

# THE JOSLYN

## The Architect's Newspaper

**We Needed This: The Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha opens a new addition by Snøhetta**

By Charles Weak

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The new addition respects the rosy marble of the existing buildings but harmoniously updates the facade to reflect contemporary attitudes. (Nic Lehoux)

Thunderstorms have always been a fact of life in Nebraska—beautiful and awe-inspiring but intimidating if you're not used to them. Certainly, changes to a host of Nebraska institutions in years past (Gene Leahy Mall, Omaha Central Public Library, Holland Performing Arts Center, Eppley Airfield) evoke similar feelings of excitement and anxiety. But Snøhetta's completion of the new Rhonda and Howard Hawks Pavilion at the Joslyn Museum of Art, one of the city's—and the region's—most important arts institutions, has signaled a renewed faith in the Midwest cultural scene.

It's been decades since Conagra ushered in the 1990s building boom, restructuring Omaha's riverfront and downtown with a new 30-acre corporate campus. This moment in Omaha's history was complicated. Starting in 1990, the city added 5 million square feet of new office space, saw Gallup open an office in town, and was anticipating the opening of a new mall at 144th and Center streets. But the

most controversial addition was Conagra's new campus: This led to the largest demolition of a district listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Omaha's Jobbers Canyon district. Yet just 25 years later, in 2015, Conagra cut 1,500 jobs and moved its headquarters to Chicago.



The new Rhonda and Howard Hawks Pavilion at the Joslyn Art Museum adds gallery exhibition space, public gathering space, new and restored public gardens, and new entrance. (Nic Lehoux)

Young Nebraskans like myself may be skeptical of today's level of new development; however, we all know that turbulent thunderstorms bring rain, petrichor, and cool weather.

I like to say about the new Rhonda and Howard Hawks Pavilion at the Joslyn Art Museum what Nebraskans often say about thunder and the rain: We needed this. The new 42,000-square-foot addition by Snøhetta opened in September, connecting the Joslyn's two existing pink marble boxes: the original 1931 art deco building, designed by John and Alan McDonald, and the 1994 Suzanne and Walter Scott Pavilion, designed by Foster + Partners. Snøhetta's scheme adds 16,700 square feet of gallery exhibition space, 15,400 square feet of public gathering space, new and restored public gardens, and a prominent new entrance whose precast volume cantilevers out past the glass doors.





The rectilinear rigor of the original building softens into a contemporary curve. (Nic Lehoux)

The Joslyn sits just outside of downtown Omaha, a few blocks west of the Gene Leahy Mall. If you're driving westbound on Dodge, you'll see the Joslyn's rosy marble ascend from your passenger-side window as you drive past Omaha Central High School. Upon arrival, visitors can see Snøhetta's new concrete mass peeking out just beyond the entrance's stone walls.

"A lot of people told us, 'Don't eff it up,'" Jack Becker, the Joslyn Art Museum's executive director and CEO, said at a recent press conference. "It's interesting talking to people who have been coming here for generations. This is often their first museum experience or their predominant one."

### **A Meditation on Transition**

Like many Omahans, I first visited the Joslyn as a child. The astonishment I felt at age eight upon entering the 45-foot-tall glass atrium has stayed with me and is perhaps to blame for my interest in architecture.

Returning to Omaha in recent years has meant reconciling with the city where I grew up, in all its renewed versions. Even as Omaha changes, however, and new libraries, parks, and art museums come online, the things that make Omaha feel like home (Husker football, temperamental weather) remain constant. As the form of the new Hawks Pavilion emerges from between the two existing buildings, it borrows formal inspiration from the Nebraska landscape and weather patterns. Snøhetta's design is a

meditation on what it means to transition: The resolute rectilinear forms of the existing pavilions soften into a new curvilinear shape; a grand atrium guides visitors to intimate gallery spaces; and interiors bleed into the adjacent landscape of native prairie grasses. These grounds have been revamped for outdoor museum events. I look forward to witnessing how both the building and the grounds will change with the seasons and the weather.



