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Bartle Hall loading dock goes from drab to dramatic

By KEVIN COLLISON

The north loading dock of **Bartle Hall**, an ugly entry point to downtown for 30-plus years, has been radically transformed to not only look good but also function better.

The \$7.3 million project, which opened last month, was designed by **Crawford Architects** of Kansas City with an aesthetic assist from New York artist Zhao Suikang. Crawford revamped the dock layout to make it accessible to large trucks, and Suikang created a shimmering metal sculpture called "Winds of Aphrodite" to adorn the aluminum mesh enclosure.

"It's still a loading dock, not a museum, but we may have made a silk purse out of a sow's ear," said Stacey Jones, a partner at Crawford.

The loading dock had been a plain, industrial operation along the south side of 12th Street between Broadway and Central Street since Bartle Hall opened in 1976. It was the first view many people saw arriving downtown via 12th and Broadway. It also faced the **Folly Theater** and was visible from nearby hotels, including the **Kansas City Marriott Downtown**.

"All the buildings were looking down into a loading dock with garbage Dumpsters and crates," Jones said. "That's what a lot of guests to Kansas City were gazing at."

The loading dock not only looked bad, it couldn't accommodate large trucks. Drivers were forced to enter and exit off 12th Street, and the tight turns were impossible for semitrailers to maneuver. As a result, the north end of the convention center often was underused.

Crawford's tasks from Kansas City's **Capital Improvements Management Office** were to make the loading dock usable for today's larger vehicles and achieve a major face-lift as well.

First, the entrance was shifted to Central Street so truckers don't have to make the sharp turns. They can drive directly into the dock area and then back easily to the loading platform. After delivering or picking up their loads, the trucks then exit straight onto Broadway.

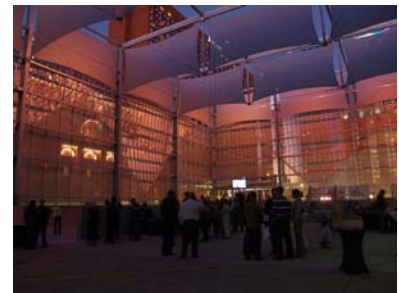
The second task was to camouflage the 27,000-square-foot dock area. The architects designed an open-air, 55-foot-tall enclosure made of aluminum mesh. Rather than enclose the structure with a solid roof, they installed sail-like mesh panels across the top that act as louvers.

When viewed from nearby high-rise buildings, the panels block the view into the dock area. They provide shade for workers inside and allow fresh air and ventilation.

The final task was to transform the mesh dock enclosure into a work of art. Because the project was publicly financed, it qualified for the city's One Percent for Art program.



The new loading dock enclosure at Bartle Hall was designed by Crawford Architects, where Stacey Jones is a partner. A New York artist created the metal sculpture.



Crawford persuaded the **Municipal Arts Commission** to allow the artist to work with the architects to incorporate the art into the enclosure.

"We said: Why don't you pay the artist his fee and we'll allow him to play with this immense canvas," Jones said. "We truly get an integration of art and architecture this way."

Suikang, an instructor at the **Fashion Institute of Technology** in New York, created a work that on the east and west sides of the enclosure is a whimsical takeoff on the massive triangles that form the walls of Bartle Hall. The north side, facing 12th Street, has a shimmering, metallic wall sculpture.

He described his work in a statement as a "piece of silky fabric stuck on the corner of the building," blown there by a sudden tornado. "It suggests the feminine (yin), mysterious and unpredictable side of life."

City officials are pleased with the result.

"The conversation at the opening event was how the look of the north dock has changed perceptions of folks coming downtown," said Oscar McGaskey, executive director of the city's **Department of Convention and Entertainment Facilities**.

Doug Tatum, executive director of the Folly Theater, welcomed his neighbor's makeover.

"The old loading dock was not a pretty sight," he said. "... I think it's pretty creative what the artist has done."

Local architects saluted the project as well.

"I think it's a very nice relief from the original building and a delightful design solution for such a needed but normally unattractive operation of loading and unloading trucks," said Steve McDowell of **BNIM Architects**.

The contractors on the project were **Taylor Kelly Construction** and **Pyramid Construction**. Jones singled out **A. Zahner Co.**, a Kansas City firm nationally renowned for its architectural metalwork, for fabricating the metal.

"Zahner can pull magic like a rabbit out of a hat," he said.