

Lands' End founder Gary Comer taps architect John Ronan to craft an innovative new space

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If only every inner-city neighborhood had an angel like Lands' End founder Gary Comer. In his old Grand Crossing neighborhood on the South Side, the 78-year-old casual clothing magnate has funded a new \$30 million youth center that, despite a sometimes-garish exterior winningly stitches together social conscience and striking aesthetics.

The center's architect is John Ronan, one of the young talents who has infused Chicago's design scene with fresh energy. Two years ago, Ronan beat such international stars as Thom Mayne of Santa Monica, Calif., last year's Pritzker Architecture Prize winner, in a competition for a public high school in Perth Amboy, N.J. His out-of-the-box design, now on hold for lack of funds, calls for a school with five towers, each housing communal facilities such as a gym and set off with vibrant graphics.

His youth center, located near the Chicago Skyway at 7200 S. Ingleside Ave. and topped by an 80-foot-tall tower with an LED sign, is cut from the same cloth as the planned New Jersey high school -- a beacon of hope for an area that needs it. At the May 25 dedication for the building, Comer joked that the 42-year-old Ronan got the job because he was the only one of three potential architects who answered his own phone.

Glass was verboten

The center offered Ronan challenges that are unheard of in the expensive private homes he's designed since he opened his practice in 1997. "The building users didn't want any glass in the building. I was really struck dumb," Ronan says. But "that's the reality they live with. The question was how do I keep this building from being a bunker?"

Lots of bulletproof glass along the outside walls, for starters. And plenty of skylights that bring in light from above.

Those are two elements in the building that demonstrate why Ronan deserves a spot on the design map -- and how his approach to architecture differs from those of other Chicago up-and-comers, such as Doug Garofalo, who uses the computer to create fluid, biomorphic shapes called blobs.

"I'm interested in more of a spatial complexity than a formal complexity," Ronan replies when asked why he clings to seemingly old-fashioned right angles and rectangles.

Formally known as the Gary Comer Youth Center and providing a permanent home for the previously itinerant South Shore Drill Team (as well as programs for children at the nearby Paul Revere School), the building illustrates the fundamental soundness of Ronan's approach.

The center's context is urban decay -- a variety of modest homes (some well-kept, others ramshackle), vacant lots, storefront churches and heavily trafficked roads. Ronan wisely sees no need to imitate these surroundings, as postmodern architects might have done 20 years ago. That's the past. His building aggressively asserts the future.

Convertibility a core value

At its heart is a gymnasium that can be converted into a 600-seat theater with movable tiers of seats, motorized theater curtains and motorized stage doors that reveal an 80-foot-wide, 30-foot-deep stage. The handsomely proportioned, light-filled room serves as the drill team's main practice and performance area.

Wrapping around it, like a series of long, evenly spaced bars, are a variety of facilities, including a cafeteria, a recreation room, a dance room, an arts and crafts room and an exhibition/lecture hall. Outside, a parking lot also serves as the drill team's practice parade ground, one of numerous flexible spaces both inside and outside.

In a typical youth center, interior walls would segregate this rich assortment of uses from each other and the activities would not be expressed on the building's exterior. The excitement within the building would dissipate.

In a far more creative unity of form and function, Ronan uses large expanses of glass to open views from one room into the other. He puts

areas such as the dance room and the exhibition room on vivid display, using cantilevers to thrust their glass walls beyond the building's perimeter. Seeking to express the youthful energy of the inhabitants and the optimism of the community, he clads the steel-framed building in brightly colored cement panels (which come in seemingly random patterns of red and blue). If one of the panels is damaged, workers can take out the rivets that hold them in place and easily install a replacement.

It is, on the whole, an effective exterior, with a strong civic presence despite its lack of outlandish, look-at-meshapes.

The cantilevered rooms and their vast expanses of bulletproof glass endow the building with sculptural force. The steel-framed tower lessens their dominant horizontality, suggesting a modern version of an old-fashioned church steeple with its ghostly steel mesh cladding and an LED sign that advertises events at the center. The building effectively echoes the monumentality of the nearby Revere School, with its castlelike top, rather than imitating it.

There are subtle pleasures, too, such as the way Ronan bridges the second floor over sheltered outdoor foyers to create a graceful path inside. Most important, the action on the inside is communicated to the outside. The building does far more to express its activities than its structure. That showcases the center far more effectively than any sign.

Exterior panels a problem The innovative exterior panels, however, turn out to be a mixed blessing. True, the panels animate what otherwise would have been an enormous windowless mass. The blue panels even have a cool sophistication that joins with the smokestacklike form of the tower to suggest a sleek steamship. But the red ones are simply garish, resembling an oversize version of the pinkish and reddish asphalt shingles once attached to aging wood frame houses around Chicago. One wonders how they'll look in 10 years. For now, the cladding is more exuberant than elegant.

Inside, despite the need for the protective exterior, the center manages to be light and open.

The interior spaces work not simply as individual rooms but as interlocking zones that simultaneously create a sense of openness, enhance the center's sense of community and offer a form of security because people can be watched. A good example is the view from the cafeteria to the gymnasium. Shared maple flooring makes the two rooms seem like one. The glass between them is less a wall than a screen. The fact that the gym is sunken below ground level only adds to the spatial drama.

"The idea was to feed off the energy of the drill team and let that permeate the building," Ronan says.

The gym is an apt demonstration of what he calls "programmatic sustainability." Translation:

By combining two normally separated uses, a gym and a theater, into one, you save both money and energy. Of course, multipurpose buildings, such as the combined football and baseball stadiums of the 1960s, have failed before. In that regard, the acid test is going to be how the gym works as a theater -- whether its acoustics are effective, whether sound from inside the room doesn't disturb quiet spaces elsewhere in the building, whether its seats are comfortable and the machinery that moves them doesn't break down.

Flexible interior design

But there are no such caveats for the rest of the interior, which is both tailored to its occupants (the dance room, for example, is twice the normal height to let the drill team practice rifle and flag throwing) and flexible enough to accommodate future unanticipated uses.

Among the finest spaces are an exhibition/lecture hall (another flexible space) and the arts and crafts room, both of which allow children to rise above the everyday and look back down on their neighborhood -- its churches, its schools, its housing. The best space, however, is the roof garden, which is flanked by offices for the center and a corridor leading to the exhibition/lecture hall.

Like a conventional green roof, this one works against the urban heat-island effect by replacing heat-generating asphalt with heat-reducing plants. But it offers the advantage of being habitable, a place where kids growing up amid gangs and drugs can instead plant flowers and vegetables and watch them grow.

You can feel a sense of possibility here that you can't on real ground. Good architecture can do that. It doesn't just create new possibilities for how we use the world. It opens up new ways of seeing the world. That's what happens when an angel such as Gary Comer remembers from whence he came.