

SHEDDING LIGHT

Thomas Phifer and Partners turns a simple structure into a stunning expansion of the North Carolina Museum of Art. BY JOSEPHINE MINUTILLO











TOM PHIFER SAID THAT he wants his new building for the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA), in Raleigh, to disappear into the landscape. By saying so, he is daring you to take a closer look, knowing full well that his first museum, like the art that hangs on its walls, will stand up to the scrutiny.

From a distance, it looks hardly more than a warehouse, an impression that did not sit well with some locals, who for endless months during construction could see only a squat concrete box. Certainly they would have preferred the bold civic gesture, a splashy concoction to bring attention to the Raleigh community. But the focus here is on the art, and the visitor's interaction with it. So while the museum's strong permanent collection, which occupies all the galleries, is not teeming with masterpieces like those of some larger institutions, under the soft light of day, it shines.

Three decisive elements transform what might easily have passed for an ordinary shed into this stunning house for art. Massive aluminum panels, arranged like pleats, clad the precast concrete wall panels of the steel frame structure. A series of courtyards and reflecting pools cuts into each face of its



rectangular form. Topping everything is a spectacular array of coffered skylights that combines with the glazed courtyard openings to bathe the galleries in controlled natural light and bring the outside emphatically in.

And since the one-story structure has no place for a soaring atrium or grand staircase, *de rigueur* in museum buildings both Classical and Modern, Phifer's singular gesture is to demarcate the main entry with a steel and glass canopy beside an allée of American elms. Just past the threshold, the visitor is immediately confronted with art, the reception desk slightly askew. While this entry shares an outdoor plaza with NCMA's existing Edward Durrell Stone building, now home to temporary exhibitions and offices, visitors can access the new building, which is free to the public, from its courtyards as well. "There is a brilliant new thinking about buildings for art," says NCMA director Lawrence Wheeler. "Ours reflects these democratic values." (Security cameras monitor the building and grounds.)

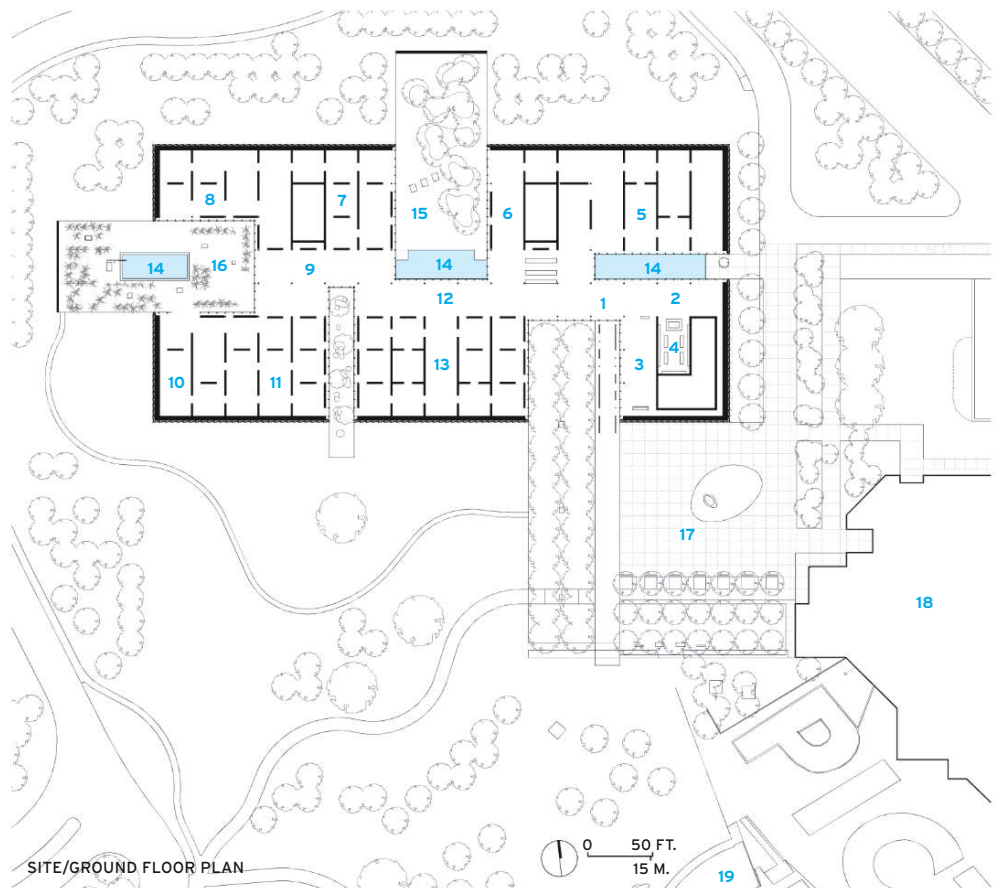
It's a way of thinking that leaves visitors to experience the art, both inside and scattered throughout

FIRST SPREAD: The shaped earth forms a blanket around NCMA's new one-story building. Surrounding it are both trees and tree-like sculptures by artists Ursula von Rydingsvard and Roxy Paine.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The sculptures in the Rodin Garden are set among gravel, water, and bamboo plants. The garden extends the western end of the building spine, which features smaller works by the artist, into the landscape.

