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Twombly Gallery, Renzo Piano Building Workshop, architect, with Richard Fitzgerald & Partners, associate architect, 1995.

The Twombly Gallery and

William F. Stern



The 1995 completion of the Twombly Gallery in an early-20th-century Montrose neighborhood continues a contemporary pattern of building that was established with the Rothko Chapel in 1971. Like the Rothko and the nearby Menil Collection, the Twombly Gallery is the result of an unusual three-way collaboration between artist, architect, and patron.

For the 1987 opening of the Menil Collection, the collection's founder, Dominique de Menil, with the Menil's first director, Walter Hopps, and its current director, Paul Winkler, had hoped to mount an exhibition of paintings and drawings by the American artist Cy Twombly. Not until 1989, however, was such an exhibition presented. The Menil Collection already owned works by Twombly, and for the exhibition these were augmented by paintings and drawings from the Dia Art Foundation and from private collections. The Dia Art

Foundation, founded by Dominique de Menil's daughter Fariha (Philippa) and her husband, Heiner Friedrich, owned Twombly paintings and drawings collected in the 1970s and additional pieces purchased for Dia in 1980. At the time of the Twombly exhibition in Houston, discussion began about a collaboration between Dia and the Menil for a permanent Twombly installation in Houston, with a smaller installation in New York. In fall 1990, Paul Winkler, Dominique de Menil, and Fariha and Heiner Friedrich visited Twombly at his home in Rome to solicit his support for the project. Twombly was receptive, producing a conceptual sketch that would later become the basis for the Twombly Gallery plan. He also offered to give works he owned to both spaces. The Dia and Menil representatives agreed that a new building would be constructed in Houston for a major installation of Twombly's paintings, drawings, and

sculpture drawn from the Menil and Dia collections, along with more than 35 works donated by the artist himself. The Menil took title of six paintings from Dia and in so doing helped the foundation to purchase a building on West 22nd Street in New York, across the street from the foundation's existing four-story loft building. When renovated, the new building will be used for single-artist installations drawn from Dia's collection, with part of one floor designated for a permanent installation of works by Twombly. With this determined, in November 1991 the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Genoa began to develop a design for the Twombly Gallery in Houston.

Thirty-five years earlier, in the mid-1950s, John and Dominique de Menil came to the neighborhood that would eventually house their extensive collection of art through their association with the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic liberal arts university founded by priests of

the Order of St. Basil. The de Menils' architectural influence would first be felt when they were asked by the university to assist in the selection of an architect for new buildings. Among those recommended, Philip Johnson, who had designed the de Menil house in River Oaks in 1950, received the commission to draw a master plan for the St. Thomas campus. The de Menils underwrote the costs of the master plan and soon became actively involved in helping to form a new art department for the university.¹ Fashioning his plan after Thomas Jefferson's academic village at the University of Virginia, Johnson proposed a series of two-story block buildings laid out around an elongated court, interconnected by a U-shaped covered walkway. The design, a boldly modern composition of exposed black steel frames inset with panels of dusty-colored brick and floor-to-ceiling glass, demonstrated Johnson's allegiance to the International Style of

Mies van der Rohe. Without upsetting the balance and scale of the older neighborhood, these buildings stood comfortably among the picturesque bungalows, frame houses, and live oaks, setting a pattern that would be adopted by a succession of architects.

At the time of the St. Thomas master plan, the area surrounding the campus was in decline. The Montrose subdivision and its adjoining neighborhoods had been developed in the teens on open farmland by entrepreneurs intent upon providing modest middle-class housing. With its tree-lined streets and parklike landscape, Montrose was typical of America's first suburbs. Restricted for residential use and planned with uniform building setbacks, the neighborhood had matured during the 1920s into a harmonious pattern of one-story Craftsman bungalows and larger two-story houses set among graceful live oaks. After World War II, as a younger generation sought housing in newer suburbs, the planning restrictions in Montrose and many of its surrounding neighborhoods lapsed, leaving the area vulnerable to apartment construction and small-scale commercial development.

houses are the Da Camera chamber music society, Writers in the Schools, Texas Accountants and Lawyers for the Arts, and Inprint, Inc., the fundraising and promotional arm of the University of Houston creative writing program. The bungalows and frame houses acquired a particular distinction and the neighborhood was unified when the architect Howard Barnstone suggested painting all the houses a medium gray with white trim. Another Menil property, Richmond Hall, located on Richmond one block south of the Menil Collection, has been used as a supplementary exhibition space for the Menil and most recently for FotoFest.

