

FALL PREVIEW

Architects Are Coaxing Downtowns Back to Life

Gone are the days when designers made a splash with a shimmering new building torquing this way and that. The season's debuts forge links to regional designs and new connections.

By Christopher Hawthorne

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Can architecture save the American downtown? Or at least give it a much-needed shot in the arm?

Hollowed out by hybrid work schedules and caricatured as lawless by the likes of Fox News, many of America's urban cores are less vibrant than at any point since the 1970s. Nationally, according to a recent Conference Board survey, office occupancy rates post-pandemic have settled around 50 percent, leaving one cubicle empty for each one that is filled.

Converting commercial towers into apartments or condominiums is one popular strategy for bringing people back. At **25 Water Street** in Manhattan's financial district, the New York architecture firm CetraRuddy has overseen the

transformation of a 22-story office building into a residential tower with 1,300 rental apartments, the city's largest such makeover yet.

But many office buildings simply aren't good candidates for conversion. The bigger the tower — and the bigger its floor plates — the tougher it becomes to turn work spaces into apartments without stranding residents far from natural light and operable windows.

That leaves cities looking for other strategies for coaxing their downtowns back to full, prepandemic vitality — and canny architects repackaging their pitches to clients to emphasize their talents as resourceful regenerators of urban life. Two examples on the West Coast, where the malaise has been especially slow to lift, suggest the promise and the limits of looking to high-profile architecture, beyond the office-to-residential conversion, as catalyst.

After an elevated freeway in **Seattle** called the Alaskan Way Viaduct was taken down in phases beginning in 2011, city leaders considered no shortage of proposals imagining new parks, bike paths and gardens in its place. The goal was to restitch long-severed connections between the city's downtown and its waterfront. But progress came in fits and starts, and, once the coronavirus pandemic began, fell into a deep freeze.

Ocean Pavilion, Seattle Aquarium



The Seattle Aquarium's new Ocean Pavilion and public plaza. The skin and facade of the building is Alaskan yellow cedar, metal panels and glass. Lara Swimmer/ESTO

The Seattle Aquarium's new **Ocean Pavilion**, a bold, gymnastic design by the local firm **LMN Architects**, is already accelerating the thaw. The drama of the \$160 million project, which adds a third building to the aquarium's campus, comes from the way it stretches between the Pike Place Market on one side and the waterfront on the other, bridging a roadway as it goes.

Where it meets the water, the new building is a linchpin in a larger landscape plan by Field Operations.

"Urbanistically it's at this really potent location," Mark Reddington, a partner at LMN, said of the pavilion, which the firm designed in close collaboration with leaders of local Native American tribes. The facade facing the water is clad in

Alaskan yellow cedar from tribal lands. The star of exhibitions inside, by Thinc Design, is a 325,000-gallon, warm-water tank holding sharks and stingrays from the South Pacific.

Transamerica Pyramid, San Francisco



The upgrades to the Transamerica Pyramid building in San Francisco, by Foster + Partners, include a private, tenant-only bar on the top floor. SHVO/Boyero Visualizers

In **San Francisco**, the New York developer **Michael Shvo** has made a high-stakes and in many ways counterintuitive bet on the future of the 1972 **Transamerica Pyramid**, designed by William Pereira and long the most recognizable silhouette on the city's skyline. In 2020 Shvo led a group that bought the tower, two adjacent office buildings and a wooded grove in between, called Redwood Park, for \$650 million. He then hired Foster + Partners, the megafirm founded by Norman Foster, and spent a total of \$400 million on upgrades, many of which are rolling out this fall.

Foster's revamp, which includes a bar on the top floor named Norman's (after the architect), largely smooths the edges of Pereira's idiosyncratic design. In the lobby and other public spaces, the wood is blond, the lighting discreetly recessed.

Shvo's hope is that the handsome upgrades will lure tech companies, especially in the quickly growing A.I. industry, from other parts of San Francisco, or firms from Silicon Valley's Sand Hill Road, long a key venture-capital corridor. The goal, he said, is to create "a kind of vertical Sand Hill Road in the heart of San Francisco."

But the road to success for the developer still runs uphill. He is in a legal fight with the members-only Core Club, which had been lined up as one of the tower's tenants.

