

# menil

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

**Josef Helfenstein:** I strongly feel that art belongs to the public and is made for the public good. Museums therefore have a legacy for our communities—not just for one segment of society, but for the community in all its diversity. Members of all socioeconomic groups should have access to art, as they should have to a decent education. In our increasingly commercialized and privatized societies, museums are very crucial as cultural treasure houses, platforms of memory, and places of education and public discussion.

But most important: museums are places of wonder and of beauty. I think the Menil is such a place. It is also more than a museum: as Reyner Banham observed, it is a neighborhood of art. The Menil has always tried to integrate modern aesthetics with ethics.

**David Chipperfield:** Museums hold an increasingly important position in a society so often absorbed by the superficial and the ephemeral. Incessant consumption is the defining characteristic of our lives today; I believe that museums have become important breakwaters against this tide.

**Johnston Marklee:** Art museums are about slowness. We live in a time when everything is available all the time, a lot of information without knowledge, a lot of distraction without concentration. Museums should offer a kind of place and atmosphere different from the quotidian; going to a museum is about editing out all the noise so that you can see things differently.

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

**JH:** Museum architecture should support the display of works of art and the visitor's perception of them. Ideally, that relationship is reciprocal; in other words, good art often enhances good architecture simply because great art has the capacity to transform the visitor's under-

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standing of the world. And the same can be true for architecture, although it usually has a more functional purpose than art has.

**DC:** Like much contemporary architecture, the architecture of the museum has become increasingly concerned with image. Architects are responsible for attracting larger audiences to museums and consequently seek to be iconic in their work. In this pursuit the more delicate duty of the museum—to provide a place for viewing art and for concentration—is sometimes forgotten.

However it is also true that the engagement between contemporary art and its viewer has become increasingly complex. Artists seek to challenge accepted modes of presentation for their work, fostering engagement through participation and performance. To be places of contemplation and of dialogue simultaneously is the challenge facing today's institutions.

**JM:** We find it best when the architecture acts as a backdrop to art—a backdrop that is not mute but reticent, remaining silent unless spoken to.

**How would you describe your architectural approach regarding the preexisting buildings by Renzo Piano Building Workshop and other buildings of the Menil campus, and how did you respond to the preexisting exhibition spaces?**

**JH:** What is extremely successful about Renzo Piano's main museum building and Cy Twombly Gallery, and also the neighboring Rothko Chapel by Philip Johnson, Howard Barnstone, and Eugene Aubry, is that they have defined a neighborhood in a completely understated, unimposing way. They managed to create a true dialogue with the surrounding fabric of vernacular buildings, mostly bungalows. For me, the post-Piano approach is based on understanding the delicacy of this balance, and on not imposing a hierarchy. On our "campus" the museum buildings, bungalows, outdoor sculptures, trees, the visitors, their dogs, and even the cars

are all literally on the same level. People visiting our museum never even have to take a step up to enter a building and experience art. It is a very simple, astonishing, beautiful concept. The scale between these different elements is right, and so is the relationship between architecture and nature, and the way light is integrated into the buildings.

For me, the Menil neighborhood is really a holistic place, a kind of contemporary urban utopia—but one that is real. And this seems to me the basis for any change or expansion. We have no intention to alter the existing buildings or exhibition spaces. However, the Menil Drawing Institute will add a new stand-alone building, whose size will respect the current relationship between the main building and the single-artist spaces as well as the fabric of the bungalows. The placement of the Drawing Institute will completely change and expand the reach of the current campus through the creation of a new park southeast of the Twombly Gallery. This space is currently not accessible to the public. I am really looking forward to this change—it will be eye-opening.

**DC:** It is difficult to think of a more pleasing cultural environment than that of the Menil. The setting and the intelligent architecture conspire together to make a place that is both very special and very normal. The unmonumental but supremely dignified museum architecture sits convincingly within a rather domestic setting, reinforcing the personality of the collection and putting its art in a unique position.

**JM:** We see our building as mediating between the scale of the institutional buildings and the residential buildings on the Menil campus, taking a cue from the original Piano building. We imagine ours could be perceived as a building that existed before the Piano buildings but after the pre-war bungalows, in an era of in-between. The Drawing Institute also reflects this in the character and scale of its interior exhibition spaces, which are formally somewhere between an institution and a house. Mastering the building's

scale within the context was paramount to the problem of shaping an environment to study and exhibit drawings.

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

**JH:** Due to the absence of planning in Houston, the Menil has always felt that we as the client have the responsibility to do things right, not so much from the perspective of a property owner as from a civic point of view. In our efforts to do so, it helps that Houston has a great sense of energy and opportunity and is economically thriving, which we hope will continue to fuel this city's great tradition of private philanthropy. Perhaps because of its youthful nature, and certainly because of its diversity, which I see as Houston's greatest asset, this is an outstanding city to give life to new ideas.

**DC:** We have enjoyed the open and enthusiastic atmosphere of the institution and the youthful energy of the city, as well as the light that Renzo Piano so skillfully made into the main material of his architecture.

**JM:** The intensity of the sun and rain could not be taken lightly. On the one hand, we wanted to create an intimate building that was nestled into the park and surrounding trees, while on the other we had to protect the building's contents from the extreme conditions of sun and water in Texas. By stretching the roof out over the landscape to define interior-exterior courtyards and porches, we created a protective halo. This in-between space, which is shadowy and dry, buffers the interior of the building from the exterior, like a space suit!

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*Josef Helfenstein, Director of the Menil; David Chipperfield, who created a new master plan; and the Menil Drawing Institute architects, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee, responded to the same series of questions via email.*