

HOME, NOT ALONE

MCA DENVER OPENS IN ITS PERMANENT CENTRAL PLATTE VALLEY SITE

By John Gendall

The fall opening of MCA Denver in its new home also brought to the city a sleek, light-infused design by an emerging architectural star.

Long sequestered on a single floor of the Sakura Square office building in LoDo, the MCA operated in a sort of improvised transition. For its first three years, the now 10-year-old museum exhibited out of different rented spaces. Then it settled in, temporarily, to Sakura Square.

But on October 28, the museum opened a space of its own, a 27,000-sq-ft glass box on 15th and Delgany in Denver's Central Platte Valley.

"We couldn't possibly be happier with our first permanent home," says John Grant, MCA deputy director.

"The landlord at Sakura Square was very supportive, and we were able to build up our voice there, but it was like when you leave your parents' home and are living out of a small rental apartment," he says. "When you get everything together, you go out and buy yourself a home—and that's where we're at now."

A CULTURAL LANDMARK

MCA's architect, London-based David Adjaye, is most often described as an emerging practitioner, but with a string of recent important public projects, including MCA, the 41-year-old Tanzania-born designer has become an important voice in architecture.

Adjaye has become known for a unique brand of monolithic minimalism and experimentation with materials. Brit Probst, principal of Denver's Davis Partnership, the local architect-of-record, said that Adjaye "has really honed his aesthetic sensibilities," adding that "his simple forms are always well-proportioned volumes and elegantly detailed."

MCA fits soundly into that style and will be an important cultural landmark in the neighborhood west of LoDo, showing rotating exhibitions of global contemporary architecture.

It also provides an elegant physical landmark for the developing Central Platte Valley neighborhood. Clad in large panels of dark gray glass, the \$15.9-million building is almost entirely translucent, allowing abundant

but muted light into its spaces. Each of the glass panels was custom designed and fabricated, then assembled glass-to-glass on the building with a silicone sealant.

A second skin behind the curtain wall is made with a material called MonoPan. This translucent polypropylene composite has applications ranging from lining transport trailers to partitioning offices. Here, however, the translucent honeycomb panels take on a novel use by further insulating the building, filtering light and creating an ethereal surface effect on the facade. The architects designed the chamber between the two skins to help minimize the building's heat gain/loss. Measures such as these are expected to earn the building a LEED-gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

SUPPORTING ART

While many contemporary art museums are creating large, open galleries that can accommodate even the most sizeable artifacts, at the MCA Denver the architects and museum administrators had something else in mind. The museum is divided into six principal galleries, each linked by what Adjaye calls a "respite corridor." The intention is to force intimacy with the art in a gallery, then provide space for contemplation in the promenade as visitors wander to the next gallery. The architects also designed each gallery to allow curators to treat art on different scales. The design creed was to support MCA's curatorial mission, not to define it.

Carved from the building's busiest corner, a black concrete entryway brings guests into the museum. Interior spaces of the three-story building are organized around a series of enclosed galleries, promenades and the voids in between. Probst explains that "the volumes that house the galleries stand on their own—they're not actually structurally tied into each other."



PHOTO BY DEAN KAUFMAN

The spaces in between become cavernous voids, bringing in daylight from skylights above. Windows to the outside dot the corridors, providing selected vignettes of Denver, and the central atrium connects all of the pieces.

“The atrium allows the building components to be seen independently, and spatially creates a very interesting effect,” Probst says.

A rooftop terrace made with Brazilian cherry wood crowns the building and provides a material and volumetric juxtaposition to the otherwise glass museum. Set on a concrete foundation, the structural steel has very few interior columns to achieve the architect’s spatial outcomes. Denver’s M.A. Mortenson, MCA’s general contractor, turned to thicker steel to support the slab-on-metal decks.

“Adjaye’s architecture is about a clean simplicity, but it’s a simplicity that’s actually quite complicated to achieve,” Probst says. Citing the T-shaped skylight as an example, he says it’s a “beautiful form and a wonderful natural lighting element.

“But,” he adds, “there could be no structure, no mechanical systems and no duct work compromising that opening. It’s a complicated design move to achieve, and the same goes for the atrium.”

TIGHT SITE

The site itself presented significant challenges. Donated by the Denver-based developer Mark Falcone (who will shortly move into his new residence directly adjacent to MCA, and also designed by Adjaye), the site is in a tight urban context.

“This was an incredibly tight sight—we have neighbors right up on the site,” says Dale Heter, Mortenson’s director of operations for the Denver office and the construction executive for MCA.

“Working on a small-scale building on a curb-to-curb site makes construction logistically difficult. We were always really careful about noise-abatement issues and never worked early mornings or late evenings. We had to be really systematic about coordinating the fire lane and managing our equipment and waste.”

But the neighbors were forgiving. “The neighborhood is fantastic,” says Grant, adding that “many Central Platte Valley residents are involved in some way with the museum, and everyone’s been waiting for the organization to get down here.”