

The Nasher Sculpture Center

Dallas, Texas, USA

1999 - 2003

Together with his wife Patsy, Ray Nasher, a great entrepreneur and extraordinary patron of the arts from Texas, have amassed one of the richest private collections of modern and contemporary sculpture in the world. Despite loan requests from numerous museums, Ray Nasher decided to exhibit his works in a space that would be specially designed to house his collection: the project was assigned to the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in 1999.

The site is situated in downtown Dallas, in what is known as the Art District: the district that houses the city's major cultural and artistic institutions. It was originally a parking lot surrounded by four rectilinear roadways, which was and nestled between a skyscraper and an underground freeway. According to the customer's requests, the museum had to be a quiet place – an oasis amid the local skyscrapers. The project's aim was therefore to create a museum-garden that would astound the city from a sociological and anthropological standpoint (as if an archaeological find were to have suddenly been uncovered in the heart of a modern metropolis).

The building, with an area of nearly 5,000 square meters, is made up of five identical and parallel rectangular pavilions, whose volumes are delineated by walls of Italian travertine. The stone has been polished inside the pavilions, while outside it has been processed using jets of high pressure water to age and abrade the surface, thus making it appear as if it had undergone thousands of years of weathering. The façades at each end are made up of large windows – transparent partitions that visually extend the interiors toward the outside, into the garden and onto the roadway.

The museum was constructed on two levels: the three central arcades on the ground floor house the sculptures and paintings that are most sensitive to atmospheric agents. The lateral arcades, on the other hand, contain the cafeteria, the shop and offices. On the lower level,

there's a small gallery for light-sensitive works, such as prints and drawings, as well as preservation laboratories, research and teaching areas, and even an auditorium. The latter overlooks a portion of the garden that descends toward the hall in a terraced fashion, thus creating an outdoor theatre. The mobile façade allows for both indoor and outdoor performances to be carried out.

The garden, which is entirely enclosed by travertine walls, accentuates the impression of being at an archaeological site. Situated just slightly below street level, this 8,000 square-metre outdoor area hosts a rotating collection of nearly 25 sculptures and boasts a wide range of plant life, including cedars, oaks, afghan pines, weeping willows and bamboo.

The roof is comprised of five glass vaults nestled between seven others in travertine, which are suspended above the pavilions and rest upon thin steel beams supported by stainless steel tie rods. A shielding system, made up of aluminium panels, is positioned above the glass ceiling. These three-dimensional elements, whose design has been patented, are repeated 223,020 times and only allow for the passage of direct light from the north. The diffused illumination that's achieved by simply pairing of the die-cast shielding elements with the glass roofing provides for lighting levels of up to 2,000 lux, which is only acceptable because the collection is mainly made up of sculptures. The interior space thus acts as an extension of the sculpture garden, and vice versa.

The museum was inaugurated in October of 2003.

Lia Piano