

RADICALLY UNDERSTATED

MENIL DRAWING INSTITUTE AND MASTER PLAN

BALANCE **CAUTION** AND **INNOVATION**

BY CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE



Rendered aerial view of Menil Drawing Institute, Twombly, and Menil Collection from southeast. Courtesy Menil Collection.

It is rare that a week goes by during which I do not get at least one email trumpeting the expansion plans of an American art museum. Across the country, museums are chasing extra square footage and the prestige that comes with hiring a prominent architect to design a substantial and eye-catching new building. Peter Zumthor in Los Angeles. Shigeru Ban in Aspen. Diller, Scofidio + Renfro in Berkeley. Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in Miami. Snøhetta in San Francisco. And Renzo Piano—well, Renzo Piano nearly everywhere, from New York to Chicago to Cambridge, Massachusetts. (And across the Charles River from Cambridge in Boston, too, for good measure.) As an architecture critic, I could devote myself to reviewing only new museum wings in this country, leaving every other building type and every other country unexamined, and still have trouble keeping up.



Menil Drawing Institute west elevation. Courtesy Menil.

Against this backdrop, the master plan that the Menil Collection in Houston is relying on to guide its own expansion seems not just genuinely but almost radically understated. Produced by David Chipperfield Architects, the plan emerged from an invited competition overseen by Josef Helfenstein, the director of the Menil since 2004, and was approved by the museum's board in 2009. It calls for measured growth over time, one small stand-alone art gallery at a time, along with the addition of a café and expanded parking lot. It does not call for a grand new central building or a linked collection of impressively scaled wings. Nor has it been a vehicle for the museum to correct or flee from the perceived missteps of other capital projects or smooth over the errors of earlier architects, directors, and boards of trustees, as has arguably been the case at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Whitney Museum of Art, The Museum of Mod-

ern Art (MoMA) in New York, or the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), to name just a few in what has grown to become a very long list of art-world institutions plagued by that kind of intergenerational architectural regret. It is instead a document intended to build on and indeed safeguard the considerable, singular appeal of the museum's original gallery building, designed by Piano and opened to the public in June 1987—as well as the bungalows from the 1920s and 1930s that line the edges of the museum campus and the simply treated landscape, made up mostly of grass, substantial oak trees, and a small handful of artworks, that holds the 30-acre parcel together.

The Chipperfield master plan, in fact, attempts to add new structures to the Menil campus very much in the image of the quietly astonishing Piano building, which remains with the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, the finest artworld design of the Italian architect's long career. The model is clear: the horizontal, usually single-story, gallery building set into that green landscape and visible in the round. Quite carefully the master plan also seeks to stitch the museum campus more securely into the urban fabric and to the surrounding city grid, strengthening the sense of a north-south axis through the site and looking ahead to the day when a light-rail line will be finished along Richmond Avenue, on the Menil's southern edge, changing the way visitors approach the museum and its relationship with the rest of Houston. In the methodical and unflashy nature of its approach to expansion, the Menil is matched among American museums perhaps only by the Clark Institute in William-



Menil Drawing Institute south elevation. Courtesy Menil.

stown, Massachusetts, which unveiled an expansion by Tadao Ando and Annabelle Selldorf in 2014.

At the same time, the Chipperfield plan holds the potential to produce some of the most important museum buildings of the first few decades of the twenty-first century. And in fact it is this relationship between institutional caution and architectural ambition that I am interested in exploring here. Paradoxically enough, it turns out that the sobriety of the Menil's expansion efforts and Helfenstein's leadership style more broadly have been key elements in helping the museum become a patron of searching, innovative architecture. The first building proposal to come out of the master plan process, Johnston Marklee's Menil Drawing Institute (MDI), is evidence of this productive relationship between caution and experimentation. It is a design that appears spare, even plain, at first glance and reveals layers of complexity, surprise, and risk-taking the more it is studied.

