

kimbell

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What in your opinion is the art museum's cultural and social mission in general today?

Eric Lee: First of all, it is impossible to generalize about art museums because they are all different. But I do believe that the fundamental mission of every art museum should be to delight, inspire, and educate through art, and to enrich people's lives by providing a captivating respite from the everyday world.

Renzo Piano Building Workshop: Today the notion that a museum has the primary purpose of exhibiting art and protecting art is becoming less and less true. I feel the museums today now have mixed and overlapping missions that make them more dynamic institutions that have greater appeal to all types of visitors. Certainly museums today need to create interest and provoke curiosity with exhibitions, concerts, films, etc., to attract visitors. But to be truly viable the museum needs to educate their visitors and members with study centers, workshops, and lecture series that enhances the emotion and sense of inspiration.

What do you feel is the best relationship between architecture and art?

EL: Architecture and art should complement one another. In a gallery, the architecture should serve the purpose of making the art look its best: the gallery should be properly scaled for the art, have good lighting, direct one's eye to the art (such as a painting on a wall), provide a background of color, materials, and textures to properly frame the art without overwhelming it, and put the visitor in the proper frame of mind for viewing the art. The architecture and art should exist in a careful balance: they should both be strong, but not so strong that one overpowers the other.

It is easier to achieve a balance between architecture and art when a gallery is designed for a specific collection. It is much more difficult to achieve this balance in a gallery for special exhibitions, where an exhibition of Samurai armor might be followed by a show of Impressionist paintings.

RPBW: The relationship between architecture and art, in a museum context, depends greatly on the type of collections, i.e., contemporary art, old masters, sculpture, or works on paper, and whether it is a permanent installation or a temporary exhibition. Therefore, as an architect, I

have difficulty in expressing what is the “best” relationship. For permanent installations I find the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris with the *Nymphéas* of Claude Monet or the Cy Twombly Pavilion in Houston to be perfect examples of architecture and art working together in creating a sublime atmosphere. With temporary exhibition spaces, the tendency is to make the usual nondescript “white box” that aspires to flexibility but tends to fail in providing the sense of place and belonging. To many this may be a desirable need and effect, but we have always felt that architecture should not be intrusive in the realm of art but it should not be completely nonexistent either. Our building at the Kimbell Art Museum was designed to exhibit “old masters.” Therefore, the exhibition spaces were purposely designed to create intimate rooms that had great flexibility but were not void of material, texture, color, light, nor architecture.

How would you describe your architectural approach regarding the preexisting building by Louis Kahn, and how did you respond to the preexisting exhibition spaces?

EL: The Louis Kahn Building directly inspired the Renzo Piano Pavilion, which echoes its great predecessor yet is the product of Piano’s own style, temperament, and time. You might say that the Piano Pavilion is Virgil to the Kahn Building’s Homer.

Most of the galleries Piano has designed have been modern white box galleries, in part to allow for maximum flexibility in the installation of art. But at the Kimbell, Renzo came to believe that he could not possibly have white box galleries when rich, warm, architecturally powerful galleries were next door in the Kahn Building. Renzo introduced concrete on the galleries’ peripheral walls, which correspond to the travertine walls of the Kahn galleries, and ceilings supported by long wooden beams, which correspond to the concrete cycloid vaults of the Kahn Building.

RPBW: The first words that come to mind are thoughtful and sensitive. We understood immediately the ramifications of building on the “Great Lawn” in front of the Kahn Building and that our project would be exposed to serious criticism if not designed properly. Therefore, we were constantly moving between drawings, models, and reality. We paced the site trying

to understand the appropriate distances and heights. We made numerous mockups in Genova and Fort Worth to select the appropriate facade materials. Then we made renderings and models to confirm our assumptions about scale and sense of presence. And when we all finally felt comfortable with the design direction, we then paced the site again to reconfirm that all was correct. Certainly the Kahn Building was a great inspiration for our work. His palette of materials, the structural expression, and the use of controlled natural light brought about a work of architecture with great integrity that we all desired to emulate.

Have you found anything particular about realizing a project in Texas?

EL: The intense light of Texas has an enormous impact on both the design of buildings and how they look once they are realized. And the optimism and can-do spirit of Texas make the projects happen!

RPBW: As you know, we have been fortunate to realize four important museum buildings in Texas. Our first project in Texas started with the Menil Collection completed in 1987, then the Cy Twombly Gallery completed in 1997, the Nasher Sculpture Center completed in 2003, and now the Piano Pavilion at the Kimbell Art Museum. However, I would like to emphasize that our adventures in Texas have all been very positive. This could be attributed to a strong and capable building industry with a can-do attitude coupled with pride. Very likely the biggest positive factor for us building in Texas has been our clients. All our clients in Texas have been open to a challenge in making architecture that does more than just respond to their functional needs but can evoke profound emotion and enrich our lives with joy. Again, we have been fortunate!

Both Eric Lee, Director of the Kimbell, and Mark Carroll, Principal at Renzo Piano Building Workshop, responded to the same series of questions via email.

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