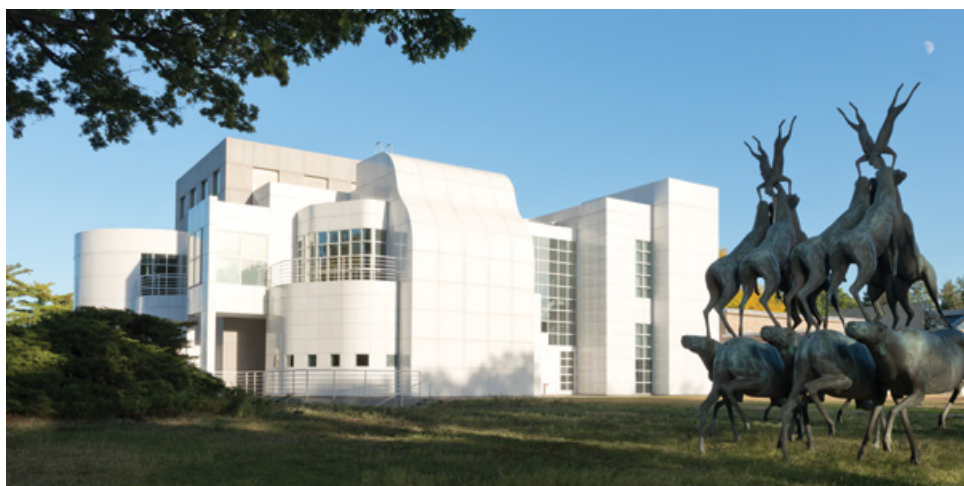




Architecture Guide



Architectural History

In addition to its noteworthy art collection, the Des Moines Art Center boasts a world-class collection of architecture.

Since its humble beginnings in the early part of the 20th century, the Art Center has developed into an internationally recognized institution. Beginning as the Des Moines Association of Fine Arts, it operated out of the turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts-style Main Library building on the banks of the Des Moines River in downtown Des Moines beginning in 1916. A new museum became possible with a bequest from James D. Edmundson. At the time of his death in 1933, a trust worth more than half a million dollars was established with the stipulation that the money be held for 10 years in the hope that the assets would recover from the Depression. They did, and in 1943, leading citizens of Des Moines finalized plans for a modern museum of art.

The public buildings that house the Art Center collections and programs today were designed by

three of the most significant architects of the 20th century and reflect a dedication of the institution throughout its history to world-class architectural design. Each of the architects was hired at a pivotal point in his career with work just coming to the attention of the public.

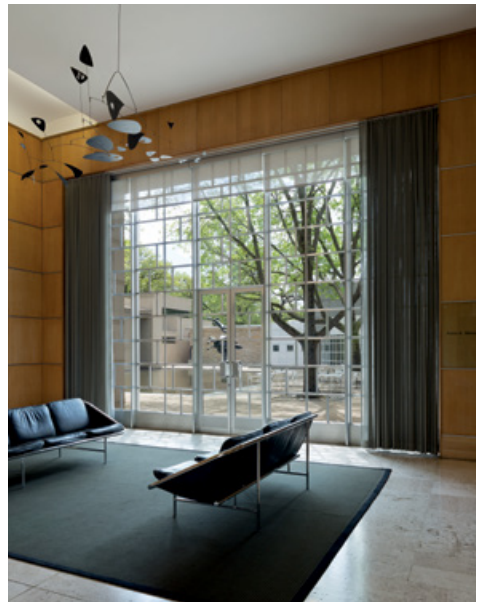
The original 1948 building was the work of the Finnish-American, Eliel Saarinen, who helped introduce modern architecture into the United States and had, only a few years before his Art Center commission, won a major national competition for a proposed Smithsonian Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The second Art Center architect, the Chinese-American I. M. Pei, also won a highly competitive commission in Washington with his design for the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, just as his 1968 addition to the Art Center was finished. Completed in 1985, the third building by Richard Meier stands in sharp contrast to both the horizontality of Saarinen and the humility of Pei. Two of the architects for the Art Center were early winners of the most prestigious international award for architects, the Pritzker Prize, established in 1979: Pei, who won in 1983, and Meier, in 1984.

The courtyard surrounding the Maytag Reflecting Pool features the point where the three buildings meet—I. M. Pei's brutalist concrete and glass edifice on the left; Eliel Saarien's low, flat Lannon stone building in the center; and Richard Meier's signature white porcelain-covered metal panel building housing the café on the right. Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines





The Eliel Saarinen main museum entrance.
Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines



View from the Saarinen lobby to the courtyard.
Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines

Eliel Saarinen building 1948

Some of the most influential architectural proposals in American history have been for buildings that were never realized. One such proposal is Eliel Saarinen's 1939 winning competition entry for the Smithsonian Gallery of Art—never constructed due to Congressional failure to fund the project. Drawings of his proposal were shown in Des Moines in that same year, and this exhibition led directly to his Art Center commission. The Des Moines Art Center is the clear offspring of Saarinen's groundbreaking Smithsonian proposal in that both emphasize a harmonious relationship to their site. In addition, both designs feature low stone masses that hug the ground, with a courtyard focusing on a reflecting pool (including a proposed sculpture by Carl Milles) and beyond to open space. Saarinen's insistence on the connection of his architecture to its surroundings was furthered in both designs by the view afforded from the courtyard: to the National Mall in the case of the Smithsonian and to Greenwood Park in the case of the Des Moines Art Center.

