

## CLYFFORD STILL MUSEUM: BRUTALIST HOME FOR ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST'S WORKS

**What are some important design elements an architect might consider when designing an art museum?**

Clyfford Still is considered one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and belonged to the first generation of abstract expressionist artists who developed a powerful and innovative approach to painting following World War II (About the Museum). The Clyfford Still Museum, which opened in 2011, was founded to promote public and scholarly understanding of the late artist's work through the preservation and presentation of more than 94% of his total output. Denver competed with several other cities for Still's collection. In 2004, Denver was selected by Still's widow, Patricia, to receive the collection, plus additional archival materials, with the requirement that the city build a museum entirely devoted to his work. The museum would eventually find a home in the Golden Triangle neighborhood, among some of Denver's most important cultural institutions.

### **Structure**

The museum is a ribbed, cast-in-place concrete building with strategically placed wooden elements and windows that bring rhythm to the exterior with a focused infusion of light to the interior (Voelz Chandler, 2013). The Still Museum is an elegant 28,000-square-foot structure. The upper cantilevered level is dedicated to 10,000 square feet of gallery space. Concerns of intimacy, proportion and ideal viewing conditions influenced the design of the museum. As a result, the largest gallery measures only about 1,200 square feet, with a ceiling placed, by today's standards, at a modest 12 to 16 feet above the floor (Sobel).

The quality of light, not just within the galleries but in the entire building as a whole, is the essential characteristic of the design, even more defining than the 4,000 cubic yards of textured concrete cast into the earth. The evenly dispersed natural light that fills the exhibition rooms not only presents Still's canvas surfaces in the most compelling and truthful way; the gentleness of the daylight also enlivens the senses as visitors move through the variously proportioned spaces (Sobel).

### **Collection**

The museum's collection includes about 825 paintings and 1,575 works on paper. Some of Still's paintings have yet to be unrolled. The gallery exhibits rotate periodically, ever revealing new works. The vast majority of his accomplishments have yet to be seen. The gallery displays on the second floor, combined with the interactive timeline and glimpses at Still's archives on the lower level, offer visitors a thorough look at the artist and the man (About the Museum).

### **Architect**

The museum's architect, Brad Cloepfil, was born in Portland, Oregon in 1956. He is an architect, educator and founding principal of Allied Works Architecture of Portland and New York City. His first major project was an adaptive reuse of a Portland warehouse for the advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy. Since 2000, Cloepfil and Allied Works have completed cultural, commercial and residential projects including the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, the University of Michigan Art Museum, the Dutchess County Residence Guest House and the National Music Centre of Canada in Calgary,

Alberta. In designing the building, Cloepfil considered the topographic context from which Still's paintings emerged: Washington State's Columbia River Gorge, Alberta, Canada and other regions.

### **Neighborhood**

In 2006, the museum secured a 25,000-square-foot parcel of land immediately west of the Denver Art Museum's Frederick C. Hamilton Building, designed by Daniel Libeskind (then under construction). Later that year, the museum's board selected Allied Works Architecture, led by Brad Cloepfil, for the museum's design. The immediate neighborhood surrounding the museum also includes the Denver Art Museum's Gio Ponti-designed flagship building built in 1971, an eccentric structure designed in an almost neo-medieval style, and Michael Graves' playfully post-modernist Denver Public Library, completed in 1995. Both of these Denver landmarks butt up against various Beaux-Arts civic buildings that align along Civic Center Park. During the selection process for the Clyfford Still Museum, architect Cloepfil suggested that he would add what this campus needed most – silence.

### **References**

Clyfford Still Museum. About the Museum. Retrieved from <https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/about-the-museum/>.

Voelz Chandler, M. (2013). *Guide to Denver Architecture*. Denver: Fulcrum Group.

Sobel, D. Clyfford Still Museum. Allied Works Architecture.