



Book Review

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Form and Dichroic Light

Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon University

Michelle LaFoe and Isaac Campbell

OFFICE 52 Architecture

Foreword by Cesar Pelli, FAIA

Introduction by Michael J. Crosbie, FAIA

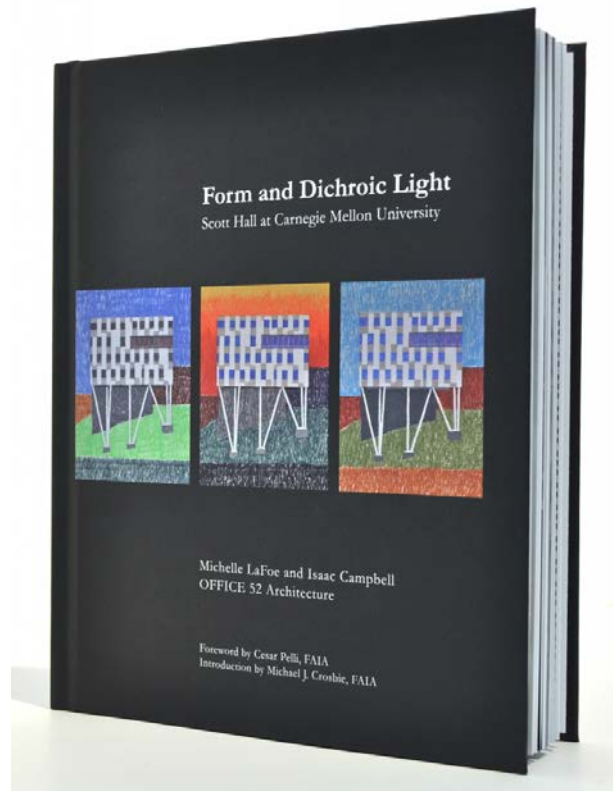
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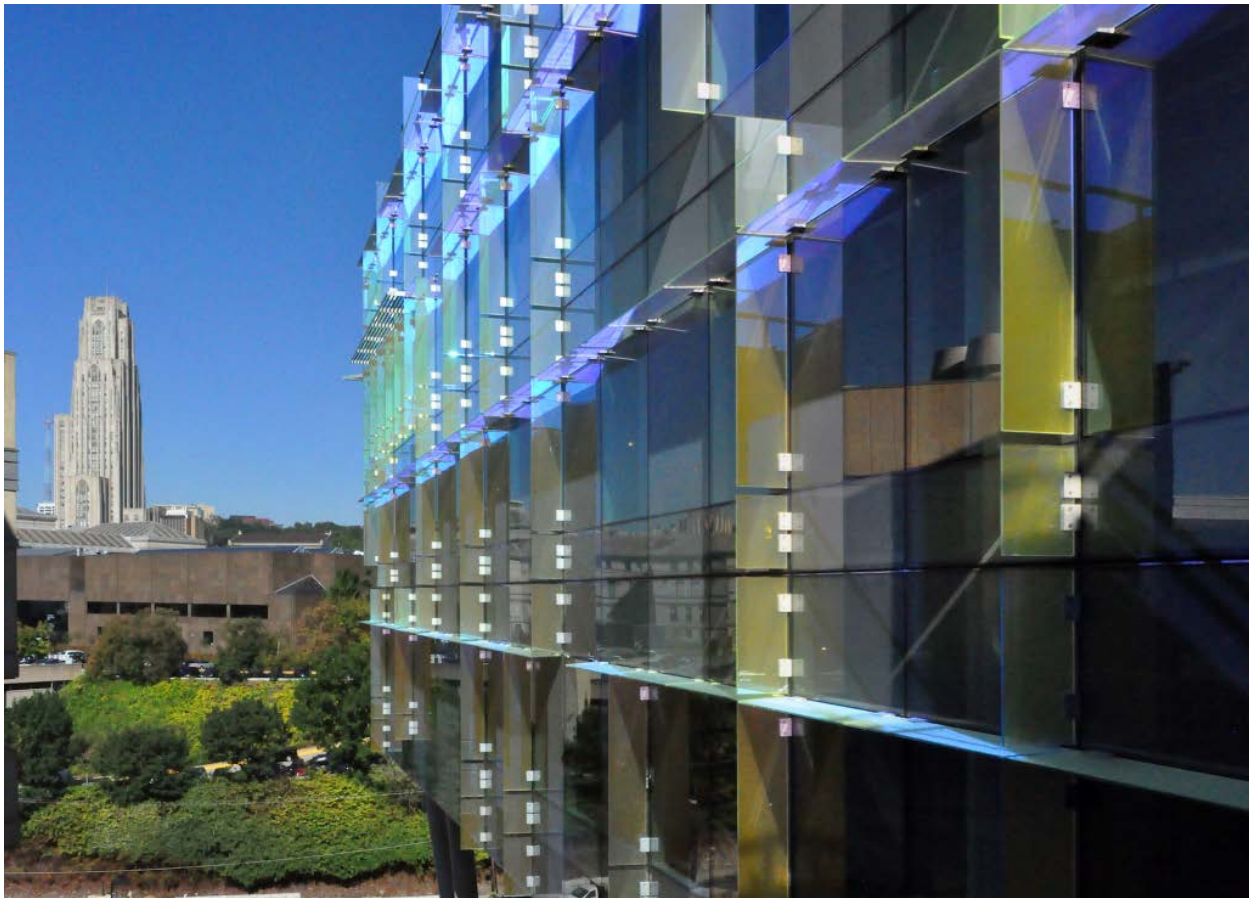
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In his introduction to *Form and Dichroic Light*, Michael Crosbie never mentions the term, “wild card,” to describe Office 52’s participation in the invited competition for the Carnegie Mellon Engineering Building. The four finalists, picked from a list of 17 firms, also included three household names: ZGF (Zimmer Gunsul Frasca), Wilson Architects, and BCJ (Bohlin Cywinski, Jackson). So, what possible chance could a firm, which had just recently opened a small office in Portland, Oregon, have against a competition lineup of this magnitude? But as OFFICE 52 Principal, Isaac Campbell explained, as a small firm, “we were quite nimble,” and the \$45,000 stipend the firms all received to produce a design could allow OFFICE 52 more time to undertake the research involved than might be the case with a larger office, where a cost controller is constantly focusing on the operation.

