

A QUESTION OF SIZE

The Blanton Museum gives Austin a notable art collection, but a less notable building to house it

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Above: Front view of the Blanton Museum of Art's Mari and James Michener Building (Kallman, McKinnell, and Wood, 2006). **Below:** View from the University of Texas campus, looking toward the state capitol.



BY RICHARD R. BRETELL

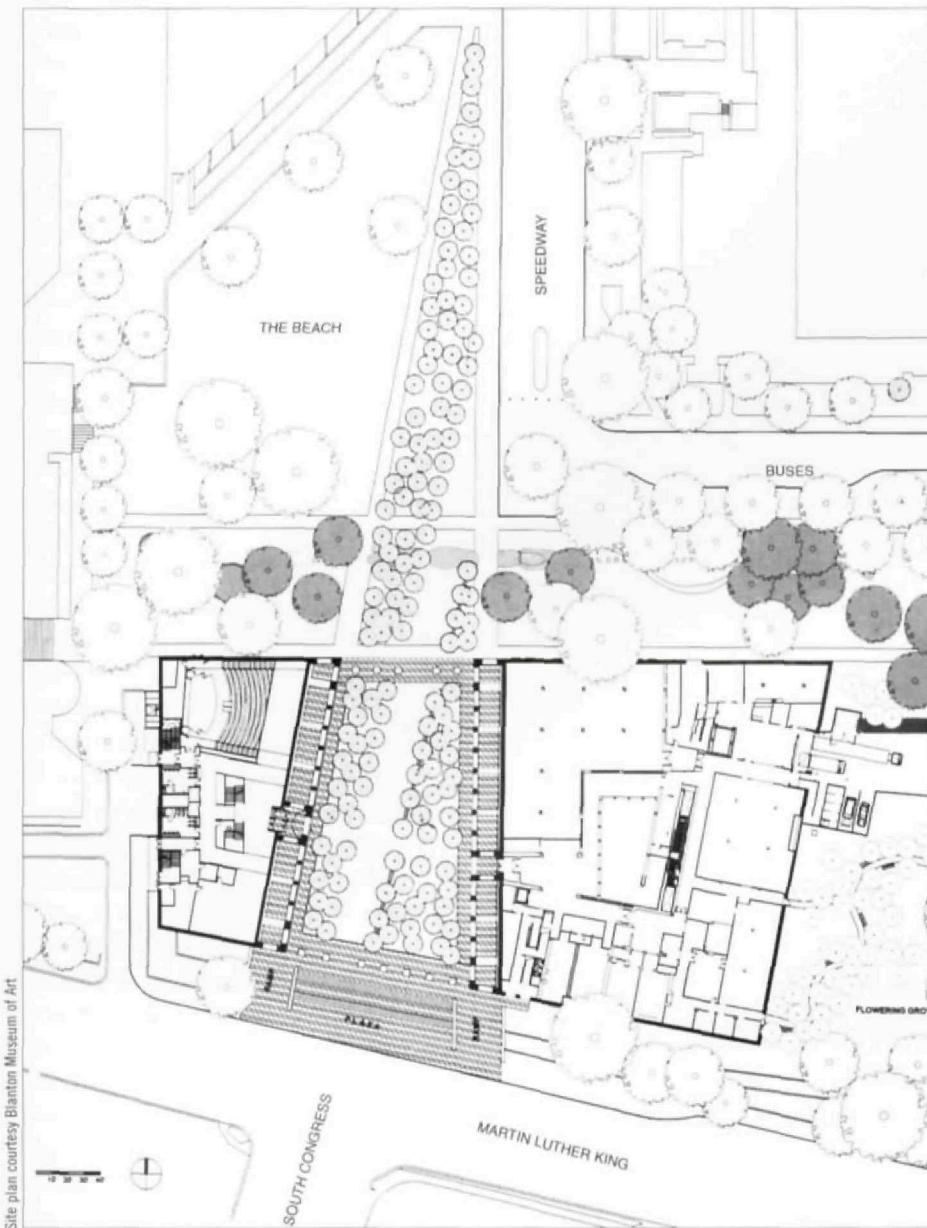
ALTHOUGH MANY OF America's great private universities have art museums with world-class collections, public universities in the U.S. have been ambivalent about the efficacy of the visual arts and art collecting for general education. The history of art was taught to "gentlemen" first at Harvard, then Yale, and gradually spread as far west as Stanford, before becoming "co-educated." As if to stress this last point, several of the Seven Sisters to the old Ivy League have superb art museums. The idea implicit in this is that art connoisseurship is appropriate to the education of the elite, but not to the masses that can only afford public education.

