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The New OCMA: A Placemaking Museum

Rick Meghiddo · Tuesday, October 11th, 2022

The opening of the new Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) is good news for architecture, art, and especially for community life. The museum has a poetic edge without being overwhelming; the space has flow and transparency, and artworks can be seen with good lighting and without distractions. More than a museum, it is an educational facility that stimulates social interaction.

Orange County has grown from a semi-rural farming area to an urban development that includes the South Coast Plaza shopping center and the John Wayne Airport in seventy years. It has a balanced ethnic mix, with 66% of its population under 45.

OCMA\'s pivotal location is relevant to generating a cascade of public spaces. The 53,000-square-foot new museum completes a cultural campus that includes the Segerstrom Center for the Arts, the South Coast Repertory Theater, the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, and the Samueli Theater. Richard Serra\'s 64-foot tall sculpture, \"Connector,\" defines a clear point of reference.

OCMA\'s project\'s architect, Pritzker Price winner Thom Mayne, known for his \"muscular architecture,\" confronted the 73,000 square-foot site sensibly to its surroundings. He has produced here a more lyrical and well-balanced project. Brandon Welling was the Partner-in-Charge. The building\'s primary structure is composed of structural steel and concrete.

A sculptural wing hovers over the lobby atrium. It is an inspiring, artful, and dynamic architectural space of curved walls covered with white terracotta tiles. A full-height irregular window overlooks the large terrace. Within the building, fluidity is stimulated by transparency. The relationship between indoors and outdoors is graceful at the terrace\'s level.

The building\'s entrance faces the piazza where Serra\'s sculpture sits. The eastern elevation, facing Avenue of the Arts, has a street-lever curtain wall that shows artworks in conversation with the street. The other two sides (west and north elevations) are introverted. This design approach works particularly well in the rear, where the building\'s identification is defined only by the OCMA sign. By doing so, the new building pays respect to Cesar Pelli\'s Plaza Tower, the Samueli Theater, Peter Walker\'s landscape design, and Aiko Miyawaki\'s Utsurchi G1 sculpture.

The museum\'s director, Heidi Zuckerman, started her new position at OCMA with an admirable job. In this exhibition, she was seconded by Courtenay Finn as the Chief Curator and a team of curators that helped assemble the various in-tandem shows. These include:

1. \"13 Women\" pays homage to the 13 women who founded the Balboa Pavilion Gallery, the earliest iteration of OCMA, which opened sixty years ago.
2. The \"California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold\" exhibits sixty works of art, including ceramics, painting, sculpture, textiles, video, and large-scale installations. Some of these have been commissioned for this exhibition.
3. Fred Eversley, a former consulting engineer for NASA, brings samples of his work at the mezzanine, which spans forty years of practice as an artist.

At the terrace, Sanford Biggers\' 24-foot wide by 16-foot-tall outdoor sculpture is a two-dimensional stage with an allegoric reclining black male figure that combines an archetype reclining male figure with non-Western culture symbolisms.

Director Zuckerman\'s statement clearly defines OCMA\'s direction: \"Our mission here is to

enrich people\’s lives in a diverse and fast-changing community. We carry out this work with the conviction that access to art is a basic human right. And we want to provide that access in such a way that everyone feels welcome and at home.\”

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