

FRAMING

By Stephen Strupp



The Milwaukee Art Museum's Quadracci Pavillion, designed by Santiago Calatrava, offers unlimited opportunities to compose. It invites viewers to play with the arrangements of sweeping concrete shapes, cascading supports, as well as fellow spectators in their field of vision. It's photogenic. It turns looking into a creative act. Point of view is the medium, and the people passing through the building provide infinitely changing variations in the appearance of the space.

But what is it that makes these doorways and window frames feel more like a playground for your eye than those in any other building?

It could be that the many obtuse and acute angles offer a refreshingly different shape for images to take place within. The windows facing the lake in Windhover Hall, for example, offer a range of views liberated from traditional rules of composition. Sometimes the sailboats and pedestrians arrange themselves in surprising ways, and the trapezoid windows function as screens for motion pictures to take place on. The repeating curved triangular shapes in the halls extending north from Windhover Hall serve as frames for people passing through, and also funnel visual attention.

Another feature that obviously separates the experience of looking within the structure of the Calatrava from most other buildings is the minimal surface. The structure itself is elaborate, but the edges are clean and simple, every surface painted plain white. It calls attention to itself only through its form and the presence of light, rather than decoration, color, texture, etc. This simplicity makes the architecture more like a group of shapes and lines to be experimented with in their visual configuration. Viewers can be creative participants as much as passive admirers. This idea of space that fosters inventiveness could be pushed further, but the challenge would be to keep the space versatile.

Architecture can set part of an experience for people to resolve themselves. When Nicolas Bourriaud discusses his idea of the "criterion of coexistence," he brings up the example of "ancient Chinese and Japanese painting, which always leaves space open for the viewer to complete the experience" (ArtForum). Architecture can provide the viewer

with a full body experience of this. In the case of the Calatrava addition, the viewer is provided with the framework to use in whatever way they can imagine.

ArtForum, April 2001. Public Relations – Nicolas Bourriaud Interview by Bennett Simpson.