The Form of NonConformity: Architecture & The Punk Rock Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT
Punk rock is about music, rebellion, anarchy, and style. How can this be translated into architecture? Can a building possess these qualities? What would a rebellious building look like? How will it challenge our conceptions of "beauty?"
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ABSTRACT

Punk rock is about music, rebellion, anarchy, and style. How can this be translated into architecture? Can a building possess these qualities? What would a rebellious building look like? How will it challenge our conceptions of “beauty?”
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Fig. 1: photo, Washington, DC
A music venue for D.C.

INTRODUCTION

The punk concepts I looked at during my research came from the period known as the “birth” of punk rock in the mid- to late Seventies. At that time music was about long, drawn-out jam sessions and sometimes-pretentious guitar solos. The musicians that would later be known as “punk” were creating music directly opposing that. These new songs lasted less than two minutes and had a bare-bones structure sometimes consisting of no more than 3 chords.

When punk music and culture made the leap across the pond to England around 1976, a specific poster campaign developed based on these ideas. These posters had the images of three chords, A, D, and G, and one simple message – “Learn these, and start a band.” Punk music was something anyone could create and was not reserved for an elitist group of musicians. As the concept caught on, small venues popped up around New York, London, and L.A. that would allow these amateur acts to perform. It was my intention with this design to bring that type of venue into the heart of DC.
Fig. 3: Concept collage

"when punk came along, the one thing you were not supposed to be was musical."

Fig. 4: Concept collage

"new music will be answered by the new architecture-- work we have not yet seen-- only heard."
Site selection proved to be the key element in unlocking this design. It was important to put the venue in an unexpected place; so naturally, the main street in the downtown business district seemed like an ideal place. The punk venue is not sitting on an empty lot. Rather, near the corner of K Street and 16th Street NW, the venue is sitting on top of existing buildings — most notably a two-level Burger King which will represent the consumerism and mass production that punks are so against. The structure of the building actually pierces through the Burger King in a number of places.
The form of the building itself is an expression of a parasitic relationship. Each one of the programmatic elements is a separate rectilinear mass. As a whole, the masses appear to be clinging to or growing out from one another. Each of the masses is clad in a different material to keep them separate. However, the materials are all panels within a unifying system. The choice was made to use a panel system like this for two reasons. The first is ease of construction, and the second is that it is easier to reclaim used materials in smaller sizes. Aesthetically, it was important to have a dirty, rough, unfinished feel from the street, and the use of reclaimed materials seemed achieve that effect.
The act of piercing was a concept that continued to present itself in the design. The brightly colored column-like cylinder on the façade is meant to be a visual representation of piercing through “the establishment.” The glass elevator was designed to be an experiential piercing in that the user can physically travel through the layers of Burger King before arriving at the venue. The elevator was also a major element in another design concept that would be known as “anarchy of circulation.” It became quite obvious early on in the process that while punk was about being unconventional and shockingly different, there was a limit to how unconventional a building could be. The venue still had to obey certain rules and building codes. On the most basic level, that meant that visitors to the building could not be forced to crawl in through the windows instead of using the doors just because it was different. In light of that fact, it was determined that certain elements of the building could be unruly and anarchic; thus, the anarchy of circulation.
Upon first visiting the venue, the average user will automatically have to choose between climbing over 5 stories of stairs, which is already fairly unconventional, or using the elevator which is located inside the Burger King, a completely different building. The anarchy continues inside.
Programmatically, the venue is pretty standard. Immediately beyond the front doors, the entry level contains a ticket counter and a small manager’s office. The majority of the floor, though, is occupied by a coffee bar/cafe. It was important for there to be some kind of life to the building during the day. This way the average businessman working on K Street can stop in and grab a cup of coffee, and sit next to a punker while he reads the paper.

Also on the main floor is a small staircase that leads down to a seating level and lounge area. This level, referred to as the Seating Level, contains various furniture and booths, but could easily accommodate a pool table or other bar-like activities.
This level is also important to the energy of circulation concept in that in order to get up to the performance space one has to go down to this level which contains the staircase that leads to the stage down seen completely unconventional in terms of building circulation, which is usually meant to be as clear as possible.

The stair to the performance space is set inside a large corrugated metal tube that was meant to call to mind a sewer pipe. This was a deliberate choice to use this traditionally underground item as the passage to see a type of underground music. The experience of climbing the staircase, with simplistic single-bulb light fixtures swinging freely with the wiring exposed, and the absence of natural light, was intended to create a sense of suspense and a feeling of going somewhere one might not be supposed to go. The sewer pipe is also a key aesthetic element on the exterior in that this item which is usually underground and tasked with a fairly unpleasant function is now suspended over sixty feet in the air and seen as a space in which someone might intentionally want to be.