A bigger challenge may be that many of the companies Shvo wants to attract see themselves in fundamentally suburban terms. The mythic start-up origin story begins in a garage attached to a split-level ranch house in Palo Alto, not high inside a tower, pyramidal or otherwise.

This fall, other key architecture debuts shoulder a somewhat lighter burden than aiming to help revivify an entire downtown. What links them is an interest in one or both of two increasingly important priorities in architecture: connection and reuse.

Gone are the days when the easiest way to make an architectural splash was with a shimmering and photogenic stand-alone building, fancy forms torquing this way and that. Along with exploring new takes on regional or vernacular design traditions, the field's top talents are taking on projects that reimagine existing institutions or public spaces — or forge new links among them.

Williams Crossing Pedestrian Bridge, Tulsa, Okla.

The new Williams Crossing pedestrian and bicycle bridge in Tulsa, with 11 arches built of weathering steel, will connect the Gathering Place with the west bank while tying into the larger Midland Valley Trails network. High Caliber Captures

One dramatic example of this emerging breed is the 1,400-foot-long Williams Crossing pedestrian and bicycle bridge, which sweeps across the Arkansas River two miles south of downtown Tulsa, Okla. It was designed by the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh with the engineering office Schlaich Bergermann Partner.

Van Valkenburgh's office is already well known in Tulsa for its work on the hugely popular Gathering Place, a 66-acre park on the east bank of the Arkansas River that opened in 2018. The new bridge, its 11 arches built of weathering steel, will connect the Gathering Place with the west bank while tying into the larger Midland Valley Trails network. It also seems likely to solidify Tulsa's spot on the shortlist of American cities worth visiting for the design ambition of their civic infrastructure.

The Frick Collection, New York City

For the Frick Collection, Annabelle Selldorf's firm will carefully restore the garden while carving out a 220-seat auditorium beneath it. via Selldorf Architects

Annabelle Selldorf remains the art world's go-to architect when what's required has more to do with untangling existing knots within an existing building or campus than with adding an eye-catching new wing. Her firm's work on the Neue Galerie in Manhattan, finished in 2001, remains a model of this elegantly precise type.

Just a mile south along Fifth Avenue, in a project for the Frick Collection set to open early next year, Selldorf also had to tiptoe around the wreckage of earlier expansion plans that drew fierce criticism. Rather than burying the Frick's Russell Page garden under new construction, as an ill-fated proposal by Davis Brody Bond called for, the new plan carefully restores the garden while carving out a 220-seat auditorium beneath it. Selldorf's design also adds a level above the reception hall and an education center.

With more than two square feet of renovated space for each one of new construction, it's an approach that plays both to the architect's strengths and to the concerns of neighbors and preservationists.

Notre Dame de Paris

The Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, heavily damaged by a fire in 2019, will reopen in December after a reconstruction of the interior, including the nave's Gothic arches. David Bordes/Rebâtir Notre-Dame de Paris

A mere two days after a disastrous fire in 2019 nearly destroyed the interior of Notre Dame cathedral, Édouard Philippe, the French prime minister, announced an international competition to replace Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's famous 19th-century spire with a brand-new design suited "to the techniques and the challenges of our time." A flood of parametric fantasies and other opportunistic proposals soon filled architecture blogs and Instagram feeds.

Thankfully the idea was shelved after a backlash, allowing a more historically accurate rebuilding strategy to come to the fore. (In the end, the most conspicuous contemporary touch in the reconstructed church will be newly designed stained-glass panels in six of the chapels.) The process has brought together skilled artisans from around Europe and other parts of the world to reconstruct the timber frame of the nave's Gothic arches, among other historic elements.

The cathedral is scheduled to reopen Dec. 8, with a ceremony celebrating the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, N.Y.

At the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, N.Y., a new series of wood-clad ticketing and welcome pavilions almost entirely open to the air will debut early next year. via Storm King Art Center

What was it Hemingway said about going bankrupt — that it happens gradually, then suddenly? The reverse has been true about the rise to international prominence of Ireland’s **Heneghan Peng Architects**. Soon after the firm was founded by the married partners Roisin Heneghan and Shih-Fu Peng, it was the surprise winner of a 2003 international competition to design the Grand Egyptian Museum next to the Giza pyramids — only to see the project fall into limbo as political upheavals roiled Egypt. The museum finally opened, partly, earlier this year.

