

Teaching by example, **ROTO** raises brickwork to imaginative new levels with the **ARCHITECTURE AND ART BUILDING** at Prairie View A&M in Texas



By Sarah Amelar

At first, we were afraid to ask the brick what it wanted to be," says Michael Rotondi, FAIA, of his design for the Architecture and Art Building at Texas's Prairie View A&M University. "What if it still wanted to be an arch? But then the answer came: It wanted to dance." So, Rotondi; his partner, Clark Stevens, AIA; and their firm, Roto, experimented with the material, creating a sheathing, with great rhythmic pleats and gaping flaps, that billows like a huge, windblown garment.

Brick was a given, mandated by the campus planning guidelines. But Rotondi, a seasoned educator, who had headed the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) for a decade, saw this requirement—and the entire project—as an opportunity to challenge the conventions of materials and spark the imaginations of architecture students.

In interviewing for the commission, Rotondi told Ikhlas Sabouni, Prairie View's dean of architecture, that he was ready to "download 30 years of experience as an architect and educator." He proposed not only to review the curriculum, but also teach the students, as part of the design process. With the search committee's approval, Sabouni soon signed on, dedicated, as she puts it, to finding "an architect of national renown, who'd create a laboratory for design, a beautiful structure that students could learn from."

Just as Rotondi had been eager to embrace Native American culture when he built at Sinte Gleska University, on South Dakota's Rosebud Reservation [RECORD, November 1999, page 84], he hoped to gain an understanding of Prairie View's culture. Historically, this 130-year-old branch of Texas A&M University, sited 45 miles northwest of Houston, has had a predominantly African-American student body. In 2000, the school won a \$190 million Office for Civil Rights settlement to compensate for long-term denial of adequate financial resources. The university allocated the funds for four new structures for the following disciplines: architecture (which shared a building with engineering), nursing, juvenile justice, and electrical engineering. In addition to the architecture school, with its 225 undergraduate and graduate students, Roto's \$20 million, 108,000-square-

foot building would house construction-science and community-development programs, as well as the Community Urban Rural Enhancement Service and the Texas Institute for the Preservation of History and Culture, with its focus on African-American contributions to the state.

Rotondi began interacting with the students through nonarchitectural, almost meditative exercises aimed, he says, at "heightening awareness, concentration, and focus," while opening windows to their subcultures. After getting his pupils to savor and describe the textures and unfolding flavors of "a fresh food item that a grandmother would prepare," he asked them to bring in a favorite piece of music. They diagrammed what they heard on 6-foot-long pages, tracing melodic lines and rhythmic structures, and relating the drawings back to the body's movement through space. "From gospel and rhythm and blues to bluegrass, all the music had roots in East or West Africa," the architect says. "So, right there, in those incremental rhythms and long melody lines, we found our building's ordering system."

Though Rotondi considered various partis, he settled on a long configuration with a central space and linear arrangement of studios—a diagram that had proved successful in SCI-Arc's latest incarnation. Prairie View initially offered him a site buried at the back of the campus, but Rotondi convinced the university president (a man committed to architecture as an educational tool) to place the building as a gateway to the school.

As realized (in conjunction with HKS), the three-story, 450-foot-long, concrete-framed structure presents its most eclectic face on its south, or entry, side. Here, a curving shell of brick wraps the cultural center, at the building's west end, while a brise-soleil of painted, perforated steel veils

