Building to Inspire

Arne Emerson and Nils Roemer in Conversation

Nils Roemer: You were born in 1971 and grew up in small places in Wyoming and Montana, removed from the urban bustle that now dominates your life in Los Angeles. Most of your portfolio has been in urban centers, not in rural areas, with the exception of projects like Vals, Switzerland. How much have those earlier impressions had a lasting influence on your work?

Arne Emerson: You know, those places have had a big influence on me, but I didn't realize it until later in my career. Particularly the landscape around where I grew up. Montana, where I went to college, is called "Big Sky Country" for its wide plains and mountains. The eastern parts of Wyoming, where I was raised, have fewer mountains, but similar beautiful open spaces. Growing up, I remember being fascinated by the contrast of the flat plains with the grain silos. There's a very strong horizontality in the landscape, with moments of verticality that are strikingly architectural—an empty plain with two or three grain silos, or a barn. In that rural context, they were monumental pieces of architecture and engineering that marked the landscape.

I think this somewhat austere environment sparked me to start looking out for other things that were interesting—but the starkness of it also made me yearn for something else, or somewhere else. Twice a year my family would leave our hometown of Casper, Wyoming, to go to Denver, the big city. This was a major event in my childhood and it planted in me a life-long love for cities and urban spaces. I loved going to the city—I liked what it had to offer—the pedestrian malls, towers, freeways. I just liked the urban-ness of it.

Now that I've had a chance to travel and work in some of the world's major metropolises, I realize that as a kid I had barely scratched the surface of what a city could be. Denver was the biggest city I had seen until I was in college and went to Los Angeles on a studio trip. I didn't have the opportunity to travel outside the country until I was in my late twenties, and I finally made it to Europe to experience the architecture, art, and culture that I had studied. I went to Berlin first. ...

NR: Interesting choice.

AE: Yeah, it was great. When I was in school, we had a study abroad program but I was never able to afford it. So, I never really experienced any major cities until I was probably 28 or 29. I suppose I had a little bit of an arrested development when it

came to understanding cities and how they influence architecture and culture, but as soon as I started traveling, I got a bit obsessed—and even more so, once I began working for Daniel Libeskind and had the chance to work on projects around the world.

NR: Your projects are on a scale that really shapes landscapes. The Athenaeum is very indicative of a style, where the inside and outside are intertwined. Natural light will be a constant fixture and constantly change the inside of the buildings.

AE: The idea of interconnectedness and the convergence of architecture and landscape has always interested me. Buildings are part of their environment—they need to be thought of as a part of the city, or a campus *and* the city in the case of the Athenaeum. Some of the most important spaces on campuses are the spaces in between the buildings, the walkways, plazas, green spaces. For the buildings within the Athenaeum to be successful, they need to be connected to these exterior spaces, they need to bring the outdoors in to the building. That is the reason why the buildings incorporate so much glass and are lifted up to create covered exterior and interior spaces—inviting the public in, creating that sense of connectedness, creating interesting spaces to learn, meet up, and study.

If I would have grown up in a city, I don't think I would have had that same sensitivity for that. Being from a rural area has very much informed my understanding and approach toward architecture and the desire to integrate landscape, architecture, light, and materiality much like what we're doing at the Athenaeum.

NR: Denver becomes really transformative for you twice. You attribute your interest in architecture to a shopping mall visit with your mother.

AE: It's true—I think the first key time was when I was quite young and visiting Denver with my family, on the 16th Street pedestrian mall. There was a guy that walked by us, he had a roll of drawings and a certain physicality; he was well-dressed and looked confident, which intrigued me. I remember asking my mom, do you know what he does? Maybe an engineer or an architect, she said. Once home, I looked up architecture and aesthetics in our encyclopedias and wrote a paper. After that I was in love with the idea of wanting to be an architect, although I had no idea what it meant at the time. There wasn't really any great architecture in Wyoming or Montana that I was aware of as a kid, but that propelled me with enough curiosity to get me to architecture school. Of course, once I got to school then everything changed, when I started to learn what architecture was really about. But that initial spark is what carried me through to where I got into architecture school.

