



PDF Complete
Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

[send to printer](#)

November 18-24, 2004

CITYSPACE

Park Place



prime location: Memorial Hall was once a symbol to the world of Philadelphia's industrial, cultural and agricultural prowess. Photo By:

Michael T. Regan

As such, its impact was monumental—serving as the prototype for museums in Chicago, Milwaukee, Brooklyn and Detroit. Its influence can be seen in the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and our own Free Library's Central Branch.

Changes to this part of the park have crept glacially over the years. The Philadelphia Museum of Art relocated to the Parkway in 1928, and Horticultural Hall, also by Schwartzmann, was demolished in 1955. The Japanese House was moved here from New York's Museum of Metropolitan Art in 1957 and the Mann Music Center opened in 1976. For many years, the fairgrounds have been a quiet backwater for crisply-dressed Jamaican cricket players, smartly turned-out young soccer players and local kids using the Olympic-sized Kelly Pool.

But times are changing. The Fairmount Park Commission has engaged MGA Architects to prepare a master plan for a Centennial District—a swath of park that collects everything from the Mann to the Zoo.

Conceived as a destination-themed area of the park, the planners are working to connect its disparate attractions with the city. Microsoft's High School of the Future will be built at the eastern end of the Grand Concourse. And within this new district, Memorial Hall will take on its next life as the future home of the Please Touch Museum—the wildly-successful children's museum that has outgrown its home near the Franklin Institute and was recently spurned by the Simon Property Group at Penn's Landing.

At Memorial Hall, the museum has finally, it seems, found a grand new home. Plans by the firm Kise Straw and Kolodner call for the estimable restoration of the building which will once again invite the public inside with an engaging and pleasing atmosphere for children. For the most part, the plans indicate that the museum will succeed in preserving, restoring and transforming this glorious memory into a source of pride for future generations.

Nevertheless, an east-facing addition proposed to house a vintage carousel is troubling. As currently conceived and approved by the Philadelphia Historical Commission (full disclosure: the author is a Commission member), the Carousel House (not to be confused with the existing nearby Carousel House recreational facility for persons with disabilities) is a wan attempt at faux Victoriana resembling a mock-summerhouse inelegantly attached to the building.

It is perhaps ironic that in this place where America proudly presented herself to the world, we are now offering up an addition that appears more at home at Willow Grove Mall.

Plans to expand a Fairmount Park mainstay scream "strip mall" rather than "great hall."

by Harris Steinberg

On July 4, 1976, as the city's bicentennial celebration was in full swing, a humongous birthday cake was crammed into the Main Hall of Memorial Hall on North Concourse Drive in West Fairmount Park. The Sara Lee Company had donated a giant multi-tiered cake that literally scrapped the ceiling of this grand double-height room. Festooned with pink and white icing and decorated with American symbols, it dominated the vast central space of what has now become an aging memory of another era.

Things have always been big at Memorial Hall and the centennial fairgrounds. Built for the centennial and slated to become the first home of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Memorial Hall—designed by Hermann J. Schwartzmann in 1875—is a glorious souvenir of America's coming-out party on the international stage. It was where we demonstrated our industrial, cultural and agricultural prowess to enormous crowds. A rather subdued and restrained work of architecture, Memorial Hall is perhaps best understood as a symbol of America's quest for international acceptance.

Reflecting the 28-year-old Schwartzmann's Germanic-immigrant roots, the building is more Ringstrasse than Broad Street.



Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

...n at James Stewart Polshek's Rose Center for Earth Science 2000
...ral History on Central Park West or Moshe Safdie's current plans for
... Central Branch. Both are boldly contemporary statements that speak
...ch liberal uses of glass and metal, they complement their historic main
...ning our place in a great intergenerational conversation about design.

Instead, we have an addition to Memorial Hall that is of polite good intentions but is ultimately unsatisfying as a work of architecture. Why not let the addition be something purely American—big and loud and self-confident.

Or—like the giant cake—memorable, delicious and filling.

Harris M. Steinberg, AIA is the executive director of Penn Praxis of the School of Design of the University of Pennsylvania, is a member of the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia.



—Respond to this article in our Forums—[click](#) to jump there