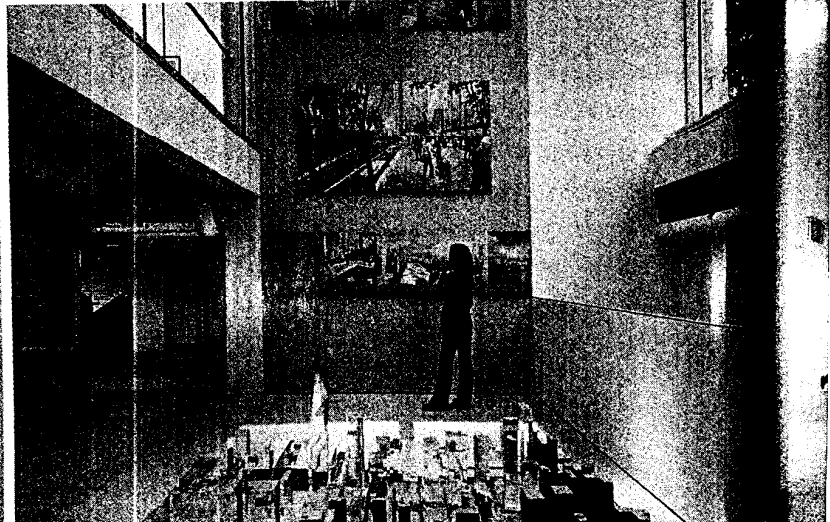
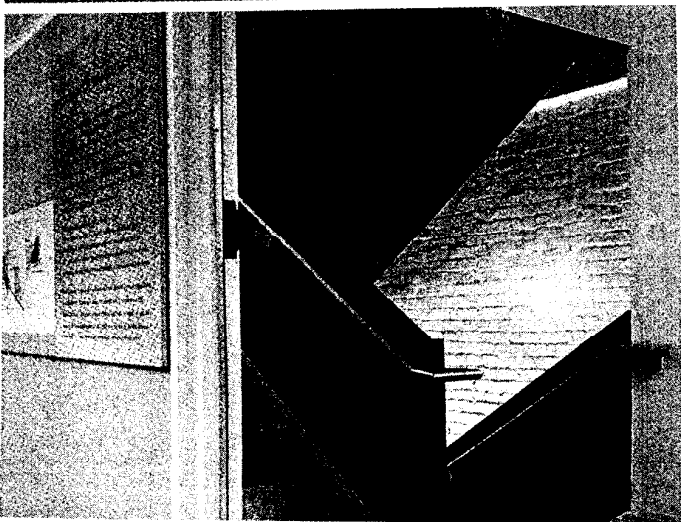
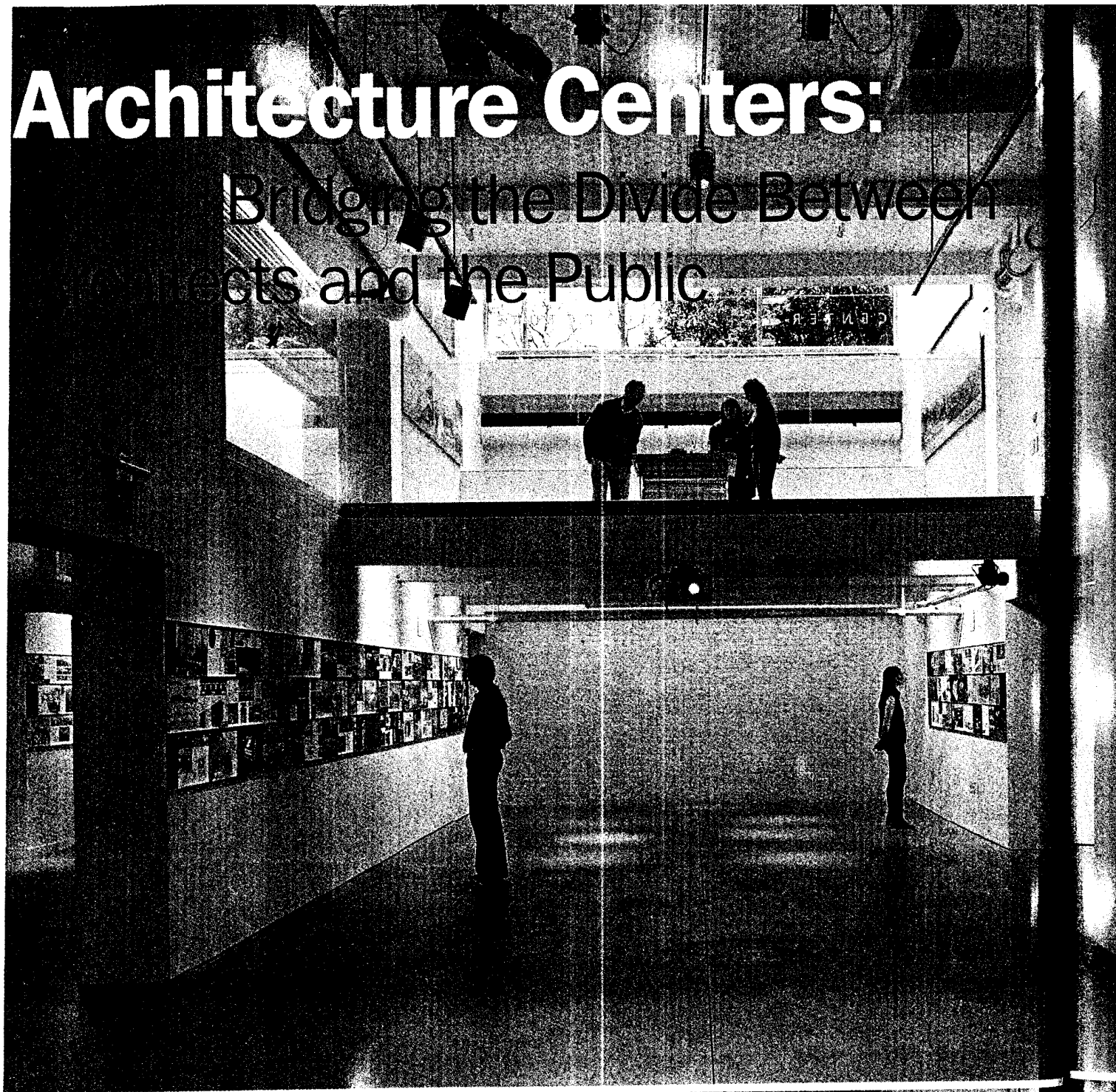