The trio of cultural buildings constructed within the neighborhood between 1971 and 1995 shows similar patterns of site planning and general relationship to their surrounding neighborhood. The first, an ecumenical chapel designed to house commissioned paintings by the great American abstract painter Mark Rothko, was built by John and Dominique de Menil to the west of the University of St. Thomas between Sul Ross and Branard. Based on plans by



Entrance to Twombly Gallery with Menil Collection across the street.

Paul Henne & Luc Houben © 1995

Philip Johnson, who had earlier been retained to design the chapel (then intended for the south end of the St. Thomas mall), the completed building was designed by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry. Like the Twombly Gallery, the Rothko Chapel is turned away from the street in favor of a self-contained site plan. Backing up closely to Sul Ross on the north, this centrally planned, octagonally shaped building faces a rectangular reflecting pool on axis with Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* and is screened from Branard Street to the south by a dense stand of bamboo (see neighborhood plan). The main approach to the entrance is from a side street, Yupon, along a walkway that enters at mid-block and leads to a paved plaza between the building and the reflecting pool. This unconventional relationship of building to street effectively allows the Rothko to stand both comfortably and independently among its residential neigh-

ors at the edge of the University of St. Thomas campus. The much larger building for the Menil Collection, designed by Renzo Piano and completed in 1987 to house the de Menil art collection, follows a similar pattern of siting to produce a compatible relationship with the smaller surrounding houses. Occupying an entire block, the rectangular building is asymmetrically positioned on the site. By adjoining Branard on the south and Mandell on the west, the building leaves a wide expanse of lawn to the north along Sul Ross, and a narrower space on the east that joins with park space across Mulberry Street (see neighborhood plan). The building's main

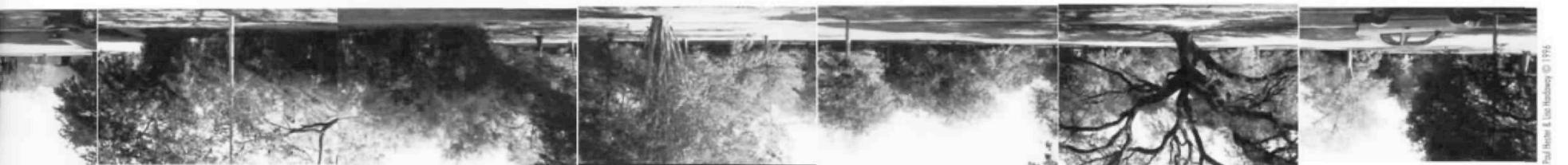
entrance, from Sul Ross, and the secondary entrance, from Branard, are placed slightly off center, further diminishing symmetrical formality. While the use of gray-stained cypress siding and white steel structure help relate the Menil to the neighboring bungalows, it is the asymmetrical siting that moderates the impact of the greater building mass on the residential neighborhood.

The Twombly Gallery, located across the street from the Menil on Branard, strategically aligns with the 1920s bungalows to either side. Unlike the bungalows, with their eccentrically articulated gabled front porches, the gallery turns a blank wall to the street, its entrance rotated 90 degrees to the east, facing onto a grassy plaza anchored by a single mature live oak. Like the siting of the Rothko Chapel, a block down the street, this maneuver effectively mitigates the formal impact of the entrance. By establishing the movement from street to building entrance through the private space of a pocket park, the experience becomes relaxed and intimate. As the termination of Mulberry Street, this space is also linked to the two open spaces on either



