

ART URBANISM

Chipperfield and the Menil master plan

THE MENIL COLLECTION HAS CHOSEN DAVID CHIPPERFIELD

Architects to conceptualize a master plan for its 30-acre property in Montrose. The selection was made after an international search, which culminated in formal interviews and presentations by several firms, including Office d'A from Boston and two Madrid-based firms, Mansilla+Tuñón and Herreros Arquitectos, all of whom are likely candidates for the design of future Menil buildings. Chipperfield, based in London, Berlin, and Singapore, recently won the Sterling Prize for its design of the Museum of Modern Literature in Germany and has completed several museum master plans.

Its current melding of architecture, landscape, and art make the Menil campus unique in terms of urbanism. The expanse of lawn fronting the main museum building, designed by Renzo Piano, is a site for three land art works by Michael Heizer – *Isolated Mass / Circumflex (#2)*, *Rift*, and *Dissipate*, while Mark Di Suvero's large-scale *Bygones* occupies a park space between the Piano building and the Rothko Chapel, where Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* emerges from a reflection pool. Bungalows from the 1920s and 30s surround the Menil and Rothko Chapel, housing a mix of residences, museum offices, and other arts organizations. The consistent use of the hallmark "Menil Gray" for the exteriors of the bungalows creates a distinct, unified – and even somewhat surreal – appearance. The Menil Collection campus fits into the neighborhood so well that one has to look for it, and even after finding the central site, one must explore further to stumble upon the Cy Twombly Gallery, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, and the Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall.

This art urbanism creates a humane and relaxing environment for exploration and contemplation. It is this understated, sophisticated character that the Menil Collection seeks to preserve in its quest for expansion. Regarding this commitment, Josef Helfenstein, director of the Menil, said "We owe it to this place," adding that, "David Chipperfield Architects has the necessary intelligence and excellent staff to deal with complex issues."

Piano was an original consideration for the master plan, but he had to withdraw due to earlier commitments. Helen Winkler Fosdick, who worked with John and Dominique de Menil (1964–73), said, "I was saddened by the loss of Renzo Piano to continue the plan of the Menil campus, but heartened by the intelligent and thoughtful presentation of

are on the list for the master plan: an expanded bookstore, a café, and a building for public programs and social functions. The new plan will also address the need for additional space for the Menil Archives, the Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center, and new buildings devoted to individual artists, as well as income-producing properties along Richmond

Avenue where Metro is planning a light rail line linking the University of Houston to the Galleria area.

That the Dan Flavin Installation on Richmond remained intact in every arrangement shown by Chipperfield delighted Fosdick as did the likelihood that the rail line will bring more visitors to the space, which was reworked by the artist for his light sculptures. The fate of nearby Richmond Square, a sprawling apartment complex owned by the Menil Collection, is uncertain. The large swath of land could relieve pressure on other properties and enable the creation of new architecturally significant sites, but the complex generates income for the Menil, illustrating the challenge Chipperfield faces.

None of the proposed master plans were released to the public by the Menil. When asked about a timeline and whether the economic climate

would cause delays, Helfenstein noted, "The timing is actually good. We are at the beginning of the process. We are not building. We are not doing a capital campaign. Before fundraising, we have to have a master site plan."

Though the Menil campus is not likely to change in the very near future, the comprehensive interview process and the selection of David Chipperfield Architects are among the most promising architectural developments Houston has seen for years.

–Marc El-Khoury



Menil campus and surrounding neighborhood with the Richmond Square apartments site left blank and marked with an asterisk.

David Chipperfield and the Menil board and staff." She attended a March 17, 2009, talk by the architect during which he presented three possible arrangements. "One sensed an extremely conscious effort to respect and carefully continue the greatness of the Menil and surrounding campus of art set in the bungalows and trees. They spoke of understanding natural light with the art, keeping the quietness of the neighborhood and art spaces, and single artist's installations – all good things that help make up this extraordinary gift the de Menils gave to Houston and the world."

Several features of the original campus concept were not built when the Menil opened in 1987 and



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