

SHEDDING LIGHT ON

Rising Sun, by Adolph Weinman, in the
Glassell Sculpture Court of the Audrey
Jones Beck Building, Rafael Moneo,
design architect, Kendall/Heaton
Associates, Inc., associate architects.

BY FARÈS EL-DAHDAH

THE BECK

Rafael Moneo's Audrey Jones Beck Building

is a lesson in opacity —

and a connection to the architectural past of

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Designed by the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, the Audrey Jones Beck Building seems to fulfill the desires of its curators, who see it, no doubt, as having set new standards. If it has done so, however, it is not without a tacit return to standards set by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's earlier efforts at building gallery space. Moneo's latest addition follows the work of three architects who were previously commissioned to design the museum in successive stages — which together were recently named the Caroline Wiess Law Building. The original structure, facing Mecom Fountain, belongs to William Ward Watkin (1924), who produced the central portion of an otherwise larger though never completed neoclassical edifice. In its earliest form, the MFAH had been planned as a trapezoidal courtyard building that was to be constructed in increments. Galleries were thus added in 1926, but by 1953 Watkin's plan was abandoned, and Kenneth Franzheim was asked to expand the existing building. Franzheim designed the Blaffer Memorial Wing, and then in 1954 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was asked to complete the museum's original building with two subsequent additions, Cullinan Hall (1958) and, posthumously, the Brown Pavilion (1974). Having the Beck Building as its most recent addition, this eight-decades-long history has finally resulted in two adjacent structures, each occupying city blocks of relatively equal size.

Complex programming aside, the difficulty for Moneo was undoubtedly the presence across the street from his project of Mies' Brown Pavilion, whose historical significance and formal virtuosity set a standard that even a Pritzker Prize-winning architect would find daunting. Moneo, who was awarded the Pritzker in 1996, seems to have opted for a counterstrategy that not only avoids stylistic and formal references to Mies, but also intervenes in an existing dialectic between the two sides of the Law Building's Janus-like profile. With Watkin on one end and Mies on the other, the Law Building is laden with an opposition as ideological as it is formal. It is a dyadic relationship that is less about Watkin's neoclassicism versus Mies' modernism and more about notions of opacity versus transparency that riddle the entire history of the museum. Stylistic difference and independent merit aside, Moneo's Beck confronts the Brown Pavilion's transparency while corroborating a conceptual trajectory that governs not only the history of the museum, but that of 20th-century architecture as well.

On its own terms, the Beck Building is deliberately distinctive. It qualifies as a monolith in terms similar to those set by Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury in a recent exhibition on the subject entitled *Monolithic Architecture*.¹ According to the exhibition curators, an architectural monolith is defined by its

"extreme economy and simplicity of overall form... [its] capacity to deliver tremendous eloquence with very limited formal means."²

The Beck Building does indeed belong to this kind of monolithic production, wherein planimetric and sectional complexities are strictly held within the volumetric restraint of shell-like elevations that are characteristically abstract and show no particular registration of a building's interior. This definition of the architectural monolith coincides with Moneo's use of the term "compact" in his own description of the Beck. "It is always desirable to enclose the largest possible volume in the smallest possible surface area," Moneo notes. "Compact architecture gives rise to saturated, dense floor plans that make use of the interstitial spaces to encourage movement...." Moneo even adds that the substance of such an architecture "is found in the interior space."³

The Beck is in plan undeniably masterful in its ability to cluster so many rooms with such ambulatory ease. The distribution of exhibition space is reserved to two principal floors that almost imperceptibly sandwich between them a vast administrative level. Circulation is marked and calibrated by grand bronze doors whose width equals their threshold while sepa-



Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

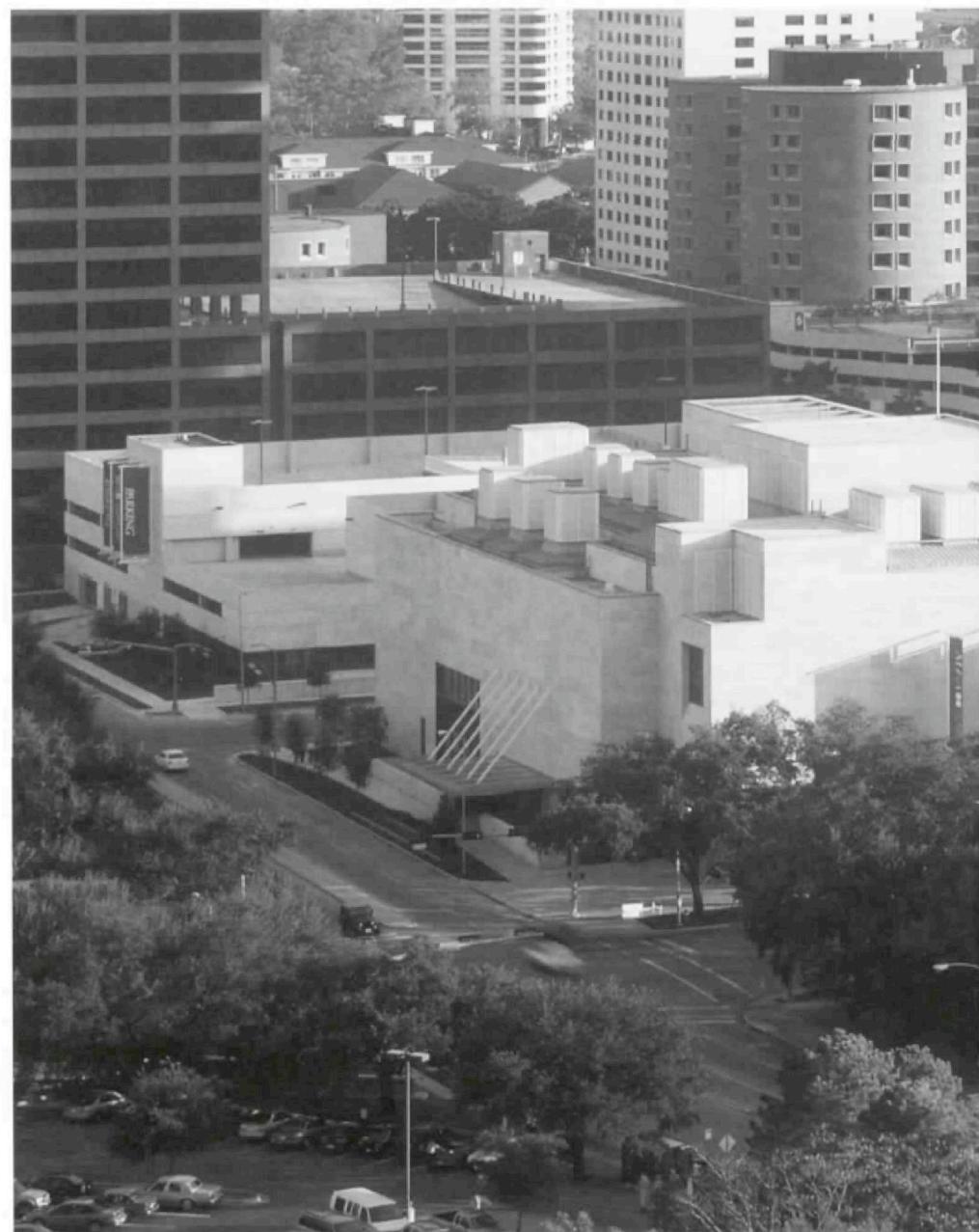


Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Stages in the life of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Top: Original building and first wings, William Ward Watkin, architect, 1924-1926. Middle: Cullinan Hall, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect, 1958. Bottom: Brown Pavilion, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect, 1974.



