

Examining structures, and creating them, with digital tools

By Robert Campbell Globe Correspondent February 19, 2012

Three fascinating exhibitions, all rooted in architecture, are currently on view in Boston and Cambridge.

The exhibitors are photographer David Pendery, artist Daniel Feldman, and architect Preston Scott Cohen. As a trio, they're proof that architecture can mean very different things to different people.

Of the three shows, the one you probably won't want to miss is Pendery's. This is an exhibit of stunning color photographs of the mid-block arcades of Paris, the tiny pedestrian streets the French call *Les Passages*.

It's as if Pendery was born to handle this topic. He first fell in love with the arcades as a teen, when his American family was living in Paris. As an adult, he became a computer guru who worked as a consultant to Boston architects, for whom he created three-dimensional digital presentations of their designs.

Now retired, Pendery has married his computer skills to his love of the arcades, with results that are sometimes astonishing.

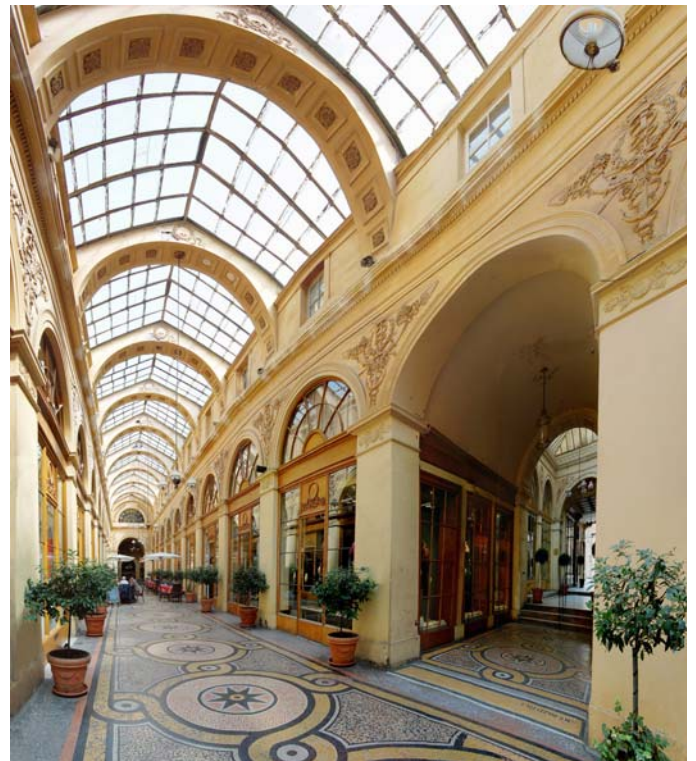
The arcades were built in the first half of the 19th century. That was an era when an emerging middle class was looking for safe places for recreational strolling and shopping, away from streets that were filthy and dangerous. Designed for this new market and the merchants who served it, each arcade is a slice through a city block, lined with shops on both sides and roofed with glass.

At the peak, there were more than 150 arcades in Paris. Many were demolished when Napoleon III and his engineer, Baron Haussmann, created the

city's boulevards. Only 20 or so arcades still exist. Pendery shows us 18 of them.

His photographs could have been made at no time before the present. Working with a digital camera, Pendery creates multiple exposures of each arcade in order to record every subtlety of light and space. He then works with a computer to stitch these multiple views into a single coherent picture.

There's a lot of manipulation involved, and you could argue, I suppose, that the resulting images are as much art as they are photography. I have no problem with that. Photography can never be more than a selective interpretation of reality. And no one has ever captured the visual truth of the arcades as fully as Pendery.



David Pendery's photograph of the inside of the Galerie Vivienne in Paris.

‘This Side Up’

My second suggestion, Daniel Feldman, is another guru with computers, but he puts them to radically different purposes.

Wherever Feldman goes, he carries a camera, and whatever he finds interesting, he shoots. The result is a digital archive of zillions of images. Working intuitively, Feldman then explores these images on the computer, trying out different combinations, changing colors and sizes. He’s never sure where he’s heading. It’s a process almost as free as working with a blank canvas, but it never loses touch with the documentary reality of the photographic originals.

What makes the connection with architecture is Feldman’s day job. He’s vice president for planning and institutional research at Brandeis University. In that position, he sees a lot of construction and demolition. He’s fascinated by a kind of dark mystery that often envelops a building when it’s still in the process of going up or coming down - growing, you might say, or dying, its innards exposed to view.

Feldman’s finished prints usually have the look of some kind of disaster. In one, a waterfall rushes through a dark interior. In another, what looks like a collapsing drop curtain hangs mysteriously across an industrial setting. There’s an emptiness, a sense of foreboding.

A couple of the prints possess a serenity that’s new for Feldman. One, titled “Wallpaper,” looks like either a still life or a stage set. In the foreground are images of a metal serving dish and a stone gate, both of which, as it happens, Feldman shot in one of the Asian galleries of the Museum of Fine Arts. Behind them, as a backdrop, is an image of a peak he found in the Rocky Mountains. It’s a surreal but powerful juxtaposition. You can’t help but puzzle over what it means. Perhaps, you wonder, these are totems on the altar of some unknown religion?

‘Lightfall’

My third suggestion is strictly for the die-hard architecture groupies. We’re very much in the academic world with this one. Preston Scott Cohen is chair of the department of architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. He’s the architect of a remarkable new addition to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in Israel, known as the Herta & Paul Amir Building. Models, drawings, and photographs of it fill the school’s exhibit space in Harvard’s Gund Hall.

I’m always delighted by the pomposity with which Harvard talks about architecture. For example, we’re informed by one wall text (not authored by Cohen) that “Cohen’s architecture forces a meditation on the normality of the anomalous.”

But once you penetrate the blather, there’s much to see. It takes some digging, but Cohen lays out the process of both design and construction with intriguing detail.

One way to view this exhibit is to see it as the case of an architect deliberately setting himself problems that maybe didn’t have to be there in the first place, but which were fun to solve. The oddly shaped urban site, for example, generates an equally oddly shaped building. Cohen then packs this shape like a suitcase, with an ingenious, tightly fitted arrangement of interlocking galleries and support spaces, some of which draw daylight deep into the interior.

As for the exterior, it’s clothed in 460 precast concrete panels, rather like the scales of an amphibian. No two panels are the same size or shape. Like the work of Pendery and Feldman, the Amir Building is something that could only have been realized in the age of computers.

Cohen got the Israeli job when his proposed design won an international competition in 2007. It was a remarkable achievement for the Cambridge resident, who was little known at the time. Tel Aviv reminds us that in Boston, architecture is an export commodity.