So too in Texas, where the flagship of the state's universities, the University of Texas—one hardly need say "at Austin"—struggled for years to form an art collection worthy of a major building to house it. But form it they did, both from gifts of existing private collections such as those of Mari and James Michener, Barbara Duncan, C.R. Smith, and Leo Steinberg, and with major purchases, such as the acquisition (a gift-purchase) of the famous Suida-Manning Collection of Old Master paintings and drawings, which over a

period of three generations migrated from Vienna to New York to Austin. This purchase was truly epochal for the university, and justified the construction of a large art museum.

The Blanton Museum of Art opened the Mari and James Michener Building, the larger of the two buildings in its complex at the southern edge of the University of Texas campus, in April. The second building, the Edgar A. Smith Building, will open next fall. Both are part of an ambitious \$83.5 million master-planned museum campus designed by the Boston architectural firm of Kallman, McKinnell, and Wood. Michael McKinnell served as the design partner, while the Dallas firm of Booziotis & Company Architects was the local architect. Peter Walker and Partners of Berkeley, California, did the landscaping as part of their comprehensive landscape plan for the entire university campus. The selection of these nationally prominent figures reflects the ambition of the university and its donors.

The question is how well that ambition was realized. In terms of size, it would seem to have succeeded. The Michener Building is truly immense. It has



Site plan courtesy Blanton Museum of Art

four masonry-clad walls, the longest of which is more than 230 feet in length and 42 feet in height; an immense Spanish-tiled roof cantilevered vertiginously over those walls; towering interior ceilings on both levels; a vast arcaded interior courtyard with skylights; an 8,000 square foot "black box" for temporary exhibitions; a state-of-the-art suite of rooms for the museum's nationally important collection of prints and drawings; and two large suites of classically proportioned, naturally lit galleries for the permanent collection.

With an E-gallery for new media, bathrooms, an information desk worthy of the Queen Elizabeth 2, two well-equipped seminar rooms, and large facilities for storage and exhibition preparation, the building has more than 124,000 square-feet of space, making it what the university calls "the largest university art museum building in America." And with the completion of the 56,000 square-foot Edgar A. Smith Building next year it will be.

So it is big. But how good is it? Let's begin at the urban level and think about the complex in terms of Austin itself. The

Blanton is located on Martin Luther King Boulevard, the street that is, in essence, the dividing line between "town" and "gown." The selection of the site was of crucial importance to the institution, suggesting that, unlike other UT facilities, the Blanton was built as much for the general public and tourists as for the university itself. In this, UT followed the Yale model of urban accessibility of art collections rather than the Harvard-Princeton model of an art museum imbedded inside a campus, ritually closed to all but insiders. And when one adds to this the fact that the Blanton is directly across the street from the equally immense, if architecturally lamentable, Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, hats off to the urban planners in their encouragement of institutional synergy.

The only criticism I have of the Blanton complex in urban terms is that the entrances to the museum's two buildings are all but invisible from the street. While the location and position of the buildings makes a positive contribution to the city, the relative invisibility of their entrances undercuts this contribution.

The site for the Blanton's two build-

ings is, in fact, a pair of sites separated by a former city street that has been closed and pulled into the complex through Peter Walker's appropriate, if unimaginative, rows of live oak trees. In order to allow expression of the street, the Blanton had to be divided into two unconnected buildings—the larger one for art and the smaller one for offices and services. Hence, the auditoriums (large and small), the restaurant, the museum shop, the art classrooms, and the offices for a staff of 60 will be in the Smith Building to the west, a short walk away on an oddly informal stone pathway from the Michener Building, where the works of art are exhibited.