Audrey Jones Beck Building, center, with Visitor Center and parking garage, left rear, and Brown Pavilion, right front.

rating galleries from each other. Exits are indicated by the usual code-mandated red sign, but in this case inventively concealed in wired baseboards on either side of the doors. With only one exception, all the upper galleries let light in through giant lanterns, and some of the lower galleries get their natural light via vertical shafts open to the sky or through occasional windows hidden on the exterior behind radiator-like grills. This diffused light strategy is even carried over to the public bathrooms, whose ceiling sections conceal fluorescent light sources. Artist James Turrell's installation "The Light Inside" in an access tunnel between the Beck and Law buildings also contributes to the variety of atmospheric qualities employed by the building — fluorescence, in Turrell's case, bordering on magic. Tunnels are among the many different ways one can enter the Beck Building, which as a monolith tends to resist penetration. In a building that insists on formal consistency, the usual appendages that mark an entrance are sources of design tension that require particular treatment. One can, therefore, enter the building through architectural devices that are there not only to let people in, but also to overcome breaches in the building's otherwise impervious surface.

Tunnels easily solve this problem, yet it takes a giant porte cochère on the Main Street side and a bridge on the Binz Avenue side to provide access to the building at ground level.

In terms of its adjacency to the Law Building, the monolithic muteness and hermetic consistency of Moneo's project tends to resist interpretation, yet one can determine why the Beck Building looks the way it does by interpreting it in relation to what it seems to stylistically ignore, i.e., its predecessors across the street. After all, projects by Moneo are riddled with lessons on architecture that usually have less to do with general contexts and more to do with immediate ones. The lesson in this case resides in the bilateral opposition between things hidden behind Watkin's stones on one end and things revealed through Mies' glass on the other. Aside from being a recurring paradigm in most of Mies' architecture (an opaque element exists in all of his transparent buildings), the transparent/opaque dyad can also be found in the history of architecture's first half of the 20th century. Calls for transparency in architecture were made at precisely the same time as the MFAH was being built. What is curious is not just that it took 30 years for this architectural tendency to

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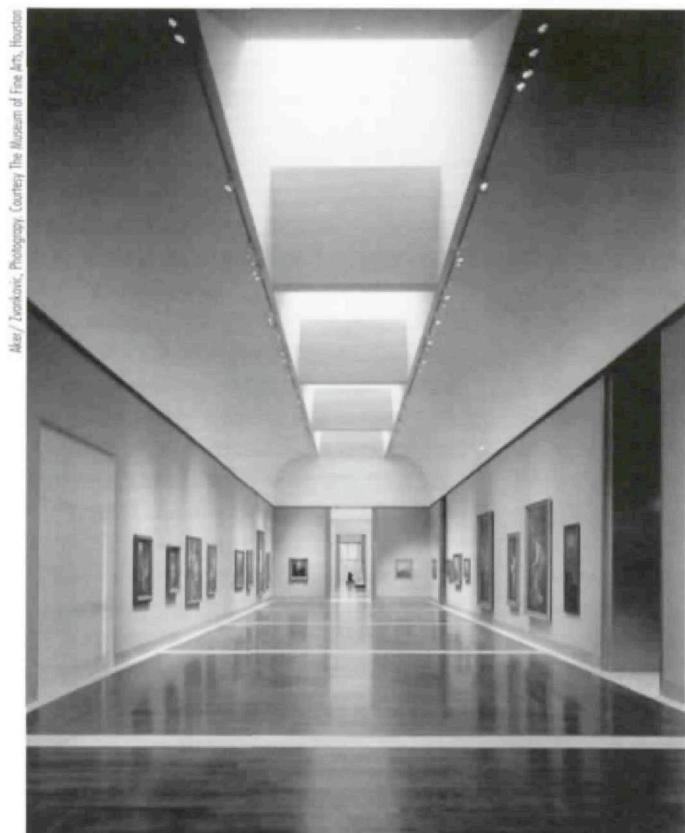


Alex / Zwickovic, Photography. Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



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A three-story atrium anchors the circulation in the Beck Building. Sculpture shown center is a third-century portrait of a Roman ruler.



