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ARCHITECTURE SMALLER IN LARGER SFMOMA



A portion of Marsha Cottrell's "A Black Powder Rains Down Gently on My Sleepless Night." Photo: Marsha Cottrell

The enlarged home of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art won't debut until 2016, but it casts a shadow across the exhibition now on view in the museum's Architecture and Design galleries.

The best moments in the show dubbed "Field Conditions" feel as charged and expansive as a big city's most complex nooks. Other segments have the detached bravado of art that tries to be daring but instead seems arcane - a sensation that architectural exhibitions in the renewed building will need to avoid at all costs.

The exhibition that opened this month and runs until January consists of 28 pieces, primarily drawings and prints. What binds them together is the idea of immersion, that buildings and places exist as part of much larger systems.

This is obvious to anyone who enjoys urban settings, the ragged edges as well as the skyline treats. It's also difficult to convey within walls, which is why the first two of the galleries together offer such a welcome surprise. The first one is a foyer-like space surrounded by four large prints, white on black, none with any discernible focus. Three by Lebbeus Woods present shards of lines and forms that seem propulsive, while Marsha Cottrell's "A Black Powder Rains Down Gently On My Sleepless Night" conveys the same unmoored tone through a dreamy lyricism where lines swirl amid dim points of light, as though the night sky had come alive.

You step from this dark gallery into a wholly different experience: nothing on the walls, just a floor covered in an equal number of small black and white tiles and a ceiling where bars of fluorescent light pivot in shifting

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patterns. The work below is Tauba Auerbach's "50/50 Floor," the installation above is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Homographies," and together it's as though the energies depicted in the prior gallery now frame our experience.

The show was curated by Joseph Becker, assistant curator of the museum's Architecture and Design Department, who says he wanted to present "a mix of artists and architects all attempting to describe a similar thing, a concept of spatiality that suggests depth and expanse."

As for the exhibition title, it comes from the 1996 essay "From Object to Field" by Stan Allen, now dean of the School of Architecture at Princeton University. The basic premise is that architects need to realize that buildings are part of a whole: "We thrive in cities precisely because they are places of the unexpected, products of a complex order emerging over time."

That's as succinct as the essay gets, and it points to a larger problem with exhibitions of this nature.

While the first two galleries are vivid and charged, the final gallery belabors the obvious. Not that individual works aren't cool to look at - Daniel Libeskind's legendary 1978 "Micromegas Studies" are here - but they're restating a point known to anyone who cares about cities. All the pieces are attached.

Viewed in that context, as an energetic whole, I'm glad this exhibition was staged. What worries me is what comes next as SFMOMA decides the importance it places on architecture as part of its ongoing mission. This is the time when decisions are being made about the enlarged museum's interior design. Yet there's been no architecture and design curator on staff since Henry Urbach left in the spring of 2011. Interviews were called off earlier this year without an offer to anyone being made.

And while we won't know until November how the museum allocates space to its different departments, all signs indicate that the A+D galleries will grow only slightly - even though the overall museum is doubling in size. I make these points because architecture isn't simply a branch of the arts. It shapes the buildings and physical spaces that in turn shape our lives. The Bay Area also demonstrates the extent to which standard frames can be reimagined, such as the way that the line between sidewalks and streets has been blurred by such innovations as parklets.

There's a value in looking back at how the cultural world defines the forms of urban life, and "Field Conditions" does this well. But SFMOMA will miss a bet if it lets itself be upstaged by the ever-mutating world outside its doors.