



Prairie Style

Michael Rotondi has given Prairie View A&M's school of architecture an impressive new home

BY RONNIE SELF



Top: The south façade of Prairie View A&M's Art and Architecture Building (RoTo Architects with HKS, 2005) is now the first thing visitors to the university see when they drive onto campus.

Above: The north façade contains the entrance that faces the rest of the Prairie View campus, and the one most used by students.

AT PRAIRIE VIEW A&M, Michael Rotondi and RoTo Architects haven't simply created a new building, they have effectively provided a distinctive new entry for the whole university. This was not by accident; originally offered a location at the rear of the campus, Rotondi talked the university into letting him site his new structure where it would be the first thing seen by someone approaching Prairie View A&M by car.

What that visitor now encounters is a building that may appear to some a bit detached from its architectural context, or simply bizarre. But in fact, thanks to its relatively modest size and scale, its horizontality, its broken massing, and its materials and color, it sits rather comfortably in the landscape. Rotondi has cited as a major influence the form and flux of his native Los Angeles, but with Prairie View A&M's new Architecture and Art Building that influence appears to yield to the simple force of the surrounding prairie.

The result of this meeting of L.A. iconoclastic architecture and the Texas landscape is something more akin to the work of Bruce Goff, the Oklahoma architect who built almost exclusively in prairie settings, than that of Morphosis, the Los Angeles firm founded by Rotondi and Thom Mayne in the early 1970s. There are certain similarities in Goff's approach to building (mainly houses) in a Midwestern prairie context and RoTo's



response to the setting at Prairie View: the already mentioned horizontality and broken massing as well as an appreciation of the decorative; a love of rounded, especially spiral, forms; a preference for angled walls and sloped floors; use of multiple materials and a certain ad-hoc approach in their handling; and a silhouette punctuated by feeler-like forms, such as a structure projecting from behind the brise-soleil on the south facade of the building.

In both Goff's work and Rotondi's Architecture and Art Building at Prairie View there is a seemingly opposing desire for an impression of unconventional shapes on the one hand and planning based on strict geometry, symmetry, and centrality on the other. Simple forms are obscured by more exuberant added elements and willfully manipulated façades. In both approaches the relation to a prairie site alternates between detachment from, and connection with, the exterior.

Rotondi has previously worked within the context of the South Dakota prairie, and has said that a prairie landscape offers a rarely seen level of openness. His Architecture and Art Building at Prairie View A&M creates a protected, inwardly focused world markedly different from the preoccupations of an earlier, still emblematic Los Angeles architecture—the Case Study houses, as an example—which opened itself freely to a more hospitable climate.

For obvious reasons, architecture schools are concerned with the architecture of the buildings that house them. Prairie View A&M is just one of several U.S. institutions to have recently commissioned a well-known architect for a new architecture or design facility. Thom Mayne, Rotondi's ex-partner at Morphosis, should soon start construction on a building for New York's Cooper

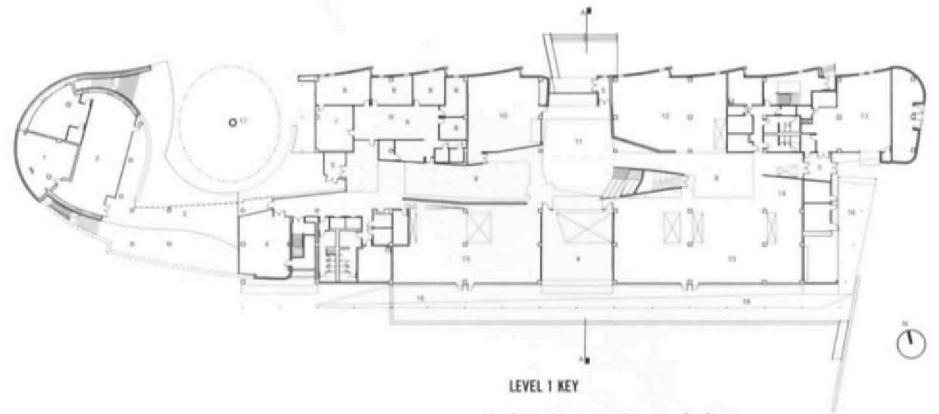
Union; Steven Holl recently completed a project for Pratt Institute; and Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects also recently completed the Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State University.

One apparent goal of all of these projects is to transmit design consciousness through ambitious schemes that bear the clear stamp of a prominent architect. The results have been strong, personalized, statements rather than the more neutral response that sometimes results when a designer, even a renowned one, assumes the role of a somewhat anonymous author. Ironically, SCI-Arc, the Los Angeles school of architecture Rotondi and Mayne helped found, is housed today in an architecturally neutral, yet impressive, quarter-mile-long former freight depot that is devoid of an omnipresent architectural stance.

