



During the day, the lanterns atop the Beck Building capture light for the galleries. In the evening, they glow.



Donor wall in Beck's atrium, displaying names of major contributors to the museum's construction.

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Mies' mediation. It is a genial way of firmly associating the building with its predecessors without having to make any stylistic concessions.

Moneo relied on the only option possible when confronted with Mies' transparent strategy. He is, after all, a hard-core structuralist who sees the world in binary terms — an example of which can be found in the title of the course he currently teaches at Harvard University on design theory, "Solidity versus Fluidity." The structural relation with Mies is further reinforced when one realizes that the stone and pattern used in the Beck Building — Indiana limestone — repeats the only opaque surface of the Brown Pavilion, its stone base. The Beck's lapidary opacity is subsequently overcome with occasional sectional cuts that reveal the offices of the museum's curators, thereby highlighting their presence and presumably the power they hold. The building's opacity is also made pervious to light through oblique penetrations in the form of various configurations of skylights. Even the large sign near the Main Street entrance, the sign that announces the institution's name, is made as opaque as typographi-

cally possible, with barely a few slits separating fat and compact letters. An earlier version of this sign, which proposed that the letters be made of both stone and glass stacked alternately, was even more explicit about the opacity versus transparency notion. Moneo also introduces a nocturnal dimension to his building by having it transform at night into a gigantic pedestal carrying a collection of illuminated, prism-like lanterns, just as Mies had succeeded in transforming Cullinan Hall into a giant vitrine.

As a deliberate counter-strategy to Mies' openness, Moneo's Beck is closed onto a complex interiority organized around a three-story atrium. A monumental stair and escalator lead to the upper galleries, in which one can find only two locations where it is possible to see out. One window frames Houston's downtown — the emblem of the city whose treasury this museum after all is — while the second overlooks Watkin's original building. The choice not to look back at Mies seems deliberate, for if the Brown Pavilion stands as the masterpiece with which any architect is inevitably forced to compete, the Beck Building seems to relate far more directly to

Watkin's wing. It is as if a complicity exists between Moneo's building and the original museum in order to somehow gang up on Mies. The Beck's upper galleries, which will undoubtedly be considered the building's *pièces maitresses*, in fact replicate the section of Watkin's original sculpture hall: blank walls up to a cornice line topped with a vaulted ceiling interrupted by skylights lined with light fixtures. Such a 19th-century museum section — an early version of which can be found in Munich's Alte Pinakothek of 1836 — ultimately facilitates the conservatism of curators, who can now go back to hanging paintings on walls rather than having to suspend them from ceilings.

At a time when transparency is back in vogue, be it in the form of state-sponsored French architecture or in the Museum of Modern Art's 1995 exhibition on the subject, Moneo's choice of the ambiguously opaque cannot pass unnoticed. Arguments against modernist transparency have, after all, been made by architects of Moneo's inclination. One should not, however, limit the Beck Building to a postmodern versus modern perspective. Moneo's Beck looks the way it does not only in pursuit of a perfect alignment with its Museum of Fine Arts, Houston predecessors, but also in terms of a preference to conceal, rather than reveal, the museum's collection. Moneo's 19th-century inspired galleries may be the inevitable outcome of conservative curatorial imperatives, but his opaque elevations, unlike Mies' transparent ones, resurrect a museum's ancestral and mausoleum-like dimensions. The hidden, after all, tends to fascinate, and fascination is a museum's undeclared primary objective. Moneo's opacity works in much the same way Poppea used her veil: his walls conceal the collection's presumed beauty only to make it more desirable. ■

1. Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury, editors, *Monolithic Architecture* (Munich: Prestel, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. Rafael Moneo, "The Audrey Jones Beck Building," Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1999.

4. One of the more memorable uses of Cullinan Hall was the MFAH's 1965 show "The Heroic Years: Paris 1908-1914," in which the paintings were suspended on wires, and appeared to float in the air. See Lynn M. Herbert's "Seeing was Believing: Installations of Jermaine MacAgy and James Johnson Sweeney" in *Cite* 40.

