

Green Museums: The Ruth Lilly Visitors Pavilion at IMA, GRAM, and MCA Denver

by Donna Schumacher



Left: Ruth Lilly Visitors Pavilion. Above: Kendall Buster, *Stratum Pier*, 2010. Concrete, steel, and fiberglass. Both at 100 Acres, IMA.

The Ruth Lilly Visitors Pavilion at the Indianapolis Museum of Art is the most recent in a string of green art museums appearing in cities throughout the Midwest. Designed by Marlon Blackwell Architect, the unassuming structure tucks discretely into the forest canopy of IMA's 100 Acres: the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park—an elegant, subtle, classically Modernist, and LEED-certified structure. (The acronym LEED, which signifies the building industry's third-party certification program for high-performance buildings, stands for Leadership in Energy Efficient Design.)

Once an abandoned gravel pit, 100 Acres is now one of the largest sculpture parks in America, featuring untamed woodlands, wetlands, meadows, and a 35-acre lake. This background sets the stage for a

building and curatorial agenda focused on sustainability. The pavilion answers the “art + nature” call with a minimized footprint and outstretched tentacles of lattice-covered walkways that extend into the forest. The latticework, created in ipe, a very hard and weather-resistant species of wood, allows light and air to filter through the structure, giving it a deceptively open appearance. As the ipe weathers to a silvery gray, the exterior skin of the structure will recede from view, blending into the silver bark of the surrounding trees.

The inaugural works commissioned for the park have much in common with the structure of the pavilion, combining functional sustainability and a delicate presence that appears to alight on the landscape. The meandering deck of Kendall Buster's *Stratum Pier* alludes to a topographical map while following the contours along the edge of the lake. A series of S-curved platforms made from

repeating slats of green recycled plastic appear to hover mysteriously over the water, creating an overlook. *Funky Bones*, by Atelier Van Lieshout, forms a whimsical series of 20 benches laid out on a flat and grassy clearing ideal for picnics. Viewed from above, the arrangement takes the shape of a stylized human skeleton.

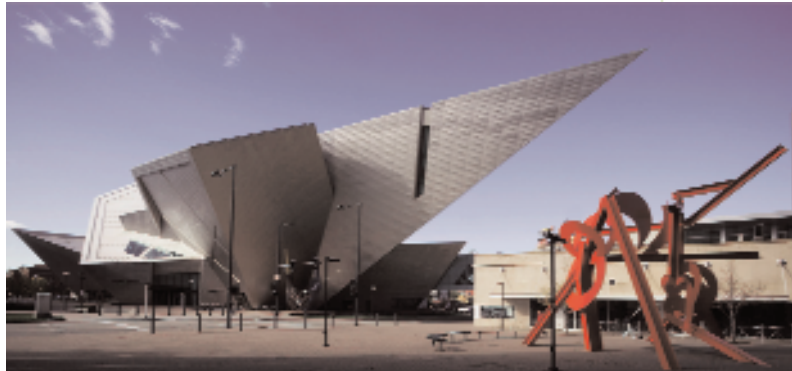
New commissions will be awarded annually, each focusing on and re-examining humanity's relationship with the environment. Mary Miss is creating this year's commission. *FLOW (Can You See the River?)*, a series of stopping points along the river and canal, investigates the watershed and its role in city life. Mirror markers create points of reflection where visitors can gain an understanding of their integral role as part of the waterfront.

Museum boards and benefactors have historically used architecture to promote new ways of thinking. When the Museum of Modern Art in New

York was founded, it became one of the first institutions to champion budding new art and architecture movements. MoMA not only exhibited building designs within its walls, it also, when the time came to construct a permanent structure, chose a Modernist architect and a Modernist design, still one of the icons of the era.

Following this tradition, the award-winning Grand Rapids Art Museum was the first newly constructed fine art museum in the U.S. to try for LEED Gold certification. Principal donor, Peter M. Wege, the owner of Steelcase Inc., a global furniture company headquartered in Grand Rapids, and the chairman of the Wege Foundation, made just three stipulations regarding the new building: it had to be of architectural quality, include an educational area for children, and achieve LEED certification. As a result, GRAM was built to the Gold standard; it received its certification in 2007. In addition, it revitalized a lackluster downtown, an essential aspect of green design.

Since its development, GRAM has become a focal point for local activities. At Maya Lin's *Ecliptic* (2002), the plaza maintains year-round activity by doubling as an ice skating rink in the winter. Small LED lights imbedded into the surface of the concrete re-create the pattern of the stars in the winter sky. Inside the museum auditorium, a summer sky pattern adorns the ceiling, linking inside and out. The museum embraces its function as com-



Above: Grand Rapids Art Museum. Top right: Denver Art Museum. Right: MCA Denver.



munity center during annual New Year's Eve celebrations by opening its doors to citizens gathering for a chilly count-down. The gracious portico cantilevers over the park, creating a grand entrance befitting a public space of this stature.

Inside, the building is organized around a large central hall flanked by curtain-wall windows with expansive views overlooking the plaza. A grand staircase leads up to the galleries, directing visitors toward the daylight filtering through skylight lanterns. Floor-to-ceiling windows create a pleasant sunny interior and permit a great deal of natural light, while three layers of filters (exterior louvers, argon-filled double-pane glass, and fabric scrims) provide insulation and modulate the sunlight. An innovative water collection system reduces demand for city-treated water by recycling rainwater and snow from the adjoining plaza. The use of local materials reduced the need for long-distance shipping. The skylight lanterns located on the top floor admit natural light into the galleries during the day and at

night become beacons on the skyline.

In 1999, the Denver Art Museum chose an architect at the height of the so-called "starchitecture" era of iconic buildings. For a major museum to achieve credibility, it seemed imperative to have grand, easily recognizable features. With jutting angles and difficult gallery spaces, Daniel Libeskind's Denver Art Museum is one such building. When the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver decided to become the first contemporary art museum with LEED certification, it made very different choices. The selection committee commissioned David Adjaye of London. In his first U.S. museum, Adjaye took the word "contemporary" as his cue, providing a means to popularize new design. The forms are simple, with the primary massing gesture of an angled wall jutting out to create civic prominence within a center-city block. The otherwise box-like structure allowed for the easy incorporation of green program elements. Double-thickness perimeter

walls are sheathed on the interior with milky white luminescent panels that glow with natural light. Outside, a gray-tinted glass curtain wall creates a monochromic enclosure of quiet stature. The light-colored, highly reflective concrete floors reduce the need for additional lighting since natural light abounds via the translucent walls. The rooftop terrace is landscaped with a garden that provides insulation and reduces rainwater runoff. In spite of the relatively small size of the museum (27,000 square feet compared to DAM's 146,000), MCA Denver holds its own as an exemplary civic structure; it received its LEED certification in 2008–09.

As the stock market soared and the price of oil reached new heights, so did the scaffolding for the world's tallest building, the soaring Burj Khalifa in Dubai. A modern-day pyramid in terms of engineering and heir to the Chrysler Building as a monument to conspicuous consumption, by the time of its completion, our 21st-century Gilded Age was on the wane. Just as the Great Depression redirected the opulence of Art Deco toward the efficient machine aesthetic of early Modernism, so too might this Great Recession replace ostentation with realism, catapulting the elegant sensibilities of green architecture into the mainstream.