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Renzo Piano and Peter Walker design a sculpture center for Dallas

RENZO PIANO has a history of creating memorable places to view art. From the Pompidou Centre in Paris to Basel, Switzerland's Beyeler Museum, Piano has sculpted museum buildings as notable as the works they contain. With Houston's Menil Collection and Twombly Gallery, Texas can already boast of two Piano museums, and before long it will be able to lay claim to a third. In Dallas in January, ground will be broken for a Piano-designed 2.4-acre sculpture garden and museum in the city's downtown arts district.

Scheduled to open in the spring of 2002, the sculpture center is a gift of Dallas art collector and real estate developer Raymond Nasher, whose collection, considered one of the world's finest private collections of modern sculpture, it will showcase. The Nasher Sculpture Center will be sited next to the Dallas Museum of Art, and besides providing a garden setting for the outdoor display of sculpture, will have a covered pavilion to house smaller works, a research center, an auditorium, a bookstore, and a cafe.

Nasher selected Piano as the architect and Peter Walker as the landscape architect for the estimated \$32 million project. Piano's basic concept for the sculpture pavilion is to imbue it with a sense of discovery, as if it were an archaeological dig. Six parallel walls will define the entry into the site and guide the visitor's view to unearth the treasures contained within. The design gives a nod to the ancient impulse for pairing masonry construction and sculpture, but juxtaposes the stone walls with a modern, high-tech roof system to complement the modernity of the collection's pieces. The hollow walls will be constructed with a traditional steel-tube column system, with a standard framing system to carry the stone veneer. The pavilion will have a wood floor, and glass walls will enclose the north and south ends to help create a sense of lightness and transparency. The curved roof is planned as an insulated glass system set into a steel frame. Steel cabling extending above the roof will help lighten the struc-

ture. Piano describes the roof as "lace-like," and the walls as "massive, strong. I feel the walls are part of the topography."

One of the most innovative features of the design is a perforated aluminum covering that will go over the curved glass roof. Referred to as an "egg crate" type design, it is not a flat grill. Instead, it is a double layer of 3D egg-shapes cast in four-foot by four-foot panels; the panels will be slightly offset to deflect the harsher south light, while allowing north light to come in the galleries. The panelized system will be painted white for additional reflective qualities. Citing his Menil Collection building as a point of reference, Piano notes, "nature is a very strong presence." "There is a sense of deep depth," he adds. "I think it will be one of the most important things in the Dallas [project] — to be able to see through the building." According to Peter Walker, this transparency will provide an unbroken visual connection from the street to the inner garden. What he and Piano are doing, he says, is building on the "remnant" idea of the arts district as a pedestrian street. "We wanted to provide a backdrop that will change with the seasons, but will not be showy," says Walker. "Something that will knit together, and show sculptures to their best advantage."

The transparent nature of the interior galleries, which will be affected by subtle changes in light, the times of day and the atmospheric effects of clouds passing overhead, will give the museum a unique ambiance. Piano refers to it as a "roofless museum," and anticipates that the building will be "very luminous," a softly glowing presence in the Dallas arts district at night.

It was over many years that Raymond Nasher and his late wife Patsy assembled their world-renowned collection of modern sculpture. Though collected by museums in other cities, Nasher wanted his collection to remain in his hometown. The city of Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art offered to build a garden for the sculptures, with the idea

of bringing the collection within the museum's orbit. But ultimately Nasher chose to underwrite the costs of land acquisition, site development, and long-term maintenance through his Nasher Foundation, an arrangement that allows him to retain control over the disposition of his collection.

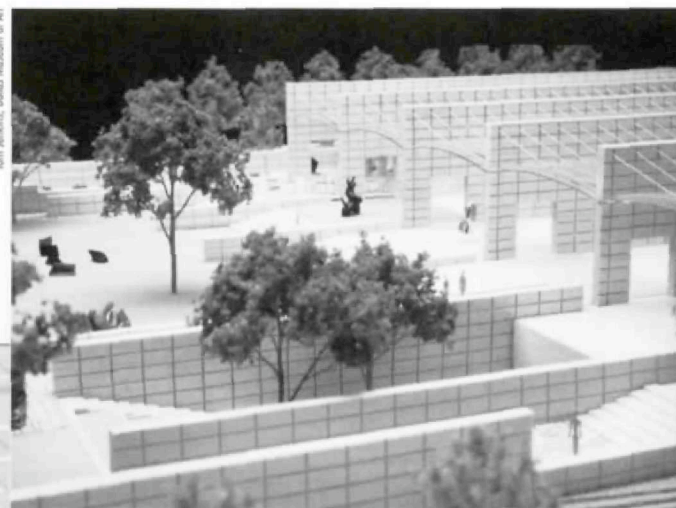
In spite of the significance of his multi-million-dollar gift to Dallas, Nasher had to overcome some hurdles to house his art in the manner he desired. His first choice for the sculpture park was his own house, which is surrounded by eight acres of wooded grounds and creeks, and which he wished to give to the city. But the city, citing traffic and parking concerns, balked at turning the residential property into a cultural district.

When Nasher turned his attention to a site adjacent to the Dallas Museum of Art that was being used as surface parking, he was again rebuffed, this time by tenants of nearby offices who opposed his desire to close a street between the museum and the proposed sculpture park. Nasher's view was that the resulting linkage between museum and the sculpture garden would have been "incredibly vibrant." Piano, though, concurred with the belief that the street should be kept open, telling Nasher, "You must accept the city as it is, not try to create some kind of kingdom for art."

As a result, the primary linkage to the new sculpture garden will be from the Dallas Museum of Art's ceremonial entrance on Flora Street, a significant but previously underutilized entrance. The sculpture center will be accessed from the north side of Flora, a street that forms the central axis of Dallas' downtown arts district. At the eastern terminus of Flora is I.M. Pei's Symphony Center, and several blocks south on Ross Street is the proposed site of a new performing arts center. "Hopefully," Nasher says, "what we are doing will be a catalyst for continuing the development of a really important arts district." — *Barbara Koerble*



Tom Jenkins, Dallas Museum of Art



Tom Jenkins, Dallas Museum of Art



Tom Jenkins, Dallas Museum of Art

A model of the Nasher Sculpture Center shows how it fills its block (top left); Renzo Piano's sculpture pavilion, with its steel-cable supported roof (top right); and how the landscaping interacts with the pavilion (above).