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MEMPHIS BROOKS MUSEUM OF ART UNVEILS HERZOG & DE MEURON DESIGN FOR NEW HOME OVERLOOKING THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Memphis, TN – Today Memphis Brooks Museum of Art unveils the design concept for its 112,000-sf new home atop a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.

Developed by the international design firm Herzog & de Meuron in partnership with the Memphis-based archimania, the design signals the 105-year-old institution's commitment to the future of the diverse community of Memphis. Upon the museum's grand opening in 2026, visitors will find expanded exhibition galleries, more and varied spaces for community and educational programs, and several central spaces offering continual free public access.

The relocated Brooks is the keystone of an ambitious six-mile-long redevelopment of the Memphis riverfront that is now underway. A view to the future by way of recreational paths and parks; a cultural corridor of museum, library, and law school; and a newly preserved historic cobblestone landing, the project reorients Memphis towards the river, inviting connection, and aims to contribute to the life of the city's downtown. The riverfront plan was conceived by Studio Gang, Chicago, in tandem with SCAPE, New York, for the Mayor's Riverfront Task Force and the Memphis River Parks Partnership.

"The Brooks asked the architectural team for an inspiring work of architecture that would welcome the local community, the surrounding tri-state region of West Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi, and, indeed, the entire world," says Carl Person, President, Brooks Museum Board of Directors. He continues, "We got that, and more."

"I have no doubt but that the new Brooks will become an essential civic space for the people of Memphis," notes Jim Strickland, Mayor of Memphis. "Our city has long been known as a pilgrimage site for lovers of music and Southern food folkways; soon we will be able to better share the visual art of our region and the stories embedded in Memphis' art collection at the Brooks."

The contemporary structure will be located in the oldest part of Memphis, on Front Street between Monroe and Union avenues on Cotton Row, only blocks from Beale Street. It sits above a historic cobblestone landing, Riverside Drive, the Mississippi River, and the Arkansas flood plain to the west.

Mark Resnick, Executive Director, said: "We at the Brooks understand that we're in a unique position to consider what an art museum can be in the 21st century. We're beyond gratified to enter this next chapter in our new home, tailored-made to our needs."

Design Concept

The Brooks' future home is an earthen-clad and glass pavilion that sits atop a sloping plinth before jutting out toward the Mississippi River. The base, forged out of the river bluff, both supports the upper structure and accommodates parking and other interior uses. All the galleries are on one floor within the pavilion, providing an uninterrupted gallery experience.

A pair of double-height timber columns, a thin metal canopy, and a brick paved entry court signal the recessed main entrance at the midpoint of the east façade. This entrance court punctuates an otherwise simply expressed front comprising two horizontal bands, the upper of warm and textured earthen cladding, and the lower a continuous expanse of glass wall. Transparency at the street level minimizes a sense of a barrier threshold, encouraging glimpses into a glass enclosed entrance lobby, café, museum store, gallery for temporary exhibitions, and even into a courtyard at the very heart of the building.

The museum envisions this wood-clad courtyard as an outdoor room for public gatherings and individual respite. As a volume, it extends the city's original street grid to the river by way of a set of steps leading down to a viewing platform, where the building mass frames vistas of the Mississippi River and wetlands beyond.

Permanent collection and focus galleries encircle the central courtyard in a continuous, single-story loop. Pause spaces within the gallery sequence provide moments for quiet reflection with views to the exterior. A large temporary exhibition space at the southeast corner supplements the permanent collection galleries. There are a number of entrances directly to the galleries from the entrance lobby, and the education classrooms and the family interactive space are adjacent to exhibition spaces on the main level.

The architects leveraged the challenge of the steep terrain to script movement and sightlines. As a kind of east/west hinge point, they inserted an ingeniously designed 175-seat box theater with raked seating above the entrance lobby. An adjacent theater terrace opens out to Front Street at the roof level. A west-facing wall of glass provides an overlook of the museum's diagonal sweep. It can be obscured with exterior shading and interior drapery to provide an opaque backdrop for interior performances, and it can transform into a dramatic screen facing out into the courtyard. At the right time of day, a visitor will be able to gaze out the window and catch the setting sun casting a golden light on the courtyard below.

The new museum is visible from every side, a rare opportunity in an urban site. In fact, the architects speak of five facades. They have wrapped the exterior in a warm earthen cladding punctuated with windows of varying scale and shape. To the west, facing the river, where the museum shows its face to the world, a pair of large-scale viewing windows provide outlooks from the galleries within.

Housing an art storage facility, among other spaces, the south wing alone presents a solid wall, a lesson in massing, tactility and restraint. The pavilion wall and plinth together comprise one dynamic surface animated by the cantilever of the pavilion structure and the materiality of the cladding.