Paul Henne & Luc Houben © 1995

t h e M a k i n g o f P l a c e

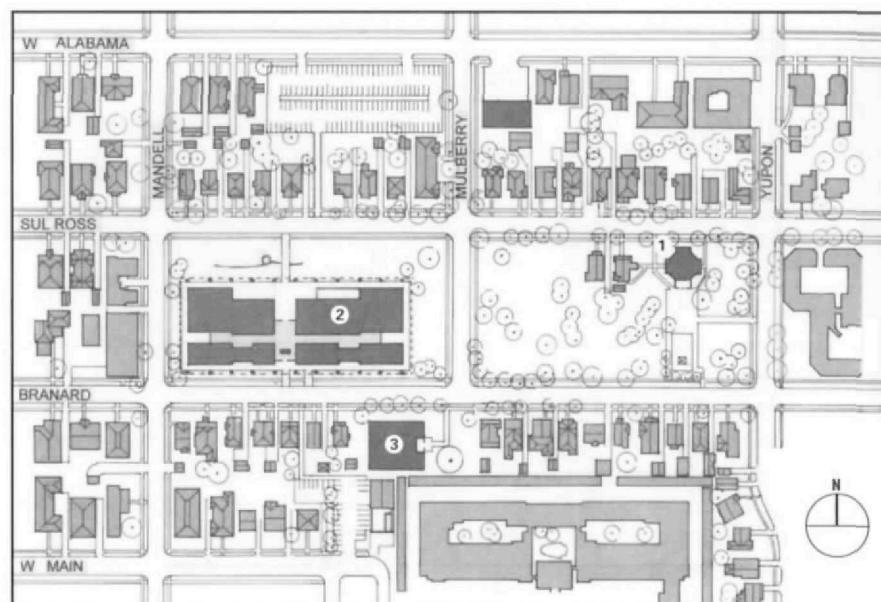


Paul Henne & Luc Houben © 1995

Paradoxically, the loss of the restrictions and the uniformity they maintained set in motion an unusual transformation of the neighborhood that continues to this day.

During the 1950s and 1960s the de Menils began to acquire property west of the St. Thomas campus, at first for the future expansion of the University of St. Thomas and later for the building of what would become one of Houston's richest cultural enclaves. In retrospect, their activity in this neighborhood can also be seen as the first and most comprehensive program of historical preservation in a city that cared little about its building past. The majority of the bungalows and houses acquired by the de Menils in this period were saved. When new buildings were proposed, older houses were often moved to new sites rather than destroyed. Over the years, these houses have been rented at modest rates to artists, scholars, and nonprofit organizations. Among the organizations leasing

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Neighborhood Plan.

- Key:
 1. Rothko Chapel
 2. Menil Collection
 3. Twombly Gallery

Drawing by Elizabeth Spitzer

side of Mulberry, enhancing the parklike setting of the museum buildings. Both the Rothko Chapel and the Twombly Gallery are monumental masonry buildings, barely penetrated by windows or doors, but because the formal relationship to the street is played down, their mass does not disturb the delicate and informal fabric of the residential neighborhood. Although the Twombly Gallery displaced one small house (which was moved intact to an empty lot a few houses east on Branard), this late-20th-century building is perfectly at home with the Craftsman bungalows, not through architectural style but through compatible scale and thoughtful site relationships.

The Rothko Chapel and the Twombly Gallery also share certain internal planning strategies, particularly their simplicity and directness of plan. A single gallery space, the Rothko Chapel is centrally planned and is entered through a foyer that serves as a threshold where visitors can pause before moving left or right into the ethereal volume occupied by Rothko's panels of color, which are installed on four opposing walls of the octagonal

room. At the Menil Collection the visitor also arrives into a receiving area, larger in scale than the more intimate Rothko foyer and open to the outside. Through the simple idea of a centrally planned foyer with a transepting hallway that extends the length of the building and contains galleries on one side and a restricted service zone on the other, Piano assured a clarity of organization that makes the experience of the Menil building relaxed and unencumbered. The wide, graceful hallway, open on either end to the outside light, connects the museum interior to the lush greenery of Houston and the neighborhood beyond.

