

William T. Eberhard AIA, IIDA: ESSAYS ON ARCHITECTURE:

**The Lumen**  
Cleveland, OH



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## The Lumen is Playhouse Square's Black Eye

The Lumen apartment building at East 17th St. and Euclid Avenue in Playhouse Square is the first development by the Playhouse Square Foundation (PSF). We can only pray it is their last. The project's architecture fails Playhouse Square and downtown Cleveland on qualitative and qualitative levels.

The \$135 million project with 319 apartments and a 550-car garage overwhelms its site that marks the eastern edge of Playhouse Square.

The project was designed by the Chicago architectural firm of SCB that *Chicago Tribune* critic Blair Kamin characterizes as a "workhorse" firm. *Cleveland Plain Dealer* art and architecture critic Steven Litt observes that Kamin's assessment is "a less than ringing endorsement" of the firm. One can only wonder what PSF was looking for in its search for an architect and further wonder what they think they got in SCB.

The project's preliminary design was criticized by Litt and myself in 2017 when the conceptual design was first released. Neither PSF nor SCB made any positive changes to their initial design. To the contrary, the design got significantly worse - and was constructed.

### Compatibility:

Assessing a work of architecture requires objectively evaluating its compatibility with its context. This is particularly relevant if the context has a quality to be respected and therefore acknowledged in the design of the new work.

The theatres of Playhouse Square are the envy of every city in America. The Hanna, Ideastream and Bulkley Buildings are not architectural masterpieces, but their stone façades and the adequate articulation of their bottoms, middles and tops are acceptable and create decent background buildings that contribute to the quality and permanence of the Playhouse Square experience and brand.

The United Way Building is a jewel, even in its third life after Bonwit Teller and the Prescott Ball & Turben brokerage firm who were not given enough credit for buying the building and renovating it in 1980 which was the first major effort to save anything at Playhouse Square.

Assessing compatibility requires evaluating the scale, form, materiality and rhythm of a work in relation to its



Above:

1. Playhouse Square's Euclid Avenue north side
2. The Lumen (left) and B. F. Keith Building (right)

neighbors. This is not to imply that a new work must copy, emulate or limit its design by its context, but if the neighbors have a quality, it is incumbent on the architect and owner of a new work to make an earnest effort to develop a design that fits well in its neighborhood and interacts effectively with its neighbors.

In this regard, the Lumen is a complete failure.

### Scale:

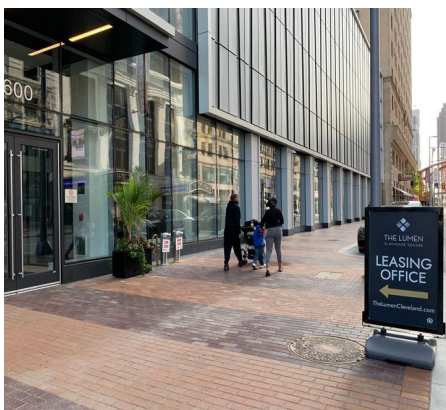
The scale of the project is too tall.

The 36-story Lumen building towers over the 20-story distinguished B. F. Keith Building across the street. This is unfortunate because a more complimentary massing could have created an appealing bookend kind of gateway to and from Playhouse Square. A lower mass stretching to the west could have also delivered more apartment lake views to the marketplace – a real estate benchmark of apartment value





Top to Bottom:  
1. Lumen Conceptual Design Rendering  
2. Lumen Garage as built  
3. Lumen sidewalk dead zone



and desirability.

In his review that labeled the project's design "underwhelming," Litt charted the potential "pivotal role" the project's development could have attained, for it had the potential to "enlarge the city's skyline, add more street life and consumer demand for local businesses, create a stronger sense of 24/7 vitality and provide additional parking for theatergoers."

At a technical level only, Lumen has enlarged the city's skyline and provided some additional parking for theatergoers, though the project was constructed on a parking lot used by theatergoers, so the net add of parking spaces is small and insignificant.

### **"Street Life:"**

In his 2017 review, Litt was concerned that the SCB design would "repeat the unfortunate pattern created in the 1970's and '80's throughout the downtown Erieview Urban Renewal District, in which office towers are flanked by garages that deaden stretches of Superior, Walnut, Rockwell and Chester avenues."

It should indeed be noted that SCB and PSF ignored the prevailing urban design standards in the US of the last 40 years that avoided the Erieview trend like the plague. It should also be noted that along Euclid Ave. and in Playhouse Square, that pattern was successfully avoided - until the Lumen.

