Wiesner Building openings in celebratory mood

Wiesner Building dedication, October 1–2.

I. M. Pei explains architecture of Wiesner Building

Pei explains architecture

I. M. Pei remarked on the Wiesner Building dedication:

"It is the smallest, but most challenging and most interesting building I worked on at MIT"...with those words, the architect I. M. Pei '40 began his speech on the dedication of the new Wiesner Building last Wednesday. Yes, he said of the experience, "I was always a bit nervous about this," but he continued, "I was always a bit nervous about this...".

Pei explained that his building record at MIT is unrivalled, and he would not want to repeat it. He explained that his building record at MIT is unrivalled, and he would not want to repeat it. The first day was devoted to the presentation of artwork, and the sculpture garden of the new Wiesner Building. The second day was in part devoted to a selection of concerns that were expected to be explored in the new building: creativity, learning, beauty, and the emphasis was on celebration. It all culminated in the presenta- tion of dedication plaques and a sumptuous reception in the crowded atrium of the Wiesner Building.

The third day was devoted to the work of the principal occupant of the new building, the Media Laboratories, ranging from holography, computer animation and intelligent robotics to music and science on a television technology.

The highlight of the day's presentations was surely Professor Barry L. Vercoe's demonstration of "Syntactic Perfor- mance." Computer music has tended to be sterile, said Vercoe, because the player had to fall in line with a computer which could not respond to his individuality. But his lab was developing synthesizers that can provide a responsive accompaniment for a soloist; a computer to follow the lead of a soloist: a computer to follow a lead. He first heard a flautist playing a Bach sonata with a computer — "listening" to his playing by tracking both the finger motion and acoustic signal — filling in the harmonic part. The computer did a convincing job until the player "did something really interesting". It was remarkable natural.

The highlight of the day came with a display of wit, Marvin Minsky style. Talking about the possibilities of scoring, the uses for humor, and why we like it, Minsky provided us with this intriguing question: Why didn't we find the repeated notes that open Beethoven's Fifth Symphony boring? Because we're not listening to the notes, but to the differences between the notes, Minsky said.

Minsky made a jab at Noam Chomsky, who has been a critic of artificial intelligence ideas to which Minsky subscribes, indicating that Minsky's conjectures are controversial and very much open to de- bate. But although one might not always agree with him, it's impossible not to find Minsky stimulating.

Some of the other talks were unfortu- nately dull by comparison. Marvin Deni- cotto overran his time and outstayed his welcome with a talk on the way that the- ater and other Performing arts could in- teract with corporate computer technology into their worlds. Denicotto's program seemed to be spectacularly futuristic, failing to account for the sensibilities of theatre as we know it.

Denicotto talked of the possibilities of computers taking "standard plots" and having computers extending them in various ways. A play might, for instance, words, what deviation would result: that happened to be at the intersection of the field of art and technology? In the words of John de Monchaux, dean of the school of architecture and planning, "the future seems unknown." By bringing together di- verse people with very different back- grounds, what sense is cut the unex- pected outcome of the research. Rather, is it the possibility of a unique process that may evolve from the exploration, advancement, and understanding of these people.

Hugh Southers, a representative from the National Endowment for the Arts, speculated that perhaps, "less self-centered art and a more humane science would be developed." We can only hope that this conjecture will prove correct, that we will see a spoiling of new creativity, and not the degradation of the essence of human- ity — the essence of art — in a new temple of technology where computers are the end, not only the means.

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