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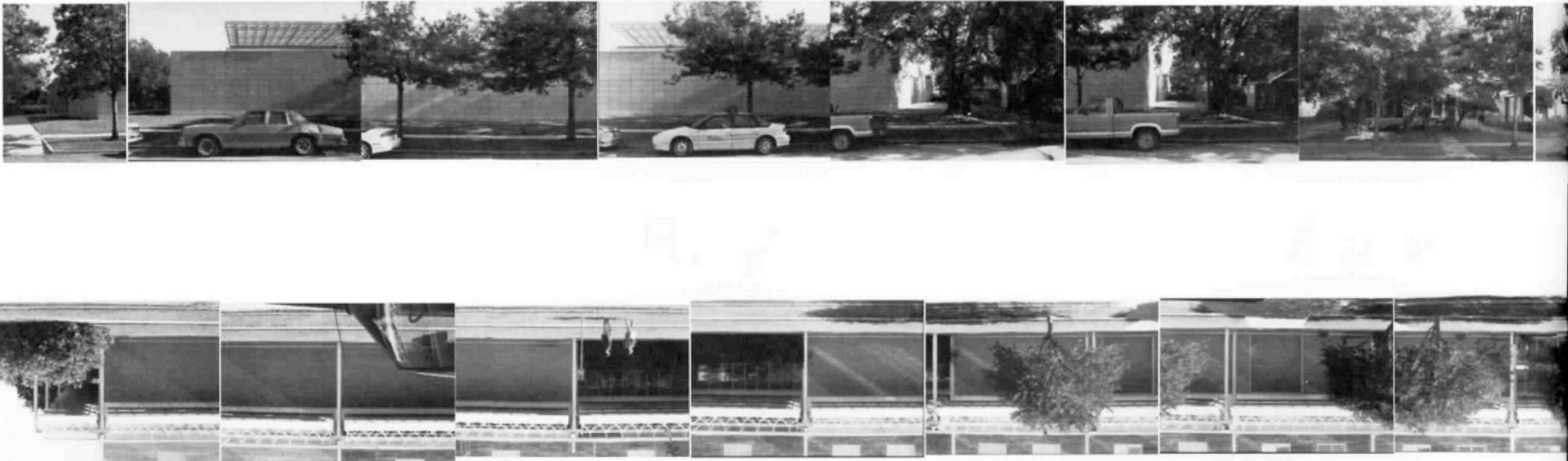
The conceptual plan of the Twombly Gallery that originated from the sketch drawn by Cy Twombly during the early planning discussions shows a rectangular block containing five connected galleries. Piano significantly elaborated Twombly's concept by laying out galleries within a plan based on a nine-square grid, adding at one end of the building block a narrower rectangular volume for the entry vestibule. Where the foyer of the Rothko is substantially closed, the foyer of the Twombly Gallery, like that of the Menil Collection, opens to the outside through a wall of glass and glass doors framed by a poured-concrete portal. On the opposite side of the building, the required second means of egress has been treated like the entrance, opening through an identically framed glass wall to the outside. The foyer itself occupies the center bay along the three-bay width, with an archive room on one side and a service area and stair to the basement mechanical rooms on the other. The vestibule might be compared to the porch of a Greek or Roman temple, framed by a tripartite portal with perfectly proportioned poured-concrete columns and lintel standing in for an ordered Classical structure. Although born and raised in Virginia, Twombly has spent the last 40 years in Italy, and many of his paintings make reference to the ancient world. Italian architect Renzo Piano has subtly incorporated references to that world into the building, respecting as well the intentions behind the

Menil, the logic of the plan and the clear sequence of spaces provides for an easily perceived path between galleries, with subtle variations giving each a slightly different spatial quality.

Beyond these planning and spatial continuities, what most closely unites the Rothko Chapel, the Menil Collection, and the Twombly Gallery is the use of overhead natural light as a means of illuminating spaces. From the Rothko to the Twombly Gallery one encounters a drive to achieve perfect natural lighting, and while the effect in each case is different, the results are equally astonishing.

The paintings and interior of the Rothko Chapel are illuminated from a roof-mounted pyramidal skylight centrally positioned over the chapel space. After the initial installation, it became apparent that too much direct sunlight came through the unprotected glass, and a cloth scrim was soon added underneath the glass pyramid. Later, to diffuse the light further, the scrim was replaced by a concave baffle suspended beneath the skylight that allows light to drift in softly along its edges, delicately washing

Piano was confronted with an even more specific program of natural light for the design of the Twombly Gallery. To achieve the appropriate levels and desired quality of light, the architect designed a roof system that filters light in stages through four screens placed over the outer galleries, with opaque flat roofs covering the center gallery and the entry vestibule. The uppermost layer of this intriguing filtration system is manifested on the outside by a bright white steel canopy, supporting a mesh of fixed aluminum louvers, that appears to float over the building mass. While lighter and more delicate, the light-filtering louvered canopy makes friendly reference to the white concrete baffles of the Menil Collection across the street. But unlike the Menil, where the curved baffles are exposed beneath the skylights, the louvered canopy of the Twombly Gallery is intentionally obscured on the inside. Beneath the canopy, a double-glazed, clear-glass hipped roof seals the interior from the outside elements. Barely visible from the outside, the glass roof has a nickel coating to filter ultraviolet light



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Twombly sketch that generated the plan.