SCB's architect argued that it was not possible to locate offices, apartments or retail along Euclid. That bullshit is easily refuted had the project removed the north parking spaces along Euclid on its lower levels and added another level of parking vertically to deliver the 550 spaces required. If PSF had any kind of an urban design conscience, it could have filled that space by relocating its own offices to at least enliven the street during the day.

Instead, PSF and SCB failed Playhouse Square and the city with the project's massing which took the entire street presence between the tower at East 17th Street and the Hanna Building at East 14th Street and infilled it with a parking garage. The streetscape of continuous retail and restaurants at Playhouse Square was fractured with a new dead zone.

The initial PSF/ SCB renderings showed a massive graphic display on the garage's upper floors featuring theatre shows in an attempt to visually enliven the mass and take the eye off of the disregard of the developer and architect for the architectural syntax of Playhouse Square and the whole of Euclid Avenue down to Public Square.

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But the completed Lumen project features slanted metal panels instead with no graphics. Litt tells us that these metal panels are supposed to evoke theatre curtains. A small branch bank occupies the ground floor space at the east end of the five-story garage mass.

And the garage's ground floor was promised to feature display windows that were to be programmed by Playhouse Square. They are absent two years after completion.

### **Form and Shape:**

The tower is clad in blue glass above its black glass base which Litt describes as “a large slab in blue-tinted glass that would appear at most times of day and in most kinds of weather to melt into the sky.” We should be so lucky.

Litt adds, “The firm has complicated the form of the slab by angling large sections of its north facades outward like one-sided bays designed to grab westward views down Euclid Avenue toward Public Square.”

These 4' projections were supposed to glow and masquerade as 'design.' But these small planar shifts are not substantial enough to effectively break up the bulk of the tower's large mass, give it genuine character or acknowledge the visual rhythms and proportions of its neighbors.

Such gimmicks – not unlike those of the Downtown Hilton Hotel – which Litt accurately describes as “insubstantial and not terribly exciting,” are typically the work of unskilled architects unable to otherwise design their buildings with a balance of scale and character, so they have to resort to such gimmicks. It is the same with gratuitous material changes like those on the Lumen's east and south elevations.

### **Materiality:**

Playhouse Square's buildings are, with one exception, all stone and terra cotta masses - sturdy materials that convey a quality and a timeless brand identity for Playhouse Square. Playhouse Square buildings deliver a human scale with their punched window openings. The single exception, the turd-brown glass US Bank Building at East 14th and Euclid Ave. is loathed by Clevelanders who refer to it as the 'Darth Vader' building for its sinister appearance and its own failure to fit in. At least its scale does not overwhelm the Hanna Building.

One change made after the Lumen's initial conceptual



Above Left: The Lumen; Above Right: Hilton Downtown Hotel  
Below: Lumen & Keith Building East Elevations



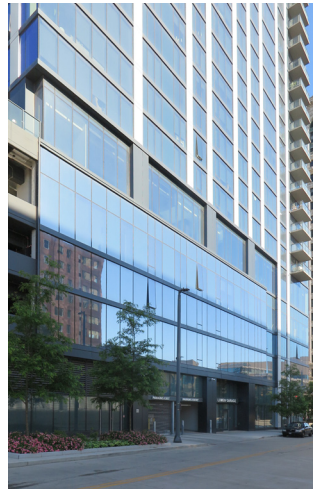




Above Left: Lumen original Design Rendering from the east  
Above Right: Lumen east elevation as built



Below Left: Lumen original design rendering  
Below Right: Lumen base on East as built



design was the addition of vertical metal stripes at what are presumably the building's structural columns – but only at the building's east and south sides.

The Lumen's all-glass facade is otherwise scaleless, cheap and inappropriate for its context.

### Design Development:

Projects typically go through three successive phases of design from the architect before they are bid and constructed: Schematic Design, Design Development and Construction Documentation. Design Development is when the architect prepares more detailed drawings of the project's exterior and interior and interacts with engineers to refine a project's design and details. At the end of the DD phase, the drawings are typically given a detailed estimate to confirm that the project is tracking to its budget in a satisfactory manner and if not, adjustments are made by the design team.

The Lumen as constructed appears to have not benefitted from **any** DD refinement. To the contrary. The tower's elements collide gracelessly with one another where the east elevation's middle vertical metal bands simply bash into the glass base and louvered top.

The original design showed a deep recess between the garage and the apartment tower on the east elevation which at least differentiated the function of the two elements and gave relief to the massive east facade by effectively floating the tower over the garage. The built version instead features a token 16"-18" setback from the column covers to the glass, and horizontal black glass below at the garage which is a 'miss' for it appears nowhere else.

