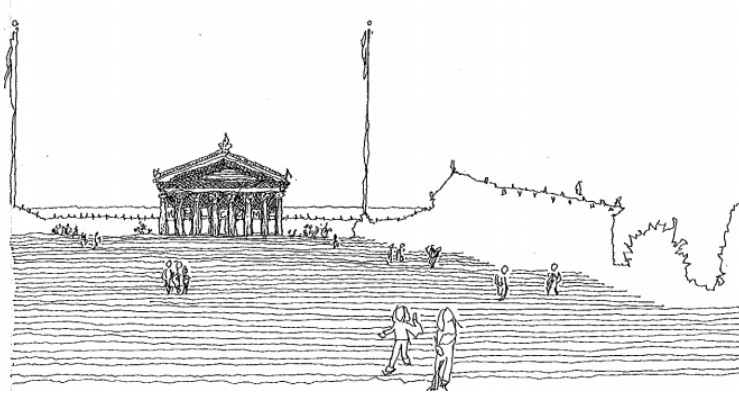


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## Circling around Frank Gehry's Stair

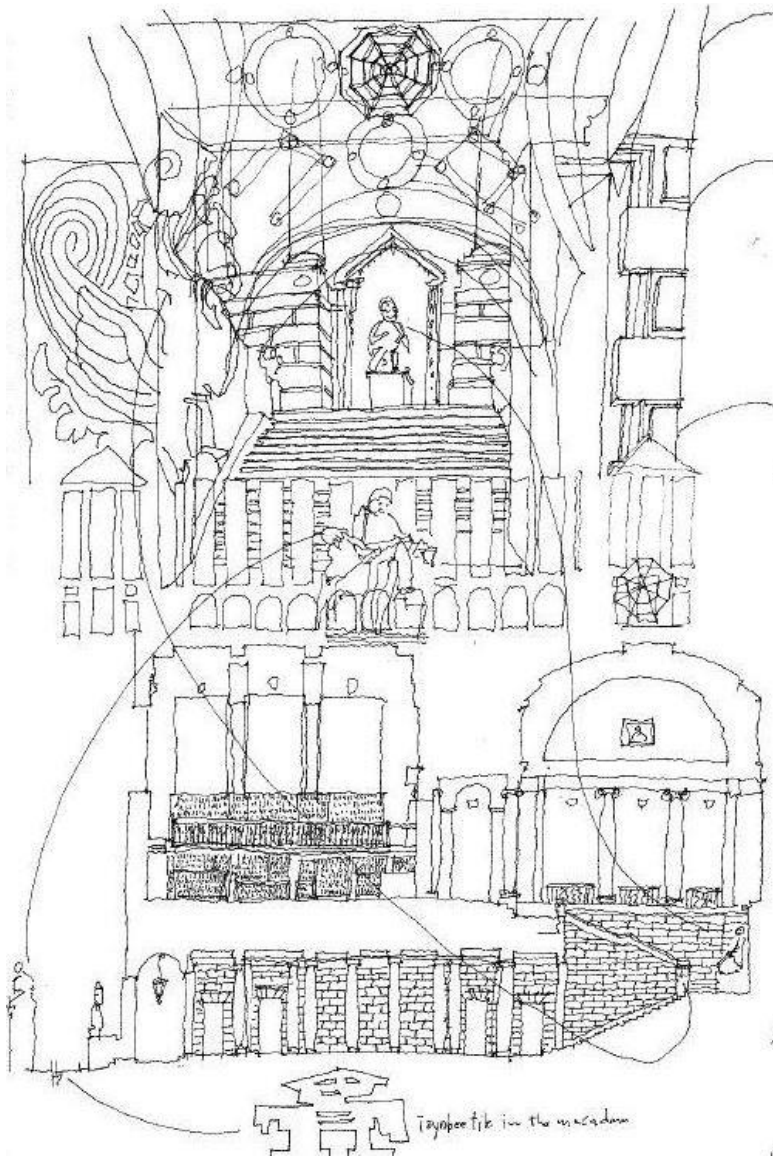
by Sean O'Rourke, AIA (with drawings by the author)

I have written before for DAG Forum about the risk that the Philadelphia Museum of Art is taking by considering such a significant change to Rocky's stairs at the end of the Parkway as adding an outdoor room in its middle. [See my ["A Session with Art: 'Making a Classic Modern' \(or Wrestling with a Crisis in Faith\)"](#).] Recently I visited the new work that Frank Gehry has done inside the PMA, and I am equally disappointed by the stair he so awkwardly inserted in the Williams Forum at the center of the new ground floor.