Alex / Zwickovic, Photography. Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The open, light-filled design of the galleries in the new Audrey Jones Beck Building (left) reflects an aesthetic found in the Sculpture Hall of William Ward Watkin's original museum building (right in c. 1926 photo).

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materialize in the form of Cullinan Hall, but that the opposition between the opaque and the transparent had already been introduced in Watkin's original design only to be stressed by Mies, and now picked up again by Moneo.

In its early form, the opposition between transparency and opacity was less political than it was typological. Watkin modeled his museum on a building type that was two-storied, with top-lit and windowless upper galleries stacked above galleries lit from either side through windows. Skylights were meant to produce optimal lighting conditions, and to facilitate an arrangement thought well suited to the display of sculpture in the upper galleries and painting in the lower ones. (After the museum opened the arrangement was reversed, with paintings being placed in the upper galleries.) This accounts for the museum's original elevation, which was fenestrated on the ground floor and "blind" above. Watkin's building, however, began to lose its binary significance in the 1930s with the introduction of new lighting and air-

conditioning technology. Compounding the change were curatorial trends that called for the exclusion of daylight altogether. With each remodeling, the Watkin building was gradually rendered opaque. High-watt incandescent and long-life, low-heat fluorescent light fixtures rendered natural light obsolete; ceilings were lowered to allow for new air ducts and to minimize the volume of air that needed to be cooled or heated. To help ensure controlled ventilation and humidity levels, windows were walled in and skylights sealed off. This trend toward the hermetic was most radical in the Blaffer Memorial Wing, a windowless building with an upper exhibition gallery whose environment is controlled by a mechanical room below. Such an optimal space for viewing art simulated an 18th-century domestic interior that had been propped up and wrapped with air ducts and electrical wires. At the time, most museum extensions relied on this windowless strategy, which in the case of Houston gave way to its exact opposite in 1958 with the opening of Cullinan Hall.

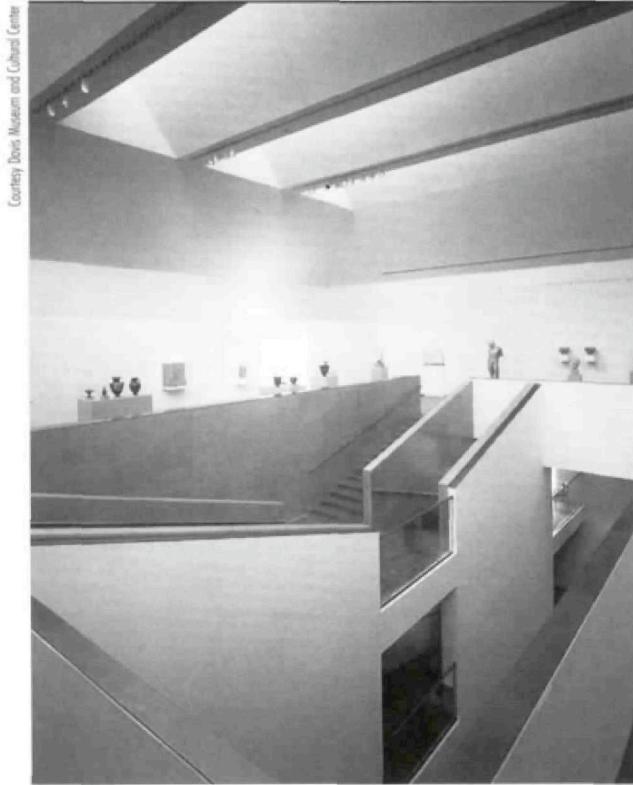
The 30-foot-high glass windows of Cullinan Hall were counter to then accepted museum practices, which insisted on blocking out natural light. Cullinan Hall's first floor was raised six feet above ground level so that even the basement could be naturally lit with a continuous band of windows. Architectural imperatives superseded the then-declared optimal need of curators, who had to contend with a radical structure and invent their displays accordingly. Just as in the subsequent Brown Pavilion, the strategy became that of transparency, whereby the building would not only let light in, but would also acquire a nocturnal dimension through which gallery space could be externalized and displayed to the street. Exhibitions were compelled to adopt modernist strategies in which, for example, paintings were hung from the ceiling, free-floating in a room without partitions so that they could be experienced in ways until then unprecedented.⁴

Transparency was also achieved by contrast, as the Watkin wing was almost totally sealed off, with only traces of its former fenestration left on its elevations.