Architecture Centers:

Bridging the Divide Between
Projects and the Public



By Sam Lubell

The crowd is cool. Many are wearing the familiar square black glasses and stretchy black shirts reserved for Volkswagen ads and trendy art galleries. But the discussion isn't ordinary. One can hear the words "public space," "square footage," "density," and "axial symmetry" between bites of fancy hors d'oeuvres.

Welcome to another night at the Center for Architecture, the AIA New York Chapter's new space on La Guardia Place in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. When the center opened last fall, the chapter expected success but may not have anticipated that the facility would become a gathering place where young and old alike—those involved with architecture and those who are not—would gravitate day and night.

Architecture centers like New York's provide a variety of functions. They serve as hubs for architecture-related events and exhibitions and as meeting places for people interested in design. They offer resources to practicing architects and house charitable programs such as architectural education for young people. But most important, the spaces play matchmaker: introducing a traditionally isolated field to a once-ignorant or skeptical public, helping to establish a dialogue between them that is essential to promoting good design. As Ted Landsmark, president of the Boston Architectural Center (BAC), an architecture school that offers its community spaces to explore architecture, sums up: "It engages the public as a client for better design."

Many architecture centers in the United States, such as New York's, Chicago's, San Francisco's, and the Boston Society of Architects, are managed by their local AIA affiliates. Architecture schools such as BAC and building design museums and nonprofits such as the Van Alen Institute, The Architectural League, and The Municipal Art Society in New York; the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.; and the Chicago Architecture Foundation also provide such spaces. Independent of industry ties, these latter organizations claim to develop a strong trust by being guided by public interest rather than what are often considered parochial professional concerns. But most AIA chapter directors, like San Francisco's Margie O'Driscoll, point to improving dialogue between their chapters and the outside world: "We just have a different perspective," says O'Driscoll. "We talk about architecture, not just to our members, but to the community. In the long run, a better-educated client helps our members."