A lofted atrium hosts people and art across two floors. (Nic Lehoux)

Michelle Delk, partner and landscape architecture director at Snøhetta, shared that “Jack [Becker] organized a group of us to go see sandhill crane migration. That placed us in the larger Nebraska landscape, which led us to call attention to seasonality and moments that pass by, light and shadow, like being in the blind.” Delk is referring to a research trip the team took, which gave the design team clarity on “moments where you can frame experiences differently and how the result can be quite moving.”

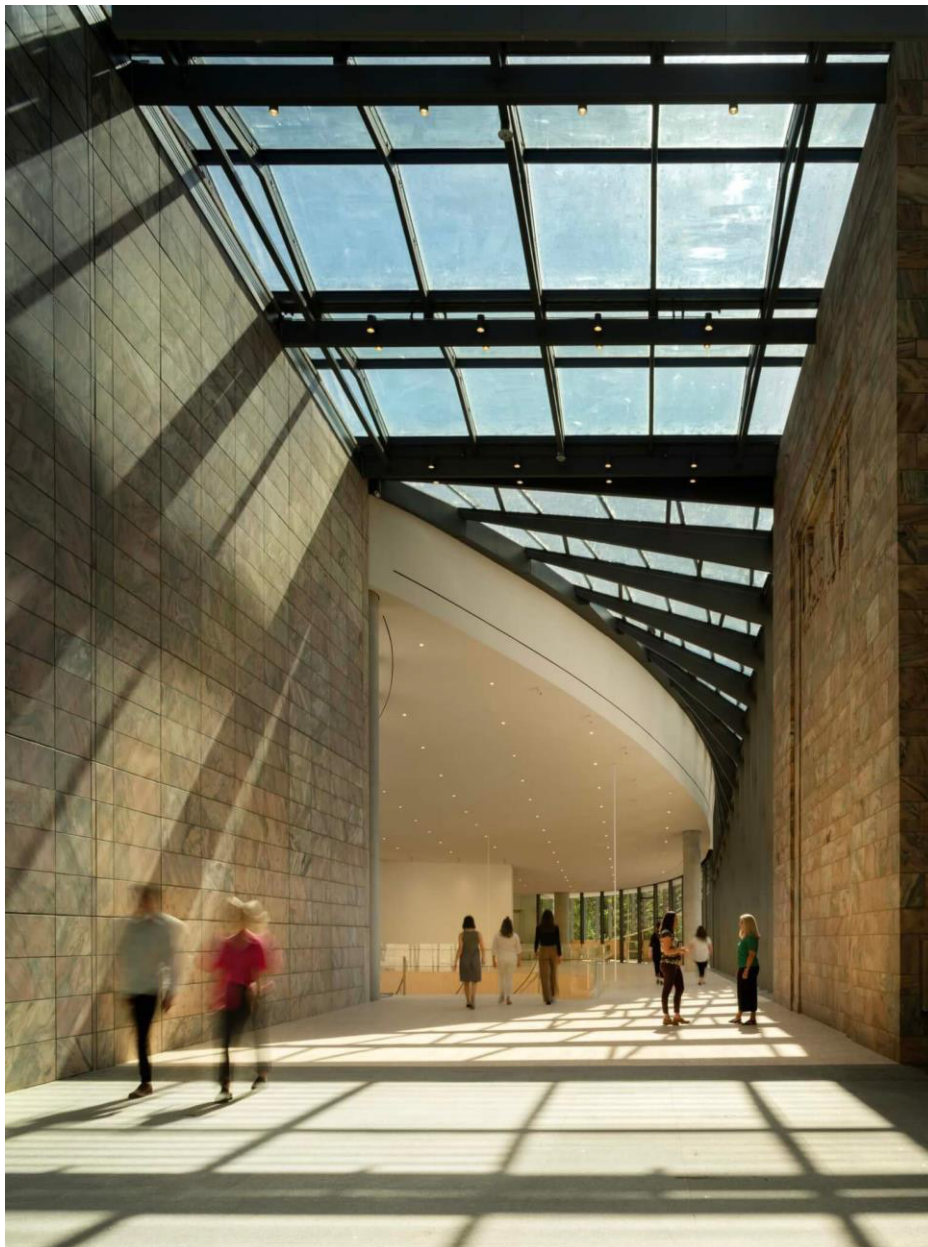
### **Compress and Release**

Early in the 20th century, Sarah Joslyn, the museum’s original donor, had a vision for an arts center to serve the people of Omaha. But that vision has expanded as the museum’s regional influence has grown. Art enthusiasts from Denver, Kansas City, Des Moines, and Chicago find inspiration here, starting when they enter the Phillip G. Schrager Atrium. Snøhetta designed this new entry to create connections to newly renovated outdoor public spaces and gardens populated by native plants and sculptures. A roiling upper volume, whose staggered precast baguettes appear to spin, spills out past the transparent ground floor, sitting low and creating a series of covered outdoor spaces before transitioning to glass and nestling itself neatly between the existing marble buildings.



