



POST Houston's POST Market. Photo by Leonid Furmansky. Courtesy OMA New York.

Post- Post

Drake Flood

Post

For decades, Houston's mayors, developers, and architects have encouraged downtown's role as a cultural hub. After the creation of popular venues in the first decades of the twentieth century, the predominant civic strategy post–World War II was the exercise of the modernist tabula rasa philosophy. Eminent domain, slum clearance, and highway expansion was practiced in support of the rapid annexation of suburban communities, fundamentally changing the city. In 1966, the monolithic Jones Hall and Plaza, designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott, imported New York culture four years after Lincoln Center opened; in 1968, Ulrich Franzen's Alley Theatre opened to great acclaim. However, much of the city's energy was distributed elsewhere; downtown became “the hole in the doughnut,” as described by Joel Warren Berna in *Cite 42* in 1998. Destinations like the George R. Brown Convention Center (1987), Bayou Place (1997), and the renovated Rice Hotel (1998) attempted to shift this balance. In the early 2000s, the Toyota Center and the Downtown Aquarium were both marketed as the next exciting answer to downtown's missing public sphere. Discovery Green, completed in 2008, added a much-needed breath of greenery adjacent to the convention center; it remains a popular and active destination. Today, downtown is awash in contemporary attempts to make it an attractive public destination, with notable success.

OMA New York, led by Partner Jason Long and Project Architect Salome Nikuradze, and Lovett Commercial, led by Kirby Liu, have realized the next milestone in downtown's history. As an adaptive reuse project, POST Houston responds to the history and culture of the city, resulting in a building that is a welcome addition to the network of private social spaces that host the city's public life.

Pre-POST, the building was the Barbara Jordan Post Office, opened in 1961 and designed by the Houston architecture firm Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson. At its height, the building employed over 2,000 workers and supplied the mail processing for the southeast region of Texas. Its architecture was defined by its functionality, as its concrete structure provided a factory-like open space for USPS operations. In 2015, USPS budget cuts enacted by the Obama administration caused this location to close; it was then purchased by Lovett Commercial, led by Frank Liu. Many Houstonians experienced the sublime quality of the unaltered campus at the music and art festival Day for Night, which was hosted here in 2016 and 2017, thanks in part to the efforts of Frank Liu Jr., a musician himself.

For a city like Houston, whose architectural history is littered with unfortunate demolitions, the preservation of a modernist building like the Barbara Jordan Post Office is a victory. With MacRostie Historic Advisors, the project utilized historic tax credits, which meant that its appearance from the street had to be maintained. Windows were cut into the north elevation, but they used the "modularity of the existing grates," according to Long, so as to retain the language of the blank façade. Inside, remnants remain: a network of Cold-War-era surveillance tunnels attached to the first-floor ceiling were kept. These passages, accessible from the exterior, allowed for the panopticon-like monitoring of the workers below. These vestiges heighten the impact of

OMA New York's improvements. Architects should look to POST as a precedent for future adaptive reuse projects.

OMA New York's primary intervention into the existing structure recalls the work of the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who transformed buildings through the surgical introduction of voids. POST's voids establish new relationships: between floors, between roof and interior, and in long views through the extensive floorplates. It's a big place: each floor is 250,000 square feet, with a 120,000-square-foot skylawn and 50,000-square-foot rooftop farm. These subtractions undermine the previous hierarchy of the column grid. The trimmed concrete floor plates showcase not only the building's structure but also how it was altered; in the final treatment the concrete edges stay as rough cuts, inviting occupants to consider the previous life of the structure rather than hiding the gaps and presenting the project as a newly packaged whole. The idea of putting "different programs in every corner," as Long said, isn't that wild, but its aesthetic results are notably austere when compared with the stylings of older models like the interior shopping mall or recent destinations that seek to channel something like Austin's bohemia. It's a testament to OMA New York's skill that the intervention in the building is so restrained. On the interior, the team, which included executive architect Powers Brown Architecture and Harvey Builders as the general contractor, kept the ad hoc signage and materiality that accumulated over the decades of use as a mail sorting facility. This simple decision is amplified by the use of an opposing material palette for the new additions: aluminum, square grating, and neon and fluorescent fixtures.

Day or night, the interior is heightened by the work of lighting consultant Dot Dash, who carefully considered the vantage points of the occupants and created a lighting experience that encourages circulation just as much as



Ground floor axonometric. Courtesy OMA New York.



The Barbara Jordan Post Office.
Courtesy OMA New York.



The Z atrium. Photo by Leonid Furmanskyy. Courtesy OMA New York.

the stairs themselves. The bathrooms, similarly, become distinctly memorable through their ethereal lighting and bright colors.