Fig. 20: Section sketch
After climbing the stairs to the performance level, the user can hear the music from the stage, but cannot yet see the stage. Straight ahead, however, the visitor can see the bar, a staple in any kind of music venue. This area, which is repeated on the balcony level, is quite simplistic. It consists of a bar counter, a few stools, and some tall tables to stand around. It is intended to be a space for small groups or individuals who might need to get away from the noise temporarily.

The performance space, which takes up the rest of the level, is a large open area in front of the stage. There are two large speaker towers provided on either side of the stage that is framed by two columns. This level also includes a backstage area for the musicians.
The balcony level is very similar to the main performance level below it. The general use of this space is for the audience. There is another bar on this level as well as a separate pair of restrooms. This floor also contains a modest storage room from which the roof can be accessed.
The building was designed using steel construction. There were some obvious obstacles to overcome with the structure, the main one being the fact that the entire building is on stilts. Establishing a grid of columns at first seemed too orderly and very un-punk, but as the process went on it appeared that there was already a built-in grid being made. The bordering edges of the surrounding buildings and those underneath the venue provided very clear lines where the columns might be placed.

After the grid was established it had to be broken, because punks like to break rules. Small offsets were created at specific points in the structure to highlight certain elements of the design. The columns differ greatly in size and location on the performance level than on the entry level. This is to signify a different kind of space. The performance and balcony levels are entirely focused on the music while the lower levels are about socialized or other activities. For example, two columns were specifically offset from the grid to frame the stage. In the bar area, one column was moved as a way to express the massing of the performance volume to those on the interior.
The small columns encountered upon first entering the performance level were placed for a few reasons. Firstly, the general perception of a column is something big and strong. The small columns are a direct challenge of that stereotype. Secondly, the “forest” the columns create is an additional effort to confuse the average visitor through anarchy of circulation. Thirdly, the large number of columns visually reinforce the concept of piercing on the front elevation where they can be seen poking through the roof structure.

After the column locations had been determined, the bracing could be placed. Two levels of girders below the building provide horizontal bracing. The somewhat complex diagonal bracing was meant to look like a tangled mess without any order (anarchy). However, in planning and building the bracing members, there were specific rules that had to be followed. Those rules are examples of the kind of “authority” that this punk building had no choice but to obey. No one can rebel against gravity.

Fig. 24.1, 24.2: Framing sketches
The choices on materials were made based on either aesthetics or acoustics. On the exterior, each individual mass is clad with some kind of industrial-looking material. Some of those include concrete panels, polycarbonate plastic, chain-link fence, laminated glass, and Cor-Ten steel. The Cor-ten steel in particular was chosen for the mass containing the bathrooms. This steel is rust-colored and stains almost everything around it. This was an appealing choice for its initial appearance, and also the contribution it would make in the future aesthetic of the building.
The performance and balcony levels, which read as one volume from the exterior, are clad in corrugated aluminum. It was intended that this metal would have graffiti on it, representing the dynamic and rebellious activities inside. The users are actually encouraged to spray paint, that is, if they can get up there to do so.

One space that has been overlooked is the smoking deck behind the building. It is illegal to smoke in any kind of public establishment in Washington, D.C., and it was important to provide this kind of space for the users and musicians. The deck is accessed by the fire stairs, and is surrounded completely by full-height chain-link fence. From here, graffiti artists can climb up the fence to other building levels.

Fig. 26: Concept sketches
Fig. 27: Early elevation
Acoustic materials for the interior spaces were chosen carefully. The main performance area is covered with corrugated metal acoustic panels. The intention here was to reinforce the massing concept from the exterior, and mirror the materials seen from the outside. The floor is clear rubber on top of crushed newspaper. The soft materials are better for absorbing sound, and the newspaper brings to mind the initial experimental cubes with which this design process began.

Acoustic melamine foam was used in the small area below the balcony floor. The pyramid shapes bring to mind the spiked Mohawks that punk rockers have been known to sport, and again the piercing concept.
CONCLUSION

This punk music venue tucked inside an alley on K Street is meant to inspire people to question their own perceptions of beauty. The intent here was to challenge the general conception of what a building should be. Even though there are many aspects of the building that are wildly unconventional, as a whole it remains a completely usable public space for the city to enjoy.
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