5. Celeste Marie Adams, *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: An Architectural History, 1924-1986* (Houston: MFAH, 1992), p. 62.

6. Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 17.

A TALK WITH RAFAEL MONEO



THE BECK'S ARCHITECT FINDS IN HOUSTON A PLANE TRUTH

By Carlos Jiménez

In the years since he was chosen to design the Audrey Jones Beck Building, Rafael Moneo's profile in America has risen considerably, thanks in part to his winning the Pritzker Prize in 1996, and also to his selection that same year as the architect for the Cathedral of Los Angeles. Moneo is known not only for his buildings, but also for his academic profile; he has been a professor at Barcelona's School of Architecture, and from 1985 to 1990 was chairman of the architecture department at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where he still teaches. In March, Carlos Jiménez met with Moneo while he was in town for the opening of the Beck to discuss his current and future projects, his thoughts on Houston, and his ideas about architecture. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Cite: Congratulations on the completion of the Beck Building. During the more than eight years you've been working on this project, you visited Houston numerous times. Although your stays have often

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is so complete and overpowering,” says Moneo,

“that it gives one the sensation that there are no limits to the city.”

been brief, you have no doubt accumulated many impressions of the city. What are the most singular ones?

Moneo: The most striking image that I preserve is the city’s horizontal planarity. Its almost infinite quality is truly extraordinary, a horizontal presence so complete and overpowering that it gives one the sensation that there are no limits to the city. Here one becomes fully aware of the horizontal plane’s undeniable force. What is equally striking is to see this plane covered by another plane: the mantle of live oaks. This mantle gives the discordant city an element of continuity, of cohesion, transforming Houston’s multiple grids into a very special place. Cities such as Houston, developed primarily with the automobile in mind, unleash the horizontal grid infinitum. The grid in Houston operates almost autonomously, contrary to, say, Los Angeles, where one sees the city’s topography and landscape intertwined with the urban grid.

Cite: What can you say in general about Houston’s architecture?

Moneo: Well, let us talk for instance of Houston’s downtown, in my opinion one of the most pristine and beautiful in the United States, precisely because it enjoys the condition of being so new. In Boston, a city with which I am more familiar, the downtown suffers from having to always support the prevalence of an older city, which diminishes the potential for the skyscraper to develop its full energy. In Houston, one senses that in its lack of historical obligation, the city is always enunciating that the best is yet to come. This feeling that the past does not press over the city we have to ultimately understand as a positive thing, certainly one that in the case of Houston helps maintain a vital optimism.

Cite: The Beck is only the second building that you have completed in the United States. Do you have other works underway in the U.S.?

Moneo: Actually, I’m involved in a few. Under construction is the residence for the Spanish ambassador in Washington, D.C., a project I have been working on since 1990. Although it is not a complex facility, the building’s program calls for a multitude of rooms, among them reception rooms, apartments for high dignitaries, and, of course, the house for the ambas-

sador. Due to the site’s strong sloping section, the design creates a series of interrelated level changes between the various programmatic elements as they move from the site’s crest toward the property’s frontage on the Potomac River. The result is a series of platforms, terraces intertwined with gardens. I would like to imagine that when finished, the embassy’s gardens will elicit echoes of certain Andalusian gardens.

I am also working on a project at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, which has not yet begun construction. The interesting thing about this project is that it is in strict continuity with a museum that Eliel Saarinen built at Cranbrook. Our building literally extends the legacy of Saarinen’s building. It is a challenging project when having to deal with such an illustrious neighbor as Saarinen, an architect for whom I have always had great admiration and respect.

Lastly, we are doing a very small, yet most satisfying work, an extension to the house of a Harvard professor, located on a beautiful parcel of land in Belmont, not far from Cambridge. As with the Spanish embassy, the site is a steep section with a waterway at its end, in this case a creek. We are practically duplicating the square footage of the original 1950s house, thus creating two houses. The new house boldly ventures into the wooded site, creating the feeling of being inside the forest.

Cite: It’s interesting that you have not yet mentioned the Cathedral of Los Angeles, your largest commission to date in America. What is that project’s status?

