

Woo Designs a Gateway to Campus



Architect

The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art was designed by Kyu Sung Woo Architects; architect of record: Gould Evans Associates.

Kyu Sung Woo, a native of Seoul, South Korea, earned a bachelor's and master's degree in architectural engineering at Seoul National University. He came to the U.S. in 1967 and earned a master's degree in architecture from Columbia University in 1968, and a master's degree in urban design at Harvard University in 1970.

6

Kyu Sung Woo, principal, Kyu Sung Woo Architects, Cambridge, Mass., speaks modestly about his design for the Nerman Museum

of Contemporary Art, despite a career that has garnered numerous international awards. A native of Seoul, South Korea, Woo is well-credentialed with degrees from prestigious universities and well-known for designs such as the 1988 Olympic Village. After a recent return to his office after a long international flight, Woo graciously answered questions about the Museum (see lead story pages 2-3).

Q How does it feel to have the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art almost completed? Are you satisfied with its realization?

A It feels terrific. To see the realization of the building is fantastic. I am very content with the realization of the Nerman Museum.

Q How did you decide on the design of the building?

A The building was generally a departure from the rest of the campus design. It is situated at a 45-degree angle to the Carlsen Center looking out toward the main road and facing the city. I wanted the Nerman Museum to be a gateway to the campus.

Johnson County Community College is very unique in the fact that art is a part of its everyday life. I wanted the building to be a beginning of that journey.

When designing a building, it is very important to work with the site and program for the building. I think that experiencing art is the major purpose of the Nerman Museum so I wanted the art and building design to complement each other. The building complements the art, and the art complements the building.

Q What mechanism did you use to allow natural light to enter the gallery?

A Natural light is the connection to the outside world. Natural light adds ambience to a space. The galleries borrow natural light from the outside as the light is allowed to penetrate through tight areas. One can experience light differently with the variables of space and time, and that is the importance of the skylight over the lobby as well. One can use artificial light to light the art, but the space is better with the addition of natural light. I also use a lot of light in the public lobby. Natural light is very important to a space.

Q How did you choose white limestone rather than the red brick used for the rest of the campus buildings?

A I think, one, limestone makes the building different. Since the Nerman is smaller than some of the other campus buildings, the white limestone intensifies its presence. Second, limestone is native to the site. I like the connection between the limestone on the exterior of the building and the genuine material found at that location.

Q Were there any parameters or prerequisites for the building that proved challenging?

A To me, every building is challenging. I work with the program and mission of the building, but I like to think of that challenge in a positive way. To me understanding the mission of the building and its location is challenging – and also exciting.

Q How do you want people to experience the Nerman on their first visit? How do you recommend first-time viewers approach/go through the building? Is there a circulation sequence?

A I don't really have a preference – there is no specific way one needs to experience the building. The building is unusual in that it has two main entrances. I assume that people will experience the first-floor galleries and, then, go to the second floor. The building is rich enough to experience in multiple ways. The building is pretty complex.

Q What highlights do you hope visitors will appreciate in the architecture?

A I hope the building enhances the experience for the visitor and makes them appreciate the art. I hope the building enhances the site and the campus.



Architect Kyu Sung Woo; Bruce Hartman, museum director; and art patrons Margaret and Jerry Nerman are shown here at the first presentation of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art on March 23, 2004.

Q Can you name some particular architectural elements in the Nerman that you used for the first time in the Nerman? How is the Nerman unique?

A Every building is new and unique. Every element is new. But one in particular that I might point out is the cantilever over the entrance. I am looking forward to seeing the light sculpture on the cantilever now that it is completed.

Q Is this your first building in the Midwest? Does regional location influence the design?

A Yes, this is my first building in the Midwest. Design is a process in understanding a location so I don't really pay attention to whether that design is in Korea or New England or the Midwest. I look at the given conditions and culture of an area, and I do my best to understand a specific location and mission. As for the Nerman Museum, perhaps, I have understood.

After graduation he worked closely with Josep Lluís Sert at Sert, Jackson & Associates (1970-1974). He was an urban design consultant for Harbison New Town, S.C. (1973-1980), senior urban designer for the mayor's office of Midtown Planning and Development, N.Y., N.Y. (1975), and principal of Woo and Williams (1979-1990). In 1990 he founded Kyu Sung Woo Architect, Inc., where he has continued his focus on creative design solutions in the United States and abroad. During his career, Woo has built extensively, with many major design works implemented.

Woo has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. He is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

