

Rita McBride

Bells and Whistles

2009-14

Brass

Mnemonics and Pneumatics

Robert Kirkbride

CAN INFRASTRUCTURE BE ORNAMENTAL? As with city water mains and the bones in our bodies, infrastructure tends to “do its job” unobtrusively, if not invisibly, below the surface and behind the scenes. In fact, infrastructure rarely captures our attention until it fails, disrupting everyday life. Consequently, it tends to elicit curses more than praise. Yet, perhaps infrastructure might serve *and* inspire, by deliberately drawing attention to itself.

“Is sculpture a form of decoration in architecture?” Rita McBride asked rhetorically in recent correspondence about her project *Bells and Whistles* (2009–14).¹ I’d inquired about the pentagonal geometry of her 530-foot-long site-specific installation, an apparently (but not literally) continuous bespoke brass sleeve that encases the egress-stair pressurization ducts in The New School’s University Center.² At once decorative and enmeshed with the building’s life-saving infrastructure, *Bells and Whistles* extends McBride’s ongoing exploration of relationships between *servant* mechanical systems and the spaces they *serve*. “When I started imagining a systemic work of sculpture that could incorporate itself throughout the building, I immediately thought of the arterial system of the body. A sculpture that would distribute nutrients and carry away toxins throughout the organism.”³

Bells and Whistles highlights “the essential but hidden mechanical life of the building,” presenting occupants with a scavenger hunt hiding in plain sight.⁴ Dodging and weaving, the sculpture draws the eye through classrooms, over alcoves, and along hallways to the emergency stairwells. Therefore, *Bells and Whistles* is well-suited for The New School’s

PAGES 186–89: Rita McBride, *Bells and Whistles*, 2009–14 (detail).

¹ Email correspondence with the author, April 29, 2017.

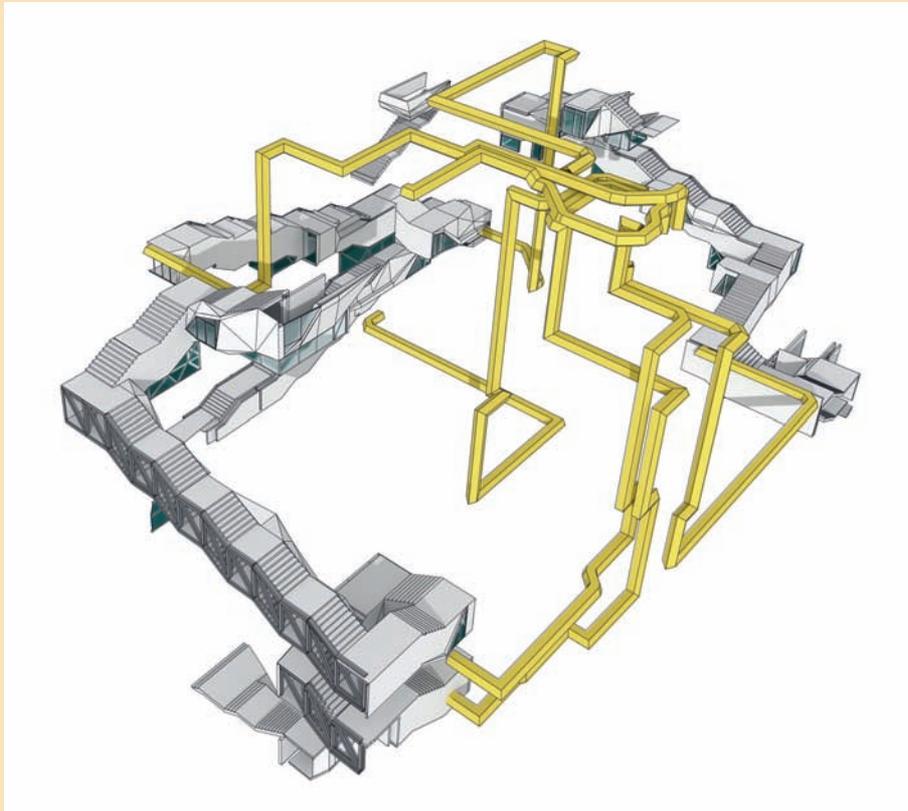
² Distinct from the ductwork (or HVAC) that circulates air throughout a building, egress-stair pressurization ducts use positive pressure to supply fresh air to emergency stairs during an evacuation, which prevents smoke from following occupants into the stairwell.

³ Email correspondence with the author, April 29, 2017.

⁴ Rita McBride in collaboration with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, *Bells and Whistles* project summary (2014).

Art Collection, which is distributed throughout the university's public and private spaces; it is kindred in spirit to the university's mission to engage the inner workings of things, including the frameworks of justice and injustice, and the systemic flows that influence how *stuff* is made, distributed, and used in our world.

Why, one might ask, couldn't *Bells and Whistles* be the pressurization duct itself, rather than its sleeve? According to the University Center's architects, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), with whom McBride collaborated closely, the pentagonal sleeve *was* conceived as the pressurization duct. However, the numerous seams in the multifaceted ductwork



Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), diagram of Rita McBride's *Bells and Whistles*, 2014.

could not guarantee the perfect seal required by the pneumatic system. Moreover, pressurization ducts require fire-protective insulation. As a result, *Bells and Whistles* encases both the circular pressurization duct and its two-hour fire-rated wrapping. Although the sheath might have been fabricated using circular tubing, thereby reducing the number of seams, McBride's pleated hydra evokes the University Center's brass facade, bringing the outside inward, while its faceted bends and joints mirror the gray glass-fiber-reinforced concrete panels of the building's interior skin. Through its materiality and formal expression, then, *Bells and Whistles* is simultaneously integrated with the building and supplementary to its life-saving system.

Why is *Bells and Whistles* pentagonal in section? "The associations of the pentagonal shape are so rich and varied as to be almost kitsch," McBride notes, emphasizing her underlying aesthetic aim. "To distinguish this system as sculpture rather than engineering," she writes, "an added level of complexity was needed, [and] the pentagon shape offered this quality. For a pentagonal duct to maneuver in and out of the floors and ceilings requires a level of artifice far beyond the building's normal construction standard, one that only recently is possible with the help of computer-assisted fabrication."⁵ Presented to a building inhabitant's upward view, the faceted geometry of a downward-pointing pentagonal section is also far more visually dynamic than a flat-bottomed rectangular duct. Meanwhile, a profile more faceted than a pentagon, for example a hexagon or heptagon, would have been inordinately difficult to fabricate. A pentagonal section is symbolically evocative, experientially provocative, complex and yet achievable.

"Decoration," McBride observes, "is essentially an additive and superficial complexity."⁶ Yet ornament hasn't always been perceived as superficial. "In modern English," as Mary Carruthers observes in *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (2005), "we insist on conceptually separating decoration from function. In Latin, these verbs encompassed both."⁷ For millennia, ornament (from *ornare*: to equip, to adorn) has conducted the mind's eye along edges, seams, and folds in the constructed environment, providing perches for the birds of thought.

⁵ Email correspondence with the author, April 29, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.

Ornament is integral to wayfinding in cities as in buildings, not merely as a matter of functional expediency but also as a conscious and subconscious identity-building endeavor for individuals and for communities. Intrinsic to the arts of memory and rhetoric, the decorum of our habitats informs the decorum of our habits, framing how we think and interact—verbally, materially, and spatially. Minimal or maximal, the construction lines of buildings, furnishings, and clothing draw the eye through space and time, revealing how human relationships manifest themselves as fabricated artifacts and habitations. As we make our constructed environment, it makes us.



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