

THE JOSLYN KC STUDIO

See Hear: Steve Paul on Rambling Around the Arts | An Omaha Museum Grows Again in Vibrant New Directions

By Steve Paul

KC Studio

September 9, 2024



The Joslyn Museum reopens in September after nearly two years of expansion and renovation, including a reimagined sculpture garden as seen in this aerial rendering. (courtesy Moare)

OMAHA, Neb. — An intriguing sense of historical continuity slowly emerges in the newly expanded Joslyn Art Museum. The Joslyn reopens Sept. 10 after nearly two years of renovation and construction of a sleek new wing, and its leaders are ebullient over the prospects of reconnecting with the community and sharing its vibrant new spaces.

The Joslyn has been an Omaha jewel since 1931, sitting pretty in its pink marble-clad Art Deco building. In 1994 the museum added a Norman Foster-designed, modern block, which mimics the original building with its skin of pink-hued marble mined from the same Georgia quarry as the original.

In 2018, museum leaders selected the international firm of Snøhetta to bring the campus into the 21st century and help reenvision its scope. Six years later, the results appear to be stunning and wholly engaging.

Just on the surface, the new Rhonda & Howard Hawks Pavilion makes an elegant, airy and light-filled union with both of its predecessors. On the exterior a rhythmic array of horizontal fiberglass and concrete panels, familiarly referred to as baguettes, contain an aggregate of crushed pink stone that in the right light will subtly echo their elders.

Standing in the new entrance atrium, surrounded by white walls, abundant glass and handsome wood-lined surfaces, one can think of the new Joslyn as a three-part essay linking solidity and open space, intimacy and awareness of the world outside.

During a recent walk-through with Joslyn CEO Jack Becker, a corps of workers were still preparing the grounds of an expanded sculpture garden and the transformed grand lawn that will help make the museum more visible to Dodge Street, Omaha's main westbound artery. Inside, electrical engineers were threading multicolored cables through ceiling panels and new exhibits were in varying stages of installation.



(photo by Nic Lehoux)



(photo by Nic Lehoux)



(photo by Nic Lehoux)



(photo by Nic Lehoux)

“We wanted the landscape to be more of an experience,” Becker said, while overlooking activity on the grounds from the new building’s second floor.

From his perch we could see the path of the Jesús Moroles “Omaha Riverscape” sculpture that will snake through the reinstalled reflecting pool.

Snøhetta’s Michelle Delk said by email that the new garden’s three acres “draws inspiration from the thoughtful compositions of the fine art within the museum and the subtle beauty of Omaha’s regional landscape.”

Almost everything about the museum, down to the branding typology, will feel new even to those who know it well. The main entrance has been moved to the north side, off James Fous Avenue, under the cantilevered top level of the Hawks Pavilion. The original building will sparkle with freshly polished marble floors, repaired and repainted plaster, a modernized lecture hall, expanded and reimagined education facilities and all new display cases. Two huge, knockout Art Deco lanterns still command attention high above their original atrium space.

The 1931 building houses ancient art and artifacts, global collections, and 19th-century American and Native American holdings. Becker pointed out some of his favorites, including a 5,000-year-old Egyptian vessel and tiny Roman objects made of gold. The 1994 Scott Pavilion contains mainly 20th-century artworks. New galleries in the 42,000-square-foot addition will take viewers into up-to-the-minute art territory. And the sculpture park will boast new works by Hank Willis Thomas (a mirrored stainless-steel version of his Martin and Coretta King tribute, “The Embrace”), and Alison Saar among others.

One inaugural show will introduce the Philip G. Schrager Collection of more than 50 works of 20th-century and contemporary art from the estate of a late Omaha businessman.



Joslyn Museum executive director and CEO Jack Becker in the new Hawks Pavilion (photo by Steve Paul)

Another will feature works on paper by Omaha native Ed Ruscha. The artist has given the museum 18 paintings, prints and sculptures spanning the last six decades along with 20 works by several of his Los Angeles-related contemporaries.

Other new exhibits will be installation oriented. One, in a Scott Pavilion gallery, will present the pared-down sculptures of Eva LeWitt (yes, daughter of Sol). The other, by French artist Clément Cogitore, involves a time- and history-bending mashup of video, dance and music.

The museum and its designers, including the Omaha firm of Alley Poyner Macchietto as architect of record, relate the lightness and horizontality of the new building to both a cloud-studded Great Plains skyline and Prairie School traditions. The new building even seems to converse well with the century-old, classically inspired Central High School just over the fence line to the east. It's not a small thing, when it comes to continuity, that the contractor for the project is the Kiewit Corp., which built the original museum as well as the Foster addition.

In the Hawks Pavilion, a curving staircase, faced in light-colored Polish ash, makes a sweeping wow statement in the entry hall. Not just a way to get upstairs, it's "a grand gesture," Becker said, and it speaks to the creation of "spatial and visual interaction," a principle I recently encountered in the work of the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza.

In mulling over the Joslyn project and its history, I couldn't help but think about parallels to The Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. The Joslyn opened two years before the Nelson, and each was born as a product of abundant wealth, generous philanthropy and grand optimism in the face of the Great

Depression. The Joslyn first expanded in the early 1990s, employing Foster, one of the most notable of international architecture stars; the Nelson began planning the Bloch building five years later and opened its glass-topped Steven Holl structure in 2007. The Nelson has just recently launched another expansion plan. The comprehensive collections of the two museums are complementary, and Becker reminded me that they collaborated on the big American Art Deco exhibit of 2022.

Together, the two museums serve as central stars in a constellation of midwestern art institutions that stretches at least from Bentonville, Arkansas, to Chicago. And the Joslyn's new building and reconfigured campus can only enhance the attraction for intercoastal art travelers.

THREE THINGS

The **Kansas City Symphony**, fresh off its first European tour, begins its new concert-series era under the leadership of Matthias Pintscher the weekend of Sept. 13-15. On the program: "The Firebird," Stravinsky's complete, ear-stirring ballet score; Dvorak's Cello Concerto featuring soloist Alisa Weilerstein; and a recent work honoring Beethoven's 250th anniversary by the Berlin-based Korean composer Unsuk Chin. In addition to the Symphony's meat course, a bubbling slate of pops and movie-score concerts follows throughout September and October. kcsymphony.org

It's always a great pleasure to have **Karrin Allyson** back in town, and this time the singer/composer/bandleader will be riding a wave of Latin spirit reflecting her recent record, "A Kiss for Brazil." That means she delivers the goods in lyrical Portuguese as well as English. I might be making this up, but in my memory Kansas City was the place that launched her career into a serious jazz orbit all those timeless years ago. Regardless, she kicks off a new season of the Folly Jazz Series on Sept. 21. follytheater.org/jazz/

It's hard to imagine a more influential and sharply rendered literary voice than the one presented by **Margaret Atwood**. Her achingly prophetic "The Handmaid's Tale" is only the beginning of her far-ranging body of work and belies the wry humor with which she often packages her message. The Canadian poet, fiction writer and essayist brings her fully stocked quiver to the Kansas City Public Library Sept. 24, contributing major star power to the library's 150th anniversary year. She'll be in conversation with the library's Kaite Stover, an event sure to draw an overflow crowd. kclibrary.org

<https://kcstudio.org/an-omaha-museum-grows-again-in-vibrant-new-directions/>