

Former Liberty Bell Pavilion holds clues to architecture

Never embraced by the public, this space can teach us about artistic failure.

By David B. Brawer

Recently I took a tour of the new Liberty Bell Pavilion. As I walked through Philadelphia's newest monument I couldn't help but cast a sad, wistful glance to the old pavilion. This small building, much loved by architects and much hated, it seems, by just about everyone else, likely will be demolished when the bell takes up residence in its new home on Oct. 9.

After 27 years this jewel of modern architecture may soon be just a memory. For an architect who completed his education at the University of Pennsylvania at the moment of its creation, this is a poignant, yet revealing, milestone. The fate of the old Liberty Bell Pavilion tells us much about the



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promise and failure of "modern" architecture.

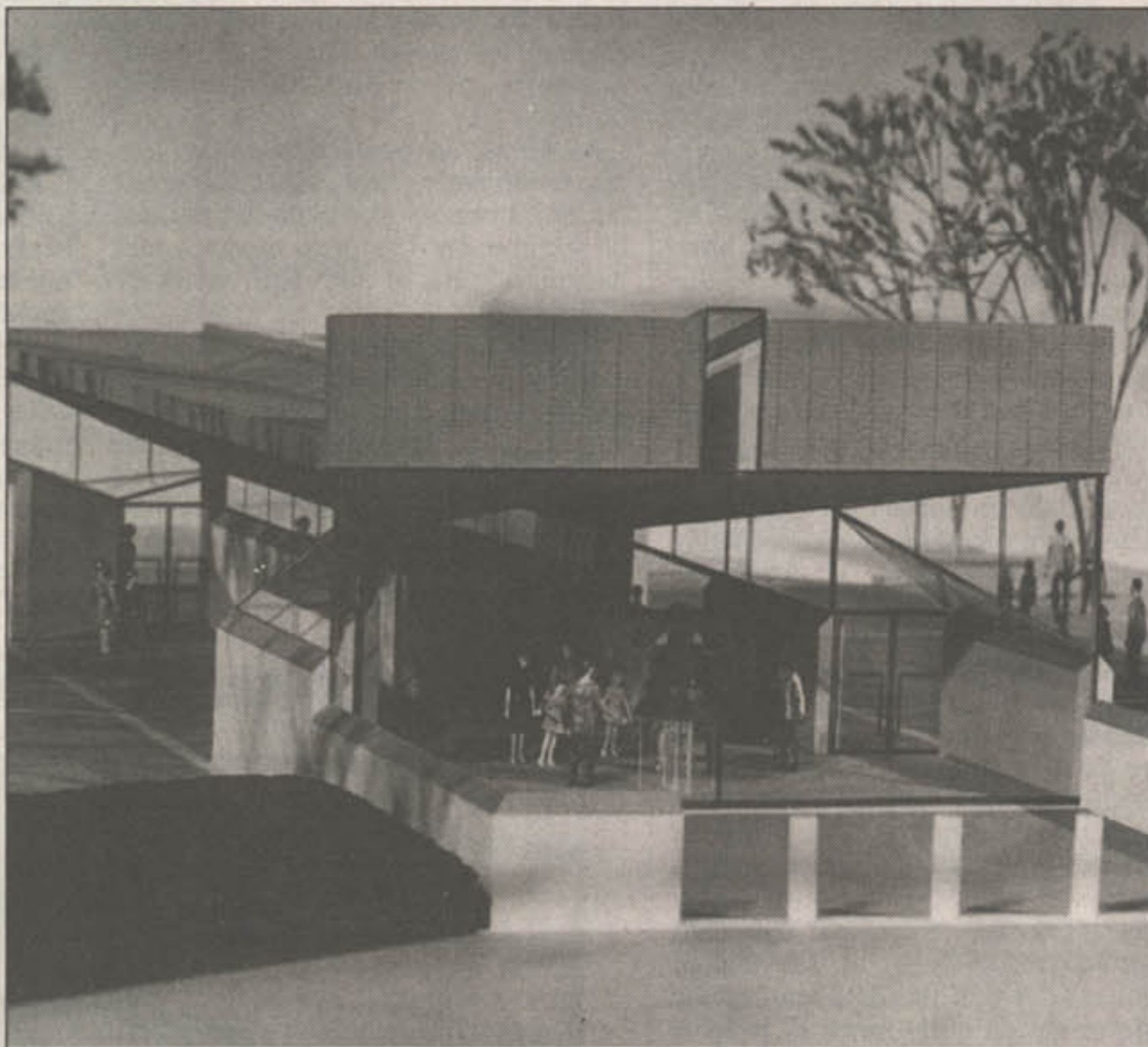
The pavilion was designed for the National Park Service by the Philadelphia firm of Mitchell/Giurgola Architects for the 1976 Bicentennial.

Fearful that Independence Hall could be damaged by hordes of visitors, the Park Service commissioned a new shrine to house our most sacred national relic. The building that Romaldo Giurgola designed is an elegant composition of symmetrical planes of stone, glass and metal panels a block north of Independence Hall. From Market Street, visitors and natives alike are treated to the dramatic site of the Liberty Bell with Independence Hall in the distance.

Why, then, is this building so despised?

Quite simply the Liberty Bell Pavilion was never a very good neighbor. It was quiet and respectful, even elegant, but it never really fit into the neighborhood. Of course, there were the other modern buildings on Independence Mall, and it fit in with them. But they weren't the neighbor that mattered. The only one that really mattered was the small brick-and-wood Georgian statehouse a block away.

Though the pavilion may have solved the functional requirements of the Park Service, it definitely did not solve the stylistic requirements of nearly everyone else. It has been rejected not because it did not do its job well, but because it did not look the part. It ap-



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Romaldo Giurgola's design for the Liberty Bell Pavilion put history in a modern context. It is an elegant composition of symmetrical planes of stone, glass and metal panels.

parently was not what most people thought a Liberty Bell pavilion should look like.

What is an architect trained in the great modernist traditions of Lou Kahn, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright to do with this knowledge? Do I turn my back on the lessons of these masters and give the public "what (I think) it wants"?

I don't think so. There must be a way to acknowledge public taste while not denying the rich legacy of 20th-century architecture. Architecture is the most public of the fine arts, and we architects must recognize that fact.

There is not a city in this country where different architectural styles "bump" into each other more regularly than in Philadelphia. As with people, "respectful diversity" seems to work pretty well for buildings.

We live in a tremendous classroom where the lessons of how to fit in with the neighbors are all around us. The buildings that have recently been erected on Independence Mall — the Visitor Center, Constitution Center and new Liberty Bell Pavilion — are only the latest additions to our continuing lesson plan. I hope that they will enliven and further the discussion between ar-

chitects and those who use our buildings and are forced to look at them. The old Liberty Bell Pavilion certainly contributed to that dialogue.

The National Park Service would like to give the old pavilion to any qualified person or organization willing to pay for its removal and erection in another spot. Though this would preserve it and ensure its continued place in this important dialogue, I respectfully disagree with this position.

As much as I would hate to see its demolition, it would be far worse to see it resurrected as a garden folly or cafe, just some of the new uses that have been suggested. It was designed for a very specific place and purpose. If it no longer serves the needs for which it was designed, then demolish it. Giving it a new life as the next trendy meeting place will do it no justice. I would prefer that a lot of photographs be taken of it to remind us of what the promise of modern architecture was and to force architects like me to ponder why the public never embraced it.

Maybe we can learn something.

David B. Brawer, a partner in the firm of Brawer & Hauptman Architects, has practiced architecture in Philadelphia since 1976.