

MASSENA, USA

For security reasons, we can't tell you the name of the country you're entering

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The American landscape is dotted with symbols of our fear. Buildings armed with steel, bulletproof glass and blast-resistant structures are now so normal that we no longer accept them as fact, but as cliché. A semiotic reading of the situation generally produces predictable results, but sometimes gets more complex, as when local authorities recently removed a 21ft sign spelling out the words 'United States' from a new border crossing station at Massena, on the US/Canadian border in upstate New York.

The site – containing four buildings due to open in the autumn – is by New York-based practice Smith-Miller + Hawkinson (SMH+), with graphics by international design

firm Pentagram. The project strategy was realistic from the outset: 'There was an idea about openness of the border and creating an optimism of crossing, while being aware of anxiety and how it unfolds,' explains SMH+ partner Laurie Hawkinson. 'If you're a public architect there's a responsibility,' adds Henry Smith-Miller, the firm's other principal. 'Our charge was to take the programme and represent it in the best way we could. We have to do this, otherwise everything's going to be a bunker.' The firm worked closely with the client, the US General Services Administration (GSA), meeting frequently and ultimately coming in \$4 million under budget; the project cost totalled \$54 million.

In challenging the standards for design, the architects took on an admirable feat with great success, and not just with the buildings themselves. According to Hawkinson, the firm convinced the government to purchase a significant amount of land around the site – 57 acres for 7,800m² of built space – to better manage the environment. The buildings themselves are surprisingly light, both in materials and engineering, and certainly more open than one would expect. The architects also developed, along with Pentagram, a colour-coded way-finding system (yellow, so as not to be too patriotic) that allowed them to get rid of kerbs and prescriptive circulation walls, thus keeping the space as open, visible and clear as possible.

But, they point out, there were realities in undertaking the project. 'This is like a police station, not a visitors' centre,' Smith-Miller chuckles. Hawkinson adds: 'There's a tremendous amount of security. We have ballistic glazing in parts, and you don't want people to be seen beyond

Below_ The 21ft lettering at the Massena border crossing, which was removed on the orders of security officials



any material.' Wanting natural light, the designers selected translucent polycarbonate for the glazed openings, the most apparent design gesture. 'We had to do an extensive review of the material and propose it in Washington. We sold the argument that one, it doesn't shatter, and two, it's translucent and therefore doesn't reveal anything about the building [interior],' says project architect Sean Gallagher.

This allowed a level ambient light that largely satisfied the client's requirements, negating the need for excessive artificial lighting and allowing the roof a less heavy profile. 'The canopies were left clear and we used them to reflect even more light in,' says Smith-Miller. The building earned US LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) status, also the result of the strategy to take care of the surrounding landscape. Which begs the question: if the government was open to using a new material (polycarbonate), a less bulky design (the thin profile of the roofs and walls,



The values this sign was intended to promote – openness and optimism – are compromised by its removal

owing to the structural and environmental strategy), and a new approach to land maintenance (less defensive), then why draw the line at a seemingly innocuous sign?

The architects and designers remain unsure. 'If it's a public project paid for by public funds and supposedly representing an open government, then where is the individual who was able to change the building's form? We asked: "Who has the problem?" and no one answered,' a rather frustrated Smith-Miller later explains.

Pentagram partner Michael Bierut had a different perspective. 'A while back, we did a system of signs for Lower Manhattan. One element was a four-sided mini-kiosk, like a rectangular lollipop on a pole, at the World Trade Center site. Security were worried that people would try and hide a bomb in the hollow so they were removed. I remember thinking: "God, they're paranoid" – and then 9/11 happened,' Bierut recalls. 'I don't want to dismiss this whole thing – these guys seem responsible. Here, it does

seem like all it's about is reading sign as symbol and translating that into a target,' he adds. Both he and the architects described the project as a symbol: meant to be open, inviting, a break from the bunker architecture that is typical of such projects.

It's interesting to hear them describe it as such. **The opposing sides are thus agreeing on the issue: its symbolism makes the project a target, and so it becomes difficult to fault the government for promoting the rhetoric of hysteria** – at least where they have control over mitigating anything that has any profile. Clearly what's sad here is that icons meant to symbolise openness, freedom, and optimism (like the new World Trade Center which, eight years on, has still to be built), are ultimately usurped by a reality

that the American government has helped to create. As Bierut points out in reference to his earlier project for the World Trade Center, the government comes across as paranoid until something bad happens, and then they're vindicated.

The Massena border crossing controversy is obviously a much smaller example, but it demonstrates that state paranoia can affect buildings at all scales. Sadly, to the continued detriment of such projects, this is compounded by a veil of secrecy. 'We never really got an explanation. I thought we might have a chance to argue or present an alternative, but no,' says Hawkinson, adding: 'My feeling now is that the building is incomplete. We placed the sign there for a reason. It's odd.'



Above_ Neutral yellow was also used to implement a colour-coded route system
Left_Architect SMBH+ had to convince Washington to allow the use of polycarbonate glazing