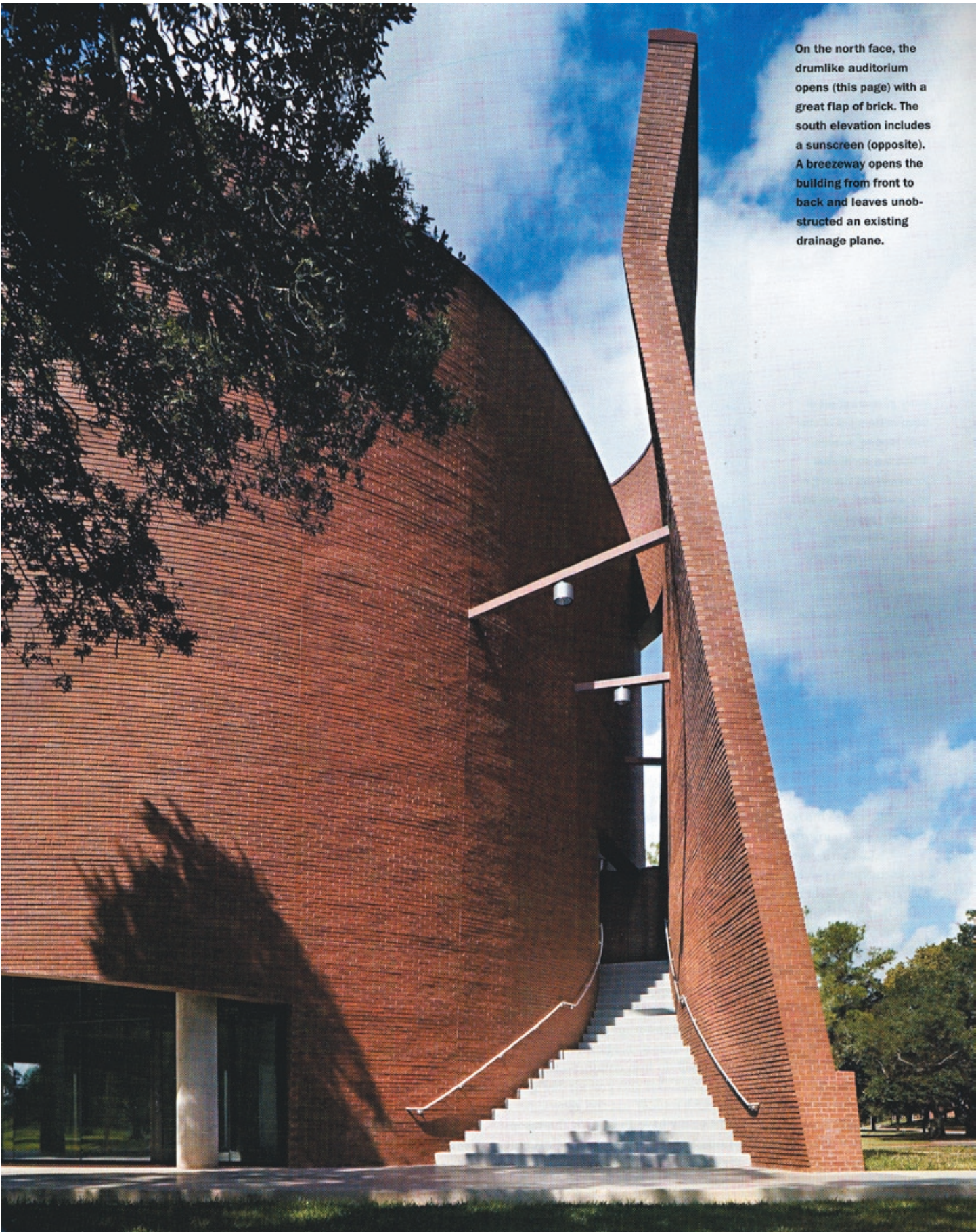
Project: *Architecture and Art Building, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas*

Architects: *Roto Architects—Michael Rotondi, FAIA, Clark Stevens, princi-*

pals; Tom Perkins, project architect; Jim Basset, Alyssa Holmquist, Devin McConkey, Sergio Ortiz, Otoniel Solis, Jack Nyman, John Lessl; HKS—Jess Corrigan, AIA, principal

