An architectural breakdown of VCU’s new Institute for Contemporary Art

Posted by: brad – Apr 25, 2017

If you’ve driven through the Broad and Belvidere intersection at any point in the last year and a few months, you’ve noticed the construction of a hulking glass and steel building that will soon house VCU’s new Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). In a press conference held today, VCU teamed up with BCWH Architects to offer some insight into the mysterious structure designed by NYC-based Steven Holl Architects.

“The site is a gateway to the city, and through the evolution of the Monroe Park campus, its also a gateway between the campus itself and the city of Richmond,” said Charles Piper, Principal at BCWH. His group has been working with Steve Holl locally to help facilitate the creation of the structure.

Holl, whose works are recognized internationally for their beauty and ability to transform spaces, started designing the ICA building in 2011. The $41 million (and 41,000 square ft.) structure is set to open this October, just in time for November’s First Fridays art walk.
Piper said the Broad and Belvidere intersection itself helped inspire the ICA’s design - specifically the heavy traffic flow and the area’s many turning movements. All these features helped form the “torsion” of the building, its circular motion, both in the planning and vertically in its section.

“It’s as if the energy of the intersection threw itself up into the forms of the twisting shapes of the building,” said Piper. “All the energy drawn from the intersection twists and rises into the rectangular tower.”

The ICA hopes to serve many purposes - gallery space, public forum, entertainment and event venue, as well as a meeting space for students and the community. Upon completion, the center of the building will be transparent through from the street to “invite entry and free exploration and connection” according to Piper.

Piper also pointed out the obvious: “the building is unlike anything else in Richmond,” but he hopes the intersection’s influence will help the building to “respond contextually” as a gateway to Broad St and Belvedere as an urban entrance. The “double front” of the structure will offer human entry from either the city-side, or the rear where a sculpture garden will guide folks from campus.

Piper said contemporary art has the “catalyzing power” to pose questions about perspective about experience, values and memories and the ICA building hopes to embody that potential “every time you drive by or come inside.”

The building’s dramatic curves and surfaces will also act to alter our impression depending on the time of day, weather and season - from roof top gardens to how light will play off and reflect from its zinc walls. Add to that the asymmetrical nature of the structure and it promises to be a truly unique end cap to RVA’s Broad St. Arts District.
"It’s not the same building from any two points of view," Piper said, specifically referring to the building as a piece of "functional Sculpture" that is animated by its occupants and the items placed in it.

As with any modern building, there's also a stress on sustainability with most of the structure's guts - steel, glass, concrete and zinc - being made from recyclable materials.

Heating a cooling will be handled by 43 geothermal vents that will further reduce the electrical demands while walls will be made of dual layers of insulated glass that act as natural vents for excess heat.

"These design elements, as well as the sustainable features, will support the curatorial and educational mission of the ICA," said Piper in closing - you're chance to see the structure complete happens October 28th, 2017.

Words by Brad Kutner - renderings via Steven Holl Architects, construction photos via Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU

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