A neat juxtaposition of life and art—or commerce and pure esthetics—is thus enforced by architecture, although it may seem unusual to visitors that the temporary exhibition area is in the art building, completely removed from the café, museum shop, and auditorium, which normally are fed by temporary exhibition attendance. Art and life were apparently thought a better division than permanent and temporary. The only curatorial inhabitants of the art building are those in the Julia Mathews Wilkinson Center for Prints and Drawings, who, I take it, could not be pried away from their art. As a former curator whose office was steps away from his galleries, I heartily approve of their decision.

The most flattering view of the Blanton's two-building campus is from the university side, near the vast neocorbusian Perry-Casteneda Library. This view is centered on the wonderful granite double-drum dome of the Texas capitol at the end of Congress Avenue, which is aligned at an angle with the closed street between the buildings. This urban composition is utterly compelling, and is, in some ways, justification enough for what is probably a functionally flawed division of what otherwise might have been an integrated institution.

The Michener Building is an immense, tile-roofed box with almost completely planar walls of variously colored materials—brick, stones (I counted three different colors and degrees of hardness, "structural polychromy" in Post-Modern guise), stucco, wood, glass, and metal. The back, or the side facing the parking garage, is the low-budget side, dominated by brick, rather like Tom Beebe's failed modernist back sides of the neo-Baroque Harold Washington Library in Chicago or his classical baroque Meadows Museum in Dallas. The Blanton's expensive front, facing the closed street, is almost completely stone, although the granite and limestone pieces are so small and thin that the wall seems like a mosaic over an invisible structure rather than a weight-bearing masonry façade that can visually support the immense, overhanging roof. When compared to any of the superb Beaux

Arts facades on the UT campus by Cass Gilbert, Paul Cret, and Mark Lemmon, it fails at the most basic level of architectural integrity, indicating that we are so accustomed to disguised structure that we no longer expect masonry walls even to look as if they support a roof.

The Blanton's site, which is a huge rhombus, suggested two rhomboid rectangles for its buildings. The Michener Building juxtaposes two right-angle corners—at the northwest and the southeast—with acute and oblique angled corners on the northeast and southwest sides. The entire building is arranged around a large courtyard that is, therefore, a rhombus as well. A staircase opposite an L-shaped colonnade with modernist remakings of Roman arches and Mycenaean—or Italian 1930s neoclassical—columns leads up to the galleries. With a totally modernist series of triangular north-facing lanterns on the ceiling, this space seems more like a vast opera set awaiting performers than a welcome center where one sits, reads a map, and plans a visit. For the impaired among us, there is an elevator placed near the front door that goes to a landing above the entrance that is diagonally opposite the staircase landing. So much for consistency. The two types of visitors—those who elevate and those who walk—will have forever different experiences of the museum narrative, each with a different beginning and a different sense of historical and cultural time.

The two landings divide the piano nobile into what are effectively two museums, the smaller and more successful of which is devoted to European pictorial arts from the Renaissance through the 19th century. This is on the northwest corner of the building, and consists of two parallel and integrated suites of galleries, the larger of which is devoted to painting and the other to the graphic arts. Each wall linking to another gallery is punctuated by a centrally placed door, with the enfilade of doors ending, in each case, on a work of art or an exit door. The galleries are designed and detailed as skylit paintings galleries on the Beaux Arts model perfected in the United States by Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge in Chicago in the 1890s and reaching an apogee in John Russell Pope's National Gallery of Art building from the 1930s. However, the lay-light cove system within the Blanton's galleries is not surmounted by the wonderful glass roofs of the Beaux Arts prototypes, probably because the Texas sun, as we all know, is very bright. Rather, the architect disguised clerestory windows in the roof, thereby allowing only powerfully directional light into the space above the lay-light. This produced a dim glow from the lay-lights when I visited on a brilliant October day, almost as if the building was more afraid of natural



Top: An example of the Michener Building's smaller galleries, which are given over to European pictorial arts.

Above: One of two large skylit galleries devoted to the Blanton's collection of American and Latin American art of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Right: Main lobby and "grand" staircase.



light than in awe of its power to animate works of art.

