



Rothko Chapel interior and benches.  
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# Museum

## Roundup

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In the winter of *Cite's* production, two leading art museums in Houston—the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston—realized major new buildings, while the Rothko Chapel restored its space and added a small building, and the Contemporary Art Museum Houston renovated its spaces. The efforts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston concluded a lengthy building campaign. Meanwhile, the Rothko Chapel anticipates a second phase, and the next steps in the Menil Collection's master plan await. This text reviews these efforts to improve the institutional core of Houston's art scene.



The Menil Drawing Institute (MDI) opened in November 2018. It was designed by Johnston Marklee (JM), an office based in Los Angeles led by Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee. Following the completion of a masterplan by David Chipperfield Architects, the MDI and a new mechanical services plant were the first new buildings to be realized. The roughly 30,000-square-foot MDI is indicative of the Menil Collection’s purpose and style, but JM provides its own take on the relevant precedents. The office is interested in similarity over sameness; their efforts result in work that is deeply rooted in architectural history but simultaneously searching for something new.<sup>1</sup> In *Cite 96*, architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne reviewed the masterplan and proposed MDI design, noting its “institutional caution and architectural ambition.”<sup>2</sup>

The MDI is situated at the edge of the bungalow fabric of central Montrose that is now owned and preserved by the Menil Foundation. In their scheme, secured via an international competition, JM aggregated “discrete programmatic volumes under one roof,” a model seen in the project’s diagrams.<sup>3</sup> An infrastructural basement is where artwork is stored, with appropriately intense flood protections. The building is largely private, in the sense that most of its area is dedicated to staff operations.

As Hawthorne notes, the angled ceilings of the porches join to form a gabled ceiling inside—the recognizable shape of a “housey-house.”<sup>4</sup> The public can visit the gallery, hall, and bathrooms, whose waiting area is furnished with a low polygonal bench copied from one in the home of the de Menils. The long connecting hall is empty save for a desk and the long walls, which host large drawings. The single gallery can be divided with partitions. The space relative to the supporting back-of-house infrastructure might seem like a small payoff for the effort, but that ignores the medium at hand—drawings. If you take the task seriously, circulating the room to look closely at intricate works requires enough effort that even after one lap it’s useful to venture outside and rest your eyes.

The exterior is two-toned, split between the angled steel soffits of the white ceiling and the dark stained vertical wood cladding. The limitations of Texas construction show. Outside, one can detect a shadowy registration in the finished surface between its interior supports, a slight distraction from the otherwise continuous surfaces.

The two courtyards, on either end of the building, precede entry into the gallery. *Courtyard* feels like the wrong architectural term—they’re really more like *porches*. Whereas a courtyard is defined to be “completely or mostly enclosed,” a porch is “a covered shelter projecting in front of the entrance of a building.” The distinction changes how the space is delivered to the public and what its potential occupations might be. Apart from the art itself, these spaces are the most unique aspect of the MDI.

The porches are open on their corners and a side. The central planted areas, designed by Michael Van Valkenburg Associates, are populated by hunks of stone and selected trees. They’re contemplative spaces until they’re commandeered for wedding photos or group selfies. They’re also nice in the rain when water spills into the planter, forms a vertical surface, and seals you into the space for a time.

The MDI reveals one interest of JM: to make the generic specific. They use everyday means and methods of construction to make something that’s just a bit *off*. Their strangeness is deliberate and strategic, but it’s never an outright assault. But the dialectic is a two-way street: JM is also interested in making the specific generic. They do this with equal skill, somehow turning odd crystalline forms with big openings into normal things through the application of their architectural expertise.

In the 2018 *E! Croquis* about JM, Stan Allen addresses their attitude towards history in architecture as one that is cumulative, though not necessarily progressive.<sup>5</sup> Allen establishes that the firm participates in history while not being bound by it. He connects the dots between the firm’s self-acknowledged references and additional figures like Álvaro Siza, writing that “what Siza and Johnston Marklee share is a

plastic sensibility in which solid and void interpenetrate uninhibitedly, and in which transitions from surface to surface, material to material, or space to space, are always seamless.”<sup>6</sup> Siza has offered that “architect’s don’t invent anything, they transform reality,” an aphorism that syncs with JM’s attitude that nothing comes from nothing—that a search for “new” form *ex nihilo* is exhausting and unproductive.<sup>7</sup> The outer ring of covered space around the original Menil building is a notable prece-dent for the MDI, but these entry spaces feel different: They’re lower, more compressed, more integrated into the form of the building. Where did these porches come from?

