



The Buffalo News

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

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Updated: 11/15/08 03:49 PM

A design full of surprises

Burchfield-Penney's functional and fanciful design gives visitors something to ponder every step of the way

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The new Burchfield-Penney Art Center is all about surprises.

At each end of the center's gracefully curving 147-foot wall on Elmwood Avenue, small windows provide fractional glimpses into the glimmering interior of the main gallery. The main entrance, downplayed almost to the point of vanishing, is purposely swallowed up by a square outcropping that houses the center's boardroom.

The entire building, sheathed in gray zinc panels, is like a mystery waiting to be solved.

But stepping through the doors is a little like entering another dimension. Or, to put it in terms of the

childlike wonder the museum's interior inspires, like walking into some art world equivalent of "The Secret Garden."

For first-time visitors, gasps are not uncommon reactions.

Natural light from three enormous skylights filters down onto the pure white walls of the main corridor, which is buttressed on the right by a huge, sculptural staircase that curves ever-so-slightly leftward. Lined up on the left are all those amenities modern museum visitors have come to expect — gift shop, ticket desk, cafe — and a series of three rectangular rooms that will serve as educational spaces.

The exterior of the building gives no clue to the existence of this light, airy vista, nor to the museum's imposing vertical scale. And that, in a nutshell, was the intention. And same goes for the rest of the museum experience, which pokes and prods the visitor along without fully revealing its many hidden secrets until you're right in the middle of them.

"You have no idea how big the building is in the front," said Charles Gwathmey, whose New York City-based firm Gwathmey Siegel and Associates designed the building. Once you enter, he continued, "it starts to unfold. Hopefully the sequence of spaces is surprising and it builds up."

Many paths to gallery

Unlike most classic museums (e.g. the original 1905 Albright-Knox Art Gallery), where the visitor has to follow one path from gallery to gallery and retrace his steps to leave, the Burchfield-Penney gives museumgoers options. They can either ascend the curved staircase into the glass-enclosed reception space, wind through the second-floor sculpture gallery and descend another staircase into the huge main space. Or they can enter the first-floor galleries through the traditional entrance and approach the main space from there, leaving the the upstairs for later.

Either way, the divergent paths to the main gallery are built like a crescendo, with the scale constantly prodding along the viewer's curiosity until the big revelation of the feature gallery at the end. Most spaces, starting with the first-floor gallery-in-the-round dedicated to Charles Burchfield's interpretations of the seasons, provide what Gwathmey called "piques of anticipation" about what lies ahead.

The circular Burchfield gallery, enclosed in a rotunda of gray blocks, leaves just a few inches of space between itself and the south wall. That's so viewers can catch a sneak peek through the opening into the grand main gallery, creating a magnetic glimpse to draw them through the museum as a child is drawn through a garden.

Directly across from that gallery are rooms dedicated to the museum's permanent collection. And at the building's north end near the Burchfield rotunda is a to-scale re-creation of Burchfield's studio, placed at a skewed angle against an adjacent gallery dedicated to Burchfield's work.

And the subtle curve of the large east gallery, modeled after the second-largest space at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) in Boston, is meant to be a counterpoint to the rest of the galleries, all of which are square, rectangular or otherwise orthogonal. Through adjustable lighting, the nearly overwhelming space can be subdivided into smaller galleries, creating the impression of intimacy within it.

"An artist's sandbox'

With all the grandeur of the grand east gallery, it's easy to overlook the fact that some of the most interesting spaces in the museum are its more modest galleries.

At the south end of the first floor is a small, square gallery, dedicated to tech-heavy contemporary art. It's outfitted with three adjustable-height ceiling grids each able to support one ton and a floor that can be repeatedly reconfigured and drilled into. The space, which Burchfield-Penney Director Ted Pietrzak

called "an artist's sandbox," will give Western New York artists the opportunity to create ambitious and cutting-edge installation pieces.

Tucked into the center of the museum is a 156-seat, cubelike auditorium outfitted with digital projectors, surround sound and the capability of recording live lectures and performances.

But the coup de grace, at least from the perspective of Gwathmey and Pietrzak, is the glass-enclosed, cantilevered balcony that juts out from the second floor into the main gallery. Its inclusion, Pietrzak said, was gleaned from similar features in museums like the Mass MoCA and the Clark Institute of Art in Williamstown, Mass. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, it provides an opportunity for the viewer to look at art from a different angle, to consider where they just were, or where they might soon go.

"The importance of that is that we have to kind of come back and reflect on our own experiences rather than just keep adding to them," Pietrzak said.

Gwathmey, who called the space his favorite in the entire building, cited the three windows of the rotunda through which a viewer can glimpse the Albright-Knox, the Buffalo State College campus and a segment of the Burchfield gallery itself. The lights embedded in the ceiling are configured to mimic the constellations of Orion, which Burchfield often referenced, and Taurus.

At the west end of the second floor is the spacious Burchfield-Penney board room, which looks out on Buffalo State. Next door is a glass-enclosed art conservation lab dedicated to the preservation of works on paper, which account for 66 percent of the Burchfield-Penney's collection. Visitors will be able to peek into the lab to see preservation work in progress.

And through the whole experience, whether in the vestibule or the second-floor craft-art and ceramic galleries, natural light filters down from above, bouncing off the white walls to create a heightened awareness of the meticulously designed surroundings, revealing all the carefully planned angles and secrets built into Western New York's first new museum in more than 100 years.

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