The entry foyer leads to eight separate galleries laid out within the geometry of the nine-square grid. Taking advantage of the multiple combinations inherent in that geometry, Piano designed one of the outer galleries as a double square to accommodate larger and longer paintings. All of the galleries save the center one open on two sides to adjacent galleries, allowing uninterrupted circulation in either direction. Portal openings between galleries align but are not necessarily centered, creating variations in wall lengths to accommodate paintings of different horizontal dimensions. In the middle gallery facing west, on the opposite side from the foyer, the space is brightly illuminated through windows and glass doors, producing a sensation so dramatic that in moving into this gallery it is as if one has actually stepped outside. This transitional space compares to the Menil Collection, where one is constantly brought to the outside. And like the

the paintings.²

The experience with natural light at the Rothko Chapel served as a lesson for the Menil Collection. Acknowledging overhead illumination as an ideal, though difficult to control, light source, Renzo Piano designed a system that would accept natural light and at the same time diffuse the light as it entered the galleries. Ranks of ferroconcrete baffles, suspended beneath coated skylights, are angled to filter sunlight from the north, providing a cool white glow that reflects into the galleries, most strongly illuminating the south walls. This light is supplemented by the expanse of glass openings at the entrance and either end of the wide hallway, by narrow slit windows along the perimeter walls, and by light from an interior atrium on the east end of the building. The overall effect is a remarkable use of daylight to gently illuminate the art and, in Piano's words, "bring life to the space."

Working with a single-artist gallery,

in the range most harmful to art objects. Beneath the glass roof and inside the building, operable louvers supported by a steel frame provide the third layer of protection. Mechanically controlled and operated with a light-sensitive photoelectric cell, the louvers automatically adjust their apertures according to changes in daylight. Directly below the mechanically controlled louvers, a stretched cotton scrim fabricated by a Galveston sailmaker forms a ceiling and provides the final layer of Piano's light-filtering sandwich. For night lighting, custom-designed fixtures attached to light tracks suspended from the steel frame discreetly poke through the cloth.

This technological tour de force produces light virtually without shadow, a condition so rarely experienced that the initial sensation is a kind of dizziness. The perfectly even natural light is different from the Menil's light, which varies subtly, or the Rothko's, which changes in intensity from top to bottom. As light

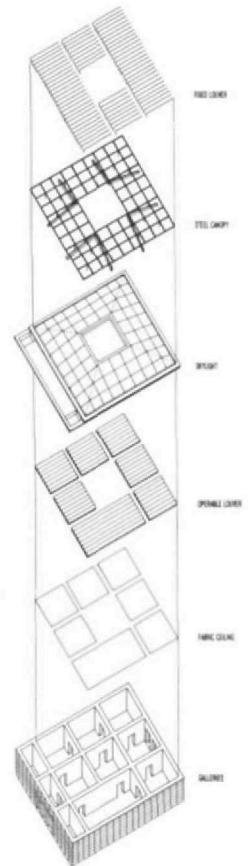
filters through the sailcloth it takes on a warm tonality, filling the space with a lantern-like glow that quietly varies when outside conditions shift from clear to cloudy. The light softly reflects from the crisp plaster walls, providing near perfect illumination for Twombly's paintings, particularly those with pale backgrounds and intricate markings that weave in and out of the surface. These paintings, subtle in content and delicately expressed, are seen at their best in the airy, shadowless light that filters into the galleries. Appropriately, paintings more vibrant in color and thicker in surface are displayed in the gallery on the opposite side of the entrance, where filtered light is mixed with daylight coming through windows and doors. Only the center gallery and the archive room next to the entrance, both intended for the display of more delicate works on paper, receive no daylight. Selected galleries in the Menil Collection are also closed to outside light and provided with controlled, often dramatic, artificial lighting. It is no exaggeration to claim that the lighting of the Twombly Gallery, particularly under

Johnson's St. Thomas buildings. Both architects utilized an exposed steel frame structure with in-fill panels, brick at St. Thomas and horizontal cypress siding at the Menil. Whereas Johnson was clearly influenced by the work of Mies van der Rohe, Piano, as architectural historian Reyner Banham has observed, seems to have taken as his point of departure the work of California architect Craig Ellwood and others who participated in the Case Study Houses program of the 1940s and 1950s.³ But Piano goes far beyond Johnson, whose 1950s design seems almost imitative of Mies van der Rohe's buildings at Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology. For the Menil Collection Piano designed an exceptionally innovative work of architecture whose elegantly detailed steel frame, painted white, embraces the gray-stained cypress panels and supports the white ferroconcrete sun baffles, consciously joining the Menil to the neighboring bungalows by echoing their painted gray clapboard and white trim.