In 2G, R.E. Somol riffs that JM are both bureaucrats and phenomenologists: They accept constraint and are also deeply concerned with embodied experience.<sup>8</sup> A similar preoccupation occurs in Donald Judd’s sculptures, spaces, and writings. The spaces he renovated for his life and work exhibit similar qualities. JM has absorbed Judd’s pragmatism in serious ways, which makes sense as the duo got their start in Marfa, where their earliest projects were realized. When introducing JM’s work in the 2015 newsletter of the Chinati Foundation, Karen Stein wrote that “the anti-heroic model of Chinati itself has become a recurring theme in Johnston and Lee’s work.”<sup>9</sup> In a 2014 lecture, Johnston remarked that they

feel so fortunate that our first projects were here in Marfa, and many friends have been important to us here for almost twenty years. As we were putting together this talk, we were thinking about beginnings and how much Chinati and our experience here in Marfa—the artists we’ve met, the history of the place—have informed our thinking as architects as we began to expand our practice beyond Texas.<sup>10</sup>

Mark Lee, in the same lecture, already detected the beginnings of their interests even in the small works they made in town. They present the work of the office, which concludes with the MDI. The passage is a useful window into the architects’ understanding of this work. Remarking about the MDI’s ambiguity, Johnston said that they “have an interest in a kind of in-betweenness: between building and garden, inside and outside, day and night, light and dark, dark and light. That sort of ambiguity through contrast is something that we’re really interested in.”<sup>11</sup> Lee followed up with a revelation:

I think that many of the things we’ve used with [the MDI] were things we first learned here. Really thinking about the specificity of the art environment, understanding the intimacy of scale, dealing with the existing pre-war houses, are things that we first learned from Marfa, working on these West Texas houses. And for us this project marks a return to Texas. We started in Texas and we end in Texas. So after this project, we should retire.<sup>12</sup>

Here is a clear origin for the MDI’s porch in JM’s referential architectural vocabulary. This architectural element plays an important role at Chinati. The former barracks of Fort D.A. Russell are U-shaped buildings ringed on their interior three sides with porches. These spaces provide shelter from the elements but also collect visitors before and after they circulate through the interior. On a tour of Chinati, it’s normal to find people gathered on these porches chatting, looking across to the opposite porch across the gravel, or circulating around them from side to side. They are important transitional spaces between the exterior environment and the interior realm of artistic experience.<sup>13</sup>

The connection between the contextual work of being a young architect in Marfa and the realization of the MDI closes a loop in JM’s thinking over the past decades. It “brings them back home,” in a way.

With multiple buildings in its campus, the exterior environment is an important part of the Menil experience. The sidewalk north to the main building from the MDI is now a busy thoroughfare and is lined with donor signage designed by MG&Co. The outdoor areas provided an essential service during the pandemic: The lawn blossomed with blankets and the furnished wooden patio next to the MDI was a welcome place for take-out dinners. The spaces also received a bump when Tobe Nwigwe, a rapper from Alief, and Lil’



The main entrance of the Menil Drawing Institute by Johnston Marklee.  
©Takudzwa Tapfuma, Rice Architecture.

Keke recorded the video for “Purple Rain Thing” at the building. Moments like this showcase how the MDI has quickly been absorbed into the cultural life of the city.

When the inevitable development arrives south of the MDI, the campus will again change: Chipperfield’s masterplan allows for buildings up to eight stories along Richmond Avenue. Beyond Flavin’s Richmond Hall, the institution might have major frontage that may form an urban wall. Once that happens, the MDI will perform even more like a gateway, as it will be the interior entry point from the new (commercial) buildings into the Menil campus. The MDI’s deliberate design as a place of in-betweenness will only grow more useful. It will become an even better porch.

*Portions of this text were originally written for an assignment in ARCH 655: Contemporary Practices, a course taught at Rice Architecture during the Spring 2019 semester by Assistant Professor Scott Colman and former Dean Sarah M. Whiting.*

#### An Icon, Restored

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who appreciate the Rothko Chapel, and those who, upon entry, scratch their heads and wonder what’s for lunch. The interior is a test: Are you willing to open yourself to what might happen if you sit and quiet the mind? Many beloved churches exist in the world, but few capture the dull throb of existence and the possibility of redemption like this space.