I hope I'm not implying that the museum has decided to follow this unusual course without anxiety or conflict. In fact uneasiness about Johnston Marklee's lack of experience, particularly among board members who preferred simply to hire Chipperfield to design the MDI, since he was already in charge of the master plan, nearly upended plans for the building (though the board ultimately was unanimous in its selection of Johnston Marklee). And there are forks in the road yet to come.

To succeed, every director of a major American museum these days has to be an expert in two

things: in the history of art and in the separate realm, slippery and ineffable, of raising money. An interest or expertise in architecture (or more broadly in urbanism, in the question of how neighborhoods and cities are made and how they grow) has not typically been a central requirement. In fact a museum director who is too interested in architecture and capital improvements (see Richard Koshalek at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden or Michael Govan at LACMA) is often at risk of being criticized for neglecting the most important parts of his or her job. Perhaps as a result of that fact, many museum directors I've met over the years have worn their lack of knowledge of or passion for architecture as a badge of honor. When I traveled last year to Houston to meet with Helfenstein and discuss the Menil's long-range building plan, I found a museum director taking pains to avoid both those poles. Helfenstein, who was born in Bern, Switzerland, and came to the United States in 1999 to run the Krannert Museum at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, is no Koshalek, in the sense that when he talks about architecture and urban design he uses the same measured tone he employs when he's discussing forecasts for the Menil's endowment. You don't get the sense that he is captivated by Chipperfield as a personality the way Govan is to a certain degree captivated by Zumthor. But neither is Helfenstein the smooth technocrat, the perfectly coiffed and expertly tailored museum director who seems a transplant from Wall Street. He is knowledgeable and enthusiastic about architecture but has a cautious streak that seems preternatural.

We met in a conference room on the second floor of the main Menil building. Models of the museum campus were on the table; renderings of the MDI were arranged along the walls. Soon we'd be joined by Sheryl Kolasinski, the Menil's deputy director, who joined the museum in 2012 after 17 years at the Smithsonian Institution.

Tellingly, Helfenstein began his description of Chipperfield's master plan by explaining not what the museum was hoping to build or add but what it wanted to protect.

"This is a low-key neighborhood," he said. "What stands out for me is the complete lack of hierarchy in terms of how things are treated. It's all on the same level. There's no pedestal—not for the buildings, not for the art."

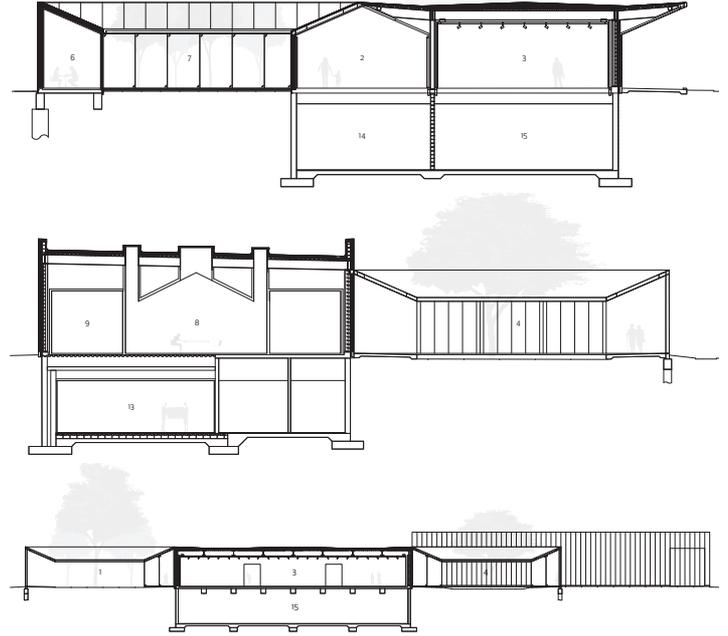
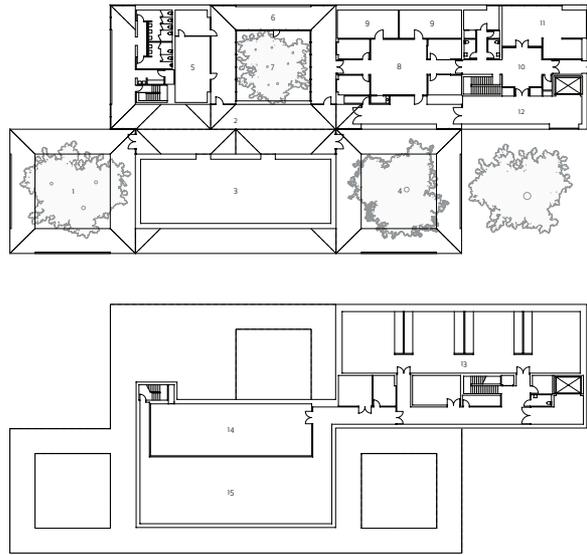
In the Renzo Piano building, he added, "There's not even the beginning of a staircase or anything like that."

