

←finding a direction→

Jurgen Habermas once wrote, that you must “find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured.” John Ross knew this, and in 1816 he found his direction along the banks of the Tennessee River. Almost a hundred years later, at Ross’s Landing, this becomes relevant once again in Chattanooga’s Experimental Performing Arts Center. To create experimental art one must also find a direction, to make an expedition into the unknown, in a direction that allows one to create new forms and techniques.

The goal of experimental art is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture, so that the habitual patterns, which reinforce social norms, are broken. It is a rejection of past traditions: a breaking down of barriers between the arts; a synthesis of the arts. Like Artaud’s theater of cruelty, Brecht’s epic theater, or Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk.

The box structure of the Tennessee Aquarium is a regression into the past. A self inflected wound. The Experimental Performing Arts Center takes this traditional box and begins to deconstruct it, rebuilding it in new forms. The theater is a box inside of a box, a glass box. It is a metaphor of how historically the Arts have restricted themselves, unnecessarily. Other pure forms branch out from it.

The smoke stack is a symbol of the past of the historic industrial Chattanooga. The Chattanooga that lived and died by the railroad and eventually became so polluted it couldn’t see what it was doing anymore. The stack has been taken apart and the bricks used as part of the brick wall sculptures throughout the site. These pieces are pure simple planes segmented to represent the collapse of the divisions that currently separate the arts. The building is set back on the south side of the site allowing the riverside to remain open and green as well as accommodate the brick sculptures.

The ramp implies a barrier or wall, like that those traditionally placed on the arts. As the volumes begin to interact with ramp, one realizes it is not really a barrier at all. It was just a mental barrier. The mind has been set free upon this realization. The volumes penetrating it, going on top of it and underneath it. Architecturally, the ramp allows diffusion of the circulation into the studio spaces, the theater and the public areas on the top floor. The transparency of the glass construction of the ramp signifies the barrier is fading away. The ramp begins at the intersection of Chestnut and Second Street, collects the people and follows the topography to the southwest corner of the site at its highest point, then back down and around the berm of the baseball stadium.

The structure is on the outside of the volumes, held up by columns and giant trusses. This allows for the creation of a universal space, a space with partition walls that can easily be changed and manipulated. This is essential for an experimental art center so it is not limited by the space, like the confined space of a traditional performance center.