Museumgoers now enter the Joslyn beneath the rose-hued precast volume. The tones of the baguettes and the volume's solidity on its northern face nod to the two existing buildings. "The first question everyone asked us was 'Will the new building be pink?' Our immediate answer was always no," said Snøhetta architecture director Aaron Dorf. "We experimented with different sizes and tones of aggregate, and the result was a kind of light blush to the building; it's not white, it's not pink, and it changes during the day and depending on the weather."

Once a visitor is inside, the weight of the low entry releases as the cantilever gives way to the atrium, whose sweeping curvilinear elements tie the Hawks Pavilion's atrium in with the existing glass atrium. "You feel a sense of compression, and then it opens up. It's a bit like walking into a church," said Snøhetta founding partner Craig Dykers. "There's a sense of drama."



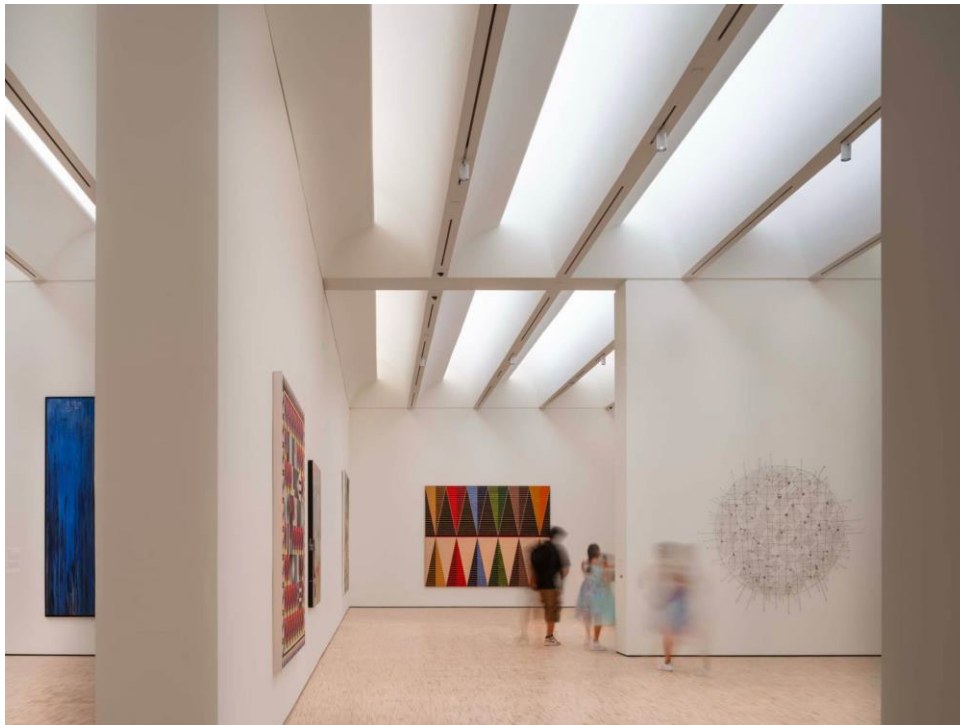
The addition creates an occupiable space between new and old. (Nic Lehoux)



## Change and Constancy

The drama Dykers described feels like a nod to the compression and release of the old building but with a twist. The atrium carries visitors up the grand stair and onto the second floor, which is lofted on thin white rods. At the top of the stair, this second-floor space is awash with natural light from the adjacent curtain walls. Sculptures from the collection then line the path toward the first two open gallery spaces of the new pavilion and the Phillip G. Schrager Collection, a donation of 52 works of postwar and contemporary art constituting one of the most significant gifts in Joslyn history. In addition to the traditional gallery spaces, the Hawks Pavilion hosts a new gallery of works on paper; the inaugural exhibition is by Omaha-born artist [Ed Ruscha](#), who donated 18 works as part of the addition.

