Cultural Daily

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Frances Anderton: Living in the Designed World

Adam Leipzig · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Frances Anderton, at right, interviewing designer Thomas Heatherwick

I'll confess that I'm a design freak; I care as much about the thickness of a font as the thickness of my waistline. I look at the creative choices people make—the creative choices that surround us every day, from the color of an awning to the thumb-hold on a coffee mug—and applaud genius or, more frequently, recoil in horror at the utter lack of design awareness.

So it was a great pleasure to have a conversation with Frances Anderton one recent afternoon, as summer turned to fall. Anderton is a frequent contributor to design-centered magazines, and the host of DnA: Design and Architecture on Santa Monica radio station KCRW.

Adam Leipzig: Frances, you have spoken frequently about how you came to Los Angeles from England, landed at LAX, and suddenly had an epiphany that LA is the place for you. But when I have been traveling, particularly in Europe, and I land at LAX and take the drive into town, I am so depressed by what I see out the window, this city with no consistency, no central vision, no unifying architectural principle.

Frances Anderton: Well, there is that ugliness. My drive from LAX takes me along Lincoln Blvd., which is changing as LA gentrifies. There is something about the unchanging relentless LA-ness of Lincoln that, in its ugliness, I find reassuring. I am reassured by seeing the billboards higher than the buildings, the general hodgepodge of it, even as I'll admit it is not one of LA's most beautiful streets.

On my initial arrival, LAX's theme building captured me. It is futuristic, spidery, representing the optimistic sci-fi modernism that LA produced for a while. After three days here, the oddness slipped into something I really like.

AL: I find the oddness is often just bad design. But of course, LA has no corner on the bad design market—there's bad design everywhere, especially on the Internet. We're even at work on re-designing Cultural Weekly soon to up our game. Why is there so much bad design everywhere?

FA: One person's bad design is another's good design. We might take design issue with a lot of the California Spanish-style housing, we might want something less kitschy, but there are some who see it as attractive. Then, there really is just incredibly bad design, like big-box retail outlets.

Design is not necessarily a shared value for everybody. For many people who build cities, who are developers, there is an economic issue as well. We could make an argument that good design is good for business. The only consolation in LA is that there something rather surface in its buildings; they will not be around forever.

Good design is not an imperative for all people, and at some levels design is subjective. For example, I have a personal attraction to brutalist architecture.

AL: What do you think about BCAM, the Broad contemporary Art Museum, the newest addition

to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Campus, designed by Renzo Piano?

FA: My initiation into modern architecture was being taken to Paris to see the Beaubourg when it first opened, which put Renzo Piano on the map. As a young teenager, riding on that escalator on the outside of the building, it took my breath away. It was the most exciting architectural experience I'd had in my entire life, and it catapulted me into modern, high-tech architecture.

I'm older now, and there's no way BCAM compares to that experience. But it does work as part of the master plan that has re-oriented LACMA to the west and immensely improved the user experience.

AL: You're being honored by the Museum of California Design on October 6. What's your take on what they do?

FA: There are people who design, and people who appreciate and find design. Bill Stern, MOCAD's executive director, appreciates and finds designers—and fights for them.

AL: MOCAD is an interesting museum with a unique business model—they don't have a physical space. They don't spend their time fund raising for a building; instead, they raise money for exhibitions and collaborate with museums that have physical space. But I've always wondered, what if they got a giant endowment? Frances, pretend you're the architecture-czar for the Museum of California Design and you are going to commission their building. What will it look like?

FA: It will be in a park, a gorgeous landscaped environment, given that Bill Stern's passion is ceramics, and we all know how beautiful ceramics look amid a garden environment. In terms of architecture, I wouldn't give them a monolithic building. It will be a series of "follies" within the garden, interesting pavilions designed by a range of designers. That's more of in keeping with what California design is all about, and it is more financially manageable that way, too.

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