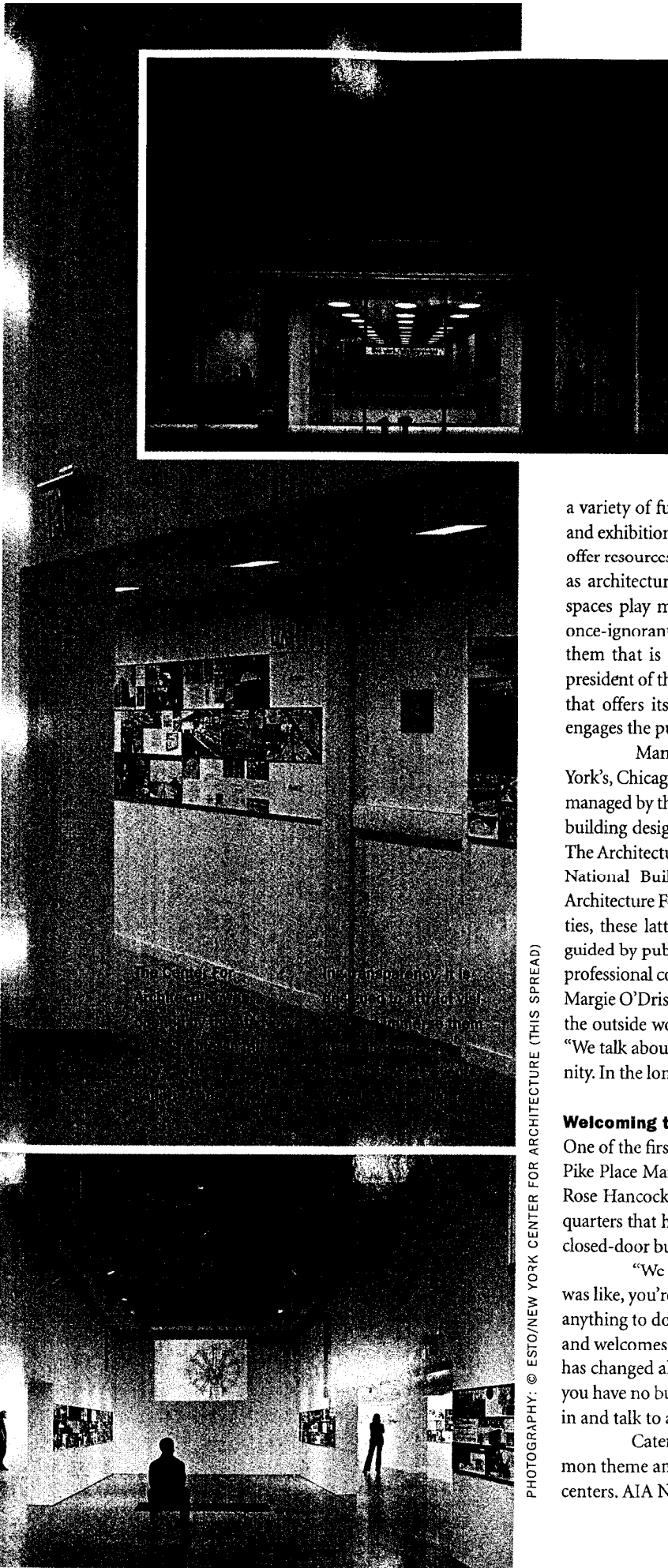
Welcoming the public

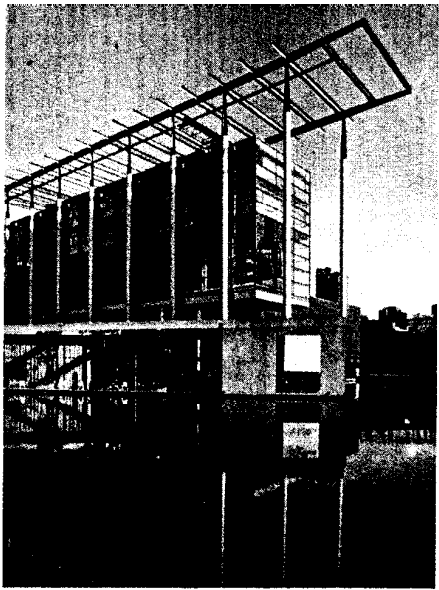
One of the first U.S. facilities was Seattle's, a storefront space near the city's Pike Place Market established by the AIA Seattle in 1991. Director Marga Rose Hancock notes that the center was incorporated into an AIA headquarters that had essentially been a meeting place for architects, who held closed-door business meetings there. Public input was not a consideration.

