



Design Review Board (DRB) Staff Report
Prepared for the April 5, 2023 DRB Meeting

New Construction

Case # 23-20: Memphis Brooks Museum of Art
65 S. Front St.
Memphis, TN 38103

Applicant: Zoe Kahr
Memphis Brooks Museum
1934 Poplar Ave.
Memphis, TN 38104

Property Owner: City of Memphis

Representative: Todd Walker
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Background: In the Fall of 2018, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and the City of Memphis announced plans to build a new world-class facility to house the Memphis Brooks Art Museum at a prime downtown location. The former Memphis Fire Station and the Riverfront Parking Garage have been demolished to clear the site for this new construction. The new 117,000 sq. ft. museum will occupy the entire city block bound by Front Street to the east, Union Avenue to the south, Riverside Drive and the railroad tracks to the west, and Monroe Avenue to the north.

The aspiration of the project team is to create a world-class art museum that will function as a new public living room in the heart of Downtown, adjacent to the exciting recent investments along the riverfront. The new Brooks Museum is intended to be one of the most accessible public buildings in the city with more than 60,000 sq. ft. of free art-filled indoor and outdoor public spaces and 59,000 sq. ft. of galleries. The design plan also includes a community courtyard, theater, outdoor amphitheater space, rooftop sculpture garden, and a pavilion overlooking the river. Onsite parking will include approximately 150 parking spaces in Level -1, accessible from Monroe Avenue along the north side of the site.

DRB review is required since this is considered a public project due to its location on public property. The project also received direct support from the Downtown Mobility Authority (DMA).

Project Details:

The overall museum design will consist of two distinct parts. First, a sloping base that mirrors the appearance of the original bluff will contain the parking structure, back of house, and service-oriented functions. Secondly, a “gallery pavilion” will sit atop the base and contain most of the public space and traditional gallery functions. The gallery pavilion will have its public front door facing Front Street. Exterior cladding materials will utilize an earthen palette featuring two types of custom brick. A custom horizontal brick (2.25 in. high x 24 in. wide) will be used on each of the four exterior building elevations. A different custom brick (3.5 in. high x 20 in. wide) will be used in the entry and as courtyard paving. Exterior windows and storefront systems are expected to be glass and aluminum with an interior wood finish. Metal canopies will be fabricated from polished and blasted stainless steel.

Level 1:

Programmatically, most public space within the Museum is located on the ground-floor level as accessed from Front Street. The main public entrance is centered on the Front Street façade with a recessed entry and double-height space beneath an extended stainless steel metal canopy. The Front Street façade features a glass and aluminum storefront system across most of its length. Engineered wood columns and custom brick cladding are the primary exterior materials on the east side. A protruding brick ledge located beneath the storefront windows will provide a seating opportunity along portions of Front Street.

The main pedestrian entry from Front Street leads guests to the Visitor Services area containing the main lobby, museum store, café and access to the interior public courtyard. Stairs leading up to a mezzanine and theater space can be found off the main lobby.

The main art gallery space is laid out in a U-shape configuration centered on the western half of the courtyard. Two large windows are located on the western side of the gallery space with views towards the Mississippi River. Sassafras wood paneling will clad the interior walls of the courtyard. Two courtyard windows will allow visitors to glimpse into interior gallery spaces to the north and south. On the west end of the courtyard is a series of downward steps leading to a lookout point and exterior plaza named the River Window.

The floor plan includes a temporary gallery space and a permanent collections and storage area located along the southern edge of the building, adjacent to Union Avenue. Due to the sensitive nature of this use and the need to limit potentially harmful sunlight, exterior windows are not included on the southern exterior wall of the museum. However, exterior ribbon windows are found on the northern side of the building along Monroe Avenue. These windows will allow natural light into the education and classroom space.

Roof Level:

The roof will provide an additional public space with a roof garden accessible to the general public. This 47,000 sq. ft. public rooftop will include a sculpture garden, walking path, and landscaping with native Tennessee plants. An event terrace enclosure near the northwest corner of the roof will provide the potential for a special event space with accompanying bar, storage, and restrooms.

