



## Studio Gang Designs a New Museum in Little Rock

### Description

It's not enough that Arkansas is home to Fay Jones' Thorncrown Chapel in Eureka Springs.

Or that 2020 AIA Gold Medal winner Marlon Blackwell is teaching and practicing in Fayetteville.

No. Now Little Rock is reaching for its own architectural zenith, with a new design for the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts by [Studio Gang](#) – and landscape architecture by SCAPE.

"We're going to be the go-to destination," says Victoria Ramirez, executive director of the museum. "The people who live here love it here – and we want it to be the best."

Groundbreaking for the museum took place in October 2019, and it's now about 60 percent complete. On schedule for a 2022 opening, it may have serendipitously skipped the pandemic altogether.

Museum officials talked to a number of architects in their own offices, and found that Jeanne Gang intuitively understood their goals of balancing an art experience with a building that puts visitors at ease. "There was an understanding too that there's a social aspect – it's not just a home but a welcoming destination," Ramirez says. "We want people to spend the day enjoying the arts and the social aspect and gather together, and she understands that."

Gang encouraged the museum staff to embrace the work of Kate Orff of SCAPE Landscape Design, because the two had worked well together before. "They seem to be philosophically aligned, which means they can push the boundaries a little bit because they trust each other," Ramirez says. "So it's an all-woman team that just happened, and it's pretty exciting when you consider it's happening in the South."

The original 1937 museum is located in Little Rock's 13-acre MacArthur Park, with longtime programming needs to be integrated into the new building, like galleries, an arts school, performing arts and a children's theater program. "The assignment was to make it all work in a building that's intuitive and inspiring in a park setting," she says.

When the two firms presented concepts and ideas and started to hone in on final plans, their designs

seemed philosophically synched-up. A pleated roofline forms a central, north/south axis called the Blossom – because of its tendril-like form reminiscent of a flower.

“Kate and SCAPE picked up on that for water runoff and drainage and created beds of plants to live under the pleated roofs and catch the water, that we call Petals,” Ramirez says. “She was responding to design also with outdoor seating that reflects the Petal beds.”

On the north side of the museum, the dominant feature is a glass-enclosed space on the second floor called the Cultural Living Room. It’s designed to offer a view of the landscaped front lawn, but also of the downtown skyline. “She’s created a building with an architectural presence and a signature side to it to associate with us – and with Little Rock,” Ramirez says.

The formal entrance on the north side envelopes the original museum’s 1937 WPA-era façade and doors “It’s a nod and acknowledgement of the past and also looking at the future,” she says. “The facade looks very much of the era, with relief and fonts that are Art Deco.”

As visitors approach the museum on the north side, they’ll walk first under the Cultural Living Room, then arrive at an open-air courtyard, look up and see the sky, and find themselves nearly surrounded by the building. “Then you take a few more steps and walk into the main north doorway of museum, that of the 1937 building, and into a two-story lobby lined in walnut,” she says. “It’s very much a jewel box space.”

Where the landscape slopes down to the south, Gang added a transparent glass entrance for a new restaurant and gift shop. “We think most people will use the south side entrance because of the restaurant and store,” she says. “We reconfigured parking so that it can be equally used.”

So what’s it like to work with Studio Gang on a project of this scale? “She’s such a problem solver,” Ramirez says. “It’s an elevated museum experience, because she thinks about all those problems and knows that architecture can solve them.”

In the process, she’s creating a landmark for Little Rock.

For more go [here](#) and [here](#).

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