

JOHN KING *Place*

# 'Architecture Now! 6' an epitaph for excess

Strange days indeed — when leafing through a new book of boundary-shoving architecture suggests nothing so much as a stroll down memory lane.

A museum that looks like a modular helicopter! A 1,476-foot-high tower for Moscow that includes a 3,000-room hotel! A library designed to resemble a volcano!

How times have changed in the past year, so much so that a book titled "Architecture Now!" has the distinct whiff of *then*. The idea that new buildings should strive for cultural buzz, or that contorted silhouettes are the in-crowd ideal, all seems so ... 2007.

Which doesn't mean innovative design is dead, though significant buildings of any sort are likely to be on hiatus the next few years. But when the economic clouds lift, I hope that flamboyant shape making takes a backseat to more fundamental concerns — such as the creation of buildings that emphasize social and environmental sustenance over flashy thrills.

Marking the end of an era wasn't the aim of the sixth installment of Philip Jodidio's periodic survey of the architectural scene. Rather, he set out to celebrate a point in history where architecture "is nothing if not inventive" and where experimentation is seen in everything from skyscrapers to housing for victims of natural disasters.

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It also allows glimpses of work that most of us won't ever see in person, such as the ghostly yet graceful library at Tama Art University in Tokyo by Toyo Ito, the architect of UC Berkeley's planned museum and film archive in downtown Berkeley.

Inevitably, though, this collection of 79 works — including eyepoppers as yet unbuilt — speaks to an age of cultural excess.

The crown jewels of the 2008 Olympics are here, the Watercube and the Bird's Nest. So are such spectacles as the latest work of Coop Himmelb(l)au, an Austrian firm whose Akron Art Museum from 2007 strove to revive that Ohio city by dropping a thatch of concrete and metal forms next to the existing galleries. The cantilevered additions stick out as though they were frozen helicopter propeller blades.

A former Coop Himmelb(l)au designer, Tom Wiscombe, is represented by his proposed National Library for the Czech Republic. It would thrust from the landscape with a squat crown clad partially in

red that "invites a comparison to a volcano," Jodidio writes, noting the obvious.

The most cloying example of excess in "Architecture Now! 6" comes from a surprising source: Foster and Partners, an English firm renowned for

supple and sustainable high-tech design. Here, though, we're shown two projects-in-waiting for Moscow that are laughably grandiose — including Crystal Island, which would contain a 3,000-room hotel, 900 apartments, a museum and — why not? — a school for 500 children. As to the design, it starts broad and swirls clumsily inward to a narrow point 1,476 feet in the air.

Imagine a pointy-headed Jabba the Hutt.

No-limit exhibitionism like Crystal Island speaks of an era before the world economy imploded; the flood of red ink in Russia likely has washed it away. I'd also wager that Prague's volcano has gone dormant.

That's today's reality: The future has ground to a halt. Here in San Francisco, at least seven downtown towers in the 400-foot-height range have all the approvals they need to begin construction. But there's no demand for the housing

and offices they would contain.

It's a skyline-in-waiting that might not ever come to pass.

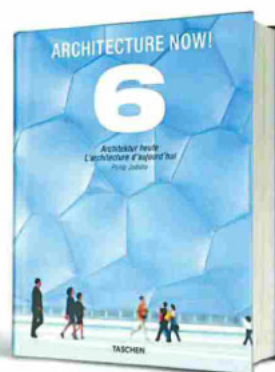
From this perspective, the most resonant buildings in "Architecture Now! 6" are the ones that point toward a more modest future.

Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art by London architect David Adjaye is a simple box skewed slightly toward the street, clad in dark glass. The materials inside are tactile rather than lavish; the museum also received a Gold rating from the United States Green Building Council. Instead of Coop Himmelb(l)au's pyrotechnics, Adjaye offers intimate physical pleasure and an awareness of larger environmental concerns.

Nor is there anything iconic about the Cistercian convent in Norway designed by that nation's Jensen & Skodvin. Instead, it responds to a grassy coastal setting with walls of thin dappled stone and an airy interior framed in wood. But it feels like a place that would offer solace and calm, two emotions in short supply these days.

Extravagant buildings have their place; our cities need visual snap. But the larger purpose of architecture isn't to make a fuss; it's to shape an urban landscape that endures.

*Place appears on Tuesdays.  
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