An axiom of architectural design that has centuries of precedent regardless of a building's style or vocabulary is that if a project has any scale, it should have an bottom, middle and top - **that should be integrated with one another.**

The Lumen tower's three elements are painfully not integrated with one another.

The vertical banding of columns on the east and south elevations is missing altogether on the north and west elevations.

There is no transition at all at the top – the glass and metal panels simply stop abruptly at the horizontal louvers fronting rooftop mechanical equipment. A meager effort would have at least utilized vertical

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louvers instead of continuous horizontal slats which would have been the same cost. It was just a matter of giving a shit.

At the base, the tower's vertical column covers stop abruptly over the black spandrel glass at the lower garage floors. Originally, the garage's east exposure was to feature vertical panels like the Euclid Ave. facade which would have at least provided a continuity between the east and north facades. But this too was lost in the final design. The presentation of columns terminating and appearing to rest and bear on glass is irrational and unsettling. It is visually awkward and unattractive.

The building's original design of the east massing was a graceful and architecturally appropriate method for joining/separating the apartment tower at its parking garage base. But in the final design, this refinement was eliminated and the tower simply slams into the base, and columns abruptly disappear or change material or arbitrarily double in width.

Similarly, originally the rooftop mechanical room was situated to the tower's west side of the roof. But in the version constructed, it occupies the entire roof so the tower walls also slam into its horizontal louvered perimeter walls.

This ineffective resolution of details is simply poor design.

PSF should have known better and demanded design excellence for such a large and important project. The implication is that the PSF Board and design team lacked an adequate understanding and appreciation of even basic architectural design principles, let alone design excellence.

And Cleveland's Downtown Design Review Committee should have likewise refused to approve something so lacking in design quality and appropriateness. The tragedy of the Lumen is that neither the client, architect nor Cleveland's Downtown Design Review Committee were sufficiently adept at discerning the numerous shortcomings and providing constructive critical commentary to keep disappointments like this project from happening.

This project and others indicates that the talent pool on the DDRC is lacking which explains the weak and toothless performance of the group over the last decades.

### **Stewardship:**

PSF delivered another mediocre major project for downtown from an out-of-town firm. What was PSF's justification for this?

An apartment building and parking garage is not a complex design challenge that is beyond the abilities of dozens and dozens of local architects. Who did PSF consider for this assignment? Was a formal evaluation of firms done? How many were interviewed?



Above:  
Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art; Farshid Moussavi  
Below:  
Lewis Environmental Center; Oberlin College; Will McDonough  
Downtown Hilton Hotel







Left Above: Lumen garage along Euclid Ave.  
Right Top: Detail of Lumen's awkward east elevation



In 1996, Litt wrote that Cleveland has a weak design culture. In the years since, while there have been but a few notable exceptions – CWRU's Student Center by Ralph Johnson of Perkins & Will, CSU's College of Education by NBBJ from Columbus and Perk Plaza at Chester Commons by Balsley Associates of New York. But those successes aside, we continue to be victimized by significant failures from out-of-town architects whose reputations do not suffer irreparable damage from laying turds in Cleveland.

Cleveland's MOCA is a significant similar terrible example, despite a spectacular site and a reasonable budget. The inexperienced London-based architect hired by MOCA failed to capitalize on the fantastic highly legible site to make contemporary art visible and accessible to Clevelanders.

Instead, she imposed an arbitrary opaque black stained stainless steel block form, itself a gimmick that literally turns a black face to the community. And the result is not a even a decent setting for contemporary art.

Oberlin College's Lewis Environmental Center by Will McDonough was announced to the world with a dozen sustainability and energy objectives. It failed to achieve even one of them!

Cleveland's Downtown Hilton Hotel is an awkward attempt to make up for a cheap glass tower dropped on top of a stone and glass base with arbitrary and irrelevant angles in its upper glass facade to try and make something interesting. Instead, it delivers a trite and jumbled unattractive pastiche of its own tired gimmicks.

The Lumen compels us to recall the letter to *Cleveland magazine* from the late Peter Lewis regarding a lack of leadership in Cleveland's institutions which sadly still rings

true.

Korman Jackson managing partner Jon Pinney made his splash on this subject at the City Club a few years ago, and called for the inept old guard to stand down for their failures and make way for new people who might actually lead. The board members and so-called 'leaders' of our public and private institutions have people with no apparent education in the arts or a rudimentary understanding of design excellence.

And while our neighbors in Pittsburgh, Columbus and Cincinnati are not as infected with this plague as are we, such clients too often resort to the axiom, "Just hire an out-of-town firm. Then it will look like we looked at local firms - even though we didn't – and were not satisfied. So we are off the hook."