I will acknowledge that the other interior changes improve the heart of the building. Providing public access to the vaulted north and south walkways and opening the Williams Forum to make a visual connection from the west entrance's Lenfest Hall, and across the Forum to the two wings, have transformed the museum. The Forum is an open, transparent connective core under-



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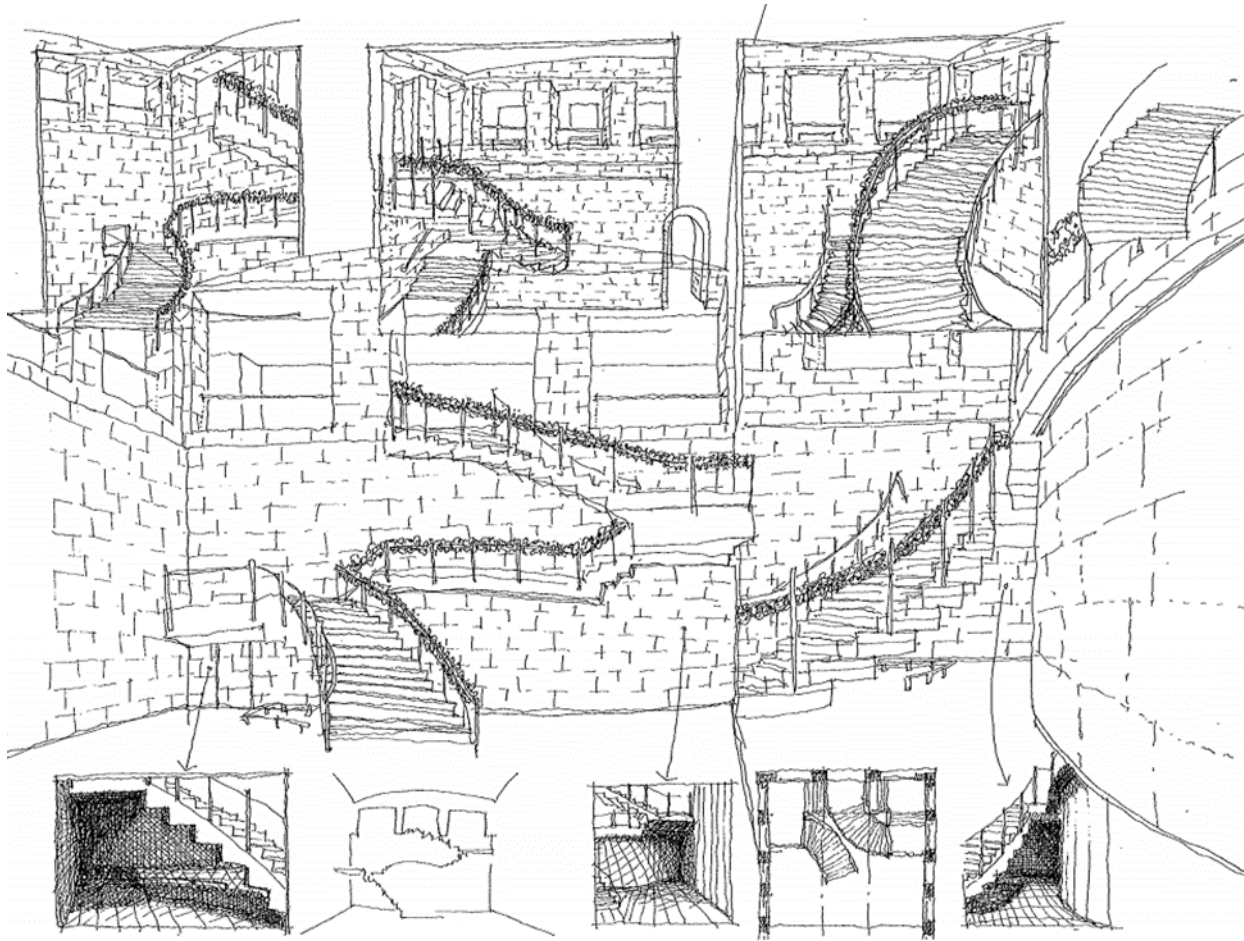


neath the Great Stair Hall. The project has revealed and made accessible so much more museum—no mean trick considering its physical constraints. However, despite all the appropriate accolades, let's remember what is still planned: extending from the Williams Forum will be more gallery spaces under the east plaza, to the possible ruin of the Rocky Stair that I mentioned at the start.