Of course, the inspiration for that horizontality, that sense of being close to the ground, literally and philosophically, is the collection of bungalows. "The bungalows have porches. This building [the Piano] has a porch around it. Not only is there no hierarchy in terms of height, there's none in terms of public and private. You sit on any of these porches, as a private person; you sit and look out, and you can actually talk to strangers. Europeans come here and they can't believe it."

Similar ideas guided Piano's design for the Cy Twombly Gallery, a quiet cube faced in concrete block that was completed in 1995. Frankness and openness is also evident in the approach of the Menil's landscape architects, Michael van Valkenburgh Associates. When Van Valkenburgh started work on the campus,

FLOOR PLAN KEY

- 1 Entry Courtyard
- 2 Living Room
- 3 Exhibition
- 4 East Courtyard
- 5 Offices
- 6 Cloister
- 7 Scholar Courtyard
- 8 Drawing Room
- 9 Art Storage
- 10 Library
- 11 Technical Study
- 12 Loading Area
- 13 Art Storage
- 14 Mechanical
- 15 Storage



Menil Drawing Institute ground floor and basement plans, north-south section through scholar courtyard, north-south section through drawing room and east courtyard, and east-west section through courtyards and exhibition space. Courtesy Menil.

Helfenstein said, “We already had a template. We didn’t need people to come in and start overdesigning the park, with paths that we don’t need. That’s very fancy, that approach, and people do that today.”

Still, it would be a mistake, Helfenstein added, to confuse the sense of modesty that seems to have imbued the whole Menil campus with contentment or stasis. The approach of the campus is in fact a bold statement of principle in Houston, he said, given the ad-hoc approach to development that rules the rest of the city.

“There’s really high standards here, a sense that the world is watching us,” he told me. When it comes to the new buildings on the campus, “If we do something sort of average, it will be an embarrassment, and it will be terrible, kind of ruining what we’ve done before.”

This is the crux of what makes the Menil an outlier in the American museum world, this slow-going progressivism. In most museum expansions I cover, the goal is not to protect what has come before but, in one way or another, to redeem it. This is the case at museums as different as MoMA and LACMA, SFMOMA and the Barnes Foundation. New buildings are expected to replace, make up for, or disembowel the buildings erected by previous directors and trustees. The process is not additive but consists of a series, endlessly repeatable, of fresh starts. It’s a truly American approach: the eternal dream of the clean slate.

At the Menil that idea is anathema. Much of the architectural spirit of the museum, of course, can be traced back to the rigorously productive relationship Dominique de Menil forged with Renzo Piano, who was 45 years

old when she chose him to design the museum’s main gallery building. His design, equally informed by Craig Ellwood’s Case Study Houses in Los Angeles and the high-tech experiments of Piano’s former collaborator Richard Rogers, with whom he designed the Centre Pompidou a decade before, seemed effortlessly to sidestep the debates then roiling architecture about postmodernism versus late modernism, historical reference versus flat-roofed, forward-looking clarity. The building, produced at a time of significant soul-searching and uncertainty in the profession, is as comfortable in its own skin as any piece of museum architecture in the world. It has a gently retrospective appeal in its nod to Ellwood but is free of anxiety about any conflict between historicism and modernism.

