

INTERIOR DESIGN

August 2013



edifying edifices

College museums can teach much more than Art History 101

Long a commonplace fixture of U.S. higher education, teaching museums have reconceived their mission. Colleges and universities are commissioning museums not simply as passive containers for art and artifacts but also as active instruments of pedagogy: The building itself teaches. In some cases, the architecture draws on art as inspiration. In other cases, an interior encourages hands-on involvement with the objects in a collection. Beauty is just a bonus.

Schools have cast their nets widely for architects, often through national and international competitions, and results have been avant-garde on even the most traditional redbrick campuses. Interesting comparisons and contrasts can be drawn between the design strategies deployed and the curatorial attitudes exhibited at Colby College in Waterville, Maine; Michigan State University in East Lansing; and Hamilton College in Clinton, New York.

Philip Johnson once told me that he never let his art collection influence his architecture, but Frank Gehry does mostly that, absorbing the lessons of his artist friends. Frederick Fisher, who once worked for Frank O. Gehry & Associates and who grew up professionally in the context of California's light-and-space movement, has adapted artist Robert Irwin's ideas about environmental phenomena at the Colby College Museum of Art. For its Alford-Lunder Family Pavilion, an addition to a rambling cluster of structures—including a 1999 contribution by Frederick Fisher and Partners, Architects—he and partner Joseph Coriarty looked at Irwin's scrimms to understand how filmy materials catch and diffuse light in evolving visual fields. "Our design is not a formal statement. Its appearance changes over the course of the day, like the surface of a lake," Fisher says.

This investigation resulted in facades that are basically shadow boxes, surfaced with fritted glass to look variably solid, filmy, or transparent, depending on the sun. In addition, the fritting softens reflections, giving a more gentle presence to the 26,000-square-foot newcomer,

mattersofdesign

which is sited to command the main campus entrance. During the day, the fritting works its effect on the outside. At nightfall, as the curtain wall dissolves, a Sol LeWitt mural in a rainbow of colored arcs becomes more visible behind, painted in the front stairwell. Fisher's building is a case study in perception, teaching Irwin's fundamental discovery that light affects how we see, whether we're looking at art or at architecture.

Zaha Hadid has studied illusionism in painting, for example plays of perspective. With Michigan State's Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Zaha Hadid Architects has completed a 46,000-square-foot building that tricks and stimulates the eye. Like Fisher, she made the facade capture and reflect surrounding phenomena—the material, in her case, is pleated and quilted stainless steel. Unlike Fisher, whose surfaces are diaphanous but whose underlying forms are static, she uses planes and volumes to create movement. She forces perspective with converging and diverging lines, she says, stretching and distorting shapes both inside and out, "beyond the boundary of the building." These optics put viewers on an alert that sensitizes their sight to the pleasures of viewing. The building becomes an exercise in seeing.