Moneo: The Cathedral surely has given me the most headaches. We have now completed all of the foundation work, and soon we will see the walls emerge and render the building’s profile. I anxiously await the unfolding of this project, for its importance to the city of Los Angeles, for its public character, and for the immense challenge of having to answer what constitutes a sacred space today. Really, it is the project that keeps me in full alert. I am constantly conscious of the importance of this project to its community.

Cite: Following on a similar scale of public works, you recently mentioned a market you have been designing in Beirut. Is this an ongoing project?

Moneo: Sadly, the circumstances for this

project have not been the most favorable. Even though Lebanon is making every effort to reconstruct its brutalized urban conditions, the economic realities are still very difficult. I have confidence, though, that the project will proceed, as it is a most crucial work for Beirut. This city has been fundamentally a market, and it is precisely in the market where encounters between diverse peoples occur. Undoubtedly, this type of space will contribute to mending, to healing, the city’s broken and interrupted social life.

Cite: Last year you were chosen to design an addition to Madrid’s legendary Prado Museum. When visiting the city last year, I found you mired in the politics that such projects inevitably engender. I admired then your patience in dealing with the controversies this project has unleashed. What have been some of the most recent developments?

Moneo: The Prado Museum addition has given us as many headaches as the Cathedral for Los Angeles. Both projects were won in rigorous competitions, a fact that would seem to guarantee a degree of settlement through the jury’s selection. But the truth is that once the project is presented to the public, disagreeing voices multiply, some from curators dissatisfied with the museum’s new agenda, others from museum neighbors worried by the arrival of a new density at the front of their doors, and others from colleagues who are not in agreement with the aesthetic direction that the project has taken. These are inevitable consequences any time anyone has to work with such an iconic public institution. When working on a building such as the Prado, there is a need to continually explain or acknowledge the multitude of suggestions. That is not an entirely negative situation, nor does it bother me. I simply accept this ongoing dialogue. I know that the presence of diverse opinions will eventually enrich the project. The project does not suffer, it simply follows its evolution, gradually becoming more reconciled with its objectives. To speak of the architecture for the Prado Museum addition as a reconciliation, I consider a virtue.

Cite: What are your thoughts on the changing condition of time in architecture, more specifically, the diminishing amount of time given to design, development, or construction of a work?

Moneo: We are going through a period dominated by the impression that everything is in continual change, that everything is in perpetual motion. In any effort we undertake, we want to see fast and immediate results. Therefore, time is converted into a highly pressured commodity, one in which architecture is pushed to reduce the margins between the beginning of an idea and its eventual execution. This sensation of moving faster might suggest that reality can be as fortuitous as images rambling across a computer screen. It leads to the thinking that architecture must somehow be imbued with this immediateness, or that it might be produced with the same speed at which images appear and disappear in front of our eyes. But the act of construction continues to demand enormous time and vigilance. The great effort and cost that it takes to build leads one to view the design process as a slow and reflective practice.

Cite: What are your thoughts regarding the architect’s role in the ever changing society you make reference to?

Moneo: Although society’s perception and relationship toward the spaces that it uses has dramatically changed in the last few years, I believe that we still require someone who can be responsible, who can structure and give form to that which is built. Naturally, today the occupation of architect does not imply the same contact with a supreme technical knowledge that might have been expected of a medieval architect. Most likely an architect in the Middle Ages was the most capable person to deliver the orders that would make a construction possible. Today an architect is certainly aware of the key elements of a construction, but he or she is not in full dominion of all of the technical imperatives. Nonetheless, the ultimate definition of the role of the architect still centers around the notion that the architect must assume responsibility for what is built. In my opinion, this responsibility should demand the following: the study of contemporary formal problems, the ability to build within a variety of urban mediums, the knowledge of new programs, a keen knowledge of technical issues, and, lastly, a deep investment in the world of culture while grasping the pregnancy of a moment. All of these things are essential in the making of an architect, and all of these things comprise the reasons why we can still talk about the indispensable role that the architect continues to play in our society. ■