

ONCE A HARD-EDGED DESIGN TREND, BRUTALIST AND MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE DOWNTOWN IS GETTING A MORE INVITING REVAMP

BY BENJAMIN LEGER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAEGAN LABAT

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The multi-level Riverfront Plaza includes the recognizable “red stick” sculpture. Photos by Raegan Labat.

Sharp edges, raw concrete, and angular, fortress-like design. Some of downtown’s most important buildings and public spaces—City Hall, the River Center and the Riverfront Plaza—are pretty imposing.

They seem plucked from the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe during the 1950s and ’60s, a time when architects were rejecting classic design in favor of modernism and, to a further extent, brutalism—all harsh angles and stark, cold exteriors.

“These places were designed to be looked at,” says Downtown Development’s Davis Rhorer. “But they really didn’t think about the use of space.”

Today, many of those same buildings are in the midst of renovations to soften the edges and create more welcoming entrances.



The River Center Theater is getting an exterior facelift beginning next year.

In the decades since they went up as part of a public complex clustered around St. Louis Street, our ideas of what an inviting civic design looks like have changed. The River Center has already gotten new entrances framed in glass and steel to break up the walls of concrete. The box-like library was torn down in 2016, with a sleek and modern new version set to open next year. The multilevel Riverfront Plaza is being beautified with more organic landscaping. And the city is planning to revamp the River Center Theatre's exterior and lobby with floor-to-ceiling glass and metal panels.

Is this all part of an effort to chip away at downtown's brutalist architecture?

LSU architecture professor Michael Desmond wouldn't characterize the buildings that way. He has studied and written extensively about Louisiana and Baton Rouge's architecture. More importantly, the firm of his late father, John Desmond, was responsible for much of the City Hall complex's design.

According to Michael, its layout and design were all about form following function.

"Dad's idea was to focus the whole complex toward the river to use it to frame the Old State Capitol," Michael says. "It was a planning move more than an architectural style move."

Part of that included maintaining a public space between the new City Hall and River Center Theatre so the old courthouse across St. Louis Street—with its more classical style—still had views down to the river. He also intended to put more green space between City Hall and the library, but the city thwarted that plan, instead installing a ramp down to the parking garage.

As for the appearance of the buildings themselves, Michael says his father wouldn't have considered it brutalism. "It's not a pleasant name, is it?"

Instead, he calls his father's designs "rational modernism." "He always thought that exposing a structure and making the structural logic of a building clear was important for design," Michael says.

His father had a hand in some of the city's most recognizable and modern buildings, including Pennington Biomedical Center and LSU's Student Union. "He experimented with these modern materials but still found ways to make them expressive in ways that are really quite brilliant," Michael says.

His work downtown jelled with trends at the time for civic buildings around the country, favoring inexpensive materials like raw concrete and those bulky, angular shapes.

But our focal points downtown were different then—and this was also before the advent of Americans with Disabilities Act compliance made the multisteped plazas around City Hall and the River Center so outdated.

Downtown Development is in the midst of converting City Hall plaza into a smooth and accessible lawn perfect for outdoor concerts. It should be completed early next year.

In revamps of all these downtown spaces, the design teams are being mindful of the original details, Rhorer says.

The Riverfront Plaza, with its tiered and maze-like paths and water features, is another project being eyed for a redesign. Built in 1984 and designed by Lou Faxon, it nods to the brutalism and modernism in the surrounding architecture.

“Once you spend time there, you start noticing the exposed aggregate and hard edges. You see how intricate it is as you move up the levels, and then the climax is this great entrance to the Mississippi River,” Rhorer says. “I’ve really come to appreciate its design and really look forward to fixing it up.”

SOFTENING THE EDGES

Four imposing landmarks downtown are undergoing revamps

Riverfront Plaza



Rendering by Carbo Landscape Architecture / Courtesy Downtown Development

This multilevel plaza, with its winding water feature, will be enhanced with new lighting, landscaping and a sound system for its little-used amphitheater. The \$450,000 project should be complete by summer 2018, says Downtown Development's Davis Rhorer.

River Center Theatre



Rendering by Post Architects + HMS Architects / Courtesy Downtown Development

The midcentury-style interior dating back to its 1977 opening will be transformed, including new seating and VIP boxes. The lobby will get an expansion with a floor-to-ceiling glass exterior, metal panels and modern signage. The city-parish owns the theater, and its \$18 million renovation should begin in mid-2018, according to news reports.

City Hall Plaza



Rendering by Reed-Hilderbrand / Courtesy Downtown Development

The former grotto-like space with multiple stepped entries is getting flattened out into a wide lawn. While attendees of downtown festivals are accustomed to seeing performances on the Galvez stage from the Town Square side, the revamp will provide three times the amount of space for attendees on the other side, Rhorer says. The project—at the price of \$3.9 million, according to initial reports—should be completed in January.

Chase South Tower



Photo by Raegan Labat

The clay-colored exterior of one of the most recognizable office buildings downtown is getting a whitewashing by its private owners. Inside, several floors are under renovation to upgrade it from Mad Men-style offices to “loft spaces” with exposed brick walls and polished concrete floors. The total \$7 million price tag is an effort to make it more enticing to modern occupants, though the exterior work hadn’t started by press time.

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