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A temple of green blooms in Michigan

By Blair Kamin | Tribune architecture critic

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. - A building expected to become the world's first all-new green art museum opened in this western Michigan city Friday, yet it has little in common with the earnest but visually challenged solar houses of the 1970s. No clunky rooftop solar panels here, thank you. Instead, the new Grand Rapids Art Museum is a serene temple of green, one whose energy-saving features are deftly layered into the building rather than crudely glommed onto it. Elegance and environmentalism, it reveals, are not incompatible.

The \$75 million, 125,000-square-foot museum, which fronts on a contemporary outdoor plaza by Maya Lin, was designed by 38-year-old Thai-born architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who is part of the team reshaping the interiors of the Art Institute of Chicago. Yantrasast is based in Los Angeles, but his work is more in tune with the restrained minimalism of the great Japanese architect Tadao Ando, for whom he once worked, than the explosive baroque modernism of Frank Gehry and other Los Angeles architects.

At once understated and powerful, the museum represents the latest move beyond the visually overheated structures that sought to duplicate the "Bilbao effect," the global buzz and influx of tourists that followed the opening of Gehry's voluptuous Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, 10 years ago. Its crisply outlined, well-crafted exterior of concrete, glass and aluminum reflects the passion for details associated with such renowned Grand Rapids furniture-makers as Steelcase and Herman Miller.

Gift had one condition

Located two blocks east of the river from which the city takes its name, the new museum owes its existence and its green streak to the generosity of local philanthropist Peter Wege. In 2001, he offered a lead gift with one significant string attached: The building would have to meet the standards of the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system. No art museums that were entirely new construction had done so before, according to the council, in part because museums consume enormous amounts of energy keeping their precious works of art in a perfect, climate-controlled environment. While the council has not yet officially certified the museum, it has been designed to attain a LEED Gold rating, the second-highest after platinum.

Yantrasast, an amiable fellow who has a shock of white in his head of black hair, was not the museum's first choice to meet this challenging brief. The initial pick was a young, London-based firm, Munkenbeck & Marshall. But the arrangement collapsed, and the museum in 2003 turned to Yantrasast, the project architect on Ando's acclaimed Modern Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas. Yantrasast and his firm, the oddly named wHY Architecture, worked on the museum with the architect of record, Design Plus of Grand Rapids. "He understood we were in distress," said the museum's director, Celeste Adams.

More important, he grasped what it took to create a strong sense of place in the heart of a once-dying downtown that has revived in recent years with a new convention center, sports arena and Lin's plaza, which is called "Ecliptic." The plaza's focal point, a sunken, oval-shaped outdoor room, becomes a lively skating rink in the winter months. The museum faces this welcoming public space like an ancient temple, with three stacked gallery towers and their squared-off skylights hovering above. But it is a temple of community, not a temple of authority -- porous and inviting rather than impervious and intimidating.

Fits well in the neighborhood

Beneath its cantilevered concrete canopy is a heated outdoor dining area where, as Yantrasast envisions, families will drink hot cocoa while they sit and watch their children skate. It is a surprise to see an architect from a hot, tropical country such as Thailand be so well-attuned to the rhythms of life in a cool, northern city.

Despite its strong civic presence, the museum does not overpower the Victorian commercial buildings that sit across the street like something out of Edward Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning." It strikes up a conversation with them, a gentle dialogue rather than a shouting match. That civilized conversation stretches around the building, with the exception of the building's mostly concrete, too-blunt back.

There is plenty of green design in all this. It's just that none of it screams, "I'm green." The centrally located plaza and museum can be reached on foot, by bike and by public transit as well as by car. The big canopy shields the museum's interior from the hot sun. The skylights draw in energy-saving natural light. At night, they double as lanterns that advertise the vitality of the downtown. The green features added about 10 percent to the building's cost and should eventually pay for themselves in savings on energy bills, Adams estimates.