In spite of its flaws of lighting and its profusion of centrally placed doors—many galleries have doors on three walls, thereby relegating the art to the corners—the Blanton's suite of galleries for European pictorial arts is beautifully proportioned and very conducive to the sensitive hanging by the curatorial staff. There is no doubt that it is the best suite of galleries devoted to Old Master paintings, drawings, and prints hung in a media-integrated fashion in any American university museum. The octangular corner gallery with its tall, vertical walls and veiled windows is a wonderful oasis in the midst of the smaller rooms, with their highly concentrated and comparative hangings. The hang is perfectly suited to what we used to call “a teaching collection,” and it is easy to imagine groups of undergraduates learning about attribution, iconography, condition, national schools, and the like directly in front of works of art by such masters as Durer, Veronese, Rubens, Vouet, Guercino, Claude, Rembrandt, Tiepolo, and Piranesi. Even the founders of the Fogg Museum at Harvard would be impressed.

This suite of small and medium scaled galleries exists in a dramatically imbalanced relationship with the other L-shaped wing, which is mostly devoted to the Blanton's large and nationally important collection of American and Latin American art of the late 19th and 20th centuries. This area is dominated by

two absolutely immense skylit galleries, with single uninterrupted walls 18 feet high and 150 and 97 feet long respectively. The long walls are topped by decorative semi-circular coves held in place by flat lay-lights. These rooms are so large and so commandingly formal that they render all but the largest works placed in them visually insignificant. Major paintings by great masters of American modernism, most of which were intended for small spaces, line the walls like pinned butterflies acting as specimens for the viewer. Many of my favorite paintings by Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Tworkov, Paul Gottlieb, Helen Frankenthaler, and others look like curatorial playing cards. They are arranged in a room that so enervates them that they appear weak, almost like slides or photographs rather than powerful objects designed for close aesthetic encounter. These huge galleries would also swallow up the groups of students and faculty for which they were presumably built. They are, in effect, more like basketball courts or classical bank lobbies than modern art galleries.

Indeed, with the exception of the stolidly traditional works in the C.R. Smith Collection, which are all crammed into one small room, and an almost hilarious circular gallery of plaster casts from the famous Battle Collection, which are devoted to European art but are inexplicably placed in the American galleries, the majority of the works in the Blanton's collection of the Americas is 20th century and modernist. We know a lot about the visual conditions for which these works were made—bright incandescent light, white walls, asymmetrical spaces, side lighting (if any natural lighting), and low ceilings. To design galleries for them suited for huge Baroque paintings and rooted in the Old Master museum architecture of Paris, Berlin, Dresden, St. Petersburg, and Vienna is fundamentally to misunderstand both the art and the role of the museum in presenting it. This problem reaches its apogee as you approach the huge corner gallery in which a dramatic installation by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles, an installation designed for a small, dark room, has been suspended in a high space in which the windows and the skylight have been closed to accommodate it. This work would have looked infinitely better placed in the flat-roofed, unlit temporary exhibitions spaces below. Here, architecture and art are in open conflict.

It is tempting to rush to the smaller and equally Beaux Arts galleries that parallel the two vast spaces and say, “Aha! These are much better!” But they are only better scaled. They, too, exhibit a misunderstanding of the art they contain. The superb easel paintings of Marin or Davis or Bywaters, to name just three artists, would have looked

better in modernist installations. The efforts of modernist compositional balance are based on the principals of what artist and scholar Jay Hambidge called "dynamic symmetry," by which he meant calibrated asymmetry. The placement of works by modernist artists in symmetrically planned, coved, Beaux Arts galleries is, in powerfully subliminal ways, a form of aesthetic entombment.

It is precisely this modernist historicism, a form of simplified Beaux Arts architecture, that is the central problem of the Blanton as a building. It also raises serious questions about the intentions of its architects and their clients. Few can forget the bracingly Corbusian and powerfully brutalist building for the Boston City Hall that made Kallmann and McKinnell famous in the 1960s. And their sublimely tough parking garage nearby that injected such life into the architecture of the automobile is one of late modernism's masterpieces.

It is likely that no reasonably knowledgeable person could identify the Blanton Museum of Art with any of Kallmann and McKinnell's epoch-making masterpieces. In fact, McKinnell's particular brand of post-modern historicism, as embodied at the Blanton, is an utterly compromised kind of architecture that will appeal to purists on neither side of the great ideological battle—neither the neo-modernists nor the post-modern historicists.