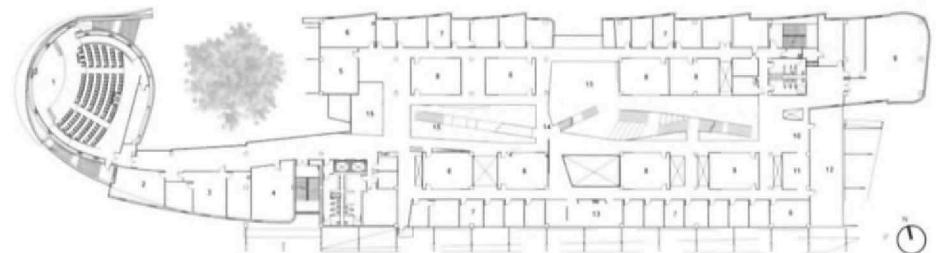
Recent architecture school buildings have also been designed as learning tools in themselves. Structure and mechanical systems, for example, have sometimes been left exposed for didactic purposes. Promoting a sense of community and enhancing student exchange has likewise been a major objective. As a result, a central public space, usually an atrium, has been a common architectural feature.

When visiting the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, Rotondi admired Philip Johnson's vast atrium, a space that overflows with life, especially during events such as graduation. Rotondi has cited that space as a reference for his own building at Prairie View A&M, which is most definitely an "atrium scheme," even if in this case the central area has been christened "the canyon."

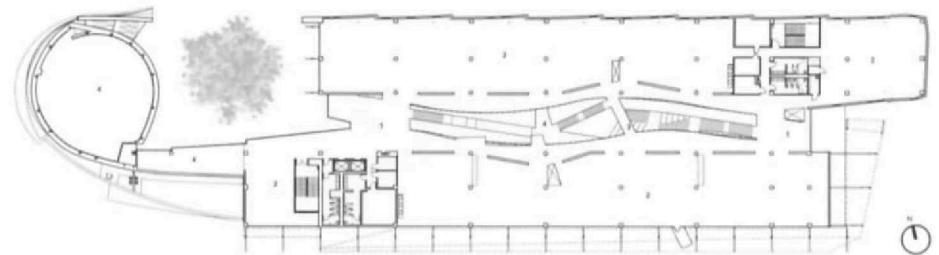
Rotondi's 105,000 square-foot building is defined by four major components. Two of those components are a pair of



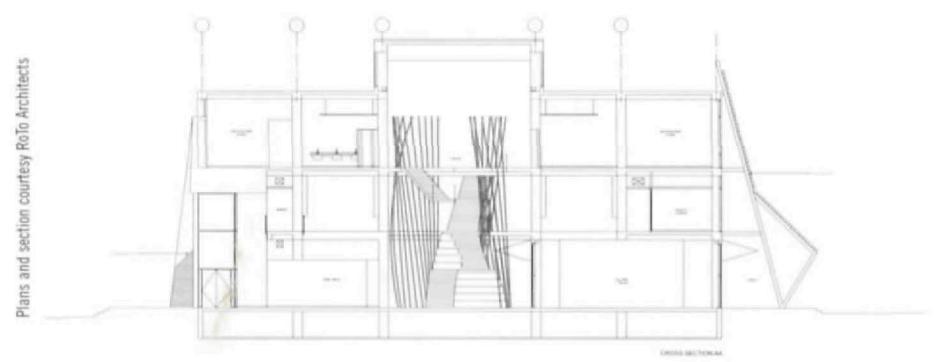
- LEVEL 1 KEY**
- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Cultural Center Archive | 9 Canyon |
| 2 Cultural Center Gallery | 10 Lecture Hall |
| 3 Breezeway | 11 Main Space |
| 4 Architecture Gallery | 12 Art Studio |
| 5 Entry | 13 Wood and Metal Shop |
| 6 Administration | 14 Lounge |
| 7 Conference Room | 15 Architecture Studio |
| 8 Office | 16 Porch |
| | 17 Century Oak |



- LEVEL 2 KEY**
- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 Presentation Theatre | 9 Computer Lab |
| 2 Cultural Center Meeting Room | 10 Lounge |
| 3 Cultural Center Offices | 11 Cafe |
| 4 Reference Library | 12 Roof Deck |
| 5 Conference Room | 13 Faculty Lounge |
| 6 Work Room | 14 Canyon |
| 7 Offices | 15 Open To Below |
| 8 Classroom/Seminar | |



- LEVEL 3 KEY**
- | |
|-----------------|
| 1 Lounge/pin-up |
| 2 Studios |
| 3 Canyon |
| 4 Open To Below |



Plans and section courtesy RoTo Architects

Top left: The building's exterior is clad primarily in red brick, with matching mortar to create a more homogeneous surface.
Above: Plans of the Art and Architecture Building's three levels show how the auditorium was pulled away from the main building to allow for a mature live oak tree, while a cross section shows how the "canyon" running down the center links studios, classrooms, and offices on either side.