"We pretended the people weren't out there," says Hancock. "It was like, you're not supposed to be here, kid. You, mortal, you don't have anything to do with this." The new center, which opens up onto the street and welcomes the public for events, lectures, and even portfolio sharing, has changed all that. "Instead of the former message, which was 'mortal, you have no business here,' it's like architecture is accessible. You can come in and talk to an architect. They're just like you and me."

Catering to architects, not "people," seems to have been a common theme among many AIA chapters before the advent of architecture centers. AIA New York Chapter executive director Rick Bell, FAIA, notes

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The Netherlands Architecture Institute (1) appears to float. Madrid's Las Arquerias (2) is a daring exhibition space for architecture managed by the Ministry of Development's Department of Architecture. The Amsterdam Center for Architecture (3) and the Architekturzentrum in Vienna (4) explore varied dynamic designs.

that the New York Chapter had been isolated by its old headquarters, on the 6th floor of the New York Design Center at 200 Lexington Avenue, which houses mainly designer showrooms. (Chicago's AIA headquarters have similar offices, located on the 10th floor of the city's Merchandise Mart. The center has a large conference room, but no exhibition space.)

"We wanted to make it clear that this wasn't just a clubhouse for architects," says Bell of the chapter's new space, built into the first floor and two subfloors of a former industrial building. The 12,000-square-foot building, designed by New York-based Andrew Berman Architect, combines aesthetic sophistication with a concerted effort to lure visitors. The center features a 64-foot-wide glass facade that attracts attention and allows onlookers to gaze into the structure's subbasement floors, which are open to the sky thanks to strategic removal of floor space above.

"I think people make decisions to enter spaces based on what they can see," says Bell. Such techniques also provide a flood of natural light and a sense of copious space. Moreover, the center offers abundant, attractive gallery areas that exploit the industrial aesthetic of the existing

building (exposed pipes, ducts, brick) and, with a dramatic lighting scheme, make the space an attractive new exhibition venue.

Although not all located downtown or on the street, many centers are alluring spots whose architecture shows off some of the best design the profession can offer. The Chicago ArchiCenter, in the Daniel Burnham-designed Santa Fe Office Building, opened in 1993. Designed by Jaime Vasquez of SOM Chicago, it resembles a top-flight art gallery bordering on a designer boutique, with striking contours and studio-quality lighting. One of the grandest spaces in America (although, some argue, not an architecture center, because its main function is as a museum) is the National Building Museum, adapted in 1985 from an 1880s Neoclassical structure by Montgomery Meigs. The building's massive Corinthian columns and its 316-foot height make it among the most dramatic settings for architecture in the country.

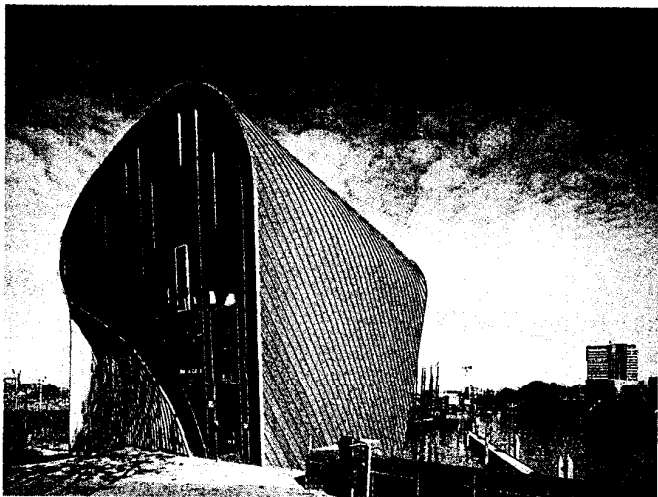
After luring visitors inside, a center's next goal is to engage. Last fall, the Center for Architecture served as a theater for the staging of *Private Jokes, Public Spaces*, an insightful play about an architectural studio by Moshe Safdie's son, Oren. The show drew good reviews and a varied audience, not just of architecture fans. Other events on the center's seemingly inexhaustible calendar include *Going Public*, a display of hundreds of public projects in the city; the model of David Child's proposed "Freedom Tower"; and lectures and symposia about topics ranging from skyscrapers, museums, and construction finance to the history of Puerto Rican architects. Past speakers have included I.M. Pei, David Childs, Daniel Libeskind, and Zaha Hadid. Other centers organize tours, present design competitions, and explore important social and design issues in diverse exhibitions.

