

Posted on Sun, Jan. 23, 2011

Frank Gehry's boxy New World Center sings on the inside

By Beth Dunlop
Special to The Miami Herald



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

The vast, flat, glass-and-concrete façade of Frank Gehry's new home for the New World Symphony is much more than just a wall. It is a metaphor, and a fairly powerful one at that. Think of it as a window — which, structurally and symbolically, it is.

Where the wall is glass (and there is a lot of glass), it looks into an intricate interior architectural landscape that Gehry calls "the village" and likens to such archeological cliff-dwelling sites as New Mexico's Chaco Canyon. It is the clearest glass available and intended to disappear when skylit by day or backlit by night. It won't, really, but it

is purposefully transparent, to allow passersby to see the architectural and artistic life within the building.

It may stretch the imagination more to think of the utterly opaque 7,000-square-foot expanse of white stuccoed concrete as window, but that's where the idea becomes symbolic. It is a window into something equally mysterious and magical — the creative process, most particularly of music and art — in the form of "wallcasts," beginning with *Chronograph*, a specially commissioned work of video art. When the New World is playing, the concerts will be projected onto the wall, a kind of inside-out window into music.

Conceived as a laboratory to explore the future of music performance and the interaction between music and other art forms, the New World Center is the new campus for America's orchestral training academy with post-graduate music fellows, most still in their 20s. Designed by Gehry, who ranks among the most important architects of our time and of modern history (and indisputably the most famous), it is a 100,641-square-foot building housing a 756-seat concert hall, with a rooftop garden, rehearsal rooms, a music library, the Knight New Media Center and a rehearsal and meeting room called the SunTrust Pavilion.

The building is wired for Internet2 and has 17 miles of fiber optic cables, plus high-definition cameras, 10 of them in the concert hall to achieve those "wallcasts" outside. A 557-car garage, also designed by Gehry and clad in what was once his signature chain-link mesh, is also part of the project.

A key part of the project is the new Miami Beach SoundScape, a imaginative and evocative 2.5-acre park designed by the Dutch firm West 8 that has been more aptly described as a "Music Garden," as it is fully wired to broadcast the music produced within the building and much more but stands alone as a second work of art, one with the building yet strong and singular on its own. From the ExoStage section of the park, it will be possible to watch and listen to wallcasts of music and video art (and likely dance, opera, films) settled in on a blanket or a lawn chair or perched on the cannily designed concrete benches that wend their way through.

The complex sits on two former parking lots at the corner of Washington Avenue and 17th Street in Miami Beach, just north of Lincoln Road.

For New World founder and artistic director Michael Tilson Thomas, the choice of Gehry was a given. The two have known each other for the better part of a lifetime. Their memories go back to a time when the conductor was practicing piano and the architect sketching "on cocktail napkins," and the relationship has grown over time. Tilson Thomas says that he would only have entrusted the intricate, visionary program for the building "to a partner like Frank, who is such a music lover."

For his part, Gehry, 81, says that at this stage of his life and career, he would rather design buildings for music than "almost anything else." He has done so on a number of occasions, most notably with the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the Richard B. Fischer Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College in Rhinebeck, N.Y. The New World Center is more the scale of the latter, though — on the surface at least — the aesthetic is less expressive.

That this building does not sweep or swoop or jut into the air carving a sculptural silhouette separates it from most of the rest of Gehry's exceptionally expressive work. Indeed it's a flat, unarticulated, unadorned box — with two exceptions: a sculptural entrance canopy facing the park that conjures allusions to waves — at sea? of sound? — and, on the side of the building, a "scoop" that shades the building by day and becomes a lighted lantern at night.

"I have been known to design box buildings before," the architect asserts. "I wanted to do a neutral container with everything stuffed inside."

Indeed it is that. The village that is visible through the glass unfolds with a crescendo as you step through the door. There, the forms of the building take over — elliptical, curved, convex, concave, angled and occasionally straight. No vista is like another, and it is indeed futurist and ancient-seeming all at once. It is perceived in pieces rather than as a whole.

This center space — lobby, circulation, divider between the public concert-going and the private campus areas — is skylit and all white, with a blue titanium canopy hanging over a bar made of laminated tempered frosted glass that is lighted from within. The lobby floors are polished gray concrete — unfussy and weatherproof on sloppy days. The space is simply furnished with molded maple strip "Hat Trick" chairs designed by Gehry (who also loves hockey) for Knoll and benches made of random-cut Douglas fir (aka plywood) that are upholstered in aqua Naugahyde. Elsewhere one can find furniture by Eero Saarinen and Florence Knoll. A single artwork, the 2003 Taboehan by Frank Stella, hangs on one wall.

The concert hall was designed to accommodate full symphonies to solo recitals to intimate night-club-styled performances. It is shaped, largely, by a series of acoustical “sails” — large, billowing forms suspended from the ceiling and along the upper walls. This is a uniquely flexible space, with a hydraulic stage that rises and falls in 10 parts and four satellite stages set at various heights against the front, side and back walls.

The seats rise only 13 rows at the highest point. They are upholstered in deep sky blue and pale turquoise fabric (designed by Gehry and created by Poltona Frau) with a pattern that evokes clouds or cresting waves. The choice of cloth plays an important acoustic role, absorbing sound when the seats are empty, during rehearsals, for example. The floors under the seats are maple; the stage is Alaskan cedar, selected — says Yasuhisa Toyota, the project’s chief acoustician, for its ability to capture vibrations and become one with the instruments. And indeed, an almost-full rehearsal showed the sound to be rich and round, the sightlines good and the feeling intimate.

A remarkable building deserves a remarkable landscape. The rooftop garden by Miami-based Raymond Jungles is an oasis planted with such Florida natives as gumbo limbo, cassia and pitch apple. It’s serene and understated and offers a long vista over the city and a view down onto SoundScape.

There, Adriaan Geuze, the principal of West 8, sought to create a space that would work seamlessly with Gehry’s building and yet stand on its own. The park has a slight, subtle topography and is crisscrossed with a mosaic of walkways that offer a glimpse of a subtle idea that they are shadows of the sculptural forms Gehry used in the building. Exuberant metal shade pergolas (though the design is drawn from the dramatic cumulus clouds Geuze so admired in the Miami sky, they manifest themselves as abstract trees) have been planted with red bougainvillea that should grow into profuse bowers. The plant palette is purposely limited to include the red bougainvillea, yellow Poinciana and Vetchia palms, as well as swathes of grass, including the listening lawn in front of the projection wall.

In the end, all this art is united in a purpose of creating a new audience, most specifically the next generation of listeners (and patrons) of classical music, but, even more, this campus offers a chance to explore the future in the context of the past, where great art is not separated by the centuries. (Imagine listening to the 18th century genius of Johann Sebastian Bach while viewing it in the context of avant-garde video interpretation.) Technology gives the building an edge here, but it is the architecture — the immediacy, the intimacy, even the urgency of the architecture — that expresses it.