NR: You were a first-generation student at Montana State University without a great many preconceived ideas about what architects are. Yet today you are a partner in one of the major architectural companies. There's a interesting story behind all of that. Once you graduated, you were trying to land a career in L.A., but then realized that there were more opportunities for you in Denver. Denver was good to you one more time.

AE: Well, ironically, yes. When I was in school there were a handful of architects I was really excited about. One was Daniel Libeskind, one was Morphosis, there were others, but those were really the two firms that introduced me to the world of

architecture. This was the early 1990s, pre-internet. Books were the only way to understand what was happening in the world, without traveling. The writings of Thom and Daniel and a few others were hugely influential to me, and I realized that I needed something bigger… beyond Montana, bigger than Wyoming. So, when I graduated in 1995, I sent out resumes to offices in New York and L.A. I couldn't get to New York, so I drove to L.A. and I actually tried to interview with Morphosis. There was a small recession in 1995, so I wasn't able to get a job. I returned to Denver, where I had some friends, and started working at a local architecture firm.

Even though I loved Denver, it was somehow too small for me after my pilgrimage out to Los Angeles. It felt like there weren't as many people in Denver who were open to experimenting or doing anything new or bold. In fact, it was quite conservative, so I was kind of turned off by that mindset and just wanted to escape. As a young designer I wasn't happy—I was either going try to move to the coast or go back to school. But in 1999 that all changed; Daniel Libeskind was selected to design the extension to the Denver Art Museum. His office was based in Berlin, in Charlottenburg, and they needed to partner with a local office in Denver. They interviewed our firm and we were selected as their joint venture partner. I was fortunate to be one of two people to be put on that team. That moment was also pivotal for me.

I dove into the project headfirst and was working incredible hours. I was a sponge—it was exactly what I was looking for at the time: big ideas, creativity, and collaboration. It was a museum and a masterplan that became a cultural nexus within the arts district. Daniel took a liking to me and asked me to work for him. I was with him for almost a decade as one of his main designers. That experience—working with such a great thinker as Daniel—opened me up to the world and how buildings and cities are important in shaping our built environment. That was pretty transformative.

NR: Daniel Libeskind was part of this rebellious group of architects that was celebrated in in the big landmark exhibit with Gehry and Eisenman on deconstructionist architecture. Have some of those aesthetics stayed with you? The emphasis on this multiple perspective, the blurring of inside and outside?

AE: One of the most influential things I learned with Daniel was how buildings and master plans can shape a city and the built environment—the spaces we experience every day. Up to that point I had been more focused on just the building itself. With Daniel it became more about the city. For example, how do the surroundings inform the building? How does it inform the architectural gestures, the circulation patterns, the scale and massing and relationships to the surroundings? How does the building actually sit within the surrounding buildings or a skyline or a flat plane? The whole notion of buildings, city, and urban context I learned, completely transformed my ideas of the transformative potential that architecture embodies. I then started looking at design much more holistically. Buildings are actually a living, breathing part of, and an extension of a city, and vice versa. I started to look at how you can take that inspiration from a city, whether it's a view corridor, whether it's a circulation pattern or surrounding buildings, whatever that is, and how that can start to shape the building.

Daniel's work is very intuitive and sculptural. Instead of talking about pragmatics, even though we did, the design

process was informed by intuitive moves at all scales—both exterior and interior—and how a building can respond to its surroundings in unique, non-traditional, and abstract ways. That intuitive process gave me the confidence to not be afraid to approach a design from different perspectives—pragmatic, intuitive, sculptural. One of his favorite quotes was "why does it have to be 90 degrees, where there are 359 other possibilities." Shaping space is one of the most important things we do as architects.

