

ArchitectureBoston



THE 2000 HARLESTON PARKER MEDAL The Davis Museum and Cultural Center

Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA

ARCHITECTS:

Rafael Moneo and Payette Associates

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER:

Richard White Sons



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**The 2000
Harleston Parker Medal:
The Davis Museum and
Cultural Center
Wellesley College
Wellesley, Massachusetts**

**Design Architect:
Rafael Moneo
Madrid, Spain**

**Architect:
Payette Associates, Inc.
Boston
www.payette.com**

**Contractor:
Richard White Sons, Inc.**

**Consultants:
LeMessurier Consultants, Inc. (structural);
Fissher and Marantz (lighting); John
Altieri Consulting Engineers (mechanical,
plumbing, electrical); Acentech
Incorporated (acoustics)**

**Photography:
below - Steve Rosenthal
facing page top and center - Scott Frances/Esto
facing page bottom - Steve Briggs**

The Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, completed in 1993, was the first American building by Rafael Moneo, the Pritzker Prize-winning Spanish architect. Its site is adjacent to the Jewett Art Center, Paul Rudolph's 1958 masterpiece - a seemingly sure-fire set-up for the kind of controversy that has followed other efforts to add onto Modern masterpieces. Instead, this addition to the Wellesley family is exceptionally well-behaved and respectful, with a healthy measure of self-esteem. Referential without being overly reverential, Moneo has actually improved the Jewett by at last making its famous stairway to nowhere a stairway to somewhere.

Despite its role as a regional resource, the Davis is primarily a teaching facility. Teaching museums tend to be more intimate than their big-city counterparts, their smaller scale and greater accessibility placing the students eye-to-eye with artists of the past. Here, intimacy is created by glimpses of life behind



the scenes, a bit like going on a house tour and finding that someone has left a sweater on the back of a chair. Students visiting the museum see the freight elevator, observe curators at work, walk past administrative offices, and learn that art is more than entertainment.

The Davis' intimacy is also a function of its architecture - not in the bold massing observed from the exterior, but in the development of its interior spaces. The gallery block is conceptually simple: a cube of equal height galleries stacked four-high, pierced by a central stair. It is daylight that makes this simple idea come to life: daylight that pours into the upper gallery through five north-facing lightscoops, that streams down the exterior walls to the level below, that spills through an atrium next to the stair, drenching three levels. The stair itself is perhaps the most intimate space in the building. Wide enough for only two people, it is enclosed by maple-veneered walls that produce a soft gold glow under its low lighting. At each landing, the visitor is given a view through the atrium back into the galleries, a sensation like standing in the shelter of a cavern while peering through a cascade to the landscape beyond.

Climbing the stair is an experience to be savored, a point made at the upper levels where the steps themselves change to very low risers and deep treads. It is a sudden, and rare, intrusion by the architect, as though he is plucking at your sleeve, urging, "Slow down! Take your time! You're going to love what's next, it's really good!" And it is good. Arriving at the top, the tight dimness of the stairway explodes into a bright airy gallery, an attic full of treasures where the roof has been removed to let the light in.

One of the most appealing aspects of the Davis is also the greatest factor in its success: the lack of ego in its architect. Moneo is certainly confident, but he is also modest. After visiting the arts complex, you begin to understand his sense of propriety, that hollering for attention is an unseemly activity. Instead, he has made a building that takes its place quietly, asserting its presence while honoring those around it. A good lesson from a teaching museum.

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA



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Jury:

Susan Personette AIA
MIT Capital Projects, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Chair, Harleston Parker Medal Committee

Kimberly Alexander
Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

Bob Daigle
Daigle Engineering, Methuen, Massachusetts

Deborah Fennick
TAMS, Boston

Brian Healy AIA
Brian Healy Architects, Boston

Lee Kennedy
Lee Kennedy Company, Dorchester, Massachusetts

Peter Kuttner FAIA
Cambridge Seven Associates
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Theodore Szostkowski AIA
Kallman McKinnell & Wood, Boston

Marc Truant AIA
Mark Truant & Associates
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Nick Wheeler
Wheeler Photographics, Weston, Massachusetts

Editor's note: The full text of jury comments may be found at www.architects.org/awards.html

For information about the design of the Davis Center:
www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/DMCCMoneo/DMCC_building_homepage.html

The Harleston Parker Medal was established in 1921 by J. Harleston Parker to recognize "the most beautiful piece of architecture, building, monument, or structure within the city limits of the City of Boston or of the Metropolitan Parks District." Its only criterion is "beauty," an attribute its creator neglected to define - much to the delight and puzzlement of juries ever since. This year's jury was no exception:

"Our discussion of beauty centered on the transcendent, subconscious, emotional, and timeless qualities of the buildings we each found beautiful. Soul-restoring, profoundly moving, culturally meaningful in our society, enduring, transcultural - these were some of the terms mentioned in our discussion. We agreed that social responsibility was desirable but not necessary condition of beauty, in contrast to the juries and the awards of the past several years."

"The Davis Art Museum emerged as the clear choice. The jury appreciated witnessing the 'hand of a master' at work in the building's high level of resolution and rigor, as well as its carefully studied and executed simplicity... The interdependent, integrated interior spaces of the museum were compelling, deeply satisfying and uplifting all at once, fitting our collective sense of what is beautiful. We agreed that the building has the timeless quality that we sought...The jury unanimous in agreeing that the Davis Art Museum met our criteria for beauty and clearly deserves the Harleston Parker Medal."