

# Perez Art Museum Puts Miami on the Map

by bill kearney



Museum Director Thom Collins walking through “Image Search: Photography from the Collection,” in the process of being installed at the new Pérez Art Museum Miami.

As you arc over the MacArthur Causeway, you’ll see a stunning billboard for Miami—not the *Scarface* Miami, not the Kardashian Miami, but the Miami of the future, what we could be. The billboard is not a photograph but a new public art museum. It sits, a series of voluminous interconnected boxes seemingly suspended above the ground and shaded by a vast overhanging canopy, in what will be a rolling park gladed with indigenous hardwood hammocks and back-dropped by the new gleaming condo towers of downtown.

Formerly the Miami Art Museum (MAM), and now dubbed the [Pérez Art Museum Miami](#) (PAMM) after a \$40 million donation from real estate developer Jorge Pérez (along with 110 pieces of art from his personal collection), PAMM, at the time of writing, is a cacophony of construction sounds: buffers, drills, vacuums, saws. And though the walls have been sealed and much of the art hung, there is still natural light—Miami light, one of the reasons Bruce Weber shot beautiful people on Deco rooftops here—filling nearly every room. Shadows and

shafts of it from the trellised roof angle through an exhibit space with sight lines directly down Government Cut to the shimmering Atlantic and Gulf Stream. Unexpected for a museum, but not this one—light is part of the message, and with it comes the sense of connection to the world outside. If all goes as planned, PAMM will be a messenger of what a museum can be in the 21st century. And it will undeniably be a building by which this city is judged, a cultural benchmark that says Miami actually has arrived—even though we’ve heard that too many times before.

Prior to 1996, Miami didn’t have a public art museum; the closest was the Center for the Fine Arts, an exhibiting organization that lacked a collection of its own. That year marked a distinct turning point when then-Director Suzanne Delehanty steered the organization toward creating a permanent collection, and the Miami Art Museum was born. But there were problems.



A rendering of the finished building.

“I often refer to the [old MAM] complex as a semiotic and other crime,” jokes current PAMM Director Thom Collins. “It inhibits social gathering.” Additionally, it lacked the space to house, conserve, and present a permanent collection, and had no educational spaces. The resolution of all of these limitations would fuel what became the three-pronged “Program,” or vision, for the PAMM building of today—to grow and house a permanent collection, to educate, and to become a hub, socially and culturally, for a young city at the juncture of two

hemispheres. “Museums have begun to rethink themselves in the social fabric: What is the potential for social catalysis?” Collins says.

By 2004, that potential was not being reached. MAM trustees determined that a new facility was needed, and the city provided the coveted waterfront real estate. Delehanty guided the museum through the bond issue and a county vote, a budget, and a schedule. When it was time to select an architect for the project, the trustees brought in a new museum director, Terence Riley, himself a trained architect and former chief curator of architecture and design at MoMA in New York City.

With the Program in mind, Riley and the trustees considered 75 architects, narrowed the field to 12 finalists, then visited sites globally to make the final cut. Eventually, they chose Herzog & de Meuron, known for—among other things—the “Bird’s Nest” National Stadium in China and the 1111 Lincoln Road building on South Beach. Collins notes that unlike some other big-name architects, there is no signature look to Herzog & de Meuron’s work, and that’s a good thing. “Trying to put art into a building that exists as a sculpture first and as a functional space for presentation second is [problematic],” he says. “That’s not how HDM works, and I feel they’ve done a fantastic job giving us a progressive set of spaces.”



*Hew Locke’s For Those in Peril on the Sea, 2011, on view in the Project Gallery.*

As Riley looks at the building today, he says HDM “absolutely solved the Program.” But there were fits and starts. At one point in the creative process, HDM presented Riley with

several studies, some of which were seven stories high and looked like sculptures. “They said, ‘We were thinking about what would be an iconic image,’” he remembers. Riley himself had grown perturbed by what he calls “millennial hysteria,” which he says pushed museum directors and their architects at the time to “be the 21st century.” “Everybody was striving for the picture that’s going to land on the front pages of the magazine and almost forgetting what a museum is supposed to be like.” Riley’s response to HDM was, “‘Just forget about icons and make it a great museum. If it’s a great building, it will become an icon,’ and actually they were very relieved.” From that point on, PAMM developed a more horizontal stance with blocks connecting to one another. “The beauty of this museum was that it was on this flat, looking out to Government Cut toward the horizon,” says Riley. “Everything was horizontal in my mind, and when you’re talking about moving thousands of people a day through a museum, to go up six stories, elevators, and all those discontinuities... If you have to change floors every 20 minutes, the disconnect between floors is tough to overcome.”

Construction began in January of 2011, and the museum opens by the skin of its teeth this month, just as packs of international art hounds descend on our city for the annual aesthetic bacchanalia known as Art Basel Miami Beach. All told, there are 200,000 square feet of programmable space, both indoors and out—three times the size of the former location. The property is part of Museum Park, which runs from the docking station just north of the American Airlines Arena up to the MacArthur Causeway, and includes the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science. PAMM sits at the northern edge on an 18-foot-high platform plaza—above storm surge levels set by Hurricane Andrew.