Described by Long as a “an agglomeration of culture, food, and tropical urbanism housed within a solid concrete shell,” the massive warehouse was subdivided into four discrete zones, each centrally organized around a large void. To the east is 713 Music Hall, operated by LiveNation. The venue, also designed by OMA New York, holds 5,000 people on two levels. Already, local heroes like Tobe Nwigwe have played there.

Each of the other three subtractions are atriums open to daylight above. Each is organized around a large, sculptural staircase that is formally unique and relates to the program of that zone.

Approaching from the Barbara Jordan Plaza, underneath the low tower, you arrive at the Z atrium. The monumental, social stair is pushed to the back of the atrium. It’s a

switch-backed path clad in stained oak, with flat platforms for coworking or socializing. This geometric form is hung from the roof to allow for the accumulation and circulation of people underneath. This feat of suspension also draws views upward to the ethylene tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE) pillows that enclose each atrium. The air in the ETFE pillows reduces heat gain and has the added benefit of subtly diffusing the light. It’s still warm inside at the top, as the hot air rises and stacks against the ceiling, but the space is filled with daylight. This is the first commercial project in Texas to use ETFE widely.

The O atrium, the largest of the three voids, houses perhaps the most exciting selling point of the project’s cultural offerings: POST Market. Flexing an impressive cast of local, national, and international restaurants, the food hall, using the precedent of a night market, expresses the culinary prowess and diversity that Houston is known for. To fill



The O atrium. Photo by Leonid Furmansky.



The X atrium. Photo by Leonid Furmansky. Courtesy OMA New York.



Entry plaza and the existing post office façade. Photo by Leonid Furmansky.



The skylawn. Photo by Scott Shigley.

the space, OMA New York designed a set of food booths in aluminum that accommodate a variety of communal and private eating experiences. The O staircase, which spirals up to the roof, has a totemic presence in the food hall. The double helix staircases—also made of aluminum—are clad in metal fencing and fluorescent tubes whose output bleeds into the neon lights crowning the individual food stalls. POST is given another graphic layer through its signage system by MTWTF with Formation, but hopefully the market will continue to add visual activation, to be seen in the midst of the crowds already dining here.

The X atrium is slated for retail when more tenants move in. The crisscrossing X staircase evokes the sentiment of a grand Parisian entry, inviting the onlookers to admire the movement of immaculately dressed influencers. The Escher-like, cascading treads have already been used for a variety of events, including a ballet, fashion show, and an acrobatic performance.

To the OMA team, this building is as much a destination as it “is a link to a new public space within the city and [a] dramatic view out over its juxtapositions,” said Long. Ascending any of the three central staircases will bring you up to the five-acre skylawn. Designed by Chicago-based landscape architects Hoerr Schaudt, the rolling landscaping and meandering path stages clear moments for snapping pictures with the city. The height of the warehouse puts the visitors neatly level with the highways that ring downtown. Even the skylights, whose circular panes of frosted glass direct light into the tenant spaces below, are a welcome element of strangeness.

There is one point of conflict. The staircases, while exciting, center experiences that aren’t accessible for all occupants. Elevators are pushed to the edge of the floorplates, and, while the stairs received boutique treatment, the elevators are relatively standard.

From the perspective of universal design, it’s a shortcoming that so much focus is placed on the three monumental staircases. While POST’s new ideas about adaptive reuse are exciting, the consideration of access for differently abled bodies could have been better addressed.

While presenting the project during an RDA lecture last year, Long said that “there’s a real capacity in Houston to make something really positive out of public/private moments.” In that same lecture, Long detailed OMA New York’s overall approach of “radical juxtapositions” and the ambition to create a microcosm of the city itself, which is similar to the concept of “dirty realism.” As explored by scholar Fredric Jameson decades ago, the term signals a mode of producing privately owned space that allows for the sporadic nature of true public life. It was a key concept for OMA’s work in the early 1990s. (Rem Koolhaas wrote an essay on the subject for 1994’s *S,M,L,XL*.) Jameson argued that the danger of privatized public spaces is that they don’t allow for “one’s private life nor the monumentalization of collective powers.” But today, POST Houston, carved from a former piece of civic infrastructure, stands capable of offering these experiences to visitors.

POST’s energy is also the result of a dynamic architect/developer relationship spearheaded by Kirby Liu. Liu is cited by many within the project as one of the key voices who defined what exactly it means to create an intensely social civic space. The vision for the destination—and its 713 Music Hall, in particular—was also shaped by Liu’s brother Frank Jr., who died this year. A memorial service in celebration of his life was held in January on the skylawn.

Years in the making and now open, POST is a testament to the creative potential of adaptive reuse. Its spaces will only get better as Houstonians claim them as their own.