Heneghan Peng’s American debut — a small group of entry buildings at the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, N.Y., designed with Claire Weisz’s firm WXY and the landscape architects Gustafson Porter + Bowman and Reed Hilderbrand — has seen a smoother rollout ahead of its opening early next year.

“It occurred to us that everybody who comes to Storm King, because it’s an outdoor experience, is already dressed for the outdoors, whether it’s a summer outdoors or a winter outdoors,” Heneghan said. “And therefore, why should we

build a building? Why not just enclose the absolute minimum area?”

The result is a series of wood-clad ticketing and welcome pavilions almost entirely open to the air. The alfresco washroom sinks, Peng said, were inspired by temple architecture in Japan.

Bronx Music Hall

The new design of the Bronx Music Hall will “bring music out onto the streets,” said Claire Weisz, whose firm is behind the project. WXY

WXY has a second significant debut this fall: a performing arts venue at the corner of Elton Avenue and East 162nd Street, a mile east of Yankee Stadium, that is closely integrated into an existing low-income apartment building. The Bronx Music Hall is a permanent home for the Bronx Music Heritage Center,

featuring a 300-seat flexible auditorium along with space for classes and rehearsals. The facade is dotted with raised concrete disks that suggest polka dots or vinyl records. (Or maybe polka records?)

Along the exterior are a pair of new public plazas, one featuring a sunken amphitheater. In a neighborhood full of working musicians, those elements will “bring music out onto the streets,” Weisz said.

Goethe-Institut, Senegal, Dakar

The Goethe-Institut in Dakar, Senegal, designed by the 2022 Pritzker Prize laureate, Francis Kéré, has exterior walls made of compressed-earth bricks, following the local design practice. They are arranged in a latticed pattern to allow breezes to pass through. Kéré Architecture

Goodbye Turin, hello Dakar. The Goethe-Institut, the German government's cultural-diplomacy arm, is closing outposts in several European cities while looking to forge stronger ties in Africa.

Its first ground-up building is nearing completion in Dakar, the Senegalese capital. Designed by the 2022 Pritzker Prize laureate, Francis Kéré — who was born in Burkina Faso and has long been based in Berlin— it has exterior walls made of compressed-earth bricks, following the local design practice, arranged in a latticed pattern to allow breezes to pass through. Along with spaces for concerts and German language classes, it will include a library, cafe and rooftop garden under a steel canopy.

It sits next to a house museum occupying the former residence of Léopold Sédar Senghor, who served from 1960 to 1980 as Senegal's first president. In the American context this would be a bit like building in the shadow of Mount Vernon.

The Senghor museum, completed in 1978, “is almost like a castle, or a fort,” Kéré said. “We've just tried not to compete with it but instead to make something very open and welcoming, with a lot of transparency.”

Next on the drawing board for Kéré Architecture: The new Las Vegas Museum of Art, a design that “blends the beauty of the desert environment with local building principles,” he said.

'I.M. Pei: Life Is Architecture'

An installation view of the exhibit “I.M. Pei: Life Is Architecture,” at the M+ Museum in Hong Kong. via M+, Hong Kong; Photo by Wilson Lam

When he died five years ago at 102, I.M. Pei, born in China and trained at M.I.T., was one of the half-dozen most famous architects on the planet. But according to Shirley Surya and Aric Chen, the curators of “I.M. Pei: Life Is Architecture,” his work has long been misunderstood, warped by the outsize prominence of broad-shouldered, postcard-ready projects such as the National Gallery in Washington and the glass pyramid at the Louvre. As a result, they argue, Pei’s reputation has been unable to shake free of certain stubborn tropes, notably a focus on “monumental geometry” and a hackneyed “traversing of East and West.”

The Pei at the center of their show, which runs through Jan. 5 at the M+ Museum in Hong Kong, is different — an architect “who carried out close readings of regional and local contexts around the world” and consistently investigated “new interpretations of the idea of tradition.”

Pei fans unable to get to Hong Kong will find an engaging version of this reappraisal in the catalog, which was edited by Surya and Chen and will be published Sept. 10 by Thames & Hudson. Or they can make a trip to Syracuse, N.Y., where the Los Angeles architecture studio Millions has slipped a luminous new cafe, Louise, inside the 1968 Everson Museum of Art, a collection of cantilevered concrete boxes that is one of the finest art-world designs of Pei's long career.

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