

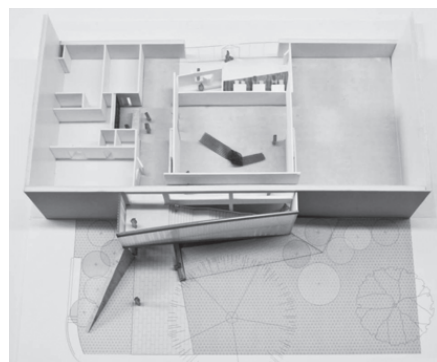
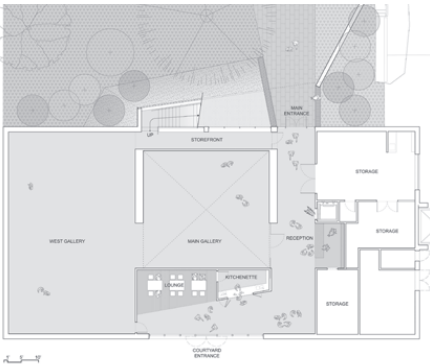
ARCHITECTURE

NEW ANGLES ON THE BLAFFER

WORKac Faces the UH Gallery to the World

IT SEEMS THAT THE UH ADMINISTRATION, UNLIKE their Rice counterpart, does not see architecture as central to the university's mission. Yet going against the grain out on the arty north edge of the campus, in the shadow of Philip Johnson's jokey cupola, a clever and eye-catching two-million-dollar renovation of the Blaffer Art Museum, housed in Caudill Rowlett Scott's functional 1973 Fine Arts Building, will commence in July.

Blaffer administrators, with some help from higher-ups at the university, selected the young and acclaimed 14-person New York City firm WORKac as architects, which makes its Texas debut with the design. Other work includes Diane Von Furstenberg's Studio Headquarters in New York, the New Holland Island in St. Petersburg, and the proposed Shenzhen Interchange skyscraper



in China. Architect Anne Menke found herself in Houston for the first time in January after studying in Potsdam, practicing in the Netherlands, and spending the past three and a half years in the firm's Lower East Side loft office, designing everything from Anthropologie stores in California to public libraries in Queens. And while fond of the UH building's brutalism, she found its current state diminished and stale.

Vibrant angularity is on its way. Menke and her firm's love of such forms is visible in both her wardrobe (when we met, her shirt's pattern was a complex mesh of various lines—and, thus, angles)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Plan, south elevation, and model. The old south entry will become a lounge or café.

and the plans for the Blaffer, whose most pronounced change comes in the form of a cantilevered glass stairway that will mark the museum's new front entry. As well as serving as a lark for student commuters and passing drivers, this addition frees visitors to move up, down, east, and west, eliminating the need for the west gallery's awkward staircase, which will be removed. Supplemental angularity will be provided by the "wallumn": the support for the staircase that juts just so to provide edge to the design and visibility from the street.



The north side of the Blaffer Art Museum will become the main entry.

Randomized angular exuberance is also promised in the interior light fixtures.

This new entry will turn the Blaffer Art Museum northward, recognizing the shift that has occurred on Elgin Street since the College of Architecture building and the Moores Opera Center moved in next door. No longer hiding in the Fine Arts Building's modest courtyard, the Blaffer will face an enormous and busy student parking lot, with the stark General Services Building in the distance. The old southward entry space will be transformed into a lounge or café, serving both gallery-sponsored courtyard events and visitors seeking relaxation or caffeine. The courtyard itself will also be redesigned by landscape architects SCAPE. Its west wall will become suitable for film screenings, outdoor seating will be more available, and changes in elevation will make the space more winning.

The Blaffer's interiors will also be significantly altered. No longer will movement between the two second-level gallery spaces be restricted to a narrow alley lined with offices. The upper east gallery will become a shared film and studio space. Downstairs, a passageway from north to south, opening into the courtyard, will be cut through in hopes of attracting the curious commuters from the north lot. A bathroom will be added (currently the closest are in an outdoor hallway amidst student lockers).

Blaffer administrators have long awaited a transformation for the gallery, and their choice of WORKac from among 35 other firms has helped produce a dynamic and cool design that will be a welcome sight on the campus. Says Blaffer Director Claudia Schmuckli of the design, "I was immediately taken by the simplicity of the suggested solution, which not only addresses all areas of concern but also opens up myriad possibilities for programming... I think it's fair to say that the renovation will not only redefine Blaffer's presence on campus but also its role in the city of Houston." - Aaron Carpenter