

## TALK OF THE TOWN | METROPOLIS 05.07.03

### A Sense Of Place

Tampa's signature building

BY SUSAN F. EDWARDS

The first time I visited Tampa in the mid-1970s and saw its tattered bungalows and eccentric Plant Hotel, I thought, this is a town with imagination; this is a town with a past.

Since then, the bungalows have been spiffed up and the city skyline has changed dramatically, obscuring the minarets' dreamy profile with a handful of skyscrapers erected somewhat prematurely by developers during the building boom of the 1980s, when loans were easier to get than tenants.

Of the crop, there's only one that stands out as a modern signature building -- a piece of architecture that distinguishes our skyline from a thousand other cities: the NationsBank building, that luminous ivory cylinder at the corner of Kennedy and Ashley in downtown.

With its precise and complex geometry and organic materials, it looks at once arcane and ultramodern, like a giant sundial or a stalagmite rising from the limestone shelf that lies under the city. In fact, architect Harry Wolf used that same Florida limestone on the surface of the building, polished to an elegant sheen, to connect the building to the place it occupies. It's one of many references the architect makes to this place.

"Most cities look like everywhere else," Wolf says. "They're like chain cities, and that blurring devalues human experience; it affects the psyche and the spirit." That's why, he says, he works to design buildings that have a specific sense of place.

Goethe described architecture as frozen music, and that metaphor came to me the first time I stood at the foot of Wolf's building. I heard "Thus Spake Zarathustra" in my mind and felt a certain kinship with the ape beholding the monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Inside, the building was like a cathedral, all soaring spaces and organic curves, lit with a drama of near-celestial proportions. Again, the building evoked music: a 13th century choir of monks, a majestic organ fugue, an ethereal saxophone and voice improvisation by Jan Garbarek and The Hilliard Ensemble. It was like being in a Roman ruin or some fabulous empty stage set ready for a new chapter of the city to unfold upon it.

To reach the pair of giant cubes from inside the tower, you walk down a ramp under a shallow pool. The rippling waters above cast unearthly liquid light onto the walls and floor. Inside the cubes, the sense of spaciousness expands once more to a scale that evokes awe without being overpowering. You can see the hand of the architect weaving light and shadow into complex geometric patterns, rows of squares intersecting circles.

There is something thrilling, too, about driving across the Kennedy bridge late at night toward downtown and seeing this spectacular diaphanous circle gleaming within the cube. The massive tower rises above, its twin beams of light projecting upward, a beacon, a lighthouse, a turret guarding the entrance to the city.

Such a gateway creates certain expectations, and it's a bit of a letdown to pass through that dramatic portal only to find not much behind it. But it takes a long time to build a city, especially when there is no unified vision and so many mistakes have been made.

Harry Wolf did his job. He accomplished the instructions of his client Hugh McColl, who was then president of NationsBank, in grand manner. "He told me to find a place in the center of things, and if there was no there there, to make one." Wolf created a place of distinction specifically designed to interact with its site. One way he did that was by embedding references to the history, the geography, the people and the built environment too numerous to describe here.

It's a place where grand and creative things might happen. Wolf envisioned the cubes as public space, open and airy, "a sort of a Florida room writ large," as he puts it. He saw it as the scene of concerts, with music and people spilling out toward the reflecting pools on the north side.

So far, much of his vision has failed to materialize and I can't help feeling that we as a city have so far failed to live up to the building.

For a while, the city presented lunchtime concerts in the garden and there was a restaurant in the lobby. One group tried half-heartedly to use the amphitheater for performances on New Year's Eve, though, says Wolf, it was conceived as a folie, "not so much for performances but as a place to sit and enjoy the river."

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HAND OF THE ARCHITECT: Harry Wolf weaves light and shadow into complex geometric patterns.

(credit: HARRY WOLF ARCHITECTURE)

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Local pundits dubbed it "the beer can building." Others, whose offices gave them a bird's eye view of the tower and its twin cubes, could not get past the resemblance to their own genitals.

The building has since changed hands and has largely been forgotten. The reflecting pools have been paved over; the cubes are empty and a little forlorn. Office workers shrug blankly when asked what they think of the building in which they spend most of their waking lives, blind to the eloquent gestures of a skilled artist designed to enchant them.

Harry Wolf did his job. Now we should do ours.

The garden surrounding Wolf's building, designed by Dan Kiley, is integral to it. It would take a book to explain the intricacies of this site and how the two work together. But you can experience it yourself -- for now, at least.

The city intends to destroy the garden -- ironically to make way for the new cultural arts district and Tampa Museum of Art.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation in Washington, D.C., has launched a campaign to save the garden, asking people to call or write the city and the museum to request that the garden be saved.

If you'd like to participate, here are the addresses and phone numbers (send me a copy of your correspondence too): Pam Iorio, Mayor, City of Tampa, 306 E. Jackson St., Tampa, FL 33602. 813-274-8251 or [pam.iorio@tampagov.net](mailto:pam.iorio@tampagov.net).

Linda Saul-Sena, Chair of Tampa City Council, City of Tampa, 306 E. Jackson St., Tampa, FL 33602. 813-274-8131 or [linda.saul-sena@tampagov.net](mailto:linda.saul-sena@tampagov.net).

Emily Kass, Director, Tampa Museum of Art, 601 N. Ashley Drive, Tampa, FL 33602. 813-274-8130 or [tm22@tampagov.net](mailto:tm22@tampagov.net).

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