Saarinen's building utilizes a warm limestone cladding quarried in Wisconsin known as Lannon stone. The stone is rough-cut and laid in a random

pattern for the exterior walls, with an elongation and refinement of the stone at the moment where the walls meet the sky or where visitors enter the building. Along the public front the building is quite solid, pierced by the transparent entry's walls and canopy which sweep outwards to welcome visitors. The mass of the building snakes across the site enclosing a dramatic courtyard which, before 1968, opened southward to the rose garden over a tranquil reflecting pool.

Saarinen's vision for the facility always balanced the physical prominence of the site with the cultural status of the building, protecting the integrity of each. Upon its completion in 1948, it represented innovation in American museum design as well as a new type of institution—a blend of museum and education center—an art center.

I. M. Pei building 1968

When the trustees of the Des Moines Art Center selected I. M. Pei to design an addition to the building in 1966, their choice was one of deference to the architectural integrity of Saarinen's building. The assignment from the trustees was daunting: to provide space for the display of monumental sculpture, with gallery heights as much as twice those of the existing building. In addition, there





I.M. Pei building with a view to Greenwood Park. Photo: Paul Crosby

was need for a larger auditorium to serve an increasing audience. These demands risked a new building which would tower over the Saarinen, creating an aesthetic conflict between the low natural masses of the original building and the more severe forms for which Pei was becoming famous.

To resolve this conflict, Pei utilized the topography of the site, which slopes down southward from Saarinen's open courtyard. By nestling the large volumes of his building against this slope, he could match the height of his building to that of the Saarinen galleries and close the courtyard with a glazed sculptural facade and a new reflecting pool. Only the largely transparent butterfly roof of his new gallery would soar above this height.

The materials of the new building would simultaneously challenge and accept Saarinen's material palette. Saarinen's natural stone cladding would be juxtaposed against the concrete walls of Pei's design. The new walls, however, would be bush-hammered, roughening the crystalline concrete volumes and, also, revealing the larger

Lannon stone aggregate within the concrete, thus giving the new walls a visual connection to the older cut-stone walls.

The dominant effect of the completed building is largely interior, a play of solid and void, enclosure and release, lightness and mass. The newly enclosed courtyard is simultaneously a harmonious volume and a juxtaposition of the solidity of the Saarinen building and the sculptural playfulness of the Pei. Entering the soaring upper gallery from narrow halls on east and west, the visitor is offered a breathtaking spatial experience. The concrete "wings" of the butterfly roof hover overhead, opening to admit abundant natural light which cascades over the roughened concrete walls. Across the expanse of the upper gallery, the lower gallery opens downward and outward to views of the Greenwood Park Rose Garden. This eloquent and masterful building, completed in 1968, profoundly enhanced the Art Center while respecting the material palette and scale of the original Saarinen. Upon its completion, the addition was almost invisible from Grand Avenue. The Pei building extended the institution's reputation for commissioning only the most talented contemporary architects, working at the top of their game.

The concrete "wings" of the butterfly roof in the Pei sculpture court. Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines



Richard Meier building exterior above and interior atrium right. Photos: Rich Sanders, Des Moines

Richard Meier building 1985

As the permanent collections of the Art Center grew and began to include very large-scaled contemporary works, the need for exhibition space especially suited to these works became clear.

In 1982, five internationally prominent architects were invited to a competition to design the next building for the Art Center. In addition to providing more space, the members of the building committee saw this project as an opportunity to reposition the relationship between the institution and the community. Richard Meier's winning approach would increase the visibility of the museum in parallel with its increasing cultural visibility.

Meier's building is an extroverted sculptural form against the backdrop of both the existing building and the natural site. The porcelain-coated metal panels defy the elements, and the sensuous massing contradicts the long-held belief that museum and gallery design should be subservient to the art housed within. The Meier building is both more complex and pragmatic than it may at first appear. It is composed of three parts: an iconic pavilion pushed out to Grand Avenue with permanent collections and temporary exhibition galleries, a courtyard restaurant, and a service



Richard Meier café overlooks the reflecting pool.

area on the west. This division allows for seamless functioning of the facility and keeps the scale of these parts in balance with the earlier buildings. In addition, the courtyard restaurant creates a fascinating conversation between the work of three architectural masters. The Meier is the foil to Saarinen and Pei, setting up a tension between architecture as background or foreground, gallery as neutral or dynamic, building and site in harmony or in contrary juxtaposition. In their totality, the buildings of the Des Moines Art Center create an experience that is unmatched.

TIM HICKMAN





The Art Center's distinctive architecture features many unexpected details. During your visit, take time to locate each of these distinctive views.

Photos by Steve Hall © Hedrich Blessing

ON THE COVER

Eliel Saarinen building / Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines

I. M. Pei building / Photo: Paul Crosby

Richard Meier building / Photo: Rich Sanders, Des Moines

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EDMUNDSON ART FOUNDATION, INC.

4700 GRAND AVENUE / DES MOINES, IOWA 50312

515.277.4405 / www.desmoinesartcenter.org