The fifth façade is the roof. Simply developed with an occupiable deck and green plantings—and a stunning panoramic view of the river and region—the roof expanse serves as a kind of announcement card for the museum. It is visible to those entering Memphis from either of its two bridges or by air or for those at the windows of office towers.

“We’ve aimed to design a welcoming civic landmark that upon approach explains itself visually and from the inside reminds the visitor where he or she is in relation to a legendary river and an historic city,” says Jacques Herzog, co-founder of Herzog & de Meuron. He adds, “The result will be a museum that’s both in Memphis and of Memphis, a landmark that couldn’t be anywhere else.”

Urban Context

“It was love at first sight for me, visiting Memphis for the first time,” says Ascan Mergenthaler, senior partner and partner in charge, Herzog & de Meuron. “The project has developed in a very rewarding manner, thanks in large part to the close collaboration between our team, the museum, and our incredibly knowledgeable local partner, archimania.”

The Herzog & de Meuron team marveled at how much of the original city and waterfront is intact in Memphis and looked to the existing grid of street blocks and interstitial alleys in downtown Memphis in conceiving the north/south and east/west circulation pattern of the pavilion. They went back even further in time to envision how the soil formation of the bluff must have appeared before centuries of erosion. This research convinced them that the right approach was to minimize excavation, taking away as little as possible.

The Vision

The opening reinstallation of the Brooks’ permanent collection will tell a story of art that dissolves the usual dividing lines between eras and mediums. Rather than the traditional emphasis on national schools, the rehanging will showcase works within the inter-related geographies of Europe, the Americas, Africa and the global contemporary. A particular goal is to contribute to the visibility of contemporary African American art. In advance of the grand opening, the institution is acquiring through purchase works by such artists as Sanford Biggers, Rick Lowe and Vanessa German with funds from the Joyce Blackmon Fellowship. Other highlights will include works from the Samuel H. Kress Collection of Renaissance and Baroque paintings; British and American decorative arts; American art by Georgia O’Keeffe, Thomas Hart Benton, Romare Bearden, and Marisol; photographs by William Eggleston and Ernest C. Withers; and contemporary art and works by regional artists.

<http://www.brooksmuseum.org/>

Timetable

Memphis Brooks will break ground on its new home in late 2023, following a stretch devoted to design development, construction documentation, bidding and demolition. The Grand Opening is slated for mid-2026.

Funding

The Brooks’ building project is primarily privately funded. Of the \$150M project, a substantial portion of the cost, more than \$90 million, is already secured.

Herzog & de Meuron

Established in Basel in 1978, Herzog & de Meuron is a partnership led by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron together with Senior Partners Christine Binswanger, Ascan Mergenthaler, Stefan Marbach, Esther Zumsteg, and Jason Frantzen. An international team of nearly 500 collaborators including the two Founders, five Senior Partners, ten Partners, and 41 Associates work on projects across Europe, the Americas and Asia. The main office is in Basel with additional offices in London, New York, Hong Kong, Berlin and Copenhagen. The practice has designed a wide range of projects from the small scale of a private home to the large scale of urban design. In the U.S., it is known for such museum successes as the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the Pèrez Art Museum in Miami, and the Parrish Art Museum in Long Island, New York. Awards received include the Pritzker Architecture Prize (USA) in 2001, the RIBA Royal Gold Medal (UK), the Praemium Imperiale (Japan), both in 2007, and the Mies Crown Hall Americas Prize (USA) in 2014. www.herzogdemeuron.com.

Archimania

The Memphis-based firm archimania is a force for architectural innovation in the American South. Since its inception in 1995, archimania has been recognized nationally and internationally, garnering more than 200 awards and honors from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and ranking 8th in Design nationally by Architect magazine. Led by Todd Walker, FAIA, founding partner, and Barry Alan Yoakum, FAIA, partner, archimania is a leading practitioner of sustainable design. This year the firm has been recognized by Fast Company's World Changing Ideas Awards, Metropolis' Planet Positive Awards, and the AIA COTE Top Ten Awards. The firm designed the world's first two dual certified Zero Energy and Zero Carbon buildings recognized by the International Living Future Institute. Recent projects in Memphis include Collage Dance, a center designed to increase representation for dancers of color in ballet and to enrich communities of color through the arts; Ballet Memphis, which has helped to revitalize one of Memphis' valued historic districts; Hattiloo, the only freestanding Black repertory theatre in five surrounding states; the Scheidt Family Music School, currently under construction on the University of Memphis campus. <https://www.archimania.com/>

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