NR: Thinking about the Denver extension, it's always struck me that it created very unique spaces that were also meant to facilitate a certain engagement with the art. There are kind of the widenings and the closings. There's also like a certain functionality to the interior of the spaces, that are not just simply housing something but are kind of trying to orchestrate a certain form of engagement and activity in them. Libeskind's Jewish Berlin Museum has this in different ways.

AR: Absolutely.

NR: This also shapes our Atheneum.

AE: Both the Denver Art Museum and the Athenaeum have these great unexpected spaces and serendipitous moments that are created when you liberate yourself from the conventional. For the Athenaeum, we started with the idea of creating interesting exterior spaces for learning, performance, events, and everyday campus life that connected back to the campus. We thought of these spaces as the connective tissue between the campus and the new buildings within the Athenaeum.

When we stepped back and thought about the entire new cultural district as a whole, that's when the buildings really started to take shape. It became a collection of buildings, an arts complex with outdoor spaces that connect with rest of the campus. Responding to context is very much integral to the way Morphosis approaches design; on this project, we started thinking of the Athenaeum buildings as creating a campus within a campus. If you have more than one building in a project, you can put as much importance on the spaces between buildings as the buildings themselves. Those spaces became the baseline for how we started to define the Athenaeum.

During the interview for the Athenaeum, I presented an arrow from the campus mall continuing down into the site. This extension, I said, is your biggest asset. We have this great conceptual drawing showing the cultural district in context with the larger parts of the campus, traversed by a network of site flow lines marking circulation paths from pedestrians and cars. The converging pathways organically suggest the best fit for an outdoor arts plaza activated by movement through campus, lined with smaller spaces between the buildings. These spaces create an opportunity for unexpected moments—a sculpture garden, or outdoor performance areas. They can become as full of life as the inside of the buildings will be—where education happens, where creative moments happen.

Here is the influence of working with Daniel, not only in understanding how to connect to cities and campuses, but also the idea of these flow lines and open, active exteriors for studying, events, or hanging out. The ground floor of all the buildings in the Athenaeum are lined with covered outdoor spaces, with these beautiful dancing columns. By the buildings lifting up, you also get a connection between the lobby to the outside. You begin to blur the

Museums and performance halls are what many architects dream of designing.

line between landscape, architecture, and campus, underscored by the gentle undulation of the façade inwards and upward into the building. There is a porosity to the buildings and master plan that creates connections.

NR: Thinking about the master plan required you to envision the campus almost like a miniature city. The drawing that you just mentioned, it could also be just a snapshot of the city. It's just mobility, and where the master plan is no longer about building, but part of an extended community and how they are servicing this community. The porosity of interior and exterior spaces, the flow of light, all help to approach the Atheneum from an almost functional perspective, and to describe it as a place of sharing of knowledge and ideas, less of a kind of guarded and secluded space. Porosity is therefore not only an aesthetic choice but gives a functionality to the building. We have some art objects that can withstand the sun. They will be not just exhibited in the interior, but visible from the outside. Similarly, you will see the choir or orchestra rehearsing from the outside. It's really something about creating a space that facilitates that, but almost without borders of sorts, would you go along with that?

AE: Absolutely. The Atheneum will be the new cultural heart of the campus. Sometimes art and art museums can be imposing or intimidating to people. At UTD, it is first and foremost about the campus, the students, and the faculty, and the museum and learning that should reflect that community. We didn't want the building to be this kind of enclosed, edified box with an imposing door, where you go in and you're not quite sure what's happening. Instead, we had this idea of really challenging that model of museums, and pushing to open everything up, by lifting the building up and creating these welcoming sheltered exterior spaces that can be used for art, poetry readings, or any kind of impromptu performances and/or festivals.

We also want you to be able to see into the building, to be enticed inside by what you might glimpse from the plaza. When you're walking up directly from campus, you have a view of windows into some of the most interesting, active spaces of the buildings. There is also a lightwell located in the center of the Crow galleries. By designing with transparency and light, this creates a strong connection between the art, visitors and passers-by, the campus and larger community. The art is on display.

