

## Architecture

# Finding beauty in the DNA of a biotech facility

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One of the things a good architect can do is provide the perfect gift wrapping for a building that otherwise would look like a boring box. That may not be the highest achievement of architecture, but it's a valuable one.

There are virtues besides elegant exterior wrapping at the new Vertex building at the corner of Third Street and Linskey Way in East Cambridge. But the crisp, contemporary wrapping is what you notice first. Architect Steven Ehrlich of Los Angeles is reminding us what a treat it can be, in sometimes reactionary Boston, to see an unapologetically modern building handled with panache and confidence.

The building is essentially a six-story box of biotech research labs and offices. Vertex Pharmaceuticals, a company that started in Cambridge and invents "small molecule drugs" (no, I don't know what those are either) for illnesses, is a tenant in the building, which was designed to be a generic biotech facility.

It's often been noted that the key invention of modern art is collage. Vertex is an architectural collage. It's a deft assemblage of flat planes made of two beautiful materials, one solid and the other translucent. The solid material is a pale ocher terra cotta tile, and the translucent one is a greenish-bluish glass set in vertical channel-shaped planks. Both are imported from Germany.

Ehrlich has obviously had lots of aesthetic fun, playing the role of the artist by cladding his building in this way.

Writing about the terra cotta tile, he says: "The material's warm earthiness, in counterpoint with the translucent, fluid quality of the channel glass, forms a composition of Mondrianesque syncopation between weight and weightlessness."

The games are subtler than they seem. You don't notice it at first, but the tiles come in four different textures, arranged in patterns to suggest the fundamental components of a DNA molecule — adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine. For the layman, all that's seen is a pleasingly varied tile surface. But for the inside doer, in this burgeoning biotech neighborhood near MIT, there's a coded message of welcome. Equally beautiful is the glass, a crisp, translucent watery scrim interrupted by clear windows at regular intervals on the module of



GLOBE PHOTOS/PETER VANDERWARKER

One of the striking features about the Vertex building in East Cambridge is its elegant, contemporary exterior. Inside, skylights brighten every part of the facility.



the labs within.

As noted, there's more than aesthetics to the Vertex. At the street corner, it will engage the passerby with a "Mediterranean-style restaurant," now in the process of negotiating a lease. At the roof, a spectacular metal canopy, supported by angled masts constructed by Boston shipbuilders, signals the presence of the building's social spaces inside: a cafeteria, library, and gym.

Indoors, all the labs and offices are arranged around a stunning 100-foot-tall atrium. Skylights flood natural light down into every part of the building. Ehrlich manipulates his atrium to encourage chance encounters among the scientists. Stairs, balconies, lounges, and overlooks animate the space

while tempting creative social interaction.

I suppose the interior detailing won't be to everyone's taste. I admire it. It's the kind of modernism that grows from an acceptance and affection for industrial technology. Every joint and connection are crisply resolved, as if this were not a building but a ship or a fine bicycle. The predominant materials are glass and metal, with floors made of ordinary concrete toned the color of old leather. Wood guardrails relieve the predominant hard-edged aesthetic. Cambridge architects Symmes, Maini & McKee collaborated with Ehrlich on the project.

The Vertex building isn't quite finished. Nobody will be moving in, nor will the landscape be done, until the end of the year. But it already stands as a promise of a high standard for the larger development of which it is part. That development is called "Kendall Square" (rather confusingly, since there's already a Kendall Square nearby). It's a major project being done by Lyme Properties, headed by former Cambridge city councilor David Clem.

Like most large developments, this one has been controversial, and its ultimate success remains to be seen. But Clem has done things few developers do. He held a design competition for each of the buildings, bringing in talented architects from all over the nation and Europe. He commissioned a master plan from Ken Greenberg, an urban designer from Toronto, and a landscape plan from Michael Van Valkenburgh, another noted designer. Their plans call for the extension of the old, largely abandoned

Broad Canal into the site, where it will become an amenity for the new development. The 10<sup>th</sup> acre, seven-building project will eventually include a mix of uses, including a hotel and apartments and more biotech labs and offices.

There's one more lesson from Vertex. If you want to see the difference a good architect can make, you only have to look from this building across Linskey Way. There stands another new building of similar size, shape, and purpose. It's a dog. It is an ugly, boring, gray presence that entirely lacks the inventive spirit of the Vertex. I'm not going to name the developer or the architect. But they should feel ashamed.

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