OLIN Partner David A. Rubin Designs Lenfest Plaza for Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

December 13, 2011 | Lavent OZUKO

David A. Rubin, OLIN partner and recent Rome Prize recipient, has designed Lenfest Plaza for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The plaza was created by closing a 220' length of Cherry Street, from Broad to Carlisle, close to the Philadelphia City Hall. In doing so, a true campus was made for the Academy, linking the newly refurbished Hamilton Building with the historic Furness-Hewitt Building.
In creating an institutional plaza for public enjoyment, performance and exhibition within the dense historic and cultural district of Center City Philadelphia, Rubin has designed an environment that many people can now experience: the administration, faculty and students of the Academy; guests of the new restaurant to be situated within the plaza; museum goers and art lovers; Philadelphians, and visitors to the City. In order to accommodate all of these potential visitors within a former narrow streetscape a design that allowed for social gathering but is also reflective of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’ prominence within our nation’s art history and the cultural corridor of Museum Mile was required.
Rubin’s design includes a carpet of pavers comprised of a random pattern of precast concrete with colors inspired by the Furness-Hewitt Building’s handsome Cherry Street façade running the length of the plaza. In addition, a long curvilinear bench comprised of three parts is built from sustainably harvested black locust. This bench, oversized and curvaceous in profile, invites patrons to sit on either side-socializing and enjoying the plaza from various perspectives. The re-curving form is like a three-dimensional brush stroke running the length of the plaza, connecting Paint Torch, a 51-foot tall sculpture by Claes Oldenburg, to an elliptically shaped temporary sculpture platform. With LED lighting under the front edge of the bench, a path of light sweeps through the plaza at nighttime.

The passive SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) Broad Street subway line vents that run under Cherry Street were capped with a stage made of sustainably-harvested black locust to allow for bands to perform, for people to speak from or to sit upon. The resolution of this infrastructural challenge was founded on OLIN’s fundamental belief that a great public space serves everyone equally in this case, a variety of seating options, opportunities to see and be seen, and flexible program space are key to the success and population of a great civic space.

The curvilinear bench, the temporary sculpture platform, a new cafe on the façade of the Hamilton Building, located opposite the stage are all part of the plaza’s composition. Precast concrete steps arc in a manner which reflects the long bench here, tables and chairs will spill out from the restaurant onto the plaza, enlivening the environment of the new civic space. A destination in and of itself, the cafe will become a part of daily street life for the institution and its city.

As an entire composition, Lenfest Plaza at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts unifies art and people in a civic environment that allows both to thrive. It acts as a gesture that unites a campus and links significant institutions as an urban whole, offering people from a variety of life experiences to engage in a manner that promotes positive social interaction. As an institution with works by leading American artists that has always been a leader in the education of fine arts, Rubin’s design for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’ Lenfest Plaza firmly establishes its institution as a center and a threshold, all while strengthening the culture and social sustainability of the City of Philadelphia.

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