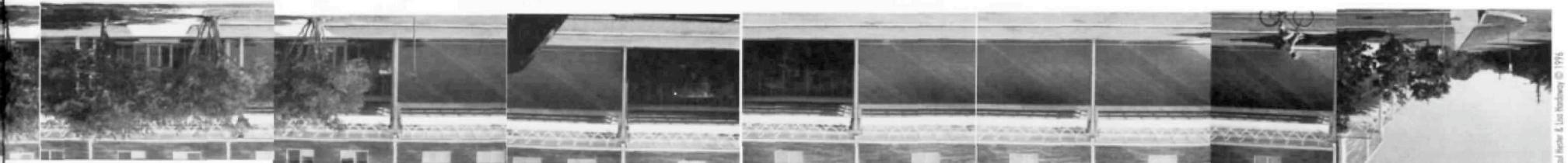
The Twombly Gallery and the Menil Collection are composed of simple

Piano expressed the thickness of the facing blocks with a 3/4-inch joint, producing a finely scaled rectangular grid derived from the dimensions of the block's face, 34 inches wide by 17 inches tall. The white, louvered metal canopy, hovering over the block, provides a counterpoint to the heaviness of the masonry structure and suggests the chamber within. By carrying the masonry materials into the foyer and adjacent side rooms, the inside and outside are brought together at the entrance. The purity of the exterior is reiterated inside, where the 15-foot-high rooms are finished with plaster walls that meet natural oak plank floors. Rooms fold into one another through the wide, square portal openings in the thick walls. While monolithic in form, the building is graciously proportioned and never overwhelming in scale, fulfilling Twombly's desire for a building that would be a timeless expression of architecture.

The collaboration that brought about the Twombly Gallery fulfills an intention articulated 40 years earlier, when John and Dominique de Menil began planning



Exploded isometric: Twombly Gallery.



natural conditions, is as beautiful and unusual as can be hoped for in any space intended for the exhibition of art.

While the Rothko, the Menil Collection, and the Twombly Gallery share essential qualities, the three buildings are articulated as individual works of architecture, each building like a member of a family in a shared precinct. Whereas a campus of museum buildings singular in style, material, and character would have dominated the neighborhood, each of these structures is a separate work, invested with the inventive spirit of modern architecture. Relating the Rothko Chapel to the University of St. Thomas, architects Barnstone and Aubry adopted the same light-colored, iron-spotted brick that Johnson had selected in the 1950s for the new buildings of the University of St. Thomas. While separate from the campus, the Rothko Chapel might appear to the stranger to be a part of the university. Renzo Piano's building for the Menil Collection in some ways harks back to

boxlike forms, exquisitely put together with precise detailing and richness of material. But in the Twombly Gallery, Piano departed from the expression of the articulated frame, designing a building dominated by mass and weight. The building is essentially a concrete-block structure with concealed perimeter poured-concrete columns and concealed interior steel columns. The outer wall is made up of a double concrete-block wall comprising an interior eight-inch-thick block and a custom-cast six-inch block on the outside. Concrete-block walls are often clad with another facing material such as brick or stone, but Piano realized that concrete block could emulate the richness of stone without disguising its materiality. Both color and profile were customized for the precast outer blocks. While stone varies in color, the process of precasting yielded a uniform light sandy color, giving the building a singular resonance. Departing from the flatness and perceived thinness of stone cladding,

the University of St. Thomas campus to promote art and architecture as a source of cultural and civic enrichment. Taken together, the St. Thomas campus, the Rothko Chapel, the Menil Collection, and the Twombly Gallery in their neighborhood of historic bungalows and modest houses form a place of lasting significance, reminding us that a city at its best is an evolving work of art. While privately planned and funded, this enclave is a vital center of Houston's public realm. ■

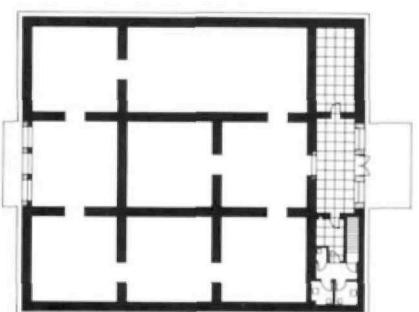
1 Susan J. Barnes, *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith* (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 1989), pp. 41-42.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

3 Reyner Banham, "Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachkeit . . . and Wit Too! The Case Study Houses in the World's Eyes," in Elizabeth A. T. Smith, ed., *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 195.



Twombly Gallery Interior.



Twombly Gallery Plan.