

"Site Unseen" at Spruill Gallery

By Catherine Fox
For the AJC

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Spruill Gallery's "Site Unseen" is, on one level, about what might have been. Plans, models and renderings detail stillborn architectural projects for Spruill Gallery, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center and residential clients. Also on view are entries for competitions that others won or, as in the case of Lord, Aeck and Sargent's concept for One Museum Place, for a project that will never be. (Its empty lot and unsightly fence just across from the High Museum is an anti-monument to the cratered economy.)

Yet, these unbuilt projects by nine Atlanta firms are very much alive with ideas, creativity and insight into the architectural process. The exhibit reveals the considerable effort devoted to research and development. Particularly evident is the careful consideration of the relationship of a building to its site and the varied ways architects approach such issues as topography, trees and the behavior of sunlight. It's almost always an iterative process of experiment and refinement, evolving from sketches and computer simulation to three-dimensional massing studies and models.

Some of the projects here research possibilities, such as Nodus' design for low-incoming housing constructed of shipping containers or Jeffrey Collins' contemporary interpretation of the southern dogtrot, a vernacular genre in which two buildings are separated by a breezeway for a natural cooling effect. His four-story version offers a lively interplay of interior and exterior spaces and makes use of the breezeway effect to cut down on air-conditioning costs.

Inspiration may come from unexpected quarters. The Richards residence by Brian Bell and David Yocum of BLDGS, a vision of pavilions carefully sited among the trees of a sloping wooded lot, is a contemporary version of the ryokan, a traditional Japanese hotel comprised of separate buildings, which interested the client. Each pavilion rests on stilts or piloti, which jut through the floor and the roof, thus mimicking the rhythm of surrounding trees (and perhaps an avatar of a similar effect found in a residence designed by their mentors, Mack Scoring and Merrill Elam).

Scogin and Elam, who were recently awarded prestigious Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize in Architecture from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, are represented here by a competition entry for the World War II museum in Gdansk, Poland, which was won by a Polish firm. The presentation material, including an artful video that takes the genre well beyond the typical animated building fly-through, reveals the kind of metaphoric thinking that enriches the design process.

Spruill has done some site-seeing of its own. Years of undergrowth have been cleared from the back of its property to create a shady sculpture garden. The opening display is a mixed bag that includes some pleasant, if humdrum, pieces and one of Pandra Williams' eco-installations of native flora and ceramic forms (which look weirdly like brains). The forms dwarf the plants now but will settle into place as the

flora grows and changes.

Catherine Fox is chief visual arts critic of ArtsCriticATL.com

REVIEW

“Site Unseen.” Through July 23. 11 a.m.–5 p.m., Wednesdays-Saturdays. Spruill Gallery. 4681 Ashford Dunwoody Rd., Dunwoody.770-394-4019. www.spruillgallery.blogspot.com

The bottom line: Projects by nine Atlanta architecture firms shine a light on the creative process.

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