This year, the Rothko Chapel celebrates its fiftieth anniversary. Opened in 1971, the chapel quickly became an icon in Houston. Nestled under oaks between the Menil Collection and the University of St. Thomas—all here in part thanks to the founding philanthropy of John and Dominique de Menil—the brick-clad building is an under-

stated, brooding thing. It could be mistaken for a mechanical plant, but this geode-like quality heightens the thrill of finding out what’s inside.

The chapel is cross-shaped in plan, but the interior is octagonal. Fourteen large canvases hang on its walls. Their blue-black expanses are portals; they absorb time, light, and attention. The chapel’s design was led at first by Philip Johnson, but his flashy proposal was soon tossed out and Rothko then dealt with local architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry. Barnstone was hospitalized for mental illness in 1968, which left Aubry to finalize the design. Johnson returned to help with the entrance and the location of the reflecting pool.<sup>14</sup> Mark Rothko never saw the project completed; he committed suicide in 1970 just days after giving the final approval for the completion of the chapel. His son Christopher Rothko has been instrumental in leading this current restoration; he is also on the Board of Directors for the organization.

The simple building’s pyramidal skylight flooded the interior with light, washing out the artworks and frying observers. Already by 1974, scrim had been stretched across the oculus, and by 1978, a baffle had been installed that cast light across the ceiling, noticeably dimming the interior. A second attempt was made in 1999, darkening the chamber. The gloom settled in, making it hard to discern the intricacies of the canvases. The baffle “sent raking light across the ceiling, so all of a sudden the brightest surface in the room was the ceiling,” said George Sexton of George Sexton Associates, who masterfully handled the lighting design. “One of the things that we were trying to achieve was to make the plane on which the art was hung the brightest surface. And I think we did that.”

The renovation of the chapel, led by New York-based Architecture Research Office (ARO), is a serious improvement of the chapel’s sacred space. But it’s also an expansion of the institution’s important work. A master plan extends the campus across Sul Ross Street and will ultimately add three new buildings with spaces for guests, programs,





Suzanne Deal Booth Welcome House by Architecture Research Office, seen from the new courtyard on the new North Campus. © Paul Hester.

offices, mechanical services, and an archive. This effort was carried out with a close reading of the neighborhood’s scale and materials. There’s a “directness with which you experience this special place in your everyday life,” Adam Yarinsky, Principal at ARO, said. “This is something that we wanted to preserve in the new buildings landscape, and the master plan.”

The new buildings are designed to blend in with their surroundings. The first phase saw the completion of the Suzanne Deal Booth Welcome House, finished in light brick (matching the chapel), light wood, and gray metal. An actual M.E.P. building sits at the back of the lot; it will make more sense once the second phase of the master plan is complete.

Looking ahead, a forthcoming larger building for gathering is pushed to the back of the lot to preserve the scale of the street, and another building with offices and an archive that exactly matches the width of the chapel’s apse will be constructed perpendicular to the street. An existing home will be moved and converted to guest housing for visiting lecturers or artists. Immediately west of the chapel, a bungalow will be relocated, and a meditation garden will be built.

The new landscape, designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz, provides an open area next to the fountain and smaller “rooms” created by rows of trees. These are places to gather and sit during Houston’s nice days; they’re a welcome spot for lounging during the pandemic. The campus’s lighting design uses the landscape and exterior finishes to prepare one’s eyes for the interior of the chapel, Sexton said. The most dramatic change is the lighting of *Broken Obelisk*. Instead of being uplit, it’s now illuminated using theatrical projectors discreetly mounted on poles. At night it appears to hover in space, glowing like a molten steel prism.

The renovation both stays close to the original design of the Rothko Chapel and makes significant improvements. During this restoration process, the chapel’s exterior brick has been cleaned and repointed, and new paving was installed. Resiliency was also important: A flood gate can now be dropped in before a storm, the new buildings are built

two feet above the curb, HVAC was relocated to the mechanical building across the street, and an emergency generator was installed.

In the vestibule, the desk, pamphlets, and other distractions that had accumulated are gone, leaving just a darkened entry chamber that disassociates the viewer from the world. The gray walls are slightly darker than the main space, which reinforces this compression. In the worship space, the walls are still gray, but looking up, the ceiling is flat—a big change from the previous pebbly popcorn acoustical finish.