In an attempt to recapture some of that spirit, or at least honor it, Helfenstein and the Menil board made their boldest move simply in how they organized the process of selecting a master planner. Together they made a series of consequential decisions: first to set up an invited competition (six offices narrowed down to a shortlist of four), next to invite architecture rather than planning firms to take part in that competition, and finally not to hire an outside consultant to run it, as many expanding museums do. The finalists that emerged from that competition suggested both its ambition and its tolerance for relative youth and anonymity: along with Chipperfield’s office, they included Office dA from Boston and two firms from Madrid, Mansilla + Tuñón and Herreros Arquitectos.

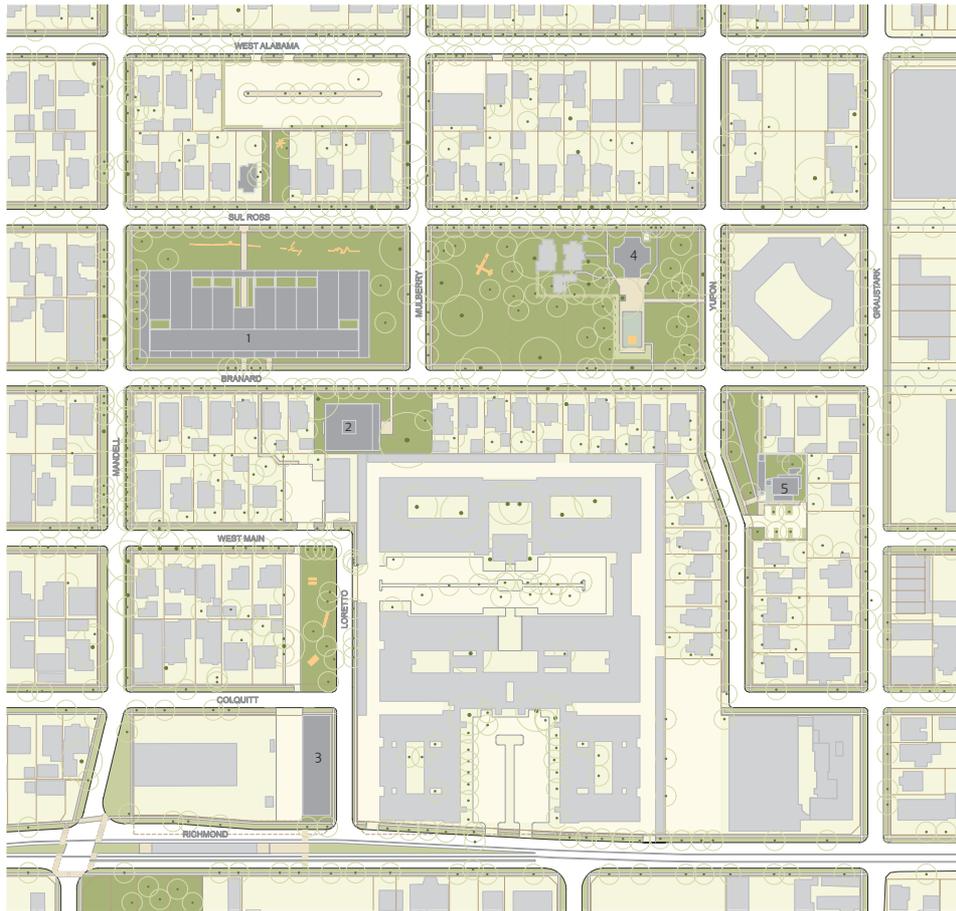
The competition for the MDI followed similar lines. (The master plan competition “was

such a good process,” Helfenstein said, “that we felt naively that we should do it again.”) To guard against conservatism, Helfenstein added the architecture dean at Rice, Sarah Whiting, to the jury, and it was she who recommended inviting Johnston Marklee. The shortlist for the building was, like the one of master plan candidates, a mixture of well-known and emerging offices. Chipperfield and the Tokyo firm SANAA made up the well-known group and were joined by Johnston Marklee, whose married partners, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, are in their late 40s, and the 42-year-old Mexico City architect Tatiana Bilbao.

