

The New Whitney: A Reply

After I posted [review](#) in the *Guardian* by its architectural and design correspondent, Oliver Wainwright, for “a more balanced” view of the building, designed by Renzo Piano. Wainwright’s article begins: “Crashing into New York’s Meatpacking district, like some great Arctic icebreaker washed up from the Hudson and run aground on the High Line, the new Whitney Museum makes an unlikely container for a beacon of modern art. It is an awkward hulk, lurching this way and that with a clumsy gait, somehow managing to channel the nearby vernacular of warehouse sheds, refrigeration stores and district heating plants into one gigantic industrial lump.”

One might think that to describe a building in such language is to condemn it out of hand. In modern art criticism, however, words which would once have conveyed disapprobation no longer always do so. Just as Milton’s Satan made evil his goodness on his expulsion from Heaven, so art critics now seem sometimes to [imposes itself](#) on whole populations. Architects have no right to play Frankenstein, and critics have a duty not to praise the monsters that the Frankenstein architects create.

“From the outside,” Wainwright continues, the new Whitney “might be shockingly ugly to most eyes, but it trumpets its awkwardness in a strangely compelling way. It is all elbows, but gradually, thin slivers of sense can be read in the great industrial bricolage. To the east, it sprouts a big steel gantry, once again recalling the terraced decks of an oil rig, or the fire escapes of nearby brownstones— another detail sampled from the low-key, rough-and-ready context.”

Moral and aesthetic evasiveness can go no further. Does “trumpeting awkwardness” in some way cancel out ugliness, and if so, why? Does the boldness of a criminal make his act any the less criminal? Note also that the author refrains from

saying whether *he* (as against, presumably, most people) finds the building shockingly ugly. Nor is there any explanation as to why the ability to read “thin slivers of sense” (would it be better or worse if they were thick slices instead?) from “the great industrial bricolage” should—whatever to do so actually means—be a virtue in a great public building ostensibly dedicated to art.

If this evasive and cowardly verbiage is “balance,” let us be unbalanced.

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