

Chicago Art Institute - The Modern Wing

Chicago (USA)
2000-2009

Founded in 1879 as an art school and museum, the Art Institute of Chicago developed into one of the world's most important museums during the twentieth century. Since the 1920s, several new galleries and accessory spaces have been added to the original premises on South Michigan Avenue dating from 1893. The latest extension, the Modern Wing, was completed in 2009 to a design by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

The museum's new wing, with a surface area of some 25,000 square meters, was built to enlarge the exhibition area by 30% and double the spaces used for teaching, which has always been one of the Art Institute's principal functions. The structure was also built at a significant urban node in the city's orthogonal grid, on the north side of the site where the museum is located, overlooking the Millennium Park and the Jay Pritzker Pavilion designed by Frank Gehry.

The Modern Wing is introduced by a majestic full-height space, which binds together the building's three levels and serves as the new entrance to the Art Institute on Monroe Street. This space – called Griffin Court – runs right through the Modern Wing from north to south, connecting the exhibition galleries and the educational center to the east with facilities for the public and an extensive open space for temporary exhibitions to the west. The galleries are devoted respectively to modern and contemporary artworks, with masterpieces such as Georges Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* and Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, while the top of the building has a large panoramic terrace, covering more than 3,000 square meters, with views over the Millennium Park. A light airy metal footbridge crosses the road below, linking the museum terrace to the park.

The spaces of the Modern Wing are articulated by massive Indiana Lime Stone clad walls, the same limestone that characterizes the Art Institute's main building, arranged parallel in a north-south direction. The south and north facades are characterized by transparent steel and glass curtain walls. In this way the skyscrapers and buildings of the city, as well as the Millennium Park opposite, stand out as a scenic backdrop for the contemplation of the artworks, relating Chicago's urban panorama to the museum.

As often happens in Renzo Piano's buildings, the roof is also entrusted with the task of modulating natural light. The Art Institute brings to completion the project strategy inaugurated in the Menil Collection in Houston (1982-1986), and reworked in the Fondation Beyeler in Basel (1992-1997) and in the extension to the High Museum in Atlanta (1999-2005). Slender steel columns, like modern tapering temple columns, support the roof structure – dubbed the "flying carpet" – which

floats above the building and is cantilevered out beyond its boundaries. Studies of the amount of light that the exhibits in the museum collection should receive led to the design of a special skylight which, serially produced, composes a “carpet” of modular components that allow indirect and rarefied light to filter into the galleries, favoring perfect contemplation of the artworks.

L. Ciccarelli 2020