This cop-out behavior was fortunately absent in Cleveland during the first half of the last century, and the outcomes were exemplary. That meritocracy that existed between the public and private clients in need of architectural services is long gone.

That meritocracy produced a city with landmarks that are worthy of the reverence they enjoy today thanks to the works of Walker & Weeks (Severance Hall, West Side Market, the Federal Reserve Bank, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Public Auditorium,



Above: Lumen Euclid Ave. presence rendering presented for approval  
Below: Lumen Euclid Ave. presence as delivered



Guardian Building/ National City Bank, First Church of Christ, Scientist, Union Banking & Trust Co., First Baptist Church, Superior Building, Willoughby Masonic Lodge, Cleveland Public Library, Allen Memorial Medical Library, St. Ann Church, Hope Memorial Bridge), Hubbell & Benes (Wade Memorial Chapel, West Side Market, Mather College, Central YMCA, Cleveland Museum of Art, Pearl St. Savings & Trust, St. Luke's Hospital, Ohio Bell Telephone Building, Fries & Schele Department Store), J. Milton Dyer (Cuyahoga County Courthouse, Tavern Club, Herrick Memorial Library in Wellington, Summit County Courthouse, Lake County Courthouse, Cleveland City Hall, Cleveland Athletic Club, Premier Industries, US Coast Guard Station) and Charles F. Schweinfurth (Mather Mansion/ Shoreby Club, Flora Stone Mather Memorial Chapel, Old Stone Church Renovation, Mather Mansion at CSU, Florence Harkness Memorial Chapel and Haydn Hall at CWRU, Church of the Covenant, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Union Club, Rockefeller Park Bridges, Sylvester T. Everett Mansion).

When this issue of out-of-town hiring practices has been raised with our community's so-called leaders today, they have responded, "Well, isn't it like this everywhere?" No! Pittsburgh, Columbus and Cincinnati each provide opportunities to local - and even young - architects to design major projects.

The Lumen is another important Cleveland project entrusted to an out-of-town C-tier firm who proceeded to slap something together without adequate care, passion or skill. And unlike other cities where there is genuine concern, debate and accountability about major projects that are presented in half-baked form, here in Cleveland, we build them - half-baked - without realizing the opportunities lost!

This institutional dislocation of Cleveland's architectural community from clients is largely attributable to a seventy-year slip-and-slide by clients who ignore the fact that the talent pool of Cleveland architects has for decades outperformed those in the rest of the state when measured by Ohio's AIA design awards programs. In the last 25 years, while representing only 25% of the membership of the American Institute of Architects in the state, Cleveland architects have won 50% of the design awards in the annual competitions.

### **Lack of Opportunity:**

In his book *Twilight of the Elites* on the deterioration of meritocracy in America, MSNBC cable news host Chris Hayes cites German social theorist Robert Michels in addressing the connective relationship between the lack of opportunity and the quality of outcome.



It can be effectively argued that the quality and strength of Cleveland's Architectural and Design Community has fallen in the past 30 years. There are a number of factors that explain this, but the lack of opportunity in our own community is at the top of the list. Cleveland architects are allowed to design apartments (!), branch banks, churches, K-12 schools, restaurants, grocery stores, suburban office buildings and retail projects.

But since the Blossom Music Center was awarded in 1967 to Piet van Dijk at the age of 38, **every** major Cleveland project has been awarded to an out-of-town firm. And it cannot be said that Cleveland is the better for it. Sadly, the list of other disappointments is long.

These results dilute the architectural and urban design integrity of our community and shoot our economy in the foot with our own gun by throwing away hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in fee income to communities far from NEOH.

You cannot become or remain a great community with third-rate architecture.

Playhouse Square previously enjoyed a strong architectural heritage and vernacular. That integrity has been dealt a very real blow by the Lumen.

When the Lumen's preliminary design was announced, Litt stated that he hoped that the refinement that comes in the design development phase would improve the project's underwhelming design. That did not happen. Not only did it not improve, it got conspicuously worse - and then got built!

Even if it had been improved, its excessive scale and insensitive materiality still insured the design would not fit its context. While many projects look better upon completion than the original renderings, the Lumen is regrettably not one of them.

Both PSF and SCB should be ashamed. Cleveland and Playhouse Square deserved better.

One would hope that PSF would not initiate further development efforts that would subject the city again to its lack of design awareness, but the Lumen project has been recently put up for sale.

While PSF has alleged that the building is 80% leased, two residents have recently reported their belief from discussions with real estate agents and other residents that the building is only 40% leased.

At a time when most downtown apartment buildings have waiting lists, that should lengthen the listing period and pull down the price. Is PSF too indignant and/or ignorant to learn their lessons?



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