

The Menil Engages David Chipperfield Architects to Design Master Site Plan

HOUSTON, January 26, 2009 – Contemplating the future expansion and development of the museum and the campus it anchors, Josef Helfenstein, director of the Menil Collection, has announced that David Chipperfield Architects will design the Menil’s master site plan. The commission follows an international search. “It was very clear to us,” said Helfenstein, “that David Chipperfield Architects -- with its impressive museum projects around the world and the architects’ clear understanding of the Menil’s extraordinary qualities and spirit -- is the firm to lead us through this process. The creation of a master site plan will lay the foundation for the future of this remarkable place.”

Many museum projects bear the mark of David Chipperfield Architects, which has offices in London, Berlin, Milan, and Shanghai. These include the master plan for the Penn Museum in Philadelphia; Neues Museum in Berlin; the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Alaska; Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK; 6 Burlington Gardens, the Royal Academy, London; and the Museum of Modern Literature, Marbach am Neckar, Germany.

The Menil lies at the center of a 30-acre “neighborhood of art” in the Houston Museum District. The main museum building, designed by Renzo Piano, opened in 1987. It houses the art collection of John and Dominique de Menil, considered to be one of the most important privately assembled collections of the twentieth century. Surrounding it are 1920s bungalows (some of which house Menil offices), an apartment complex, satellite exhibition pavilions such as the Cy Twombly Gallery and the Dan Flavin installation at Richmond Hall, the Rothko Chapel, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, green spaces, and outdoor sculpture.

A long-range strategic planning process, completed in 2006, concluded that further expansion of the Menil – which would lead to the construction of such facilities as the Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center, an auditorium, a café, additional space for Menil Archives, and buildings devoted to the work of individual artists -- should be carried out within the framework of a master site plan. That plan will also study the development of income-producing properties along Richmond Avenue, where Metro will construct a light rail line within the next 5 years.

The master site plan aims to increase the Menil’s visibility and accessibility without sacrificing its tranquil, oasis-like quality. David Chipperfield Architects and the Menil have embraced several guiding principles for this task. The plan will suggest no alterations to existing Menil art buildings and will preserve the scale, ambience and residential quality of the neighborhood.

Said David Chipperfield: “It is difficult to think of another museum where the combination of collection, architecture, and landscape has created such a relaxed, informal and humane environment for the contemplation of art. This is the challenge through the expansion process: to maintain the Menil’s sophisticated modesty and the ethos of the institution, its vision, its quality, and its extraordinary atmosphere.”