The fledgling nature of OFFICE 52 as a competitor in this event does not by any means go unnoticed by Crosbie, and he declares that their strategy to challenge the campus plan for the site—a totally different tact from what was anticipated from the others—was a risk worth taking, even at the cost of disqualification. The essay heading for his Introduction, “The Architecture of the Not So Obvious,” captures OFFICE 52’s strategy in a nutshell. “Recasting the site planning problem that Scott Hall presented for the Carnegie Mellon University campus allowed OFFICE 52 to develop a response that questioned how the problem was conceptually framed.” Crosbie then goes ahead to describe in detail the firm’s logical planning concept, which not only solved the site problem for the new building, but revealed a clever solution to opening a previously inaccessible section of the Mall to make it more inviting. Their design managed to not only accommodate the entire building program into this interstitial site, but also accomplish all of this harmoniously and logically. Instead of a building that would mark an end to a visual journey at the campus edge, it opens up new vistas.





View from Carnegie Mellon's Scott Hall to the Carnegie Museum of Art and the University of Pittsburgh © OFFICE 52

Finally the book reveals the firm's artistic bent, turning the façade into a work of art with its Dichroic glass panels, providing a light show depending on the play of light on the building's surface at different times of the day and the position of the viewer. The amount of research time the firm invested in this area to bring it to reality has certainly played dividends, enhancing the aesthetic value of the building.

So now we come back to the authors of this project, Michelle LaFoe and Isaac Campbell, the two principals of OFFICE 52. Both worked under Cesar Pelli, the author of the book's Foreword, and undoubtedly brought much of his approach to the architecture in their own practice. According to both Pelli and Crosbie, there was a little more to it than that: Pelli sees the influence of his mentor, Eero Saarinen, "with the focus on the importance of the physical model to study the form, texture and color of the architecture and the spaces they've created." Thus, in spirit and practice, Pelli sees the Saarinen tradition passed down in OFFICE 52's successful competition-winning project.

Having followed the evolution of Carnegie Mellon University's Scott Hall, both at a distance and up-close, this book was a welcome addition to the all too rare studies surrounding the gestation of a project, from competition process to realization. And for young architects, it is an example of what can be accomplished, not just with talent, but also with a solid foundation accumulated over several years of practice.

Oh, and by the way, OFFICE 52 can no longer be considered a "wild card."

<https://competitions.org/2018/06/office-52-at-carnegie-mellon/>