Finally, the function that could be the most important of all—one that grows out of visitors' initial interest—is encouraging good design through public input.

"Having the general public weigh in and be educated about architecture makes for a population that can support positive changes. That's how the profession evolves," says O'Driscoll of the San Francisco AIA headquarters, which is located in the city's Downtown Business District and hosts regular public events, lectures, and charrettes, allowing people to respond to new developments, wage debates on the city's housing crunch, and become informed about other design issues. Residents who come in, she says, "care passionately," and seem to be as familiar



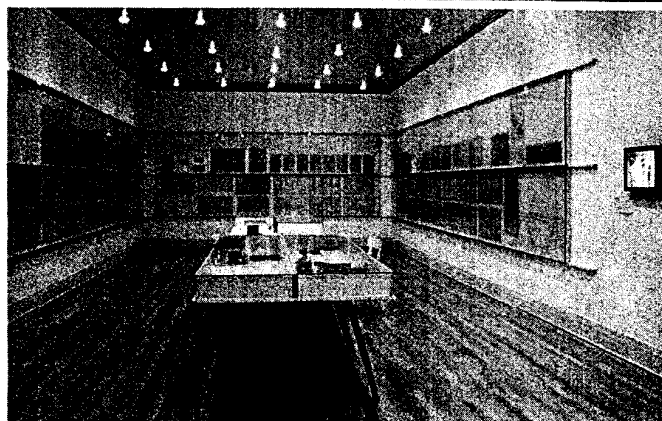
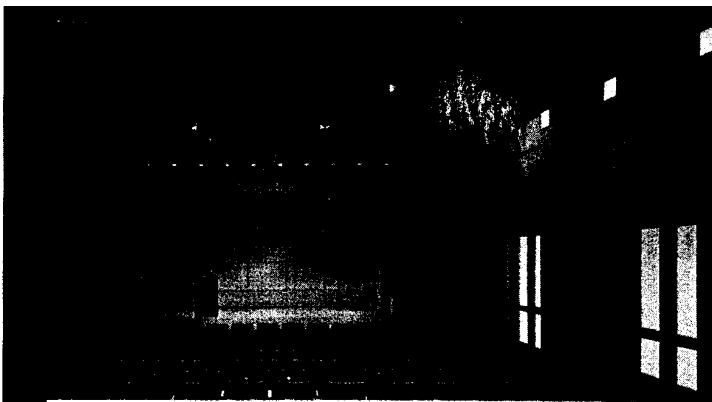
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The Canadian Centre for Architecture (5) was built in 1989 and contains one of the largest architecture archives in the world. It features an impressive theater (top) and exhibitions, like the one of Cedric Price's work (inset, top). The National Building Museum (6) in Washington, D.C., is one of the city's grandest spaces. The Chicago ArchiCenter (7) draws people inside with its striking design, according to officials.

with architectural terms as most architects and planners.

Meanwhile, Alicia Pivaro, deputy director of The Architecture Foundation in London, says that thanks to its work involving the public in design decisions, incorporating public dialogue into construction projects is now par for the course in London.

