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VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art Links Past to Future, Aims for October Opening

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By Katherine Calos



Construction continues as the True Farr Luck Gallery takes shape at the top of Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute of Contemporary Art.

Top: Visitors to the art center will be able to look over a curved partition to the forum on the first level. Bottom: Natural light will flood the True Farr Luck Gallery.

MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

The striking angles of Steven Holl's design for the center have become evident to passersby.

The Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University is starting to show its power to amaze.

It's as clear as the forms taking shape at the corner of Belvidere and Broad streets, where the ICA's Markel Center "will be an iconic gateway to the city," said ICA Director Lisa Freiman. An opening date in October and inaugural exhibition will be announced soon.

"Flexible, beautifully designed spaces ... will provide VCU and our broader communities an open forum for dialogue and collaboration across the region and throughout the world," she said.

Now that the building's steel framework is being covered with layer after layer of vapor barrier, insulation, plywood and aluminum sheathing (eventually including a zinc outer skin), the building's striking angles have become clear.

Richard F. Sliwoski, associate vice president for facilities management at VCU, expects the Steven Holl design to be “absolutely, no doubt, a landmark for Richmond, pure and simple.

“If you go back to the original story for the inspiration of the design, he was tying it with the railroad station that was there. ... It tells a great story. You have the National Historic Landmark — the Capitol, Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a temple to liberty on the hill — and then you’re coming out here to a modern facility that really makes a statement, that ties the history of Richmond into this iconic building that we’re going to have here. To me that is just wonderful.”

Michael Lease, the ICA’s interim director of facilities, installation and exhibition design, considers the architectural juxtaposition to be inspiring.

“We are a city that’s always looking to its past,” he said. “I think that the excitement so many people have about this building shows a dedication also to the future, and that we can do both of those things simultaneously.

“What a great thing for people from the city and from outside it, for the first thing they see (to be) a dedication to new ways of thinking, new ways of learning.”

The building beckons in different ways to passersby at the intersection and to students approaching from the campus.

On the street side, translucent glass soars 72 feet high to bring a flood of light into the 33-foot-high forum and the equally tall True Farr Luck Gallery above it.

On the VCU side, an equally dramatic assortment of offset rectangles forms a “V” leading to the clear glass doorway.

Inside, long sight lines and intimate views continue the sense of surprise.

In Gallery 3 on the campus side of the second level, a small window looks out on the Thinking Field, where the cantilevered overhang of Gallery 2 creates a sheltered space. After the museum’s projected opening in October, you might catch a performance happening there.

Another mystery is solved when you see the auditorium. Its rows of seats are above the outside wall that leans out toward Belvidere.

Even the basement brings excitement to Lease. During the informal site tour, he called it “Lisa’s basement,” because Freiman was able to persuade VCU to enlarge the planned basement to include a space for exhibit preparation.

"It makes my life so much easier," Lease said.

Lease and Sliwoski sat down recently at the pink-to-purple ICA office on Broad Street to talk about construction progress on the one-of-a-kind design.

In the past few weeks, welders have been working as late as 10 p.m. on metal stud framing for the roof. The final concrete pour put a finishing layer atop a network of geothermal climate-control tubing in the Luck Gallery. Window installation is rapidly sealing the interior from rain and cold.

Within the next few weeks, demolition crews should begin work to take down an old brick apartment building at the corner of Pine and Grace streets and the former Evergreen restaurant, opening new views from Grace Street. The gas station on Grace at Belvidere will remain.

Commuters who watch the progress on their daily travels through the busiest intersection in Richmond have questioned how it's all coming together, wondering whether the variety of exterior layers indicated an underlying issue or whether materials had been removed because of installation problems.

Not so, Sliwoski and Lease said.

"Different areas are in different stages of completion," Sliwoski explained. An exterior stairway, for instance, required extra thought about where to run the de-icing lines to make sure the stairs would remain safe in winter.

"It's just sequencing," he said. "We know what we have to do there. It could have been just one thing we had to figure out, so we do it right the first time going in, so we don't have to take it out."

Lease reminded onlookers that "it's an architecturally complicated building. As a result, the staging for the processes has been pretty different from something that would be a rectangle or box. For a rectangular box, you would do all your concrete at once, then you would do all your steel. ... Being that this building has all these cantilevered spaces and really complicated engineering, the staging is incredibly complicated as a result.

"You're seeing all the processes happening at once, which I don't think is that common on other buildings."

For Sliwoski, unusual projects aren't something new. He was the director of the state Department of General Services when the Virginia Capitol was renovated and enlarged with an underground extension.

"That was a unique building, too, tying in the new with the old," he said. One of the challenges was replacing five different heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems with a single system without damaging the building originally designed by Thomas Jefferson.

"In order to make it one system," he recalled, "we dug down 4 feet below the foundations, and buried the horizontal (connecting ducts) under there. To get it into the building, we went back to old photos and found the 12 chimneys. We unbricked the 12 chimneys. We expanded them. (The new ducts are) all inside the chimney chases."

Stories like that kept Lease rapt in attention.

"May I just state the obvious that it's super cool that Rich is now on this job," Lease said. "I look forward to hearing more of those stories in the future. ... Architects are so excited about the ICA and about Steven Holl's design. They are the first ones to make sort of a connection to Jefferson's building and the importance of Jefferson's building to architecture throughout the country."

When some high school students looked at the construction site last summer, they asked Lease how long he thought the building would be there. He considered the question for a moment and said, "This building will always be here."

"Steven Holl is a renowned architect," he said. "I'm sure the moment it can be put on the Historic Register, someone will make that happen. If you think about Richmond's dedication to architecture, there will be people here who champion that building for eternity."

"In a really interesting way, we are making history."