

New York Times , 5 Dec 2013

Miami Museum's Challenge: The Beach

Visitors who turn off Biscayne Boulevard at the entranceway to the new Pérez Art Museum Miami may wonder for a moment if they are in the right place. The dust-covered road runs past a huge construction site, where a science museum two years from completion is still just a structural skeleton.



The Pérez Art Museum Miami combines views of art, like the Oscar Muñoz installation above, with views outdoors.

Early this week the Pérez itself, less than 24 hours before its grand opening on Wednesday timed to coincide with the enormous art fair and gaudy party known as Art Basel — was swarming with hard-hatted workers, hammering in the final boards of the rooftop terrace and planting trees and bushes. The museum is a pioneer in what was once envisioned as a 20-acre park that would revitalize this city's downtown, a plan that fell victim to a faltering economy and budget shortfalls.

Miami still expects to build a bay walk and promenade, and to clear away contaminated soil from the site's abandoned and dilapidated park. But for now, the museum — which was renamed in 2011 after the developer Jorge M. Pérez donated \$40 million in cash and art — is

a lonely outpost. It will have to attract visitors on its own, circumstances that require it to serve as a gathering place as much as a destination for art lovers.

“In a city like Miami, a museum can be a kind of cultural and social hub, quite apart from its function as an exhibition space and an educational space,” the institution’s director, Thomas Collins, said.

The spectacular design, a striking marriage of nature and culture, certainly earned wide-eyed praise during early previews. The prizewinning Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, of [Herzog & de Meuron](#), are longtime museum designers (the Tate Modern in London, the de Young Museum in San Francisco and the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y.). Here, the challenge was to construct a building for an institution without a large collection and to design a museum that could compete with the beach for visitors’ time and attention.

“It doesn’t make sense to have a decorated box,” Mr. Herzog said as he walked through the museum. Behind him, workers were affixing donors’ names to the wall. Water, sun and vegetation define the city, Mr. Herzog noted, and “the building should respond to all these things.”

Two galleries with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Biscayne Bay are the most prominent example of that concept, and mark just how different the Pérez is from other museums, where views of the outside world and the art are rarely combined. (An extended slatted canopy prevents direct sunlight from shining on the art.)

The transparency and openness are appropriate for a city whose most famous art collections are private, Mr. Collins said. Where else, he asked, can you see into the exhibition from the outside?

The institution’s civic mission is one reason that the decision to change its name from the Miami Art Museum to the Pérez Art Museum Miami was so controversial. Four board members resigned and the museum, built on city land and partly financed by \$100 million in bonds, was pelted with protests. Even so, Mr. Pérez’s gift of 110 artworks provided the museum with some of its most important acquisitions of Latin American artists, including works by Diego Rivera, Beatriz González, and Wifredo Lam. He has also promised, over time, to give the museum his entire collection.

The building, constructed on stilts to protect against flooding, will eventually be enveloped in greenery; lush circular columns of plants — each weighing around two tons — cascade from the roof. Patrick Blanc, a botanist who helped design the multileveled gardens, said he experimented with species for years to see which would thrive in the subtropical heat and hurricanes. The gardens comprise 80 kinds of plants, said Mr. Blanc, who dyed his hair green for the museum’s opening.

Christine Binswanger, the project architect, said the vegetation was meant to provide a transition as people enter from the outdoors.

For Ms. Binswanger, the most radical design element is the wide series of steps that serve both as stadium seating and as a staircase to the second level. Thick acoustic curtains can be drawn to change the size of what could be a theater, auditorium, social center or walkway.

The ability to reconfigure space is essential in a museum that still doesn't know what the bulk of its permanent collection might ultimately look like. Right now it has 1,800 works and focuses on art from the 1930s to the present, with a special emphasis on art of the Americas and the region. The collection and architecture are keenly attuned to Miami's demographics, Mr. Collins said, explaining that there is no "master narrative" in a city of immigrants.

Its inaugural exhibitions include art from South and North America and the Caribbean, including Cuba. The Pérez has also mounted something of a blockbuster show, "Ai Weiwei: According to What?" This retrospective of the acclaimed Chinese artist and activist opened at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington last year. (Mr. Ai worked with Herzog & de Meuron in designing the Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics.)

Whether the building's cutting-edge design features end up competing with what museum officials admit is a rudimentary collection remains to be seen.

Mr. Herzog said his aim was to create a good building, not to outshine the art. The idea, he added, was that it would be "inviting for artists and collectors to produce and donate art."

"The museum and the collection will grow together," he said.