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Stage

Absorbed by design

The architects who created the sound barrier for Ford Amphitheatre found a unique form that functions.

By CHRIS SHERMAN
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The seats of the Ford Amphitheatre in Tampa with the sound baffle wall behind them that was recently installed to solve noise issues from concerts.

[Times photo - Skip O'Rourke]

Now the noise is hushed, what does silence look like?

From Interstate 4, the new million-dollar baffle built to deliver thrash rock and trash talk to paying guests (and spare everyone else) is an inescapable silver flash of corrugated metal in mangled angles.

Judging by decibel and complaint counts, the new sound barrier at Ford Amphitheatre kept the howl of Roger Daltrey and My Generation inside the Florida State Fairgrounds this spring. And it's likely to contain Gwen Stefani tonight and Charlie Daniels next.

Sound check: Good. How's the sight line? For some, the newest building on the barren eastern gateway to Tampa draws a Bilbao WOW - as if the wall possessed the curving shape-shifting spirit of architect Frank Gehry, whose Guggenheim Museum thrilled Spain and the world in 1997. Ten years later, Tampa's own rippling steel makes an intriguing first glimpse of the city and teases that more modernism awaits ahead (we wish). Others see it as more gory than Gehry, perhaps a crumpled giant semitrailer truck left by a prehistoric jackknife.

On closer look, it's no accident or Mad-Maxian lean-to, but very contemporary design. This great wall of alloy-coated steel, 400 feet long and about 70 feet high, is carefully plotted to cope with the physics of booming noisewaves - and the pressing weight of all that steel.

Each of the three-odd planes sweep and swoop on scaffolding that looks more like the

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underside of a roller coaster. What looks erratic are actually the sort of parabolic curves that delight computer modeling programs.

Something different

Architects at the Tampa office of Gould Evans, a Kansas City firm, which designed the wall and the original amphitheater, cared about aesthetics as well as acoustics. They have a progressive bent with space and light as well as sound: Gould Evans designed the new College of Business at the University of South Florida, the Truman Presidential Library and several modern theaters.

"We wanted to make sure that the wall was different from any kind of a sound wall you see on a highway," said John Curran, a Tampa vice president for the company. Because of the nature of the sound from the Ford stage, "All of a sudden we had this element of undulating wall heights."

"We hit a crossroads on how to support that wall. As time went on we wanted to make sure the wall had a more sculptural quality."

Difficult sites and constraints can force creative architecture just as bad soils can produce strong wine.

For the Ford wall, abatement of noise came first, of course. A bigger aesthetic limitation is the lack of setback space and room to breathe. Such greedy positioning is sadly common locally. It requires the wall and the great berm on which it rests to be shored up like a road cut in landslide country.

The other challenge is the classic beauty of the 2004 building, which combines the perfect radiation of an ancient Greek form with a billowing hang glider of a canopy that is part da Vinci and part aerodrome. Truly state of the art. Indeed, American Spaceframe Fabricators International, the Crystal River firm that engineered it, uses the same tensioned fabrics in soccer stadiums and portable hangars for B-2 "stealth bombers" and the space shuttle.

Gould Evans brought a bag of equally sophisticated tricks to control the noise: The big blue banners hanging inside are thick quilts of noise-deadening vinyl, aluminum and fiberglass, and the visco elastic paint on the steel dampens sound further.

Contrasting images

The form of the wall is anything but classical. It's metal origami folded to catch stray bass lines and other bad vibes.

Wiser planning, with more space and awareness of the noise five years ago, could have made a harmonious whole where the wall, forum and canopy danced together.

Let's not cry over spilt foresight. Once Live Nation committed to address the problem, its architects, work crews and local suppliers moved quickly, cleverly and at great expense.

When a facility like this cost \$23-million, it brings in plenty of money, and \$2.3-million for a sound wall is an affordable fix. Crews wrangled blueprints, concrete, rebar and steel beams for months.

It is a cutting-edge solution, straightforward about its business as a barrier, yet with edgy visuals. The V-shape that lopes along the wall traps and mutes sound on one side, while adding interest on the exterior, what Curran calls "some sense of poetry." Heavy metal bands have the same aspiration.

From a distance, the rough industrial sheet metal reaches up to block and clamp down on the escaping noise while the canopy hovers, like a clamshell trying to snap closed on a butterfly. Don't worry. Mothra the beautiful wins.

Inside, however, the puffed canopy and the corrugated metal stand far apart. They strike a handsome contrast - intriguing man-made brackets - for the great green lawn and the blue Florida sky.

If drivers passing by think the harsh angled wall fighting a billowing canvas looks like a compromise, well it is.

A very artful one.

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by Helen

05/09/07 09:54 AM

"Artful," my foot. What a cheesy description of yet another gaudy, dreadful urban monstrosity in the Bay Area. Frank Gehry just called & said he's really insulted by the reference.

by Sly Dog

05/08/07 05:50 PM

I saw the project develop a I drove along I-4. It is great to have someone with vision do something that is not another glass box. Kudos to the architects - and the owners - for the courage to make such a wonderful statement! I look 4 more to come!

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