Mies had, in fact, been invited to help remodel the older parts of the museum, and the decision to seal off all existing windows was probably made on the basis of need for more hanging space. This decision, however, ultimately served to promote Cullinan Hall as modern in contrast to the now archaic looking Watkin wing. After all, windowless buildings that hold art collections are as old as architecture itself and usually go by a name other than museum: mausoleum, a term used by Franzheim when describing his own Blaffer Wing.⁵

French philosopher Régis Debray once noted that museums and mausoleums have a great deal in common; they are both depositories of images that guard secrets in their crypts while isolating artifacts within the civic space of their grand architecture.⁶ Moneo's Beck Building is undeniably mausoleum-like, and for good reason, since it recalls the image of what Mies helped construct in order to oppose. By looking like a mausoleum, i.e., by having (almost) no windows, the Beck Building asserts its connection with Watkin's building through

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Courtesy Davis Museum and Cultural Center

BY MARTHA THORNE

In 1992, when Rafael Moneo was commissioned to design the MFAH's Audrey Jones Beck building, he had already completed four museums and was involved in the construction of a fifth. Taken together, Moneo's museums fit comfortably within his overall body of work; examined individually, each of his museums reveals some of his fundamental concerns. In this age of signature architecture, when the stamp of the architect is often readily apparent in formal aspects or decorative elements, Moneo's architecture conveys a subtler, less boastful style. His apparent rejection of "type" speaks to the careful reader, encouraging multiple layers of interpretation. This is not meant to suggest that Moneo approaches each work arbitrarily, but rather that the underlying concerns and interests are ever present,

the ancient and the new. Immediately inspiring to all who enter the main exhibition hall and encounter its dramatic arches, this building also has subtle complexities. Constructed of brick and evoking the spirit of Roman building, the rather large museum fits within the modest scale of the city through Moneo's careful handling of the different façades. The exterior of the main hall is distinguished by a series of buttresses, indicating the rhythm of the arches inside. The windows along the upper edge imply natural light. Although the building's structure is concrete faced with brick, in no way does it seem false. The dimensions, color, and positioning of the brick grant a sense of permanence and timelessness to the interior spaces. No special gallery finishes have been created; the works of art rest naturally against brick surfaces in the bays. Elevated walkways lead visitors to view the works on the upper level while offering the opportunity to experience the entire nave. The light that enters through the windows at the roof line adds to the drama of the main hall and intensifies the visitor's understanding of space and time.

M O N E O ' S M U S E U M S

while — as is made clear in his museums — their formal expression assumes a range of articulation.

Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, 1986: The Museo Nacional de Arte Romano in Merida, Spain, was built from 1980 to 1986. To date, it remains one of Moneo's finest achievements. Constructed on an archaeological site, the museum is built around the existing ruins. Through this work, Moneo creates an eerie yet powerful juxtaposition of

