



On stage at PJ's Lagers House, These United States | Marvin Shaouni

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Zago's Credo: Detroit Deserves Amazing Design

By: Walter Wasacz



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For Andrew Zago, space is a serious place. Not that you can't have fun there, too. The architect, who was born in Detroit and educated at the University of Michigan, started his engaging professional



trajectory at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and has kept rising into lectureships, studio and faculty positions in New York and Los Angeles. With various major projects under construction or looming, Zago is an authentic international art and design star.



With the edgy, urban and intriguing designs for places like Midtown's Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and Corktown's Mercury Bar show, Detroit is benefiting. Detroit needs -- no, make that deserves, good design, Zago says.

When we started our conversation with Zago in the summer of 2007, he was commuting from Detroit to New York. Two hours in his Midtown studio were largely spent reminiscing about the Detroit music scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Zago would come over from Ann Arbor to see punk and new wave shows at Bookie's Club on W. McNichols. When we saw him again it was 15 months later on a sunny October afternoon at the corner of Michigan and 14th St., where his design work put the punctuation mark on the long in the works Mercury Coffee Bar project. Now he commutes to LA's SCI-Arc and his West Coast office, but his plain-speak, jargon-free but colorful design talk remains unchanged.

A brief history of guerilla architecture

Zago, 50, first got on the national radar in 1997, when he was awarded the Rome Prize, given annually to 15 emerging artists in various disciplines. Five years later, he was appointed director of the City College of New York Master of Architecture program. Zago has also taught at Cornell, Ohio State, UCLA and currently at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (better known as SCI-Arc). He also maintains offices for [Zago Architecture](#) in Detroit and Los Angeles, and was recently named a fellow by [United States Artists](#), an artist-advocacy organization dedicated to supporting America's best artists by providing unrestricted cash grants.

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In 2006, Zago made headlines in the [New York Times](#) (and, not to be remiss, in [Model D](#)) for his design work on MOCAD. Nicolai Ouroussoff of the Times wrote that Zago recast the former auto dealership by employing "an intentionally raw aesthetic ... conceived as an act of guerilla architecture, one that accepts decay as fact rather than attempt to create a false vision of density."

In the same story, Zago said he wasn't trying to romanticize industrial decline, as many here do by default, but reveal Detroit's "depth of character, real substance and integrity. While you want to do away with the problems you don't want to lose that quality."

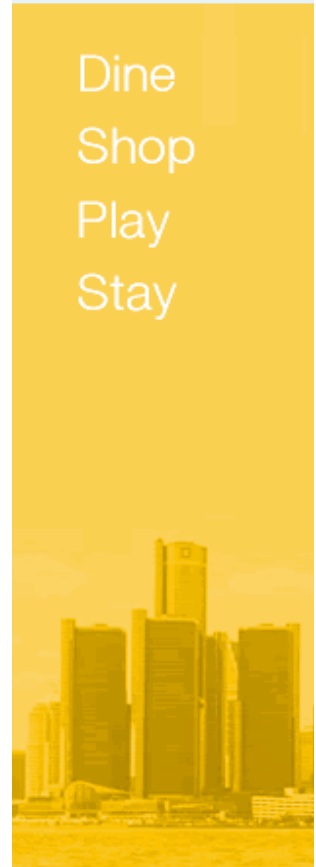
Conceptual purity

Back at the Mercury Coffee Bar, Zago uses the word "modest" to describe his work there, where he attempted to create an environment, a sustained mood, through "conceptual purity" and by giving the floor, walls and ceiling light treatments through color.



The scheme is simple: cyan, magenta and yellow flows throughout the main floor of the space. There are irregularly shaped countertops, floating slabs and curved shelving (much of it fabricated by Detroit metal and woodworks collective [Dormouse](#)), tables and chairs, and huge windows that bring in spectacular views to the southwest (the old Michigan Central Train Station) the west (Roosevelt Park) and north across Michigan to Slow's Bar BQ.

Zago says he set up the approach into the Mercury as "a separation from the street and into a funhouse ..." In the southwest corner of the space a wooden staircase leads you into a something "more natural," a basement with exposed brick, more tables and chairs for dining and coffee drinking, and a bar still in



the works that will offer beer and wine sometime in the new year.



He says he works on a principle that Detroit deserves "rigorous and progressive architecture" and needs to "lose the attitude that if we just build something, it's good enough." Print that quote and put it under a refrigerator magnet.

Third Wave for social change

The next day Zago delivers a guest lecture at the University of **Detroit Mercy** School of Architecture. The room overflows with students, instructors and curious design nerds as he mixes his multi-media presentation with slides of his projects, including competition entries for buildings in China and Sweden, and the occasional well-timed, self-tickling tangent — like showing the cover art for Iggy Pop's The Idiot LP. No we weren't sure what it meant, but it was great all the same. Also screened was a slow-moving, hallucinatory and panoramic film consisting of Detroit landscapes.

In his talk, Zago brings up the notion of a third wave of coffee bars; the first wave being the generic nighthawk diner, the second a living room model and the third ... something that has evolved into, well, a place much like the Mercury Coffee Bar, where awesome design values are married to an equally awesome coffee and food experience.

And how is that marriage going? So far so very good, says MCB partner Todd Wickstrom, who once wanted to be a doctor but decided to work

even harder it appears and become a catalyst for social change as a foodie/entrepreneur.

Wickstrom has run jazz and BBQ joints in Kansas City, owned bakery franchises in Chicago and was a managing partner at Ann Arbor's Zingerman's Deli. He also helped start [Heritage Foods USA](#), a company that promotes independent family farms, human production and genetic diversity.

Neighborhood gateway

At MCB, Wickstrom has fashioned a menu that includes a changing selection of sandwiches, panini, salads and soups, breakfast choices (like smoked salmon with tomato, onion, capers and cream cheese), a variety of espresso drinks (try the cute piccolo, equivalent to a mini latte) and three kinds of slow coffees — El Salvador los Inmortales, Honduras la Tortuga and Kenya Ndaroini. Or have a fast coffee, called the El Diablo, in small or large sizes. The coffee comes from Chicago's Intelligentsia, which Wickstrom and Zago each separately call "the best in the world."

Wickstrom says the first goal is to create a profitable business with a majority of the items on the menu eventually grown or raised here. A larger goal of the business is to bring 1,000 jobs to the area over a 20-year period based around fresh and healthy food cultivated in Detroit. He says when it's all tallied up, about \$500,000 has gone into starting up the Mercury Bar project.

"There is really a social mission at work here," Wickstrom says. "We see food as a way to economic development. I look out at Roosevelt Park and see a cool neighborhood emerging, a gateway between Corktown and Southwest Detroit. Andrew understands this thoroughly, which is why what he's doing with architecture and what we're doing with food is perfectly in sync."



Mercury Coffee Bar, 2163 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, is open 7 a.m.-10 p.m., seven days a week.

Watch the video [here](#). And they really do swirl the foam all cute like that, so get a latte.



Walter Wasacz is editor of FilterD and believes that Detroit deserves good coffee and design. Send feedback [here](#).

Photos:

Architect Andrew Zago

Front entrance

Skylights beam daylight into the basement dining room

A view of the Mercury Bar from Michigan Central Station's park

Coffee Art

All photographs by Detroit Photographer [Marvin Shaouni](#)
Marvin Shaouni is the Managing Photographer for [Metromode](#) & [Model D](#).

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