

# ART INCUBATOR

DENVER'S NEW MCA CELEBRATES RADICAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE

By Catherine Slessor

Lying at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, Denver inhabits a particularly potent interface of geography and topography. Here, the horizontal meets the vertical, as the mind-blowing spaces of the High Plains collide with the backbone of America. And here, exactly a mile above sea level, Denver's sprawling grid tames and rationalises the prairies. Spawned by the Gold Rush of the mid nineteenth century, it was the original frontier town, thriving on gambling, saloons, cattle and goods trading. In the '70s and '80s it grew prosperous during the energy crisis (older readers may recall *Dynasty*, the Denver-set TV soap), but tumbling oil prices in the mid '80s delivered an exogenous shock to the local economy that still reverberates in the spectre of parcels of land cleared for development that never happened.

Things are better these days, as manifest by the anonymous towers springing up in the CBD like slick, corporate blindweed. And true to its pioneer spirit, Denver is not afraid to embrace big gesture architecture, recently hiring Daniel Libeskind to design an extension for the Denver Museum of Art, the city's most venerable art institution. But the outcome of such ambition can be sensory overload. Libeskind's building forms part of a cultural nucleus, just across the road from Michael Graves' City Library (hardcore mid '90s Po-Mo) and a new residential development by Peter Eisenman. Between them they generate such an intense force field of architectural egos you fear the space time continuum may implode.



THE TAUT BOX IS WRAPPED IN BLACK GLASS WITH AN INNER LAYER OF LIGHT FILTERING INSULATION (MONOPAN). PHOTO BY ED REEVE.



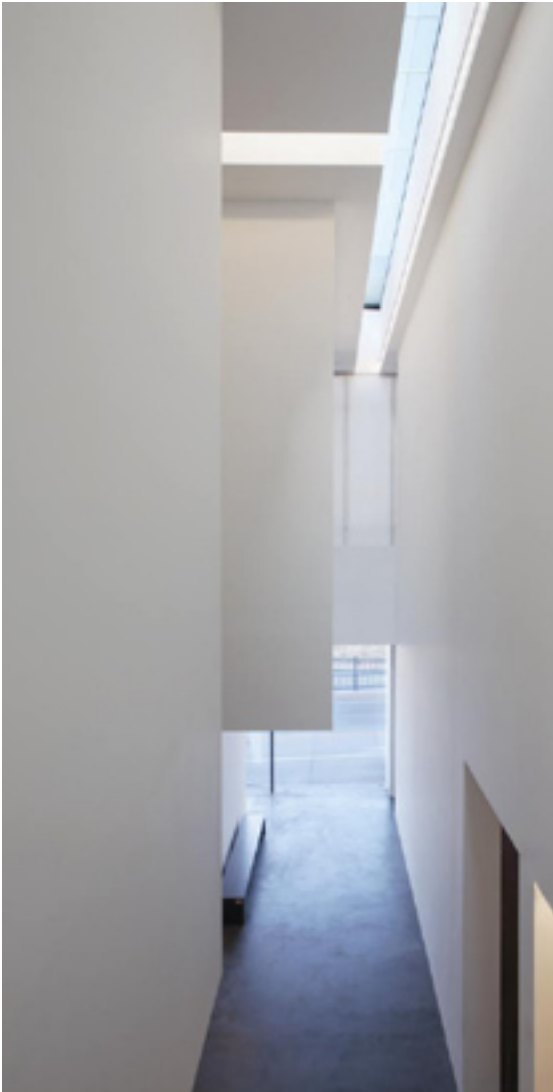
THE NEW MCA FORMS PART OF AN EMERGING NEIGHBORHOOD IN DENVER'S DOWNTOWN. PHOTO BY DEAN KAUFMAN.

Into this city of big ideas and big skies comes David Adjaye, another out-of-towner, whose recently completed Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver (MCA) is his first public building in the US and marks a pivotal point on an intriguing career trajectory. To date, London has been Adjaye's primary theatre of operations, specifically, the grungy, contradictory exuberance of its metamorphosing East End, where he has choreographed a series of private houses and public buildings. Underpinning these projects is a rigorous engagement with a contemporary language of abstraction, but this is also crucially tempered by the compression and dislocation of London's unique physical and social fabric. In terms of building scale and city terrain, the MCA signifies a challenging transition from the familiar, as the dense, grimy, forcing house of London gives way to Denver's spaced outness. Add to this the logistical learning curve of working in the USA and there appears ample potential for the nuances of Adjaye's architecture to get lost in translation. So how do you control the making of a building over 4000 miles from home? One decisive move was to hook up with the local firm Davis Partnership, who were also executive architects for the Libeskind project. Paradoxically, Adjaye's thoughtful, restrained approach with its emphasis on the innate qualities of materials and how things meld and fit together proved just as technically challenging as Libeskind's hectic geometries, but the local team hung in there and helped Adjaye tactfully push expectations and boundaries.

