

THE ARCHITECT'S NEWSPAPER

CRIT > NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF ART



Top: The aluminum-clad expansion is inset with narrow courtyards. Below: The reflective metal entry canopy. Facing page: Fiberglass coffer, fabric scrims, and fritted glazing modulate daylight in the galleries.





Pity the architect who can do a good house. Ever since Le Corbusier dubbed it a machine, and Robert Venturi built one for his mother, the house has been the premier venue for the intimate encounter between architectural theory and the drama of everyday life. And yet designers as diverse as Breuer and Gehry have struggled to translate domestic success into work of equivalent power at the scale of skyline and landscape.

Such might have been the fate of Tom Phifer, a former design partner of Richard Meier's whose own relatively young practice has been celebrated for a series of remarkably well-realized (and publicized) houses, especially prominent along the bucolic Taghkanic-Sagaponack axis of New York's weekending periphery. In those buildings, expressive twists on technically performative elements like rainscreens and sunshades revealed the surprising material complexity of glass and metal, and the productive tension between a monolithic volume and a light surface. A recent campus pavilion at Rice University elaborated these strategies somewhat more grandly. But now Phifer has scaled up to a substantial civic institution, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA).

A freestanding addition to the museum's existing Raleigh home (a wanly value-engineered Edward Durrell Stone design built in 1983),

the new building provides 65,000 square feet of permanent gallery space on a single ground-floor level, and a third as much service space below. It's a big box with narrow excisions at its edges that become courtyards, sculpture gardens, and water courts. The periphery of the box is opaque, and the cutouts, transparent: The ratio of one surface to the other is a surprising 50:50, and the depth to which the glass-lined openings extend into the plan produces striking light and lightness within.

There are other smart effects: That peripheral facade, whose dull gray appearance first suggests monolithic concrete, is actually another Phiferian rainscreen—an off-kilter assembly of anodized aluminum panels, tilting in as they rise to the facade's 26-foot height, and overlapping like shingles in plan. Within each tapering shingle-overlap is a mirror-shiny stainless steel surface; thus when viewed obliquely and especially in motion, the museum optically scintillates against its adjacent park and parking area. Secondly, and more soberly, the interior's ceiling features an array of deep Rhino-modeled fiberglass coffers whose rectangular bases define the 27-by-7-foot module of the gallery spaces, and whose tops resolve into not-quite-ovoid oculi. Their winsome geometry served as the basis for

Pentagram's custom museum typeface. Featherweight fabric screens of varying opacities precisely modulate the interior daylighting below these skylights. But their main effect is one of uncannily indeterminate and shadowless depth: a moody and shapeshifting overhead landscape.

A more polemical or self-reflexive building might have tried to steer these elements and effects toward each other in search of a big idea. This one mostly defers to the art—whose highlights include a sturdy modern ensemble of Motherwells, Frankenthalers, and Diebenkorns; a pride of Rodins; and a Judaica collection of subtle magnificence. Thus it may be only over the curated

lifetime of the building that one can deduce whether or how it accumulates to more than the sum of its effects. But the greatest effect may be as much democratic and economic as optic or tectonic. The museum is free. Its grounds, a sprawling 164-acre sculpture park poised between cloverleaf and subdivision, are unfenced and criss-crossed with trails that weave into a larger network across the exurban landscape of Raleigh. The building itself has a sufficiently grand main entrance marked by a shiny canopy, but visitors can drop in at other points through the glassy peripheral courtyards (a distant fulfillment of that Manhattanite dream of drifting into the Metropolitan



Museum directly from Central Park).

The feeling of free movement between natural and architectural landscapes is reinforced by an interior that operates essentially as one big room, with freestanding walls—many of them terminating a few feet below the ceiling—suggesting but never fully enclosing a series of galleries. In a graceful gesture, the usual control-point information desk is shifted far to the side of the main entrance, so the immediate encounter of the visitor is with art. The ceiling-mounted, casino-type surveillance eyes that presumably enable such operational fluidity are perhaps the only blots on an interior otherwise remarkably free of visual clutter. But it's a small price for something almost priceless: the architecturally-conveyed message that the museum's primary occupants are not its artifacts, but its visitors, and that when you arrive, you belong. It's a feeling characteristic of public institutions at their best: perhaps not of every house, but certainly of a home.

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