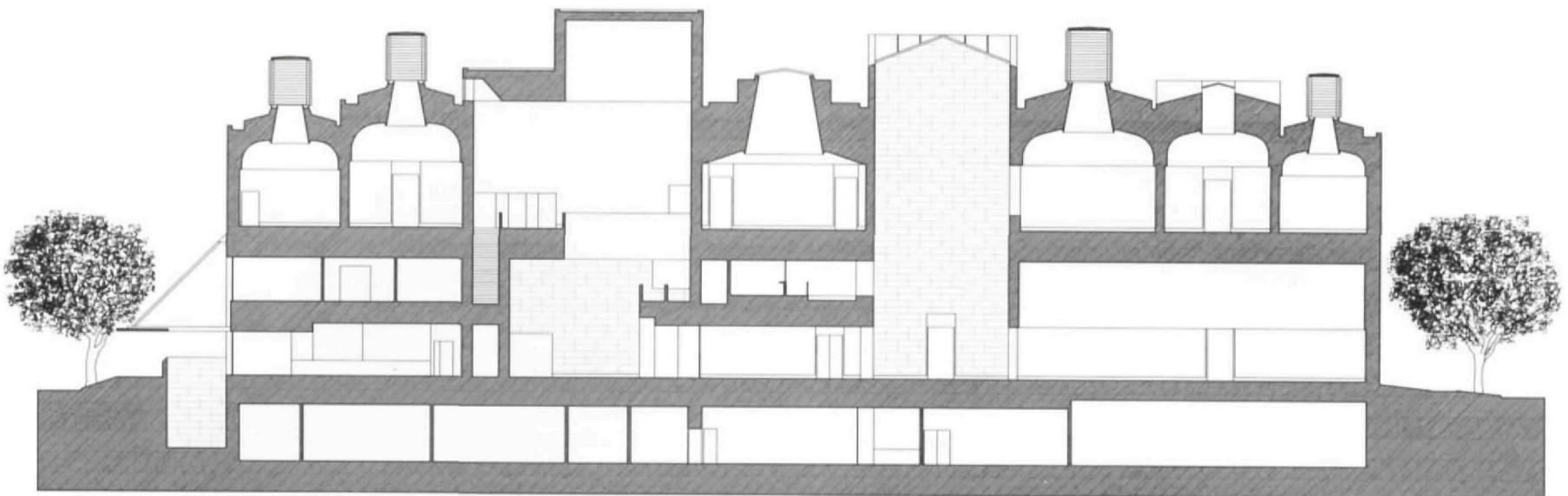
Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró, 1991: This museum building in Joan Miró's hometown of Palma de Mallorca, Spain, consists of two main parts that are highly differentiated: a linear portion that houses a study center, and a star-shaped gallery. A modest white wall, which is the back façade of the study



Courtesy Moderna Museet and Arkitekturmuseet

Top: Atrium of Moneo's 1993 Davis Museum at Wellesley College.

Left: Light lanterns on the Moderna Museet and Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm, 1998.



North/south section of the Audrey Jones Beck building, showing skylit galleries.

Courtesy The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

center, leads visitors toward the entrance and the stairs to the garden. This path continues on to Miró's studio. From the museum's entrance, one sees water, not in the distance but within the compound, on the roof of the gallery. Pushing up out of the pool are prismatic skylights.

The star-shaped gallery has little to do with the surrounding constructions; it is independent and fortress-like. When one enters the museum, a new environment is revealed. From the entrance, which opens at the highest level, the visitor can look down onto irregularly shaped, flowing exhibition spaces that are illuminated by natural and artificial light. Daylight is mediated by concrete louvers, alabaster membranes, and overhead skylights. Moneo's architecture ensures that one is not distracted by the surroundings and can focus on the garden and Joan Miró's sculpture through the open, low windows.

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1992:

In Madrid, to house the art collection of Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, Moneo undertook the reorganization of a palace designed in the 18th century, with Neoclassical façades dating to the 19th century. If one calls out the exceptional features of this work, the list would include the preparatory spaces, the organization of space and circulation patterns, the use of light, and the scale of the rooms as they relate to the artwork. Moneo placed the new entrance within a small garden on the building's north side;

visitors make the transition from a bustling urban street to a semi-private area, and upon entering the building find a large space lit from above. From here, one can begin to understand the size, scale, and organization of the building before ascending to the top floor to commence viewing the collection.

The organization of the top-floor galleries creates a combination of intimacy and procession. The openness of the rooms, sized for viewing small groups of paintings, is particularly comfortable. Natural light enters through the windows, and their rhythm enhances the rhythm of the gallery spaces. Light also enters the inner galleries from above through a series of lanterns located in the central portion of the museum's roof. The auditorium and auxiliary services are located below ground level, segregating these utilitarian aspects from the inspirational experience of viewing art.