The new skylight, designed by George Sexton Associates, uses louvers and laminated glass to illuminate the artworks. Sexton used large physical models to get the design right and checked his work with computer simulations. The interior octagonal walls of the skylight drum have been refinished, and a deep reveal provides a place for technology, including concealed projectors that require their own ducted systems for cooling and are isolated to reduce noise. Their beams reflect on the floating trapezoidal planes, illuminating the paintings on overcast days.

The effect of this infrastructural work is striking. Now the room has even more power. It’s like the axis mundi, Yarinsky said: “The Pantheon in Rome didn’t have a baffle under the oculus.” It’s much brighter inside, which allows the canvases to come alive. Once your eyes adjust, they can see a broader range of the colors and textures within the art’s surfaces, qualities that were missed by casual viewers under lower lighting. The same wooden seating and dark floor anchors the room, which is now slightly smaller: The wall of the main niche was moved six inches inward to avoid a shadow hitting the top of the canvases.

Throughout, the construction by Linbeck is precise and clean. They did an amazing job “because they took the time to understand what the goal was,” Cassell said. They “realized the need for mock-ups and sometimes the need to redo something. They were deeply embedded in the process.”



Aerial view of the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston by Steven Holl Architects. Photo: Iwan Baan.

Led by Executive Director David Leslie, this careful work, years in the making, expands the chapel’s mission to “create opportunities for spiritual growth and dialogue that illuminate our shared humanity and inspire action leading to a world in which all are treated with dignity and respect.” This charge is even evident in the dedication of *Broken Obelisk*, by sculptor Barnett Newman, to Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>15</sup> Over the years, rallies and gatherings have been staged outside, and inside, ceremonies from manyfaith traditions are regularly practiced. It’s a spiritual vortex of nothingness within the city’s sprawling emptiness. It remains one of Houston’s quintessential places.

Important activations continue. The chapel is where Solange chose to open the film version of her album *When I Get Home*. Last month, the Rothko Chapel’s 2021 Annual MLK Birthday Celebration featured a lecture from scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. A series of online events took place to mark the 50th anniversary of the chapel, including a panel discussion about the restoration featuring Yarinsky, Sexton, landscape architect Thomas Woltz, and conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro.

This restoration is recognized in print by the release of *Rothko Chapel: An Oasis for Reflection*, published by Rizzoli Electa. An essay by Stephen Fox establishes the architectural history of the chapel, while a text by art historian Pamela G. Smart reviews the landmark’s artistic and ecumenical aspects, supplemented with excerpts from its guest book. An extended portfolio of images by Paul Hester showcases the campus’s improved grounds, new Welcome House, and restored chapel. His expert eye and lens captures the solemn power of Rothko’s interior.

As we slowly emerge from the pandemic, it’s clear that the dismantling of systemic racism and the seeking of unity must continue. This makes the chapel’s spiritual work more meaningful now than ever.

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#### A Beautiful Series of Tubes

The Nancy and Rich Kinder Building at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH) was designed by Steven Holl Architects (SHA) with support from Kendall/Heaton Associates. It integrates a number of compelling spatial ideas into its design. Built by McCarthy, the result is a dynamic and lively space for art. The museum is nearly 240,000 square feet, with over 100,000 square feet of exhibition space that services an impressive collection of modern and contemporary art. Holl’s building is a success. It combines established ideas from the office with an entirely new one—the glass tube façade.

The building’s shape comes from an offset of the site at Main Street and Bissonnet in Houston’s Museum District, with allowances for live oaks. Porosity is a key concept for Holl’s work, so seven courts are cut into the perimeter. These voids break up the mass of the building and separate the galleries that ring a central interior forum. This is a similar strategy to Holl’s Visual Arts Building at the University of Iowa, completed in 2016. These court cuts are pulled through to the central atrium, providing light and a visual respite from viewing art. Gallery entrances are through large portals or carved corners, making for layered views through the spaces and across the forum. The sequencing through these rooms is skillfully balanced between close immersion and wide observation.

Above, the ceiling bends and peels apart, allowing sunlight into the top galleries and atrium. Guy Nordenson and Associates and Cardno Haynes Whaley provided the structural engineering for this feat. On the outside, the roof reads as a landscape of waves. It looks like no other roof in the city. While it’s similar to the Winter Visual Arts Center at Franklin & Marshall College, also completed this year, the lighting strategy differs—the Kinder’s is more complex. The petals curl in pleasing ways. The lighting was tested through software





Exterior view of the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston by Steven Holl Architects. Photo: Iwan Baan.