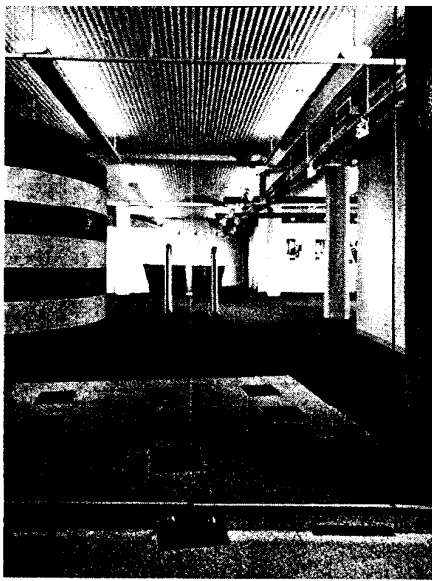
"Members of the profession are consulting with the public and involving them," she notes. "There's a much greater openness by architects and developers to try to work with the public, and I think we were one of the players in getting that sea change."

Challenges, challenges

Of course, as Pivaro points out, interacting with the public isn't always smooth sailing. Often people are uneasy with architecture, especially new architecture. "People are suspicious of change," she says. Designs that are highly creative are often seen as inappropriate. Which is why architecture centers work so hard to open people's minds not just to architecture in general, but to more progressive work that might scare them at first. The other challenge, says Pivaro, is that architects must be heartfelt in their interaction with the community. "Just because you have community input doesn't mean you're going to get a good design. You have to work with a good design team. You have to involve the community in a real way, not just as a PR and marketing stunt."

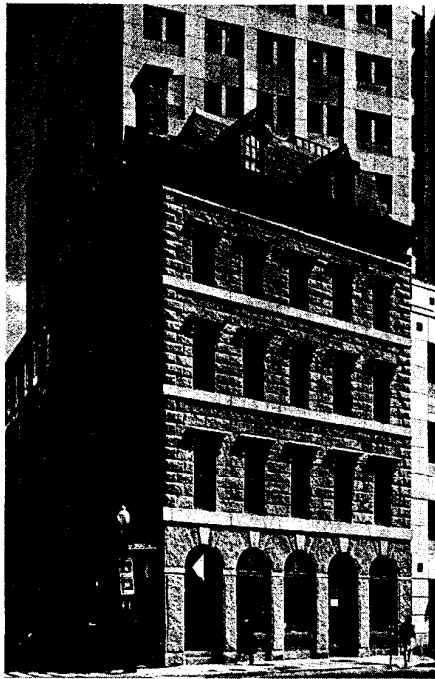
Another acute challenge faced by centers is dealing with drains on funding. This problem is particularly keen in the United States, where architecture centers don't have significant public patronage, as many European centers do (they do have more private funding, but the amounts pale in comparison). While the Center for Architecture is one of the elite in the U.S., its operating budget is around \$1 million per year (about \$600,000 from dues, the rest from private sources). The Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), in contrast, receives \$6 million euros (about \$7.2 million) every year from the government, 80 percent of its operating budget. "Architectural issues are so central to the country's social, economic, and political discussions," explains NAI's director, Aaron Betsky. Here, on the other hand, "It's certainly always a struggle," says Lynn Osmond, president of the Chicago Architecture Foundation. "It's hard for funders to understand what we are, and what our mission is. We're really pioneers as far as promoting architecture as an art form."

European and Canadian centers (like the impressive Canadian Centre for Architecture, built in 1989) have generally found acceptance and developed favorable reputations, which, with greater amounts of funding, has fostered splendid designs for their quarters, such as the NAI's building in Rotterdam, designed by Jo Coenen and finished in 1993. This is a light-as-air glass, steel, and corrugated-metal space—a clear box that seems to be floating on water. Also in the Netherlands stands the new Amsterdam Center for Architecture (ARCAM), designed by René van Zuuk, a soaring, twisting building that suggests it was shaped by wind and water [RECORD, February 2004, page 65]. In 2005, Paris will open the Modern Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, inside the Palais de Chaillot, near the Eiffel Tower. The center will merge the architectural collections of the Museum of French Monuments, the French Institute of Architecture, and the Center of Higher Learning of Chaillot. Meanwhile, Madrid's recently opened Las Arquerias, the main exhibition space for architecture in the city, could be the most architecturally interesting of all. Designed by Jesús Aparicio and Hectór Fernández and built into the 1930s Neoclassic loggia of Secundino Zuazo's New Ministries, its main lecture and performance hall is cradled in



