

Pittsburg's New City Hall

► KING

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architect has specialized in schools and other public buildings during her firm's 20-year life. She won a national competition in 1995 to plan a new civic center and then design a new City Hall.

By their nature, city halls are high-profile gigs for architects; no matter how tight the budget, your client wants to show off. But this is especially true in the case of Pittsburg, long a working-class town either dismissed or ignored by outsiders, now making the awkward transition to suburbia.

"We were looking for a building that would be welcoming and open, one that wasn't just another gray box that people work in," says Supervisor Joe Canciamilla, who was on the City Council at the time. "The idea was to say that this is a city that acknowledges its past but isn't trapped by it."

Canciamilla hedges as he speaks, not wanting to sound too touchy-feely. But he readily admits that working with Hansen was a change from the grinding norm of council hearings.

"It'd be funny — you'd have all these people wanting to move the agenda along, and Fani would answer a question about the color of the tile by talking about when the Earth was molten lava," Canciamilla says. "A status report that for anyone else would take 15 minutes, would stretch on for two hours."

If Hansen was enthusiastic then, imagine her ardor with an actual building to walk through.

The red paint on the curved stairway "ties everything together," she says, "almost like a dance through the space, very important." The Brazilian blue granite in the lobby "summarizes how one sees our planet from the moon. . . ."

"We need to educate the next generation to respect the Earth," she says.

The fountains outside? A gesture to Pittsburg's fishermen of yore. The steel and exposed ducting? An homage to local industry past and pres-

ent. The leafy ferns in the north side of the lobby underneath the stairs? An invitation to the public to come inside from the outside plaza.

Which is also why the north side of the building steps down toward a future extension of City Park and is softened by a succession of sloped green roofs: "The building from here, it almost hugs you."

As you might imagine, not everyone grasps that grand implication that Hansen poured into every square inch. So far, though, the reviews are upbeat — and from the harshest critics imaginable, folks who live across the street.

"The look is totally different. . . . It's a feather in our hat," says Eva Giovacchini, who lives with her husband, Bruno, in an immaculate bungalow on Davi Avenue.

They're at the building's rump end, an ungainly mechanical area clad in metal sheeting. She admits that not everyone is a fan ("my neighbor two doors down, he has no use for it"), but "I still love it."

After showing off the City Council chambers, Hansen discusses the atrium murals she designed with tapestry artist Helen Webber. They use text and images to tell Pittsburg's story, the one Hansen sees as a proud struggle of people working together, pulling each other up when hard knocks have them down.

She points to one behind the elevator, a seascape. "See the mother whale pushing her baby toward the sun," Hansen says. "That shows the need for families to support the next generation."

It will be interesting to see what the next generation thinks of Hansen's work. Personally, I just hope that the people who govern from it live up to her high hopes.

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