When retreating from the atrium, the scale of the building shifts dramatically to more intimate gallery spaces. At the same time, skylights in the vaulted ceiling give off a warm daylit glow, and below, fragmented ash flooring recalls the parquet floors of the Joslyn's original galleries.



In the galleries skylights in the vaulted ceiling give off a warm daylit glow. (Nic Lehoux)

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In his final novel, *You Can’t Go Home Again*, Thomas Wolfe wrote: “Perhaps this is our strange and haunting paradox here in America—that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement.” To me, Wolfe is saying that only through the natural and constant changing of our world are the immutable pieces of our lives revealed to us, be they everyday things like college football and Casey’s breakfast pizza or grand things like wispy giants floating over seas of swaying prairie grass.

<https://www.archpaper.com/2024/10/joslyn-art-museum-omaha-snohetta/>





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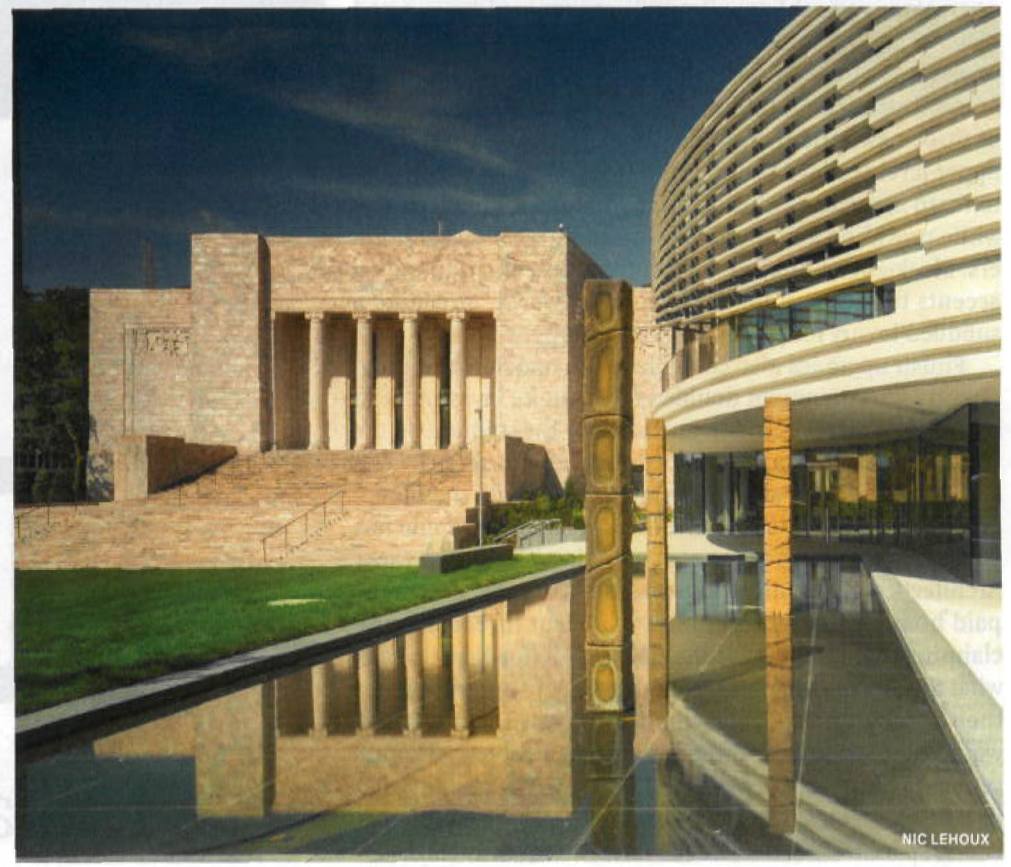




The addition creates an occupiable space between new and old.



Top: A lofted atrium hosts people and art across two floors.  
Above: The rectilinear rigor of the original building softens into a contemporary curve.



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Charlie Weak is a graduate of Omaha Burke High School, class of 2012, as well as a designer and writer based in Brooklyn, New York.