The museum continues to be quietly impressive as one approaches. Its exposed concrete walls are smooth to the touch and well-articulated, revealing the imprint of its wood form work. As one ascends a short flight of stairs to the entrance, subtle pleasures present themselves -- a view into a minimalist sculpture courtyard with a floor of white rocks, the soothing sound of a reflecting pool and waterfall, a framed look backward at Lin's plaza and the downtown skyline.

Thoughtful transition

These vignettes are all part of Yantrasast's carefully conceived transition from the bustle of the city to the contemplative spirit of the galleries. The shift continues in the two-story main lobby, where pride of place goes to artist Ellsworth Kelly's "Blue White," a big, wall-mounted work of two joined aluminum panels. In another artfully handled, energy-saving move, light enters not from above, as one expects, but from below, bouncing into the room from the courtyard and the adjoining reflecting pool.

Interesting places

At once restrained and animated, the lobby leads to some interesting places.

An elegant steel and concrete stair beckons the visitor upward to the second-floor temporary exhibition galleries. A wall of windows at the back of the building draws one past first-floor galleries to another surprise -- a shallow, three-story-high atrium carved into the building's back. Look up and you see a superlong stair along the windows, tumbling down from the third floor to the second floor like a toboggan run. It's not Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, but it's good -- a spatially exciting way to draw people upstairs.

'Art is living'

The galleries themselves are deceptively simple. On the first floor, for example, a conventional "white cube" gallery that houses the museum's fine collection of modern furniture is uplifted by the presence of borrowed light from the lobby. "Art is living," Yantrasast says. "It's not something you should inspect under operation-room light."

His third-floor galleries, which house works from the museum's collection of modern and American art, are more ambitious -- a suite of rooms with pyramid-shaped ceilings that sweep upward to the inner glass walls of the skylights. These galleries, as Yantrasast says, are "open cubes," with richer geometry and more natural light than the conventional, white-walled galleries long associated with New York's Museum of Modern Art.

They are, in the end, positive, but not faultless. With their mix of natural and artificial light, monumental and domestic scale, the galleries manage to be architecturally assertive containers that do not overwhelm

their contents. Yet the inner walls of the skylights seem plucked from a suburban office building. And being in these tall spaces feels like being at the bottom of a light well, not up in the treetops.

But such faults are relatively minor. This is an auspicious debut for Yantrasast, one that holds broader importance.

Museums are our temples, and they should reflect our highest aspirations. Along with Steven Holl's superb integration of architecture and landscape in the recently completed addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Grand Rapids museum represents a shift in values, away from spectacle and toward sustainability. To its great credit, though, it shows that energy-saving design can be both good for the environment and pleasing to the eye.



The new Grand Rapids Museum of Art sits in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids, Mich., 180 miles northeast of Chicago's Loop and alongside a contemporary plaza designed by Maya Lin, architect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The museum, which opened Friday, faces the park with a temple-like concrete portico. The building then steps upward to three stacked gallery spaces topped by squared-off lantern skylights. It is expected to become the world's first all-new green art museum. The U.S. Green Building Council has yet to confer official Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) status on the museum, but it has been designed to achieve a LEED gold rating, the second-highest after platinum. (Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids Art Museum and WHY Architecture. / September 6, 2007)



A mist fountain in Ecliptic, Maya Lin's Grand Rapids, Mich. plaza is one of three water-related features in the welcoming, contemporary public space. The others are a water fountain and an oval-shaped sunken room that becomes a skating rink in winter. Architect Kulapat Yantrasast, a protege of Japanese architect Tado Ando, is the chief designer of the new Grand Rapids Museum of Art in the background. Beneath the museum's temple-like portico, he placed a sheltered dining area where visitors will be able to sit and watch the action on the skating rink. (Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids Art Museum and wHY Architecture. / September 6, 2007)



