

A Clean, Well-Lighted Space

Thompson & Rose
bends Florida's intense
sunlight to its will
in the galleries
of a Tampa art center.
By Anne Guiney



The new Gulf Coast Arts Center administration and gallery building is carefully positioned to exploit the sun: Roof monitors face north to provide indirect light to the galleries within,



and a canopy covers the walkways between the building's two wings.

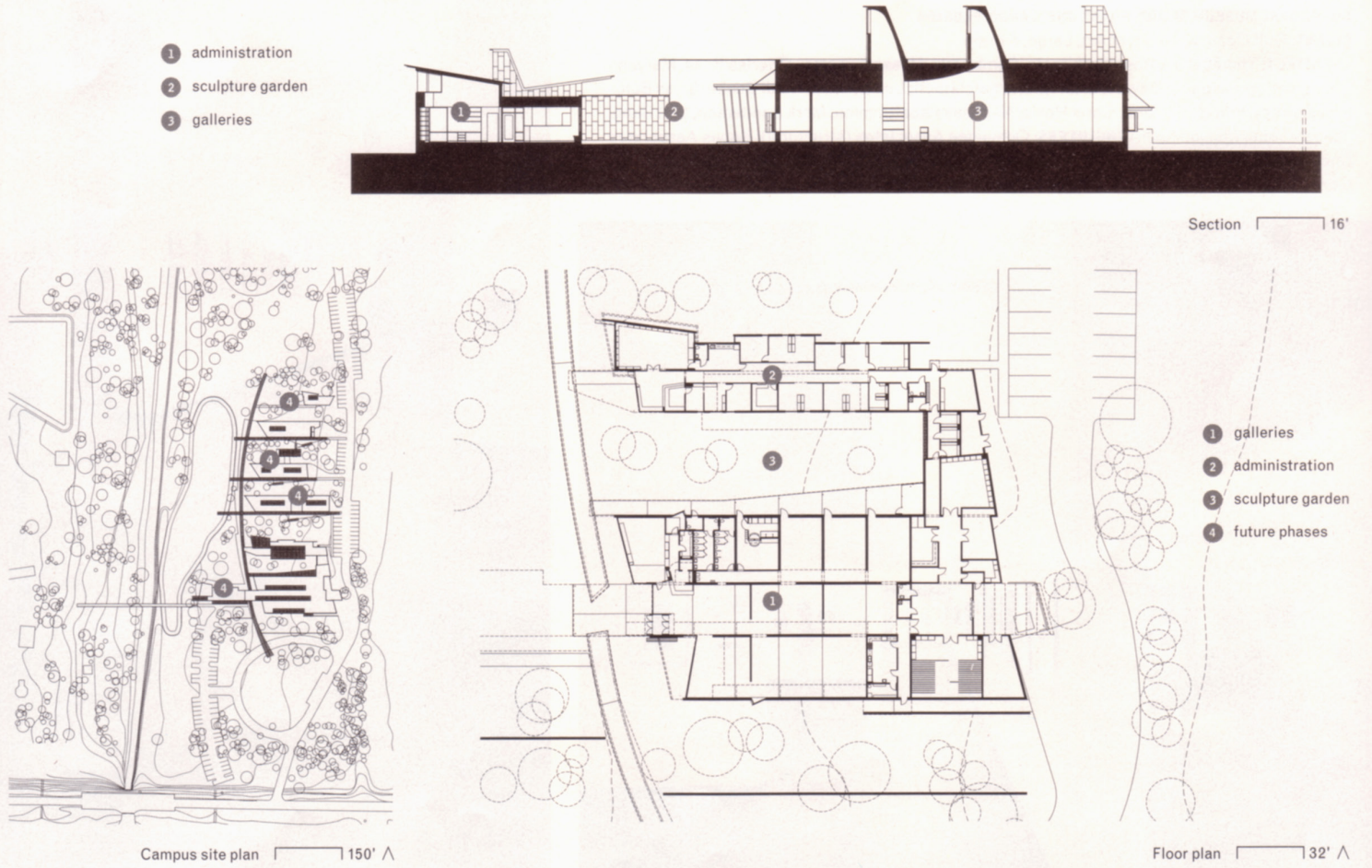
Apart from the beaches, Largo, Florida, looks like many other towns in Pinellas County—wide roads are lined by a succession of pastel stucco retirement communities, mobile home dealerships, diners, and donut shops that have grown up to serve the people who come here for the warm weather. One of the most heavily developed areas in the state, little remains of the citrus groves and piney woods that blanketed the area as late as the 1950s. This is the landscape into which Cambridge, Massachusetts–based Thompson & Rose Architects has placed an arts center that tries to modulate that most valuable local commodity, the sun.