The basis of the master plan is that the arts district is a place where life happens all the time. They're not static buildings that are just another part of the campus. They're really there to create life and energy and inspire creativity and learning. So, I think that porosity is incredibly important to the design and the kind of ethos of the Athenaeum.

NR: Multiple entry points also facilitate this. It's not that there's only one way to enter through the lobby. The many visible and physical entry points also create diverse perspectives and experiences of the buildings.

Let's turn our attention to the design process itself. Your team approaches the

design process as a very integrative process of solving both aesthetic and functional problems in conversation with the various stakeholders, while staying with the overall building requirement and of course budget. The creative process both emerges from the vision and the constraints. Morphosis has a particular iterative design process. There's no real contradiction between the aesthetic vision and its functionality, because ultimately, it's all problem-solving. Would that be right?

AE: Architecture is functional art; it has to exist in the real world, it has to deal with gravity, with heat, the elements, it has to be safe—the fundamentals. By understanding that you can combine the functional requirements with your creative vision—that's where I think the difference lies between good architects and great architects. It's in not being afraid to confront and accept the constraints, and better yet, actually using the realities as the driver of the design rather than trying to compensate for them. Every architect is given the same kind of bricks and mortar, the same ingredients; it's about how you combine those ingredients to bake that cake. We're all starting out with the same thing, so I think that the ability to be creative, redesign, and not be afraid to make changes is important to the creative process.

I'm interested in working with the larger vision, understanding constraints and needs and to solve all of that creatively in a constant conversation with the client. And you're right, we never stopped designing. I look at the Phase One museum, where originally we had the bar and the main building forms completely separated, with a big skylight bisecting the two completely. In the end, we had to merge the two. We simplified the structure and created this beautiful barrel vault, which then we've continued into the performance hall. These larger moves that initially were instigated by cost cutting, value engineering, actually only work to make the project better. And if they can't, we'll start over and redesign the whole building. We are constantly iterating and exploring to make sure we're really developing the right idea.

We toured several performance halls in Utah, California, and Texas and saw good and not-so-good examples. Ultimately, you need flexible spaces for music education and for multiple types of musical performances. The Bing Hall at Stanford was not that—it was designed for one type of performance, and doesn't necessarily work well for world music or for jazz or rock or anything else, from what we understood. We have been able to apply the lessons learned through that process to design the performance hall to be specific to the UTD music program and their needs. I think we've been able to design a space that is incredibly functional, intimate, and will sound amazing. We're also making sure that wherever you're sitting, you have this intimate connection between you and the performers. By letting the constraints of acoustics, site lines, circulation, and flow drive the design, we've been able to design a functional and beautiful performance hall.

NR: We made some interesting choices because of that, for example, when we reduced the number of seats on the side because of the acoustics. For all of us, it is important to have a beautiful building and its functionality to give everyone a great experience. We have wonderful student performers, and great faculty and other musicians, who will perform in the hall, and we want to give them a stage that makes them sound as good as they can be.

AE: This new building will be your new center of gravity for music on campus—for studying, classes, and performances. This is going to be supporting everything for the

music program. So it has to function and be great on all levels.

NR: To get us there involves, however, an incredible attention to myriad details. Over the last few years, you're probably spending the better part of your time addressing the unique challenges that come with the museum and exhibiting spaces, and now with the performance hall and music program. There's an infinite amount of really small critical details that we have to get right, because otherwise, well, art objects will not be moved through the museum, students will not get to their instruments, etc. Did you anticipate this, or did this take you by surprise that it's just an avalanche? Did you anticipate that it would get so granular in terms of the problems of museums, performance halls, the size of storage for drums and trumpets?

AE: Absolutely. It's the beauty of what we do. I think why I love architecture so much is because you know, when we did the master plan, it was just a big idea—all the details were still to come. We didn't have a lot of connection yet with you, with Jonathan Palant, with Amy Hofland. We were focused on the big ideas and setting the basic parameters—the building sizes and heights, along with these big ideas of porosity and connectivity that would drive the big picture. But the details you refer to are what turns a good idea into reality—they are what make the building come alive and be functional.