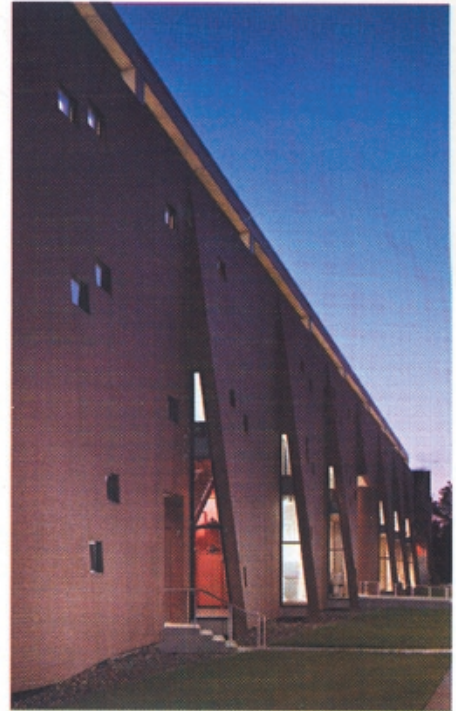
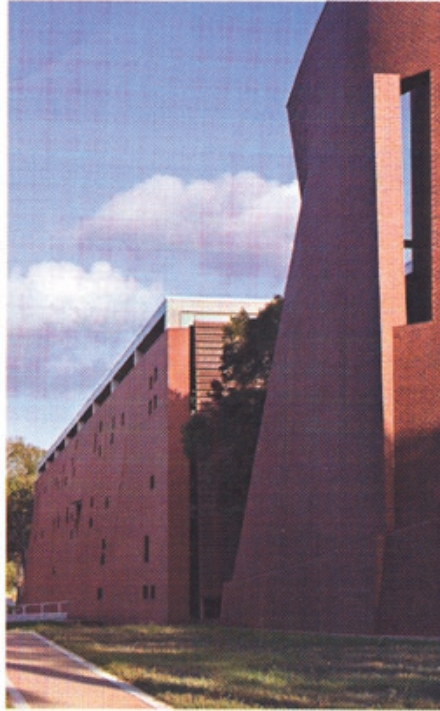
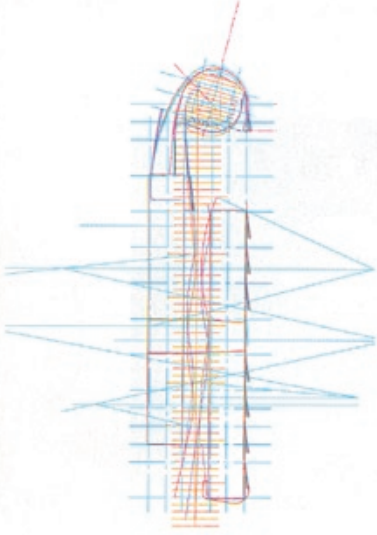
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PROJECTS ■



On the north face, the drumlike auditorium opens (this page) with a great flap of brick. The south elevation includes a sunscreen (opposite). A breezeway opens the building from front to back and leaves unobstructed an existing drainage plane.

A rhythmic diagram (below) shows the plan's ordering system. A live oak (near right) was preserved and integrated with the north elevation, which fans out like a skirt (far right). A sun-screen (bottom) veils south-facing studios.



PHOTOGRAPHY: © DAVID GUTHRIE (OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT)



On the north elevation, small, punch-card apertures in the brick walls play against large, triangular windows in the perpendicular spaces between wall planes (left). The glazed north entrance forms pleats and folds around the existing live oak tree (below). A small balcony—or penalty box, as Dean Sabouni jokingly calls it—penetrates the brise-soleil, providing a break-out space from the architecture studios, while the art studios, on the ground floor, can open with glassy, roll-up garage doors (right).



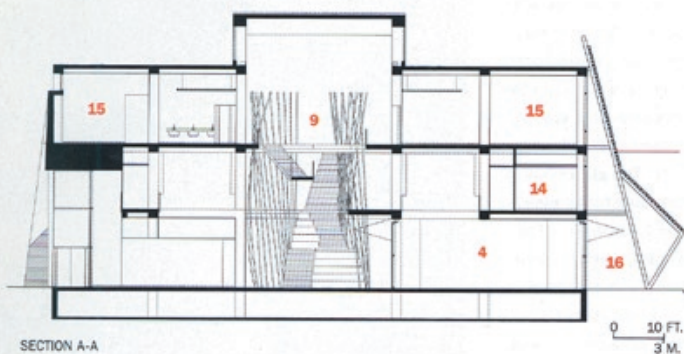
glazed architecture studios to the east. Though this elevation offers the project's most collaged and even disjointed composition, the contrasting materials and forms effectively distinguish among the functions within. And the sunscreen, dipping toward the ground, mediates between the prairie grasses in front of the building and the campus behind it, while alluding to a shady Southern front porch.

As if entering a truly lived-in home, students typically access the building not from its formal street approach, but from the back, or campus, side to the north, where an ancient oak tree commands an entry courtyard. Here, on the north face, the brickwork becomes extraordinary. Using old-fashioned, wire-cut clay bricks, instead of the more artificial-looking versions that clad the surrounding buildings, Roto inventively explored corbeling, displaying a jubilant range of possibilities in full view of the students. The skin, with mortar matching the deep orange bricks, wraps the cylindrical auditorium like taut fabric, flaring out toward the base. Like a monumental flap swaying in the breeze, a wall of brick opens from the drum, creating an interstitial space, where stairs spill out from the theater.

