First Impressions: The ICA at VCU

Richmond magazine staffers toured the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU April 25; here are our early thoughts

by Harry Kollatz Jr., Samantha Willis, Jessica Ronky Haddad
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The Institute for Contemporary Art is, according to Director Lisa Freiman, the most "ambitious, complicated" building ever constructed in the commonwealth. Contributor Gary Robertson dives deep into the construction process, financials and leadership vision behind the $41 million institution, which is scheduled to open Oct. 28, in this feature from our May 2017 issue. On Tuesday, April 25, Richmond magazine Senior Writer Harry Kollatz Jr., R•Home Editor Jessica Ronky Haddad and Richmond magazine Arts & Entertainment Editor Samantha Willis attended a media briefing and hard-hat tour of the new facility; here are their first impressions.
The Richmond to Ashland Electric Railway began operations in 1907 from a terminal at 814 W. Broad St. The construction of an elevated trestle wiped away structures between Broad and Moore streets in Carver. After the addition of a mid-20th-century covering with corrugated metal that helped preserve the Neoclassical facade, and serving as offices for the Richmond Glass Co., it is today the VCUArts gallery and studio facility, The Depot, where, with rain rushing against the roof, we heard of the ICA's beginnings.

The ICA at VCU aspires to serve as a cultural beacon and landmark for the busy corner of Broad and Belvidere. This part of town, for most of the 19th century and after, was characterized by trains, streetcars and traffic, both automotive and pedestrian. And the ICA stands upon the footprint of a Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railway passenger station named after a nearby razed mansion whose last waggish owner, Judge Dabney Carr — commenting on what was then the distance from downtown — dubbed it Elba, for Napoleon's island exile.

After Marshall Street’s right of way necessitated razing Elba Station, the name lingered in the public mind. The former Elba acreage became a park and a school that at first served white and then African American students.

But also, catty-corner from the ICA at Grace and Belvidere, at the beginning of the 20th century stood a rattletrap house requisitioned by Major James Dooley (of Maymont note) for the Arts Club of Richmond (1895-1919). [The Dooley family is getting its due with a history of their influence on Richmond and a book launch Wednesday evening at the Page Bond Gallery.]

There, Dooley’s niece Nora Houston and her eventual “intimate friend” Adèle Clark took classes and later taught appreciation of modern work and artistic
young students lamented in an undated essay Richmond’s lack of art education and a suitable place to exhibit contemporary work. The writer, in a tone of near-exasperation, describes how some citizens of means traveled to experience culture abroad while they couldn’t be bothered to support such endeavors at home.

The essayist continues, “Have they no love for beauty; for beauty of nature, of life, of love, of passions, expressed in deep feeling, straight from the heart of the artist? Do they wish to crush the rising passion from the souls of the talented?”

The name written on the upper right corner of each page: Theresa Pollak, who was under Clark’s and Houston’s tutelage from 1912-1917.
Pollak grew up to teach the first college-level art classes for what became the VCU School of the Arts, out of which the ICA sprung.

The enduring legacy of the school’s artist-practitioner teachers is evident throughout Richmond and far beyond. One of its former students, and teachers, was the recently deceased Bill Fisher and the late Jerry Donato, with a retrospective exhibition up at the Reynolds Gallery. The late Bev Reynolds, that space’s founder, sought the ICA’s creation and lived to see the early stages.

On Tuesday’s tour, we learned, too, that a 1920s Colonial Revival apartment building behind the ICA and facing Grace Street is to be removed for that old Richmond bugaboo — parking. But the transformation of this corner of town is ongoing. – Harry Kollatz Jr.

The Architecture

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While the ICA building is still very much an active construction site, our hard-hat tour provided a glimpse into the architectural surprises that await. What’s most striking at first is that the building seems much more spacious on the inside than it appears from the street, with a soaring atrium and entry points from both Belvidere Street (the “city” entrance) and Pine Street (the “campus” entrance). The first floor is also home to a spacious gallery named for the late Richmond gallerist Beverly Reynolds as well as a café, gift shop and a 240-seat theater. A large outdoor garden, or “Thinking Field,” is sure to be a popular gathering spot.
On the second floor are two more galleries and an outdoor rooftop terrace. The soaring third-floor gallery is a marvel of large glass expanses and odd angles — a curatorial challenge, for sure.
Designed by Steven Holl Architects, the three-story building is described by Charles Piper of BCWH Architects, the local firm overseeing the project, as one of the most complex ever constructed in the commonwealth of Virginia. He calls it “a functional sculpture animated by the objects placed in it,” and explains how Holl was inspired by the energy of the busy intersection at which the building is sited.

Transparency is a hallmark of its design, with its glass walls and windows blurring the lines between the streetscape and the art housed within the gallery. The environmentally sustainable building features geothermal wells to heat and cool the building, vegetative roofs, and is made of concrete, steel, glass and zinc all derived from recycled materials. – Jessica Ronky Haddad

The Art

“ Declarations mark beginnings.”

This is a key reason the ICA’s inaugural exhibition is titled “Declaration,” explained Chief Curator Stephanie Smith at Tuesday morning’s press briefing, held at the VCUarts Broad Street space, The Depot. The exhibition will run from October 28 through February 25, 2018, and it’s designed to do more than just inspire; “Declaration” is clearly meant to provoke and educate.

The ambitious first showing will feature the work of at least 32 artists, some of international renown and those who are virtually unknown. According to the ICA website, “Declaration’ will examine themes of protest, social justice, connection and creative community.” In this way, the showing will reflect the evolution of our society, and the turbulence that’s always been a part of America’s growth.
Artist Paul Rucker’s installation, “REWIND,” examines how past events correlate with present times. Part of the show features Ku Klux Klan robes, which Rucker reconstructed to make a powerful statement on race and historical injustice. (Photo by Mike Morgan courtesy Paul Rucker/ICA)

Another installation of interest will be Amos Paul Kennedy Jr.’s letterpress prints, which are inspired by the phrases and turns of speech heard in Richmond barbershops and salons. Kennedy’s prints will be displayed not only in the ICA, but throughout the city, an example of how the institution has the potential to “link campus and community in a meaningful way,” said Smith.
A number of works will be unveiled for the first time ever within the ICA’s four galleries, with some commissioned exclusively for the institution. Brooklyn-born video artist Peter Burr and writer/video game designer/artist Porpentine Charity Heartscape will present an immersive media installation and video game, featuring a character named Aria End, “a trans woman with cyborg guts,” living in a dystopian universe.
Tuesday morning. To that end, Richmonders will have the chance to contribute to Italian artist Marinella Senatore’s collaborative radio project, “Estman Radio,” by writing, producing and recording a radio drama, and then performing it live inside the ICA’s 240-seat auditorium. Richmond rock legends GWAR will also be featured in “Declaration,” as well as School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community (SPARC) students, who recorded phrases from poet Jorge Luis Borges “The Garden of Forking Paths” as part of artist Stephen Vitiello’s contribution to the show, an innovative sound installation.

“Declaration” will be free to the public and include paintings, sculptures, multimedia installations and various themed performances. It is the first of dozens of carefully designed, engaging exhibitions planned for display at the ICA throughout the year, not only in its four galleries, but throughout the building and into the city itself. –Samantha Willis

The Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU will open Oct. 28 at the corner of West Broad and Belvidere streets.
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