

San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts

by Jon Thompson



Museum = Community

The drive from San Antonio to San Angelo covers 277 miles. The distance is longer when measured in hours and minutes. The road threads through archetypal Texas, rolling across gentle swells of the Central Texas Hill Country before climbing onto the dead level skirt of the Llano Estacado. Boerne has become a bedroom community for San Antonio, and Fredericksburg is a good investment for Houston dentists, but Mason is still a town of its own, a typical Texas county seat organized around the court house square. Beyond that is Brady, the Heart of Texas, and beyond that is Eden. And finally, 45 miles west of Eden, is San Angelo.

The long drive through miles of cattle country and broad fields leads one to expect that San Angelo was built on the wealth of agriculture, and in part, it was, but the town really developed as a trading center to service Fort Concho, on the banks of the Concho River. Prosperity came not so much from the hard money of ranching or the easy money of oil but from the smart money of mercantile trade.

Location and wealth must be considered when contemplating the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts. After the long drive through sparse country, the iconoclastic sculptural exuberance of the building is unexpected. This is not a provincial museum in a community anxious to assert its place in the social order of Texas. San Angelo is provincial but in the best Texas tradition of people who make their own way and then make up their own minds.

The San Angelo Museum Board of Trustees set the tone for the new design more than a decade before ground was broken. In the mid 1980's they chose Howard Taylor as their new director. On paper, it was not



Photos of San Angelo Museum of Art
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a safe bet. Taylor's primary experience had been as director of a maritime museum in Philadelphia. He cinched the job in San Angelo when, assuming he was out of the running, he told the interview committee what he really thought; that a museum had to be more than a building, it had to be an active part of the community.

San Angelo had a museum before Taylor arrived, a very polite space in a converted section of old Fort Concho. Reminiscent of a Hill Country barn, it had thick limestone walls and a large interior volume capped by a simple gable roof. A long skylight lit the exhibits from above. With Taylor at the helm, the museum embarked on a campaign to build a new facility that would bring recognition to San Angelo. The new design had to reflect the spirit of the city and its people — the inner reality rather than the preconception of outsiders. Evidence of local support for the project came when the Development Committee launched the campaign to raise the \$6.5 million dollar budget, only to exceed their goal by an extra \$700,000.

A museum commission is the plum project every architect craves; a chance to design not just a building but a public monument. Thirty-five firms submitted proposals, including several with international reputations, including Renzo Piano, Antoine Predock, Robert Venturi, and Ricardo Legorreta, the designer of the San Antonio Public Library. Eight firms were brought to San Angelo for interviews, including Overland Partners and Lake / Flato, both of San Antonio, and Frank Welch, one of the deans of Texas architecture and a former colleague of O'Neil Ford's.

To the credit of the Steering Committee, the design firms that made the poorest

impression in the initial interview were those that came bearing preconceptions. At least one firm presented a preliminary model of the museum design on their first visit, telling the committee what the architect thought the museum should be before ever asking the locals what they wanted of their new project.

The last firm to be interviewed was Hardy Holtzman Pfeiffer Architects (HHPA), with offices in New York and Los Angeles. The firm has a long history of doing public and other buildings, including a number of award winning museums. The architect's experience was important but it was not the deciding factor. Partner Malcolm Holtzman made the pitch. Instead of presenting sketches that conveyed the firms' idea of how the plan should be organized or how the building might look, Holtzman laid out for the committee the design process. He told them how a design comes into being through a trial-and-error dialogue between client and architect, until a shared vision materializes. Holtzman presented the process, not the design. In closing, he said, "Together, we will make a building." He got the job and the process began.

The new museum building opened in late 1999. Reviews in national architecture journals invariably referred to its distinctive curved roof as being "reminiscent of a saddle or Conestoga wagon." Architectural Record reviewed it with several other buildings that were felt to be brash and/or weird. In a generally positive commentary, respected architectural critic, David Dillon, referred to the new museum design as "quirky, colorful, theatrical, occasionally perverse..."

Perverse. Having read the reviews, one approaches the outskirts of San Angelo

expecting a museum design that is either "deviant from what is right or good," or "corrupt, wicked, and perverted," depending on which definition the critic had in mind. Parking the car and approaching the building on a mild summer day under a crystal blue sky, the museum is none of that. True, the roof does have a curve, but it is a robust sculptural form, not a shallow one-trick concept.