Farther down the long north elevation, a series of canted walls fan out beneath the roofline, creating in-between spaces for tall triangular windows perpendicular to the wall planes. Playing against these large openings, small punch-card apertures punctuate the planes of brick. If the battered masonry and little windows evoke a fortress, it is one transformed by an accessibly human scale and sense of whimsy. The inventiveness continues, for example, where the walls surge out at their bases, transforming the geometry as they undulate up to crisp, 90-degree angles at the top. Paradoxically, the brickwork expresses heft or solidity, but billows like a skirt.

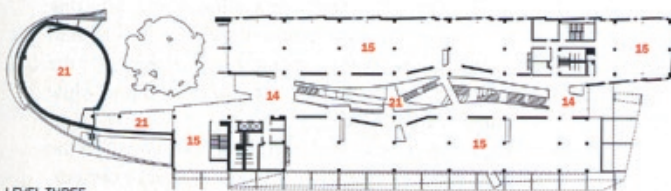
The craft of bricklaying, Rotondi says, was originally brought to this region by African-American slaves. At Prairie View, the architect encouraged his bricklayers to use traditional hand methods in new and creative ways, fine-tuning the corbels to enhance the walls' sculptural qualities.

For the interior, Roto produced a central circulation "canyon" that



SECTION A-A

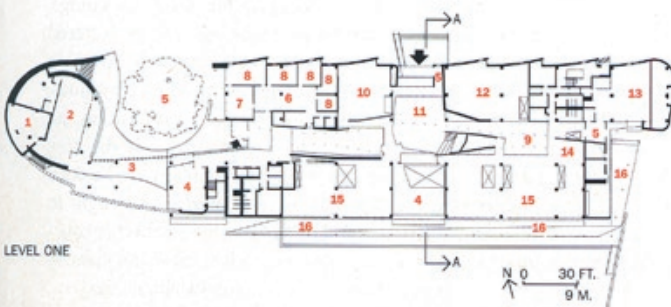
- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Cultural archive | 9. "Canyon" | 17. Theater/lecture hall |
| 2. Cultural gallery | 10. Lecture hall | 18. Reference library |
| 3. Breezeway | 11. "Main space" | 19. Classroom/seminar |
| 4. Gallery/pinup area | 12. Art studio | 20. Computer lab |
| 5. Existing oak tree | 13. Wood/metal shop | 21. Open to below |
| 6. Administration | 14. Lounge | 22. Café |
| 7. Conference | 15. Architecture studio | 23. Roof deck |
| 8. Office | 16. "Porch" | |



LEVEL THREE



LEVEL TWO



LEVEL ONE



extends up the building's three stories, providing an informal amphitheater and gallery/pinup space. This central zone is crossed by a web of catwalks, and stairs on tubular steel trusses that swoop like roller coasters. Scrims of steel cable net, resembling chain link, partially screen the area, not only defining a space within a space, but also producing moiré effects, animated by abundant daylight from the canyon's clerestory and end windows. Slender steel columns, supporting the slung steel net without reaching the ceiling, lean like casually planted wooden stakes, adding to the dynamism.

From the canyon, little remains hidden, with glass-fronted administration and art studios on the ground floor, offices on the second, and architecture studios at the top. The interior glazing invites views into work spaces, stimulating cross pollination. "Multipurpose 'piazzas' or social areas are where idea exchange really happens," says Rotondi. And because the "melody line"—long concrete floor slabs flanking the central zone—forms a quiet datum, the interior achieves balance, keeping the rhythmically charged circulation elements from becoming distracting or overwhelming. While Rotondi sees SCI-Arc's home as "neutral, enduring, and forgiving in its industrial nature" and Alvar Aalto's Helsinki architecture school as "intimidating in its perfection," he considers Prairie View a middleground: an architectural presence that is neither totally neutral nor overpowering.

Hardly intimidating, the "dancing" new building has inspired everyone, reports Dean Sabouni, to spend more time at school, a place they helped create. Certainly, the scheme emerged from an ongoing dialogue, a true give-and-take, between students and architect. But that was just the beginning: The degree candidates, actively engaging a new set of architects, are already vetting designs for the next three structures on campus. ■

Sources

Brick: Acme Brick
Sunscreen: Beck Steel
Glazing: Viracon

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.archrecord.com.



Stairs slung on bowed trusses dynamically cross the central 'canyon,' amid canted cable-net scrims (this page and opposite). Warm terrazzo floors resemble cork. As a consultant, April Greiman oversaw the colors and finishes.