The design of the external façade is a case in point. The building is wrapped in an outer skin of black glass and an inner layer of translucent insulation which filters Denver's strong, clear, *altiplano* light with gorgeous subtlety, like a Japanese rice paper screen. Because the gallery spaces are, of necessity, hermetic boxes, Adjaye wanted the interstitial promenade between the galleries and the external wall to have a different character; admitting light, and, occasionally, views. So he appropriated Monoplan for the inner skin, a proprietary insulation material more commonly used on the roofs of delivery trucks. It's not rice paper (more like tough white sacking) but does the job beautifully; the translucent walls seem organically alive with light. It also gives the seamlessly sleek façade a surprising and seductive depth, redolent of marble or looking into deep water (the museum's guide describes it as "black milk"). Beyond the phenomenology, it's also practical. The Monoplan panels can simply be slid out to allow the glass to be cleaned and the insulation helps in the building's quest for sustainable credentials (it is gold LEED certified).<sup>1</sup>



THE LIBRARY IS A SENSUOUS WOMB LINED WITH IPE HARDWOOD. PHOTO BY GRANT LEIGHTON.



THE CHASM IS LIT BY SLOTS OF ROOF GLAZING THAT YOU CAN WALK ON. PHOTO BY ED REEVE.

In America's notoriously risk-averse construction culture, using a material in this way presented challenges (detailing, performance, fire safety, will-it-fly), but the quiet persistence and technical skill of the architectural team convinced local officialdom. The backing of an enlightened patron was also crucial. As Adjaye observes from his experience of working in the US, unlike corporate clients, who want things safely flattened out, cultural institutions are generally more receptive to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

Founded in 1996 and originally housed in a remodelled fish market, the MCA is Denver's first and only museum for contemporary art, but it has no permanent collection, operating on the European *kunsthalle* model by providing a set of different spaces for periodic colonisation by artists. So rather than being a static armature for a collection, it has a more flexible, improvisational character, and its new building is deliberately conceived as an incubator for experimentation and exploration. Adjaye's collaborations with contemporary artists in London have given him an insight into how creative people live and work, and the MCA is clearly informed by these encounters, enabling him to make and sustain resonant connections between art and architecture.

In 2003, a site was donated for a new building<sup>2</sup> in the lower downtown area, near the city's station. Formerly on its uppers, this neighborhood is changing fast, as new blocks of loft apartments attract people back to the centre of town and reinvigorate the urban condition. Adjaye's original competition-winning<sup>3</sup> drawings showed the museum in isolation on its corner site, but it now has neighbors on two sides. Unlike the ritualised monumentality of the civic core, this more modest urban setting is still evolving, and Adjaye's building forms an important point of anchorage and gravity in a fluctuating milieu.

In what might be read as a subconscious echo of Denver's plains/mountains interface, the museum explores strong formal and experiential contrasts. From the street it reads as a dark, horizontal element, reinforced by the bands of glazing and the timber-clad roof loggia. Yet inside it has a dizzying verticality and glacial whiteness. The sealed boxes of the galleries enclose and define a soaring central chasm lit by narrow slots of roof glazing. Part of the

ground floor is also pulled away offering glimpses into the education area at lower ground level. Experientially, the interior is structured around alternate poles of compression and release. As you promenade around the galleries, locked together like a Chinese puzzle, you keep reconnecting with the light and space of the void. There is no prescribed route, as each gallery is a self-contained experience, but the building's dominant verticality reinforces a sense of upward momentum. You can drift, cherry pick, or forgo the art entirely and head for the roof from where the great sprawl of Denver unfolds across the plains and the razorbacked Rockies shimmer with snow. The roof is habitable amalgam of café, garden, observation deck and children's room and you can walk on the toughened fritted strips of roof light glass, to the astonishment of those at ground level four floors below.

