

Rice Building Workshop Designs Café for the Menil Collection



Houston, September 12, 2011 – In an exciting collaboration, the Menil Collection and Rice University’s Rice Building Workshop (RBW) have joined forces to design and construct a café across Sul Ross Street from the museum’s main entrance.

The project began earlier this year, when Menil Director Josef Helfenstein, inspired by RBW’s Solar Decathlon ZeRow House, approached Rice University architecture professors Nonya Grenader and Danny Samuels with the idea of working with Rice architecture students to design a museum café.

Helfenstein has long seen the need for such a gathering place, in keeping with the wishes of John and Dominique de Menil, who also envisioned a café to complement the museum, which opened in 1987. Said Helfenstein: “Designed to be in harmony with our green, residential surroundings, the Menil café will enhance the neighborhood as well as the visitor’s experience, being a place of welcome, reflection and refreshment.”

Both community-oriented and cosmopolitan, the café promises to be another architectural jewel on a campus that is already an international architectural destination, the home of Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano’s first U.S. commissions, the main museum building and the Cy Twombly Gallery.

“The Menil is one of the most significant buildings in the United States, not just in Houston, and to build on its campus is a lifetime dream of any architect,” said Sarah Whiting, dean of the Rice School of Architecture and the William Ward Watkin Professor of Architecture. “For our students to have that opportunity is astonishing.”

Last spring RBW students began work with Menil staff and the museum’s board of trustees, who had determined that the café will be built on the 50-by-64-foot plot of land located directly behind the Menil Bookstore (which is housed in one of the early 20th-century bungalows that characterize the neighborhood).

RBW then proposed three design concepts for the café structure. The one selected by

the Menil takes inspiration from a modest source: the food truck. The new structure will feature a “service core” opening up to the outside and an expansive roof (slanted toward southern exposure) that encloses a tall indoor seating space and shelters an outdoor deck. Solid walls wrapping the west and north facades will block views of the parking lot (and, notes Helfenstein, can also be used as screens on which to project indoor and outdoor films). The glass-wall front of the café will face the pathway that leads from the Menil parking lot to the museum.

The 1,500-square foot café will include seating for approximately 40 (plus an equal number outside), and all of the kitchen and various support facilities required for such an operation.

Importantly, the Menil café will embrace the latest green technologies, involving minimal energy use, solar power, natural light, and all other aspects of sustainability.

This fall, RBW will develop a comprehensive design plan in complete detail, working with the Menil, professional consultants, and a contractor to substantiate and finalize all aspects of the project. In a subsequent studio course, students will prepare final construction documents.

Danny Samuels describes the proposed structure as “another instance on the Menil campus in which an object – whether sculpture, land art or architecture – engages directly with the surrounding green space.”

Construction is expected to begin next spring, with the café opening the following year.

A café operator and all culinary details are being studied by the Menil.

Photo credit: Rice Building Workshop

Since 1996, the Rice Building Workshop of the Rice School of Architecture has been instrumental in getting architecture students out of the studio and into the larger community, where their creativity can be challenged by the demands of real-life practice. RBW has had a long collaboration with Project Row Houses, where students have designed and built various prototypes of affordable houses. In 2009, after several years of work, RBW students took the ZeRow House to the Solar Decathlon (sponsored by the Department of Energy), exhibited it on The Mall in Washington D.C., and then brought it back to Project Row Houses. Over the years, more than 300 students have participated in this collaborative endeavor, and now several more cycles of students will try their skills in the setting of the Menil campus.

Located on a 285-acre forested campus in Houston, Texas, Rice University is consistently ranked among the nation's top 20 universities by U.S. News & World Report. Rice has highly respected schools of Architecture, Business, Continuing Studies, Engineering, Humanities, Music, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences and is known for its “unconventional wisdom.” With 3,485 undergraduates and 2,275 graduate students, Rice's undergraduate student-to-faculty ratio is less than 6-to-1.

The Menil Collection opened in 1987 to house, preserve, and exhibit the art collection of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil. As modernists the de Menils recognized the profound formal and spiritual connections between contemporary works and the arts of ancient and indigenous cultures. The collection, which continues to grow, currently exceeds some 17,000 paintings, sculptures, works on paper, photographs, and rare books.

Located within Houston's Museum District, the Menil Collection is open
Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Admission and parking are always free.

www.menil.org

For further information and images, please contact press@menil.org or 713-535-3170