Level -1 & Monroe Plaza:

The level immediately beneath the main public art gallery will provide approximately 150 parking spaces. This level is accessible to vehicles from the north along Monroe Avenue. This parking level will also provide access to the River Window on the western side of the building. The stairs leading down from the Level 1 courtyard to the River Window can also function as an amphitheater space for special events or small outdoor performances.

Visitors and staff arriving by car will access Monroe Avenue from Riverside drive and enter the parking level on the northern side of the building. The upper end of Monroe, near Front Street, will be closed to vehicular traffic and converted into a public plaza. Monroe Plaza will provide a significant public space connecting the new Brooks Museum with the renovated Cossitt Library. A series of switchback walks and stairs provide pedestrian access from Monroe Plaza to the west towards Riverside Drive.

Level -2:

The lowest level is on-grade with Riverside Drive and includes a host of service and back of house functions including storage and collections. This level also features a loading dock to receive trucks from Monroe Avenue.

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The City of Memphis started demolition of the fire station and Riverfront parking garage in Q3 2022. It is anticipated that demolition will be complete in May 2023. Construction mobilization is planned to begin in June 2023 with construction soon

to follow in July. Construction of the new Brooks Museum is expected to be substantially complete by October 2025.

This project site is inherently a challenging one due to topographic conditions and the layout of the downtown street grid. Part of the original bluff, the site has a 30 ft. grade change from the low point on Riverside Drive up to Front Street. Moreover, the street grid is designed such that all four sides of the site are primary street frontages. The site does not have the advantage of a rear or back side to locate the service-oriented functions of the building, like a traditional alley would provide.

The Downtown Memphis Design Guidelines & Principles are undergirded by the core belief that new construction should make an effort to fit within the context of its location. Said another way, new construction should not strive to look artificially old or somehow mimic an architectural style from another time. While a new building can and should be a product of its own time, the design should take steps to be compatible with the established character of the neighborhood. That type of consideration is especially important in historic areas like the Cotton Row Historic District.

While the design for the new Brooks Museum is unmistakably new and contemporary in character, the design team made a significant effort to propose a design rooted in a clear sense of place. A key design goal is to create a building that fits within and reflects a prototypical urban downtown block. As a one-story volume seen from Front Street, the primary massing of the building is designed to fit within the range of historic structures in the Cotton Row Historic District. The building will not tower over adjacent buildings or block views from adjacent properties to the river. The horizontal orientation of the primary building mass is intended to reinforce this consistent edge and hold the “street wall” along the west side of Front Street. Moreover, the base of the building is clearly a reference to the original bluff that once existed on the site. Additionally, the use of an earthen palette with custom masonry can also be seen as a reference to the sedimentary layers that comprise the geology of a bluff. Additionally, the use of exterior brick and wood beams and columns is a nod to the architecture of the original cotton grading warehouse buildings that still line Front Street today.

The main volume of the new structure steps back from Union Avenue on the south and Monroe Avenue to the north. This design move ensures generously wide sidewalks and improved view corridors down towards the river. Encouraging east-west pedestrian traffic further advances a top goal of the project to help stitch back

together the urban fabric by improving pedestrian connections along the street grid and by filling gaps in the urban form.

While most downtown buildings will typically be able to add exterior fenestration to all exterior elevations, the ability to add additional windows on the south side of the building, along Union Avenue, is limited in this specific case due to the type of programming on the south end of the building. Exposure to natural light can be a significant issue for art storage and collections. Given the fact that exterior windows are not possible on the Union frontage, the design team paid special attention to creating a comfortable and enjoyable pedestrian experience with additional sidewalk width, enhanced landscaping, and protruding areas along the base of the building to accommodate public seating with views towards the Mississippi River. The resulting walk along the public sidewalk on Union Avenue should be significantly more pleasant than was previously the case when the Fire Station was extant.

On balance, staff believes that the proposed design meets both the spirit and intent of the Downtown Memphis Design Guidelines by proposing a contemporary new building with clear references to the history of the site and the context surrounding it. While additional windows on the south elevation would be preferred in an ideal scenario, staff recognizes the real programmatic and technical limitations of this challenging design program and inherently difficult site.

Staff Recommendation: **Staff recommends approval with the condition that any additional plans for exterior signage and exterior architectural lighting are submitted for DRB review and approval prior to installation.**