

# THE JOSLYN FAST COMPANY

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## **This Omaha art museum hired two of the world's most famous design studios to rethink its future**

The Joslyn brought on Pentagram and Snøhetta to help establish the museum as a world-class institution.



[Photos: courtesy Pentagram]

BY **JASON TSELENTIS** 3 MINUTE READ

Growing up in Omaha, Nebraska, the Joslyn Art Museum was a hub of culture for surrounding Midwestern towns. No matter how much or how little you knew about fine art, it was the place you could go to see works that you might not otherwise be able to access outside of the coasts.

Decades after leaving Omaha, I returned this past December, and while visiting my mother's house, I noticed a brochure for the Joslyn in her mail pile. It was unusually striking and had a look and feel that was vastly different from the Joslyn's **original brand identity**. The old logotype, locked up with a pictorial mark, was traditional and respectable, but also very much tied to the past. The new brand consisted of a bespoke typographic system, with an angular logotype and a color scheme that made the brochure stand out from the mail pile.

Weeks later, I saw Pentagram's [Instagram post](#) about its work for the Joslyn. Pentagram's Eddie Opara, whose team won the work—competing against multiple design studios, some in Nebraska—led the strategic and visual rebrand. The rebrand launched shortly after a new extension of the museum was completed by the famed architecture firm [Snøhetta](#), who partnered with Omaha-based [Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture](#).



[Photo: courtesy Nic Lehoux]

The museum's glow-up is a notable investment in a region whose cultural contributions are often overlooked. As Dusty Davidson, Vice Chair of Joslyn's Board of Governors, explained in the rationale for hiring top tier design talent: "Great cities have world-class art institutions," he says. "Snøhetta brought world-class architecture to Omaha, and we wanted a brand design that could be world-class."

## **PAST WITH PRESENT**

Opening in 1931, the Joslyn Memorial as it was originally called, was designed by father-son architects John & Alan McDonald, whose work for the Joslyn landed the building on a list of the "finest buildings in the United States" in 1938. "When I saw it the first time, way back in the '80s, I was gobsmacked by it," says Snøhetta partner Craig Dykers of the original building.





[Photo: courtesy Nic Lehoux]

In 1994 came an expansion, known as the Scott Pavilion, designed by British architect Norman Foster. Boxy in its look and feel, it's well lit from almost any angle thanks to the large glass atrium with a 45-foot-high ceiling. Then, in fall 2024, the Rhonda & Howard Hawks Pavilion opened. The 42,000-square-foot expansion, led by Snøhetta, was the impetus for rethinking the Joslyn's entire identity.



[Photo: courtesy Nic Lehoux]

This architecture proved to be a rich source of inspiration for Opara and his team as they worked on the visual identity. “I remember on their first visit, we lost track of Eddie for a moment. He was at the top of the grand steps, seeing this lettering that is carved into the building in this really unique typeface and he was up taking photographs of it,” recalls Amy Rummel, the Joslyn’s director of marketing & public relations. “Later he told us, *that was a real aha moment, this building has a typeface that could be a seed for something new.*”



[Photo: courtesy Pentagram]

The Joslyn's resulting type system, designed by Pentagram alongside Berlin's ABC Dinamo foundry,

is multifaceted, connecting architecture, art, history, and culture. The bespoke typeface essentially functions as the museum's core identity, in lieu of a solitary logo. The design is sharp yet elegant, and pulls the past and present together. "We looked at the different periods of art that the Joslyn has," says Opara. "And we looked at the anatomy of the architecture to make display type, relating it to the **Umó<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>** (Omaha) and related Indigenous languages spoken in the region."



[Photo: courtesy Pentagram]



Opara's goal was to fuse those architectural designs with a rebrand that would speak to Omaha citizens who know and love the Joslyn. To do so, he and his team set out to understand the importance of the Joslyn to Nebraska and the neighboring states. "We really went to town in regards to having a conversation with not only the key stakeholders and the board, but also the community," he says. "We did different surveys with Nebraska and neighboring states, to understand how the Joslyn is a magnet, and from a branding perspective it has lost its magnetism. What does it need to bring its magnetism back?"



[Photo: courtesy Pentagram]

Part of the answer is the shot in the arm effect that investing in top-tier design can have. The other is ensuring that bringing in outside talent doesn't lose track of what has always mattered to local institution: its community.

“In Omaha, in particular, you have a lot of people who generationally have the Joslyn as part of their families,” says Rummel. “They have personal experiences here such as, ‘I was married here,’ or, ‘I saw my first work of art at the Joslyn.’ People are really invested in this particular museum.”