There is a danger in reading a criticism before seeing the actual work, and it is this: We risk having our personal experience of the piece — a painting, a movie, a building — colored, if not supplanted, by the opinion of the critic. Once the analogy with a saddle has been made for us, we see it, too, and suddenly the building becomes a silly metaphor. Preconception overpowers perception.

Reviews of recent movie releases are often puffery or succinct thumbs-up, thumbs down expressions of the emperor's personal worldview. Reviews of movie classics are more informative and provide a better model for criticism in general. The classic, having been vindicated in the court of history, has already justified itself and given evidence of its popularity. The review then becomes an explanation of how the film was done and why it has proven worthy. The criticism offers an introduction through which the viewer can better appreciate the film. Appreciation implies that something — a film or a piece of real estate — gains value over time. This is a major role that criticism can play. It helps the viewer gain more from the experience of the work itself. Emphasis is on the fundamental nature of the work and the primary experience of the viewer, not the bias of the critic.

Having read that the new San Angelo

Museum of Fine Arts looks like a perverse Conestoga wagon, the first time viewer will see a copper clad roof that obviously was meant to look like the covered wagons of the early European pioneers. Looking for some rationale, it is assumed that this is a reference to the pioneer founding of the city. Likewise, we assume that the saddle metaphor is an allusion to the cowboy and cattle origins of the area. From that moment on, there is a tendency to become complacent about perceiving and understanding the roof and building on its own merits.

San Angelo is not in the middle of nowhere; it simply is blessed with ample elbowroom. The breadth of space is matched by a breadth of vision that one might not associate with a small West Texas town, but a close appreciation of the design of the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts gives proof that this is home to some very thoughtful people.

The swooping vault of the new museum was not meant simply as a shallow allusion to pioneers or cowboys. It evolved over time as several roof designs were tested, beginning with the most obvious. Each in turn was considered, commented on, then adjusted so that it would better suit the site and the shared vision.

In the basement of the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth are a series of dusty models that reveal architect Louis Kahn's similar process of design development. The Kimbell, a beautifully refined icon of modern architecture, seems perfect and totally resolved in its plan and form, but it did not start out that way. Rather than the widely admired vaults of the final design, early sketches show flat cheeked trapezoidal light monitors. These evolved into long cylindrical vaults, which finally became more complicated cycloids. As the roof changed on the Kimbell, so too did its siting and its plan.

A similar series of models are in storage in San Angelo. They show the design process at work. Early schematic models reveal a series of linear and zigzag plans that fit on the elongated site. A subsequent series of more developed models show that the plan has been resolved as a long block, divided into sections, but that the roofline is still in flux. The earliest roof forms are traditional, including hipped, gable, and a cylindrical vault. The first appearance of the curved roof ridge is derived from a simple gable roof. The two ends are at the same height. It includes the upper open deck with scalloped edges. One of the models shows the roofline that was eventually chosen, with the curved ridge, a vaulted section, with one end higher than the other. Because this model does not include the scalloped

deck, it might not have been the final option explored but one in a series to which the architect and client later returned. Had the metaphor of the Conestoga wagon or saddle been important to the client or the architect, it is doubtful that it would have appeared so late in design development. Rather, it seems from these many models that the team was looking for a roofline that justified itself due to its own intrinsic visual impact.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, an advocate for site-specific design, taught that "A house should be of the hill, not on the hill." In a similar vein, several architectural features of the new museum reflect material and conditions specific to the site and the region. One feature that adds a dynamic to the San Angelo roof design is the setting of one end higher than the other. This reflects the slope of the site, which leads up from the banks of the adjacent Concho River, but also breaks the symmetry of the roof. The large limestone slabs that form the facing for the exterior walls came from nearby Garden City. Some were quarried, cut from stone beds below ground, while the darker contrasting bands were taken from the surface, their stains and patina the result of eons of weathering. The horizontal bands of the museum recall the sedimentary layers from which the stones were pried. Some of these slabs show ripples of ancient sandy seabeds, still studded with petrified seashells. The ripple stones give visual strength to the base of the building and provide a serendipitous reference to the mussels found in the nearby river, which caused the Spanish to name it Concho, or shell.

The linearity of the museum plan was forced by the site, which flanks one edge of a paseo, or path, a feature dictated by city planners. This wide promenade leads up from the river, its axis centered on downtown San Angelo on the opposite bank. The other side of the paseo is flanked by a WPA-era public swimming pool that sees much action in the summer, providing a positive association with the museum for area children. The paseo continues up to Fort Concho, linking the museum to both the urban geography of the site and to its history.

