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VCU's new Institute for Contemporary Art evokes motion

By Paula C. Squires

*Michael Lease leads a tour. Photo by Paula C. Squires*

A first look at Virginia Commonwealth University's new Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) is nothing if not an example of art mimicking life. Located at the intersection of Belvidere and Broad streets, which handles 60,000 vehicles a day, the building was designed to play off the energy of that all that movement, officials said Tuesday during a hard hat tour for the press.

Years in the making, the \$41 million ICA opens to the public on Oct. 28. Tuesday was a chance to talk about its vision, its mission and to show off the dramatic contours of the 41,000-square-foot structure. ICA Director Lisa Freiman says the three-level building will be a new symbolic gateway for Richmond and VCU. "By putting it at this location, we're putting the arts at the forefront," she said.

Designed by Steven Holl Architects, the building has dual entrances, opening to the city's arts district on Broad Street and to VCU's Monroe Park campus on the other side. It was once the site of a small train station.

From the dramatic twisting angles of its zinc exterior to a 33-foot-high central forum on the main floor and a dramatic curved wall of glass on the second floor, the ICA evokes a feeling of motion. Yet there will be quiet

spots, too, including an outdoor garden set off by a reflecting pool, bluestone pavers and ginkgo trees.

Nearly 30 members of the press turned out for the tour and the overview by Freiman and others. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for everyone involved," she said. "How often does one get to build a cultural arts center from scratch?"

The center, which will be free of charge to visitors, will serve as a significant new arts resource, said Freiman, with space in four galleries, a 240-seat high-tech auditorium, café and rooftop terrace.

The ICA plans to offer changing exhibitions, performances, and interdisciplinary programs associated with VCU and other partners.

The institute also will complement VCU's role as the No. 1 ranked public school or art and design in the U.S. A student advisory board is in the works, and students will be able to apply to serve as interns at the institute, leading tours.

Partnerships and collaborations also will give the community a chance to work with visiting artists.

The building has many sustainable features, including a green wall, 43 geothermal wells that provide heating and cooling and four green roofs to absorb storm water. The expansive use of glass in the structure will allow passing cars, students and bystanders to see into the building, noted Michael Lease, the ICA's director of facilities, installation and exhibition design. "We want to be a living room to everyone in this area," he said. "We want people to drive by and get a hint of what we're about."

There will be 50 metered spaces of parking near the institute, and VCU officials are hoping patrons also will use the Pulse rapid transit bus system, which will pass by the building. The system, now under construction, should be ready shortly after the ICA opens, Lease said.

The building will be introduced to the national press on Oct. 19, which will kick off a week of pre-opening events, leading up to a public block party on Oct. 28, which will include music, food and beer trucks.

To date, the ICA has raised \$36 million in private funds towards its goal of \$41 million for construction. An endowment campaign also is underway, said Freiman. Major donations have come from ICA campaign co-chairs Steve and Katie Markel and Pam and Bill Royal. Other donors include John David and Meg Newell Gottwald, George W. and Helen H. B. Logan, True and Charlie Luck, Markel Corp., Abby W. Moore, NewMarket Corp., the Mary Morton Parsons Foundation, Patsy K. and Hunter R. Pettus, Jr. and Carolyn and John Snow.

The associated architect for the project is BCWH Architects of Richmond.