

AT THE GALLERIES

By Karen Wilkin

Coda: At a moment when new museums by brand name architects seem to be as ubiquitous as Starbucks or Duane Reade stores, the new Denver Museum of Contemporary Art by the British-Nigerian David Adjaye stands out as one of this year's best. The façade is straightforward and handsome, the progression through the building is rational, and the elegantly proportioned, beautifully lit, neutral but varied galleries respond well to the multivalent needs of present-day art. There's even a delightful roof terrace and café, not to mention LEED certification as a green building. The spaces designated for video could use sound isolation and the execution of details and finishes could have been more exacting, but overall, Adjaye's modest, intelligent museum deserves loud applause.

That would be true in any context, but the virtues of the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art are particularly noble because of its location. The clarity, logic, and restraint of Adjaye's building, conceived expressly for the art of the moment and wonderfully functional, stands in ironic contrast to the Denver Art Museum's new addition by Daniel Libeskind. When angling for the commission, I'm told, Libeskind maintained that "white box" spaces, designed for twentieth-century art, were passé; his irrationally angled galleries were what was needed for twenty-first-century art. Denver obviously bought into this typical piece of Libeskind rhetoric, but I remain unconvinced. From what I've seen, some site-specific projections can look OK in the cramped, disorienting galleries, but that's about it. The slanted walls virtually defy use, even though the museum is proud of inventing, of necessity, a way of hanging paintings on projecting brackets, which works but looks dreadful. The arbitrary collision of slanted walls creates pockets of completely inexplicable space and projections that require ad hoc barriers to keep visitors from tripping or impaling themselves. Everything other than Libeskind's signature angles and slanting windows slots seems unconsidered. The ceilings, with their rows of outmoded can lights, suggest a 1970s convention center, and circulation is wretched. In the category "outstanding museum buildings opened in 2007," Denver can boast two inclusions, Adjaye's Museum of Contemporary for excellence, Libeskind's addition to the Denver Art Museum for pretentiousness and arrogant disregard of function.