I think everyone has been so great to work with, because that's when the designs come to life. Architects work the best with parameters and constraints. We need to know the different functionalities—percussion storage, rehearsal rooms, recording studios, classrooms. The criteria of what the music program requires is what we use as the key design drivers.

Everyone in our office wants to be a part of these projects, so I'm trying to accommodate that. We often share the work with the rest of the office so everyone understands the great cultural work we are doing at UTD. Museums and performance halls are what many architects dream of designing. And right now, we've got both happening right next to each other on the UTD campus, so it's incredibly rewarding and educational. And it's fun and engaging, because we're constantly being challenged by you and your team and by the budget and pragmatics these buildings require. We're constantly collaborating to figure out how to make it better.

I've been doing this for almost thirty years, so I understand the process, but what makes it exciting and challenging is every design is totally new. This museum is different than any other museum that I've done. This performance hall is completely unique. You decided it was important enough to make an entire music building and performance hall, it has education, music, performance, culture. It's gratifying and it's great to work on because your team are collaborative, and there's so much that we don't know and that we learn from you. I find that's the best part of the process, when we have you and Jonathan, provost Musselman, Vice President for Facilities and Economic Development Calvin Jameson, and Amy Hofland and her crew. What's great about you all as a client is that everyone from top to bottom cares, because it's ultimately about education. This project is larger than all of us in a way. I think we all understand that we're building something that's going to take on a life of its own and outlive all of us.

NR: This process has been also, I think, really rewarding for all of us, and has allowed us to take early on a certain degree of ownership in what's to come. There's a strong understanding amongst us that we work here in the service of our students.

This building is for them, therefore we want to get this right.

But really also for me, it's been a great learning process and I truly admire how your team works with constraints—as something that actually has thrusted us forward.

AE: You can't be shackled by the constraints! You've got to just accept those and then take those as challenges to inspire the design.

NR: There are constraints, but then there is also the possibly enabling and accelerating tools of generative AI. Is AI ever going to replace architects?

AE: AI will never replace architecture, because of the kind of engagement with stakeholders, the need for conversation, the collaborative, integrative process of designing. It depends on human involvement. Architecture remains human-centered. Generative AI is only another powerful tool, one that will probably change the industry like CAD software did several decades ago. But Thom Mayne, the founder of Morphosis, embraced digital designing in the 1990s in an enthusiastic, optimistic way that enabled our unique iterative and collaborative design process. We're excited to embrace the opportunities that AI brings with a similar sense of optimism and curiosity.

That said, a robot will never be able to replace a Miles Davis or a John Coltrane. Ever. Because there's a human touch to that kind of art form—I think architecture has this too. There are new tools that we have, but we're using them in a way where we're controlling AI and we can harness it, instead of allowing it to take over. I just don't think any technology will ever be able to take over the architectural creative