Interior view of the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston by Steven Holl Architects. Photo: Iwan Baan.

and large physical models, so the design's translation to a ceiling that retains qualities of a paper study model is remarkable. In reality the resulting light, supported by bounced LED light, is even and majestic.

Upon entry, one is quickly in the central open forum. The ground floor contains two storefront galleries, a café, restaurant, and spaces for immersive installations. A boomerang-shaped feature stair leads upwards, tapering at the top. The second-floor galleries have lower ceilings, making for more intimate rooms for encountering art. Here the expertise of lighting consultant L'Observatoire International shines. The third-floor rooms are taller and illuminated by daylight, though the ceilings vary in height and amount of light admitted.

In many of the building's finishes, the expertise of Houston artisans is on full display. Brochsteins produced the walnut linings of the conference room and theater and the black limba interior of the restaurant. The terrazzo was installed by Southern Tile & Terrazzo, who also did the original sage-colored terrazzo in Mies's Brown Pavilion in 1974. The new floor mix matches the same large pieces of marble, but with gray mortar instead of green. There are some gaps in resolution of the new building's details, but these items shrink when considering the overall architectural effort.

The museum invites references to canonical works. The centrifugal rotation of the atrium distantly summons Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim rotunda: one region of rooms is even set a couple feet below the others, introducing a slight spiraling vertical movement. The wood floors are stained dark like the Menil's, but their endgrain pattern recalls the flooring under the pews at Le Corbusier's chapel in Ronchamp, a connection reinforced by the billowing ceilings, here not cast in concrete but sheathed in drywall by MAREK. It's easy to make comparisons to masterpieces of the 20th century and to marvel at how far construction has come, but also how consistent our inspirational concepts have remained.

The exterior is the most innovative and compelling part of the building. It advances a dialogue of "complementary contrast" with the two existing buildings: Distinct from Mies's thin transparency (1958/1974) and Moneo's thick opacity (2000), Holl's scheme explores thick translucency. The outer perimeter is clad in laminated glass half-cylinders, 30" in diameter, with some approaching 20' in length. There are three sections of these tubes on each of the long elevations. The tubes capture and thicken light; they push what glass can do as a material. At times they're reflective white, at others they go flat baby blue; the shadows also vary widely. The tubes have concealed attachments, so they float, balancing out the thick concrete walls that run back into the building. For the curious, there's one section of clear glass near the café outside where all joinery questions are answered. The overall effect conceals the true size of the building and provides a repetitive, convex, muted façade that's refreshingly abstract.

The tubes come together at six corners, but the outer corner of the building on the plaza inadvertently pays further tribute to Mies: Its inverted corner, with a single concave column of tubes, references the invisible corner refined over decades by Mies in his American works.

At night the tubes glow in a range of illumination patterns, from cooler linear lights to warmer rectangles of light that suggest interior rooms. This consideration connects the new building to Holl's extension at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, which emits a similar glow, an aspect which Jeffrey Kipnis takes up in his writing about that project's "magic." The tubes, set off from the concealed walls, work as solar chimneys and notably reduce solar heat gain, but their aesthetics are primary. Chris McVoy, partner at SHA, described how, during the competition process in 2011, someone sliced an acrylic tube in half, illuminated it from behind and stood back, transfixed by its glow. This sensual quality is retained in built form. As with the interior ceiling, the conceptual intent remains clear





Exterior view of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.  
Photo: Leonid Furmansky.

despite the tribulations of building making. This is the mark of a skilled architectural team.

Lately, a cool material palette dominates Holl's projects: steel, other metals, painted grays, translucent glass, concrete, and bright white drywall. Similar to the exterior of the Hunter's Point library in New York City, the exposed concrete walls at the MFAH are painted silver, a move suggested late in construction by Director Gary Tinterow. This is a win. Inside and out, the treatment is muted, unless hit by direct sun, in which case it shines. The color unites the wall with service items like fire stairs and elevator doors; it encourages these bits to recede. The platinum is stylish and generic at once, even nostalgically futuristic. Moments of warmth come from the lighting, including cast glass lamps designed by Holl, and the art.