Still, as the jury neared consensus on Johnston Marklee, more than a little doubt emerged.

The MDI competition was “really a cauldron of opinions,” said Kolasinski, who arrived at the Menil just as the process was unfolding. “It was exciting. Maybe a little too exciting.”

In the end, Johnston Marklee won the job, a major breakthrough for the firm, and one that arrives as its founders are just about the same age Renzo Piano was when he was hired by Dominique de Menil. Their scheme is a deft and timely marriage of abstraction and rich allusion and incorporates a number of domestic, residential metaphors. (The main circulation and gathering space will be called the Living Room.) The MDI will be more approachable, more domestic in scale, than a typical museum wing but certainly grander and more ambitious in circulation and in how it treats display than a house. Most impressive of all is how, in making room for three courtyards, each containing an existing oak tree, and in connecting to the Menil landscape, the design bears in mind a key lesson about visiting museums that too many



Site plan for existing buildings. Courtesy David Chipperfield Architects/The Menil Foundation.

In the 2009 master plan by David Chipperfield, most existing duplexes and bungalows are preserved. Changes include removing the Richmond Square Apartments, connecting W. Main and Colquitt Streets, creating new park space, and building high-density residential development along Richmond Avenue.

EXISTING BUILDINGS

- 1 The Menil Collection
- 2 Cy Twombly Gallery
- 3 Richmond Hall
- 4 The Rothko Chapel
- 5 Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum



Scenario of fully developed master plan with museum and real estate buildings. Courtesy David Chipperfield Architects/The Menil Foundation.

EXISTING BUILDINGS

- 1 The Menil Collection
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NEW MUSEUM BUILDINGS

- 6 Menil Hall
- 7 Bookstore/Cafe
- 8 Archives
- 9 Energy House
- 10 Single artist gallery
- 11 MDISC
- 12 Single artist gallery
- 13 Storage building

NEW ROTHKO CHAPEL BUILDINGS

- 14 Function and office buildings
- 15 Storage building and bungalow

REAL ESTATE

- A Low rise residential development
 - B High rise commercial and residential mixed use (2nd levels underground parking)
 - C Relocated bungalows
- 2 levels
 - 3 levels
 - 4 levels
 - 8 levels

THE QUESTION NOW FOR THE MENIL
IS WHETHER THE BUILDINGS YET TO
COME CAN ACHIEVE THE SAME KIND OF
COMPLEX, AMBITIOUS GRACEFULNESS.

architects forget: that the transition from inside to out, from the intensity of concentrating on looking to the pleasure of concentrating on nothing at all and merely feeling the sun or the rain on your skin, can be more crucial than the transitions from one gallery to the next.

The MDI will offer a test of Johnston Marklee's ability to turn promise and a thoughtful approach to expanding a practice into a persuasive collection of built work. The architects made some compromises in order to maintain the MDI's modest single-story profile, rising no more than 16 feet; roughly half of the building's 30,000 square feet of interior space will be located on a basement level, dedicated mostly to art storage. This can't have been an easy sell for curators and conservationists concerned about flooding and other possible damage.

Above ground the design is an extended architectural essay on one kind of design characteristic nestling within its opposite. The MDI is meant to be filled with dappled light, strategically mediated by the roof and the oak trees, in some rooms (especially the Living Room) and nearly paranoid about light levels, to protect works on paper, in others. Some interior spaces will be spacious enough and faced with glass to feel open-air, while its courtyards, lined vertically with wide cedar planks, will feel like interior rooms. The roof, formed from an unusually thin steel plate, lends the building a spare, modernist personality from certain angles; but inside the faceted ceiling suggests a gabled geometry.