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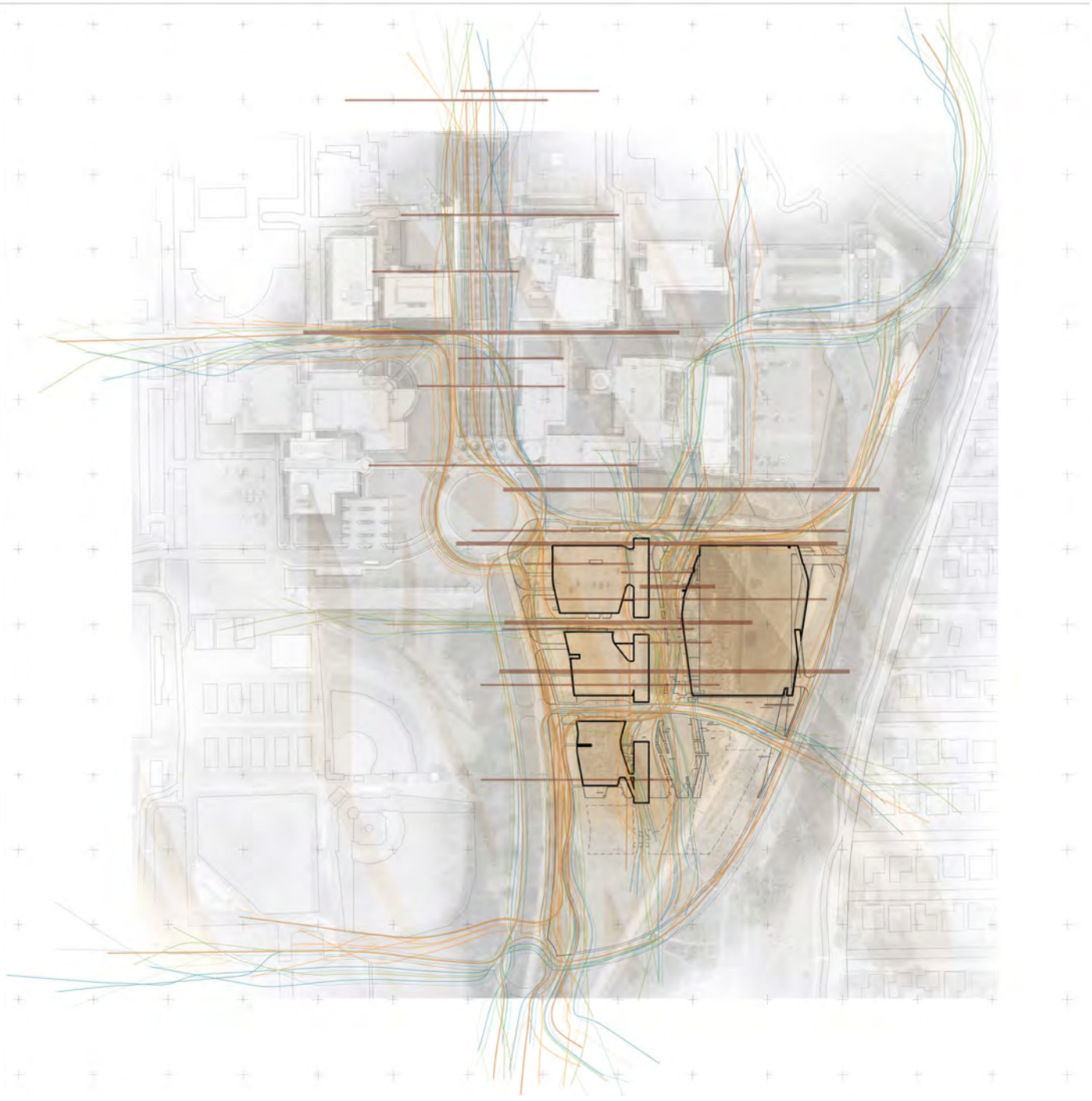
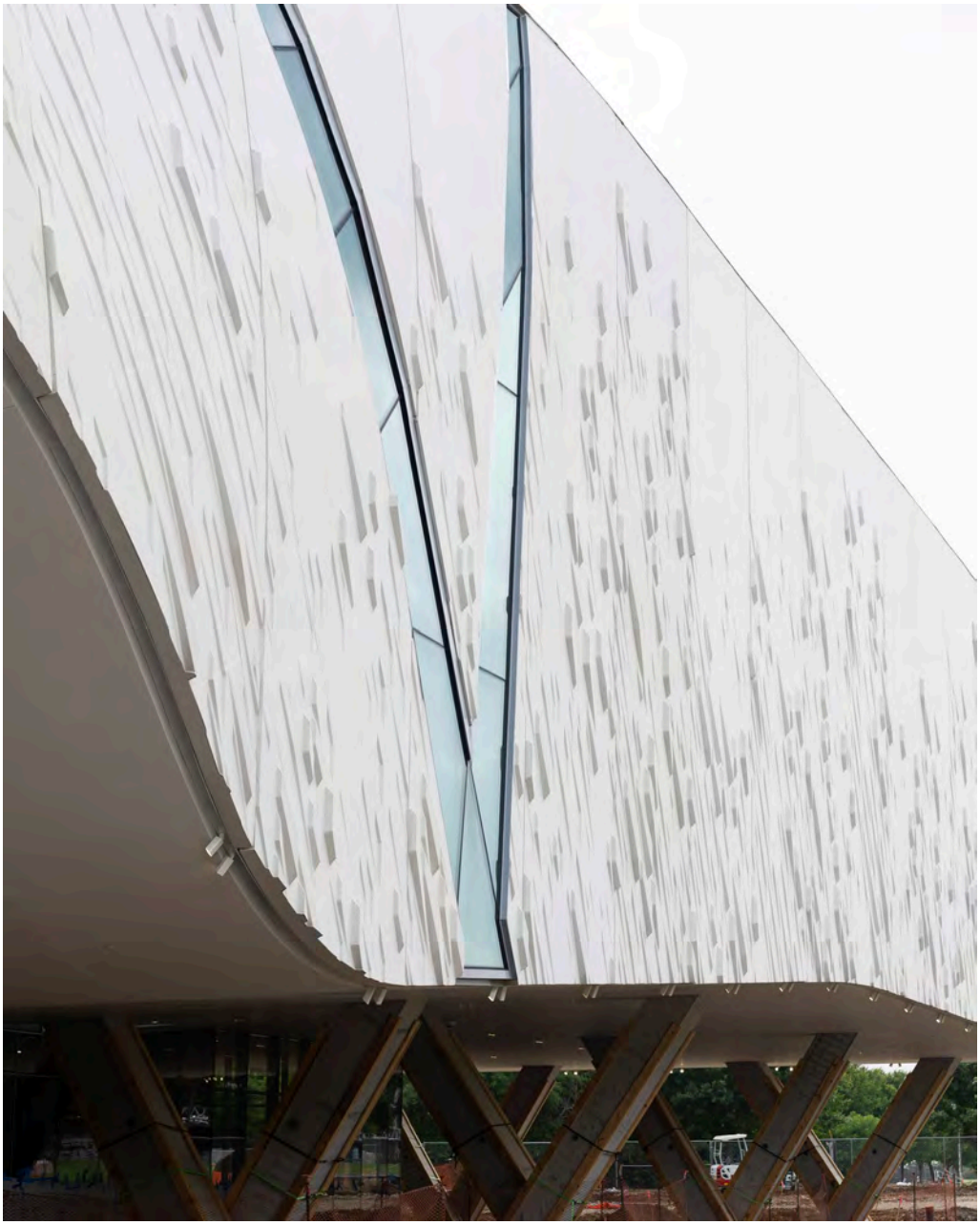
process. It may be able to replicate parts of it, but it's never going to take over fully because there's a certain soul involved. It remains a human-centered process, and that is also where the fun is. What's great for me is working with people like you that make it actually fun, because you like what's happening, and you like the process and you're open to it.