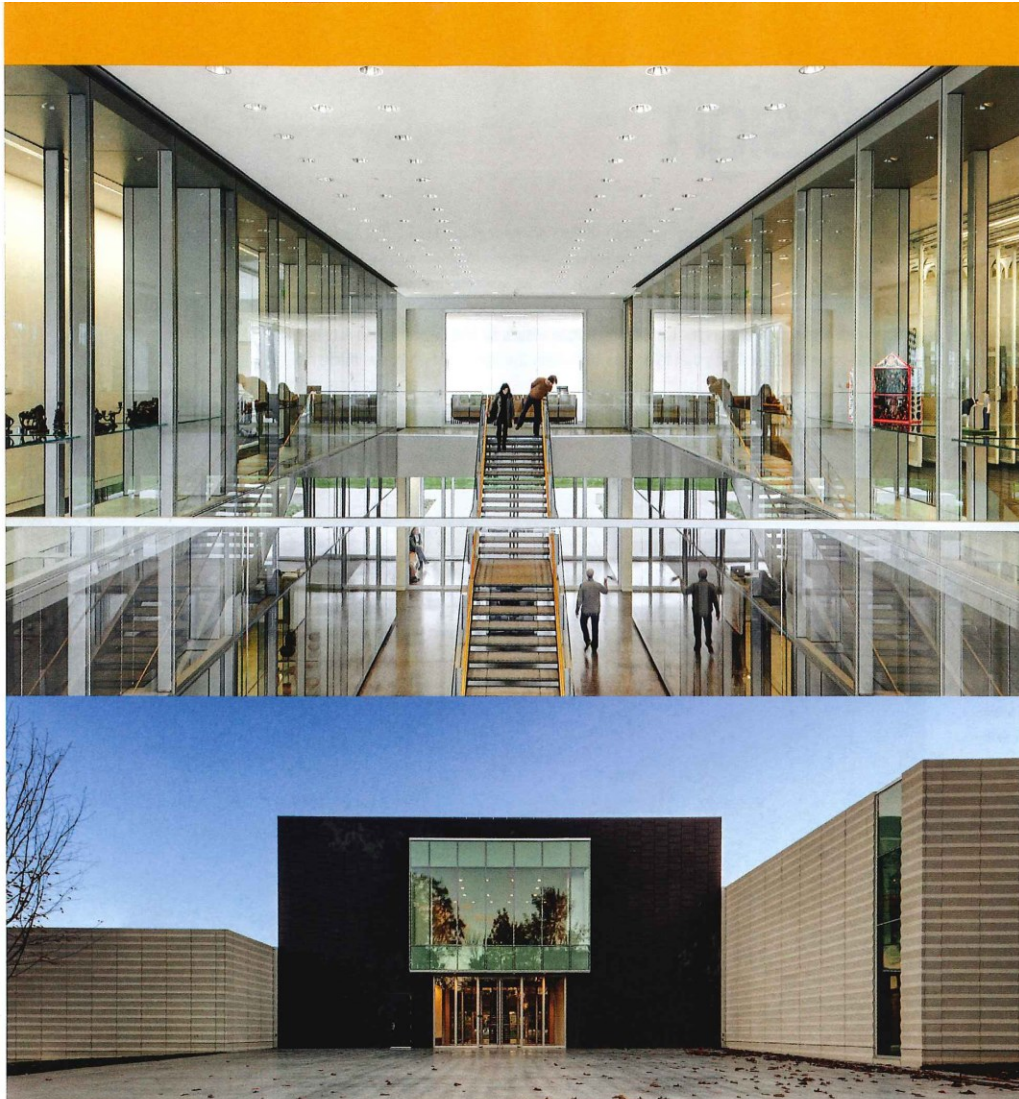
In the main gallery when the museum opened, installation artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's floating umbrella-like form seemed inflated by the spatial energy flowing through. Wall-mounted works, meanwhile, required extra finesse. Much ado has been made recently about the disadvantages of inclined planes in a museum, but the deft curators at the ➤

Opposite, from top: The glazed entry to Michigan State University's Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, a Zaha Hadid Architects building otherwise clad in stainless steel. Visitors looking up at the umbrella-like form of Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's Red Factor.

Right: Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawing #559, in a color ink wash, at the Colby College Museum of Art's Alford-Lunder Family Pavilion by Frederick Fisher and Partners, Architects.

TRENT BELLESTATE OF SOL LEWITT AND THE ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY





From top: The central atrium at Machado and Silveti Associates's Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College. Facing the rest of the campus, the Wellin's rear entry flanked by support space and the main gallery.

mattersofdesign

Broad have either employed small brackets to lift art off Hadid's several leaning walls, producing shadows that spatialize the pieces, or inclined them at a parallel angle, inviting intimacy as viewers lean in.

Whereas Hadid and Fisher relied on the perceptual to reinterpret their respective museums as teaching tools, the inventiveness of Machado and Silveti Associates is more anatomical. Rodolfo Machado effectively extrapolated Hamilton College's "open" curriculum with the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art's open displays of sculpture, open racks of paintings, and open prep rooms. As senior associate Edwin Goodell explains, "The collection had to be as accessible as possible, and every aspect of the museum had to be visible, in order to bring faculty and students into a daily interaction with the artifacts." Machado, whose memory is well stocked with architectural historical precedent, including the plans of Venetian palazzi, disposed his stable, euclidean volumes around a two-story atrium. A ceremonial staircase ascends through the middle to reach a seminar theater, flanked by offices and study areas that look like giant vitrines behind clear glass walls. Despite the Karnak-ian monumentality, the space is a visual echo chamber of glass.

This literal and metaphorical transparency is what gives a sense of ownership to both students and faculty—encouraged to meet at the museum for artifact-based classes, even if those classes are about biology or psychology. "The Wellin makes our students very proud. It now plays a much more active educational role and also helps define Hamilton's profile among our applicants," president Joan Hinde Stewart says. A prime mover behind the Machado and Silveti commission, she could be speaking for all colleges where a new museum has energized the campus and elevated the institution's image as a progressive supporter of contemporary culture. —*Joseph Giovannini*