



On a cramped site, the architects pushed the building's envelope to its limit without imposing on the quaint town. The new building gives the museum a strong presence on the main thoroughfare.



# Machado and Silvetti challenge and benefit a historic seaside community with the PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM

By John Gendall

**T**o those who have visited Provincetown, Massachusetts, it would be hard to imagine a 20,000-square-foot institutional building rising up in the middle of that quaint, New England seaside town. But such a building now exists, and thanks to a thoughtful design by Machado and Silvetti Associates, it fits right in.

Operating from a white clapboard house since 1921, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) has been a long-standing presence on Cape Cod. But ad hoc additions over the years left the museum an architectural collage of disjointed constituent parts. With each addition carrying its own mechanical system, the museum was not only unsightly, but also inefficient. The lack of climate control and leaking roofs discomfited employees and visitors, but more important, prevented the museum from borrowing artwork from other institutions.

When the new executive director Christine McCarthy took over, she decided to finally restore and expand the museum. Her challenge was to commission a large institutional building on a cramped site in a quiet residential section of the small beach community.

McCarthy turned to Boston-based Machado and Silvetti, whose principals, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, are longstanding Harvard professors and Provincetown homeowners. The two Argentina-born architects have always been particularly committed to generating specific designs in the context of competing, even polarizing, styles. They set out to navigate a third way, resulting in what the two call "unprecedented realism," the title of their 1995 monograph edited by K. Michael Hays. In this approach, they acknowledge competing vernacular and formally autonomous precedents, but position their work in the unforced territory in between.

### In between in Provincetown

Such a scheme was required for the Provincetown museum. Rather than razing the entire structure, the team salvaged and restored the original house along with two galleries in the back, while tearing down the more



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**Project:** Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts  
**Architect:** Machado and Silvetti Associates—Jorge Silvetti, principal in charge; Rodolfo Machado, consulting principal; Andrew Cruse, AIA and Michael LeBlanc, associates in charge; Kelly Smith, Derek Johnson, John Clegg, Chris Grimley, project team  
**Client's Project Manager:** Daedalus Projects

The museum's ground-level opening connects it to the neighborhood (above and opposite). Lighting in the second-story art school is partly concealed behind cedar strips, while two box lanterns (above and top) are extruded, enlivening the relationship of solid and void.



The tripartite arrangement carries through to the western elevation. At the side of the addition, a new receiving door (above) has simplified the shipping and storage of art.

derelict add-ons. In a \$5 million, two-part process, in 2004 the architects restored the old house so that the museum could mount shows in its exhibition space while the new wing was being built the following year.

Silvetti notes that they “used every buildable square inch of space.” But by manipulating the relationship of solid and void, the architects eliminated what the program suggested would be an urbanistic imposition on the small town. The elevation’s massing is broken up into three horizontal bands. The lower, concrete-and-glass portion is set back from the building’s volume. Tucked beneath the upper two levels, it withdraws from the street, an effect accentuated by the glass walls. On the top level, a boxy glass lantern is pulled up and out from the cedar siding, which amplifies this isolated element as a negative space in relation to the mass. And at night when the museum’s lights are on, other glazed voids appear that are otherwise partially concealed by day behind the thin strips of cedar. Some of the voids are behind the cedar, while others emerge from it, allowing them to break up and activate the surface.

In addition to reducing the overall volumetric impact, these techniques also manage to negotiate the space between two aesthetic polarities. The building neither capitulates to the town’s shingled ver-

nacular Cape Cod context, nor reacts against it as a purely formal, autonomous object. The uppermost band is wrapped in cedar—like so many of the museum’s neighboring clapboard buildings—but is positioned here in thin, linear strips, like unmovable louvers. The middle register is clad with cedar shingles, the most quintessential Cape Cod element. But they are custom Spanish cedar, and are sized larger than

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their Massachusetts counterparts. Fixed using a Dutch lap system, each shingle overlaps on both its top and its side, in contrast to the typical Cape Cod style that overlaps only top to bottom. And on the lowest band, the concrete and glass assert the design’s contemporaneity. But the concrete is board-formed, so its surface is imprinted with local wood. Each of the building’s distinct surfaces therefore reveals a manipulation of material and form that leaves the architecture uncommitted to any aesthetic categorization.



The new building almost doubles the museum’s space, which had been confined to the original clapboard house since 1921. The new building picks up cues from the house, but with contemporary expression.



1. Reception/bookstore
2. Gallery
3. Museum back-of-house
4. Administration
5. Museum school

The art school on the museum's second story is flooded with daylight (left). The first permanent home for this popular community resource, the school has access to the museum's collection.



SECOND FLOOR



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Features such as natural light helped the museum earn a LEED-Silver distinction. Light-sensitive artwork can be exhibited in the two galleries in back.



**Old and new**

A staircase leading up to the second-story classroom and offices helps to suture the new to the old. This feature links buildings whose floors have two different heights (10 feet in the new compared with 8 feet 6 inches in the old) without compromising the interior continuity between the two volumes. On the exterior, the new building follows the eave of the old one, which unites the two with a single, strongly articulated line. This visual continuity is accentuated by pushing the new building's upper level to the western side, away from the old house.

Partitioned into five galleries, the exhibition spaces can be used individually or collectively. Some galleries are intimate, others more expansive, but together they provide a logical and unencumbered venue for viewing art. And in a rare move for a building type that normally demands enclosed galleries, a glass wall in the first gallery allows an interaction between the museum and Provincetown's main pedestrian thoroughfare. Two galleries toward the back are totally enclosed and can thus exhibit light-sensitive work. A second-story art school draws from both the exhibitions and collection. The architects accommodated a desire by the school to have the collection on-site by adding 2,000 additional square feet of storage space.

The first art museum to ever qualify for LEED, PAAM earned a

Silver rating from the U.S. Green Building Council. Photovoltaic arrays coupled with a number of other measures, such as a thermally efficient skin, low-flow water features, and natural light and ventilation contribute to a substantial overall measure of sustainability.

**Art (vs.) museum**

Recent museum architecture often invites commentary on its relationship to the art it houses (currently notable in the escalating debate over Daniel Libeskind's Denver Art Museum [RECORD, January 2007, page 84]). On one side of the discussion are museums whose formal expressiveness results in interior spaces that force the art and its curators into awkward submission. And on the other side is an architecture resigned to providing little more than exhibition walls enclosed in a box.

Appealing once again to its ability to find a third way, Machado and Silvetti transcends that debate. With PAAM, the firm realizes a museum with an expressive and elegant form perfectly amenable to showing art. Its simple beauty satisfies the intentions of both sides of the conversation, and panders to neither. ■

For Sources, go to page 202, and Projects at [archrecord.construction.com](http://archrecord.construction.com).