The quintet of galleries make up a kind of spatial nougat, varying in scale from a typical domestic living room to a double-height salon. On my visit the smallest was being used for a video installation by Taiwanese artist Yu-Cheng Chou, while the largest had been dramatically lined with mirrors by sculptor David Altmejd to enhance his giant anthropomorphic pieces made from broken fragments of reflective glass. Galleries are simple and neutral – white walled boxes with black concrete floors – but Adjaye's tastes also extend to more sensuous fare. Rich *ipe* hardwood lines the library and café, the shop as a ceiling of blue perspex fins, while curtains of thick green felt seal off galleries when not in use. The building sits on a low rusticated base of boardmarked concrete painted glossy black, like Goth nail varnish, and mirrored panels animate the undercroft of the prominent corner entrance. From his time spent in Japan studying traditional architecture, Adjaye is conscious of how a particular ensemble of materials can have presence and control space.

Given the lively, work-in-progress nature of the art and the institution it serves, the building is as well made as it probably needs to be. There are some roughish edges, but I.M. Pei style finesse would clearly be out of place here. Contemporary art is multivalent, quixotic, provocative, sometimes scruffy, sometimes polished and infinitely adaptable. In Denver it has got the building it deserves.



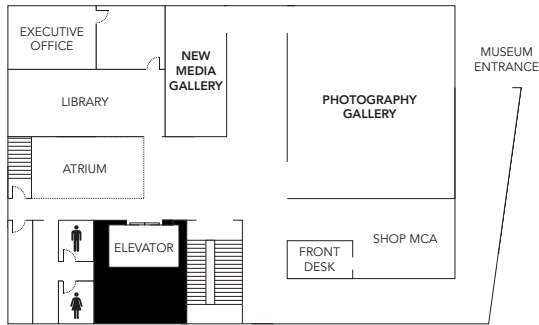
ROOFTOP GLAZING TO THE CHASM BELOW.  
PHOTO BY DEAN KAUFMAN.



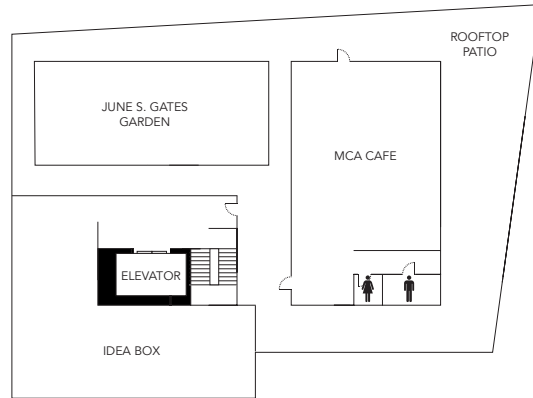
THE ROOF IS THE BUILDING'S 'FIFTH ELEVATION', A CONVIVIAL AMALGAM OF CAFÉ, GARDEN, KIDS' CENTRE AND OBSERVATORY. PHOTO BY DEAN KAUFMAN.



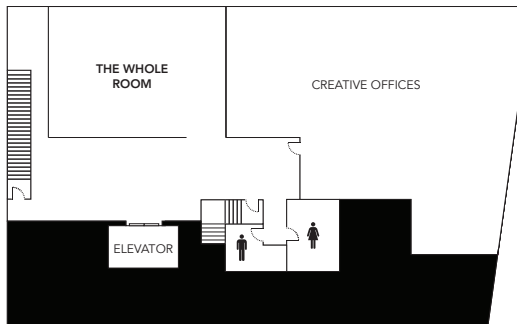
MCA CAFÉ. PHOTO BY GRANT LEIGHTON.



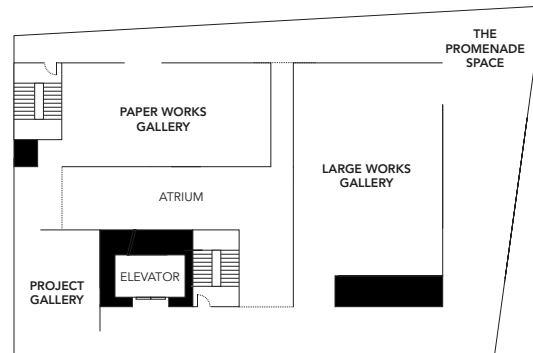
GROUND FLOOR PLAN.



ROOF PLAN.



LOWER GROUND FLOOR.



FIRST FLOOR.

1. Leadership in Environmental Design, though Adjaye is sceptical of the US 'box-ticking' culture in order to achieve an appropriate level of environmentally conscious design.

2. The MCA receives no public funding, so its budget of \$18.9 million was raised exclusively through private donors. The site, worth \$1.5 million, was gifted by Mark Falcone and Ellen Bruss, members of the MCA's Board of Trustees.

3. In 2004 Adjaye won an invited competition; other participants were TEN Arquitectos with Humphries Poli Architects, Snøhetta; Rick Joy Architects; Predock Frane; and Gluckman Mayner Architects.