

### 3.3 *Reception*

We then randomly selected University of Texas students to sort the images, but excluded those in the art and design disciplines as emerging experts, thus creating a representative sampling of the larger body we hoped to assess – the non-expert but educated citizen. We chose students, rather than a random sample of the general population, because we presumed that as highly educated citizens, they were likely to be future decision-makers. Thus, our sampling is class-sensitive, rather than truly random. To collect respondent receptions of the nine drawings we employed an empirical research protocol that sociologists call a “free-sort” in which respondents sort visual images into piles of their own making. Respondents are then asked to describe the common characteristics of the renderings placed in each pile, or category. After respondents completed the sorting exercise we asked if they had any general comments. These specific and general descriptions were documented and subsequently interpreted using the methods of *content analysis*.

In the interest of full disclosure, we conducted this protocol three times. In our first series of sorts we determined that we were asking the wrong questions. In our second series we determined, with the help of colleagues, that the *directed-sort* protocol we employed was troubled by circular logic – meaning that the proposition being tested was implicit in the direction given to respondents. Our third sort, however, produced findings that we deemed reliable on the basis of what social scientists call “emergent design”.<sup>5</sup>

## 4 Intentions and Receptions

### 4.1 *The Data*

In each set of renderings studied we found that slightly more than half of the respondent interpretations were logically consistent and could be collectively understood as a dominant interpretation, or reception. This majority of respondents grouped the nine renderings into three piles by architect, perhaps because they could recognize consistency in the graphic style in which information was presented. Among all respondents nearly equal numbers volunteered a strong preference for or aversion to the abstract rendering (Hadid) and the conventional

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<sup>5</sup>The same images were used in the initial two sorting procedures, but, in keeping with the methods of a “directed-sort” task, respondents were provided with three categories based on our analysis of the intention of the architects, in the form of short descriptive sentences, and asked to sort the nine images into those categories. The descriptive sentences used changed between the first and second procedure, but the directed-sort procedure itself remained unchanged.

rendering (Pelli). No respondent, however, volunteered a preference or aversion of the explanatory renderings (Behnisch) which may reflect its open-ended disposition. The other (less than) half of the respondents used a variety of criteria to sort the images, but these secondary or tertiary agreements were statistically less significant. The dominant interpretation of the renderings described them in language that we have characterized as *conventional* (Pelli), *abstract* (Hadid), and *explanatory* (Behnisch). These categories are, we found, directly related to well-known professional and/or academic discourses.

## 4.2 *The Conventional Rendering*

Cesar Pelli intended his firm's design to be *contextual*, meaning that the design of the proposed building consciously seeks to fit into the existing built environment.<sup>6</sup> In reference to a previous design proposed for a project in Miami, for example, Pelli has said that his intention was to avoid superficial stylistic references, but to make a building that "will be a comfortable new member of the [urban] family". Consistent with Pelli's self-description, architectural critics have often referred to Pelli's work as "self-effacing" and "right" for the place.<sup>7</sup> From our own expert point of view, the renderings produced by Pelli's office do seem to take a conventional approach to rendering reality. They do so by placing the viewing point at the eye level of a pedestrian and making the proposed new building a backdrop for a normal street scene populated by normal people and their normal cars in the act of coming to and going from the museum, which is a normal activity in Hartford. In all, this set of renderings was interpreted by architecture critics and the authors to say that "this building fits in."

In their interpretation of renderings by Pelli a majority of respondents saw a world that looked colorful, happy, realistic, complete, and familiar. From memory, they associated this set of characteristics with the commercial malls they have experienced in everyday life. The dominant interpretation of the Pelli design, then, could be said to be *conventional*, meaning that respondents did not find the design, or the way of life portrayed therein to be challenging. Rather, respondents understood this design to be an appealing example of an architectural typology that they understood well.

The architect's intention to design a *contextual* building and the respondents' reception of it as *conventional* is a close match (See Figure 1).

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<sup>6</sup> *Contextualism* in the architecture of North America is associated with the historic preservation movement that began in the s1960s and 1970s. It is generally argues for stylistic continuity with the immediate urban context.

<sup>7</sup> Boles (1989, 73).