THIS SPREAD: Phifer found inspiration for the entry canopy in the glass and mirror structures of Dan Graham. Its highly reflective glass is a dazzling counterpoint to the anodized aluminum cladding.

- 1 MAIN ENTRANCE
- 2 LOUNGE
- 3 DINING
- 4 MUSEUM SHOP
- 5 MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY
- 6 AFRICAN
- 7 EGYPTIAN
- 8 AMERICAN
- 9 RODIN COURT
- 10 JUDAIC
- 11 EUROPEAN
- 12 CLASSICAL COURT
- 13 ALTARPIECE GALLERY
- 14 REFLECTING POOLS
- 15 NORTH GARDEN
- 16 RODIN GARDEN
- 17 PLAZA
- 18 E.D. STONE BUILDING
- 19 AMPHITHEATER



CREDITS

PROJECT: North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina

ARCHITECT: Thomas Phifer and Partners
Thomas Phifer, AIA, partner in charge; Gregory Reaves, AIA, project partner; Gabriel Smith, AIA, project architect

ARCHITECT OF RECORD: Pearce Brinkley Cease + Lee

ENGINEERS: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (structural); AltieriSeborWieber, Stanford White (m/e/p); Steven Blake (civil)

CONSULTANTS: Arup (daylighting); Fisher Marantz Stone (lighting); Lappas + Havener (landscape); Creative Acoustics (acoustics)

SOURCES

PVC ROOFING: Sarnafil

SKYLIGHTS: Super Sky

LOUVERS: Unicel Architectural

CEILING COFFERS: Fibertech Columns

ALUMINUM CLADDING: LinEI Signature

METAL/GLASS CURTAIN WALL: Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope; Viracon Glass

STEEL-AND-GLASS CANOPY: LinEI Signature

ENTRANCES: Ellison

CURTAINS: Mary Bright

METAL DOORS: Total Door

LIGHTING: Litelab (track); Nippo (fluorescent); Crestron (controls)

FURNITURE: Herman Miller (reception); Fritz Hansen (café); Fermob (outdoor)

the surrounding landscape (NCMA's museum park, the largest in the country, includes a popular outdoor amphitheater by Smith Miller + Hawkinson and artist Barbara Kruger) on their own terms.

Happily, the exhibition galleries, laid out over 65,000 square feet according to a 26 foot module, do not follow a tightly controlled path of strict chronological or thematic sequences. The fairly open floor plan allows visitors to weave in and out of them, passing by the figurative sculptural works that delineate the building's spine. Curators take advantage of this freedom to experiment with how they display the art. Devorah Sperber's *After the Mona Lisa 2*, a 2005 work that recreates da Vinci's famous portrait with 5,184 hanging spools of thread, is an unexpected delight beside works from the Italian Renaissance. In another gallery, Josef Albers's colorful, mid 20th century studies for *Homage to the Square* are juxtaposed with American Impressionist Frederick Carl Frieseke's *The Garden Parasol* from 1910.

Of course, everything looks good beneath the ceiling's 360 oculi, the building's only sculptural element and the source of the glorious daylight that shines down on the collection. Phifer took Louis Kahn's skylight detail in the Kimbell Art Museum as a point of departure, finalizing the ellipsoid shape of the NCMA's ceiling coffers after numerous light studies conducted by Arup's London and New York offices. A local boat builder advised on resin technologies for the fiberglass vaults, which rise 5½ feet above the ceiling plane.

While sunlight shines down, it by no means pours in. North facing louvers and removable scrims limit the amount and type of light that penetrates an oculi and reaches an artwork. Three layers of curtains do the same for light coming in from the courtyard openings. Photocells on the roof measure daylight; the information they gather is used to adjust track lighting within the galleries.

These efforts control the quantity of light inside the museum, but the quality of light is undeniable, particularly as it changes over the course of a day. Outside the museum, the changing light produces equally dazzling effects on the 25 foot high anodized aluminum panels, which at times appear golden, their jagged outline clearly visible, while at other times they seem to dissolve completely.

This is not groundbreaking stuff. But the sum of these small but thoughtful moves erodes boundaries between building and landscape, outside and inside, and even between different genres of art. By avoiding the all too easy tendency toward architectural bravado to the dismay of some and instead focusing on good design, Phifer has created something beyond just a remarkable building. It is a remarkable place. ■



ABOVE: White oak floors and white walls characterize all of the exhibition galleries. Coffered skylights top the 16-foot-tall spaces, giving a rhythmic quality to the ceiling. The light levels from the MR16 track lights inserted between the 6 1/2-foot-wide coffers are adjusted according to the amount of daylight coming in from the oculi. The 15-inch-thick fixed walls conceal mechanical ducts.

LEFT TWO: Barely visible from the ground, a series of sleek aluminum mounds on the roof covers the oculi. Their north-facing louvers reduce heat and direct sun penetration.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY NCMA (BOTTOM TWO)