One of the best views of San Angelo is from the museum roof deck. The scalloped edges of the deck were inspired by water lilies that grow in places along the river, which was once known as Rio Des Flores, the river of flowers. Unlike the saddle analogy, the water lily reference was intentional. The scalloped balconies add interest to the long public face of the linear museum and repeat the curve of the roof.

D'Hanis tile, produced in D'Hanis, Texas, is used both inside and out. Its terra cotta hue, like the creamy limestone, comes directly from the Texas soil. It complements the lime green found throughout the interior of the museum, which adds vitality to the lobby and is carried to the exterior with the window trim. This very electric green, accentuated with neon lights, is one of the features commented on by those museum patrons who expect a more conservative palette. Museum Director Taylor responds that the green, which is the color of growing things, is more classical than some might assume, reflecting, as it does, one of the colors used on the Greek Parthenon before two millennia of wear scrubbed off its original polychrome garb.

Some feel that the central task of an art museum is to provide a "clean well lighted place" for the display of art. Museum architecture is best when it is unobtrusive. This dictum holds little sway with those who frequent — and love — museums. The Louvre is as much a draw as the paintings that hang on its walls, as is the Kimbell, whose sublime light competes with the art that it illuminates. A museum is not simply a repository for art. It is an expression of the people who built it, whether they be the nobility of Florence or the civic-minded of San Angelo. This is why museums are called the cathedrals of our time. It is not that we worship art. It is that we communicate who we are through the design of this public institution, just as the citizens of Chartres once communicated their piety in the construction — and funding — of a grand Gothic cathedral.

Too often, the things we build today are bereft of real meaning. Our largest public investment, our grandest edifice, is neither a cathedral nor a museum. It is a multi-level highway interchange. What value will these sprawling structures have for the generations that follow? Whether intentional or not, most engineering projects, devoid of compassion, have very little to say to those who follow.

This is why the San Angelo Museum is so important, and why it is such a wonderful piece of architecture. It has meaning, and the meaning was derived from the collaboration of a wise and enthusiastic architect and a group of enlightened citizen clients. The meaning that they brought to the design is evident in the whole and in each of the parts. That meaning is local. It comes from the particulars of the place and from the shared vision of the people. This brave and very personal design is proof that a "sense of place," so valued by architects, is a dynamic, organic process, ever-changing, always growing, not a static picturesque post card.

An Interview with Dr. Howard Taylor:

Director, San Angelo Museum of Art

by David McCall Freeman



Dr. Howard Taylor with model of museum

VOA: Why should a museum be involved in its community?

HT: Most museums play a significant role in their community. Chambers of Commerce and enlightened City Councils often recognize that museums, just as much as sports teams, and probably more so, contribute significantly to the local economy by being major attractors for tourism and businesses that depend upon educated and creative people. Often however, they miss the deeper and more relevant meaning. Museums are vital to the educational structure of any modern community and the most dynamic museums are provocateurs on the edge of intellectual and artistic inquiry. Museums in America according to the American Association of Museums attract over 800 million visitors a year, more than all sporting events.

Our museum in San Angelo has probably pushed beyond the bounds of most museums in community and engagement. We are small and our community itself is relatively remote. Prior to the creation of the museum children in particular have had little exposure to the visual arts nor the many other wonders of the world. Often when school groups come to the museum the first startling revelation is our elevator. Many have never seen one in person and are very excited to take a ride. This is very telling about the challenge we face.

I was drawn to San Angelo from Philadelphia because of the challenges inherent in this environment and a desire to develop some deeply held ideas about the role that museums can play. In Philadelphia while working at the Philadelphia Maritime Museum I co-organized an exhibit with artist friend Abe Rothblatt. It was an exhibit called, "Great Ideas, An Exhibit of What Could Be". Well over a hundred artists submitted concepts for visions and improvements to Philadelphia. Happily my colleagues at the Independence National Historic Park allowed us to use the Historic Second Bank of the United States for this truly awesome exhibit. Sadly I was unable

to enlist the help of some curatorial friends in the art museum world who thought that the exhibit was a bit crazy and even politically chancy.

When I interviewed for the position in San Angelo the people here were totally open to such challenging exhibitions. I discussed with them how we could conceptually have the largest museum in America if we didn't define ourselves strictly in terms of a building and four walls. The thought was simply this, if museums through their art and exhibitions are asking people to think about beauty, ugliness, or social issues should we not do something to translate those thoughts into the lives of our community and to be proactive? We certainly draw the line at direct political involvement but we do endeavor to bring life to ideas about how we exist as a community. First, we have two simple slogans that help define that idea. We say that "we are not just about art on the walls but art in our lives" and that the "community is the greatest work of art".