The Kinder Building completes a MFAH initiative that has realized four new buildings since 2012: two by Holl, Lake|Flato's Blaffer Conservation Center, and an art storage facility.<sup>16</sup> The Glassell School of Art, also designed by SHA, opened in 2018. It's characterized by its L-shape, which makes a plaza; its sloping, walkable roof; and its method of construction: precast concrete shapes form its façade and support the interior floors. This tectonic experiment is the most notable aspect of the building and gives it its rough character, inside and out. While the building doubled the space for the school, it's clear that the budget was tight, as numerous construction issues became apparent, most visibly the rooftop trellis, which provided no shade and had to be retrofitted. Still, the plaza is growing in nicely: It shaded grove offers a nice place for a meal, phone call, or conversation.

An additional improvement is the reinvigorated Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, which benefits from the increased traffic between buildings. When the pandemic breaks, the interface between the garden and Kinder Building will be a lively place to meet and eat.

Holl's building and the vast collection are the results of Houston's tradition of philanthropy. This effort concludes The Campaign for the Museum of Fine Arts, initiated in 2012, which raised more than \$470 million for construction and operating expenses. Jawdroppingly, the Kinder building opens with *no debt*. There's a nice alignment between a building faced in tubes named for a couple whose wealth comes in part from pipeline construction. As of January 2021, the Kinders, through their family foundation, have given over \$468 million in gifts and pledges to local causes that champion urban green space, education, and quality of life. For a moment, at least, any planetary anxiety about the long-term effects of fossil fuels can be paused to recognize that Houston is undeniably a better place thanks to the Kinders' generosity.

The Kinder Building is a commendable achievement for Steven Holl Architects, an office that has pursued the tactile realization of rich spatial experiences in its buildings worldwide. Now, we have two in Houston. In video remarks, Holl described the Kinder Building as a "gift to the future." I agree.

*An extended version of this text appeared online on Cite Digital on November 20, 2020. An edited version of this text appeared in the Houston Chronicle online on November 25, 2020, and in print on November 29, 2020.*

#### A Reinvented Museum

In 1972—the same year that Rice Design Alliance was founded—the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) moved into a new building on the northwest corner of Montrose and Bissonnet. Designed by Gunnar Birkerts, the building is a parallelogram in plan, with sharp edges on the northeast and southwest corners. This leaves space

for a plaza facing in front and, in back, space for loading access to the lower level and *Mel Chin's Manila Palm: An Oasis Secret* (1978). The exterior is clad in reflective metal siding, perhaps a nod to Rice's beloved Art Barn and anticipating Houston's tin house craze. One enters through a tall slot cut in the façade and moves under a low ceiling until the room "opens up" into the main gallery. Save for three square skylights whose light bounces off the entry hood, there is no natural light, which, combined with its column-free interior, makes for a flexible space for art.

CAMH is a non-collecting museum. Instead, over the years its interior has hosted major exhibitions by international and local artists alike: Uta Barth (whose images appear in this issue of *Cite*), John Chamberlain, Vito Acconci, Bill Viola, Frank Stella, Tony Cragg, Ann Hamilton, Stan VanDerBeek, Trenton Doyle Hancock, and Christopher Knowles, among so many others. CAMH's programming is forward-thinking and proceeds with a nimbleness that isn't possible at larger institutions.

Such active use wore on the building. A storage/loading room was inserted into the main gallery, and windows were covered on the basement level where a small gallery, shop, offices, and meeting rooms are located. There was a plan in place for improvements, but the museum's closure due to COVID-19 provided an opportune moment to make changes.

Led by Executive Director Hesse McGraw, who joined CAMH in January 2020, the museum has moved quickly to renovate before its reopening in early 2021. According to McGraw, the pandemic has allowed the museum "to both accelerate and expand our renovations, and to think deeply about the internal ecosystem of the museum." The layered crises of the moment "have prompted a needed and profound consideration of the ethics and values of the Museum," he said via email.

The constructive effort has been guided by Dillon Kyle Architects for architectural improvements, McDugald Steele for the landscape, and Lance Gandy for the lighting (Kyle himself is Chair of CAMH's Board of Trustees). Inside, the Brown Foundation gallery now has new flooring, walls, and LED lighting, along with a re-imagined front entry experience. The offending aforementioned storage room has been removed; its function will be accounted for with an exterior loading dock that has yet to be constructed. On the lower level, windows and cast-in-place concrete have been exposed, and new rooms have been added. Invisible but important updates were also taken to maintain the building, which is nearly fifty years old. All these items are light touches, but they make a difference.