That is a lot of complexity and metaphorical layering to pile into a building that will contain just 17,000 square feet of above-ground space, which is smaller than many houses in Houston's higher-end residential precincts. It will be a real breakthrough if the final product lives up to the renderings: A building packed into a manageable scale in contrast to the wan, attenuated, oversized wings so many other museums are building. A gallery building that feels thick with architectural ideas and gives consistent access to the outdoors, that leaves you wanting more instead of fighting off gallery fatigue? That is a rare concept these days.

Thomas de Monchaux, writing in *Architect* magazine, suggested that the building might prove to be a bit too well-behaved in the end

for the unruly complexity of Houston. Yet in certain ways the MDI design's Trojan-horse qualities—the way it cloaks its experimental streak in rather reserved outer dress—make it especially suitable for the Menil campus, which has long operated as a both quiet refuge (for Houstonians and visitors alike) and a proving ground for new approaches to museum architecture.

More than any other building in his portfolio, it is the Menil, Piano's first major American commission, that has made him the most prolific museum architect of his generation. Piano's building for the Menil remains the one that other museums' boards of trustees make pilgrimages to see; it remains the one that spawns expansions of remarkable scale in other cities—expansions, ironically enough, that often lack the sense of scale and proportion that make the Menil building so impressive.

The question now for the Menil is whether the buildings yet to come—the MDI first and then two additional gallery buildings—can achieve the same kind of complex, ambitious grace.

The early signs are good, though there have been some significant hiccups. The museum's plans to restore a bungalow on the north side of the campus as a new café didn't entirely pan out; the building was not in good shape and has been entirely replaced by the architects Stern and Bucek. Adaptive reuse morphed instead into the kind of historicism and polite contextualism the Menil has until now studiously avoided. Meanwhile an adjacent parking lot has been fitted with a geothermal system and new landscaping by Van Valkenburgh's firm. Groundbreaking for the MDI is scheduled for 2015, with completion anticipated by the end of 2016. Johnston Marklee is also designing a replacement for a utilities building, called the Energy House, just west of the MDI site.

Work will then accelerate on the southern half of the campus. West Main Street will extend east across the campus, strengthening the sense of the urban grid.

The museum has taken down part of the Richmond Square apartment building (which it owns) for the MDI and will ultimately demolish the rest, making room for two additional

gallery buildings just south of the MDI, while simultaneously working with a private developer to build a new apartment complex along Richmond Avenue. That project will both provide new revenue for the museum, replacing the rental income lost when Richmond Square and its 500 rental units come down, and create an architectural buffer between busy Richmond Avenue and the center of the Menil campus. The museum won't have final say on the architect of the new apartment building but will have significant input on its design and—perhaps more important—its scale. Indeed the museum may push for a midrise building there not only to maximize rental income but to build something of a wall between Richmond Avenue and the museum campus.

Even as these additions are planned and implemented, Helfenstein, as if to cement his status outside the mainstream of American museum directors, does his best to keep in mind what can be pared back or done without. At one point in our conversation, I asked him about a small building on one of the master plan models.

Helfenstein told me it was an auditorium, something the Menil has never had—and in the minds of certain trustees has always needed. "It's on the menu for the master plan. But I believe we have an auditorium, and it's called the out-of-doors. We do very beautiful events outside all the time."

A formal auditorium, he added, "would be a waste of money. And kind of absurd. I don't think we're going to do it." ■

FIRMS

ARCHITECTS: JOHNSTON MARKLEE, LOS ANGELES,
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: GUY NORDENSON AND ASSOCIATES
WITH CARDNO HAYNES WHALEY
MECHANICAL AND ELECTRICAL ENGINEER: STANTEC
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:
MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH ASSOCIATES
LIGHTING DESIGN: GEORGE SEXTON ASSOCIATES
CIVIL ENGINEER: LOCKWOOD ANDREWS NEWMAN
BUILDING ENVELOPE ENGINEER:
SIMPSON GUMPERTZ & HEGER
COST CONSULTING: AECOM
ACOUSTICAL/AV/IT: ARUP



Clockwise from top left: Menil Drawing Institute interior, west elevation, east courtyard, and scholar courtyard interior view. Courtesy Menil.