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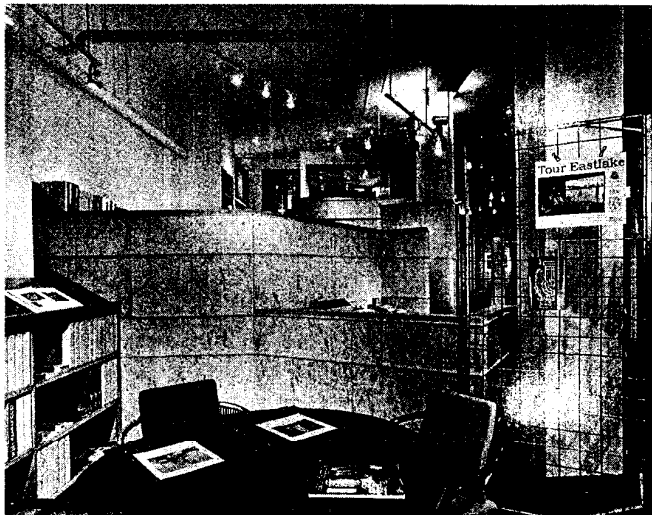
AIA San Francisco (8) hosts regular public forums. Boston has two spaces working together: the BSA's Architects Building (9), and the Boston Architectural Center's headquarters (10). Seattle's AIA headquarters (11) was one of the first to be opened to the public. Like San Francisco's offices, it will soon be redesigned.



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a U-shaped concrete slab, forming a highly dramatic spatial experience.

Few American architecture centers attain such design distinction. Likewise, few can stage the elaborate exhibitions that are common in Europe. The NAI, which has 22,000 square feet of exhibition space, recently presented a show called *Start*, featuring 40 items documenting the early work of Rem Koolhaas. Another NAI installation, *Content*, held simultaneously at the Kunsthaus Rotterdam, covered Koolhaas's work from 1996 on. Besides lacking resources for such ambitious exhibition programming, most American centers are unable to house as extensive archives or undertake such high-profile meetings and debates, nor do they have such an effective means of coordination as the European architecture network called GAUDI (www.gaudiprogramme.net).

The future

Despite their struggles, U.S. centers are becoming more popular, mirroring the field's increasing cachet. Chicago's tour attendance has doubled in the past five years, while its budget has grown from \$2.5 million to \$7 million in

the past seven years. Boston Society of Architects' annual operating budget has ballooned from \$7,000 a year in 1985 to \$3.3 million this year. San Francisco, meanwhile, has seen a growth in attendance from 100 people a month to 600 or 700 within the last year and a half.

Several centers have begun to reshape their images in the manner of the New York center. The Seattle space is soon to be redesigned by a team of architects from the AIA Seattle's Young Architects Forum. A design charrette in February produced updated, very modern sketches, says Peter David Greaves, AIA, Seattle president-elect. "Conceptually, it's like a camera obscura; you go through a dark space into a light one with a tapered, plywood-clad tunnel at the front entry." Construction is expected to begin this July and be completed by September. Meanwhile, the San Francisco center will soon undergo a redesign by local firm Quezada Architecture. As principal Fred Quezada, AIA, points out, the firm will gut the present 6,000-square-foot space and make it "extremely contemporary, at least in the functional sense."

The new center will include gallery, meeting, and classroom space, audio/visual areas, and conferencing facilities. Design will commence in a few months and be completed by the end of this year, Quezada adds. Meanwhile, officials in Philadelphia and Newark have expressed interest in centers of their own.

Like New York's, other U.S. centers have begun to place more emphasis on exhibitions, and on establishing better coordination among themselves. Osmond says that the Chicago Architecture Foundation is putting a Chicago spin on the National Building Museum's massive, and well received, *Big and Green* show, dedicated to environmental building, for its own space. The Foundation is also passing on the torch: consulting with Australian architect Glenn Murcutt to form that country's own Architecture Foundation, including an architecture center (www.architecture.org.au) that will introduce what Osmond calls a traditional public to newer ideas. "They want to make sure there's a dialogue about architecture, and that people learn to embrace modern design," says Osmond. "It's fun. There's all this interest in the world about architecture. But the real question is: How are we going to put this movement forward rather than letting it drop?" ■