

the cost would be exorbitant and it would be embarrassing to have to *import* such an um, well...important part of the design concept.

In recent years, amidst an international tendency for dramatic sculptural buildings, H&M have begun to expand the sphere of their interest from architecture as surface to architecture as form and surface. While we can appreciate the overweening significance of the new gallery's exterior cladding, we also cannot deny the powerfully idiosyncratic shape of this strange new pagoda of art. Of course, there are many different versions of the building type, but given the variation in width among its various tiers, it would seem to be most closely related to a Japanese pagoda. Whatever ethnic sublimation might be at work in the interpretation of this city's cultural fabric, Inuit nuances aside, the reference is presumably Asian. Apparently though, this odd stacked form speaks to all cultures. When recently confronted with a competition design by another Swiss architect for a Russian Art museum, uncannily similar to Vancouver's, the representative of HdM responded with, "There are other stacked buildings...and there will be for sure more." So, we needn't worry too much about the contextual significance of the shape of this particular design. Its "stackedness" is not about the here but the now, as a striking new international typology of architectural form.

—Scott Cohen

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Plumbing the Surface

written
by

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about
the
design

Vancouver Art Gallery
Herzog & de Meuron



THE EXISTING ART GALLERY SITE
occupies the busiest pedestrian
intersection in the city. All types
of people, including skate punks,



street performers, chess players, tax lawyers, breakdancers, and hotdog vendors loiter around the front of the old court building, the temple piece of Arthur Erickson's masterwork of an Acropolitic ruin that is the de facto juridical, commercial and political heart of the city, where art and fashion and law face off against one another, and protesters gather in between. The stress of leaving behind such an anarchic situation is eased, as there is already an interested buyer. The new museum will have its own public space: a semi-enclosed courtyard of sorts, accessible through discrete portals on three sides, through which visitors can pass anytime during gallery hours. It will be situated in the back of the building. The sequestered nature of the garden will provide a shady spot throughout much of the year that is easily surveilled and secured.

H&M came to prominence as "integumentary" architects, that is to say, concerned especially with the outer layer or "skin" of a building. Their floor plans reflect this. A typical H&M layout resolves all issues of site and programme with breathtaking efficiency, relegating the duty of expression to the outer surface. The genius behind the choice of wood for the building's exterior lies not so much in the deft interpretation of regional culture or climate, but in the considerable challenge that it presents technically. The West Coast Modern tradition is built around innovation in wood. We have an institute dedicated to building wood skyscrapers. But these wooden towers of the future are not meant to be clad in wood. The emphasis of their research is on structure, not skin. The only local wood remotely suitable for such an exterior application is cedar, a noble and deeply familiar material, which could make a fine cultural reference. But cedar expands and contracts like crazy, and so far, no resinous or polyacrylate coating has been formulated to save cedar from its predestined lugubrious state of differential weathering, staining and cracking. Of course, certain tropical woods are more suitable as cladding in a wet climate; a wood such as teak, for instance, could extend the interval of maintenance and replacement considerably, but

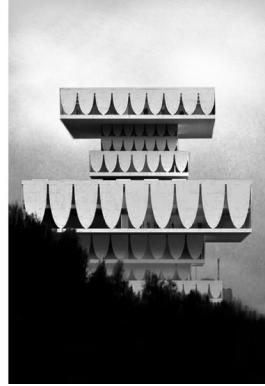


Image: Left to right, Robson Square (Vancouver), Horyu-ji Temple (Ikaruga), Perm Fine Art Museum competition entry, Valerio Olgiati. Courtesy of the author.