



BY TERENCE GOWER — STICKY PICTURES

Joseph Hirshhorn intended to provide much more than an art museum for his "city of culture" in his company town for uranium miners, as Terence Gower's installation shows. The planned amenities included a hotel, left, sketched by modernist architect Philip Johnson.

How the Hirshhorn Nearly Became the Jewel of Ontario

ART, From C1

staff.

Joe Hirshhorn, a child of the tenements, had made a decent fortune on Wall Street in the 1920s and had started using it to buy modern art. But the huge uranium strike he bankrolled in Canada in 1953 — just in time for the nuclear arms race — allowed him to think bigger, and to bring several of his interests together. As a mining magnate, he needed a place to house his workers. As an arts patron, he wanted somewhere to showcase his collection, which he now had the money to expand to museum size. And as a new-minted philanthropist, he wanted to help the world, in this case by giving those workers a model town with that art at its heart. That town was called Hirshhorn.

Gower lays out the story of Hirshhorn, Ontario, the model town that never was, in four big vitrines. Two give us background on the uranium enterprise behind the town and on the abstract art that Joseph Hirshhorn owned.

Another talks about ideas for the community itself, conceived as a step up from the gold-rush conditions in most mining centers. Hirshhorn brought in Philip Johnson,

a New York hotshot who was head of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, to do drawings and a model for his city. When they presented them to the relevant authorities, they described it as a place "planned towards happy living."

Gower's last display case gives us a look at a country house that Johnson also built for his patron, almost as a kind of prototype for construction in the nearby town. Built in the "international style" perfected by Bauhaus master Mies van der Rohe — plate-glass walls filling a sober grid of metal beams — the house, and the town, were about a vision of human control and humane order, imposed in a wild place where there wasn't much of either.

Gower's cases do something most art hasn't done for a century or so: present new facts about reality. Viewers are welcome to their own take on these facts. And that take is meant to color, and be colored by, the other elements in "Public Spirit" that more clearly look like art.

Two skeletal grids of welded aluminum reproduce, at one-tenth scale, the essential forms of the model town's buildings. Johnson's 10-story office tower becomes a 10-foot-tall minimal sculpture by Gower. A sim-

ilar sculpture turned on its side echoes the low-slung museum that was to sit beside the tower on the Hirshhorn town plaza — art and business as reflections of each other, co-existing in harmony.

And then comes the most impressive part of Gower's installation. Backing up the informative vitrines and the thoughtful sculptures, Gower gives us a dose of fantasy: a wall-size animation, so well rendered it almost looks live, that imagines how the city might have actually turned out. While a plummy female voice gives a sales pitch for the place, we're granted a God's-eye view around the town of Hirshhorn, "a sophisticated culture center," according to the pitch. We fly down the halls of the town's art museum ("its main attraction"), out along Hirshhorn's "extra-wide" main street (Gower imagines a Uranium Bar & Restaurant and the Hirshhorn Hotel, as well as a Mental Hygiene Center), up into the workers' "modern and efficient blocks of flats" (their decor looks like an ad for Design Within Reach) and finally right through a plate-glass window and out into an untouched wilderness sitting quiet under stars. Imagine a townscape in which matching buildings all look like the District's main

library (the similarity to that Mies structure is uncanny) and you'll get a good idea of Johnson's — and Gower's — urban imaginings.

It would be easy to mock the utopian, paternalistic pretensions of Hirshhorn and Johnson. The notorious failures of modernism have been a target of the avant-garde for several decades now. What Gower makes clear is that such contempt is too simple, and that modernism's good intentions can't be so easily dismissed. Standing in the middle of his installation, he says that his work "is much less about the decay of modernism than about the initial excitement, the project of modernism."

Gower has firsthand experience of that project. His father, a dedicated modernist, was the architect of many of the buildings in Vernon, B.C., the artist's rural home town. As Gower describes it, his father's ideals weren't so much about improbable utopias as aggressive melioration of what was already at hand.

Maybe that's why Gower doesn't set his animation in some 1950s past. And he doesn't set it in a silly Jetsons future. Its soundtrack is newly composed electronica; its voice-over, cast in the present tense,

sounds more robo-call than film strip, as it describes a city committed to "reducing the effects of sprawl on this pristine landscape." There's a sense that, with a bit of toning down, the ideals behind Hirshhorn, Ontario, might not be such an absurd model for any planner faced with our current urban messes.

So why didn't the project get realized? Two reasons Washingtonians will understand: money and politics. The town would cost way more than an early estimate of \$35 million, and rival townships in the area were dead set against its birth. It's hard to believe, but a decade later, when Joe Hirshhorn was still looking to build a home for his art, there was less in his way on the Mall.

Terence Gower: Public Spirit runs through March 22 at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, on the south side of the Mall at Seventh Street NW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit www.hirshhorn.si.edu.

VIDEO ON THE WEB To see a clip from Gower's animation, go to www.washingtonpost.com/museums.