Stairs are an integral part of many of the public institutions along the Parkway and at other notable buildings in Philadelphia. Walk up and down and through the Franklin Institute or the main branch of the Free Library to enjoy the way stairs enliven the experience. Or travel farther afield, to other notable Philadelphia buildings, and visit the “other” Frank—Furness’ PAFA on North Broad Street, or his Fisher Fine Art library on Penn’s campus, to appreciate what stairs can do. For all the good Gehry did for the PMA by opening its core, I think he couldn’t help express-

ing himself by designing--at the heart of the museum, in the Williams Forum--a stair that is as willful and contrived as his worst work over the years.

It seems there were any number of stair schemes suggested for the Forum, and I am not sure why the one built was selected. Gehry’s team successfully designed the Forum’s scale and shape, integrating its material and details with those of the vaulted walkway below and the first floor circulation routes above. The stair, on the other hand, is additive, like a piece of sculpted furniture that works as an experience moving people down, but not up. And most definitely, it harms the rear wall at its bottom. All the restraint and sensitivity of the space are sacrificed so Gehry can add his signature to the museum. All Gehry’s whims and fancy are condensed and expressed in this one element, awkwardly fitted into the Forum.



This isn't to claim the stair is completely wrong. The experience of walking down can be fun, as the first curved flight allows one to walk into the space—seemingly floating along a wide arc out into the Forum. Then a left turn into a corner, another left turn, then under that initial flight, more left turns and then down the second curved run to the floor. This lowest flight is like a “debutante” stair, as it brings us right back to the center at the ground level of the Forum. We start on the centerline at the top and end, at the bottom, very close to the center again. All these gymnastics are beautifully performed, but to what end? I hazard to guess: probably just because it is Frank's stair.

The experience of walking up the stair is far less exciting, so I won't bore you with its description. I was so underwhelmed that I tried walking up the stairs backwards, inspired by something the novelist Julio Cortázar once wrote about the joy of going up a stair backwards. I thought that perhaps I was missing something; alas, no.

Worst of all, at least from my viewpoint, is what happens below the stair on the ground floor of the Forum. The stairway's peculiar shape, with the first landing in one corner and the third landing in the other corner, creates pockets of darkness and gloom along the west wall. For all the bluster and bravado of the sculptural stair, its shape creates uninviting spaces that seem misbegotten—an afterthought. Which, considering its scale and location in the Forum, culminating the long trajectory of the Parkway axis, seems like a crime.

Really though, am I making too much of the stair? I would suggest, considering the context and the designer, one should have high expectations. Above the Forum is the “Great Stair Hall,” which is so appropriately named (or just perhaps waiting for a naming gift?) because the space is the stair. Its form and scale seem in harmony with the space. The experience of using it (both going up and coming down) celebrates the room, and the strong, simple form integrates itself with great art effortlessly. It is a huge gesture, which, paradoxically, does such a better job because of its restraint. Not that I think Gehry should have replicated the design in the Forum, but the “Great Stair” seems like the antithesis to Gehry’s “poor” stair.



So what’s my point? Let me circle back to the beginning. If the PMA let Frank Gehry design his Williams Forum stair so poorly, can we trust them not to screw up Rocky’s Stair out front?

**Sean O’Rourke** is an architect practicing in Philadelphia. He has recently published a book of photographs and stories, **Philadelphia: Portraits of the City** (Hong Kong and Shenzhen: Oscar Riera Ojeda Publishers, 2020), with photographer Jerome Luowicz. An exhibit of Luowicz’s Philadelphia photographs is now on display at the Philadelphia Athenaeum. These were first presented by the author in essays for DAG Forum in 2012 (PDFs are posted [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).