Davis Museum and Cultural Center, 1993:

The Davis Museum at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, marked Moneo's first U.S. commission. He has stated that "the cubic volume of the Davis Museum is like a coffer: the artworks of the collection are like the memories of those alumnae who lived here, therefore I wanted the museum to be like a treasury." Moneo's first concern was the siting of the museum. Respectful of both Paul Rudolph's nearby Jewett Art Center and the intentions of the campus'

Frederick Law Olmsted landscape design, Moneo located his building to create a view of the Jewett and honor its place within the campus. This decision allowed an existing stair to be connected to the new complex by creating a piazza, thus energizing and defining a space to be used. In response to the small site, the new museum building is a cube that rises five levels and is crowned with skylights.

Inside, the staircase is a fundamental element. It works functionally, splitting the cube into two parts and forming two different sizes of gallery space. The staircase also contributes to the viewing experience, creating a procession from one gallery to another, allowing the visitor to make a thoughtful transition from one artistic experience to the next. Although Moneo claims that the building is not lavish, the defined spaces, the choice of materials — a brick exterior, simple white interior walls, maple casework, and staircase paneling — and the effects of the overhead lighting make it visually rich.

Moderna Museet and Arkitekturmuseet, 1998:

The Moderna Museet and Arkitekturmuseet are on the island of Skeppsholmen in Stockholm, Sweden. The site for the art museum is an elongated stretch of land next to a building that was once an old ropery; the architecture museum is partially housed in a building previously reserved for modern art as well as in a new adjacent building. The intent was to affect minimally the

delicate existing architecture of the island. Moneo proposed an architecture that is "discontinuous and broken, as is the city of Stockholm." The result is an irregularly shaped building, held together on one side by a long spine that provides the main circulation route for arriving at the entry-level galleries.

Because of the requirements for housing highly diverse holdings, the flexibility of the interior spaces became a crucial factor. Moneo's solution was to create clusters of rectangular and square galleries that change in their proportions as well as in their dimensions. The gallery ceilings on the main floor are pyramidal and contain skylights, again demonstrating Moneo's concern for using both natural and artificial light for viewing art. As they do in the Audrey Jones Beck building, the skylights in the Swedish museum bob up from the roof and indicate the variety of the interior spaces. However, the skylights do more than illuminate the interior. In the Nordic climate, known for its extended absence of daylight, the lanterns become beacons in the dark, and the light emitted enhances the exterior and the overall presence of the museum. ■

Excerpted from Rafael Moneo: Aubrey Jones Beck Building, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston by Martha Thorne, text, and Joe C. Aker and Gary Zvonkovic, photographs. (Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart/London, 2000.)



During the day, the lanterns atop the Beck Building capture light for the galleries. In the evening, they glow.



Donor wall in Beck's atrium, displaying names of major contributors to the museum's construction.

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Mies' mediation. It is a genial way of firmly associating the building with its predecessors without having to make any stylistic concessions.

Moneo relied on the only option possible when confronted with Mies' transparent strategy. He is, after all, a hard-core structuralist who sees the world in binary terms — an example of which can be found in the title of the course he currently teaches at Harvard University on design theory, "Solidity versus Fluidity." The structural relation with Mies is further reinforced when one realizes that the stone and pattern used in the Beck Building — Indiana limestone — repeats the only opaque surface of the Brown Pavilion, its stone base. The Beck's lapidary opacity is subsequently overcome with occasional sectional cuts that reveal the offices of the museum's curators, thereby highlighting their presence and presumably the power they hold. The building's opacity is also made pervious to light through oblique penetrations in the form of various configurations of skylights. Even the large sign near the Main Street entrance, the sign that announces the institution's name, is made as opaque as typographi-

cally possible, with barely a few slits separating fat and compact letters. An earlier version of this sign, which proposed that the letters be made of both stone and glass stacked alternately, was even more explicit about the opacity versus transparency notion. Moneo also introduces a nocturnal dimension to his building by having it transform at night into a gigantic pedestal carrying a collection of illuminated, prism-like lanterns, just as Mies had succeeded in transforming Cullinan Hall into a giant vitrine.

