelona is a beautifully whimsical park with serpentine benches

for people to sit on and those wonderful animals he has over the staircases. Almost everything that Gaudí has done has a whimsical attitude about it. One of his buildings has a dragon roof, for example. Why would you make the roof in the shape of a dragon? It's a good idea to shed water. It wasn't absurd. It was quite harmonious. It fit with the rest of the building.

A FAIR NUMBER OF THE BUILDINGS YOU CITE IN THE BOOK ARE IN THE UNITED STATES. IS THERE SOMETHING ABOUT AMERICA THAT LENDS ITSELF TO THIS PHENOMENON?

You have a lot of very wealthy 501(c)(3) institutions in the United States. But there's the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the addition proposed by Daniel Libeskind to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I think the worst is Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ARCHITECTS LIKE GEHRY STRICTLY IN TERMS OF ARTISTRY?

I really don't know. I think Gehry has begun to make jewelry for Tiffany's. That's a perfectly suitable thing for Gehry to be doing because you don't live in your necklace or bracelet or earrings. Consequently, he can use all the whimsy and imagination he has, and it'll be perfectly consistent with the purpose of what he's doing.

I don't think his Disney Concert Hall is beautiful. I think it looks like a junkyard. I think it's captured the imagination of the public. So has Bilbao. But the buildings are not weathering well. They can't because of the exposure.

If Daniel Libeskind's Denver Art Museum were a sculpture instead of a building, it would certainly have an interesting shape. It probably would be very pleasing to people who like that type of sculpture.

HAS ANYONE IN THE GEHRY CAMP COMMENTED ON YOUR BOOK?

They haven't commented to me. I imagine they've commented among themselves.

Better Than Sex

IS SPIRITUALITY AN ANTIDOTE TO TODAY'S HOOK-UP CULTURE? **BY BARI WALSH**

THIS WEEKEND, on college campuses across the country, young men and women will dress up for parties with themes that would make their parents seriously queasy: "maids and millionaires" is a popular one, or "golf pros and tennis hos." They'll drink; they'll dance; they'll make out with someone; maybe they'll go home with someone.

And, according to Donna Freitas, a College of Arts and Sciences visiting assistant professor of religion, the majority of them will regret almost everything about the party and what followed, although very few will ever let on as much.

It's all part of the curious dynamic that drives what Freitas refers to as "hook-up culture," the anything-goes attitude toward sex that she sees on today's college campuses. That permissiveness has left many students looking for something that might just bring parents back from the ledge: boundaries, and a moral and spiritual structure that offers the chance at real, meaningful connection.

Freitas is the author of *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Funded by a grant from the Louisville Institute, she spent five months talking to students at colleges of all types and sizes. Those