The Blanton had a troubled history long before its first brick was laid. The controversy surrounding the rejection of the Herzog and de Meuron design for the museum in 2000 (see "A Flaw in the System" by Mark Gunderson, *Cite* 47) left many deeply suspicious of the university's intentions. I must confess, though, that although I was partly horrified by the logic of the UT regents in rejecting the Herzog and de Meuron design, one side of me cheered them. Having taught at UT from 1976 until 1980 as a confirmed modernist, I derived much more pleasure from the pre-modern campus buildings by Gilbert, Cret, and Lemmon than from the state-financed modernism that added such mediocrity to the campus in the 1960s and 1970s. I also feel that there are historicist architects who could have done a building much more sympathetic both to the UT campus' brilliant Mediterranean historicist architecture and the wonderfully provincial classicism of the Texas State Capitol.

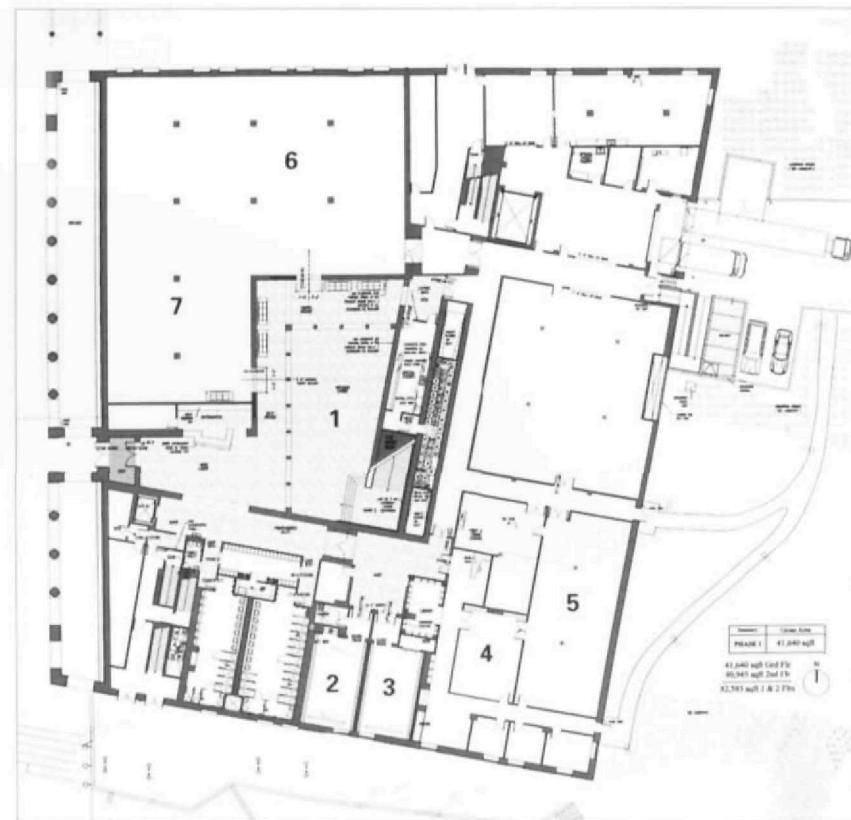
Yet it is precisely what some have called the "turn-coat historicism" of formerly modernist firms such as Kallmann, McKinnell, and Wood that creates buildings as flawed as the Blanton Museum of Art. With greater inventiveness and more nuanced use of historical referents, I could imagine a campus of smaller, interconnected buildings with a courtyard accessed from both the campus and Martin Luther

King Boulevard that would have welcomed students, faculty, Austinites, and tourists into a people-filled and truly "Mediterranean" patio with a fountain, plants, chairs, food, and drink; a separate L-shaped building for European art with greater attention to historical detail and more atmosphere; a completely modernist building designed to display the 20th century collection in dynamic and exciting spaces suited to it; a classroom and "virtual education" building with access both to the web and all the virtual museums imaginable; and offices for the people who work with art scattered throughout the complex near their areas of expertise rather than arranged in a penthouse suite designed to look like "work spaces" for a small suburban corporation.

University communities are among the most open and dynamic of any in the world, and with the superb faculty and staff at the University of Texas in mind, it is easy to imagine what could have happened to the Blanton museum with the creative design input of scientists, engineers, art historians, artists, architects, literary theorists, psychologists, and others brought together to energize the conception of a truly 21st-century art museum. Instead, the university has built a state-of-the-art museum for a 19th-century city anxious to prove its civilization. Its grandeur of scale and reliance on the architecture of the Beaux Arts makes us believe that no creative university think tank had any part in its design.

