

THE PHOENIX

Design time

Mitchell Rasor on Percy Cycles, the Eastern Waterfront, and the contemporary city

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Mitchell Rasor is changing the way your city looks. His landscape architecture and design firm, MRLD, created the distinctive plaza outside of the Preble Street Resource Center and provided detailing for the Portland Public Market. His influence on the city is likely to increase with his innovative master plan for the redevelopment of the eastern waterfront.

In his late thirties, Rasor is of an imposing height but with a relaxed presence and a distinguishing Buckminster Fuller-like shaved dome. At his home and design office in Yarmouth, we touched on his accomplishments as a musician and visual artist (he has a photography show entitled "Demolition" up now at Percy Cycles) but his passion for urban design quickly eclipsed other topics of conversation.

Let's start with Percy Cycles and MRLD's involvement there.

We were hired by Percy to do a total makeover for his new store and identity. We started at ground zero — his personality, who he is, and worked up from there. We did the store and gallery design. It's a dream client; we're even designing the textiles, there will be pillows to sit on in the gallery side. Sound, locations of speakers, lighting. It was really hands-on and fun.

We made it bright orange so it would be inviting. Plus it's Bramhall Square and we wanted to make the store a gateway into pumping that area up.

We mainly get commissioned for city planning and landscape architecture, but I don't see a division between buildings and the city and the site, it's all energizing the city. Percy, with his personality, is just as much a part of the city.

Can you talk more about ways in which the divisions between the environment and architecture are blurred?

It's often frustrating because there are these divisions between landscape architecture, architecture, traffic and civil engineering, the development community, [and] planning review boards. We're lucky because we're often able to get in early in the process, like with the waterfront. We're able to make possible the parameters that encourage an evolving contemporary city.

We won't have control over the architecture, but we can make the lot an interesting shape, so whoever builds on the lot, no matter what, the building becomes a landmark.

With Preble Street, the plaza was a former parking lot. They hired us and I think initially they were imagining a wall, a sort of smoking area. We were like, no, it has to be exposed, an intermediary force between the building and the street. We didn't want to hide the problem, the people are part of urban life, what happens in Portland. We still want to give people good design.

What are your criteria for a contemporary city?

In some ways, Portland already has so much of it. The streets and public spaces are what's happening. The buildings somewhat fade away compared to the charged voids happening at the pedestrian level. You want modulation in the types of uses and economics.

And aspects that should be avoided?

An example of failure would be One City Center. A sort of suburban design. It's dropped in the city with a food court in the middle and two of the sides don't address the street at all. A failed piece of urban architecture. You need to reinforce the city. Integrate all the parts, be flexible in order to innovate.

Regulations such as parking impact the quality of urban life. It controls what kind of buildings you can put up because you need more cars. If you can innovate parking regulations or improve public transportation, then you can build cooler buildings. The car is



PARKING TO SMOKING: Public interface.

driving the city, which is in reverse, traffic engineers should be working around building parameters instead of the other way around.

How does this relate to the eastern waterfront project?

We planned the development, 56 acres in all. We studied hundreds of different viewpoints through modeling. We imagined it like a text, with nouns and verbs connected by punctuations of excitement. When you take historic structures and uses and mesh these with the requirements of new uses and designs they should not cancel each other out, watering down the potential of the city, but should spike the punch, making the city more intoxicating and sustainable. Every project should use innovation and the element of surprise, not regulations, to find the right solution.

On the Web

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