

Project Watch

University of Iowa Opens Doors to Guitar-Shaped Art Building



by Russell Boniface
Associate Editor

Steven Holl Architects designed the three-story School of Art and Art History building to appear light, sculptural, angular and curved, and airy using an architectural palette of:

- Vast glass walls to create light-filled spaces
- A translucent, cantilevered two-story wing straddling a pond that generates a “floating” appearance; this wing symbolizes the neck of Picasso’s Guitar
- A rounded façade, derivative of the body of the Guitar
- Copper steel cladding that harmonizes with the original art building, which parallels the new structure
- Terraces on each floor with views of the pond, bluff, and original art school
- Exterior steel planes coupled with

roof planes of concrete planks

- Spatial integration of the building with the pond and visual connection to the limestone bluff
- Visual bridging of the landscape between the new and old art building.

Social openness, unity reflected in design

With Picasso’s 1912 Guitar sculpture serving as the basis of an “open edges and center” design, the building uses geometric patterns such as angles, edges, and curves to create an exterior of indeterminate boundaries and an interior of formless, dynamic spaces that underscores socializing and unity.

Campus traffic is drawn into the building at multiple points. Inside, open spaces and horizontal passageways promote gathering. The structure’s interior openness is spotlighted by a towering central atrium that fea-

tures the dominant visual element, a suspended stair of copper-folded steel plates that spirals up to the levels above. This atrium celebrates the school’s concept of seamlessly uniting art, history, and studio practice, perpetuating the “Iowa Idea” first embodied in the original art building.

Glass walls line the building’s interior passages, revealing works in progress within studio classrooms and underscoring openness. Large windows line the entire north wall of the building to create light-filled spaces throughout the interior. Unity is evident in the layout of open areas adjacent to gallery spaces, classrooms, and studios, such as an exhibit gallery adjacent to the atrium and a second-floor, 225-seat classroom that connects to a media theater for art and technology. Painting and design studios on the third floor repeat the studio skylights of the 1936 building, while design

DESIGN



studios skylights are diffused by the folded roof planes to provide new expression to prototypical artist-studio skylights. In warm weather, studios will open up to exterior balconies.

A digital printing and editing center for photography occupies the top floor of the cantilever, above the first-floor library. This elevated wing provides views of the bluff and landscape. Natural finishes and exposed materials, such as concrete floors and ceilings, give a material character throughout the building. An indoor/outdoor café is right on the pond. Faculty offices, a theater, and meeting rooms round out the interior.

Open landscape creates gathering spaces

Outside the campus, open spaces with a terrace surround the pond to provide gathering areas for students and faculty. The pond itself has been expanded for gathering. By putting the new building close to the old structure, Holl's design visually contextualizes the school's present and past, in particular its honoring of the 70-

year-old tradition of outdoor drawing classes under the nearby limestone bluff. A public route follows the contour edge of the pond and extends up into the building's central atrium.

"Steven Holl surpassed our hopes and expectations for the building in every way," says Dorothy Johnson, director of the School of Art and Art History. "Walking into the new building is like walking around inside a work of art—it is truly an aesthetic experience."

Reference:

Did you know . . .

- > Early visitors to Pablo Picasso's studio were bewildered by his Guitar sculpture and asked "What is that? Does that rest on a pedestal? Does that hang on the wall? Is it a painting or sculpture?" Picasso responded, "It's nothing, it's *'la guitare!'*"
- > André Salmon, French poet, art critic and writer, was a defender of cubism and heralded Picasso's Guitar—with its center open to space—as a new direction for art because it transcended categorization of any kind, e.g., movements, types, and genres: "We are freed from painting and sculpture, liberated from the idiotic tyranny of genres. It is no longer this or that. It is nothing. It's *el guitare.*"