NR: Back in the days in Denver when you were visiting the shopping mall and you saw that man walking around, something really important happened for you. Hopefully these buildings will create a lot of these potential moments for our students—something that captures them and really makes them all of sudden go back and say, I really want to know more about this, and develop their passion. If our Athenaeum buildings will do some of that and create an environment for these formative experiences, then we all should be very happy with the outcome. I think this will be wonderful to watch in the future.

AE: That's a great way to wrap it up. These buildings are here to teach, right? They're here to inspire and teach and influence. What's great is everything that will happen inside these walls, once they're filled with people and life and music and art and culture. To me, that's the most exciting part. If you can inspire even just one person to go on and do something great or new or brave, then we've done our job.



Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, rendering of flow lines. Photo: Morphosis.

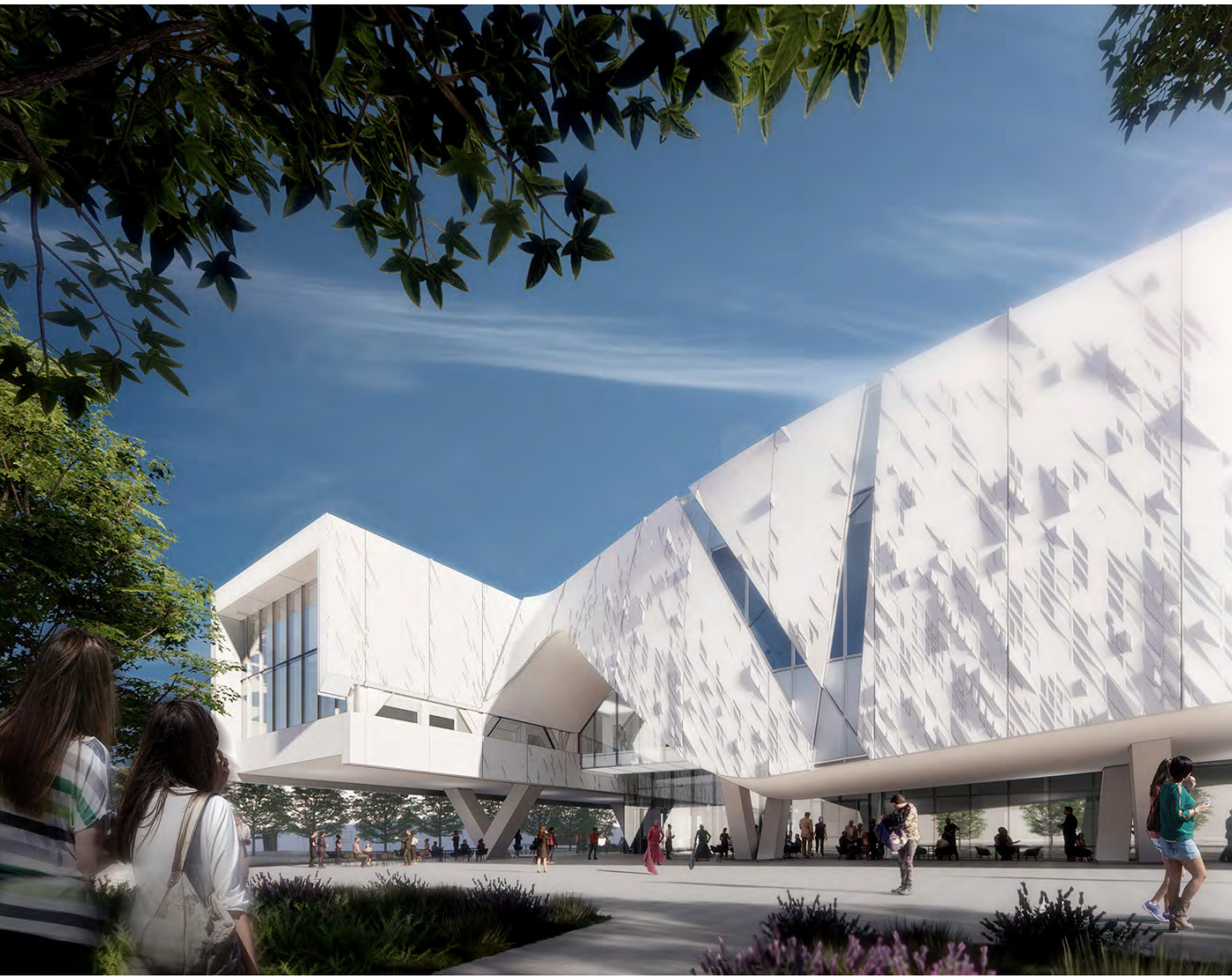


Crow Museum of Asian Art, Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Photo: Kristin Blackmar.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, plaza rendering. Photo: Morphosis.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, model. Photo: Jasmine Park.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, Brettell Reading Room. Photo: Arne Emerson.



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