Top: The Art and Architecture Building's primary social space is the canyon, an atrium that runs the length of the structure, with entrances at each end. **Above:** An entrance to the auditorium reveals Michael Rotondi's affection for rounded forms.

parallel-bar buildings, three stories high, which house studios, classrooms, and offices. These are linked by the third component, a central, full height atrium—the canyon—that is lit by continuous clerestory windows on its long sides. The fourth component, a rounded volume that houses exhibition space at ground level and an auditorium above, has been pulled away from the main body of the building in order to create a courtyard to contain an existing, mature live oak tree. The auditorium punctuates a corner where two major campus drives intersect.

The main social space is the canyon, which forms a primary, east/west axis with entries at each end. It is intersected by a cross-axis that begins with the main entrance on the north side—the entrance that faces the rest of the A&M campus—traverses the building, extends out into the landscape to the south, and terminates in a grove of trees planted in a circular pattern. This north/south axis is clearly implied, but it's only practicable on the special occasions when two large garage-type doors—one between the canyon and a gallery space and the other between the

gallery and the outside—are opened.

Unlike Johnson's atrium, Rotondi's canyon is not a simple void. It is enlivened by angled stairs and sloped bridges that connect the various spaces and levels, which are symmetrically arranged on both sides. The stairs, bridges, and spaces adjacent to the canyon provide places for *impromptu meetings, for formal or informal reviews, or simply for sitting.*

Because of the comfortable width of the space and the reasonable floor-to-floor heights, the canyon avoids monumentality. It is most definitely a space that unifies, yet it can rarely be grasped in its entirety. It is a dynamic and cheerful space, and the white frit glass in the clerestory windows makes the canyon's light seem even a bit clearer. Exposed concrete columns are on a regular grid (as throughout the build-

Angled stairs and sloped bridges enliven Rotondi's "canyon."

ing) and support the concrete ceiling/roof. The floor is yellow terrazzo. The canyon is rigorously planned, yet softened by a few twists. Without a doubt, however, the most debatable element of the entire building is the wire mesh screen structure that runs on each side of the canyon's central staircase. It is superfluous, and unnecessarily breaks up the atrium space.

The two bar buildings house loft-like studio spaces that are subdivided as necessary by movable furniture, and which open directly onto the canyon. Perforated metal ceiling panels mask the main runs of mechanical services that are otherwise exposed. All spaces have windows or open onto the light-filled canyon. Classrooms and faculty offices have glass walls that reinforce the impression and possibility of communication and community.

A large terrace to the east and two small balconies to the south offer more options for places to "hang out." In talking about cities such as Los Angeles, Rotondi has lamented the lack of true public spaces. In the Architecture and Art Building he has attempted to create a certain public and urban quality by using a central atrium. Architectural historian Kenneth Frampton, however, has commented that the atrium has become a surrogate public form, one created as a compensation for the erosion of the true public realm. Atriums create "cities-in-miniature," with primary public façades found on the inside rather than the outside. Rotondi's canyon has indeed achieved a certain urban quality as a space of "public appearance," to quote Frampton. The numerous surveillance cameras in and around the Architecture

and Art Building, however, clearly indicate that making a truly public space is considerably more difficult.

On the exterior the primary cladding is red brick, with matching mortar that renders the surface more homogenous. On the south façade, perforated metal decking, also brick-red, shades a glass wall and is supported by a straightforward, welded tubular steel frame; at ground level there is a porch-like space that opens onto the prairie. On the north façade, the brick cladding peels away from the structure and resembles a series of billowing curtains. Though it is a highly personal gesture, this basically decorative motif does indicate the structural grid within the building, while allowing east light to enter through the resulting triangular slits.

The difference in conception between this façade treatment and the wire mesh screen in the canyon may be similar to the distinction made in the past between "décor," which is derived from the basic organization and structure of a building, and "ornament," which is simply added. A preoccupation with the graphics of the north façade has, however, made it overly opaque and somewhat unfriendly to the truly "public" street that fronts this side of the building, as well as to the campus beyond. Likewise, the graphics interfere with interior spaces benefiting from north lighting, and as a result studio spaces on the north side of the building are not as pleasant as those behind the perforated screen on the south side.

The rounded form of the auditorium/exhibition space is clad in the same red brick as the rest of the building, though in this case the brick is corbelled and shows Rotondi's fondness for the spiral forms found in the cosmos, and in the DNA molecule. From certain angles the auditorium's volume alludes to the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq, which Rotondi has referred to as an example in built form of the spiral he so appreciates.

At the heart of Rotondi's scheme at Prairie View A&M is a rational and functional design. Certain quirky aspects, even if somewhat debatable, make the Architecture and Art Building appealing and endearing. Students and faculty appear genuinely proud and enchanted with the new structure.

Bruce Goff once said that "it is an architect's obligation to his client not only to solve his problems and to satisfy him, but to do more than this, so the client will have an environment which has not only meaning to him today, but in which he can continue to grow."

Like Goff, Rotondi is an architect and an educator. His real clients are the successive generations of students who will pass through his building. We can anticipate that they will collectively continue to grow in his Architecture and Art Building. ■