As a deliberate counter-strategy to Mies' openness, Moneo's Beck is closed onto a complex interiority organized around a three-story atrium. A monumental stair and escalator lead to the upper galleries, in which one can find only two locations where it is possible to see out. One window frames Houston's downtown — the emblem of the city whose treasury this museum after all is — while the second overlooks Watkin's original building. The choice not to look back at Mies seems deliberate, for if the Brown Pavilion stands as the masterpiece with which any architect is inevitably forced to compete, the Beck Building seems to relate far more directly to

Watkin's wing. It is as if a complicity exists between Moneo's building and the original museum in order to somehow gang up on Mies. The Beck's upper galleries, which will undoubtedly be considered the building's *pièces maitresses*, in fact replicate the section of Watkin's original sculpture hall: blank walls up to a cornice line topped with a vaulted ceiling interrupted by skylights lined with light fixtures. Such a 19th-century museum section — an early version of which can be found in Munich's Alte Pinakothek of 1836 — ultimately facilitates the conservatism of curators, who can now go back to hanging paintings on walls rather than having to suspend them from ceilings.

At a time when transparency is back in vogue, be it in the form of state-sponsored French architecture or in the Museum of Modern Art's 1995 exhibition on the subject, Moneo's choice of the ambiguously opaque cannot pass unnoticed. Arguments against modernist transparency have, after all, been made by architects of Moneo's inclination. One should not, however, limit the Beck Building to a postmodern versus modern perspective. Moneo's Beck looks the way it does not only in pursuit of a perfect alignment with its Museum of Fine Arts, Houston predecessors, but also in terms of a preference to conceal, rather than reveal, the museum's collection. Moneo's 19th-century inspired galleries may be the inevitable outcome of conservative curatorial imperatives, but his opaque elevations, unlike Mies' transparent ones, resurrect a museum's ancestral and mausoleum-like dimensions. The hidden, after all, tends to fascinate, and fascination is a museum's undeclared primary objective. Moneo's opacity works in much the same way Poppea used her veil: his walls conceal the collection's presumed beauty only to make it more desirable. ■

1. Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury, editors, *Monolithic Architecture* (Munich: Prestel, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. Rafael Moneo, "The Audrey Jones Beck Building," Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1999.

4. One of the more memorable uses of Cullinan Hall was the MFAH's 1965 show "The Heroic Years: Paris 1908-1914," in which the paintings were suspended on wires, and appeared to float in the air. See Lynn M. Herbert's "Seeing was Believing: Installations of Jermaine MacAgy and James Johnson Sweeney" in *Cite* 40.

5. Celeste Marie Adams, *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: An Architectural History, 1924-1986* (Houston: MFAH, 1992), p. 62.

6. Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 17.

A TALK WITH RAFAEL MONEO



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THE BECK'S ARCHITECT FINDS IN HOUSTON A PLANE TRUTH

By Carlos Jiménez

In the years since he was chosen to design the Audrey Jones Beck Building, Rafael Moneo's profile in America has risen considerably, thanks in part to his winning the Pritzker Prize in 1996, and also to his selection that same year as the architect for the Cathedral of Los Angeles. Moneo is known not only for his buildings, but also for his academic profile; he has been a professor at Barcelona's School of Architecture, and from 1985 to 1990 was chairman of the architecture department at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he still teaches. In March, Carlos Jiménez met with Moneo while he was in town for the opening of the Beck to discuss his current and future projects, his thoughts on Houston, and his ideas about architecture. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Cite: Congratulations on the completion of the Beck Building. During the more than eight years you've been working on this project, you visited Houston numerous times. Although your stays have often