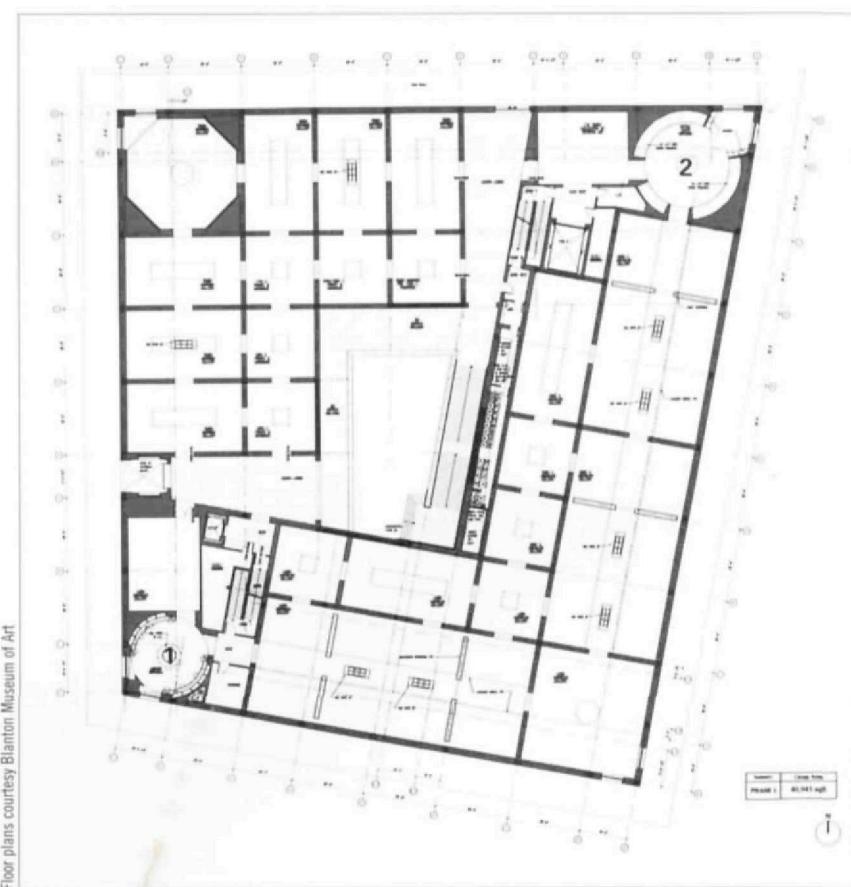
Yet all of that said, I must conclude on a more up-beat note. The University of Texas at Austin now has an art museum that, as a facility, is and will be for a long time the envy of any state university in America. It is not as adventurous architecturally as I.M. Pei's museum for the University of Indiana or those brilliantly associationist, yet utterly modernist, museums by Antoine Predock for Arizona State University or the University of Wyoming. But with its nods to tradition and its position between the UT campus and the city of Austin, it brings art to a modern metropolis and its university in an ambitious, expensive, and utterly mannerly way. Its failures are not easily correctable, but in the end neither are they fatal to the functioning of the institution. It will serve its audiences well for at least a generation.

But what will happen to it by 2030 is anyone's guess. The Blanton's galleries are already overfilled; a good many works from the Latin American and American 19th and 20th century collections are already in storage. So the museum will have to evolve as its collections, and audiences, grow. I hope that it does so quickly, so that the ambitious effort at the Blanton can be rethought and made as great as the university and the city it serves. ■



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

1. ATRIUM
2. CONFERENCE/BORD ROOM
3. SEMINAR ROOM
4. STUDY ROOM
5. CENTER FOR PRINTS AND DRAWINGS
6. GALLERY
7. TEMPORARY EXHIBITION GALLERY



2ND FLOOR PLAN, SHOWING GALLERIES, ALONG WITH:

1. E-LOUNGE
2. BATTLE PLASTER CAST ROTUNDA

Floor plans courtesy Blanton Museum of Art