

At last, 'Welcome to Manhattan'

New Staten Island Ferry terminal is an elegant addition to city's architecture

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON
STAFF WRITER

For 14 years, the ferry ride across the world's most glamorous harbor has culminated in a trudge through a maze of plywood boards, hanging wires and temporary signs. Welcome to Manhattan.

Chaos has not been banished yet. Workers in hard hats still populate the edges of the building. Out front, Peter Minuit Plaza, which will eventually be embraced by a pair of gracefully curving canopies, is a torn-up mess. But the bandages have finally come off the bottle-green, twisting wedge of the Staten Island Ferry's new \$201-million Whitehall Terminal. Ferry riders are already marching through the airy, swoop-ceilinged hall as if the place had been there all along.

Most destination-driven commuters fine-tune their trajectories to spend the minimum number of seconds waiting. The architect Frederic Schwartz has helped lubricate their way from water to work and back. When I met him in the terminal recently, he had just emerged from the subway directly into the hall, through a passageway that had been open for a matter of hours. He was breathless with the thrill.

The view: worth the wait

But he has also provided for those who miss their boats, or who prefer more leisurely rhythms. The panorama of lower Manhattan from the top of the escalators, the vast windows framing the Statue of Liberty, the upstairs deck with views of the harbor — these are reasons to take shelter here for a little longer than the ferry schedule makes strictly necessary. The transit hub has become a destination.

Time has shaped this building, in much the way it does a canyon, by wearing it down. A fire gutted the Staten Island Ferry's Whitehall Terminal in 1991, and the process of replacing it spun off into an epic of dithering, debate, redesigns and logistical hurdles. Schwartz joined Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, legends of playful architecture, to form a team that won the competition to design a replacement.

Their first proposal featured a harbor-facing clock so enormous that the barrel-vaulted hall below it seemed like a minor or-



A view from the Hudson River of the new Whitehall Ferry Terminal, nearly complete after 14 years of design and construction

nement. The clock became the architectural debate du jour, until the idea was bludgeoned to death by a posse led by Staten Island borough president Guy Molinari.

As the years dragged on and the budget withered, the design team tried to salvage the chance for extravagant statements. Instead of the clock, they turned the waterfront facade into a giant flag-shaped video screen festooned with digital stars and stripes and messages. Molinari knocked that one down, too, and ordered a plain vanilla glass facade instead. Venturi and Scott Brown pulled out in disgust, leaving Schwartz in charge.

Compromise as creativity

The friction of bureaucracy rubbing on bold plans for many years often yields an architecture of eroded ideas. Certainly, the final design here splits the difference between postmodern flamboyance and Molinari minimalism. The facade that greets the ferries is no longer glass, but corrugated steel, trimmed with bright orange canopies and LED signs. That side flaunts some of the latest "green" gizmos, notably a rooftop crest of photovoltaic panels that supply 3 percent of the building's energy at a cost substantially higher than simply buying it from ConEd. The look is sleek, postindustrial and discreet.

If by drumming out Venturi and Scott Brown New York City

blew an opportunity for architectural bravado, in exchange it got a building that ties together a thorny patch of land, without screaming for attention or confronting sleepy riders every morning with overeager cuteness. The new terminal is an elegant go-between, which is a far more difficult thing to design than a lone, heroic structure.

Just finding places to sink the supports required a contortionist's dexterity. All around and beneath is a ganglion of transit. The FDR Drive slices below. Out front, congregating buses used to hit rushing pedestrians on a regular basis, until Schwartz and his design team imposed some rationality on im-

posed traffic patterns. Threaded through the foundations is a fragile subway turnaround that the architects were prohibited from shaking with so much as the murmur of a drill. And every day comes the wave and ebb of Staten Islanders, making 65,000 trips. Putting the ferry out of commission, even for an afternoon, was never an option, even if keeping it open was a Herculean struggle.

The uses of enchantment

Schwartz used this gnarled mass of givens as a source of ideas. He gave his glass curtain wall the same greenish tint as the copper roof on the gorgeously restored Battery-Maritime Building next door. He placed large window panes between the waiting room and the slips, so passengers could watch the boats approach and dock (the marine equivalent to leaning over a subway platform to scan for approaching trains). He tilted the roof so the terminal looks like it's rising from the water toward the skyscraping colossi across the street.

Thanks to deft engineering, the city's dense and delicate nervous system is hidden by the terminal's quietly kinetic design. The high, glossy facade and softly glowing neon sign turn hospitably toward Whitehall Street, which pokes into the plaza at an oblique angle. The view simulates symmetry, and the canopies that will stretch out on ei-

ther side will strengthen that feeling of equipoise.

But symmetry is an illusion. The building turns and dips as it meets the ferry slips and their century-old machines. It's a comma at the tip of Manhattan, its tail jutting into the water to eke out every last little patch of liquid real estate.

Recollections of Rome?

In wringing simplicity out of this packed site, Schwartz kept in mind the way Renaissance and Baroque architects in Rome wrestled with its tangled geography: by setting a new facade askew to the axis of an existing church, by balancing an old tower with a new one, or by interpreting the curve of an alley as a sensuously expressive wall.

From these predecessors, he learned how to make a corner of a city look more rational than it is. He considered the southern tip of Manhattan as an ancient place shaped not by planners but by the happenstance of history. When the landscaping is complete, the Roman homage will be clearer: Peter Minuit Plaza will embrace harried commuters in its sheltering arms, in rough, thoroughly secular imitation of St. Peter's Square welcoming pilgrims. The reference may be a little grand for a ferry terminal, but, after all that Staten Islanders have suffered in their commutes, they could use a little shot of grandeur.



The Fred Schwartz-designed building's glass exteriors