The crisp concrete, glass and aluminum facades of the Grand Rapids Art Museum are designed to relate to their urban surroundings rather than overwhelming them. The northeast side of the building, seen here, faces a row of commercial Victorian storefronts across Monroe Center, a retail street. To bring life to the street, architect Kulapat Yantrasast placed a museum store, a restaurant and a secondary entrance on this side of the building. In this view, the two-story front section of the museum tiers upward to one of the three-story stacked gallery spaces. As seen in the background, Yantrasast made the building's corner seem open, rather than massive, by cantilevering the museum outward from an internal structural column. (Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids Art Museum and wHY Architecture. / October 3, 2007)



At the new Grand Rapids Art Museum, visitors progress up a short flight of stairs or a ramp into the museum's lobby. The museum's concrete walls are smooth to the touch and show the marks of its wood form work. Aluminum louvers, seen above the main entrance, are among the climate-control devices that improve the building's energy-efficiency. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)



Celeste Adams, director of the Grand Rapids Art Museum, stands on a balcony overlooking the main lobby of the museum. Aluminum louvers and fabric screens shelter the lobby from harsh natural light. Light enters from low windows along a reflecting pool (lower left) and a sculpture courtyard (lower right). The steel and concrete stair that leads to second-floor galleries is at right. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)



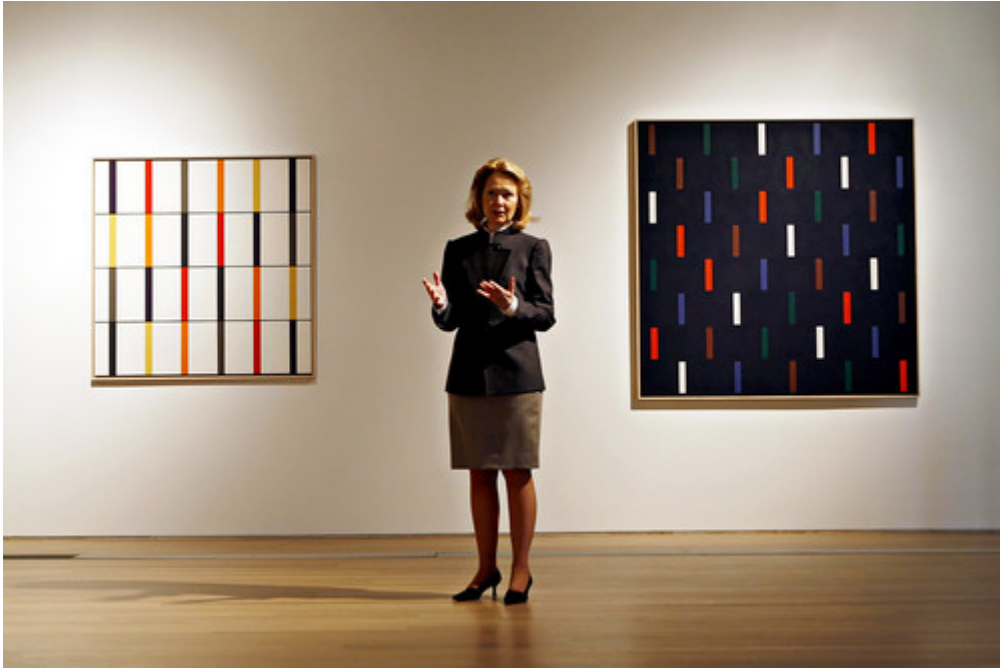
Ellsworth Kelly's Blue White, a big wall-mounted work consisting of two joined painted aluminum panels, occupies a prominent place in the new museum's lobby. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)



A mobile by Grand Rapids native Alexander Calder is shown in the rear atrium of the new Grand Rapids Art Museum. The three-story atrium draws light into the back of the building and leads visitors to upper-level galleries. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)



A conventional white-walled gallery on the museum's first-floor is enlivened by the museum's fine modern furniture collection. When the visitor in the small gallery turns around, he or she sees natural light, which is borrowed from the adjoining lobby. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)



Director Celeste Adams discusses a special exhibition of work from the Netherlands that is on loan to the new Grand Rapids Art Museum. (Associated Press photo by Adam Bird / September 13, 2007)