

New Museum's Centerpiece Is a Courtyard Sea of Stone

A sculpture by Richard Rhodes, made of 500-year-old Chinese granite slabs, is shown during construction in China in November 2002. In the weeks before the Tacoma Art Museum's May 3, 2003, grand opening, Rhodes is installing the sculpture, a heaving sea of stone with a cresting 7-foot wave at the corner marking the entrance to the galleries, in the museum's courtyard.



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TACOMA -- At the heart of this city's new art museum is a courtyard, surrounded by mirrored two-way glass and open to the sky -- a storeroom of natural light that spills into the galleries spiraling around it.

In the weeks before the Tacoma Art Museum's grand opening May 3, stone artisan Richard Rhodes is installing a sculpture on the courtyard floor -- a heaving sea of stone, with a cresting 7-foot wave at the corner marking the entrance to the galleries.

The stone is Chinese granite, hand-chiseled five centuries ago into 24-inch-square pavers for a road. Over the past 500 years, the crystalline surface of the slabs has been worn to a soft patina by animal and human traffic in the Pearl River Delta in southern China.

"They have this fantastic texture ... you get almost a sheen to the stone from the wear," said Rhodes, pulling a slender edge piece from one of dozens of wooden crates stacked outside the building.

Each piece was trimmed for the sculpture using a computer-generated paper template. The work was pre-assembled alongside a rice paddy in China, and then numbered, color-coded by section and packed up for shipping -- a blend of 16th century stone, 18th century craftsmanship and 21st century information technology, Rhodes noted.

"This is a 700-piece, 60-ton jigsaw puzzle -- you don't want to get it out of order," he said with a smile. "And what we know from having constructed it once is, if you're off a quarter inch down there, you're off two inches up there -- and all these lines converge so there's no way to hide that."

The stones will be mortared onto shaped pieces of plastic foam -- required as a base material due to weight concerns -- with rainfall seeping through to rubber matting and drains at floor level.

Visitors will follow a gently rising ramp counterclockwise around the four-sided courtyard, with the museum's five galleries -- and occasional bursts of light from surprising windows -- ascending to the right as they circle Rhodes' piece.

On the Web

Tacoma Art Museum,
www.tacomaartmuseum.org

Rhodes Architectural Stone,
www.rhodes.org

"It's a completely three-dimensional experience," he said, and "you wind up a full story above it, so your view is always changing."

And the rising swell represents a fluid microsecond at sea, so there's a fourth dimension at work as well, the dimension of time.

The courtyard covers about 2,000 square feet, but is not square by any means. The sides measure roughly 56 feet by 50 feet by 38 feet by 25 feet. The stonework, diagrammed in Rhodes' laptop computer, forms a warped hyperbolic paraboloid," he says -- not a shape offered routinely in geometry class.

Rhodes sees respite for visitors in the stone's subtle colors and textures.

"I wanted to create something that was thoughtful but didn't require your attention, didn't demand your attention," he said.

The sculpture's impact "didn't necessarily have to occur to you instantly -- it's something that could grow on you and maybe you came many times to the museum before you really fully appreciated it."

Museum architect Antoine Predock of Albuquerque wanted "a spiritual space" at the museum's center -- a tall order, Rhodes noted.

"I think that's something that the audience has to decide, they have to bring that," he said. "What I wanted was a space that was suitably blank."

The walls of the museum itself "have to be suitably blank so we can bring our hopes and expectations and our dreams to it," Rhodes said. "This space, it needed to be suitably blank so that it could be restful enough to sort of rejuvenate you."

The \$22 million museum will open with three primary exhibits in its 50,000 square feet of gallery space: of recent gifts to its collection; a selection of works by Northwest mystics Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson called "Immeasurable Spaces and Incalculable Energies"; and the Chihuly installation.

The new TAM offices are already occupied. Hanging of the exhibits is to begin March 10.