The Gulf Coast Art Center's (GCAC) new museum and administration building is the first piece in a seven-phase plan to house a collection of regional art and provide studios for education programs. While the GCAC is an independent institution, the new campus was conceived as a component of a larger cultural complex: It sits on the edge of the 200-acre Florida Botanical Garden (which is currently under construction), the Pinellas Historical Museum, and Heritage Village. The latter is a collection of local "cracker architecture"—tiny dogtrots and saddlebags and other felicitously named house types—which were moved in from locations around the county and restored. The three comprise a cultural park of sorts that county planners hope will diversify Largo's attractions.

The central features of Thompson & Rose's design for the GCAC are direct responses to the sun and heat: The sawtooth monitors which diffuse the light also give form to the roof, while a canopy over the main path between buildings both shelters visitors and visually connects the separate



Tucked high up under a canopy on the south-facing side of the GCAC's administration wing, a bar of windows allows natural light into the office spaces without creating too much heat gain. A few larger openings at ground level look out onto the sculpture garden that sits between the wing and the galleries.



A man-made lake (top and site plan, above left) that is part of the Florida Botanical Gardens lies just to the east of the museum and administration building. When the whole project is complete (site plan, above left), the GCAC campus will also have buildings for an auditorium, studios, a foundry, a tearoom, and houses for artists-in-residence.

structures. Even the modest materials dictated by the budget (\$105 per square foot) work within this logic. Pale yellow stucco covering the concrete-block bearing walls is easy on the eyes, and galvanized aluminum sheeting on the roof and entrance reflects a mottled and darkened version of the sky.

Each of the three rectangular galleries that make up the bulk of the museum building is skylit by the large north-facing roof monitors. The sunlight is diffused through baffles and washes smoothly down the walls, which are broken now and then by small windows set in at an angle. The architects use these openings to periodically reorient people to the outdoors, but within a tight frame. The curving walkway running along the front of the museum angles downward toward the view: People in the lobby looking out at the woods and gardens beyond will always see them through the frame of the canopy. "The project is about how you perceive the landscape," says Charles Rose. "It's not like Wyoming, where you want a wide-open, unbounded view."

Unfortunately, the landscape is something of a letdown. The site was originally covered in tall spindly pines with a dense understory of palmetto, and the dappled quality of the light that filtered down through the trees animated any surface it touched. Now one has only to walk over to the board-and-batten houses in Heritage Village to experience the effect. Not so at the museum, where—midway through the process—the county decided to cut down most of the pines and replace them with a more familiar mix of palms, asphalt, and grass. The result suggests the landscaping around a suburban branch bank more than a vital museum. Thompson & Rose's buildings are a thoughtful and clear response to the intemperate landscape, but the frame they form is more interesting than the view they bound. ■

GULF COAST MUSEUM OF ART, PHASE ONE, LARGO, FLORIDA

CLIENT: Gulf Coast Museum of Art, Largo, Florida

ARCHITECT: Thompson & Rose Architects, Cambridge, Massachusetts—Charles Rose, Maryann Thompson (principals); David Martin (project architect); Lucia Allais, Heidi Beebe, Brian Bell, Erin Cowhey, Franco Ghilardi, Chris Hoxie, Nicholas Papefthimiou, Mark Sanderson, Lori Sang, Takashi Yanai (design team) **ENGINEERS:** Ocmulgee Associates (structural); Bobes Associates (mechanical, electrical, HVAC); Pinellas County (civil) **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Peter Brown Construction **COST:** \$2.3 million **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Chuck Choi



The galleries sit in three parallel bars (above and facing page), and are lit primarily with sunlight diffused by curved baffles set perpendicular to the walls. The aluminum cladding on the



roof folds over onto the front façade at the main entryway (at far right), and is visible through the corner glass window.