There are many ways that we endeavor to make these concepts real and I can only mention a few. First, we have invested a larger portion of our resources in education than most other museums. Approximately a third of our budget is for education efforts including the operation of a children's art museum not to be confused with a children's museum. We have organized four major exhibits open to everyone in the community to freely express within our galleries their thoughts and ideas about our community's future. These have been complex, messy generally aesthetically unappealing, difficult and fascinating exhibits. We have followed up with forums, committees and many efforts of follow through and implementation. One outcome result was a program operated by the American Institute of Architects called R/UDAT which stands for Regional Urban Design Assistance Team. Essentially a group of architects and planners spend an intensive weekend with a broad based

community group to focus on concepts for dealing with a particular aspect of the community's built environment. Some R/UDATS are no more than an exercise, some are effective and the one in San Angelo turned out to be one of the most successful ever done. The reason was through our exhibits and forums we had done a tremendous amount of advance thinking. The result was a massive effort in the core of our community of historic preservation, creation of urban open spaces and visual and pedestrian linkage between major assets such as Fort Concho, the river and downtown.

Although not an original intention of R/UDAT our new museum has been built right in the center of the R/UDAT area. The building itself reflects our philosophy. It is intentionally exuberant and exciting. Though some would like to see it in a more insular and stand alone environment we are making a determined effort to have the built environment close in around us with a great deal of activity and urban intensity. Our offices are right at the entrance and open to the public. Very few other museums have done this (the Kimble being a notable exception) and in fact in most museums there are many hurdles to seeing the administration and even more in finding a curator or director. Our collection storage areas are open and visible and when staff is present our exhibition and collection prep area can also be visited. The functions of museums are inherently fascinating and we like to be as transparent as possible.

Our new building also has a flexible multi-purpose meeting space much larger than most institutions of our size that can seat up to 300 people. We use it of course for our own wide range of programs and rent it for earned income but also make it available extensively without charge to non-profit community groups such as local schools, the Hispanic Leadership Association, Girl Scouts, etc.



Photos of San Angelo Museum of Art by Jon Thompson

VOA: What impact has the new building had on the community?

HT: While the building was still under construction a local merchant asked me, "Exactly who is responsible for the design of that building?" I don't think her comment was meant a compliment. It is an edgy building but that was not our specific intention. The structure is a true collaboration between the architects and the museum and takes its form from the site and our needs. The architect certainly has his own vocabulary that is apparent in the use of the stone, local materials and a rich color pallet among other things. Modernism is so pervasive that any departure from the rigid geometry of a box can be difficult for many people. Our building is sculpture but sculpted to meet our needs not to be a statement. I personally enjoy elements of theatricality and exuberance. One of the most magnificent art museums in America is the astonishingly colorful and rich Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts designed by Frank Furness built in 1876. Although the building has a neon sign over the entrance canopy the building itself is a landmark and an easily recognizable sign in its own right. In fact it has generally been enthusiastically accepted by most people

here. The Dallas Morning news architectural critic David Dillon feels that an exciting building such as ours is more likely to happen in communities like San Angelo because people are less afraid and uptight about what others may think. One telling note is that the employees of the Area-Wide phone book voted to put our building as the sole image on the cover of the phone book the year it was completed.

Although we used a non-local and in fact non-Texan firm (though two of the three person team were Texans, Doug Moss and Ernesto Botino) several local architects told me they were very pleased that such a building happened here and that it has made it easier for them to create more exciting spaces. San Angelo, beneath the surface is really a very creative and open thinking place. In the late 1950's it created the nations first true campus style high-school with a number of classic modernist structures that are still in evidence.

VOA: How did the museum come to host the National Ceramics Competition?

HT: Before I even took the position in San Angelo the Board of Trustees made it clear that they wanted to build a collection. I strongly concurred. The issue was collec-

tion of what? Ultimately, we developed a policy that will allow us to collect encyclopedically anything of true quality. In terms of purchases however, we had little or no resources and would be fairly limited. The idea for the Ceramics National came before establishing our Collections Policy but it fit very nicely. We decided that we would place an emphasis on contemporary American ceramics and the work of contemporary Texas artists. This would be relatively affordable and through the Ceramics Competition many fine works would be available right at our doorstep. Exhibiting and collecting ceramics would accomplish several things. First it would bring a broad exposure to the ideas of contemporary art. Because at that time (and is still largely the case) few other museums were collecting in this area, although we were a small museum in a remote community we had a chance to stand out, create a calling card in effect and bring some respect and recognition to one of the most powerful mediums of artistic expression.