As Riley alluded to earlier, the building was designed around its Program and function, as opposed to exterior wow-factor goals. In that sense, it goes against the grain of Miami’s glossy smoke-and-mirrors reputation. In other words, we are not renting this Ferrari. “Every word in that program is in this building in some design manifestation or another,” says Robert Portnoff, project manager with Paratus Group, the firm that guided MAM trustees through the building process, from concept to completion. The on-site architect for HDM, Stefan Hörner, echoes the sentiment: “Terence Riley and Herzog & de Meuron decided to take a more difficult route and figure out what the Program of the museum is and what works for the institution, and not care too much about the exterior looks,” he says, adding that the exterior had to work with shade and the beautiful but intense subtropical environment of Miami.



A crew installing “Americana: Desiring Landscape”

That organic, inside-out design process doesn’t mean a lack of aesthetic inspiration and resplendence. As Collins noted, HDM is known for not having a singular style or method, but rather having an ability to absorb a locale’s ethos. The architects also spent time here via holidays and the 1111 Lincoln Road project. “Jacques [Herzog] had an awareness of the fact that, historically, Florida was a wooden architecture place, an architecture of piers, causeways,” Riley says. The scheme they eventually presented to the trustees “fossilized the characteristics of wood architecture, meaning long, slender plank-like pieces, and made it more monumental. We loved this discussion.”

Stiltsville, Miami’s cherished and preserved wooden houses perched on planks above the tidal flats of Biscayne Bay, has been bandied about as possible inspiration for PAMM, and the architects were intrigued by Stiltsville’s big overhanging roofs and low, blocky bodies on pilings. But another reference, according to Riley, was the magnificent banyan trees of Miami, with their myriad trunks and broad canopies that create a sort of shaded space subtly separate but connected to the land around them.

On-site architect Hörner noted, after seeing rooms finished, that the building is “very rough and very refined at the same time. It’s a building made out of natural products, and you feel it. It’s not trying to hide things behind painted walls. It’s trying to show its guts”—an idea easily conjured while examining a banyan tree.



*Cortinas de Baño* (top), by Oscar Muñoz, 1994.

To understand the interior of this museum, one has to understand PAMM's strategy of curation. As Collins explains it, Immanuel Kant's philosophy of aesthetics, in which the individual has a private reverie with a piece of art, and where formal aesthetics take priority over social context, created 20th-century museums that tended to be closed off and linear, designed to take a viewer through a single storyline of art, "a choo-choo train," as Riley sardonically calls it.

"[This] museum is a hybrid," says Collins. "What you have instead is clusters of different-size spaces that open onto one another in different ways. We can offer linear narratives, and we can also offer thematic clusters that bump up against one another as you move from space to space. What I love is that it insists on a polyvocal approach to storytelling, rather than a single master narrative," something that makes complete sense given Miami's cultural *mélange* and straddling of hemispheres, each layered with indigenous, colonial, and immigrant histories. Massive overview galleries imbued with diffused natural light offer space to tell the larger story of art, while focus galleries, with a single entrance, act as cul-de-sacs to delve into themes, such as modernist Cuban painters influenced by Europe prior to WWII, yet bringing tropical modification to their styles.

A metaphor to the non-linear, polyvocal take on presenting art is the visual openness of the interiors to the outside world. Entire walls of some galleries are windows, creating juxtapositions of art, land, sea, highways, and condos. "This museum insists that the

experience you have of art and other people in the presence of art is inescapably connected to the world outside of the museum and the frame beyond the picture,” says Collins. The designers used six different types of hard-to-achieve exposed-concrete finishes, as well as both concrete and white oak floors, to create subtle mood differences as visitors move from one room to another. “The concrete you see is the most tricky thing that we have to do,” says Hörner. “It’s a kind of living material. You have to build the negative space first to create the actual object, and there’s so many things you can do wrong. Spatially, the building is complex.”



PAMM under construction in anticipation of its December opening.

Though art museums are notoriously not environmentally friendly due to the climate control required for art preservation, it looks like PAMM may achieve gold LEED certification. The single most crucial element in this coup is the large overhanging roof, which shades the entire building and has gaps in the slabs arranged to allow more light on northern exposures, and less light on southern exposures. There’s even a rain-harvesting system used to irrigate plantings around the building.

A startling and beautiful element of the LEED efforts is the green hanging gardens, 70 in all, dropping like 50-foot jungle-covered stalactites from the building’s overhanging roof. Botanist Patrick Blanc worked with HDM to design the columns, then found 77 Florida-friendly plant species that could survive, clinging to the two-layered felt surface of the gardens with roots up to six feet long. An internal irrigation system sprays water on the wick-

like felt. Blanc expects the flowering plants will attract butterflies during the day and moths at night, and says by the second year, birds may come to nest in the gardens, as they're beyond reach of predators. But the gardens aren't merely a pretty face; breeze patterns furl off the bay, into the shade, and through the moist hanging gardens, creating what the designers hope is a microclimate unique to any museum.

As for the actual art, PAMM's collection now numbers 1,300 works. "We have the luxury here of designing and programming a new building. We don't have to figure out how to drag a 19th-century-to-early-20th-century institution into the 21st century. And we're just starting," Collins says.

Though a work in progress, PAMM may hold greatness precisely because we are young, precisely because we are not in the middle of a continent but rather at the confluence of two, and culturally connected to others. The building, with its outside/inside presence, displays art in a manner that isn't tenable in New York or other cities. It is a building that reveals elements of life (earth, water, sky) even as it displays the conjurings of the human mind, our aesthetic attempts to understand our place.

In a way, it's a museum at the right place at the right time. "If we do it properly, it will be the model for a museum practice relevant in other cities in the United States as populations evolve," says Collins. "We're just at the leading edge of that, and I think it's very important."