

# mfah

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The great light of the big Texas sky is central to our "luminous canopy."

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

**Gary Tinterow:** While art museums have assumed increasing importance in the lives of their communities throughout the twentieth century, a fundamental shift has occurred over the last 20 years. No longer the exclusive province of experts and collectors, American art museums have evolved to become community centers, loci of education, inspiration, and renewal. Accordingly, our plan for campus expansion places community interests first, providing verdant spaces and fountains, outdoor and indoor gathering places to eat and relax, to view art, films, and performances, and to attend lectures, conferences, and concerts; we will privilege social spaces.

**Steven Holl:** Today the art museum's cultural and social mission is more important than anytime yet in its history. Art education is a mission that has been central to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) since its inception. Today its Glassell School of Art is the only museum school to offer full-time studio instruction spanning all ages—from age 3 to postgraduate adults. The social mission of museums has grown steadily in the last 100 years to make them the "social condensers" of modern urban life. For these missions, it is one of the finest commissions for an architect today.

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

**GT:** The best relationship between art and architecture is dynamic, in which one enhances the other. There is no such thing as neutrality in architecture; all spaces affect the experience

of art, no matter how minimal or uninflected. As a museum man, I consider myself the referee, insuring that art and architecture play well together, respectfully and engagingly. And since many of the artists whose work we display are long gone, we must take extra precautions to look after the interests of the art as we create spaces for exhibition. That said, bad space, poorly proportioned space, boring space can be brutal, if not fatal to art. And much art created in the second half of the twentieth century is especially sensitive to its environment.

**SH:** Museum architecture must foreground the art. Today, there are two types of museum architecture:

- 1) Overexpressionistic, which overwhelms the art.
- 2) White-box-boring, which sucks the life out of art.

We aim for a third type, which has a spatial energy that pulls the user through the galleries while providing great space and light for the art.

**How would you describe your architectural approach regarding the preexisting buildings by William Ward Watkin, Kenneth Franzheim, Mies van der Rohe, and Rafael Moneo, and how did you respond to the preexisting exhibition spaces?**

**GT:** Our architects are very conscious of the notable buildings on our campus, and their work responds respectfully to the existing context. American museums as a group do not have an impressive record of historic

preservation, especially of interior spaces. I find that stripping older buildings of accretions and returning galleries to original proportions and details usually yields improved spaces for the display of art. As we work with Steven Holl Architects and Lake|Flato on our new facilities, Willard Holmes and I are carefully restoring our buildings by Mies, Watkin, Franzheim, and Moneo. All our facilities will sparkle when our project is complete in 2019.

**SH:** Our approach to the existing buildings at MFAH was to envision the whole as a new campus with green space as the syntax that connects the different buildings.

Our new museum in translucent matte glass will shape space and be in "complementary contrast" to the black steel and glass of the Mies van der Rohe architecture and the stone of Rafael Moneo's building.

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

**GT:** Texas, Houston in particular, provides an exceptional climate for realizing grand projects. Here, the sky is the limit, and everyone knows about the big skies of Texas.

**SH:** The great light of the big Texas sky is central to our "luminous canopy;" the lush Houston vegetation punctuates our architecture with rich green spaces.

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*Gary Tinterow, Director of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Steven Holl, architect for the expansion of the campus, responded to the same series of questions via email.*