Before I assumed the position in San Angelo I already had a desire to do something on a continuous basis with the ceramics medium. An annual competition seemed logical. The difficulty was that it is a very hard medium to exhibit. With a



National Competition such as ours you can anticipate that there is a certain percentage of damage that occurs to ceramics in transport before it even arrives at the museum. This is a management nightmare exacerbated by the fact that some artists are not so good at packing and it is inherently delicate medium and often get rough-handled by shippers. This is enough to scare most museums away. Compounding this challenge is that our show is very large, we usually have over a 120 works and we have put no size limitations on works accepted by our jurors. You see it all here!

There were a number of coincidences that energized the commitment that we have. My personal interest besides the fact that few others were doing it emanates from several sources. When I was a kid I grew up in Buffalo, New York whose museum the Albright Knox, had one of the most cutting edge and extensive modern art collections in the world. I was a frequent visitor and also very connected to what was happening in New York at the time. During my high-school years I moved to Syracuse, New York. Although Syracuse is a very nice town with many interesting things I still felt artistically isolated, that is until I discovered the Syracuse National Ceramic show organized by the Everson Museum. I suddenly felt reconnected to the larger world. Although San Angelo is even smaller than Syracuse I felt a regular ceramic competition here could also connect us to the larger world and would have a particular impact on school kids. I often refer to ceramics as, "the Sara Lee medium." It seems that no matter what imagery or ideas nor how challenging most people find it palatable. Everything that is going on in the world of art happens in this medium. Also, just

before leaving Philadelphia, friends Rick and Ruth Snyderman, owners of the Works Gallery, counseled me that wood, glass or ceramics were mediums that should be taken far more seriously by museums and that I would now be in a position to do something about that. When I arrived here I met the amazing Roger Allen, a master ceramicist and owner of the Chicken Farm Art Center. We immediately became friends and he lobbied hard as well as offering direct support. To this day we work closely with Roger and the Chicken Farm doing workshops and social activities around the show. I also discovered that there was a small regional competition at Angelo State University organized by art instructor and ceramicist Martha Wittstruck. She was frustrated by the limited space available at the university. She agreed to combine forces with the museum and in fact during the first four years served as our curator for the show. She was wonderful to work with and guided us in developing our call for entries, and in selecting jurors and invited artists. It was my idea to have an invited artist initially because I was very fearful that we would not get enough entries and my fall back was that I would simply ask the invited artist to send more work to fill up the space. Happily that has never been a problem.

The final element that made it all come together was that I discovered there was a ceramic tile manufacturing company headquartered in San Angelo. With help of one of the museums founders, Marilyn Mertz, I was able to persuade Monarch Tile to under-write the show for a number of years. Unfortunately, the company was bought out and departed San Angelo and eventually ceased to exist. The good news is that, Trinity Ceramics of Dallas

and its owners John and Darlene Williams have become the primary sponsors and significant patrons of the competition. We collaborate extensively with the university doing tours, workshops and a symposium. We have the enthusiastic support and input of ceramics instructor Esteban Apodaca.

The first year of the competition I received a terse note from an artist who refused to enter and said in effect "a national competition in San Angelo ha...who are you kidding!" A few years later the then editor of *Ceramics Monthly*, William Hunt referred to it as, "the leading Clay show in America." A number of other curators and critics have followed with similar comments. The competition is now bi-annual, held in mid-April of even years and we do a regional invitational in odd-numbered years. Our collaborations have grown to include a bi-annual state wide competition with the Texas Clay Arts Association and a prize awarded by the American Tile Heritage Foundation. Our permanent collection is small but growing rapidly and now includes some oriental antiquities, a selection of Mata Ortiz master-works and more than one hundred contemporary American and European artists including seventeen works donated by Garth Clark. Mr. Clark is owner of one of the leading galleries in New York City. There are also significant collections that have been promised as bequests from individuals from other parts of the country. For all this I hope we are not too pretentious about its importance. Our basic motivation remains simply to inform, inspire and entertain our community. The National Competition and the alternating Invitational are surrounded by wonderful activities open to anyone and all are very welcome here.