

A peek behind the New World Center's glass curtain

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

avigliucci@MiamiHerald.com



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

A view from the lobby atrium area where Michael Tilson Thomas, the founder and artistic director of the New World Symphony, gave a tour of the nearly completed New World Symphony Center on Miami Beach Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2010.

Here is a new Frank Gehry building that neither tilts nor twirls. There is not a glimmer of titanium anywhere. Just a whitewashed box of stucco, glass and steel, sitting decorously behind Lincoln Road Mall in Miami Beach.

The only hint on the exterior that this is a Gehry design are the shapes that burst out of the rectangular shell as if they could not be contained within -- a twisting canopy over the main entrance, a jutting rooftop office suite, a broad concave sunshade over 17th Street that some local wags have dubbed "the skateboard ramp."

All of the famed architect's signature moves -- the teetering walls, the vertiginous curves, the angular edges -- are on the inside, within a soaring, light-filled atrium. It's *The Cabinet of Dr. Gehry*, rendered in bright, precise, clean drywall and natural wood, revealed to passersby through an 80-foot-high glass curtain wall.

The New World Symphony's new \$160 million home is the architectural analogue of the mission the 23-year-old orchestral academy has adopted under founding artistic director Michael Tilson Thomas: to encourage experimentation within the stolid walls of the classical-music tradition.

A post-graduate training academy, high-tech music hall and performance lab for the 21st Century, the New World Center is a place where the traditional orchestral concert, video art and musical electronica can all be equally at home.

The 100,000-square-foot building hides within its walls miles of fiber-optic cable, numerous high-definition cameras and state-of-the-art recording equipment, all wired to the lightning-

fast, limited-access Internet2. Performances from inside the center's auditorium will be broadcast in high definition on a vast exterior wall.

The NWS building is the centerpiece of a city of Miami Beach redevelopment district that also comprises a new parking garage, with an illuminated metal mesh designed by Gehry's firm, and a lush, new 2.5-acre park.

The city provided \$15 million for the building and a parking lot behind the symphony's Lincoln Theater. An additional \$25 million came from Miami-Dade County, with the balance coming from sale of the Lincoln Theater and private donations.

Gehry is sometimes criticized for designing buildings that function less than ideally, but the New World Center is all about function.

It houses three floors of offices for symphony staff, a roof garden designed by Miami landscape architect Raymond Jungles, and, in the free-form structures within the atrium, a suite of video and sound editing studios, a multiuse pavilion for orchestra rehearsals and experimental public performances, instrument lockers and more than 30 virtually sound-proof practice rooms.

In fact, Gehry says, the drywall structures inside the atrium can be simply taken down should the symphony's needs change.

“All those boxes inside are like a stage set. They're not that precious,” Gehry said. “Think of that space as a big warehouse you can change over time.”

The intimate concert hall, designed in tandem with Nagata Acoustics of Japan -- which also designed the acoustics for Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles -- provides crystalline, balanced sound and, in an unusual touch, natural light from a skylight and a panoramic picture window overlooking 17th Street.