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ARTS&LETTERS

ARCHITECTURE

By JAMES GARDNER

Back in the 1960s there was a group of architects known, ominously, as the New York Five. Their stock in trade was a severely dispassionate, almost mathematical, style of building that was keyed into the minimalist art of Sol LeWitt, the minimalist dance of Merce Cunningham, and the minimalist music of early Philip Glass.

Today these Young Turks are roughly 70 years old, still young for architects, though less so, perhaps, for the rest of humanity. And their varied careers have taken strange twists over the decades that have intervened. John Hejduk, so theoretically minded that he hardly built anything at all, has since passed on. Michael Graves renounced the late modernist severity of his comrades to embrace the exuberant classicism of 1980s post-modernism. The theoretically inclined Peter Eisenman is only now starting to realize his projects, while Richard Meier, who has stayed truest to the style and has built extensively throughout the world, is esteemed as one of the finest of living architects.

And then there is Charles Gwathmey, who, together with his associate, Robert Siegel, has achieved what may be the most sustained and consistent success of all. Mr. Gwathmey is the trimmer of the fabled five, steering a prosperous middle course between their varied extremes. He was never obstreperously conceptual in the manner of Messrs. Eisenman and Hejduk, nor did he embrace for a second the fruity contextualism of Michael Graves. Instead he has remained remarkably faithful to the modular style with which he began, even though he has become increasingly willing to inflect his severity with an impressive register of curves, asymmetries, and other telling variations.

A good example is the newly unveiled project for SoHo Mews, a fanciful name for what, formerly, was nothing more exalted than a parking lot. Shaped more like an inter-block slab than like the tower that Gwathmey Siegel & Associates erected on Astor Place, it is also more geometric than that earlier building. To judge from the detailed renderings, the façade of this newer project — two slabs fronting Wooster Street and West Broadway — will remain faithful to Mr. Gwathmey's modular conception of exterior structures.

The windows will be clad in dark gray masonry while the mechani-

The Best of 'The New York Five'



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CHARLES IN CHARGE: A rendering of Gwathmey Siegel's new SoHo Mews on Wooster Street.

cal core on the roof is to be covered in patterned limestone modules that recall the architect's work on the Guggenheim Museum expansion in 1992. The besetting sin of the modular style, a potential tedium, is avoided by dividing the façade into two unequal zones of four and three bays, with a central zone whose two bays are entirely masonry. At the summit, a water

tower picks up the gray of the façade, after the limestone interlude of the mechanical core, and resumes the thrust of the middle zone, which, like it, is slightly off center.

To give you some sense of how the area around Canal Street is jumping, consider that the new Gwathmey Siegel building will rise within about two blocks of Jean

Nouvel's 40 Mercer, Enrique Norten's One York Street, and Phillip Johnson's Urban Glass House on Spring Street. Although this last project looked good in the renderings, value engineering has severely limited its success on the ground. This will not happen at the SoHo Mews. A mock-up of the exterior of two-window modules has been fully constructed in the pro-

ject's storefront at 72 Wooster St., and the skill and tact of its manufacture are immediately evident.

One of Gwathmey Siegel's most interesting and ambitious projects to date has received remarkably little attention for a building of such ambition. I refer to the Jewish Children's Museum, at 792 Eastern Parkway, in Brooklyn. If that name doesn't ring any bells, the reason is clear. Children's museums tend not to achieve a high cultural profile in any case, and one catering to the interests of the chasidim has, understandably, a limited draw for those of other faiths and denominations. But if you long to see 50,000 square feet

If you long to see 50,000 square feet of interactive displays of ancient Jewish dietary laws and the seven days of creation, have I got the museum for you!

of interactive displays of ancient Jewish dietary laws, as well as an installation that takes you through the seven days of creation — all presided over by a beaming image of Rebbe Menachem Schneerson in the lobby — have I got the museum for you!

Inside the building, the largely free-flowing lobby immediately strikes the visitor with its swerving, jazzy curvature. Especially in its use of pale wood, metal, and terrazzo flooring, this space clearly recalls the interiors that Gwathmey Siegel designed for the International Center for Photography, at Sixth Avenue and 43rd Street, and the Science, Industry and Business Library, at Madison Avenue and 34th Street. Particularly delightful is the beet red semi-cylindrical stairway that rises to the second floor and descends dramatically into the basement. But best of all is a tiny meshed balcony that protrudes from the cylinder, for no apparent cause, somewhere between the first floor and the basement. For reasons that it would be hard to explain, this is precisely the sort of architectural grace note that would charm the mind of a child.

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