The largest change is the redesign of the exterior plaza. Its expanse has been covered in gravel, which can be programmed with events. Steps down to the plaza and a long bench was added next to the approach ramp. Parallelogram-shaped benches/bollards define the eastern edge of the communal space along Montrose, where new signage and sidewalks were installed. A new line of uplights illuminate the metal façade at night. McGraw said CAMH is "thrilled to explore the potential of this space, in a moment where so many are connecting to the public realm in new ways." The plaza was already used for outdoor concerts in 2020: during one warm November afternoon, people gathered, masked, to listen to a DJ set. I hope there are more moments like this to come in 2021.

Last year was still an opportunity for artistic engagement. The museum was active on social media through a series of take-overs, residencies, and conversations. Onsite, the building's construction fence hosted Nathaniel Donnett's *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)*, an effort that clad the fence in images of Houston's Black communities. Local children exchanged old backpacks for new ones stocked with supplies in preparation for the upcoming school year, and the collection of acquired items was displayed on the fence. According to the museum's text about the art,

this project engages the youth's social imagination by uplifting everyday objects as material for the artwork, and the exchange as a gesture of human kindness. The exchange seeks to

inspire youth around the value of education, through the gift of a new backpack and by highlighting the inner resources and strength of Houston's Black community. The multi-faceted nature of this artwork emphasizes the power of direct action and social exchange.<sup>17</sup>

CAMH's engagement with and support of Houston's Black communities is notable, and especially so after last summer's protests following the murder of George Floyd. Floyd, who grew up in Third Ward's Cuney Homes, was known in hip-hop circles as Big Floyd and rapped with DJ Screw. Now that the museum has reopened, *Slowed and Thowed*, CAMH's exhibit on DJ Screw, is open too; this program has led to a larger agreement with Screwed Up Records & Tapes to help preserve DJ Screw's legacy. Upstairs, *Wild Life*, a two-person show with work from Elizabeth Murray and Jessi Reaves, is installed. The life of the museum goes on.

McGraw said that CAMH's mandate is to "be present, to engage directly in the complexity and challenges of our present moment"—the institution leans forward. This hard year has also served as McGraw's introduction to Houston, a city that "can invent the future. It's a place of energy, uncertainty, and wildness," in his view.

Looking ahead, CAMH's future is bright. There are partnerships and collaborations that will be announced throughout 2021. McGraw said the pandemic has changed both the museum's "internal structure and how [they] engage audiences here and elsewhere." He continued: "I like to think of CAMH as a ship of Theseus—we're in the midst of a total transformation."

#### Notes

- 1 Reto Geiser, "Specific Indeterminacy," in *House is a House is a House is House is a House*, ed. Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhauser, 2016), 41.
- 2 Christopher Hawthorne, "Radically Understated," *Cite* 96, Spring 2015, 19.
- 3 Geiser, 39.
- 4 Hawthorne, 22.
- 5 Stan Allen, "Folding Time: Johnston Marklee's Plural Temporalities," *El Croquis* 198: *Johnston Marklee (2005-2019)* (2018), 263.
- 6 Allen, 269.
- 7 Allen, 269.
- 8 R.E. Somol, "Grind Houses," in *2G: Johnston Marklee*, no. 67 (2013), 11.
- 9 Karen Stein, "All Roads Lead to Marfa," *Chinati* newsletter vol. 20 (2015), 39.
- 10 Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, "Johnston Marklee, Architects: An Overview," *Chinati* newsletter vol. 20 (2015), 40.
- 11 Johnston and Lee, 51.
- 12 Johnston and Lee, 51.
- 13 Full disclosure: I know this from personal experience, as I was an intern at the Chinati Foundation in 2010.
- 14 Barrie Scardino Bradley, "A Constructive Connection: Barnstone and the Menils," in *Making Houston Modern: The Life and Architecture of Howard Barnstone*, ed. Barrie Scardino Bradley, Stephen Fox, and Michelangelo Sabatino (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 150.
- 15 For an in-depth account of this history, see "Broken Obelisk and Racial Justice in Houston" by Amanda A. Douberley, published on *Cite Digital* on September 9, 2020.
- 16 David Heymann's earlier appraisal of the scheme also appeared in *Cite* 96, an issue themed on museums in Texas.
- 17 Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, "Nathaniel Donnett | Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)," <https://camh.org/event/donnett-acknowledgement/>.