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# ARCHITECT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

## Cultural Projects

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# Museum of the Moving Image

New York / Leeser Architecture

By Sara Hart



At first mention, it seems odd that the Museum of the Moving Image (MMI) is located in Astoria, Queens, N.Y., removed from Manhattan's wealth of cultural institutions. But it turns out that the museum is perfectly sited among the ghosts of early filmmaking. MMI occupies a building in the complex of masonry-and-industrial-sash buildings that once were the Astoria Studios.\* Built in 1920, the buildings served as the East Coast production facilities for Paramount Pictures for more than a decade. As the film industry evolved from silent pictures to "talkies," production moved to Hollywood, and the complex passed through several hands, eventually falling into disrepair.

In 1977, the newly created Astoria Motion Picture and Television Center Foundation assumed

responsibility for the site. Four years later, Rochelle Slovin, the foundation's first director, proposed the creation of a museum in one of the Astoria Studios buildings. She crafted a mission, initiated an acquisitions strategy, and inaugurated public programs, and, in 1988, New York's Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects completed a renovation of the 1920s building to house the new Museum of the Moving Image.

Over nearly two decades, the museum amassed a collection of 130,000 artifacts representing every aspect of film and television production, and by 1996 it had outgrown its facilities. Needing more space, Slovin spearheaded a master plan for renovation, upgrades, and, most importantly, an expansion, which would almost double the museum's size from 50,000 to 97,700 square feet. Then she went in search of an architect.

"We wanted a New York architect, but we also wanted one who was not only talented, but under-recognized at the time," Slovin says, explaining that she has long been committed to young artists and designers. The selection process began with 31 firms being sent Requests For Qualifications. Eventually, Slovin and a museum committee reduced the list and compensated three firms to develop ideas for the expansion. "Thomas Leeser immediately stood out," Slovin says. "He had a unique, imaginative perspective about the media arts and was undeterred by a budget that kept shrinking."

Thus began the museum's three-year, \$67 million evolution (\$54.7 provided by the City of New York). The site had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, a designation that limited alterations to the exterior. The only apparent change to the historic façade is a new entrance and bolder signage on mirrored and transparent glass. However, once visitors enter the lobby, the moving-image experience begins immediately. A 50-foot-long wall ignites a voyage of gentle disorientation, with a large-scale panoramic video constantly projecting a swirling, cyclical narrative.

Across the lobby, a pair of gently sloping ramps edged in soft blue light lead to the new 267-seat main theater. The theater's interior is wrapped in an acoustical womb of 1,136 triangular, vacuum-formed felt panels fitted together by open joints with integrated lighting. The pulsing color of the panels is International Klein Blue, named after the French artist Yves Klein, who developed the intense, ultramarine-based color from pure pigment and a binding medium.

Elsewhere, Leeser employed light-blue, seamless, cast-polyester floors and canted walls, meant, according to Leeser, to evoke the otherworldly experience of being inside a spaceship. A grand staircase is the orienting element for the museum. The first landing delivers visitors into a darkened amphitheater, where visual acclimation is challenged by digital projections. Mood lighting seeps out from under the amphitheater benches, further manipulating depth perception. Spatial flexibility drives much of the interior architecture.

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Circulation and exhibitions often share the space, creating a continuous experience. Fortunately, Leeser's strategy has a logical flow of circulation and gallery spaces that is easily embraced, minimizing any discomfort from constant changes in lighting levels. This is true even on the third floor, where a 4, 100-square-foot gallery offers flexible space for experimental installations incorporating real-time, interactive 3D and stereographic projections. These virtual spaces are created within the rational boundaries of the physical gallery, creating what the exhibiting artists are calling "hybrid spaces."

Leeser's addition covers the back of the existing building, providing a backdrop for a yet-to-be-completed 10,000-square-foot plaza. Students will enter the new education center from the plaza. The façade's skin is made of triangular panels similar to those in the ground-floor theater. More than a thousand thin, light-blue aluminum panels with open joints are precisely fitted together with a tolerance of a mere 3/16 inch. The effect, in contrast to the heaviness of the existing masonry building, is that of super-lightweight apparition, dematerializing against the sky. It's a beautifully quiet counterpoint to the nonstop action inside.

**\*Correction, March 11, 2011:** As originally published, this article incorrectly added the name "Kaufman" to "Astoria Studios." We regret the error.

## Project Credits

**Project** Museum of the Moving Image, Astoria, N.Y.

**Client** Museum of the Moving Image—Rochelle Slovin (director); Herbert S. Schlosser (chairman of the board of trustees)

**Architect** Leeser Architecture, New York—Thomas Leeser (founder and principal); David Linehan, AIA, (project manager); Simon Arnold, Kate Burke, Sofia Castricone, Henry Grosman, Joseph Haberl (design team)

**Owner's Representative** Levien & Co.

**Construction Manager** F.J. Sciame Construction Co.

**Audio/Visual** Scharff Weisberg

**Acoustician** JaffeHolden

**Lighting** L'Observatoire International

**Graphics** Karlssonwilker

**Exterior Wall** R.A. Heintges & Associates

**M/E/P Engineers** Ambrosino, DePinto & Schmieder

**Specification** Construction Specifications

**Structural Engineers** Anastos Engineering Associates

**Civil/Geo-Technical** Stantec

**Code/Expediting** JAM Consultants

**Elevator** VDA

**Hazardous Materials** TRC Cos.

**Projection Systems** MDC Systems

**Restaurant Program** JGL

**Design Security** Ducibella Venter & Santore

**Sustainable Design** Atelier Ten

**Telephone & Data** Shen Milsom Wilke

**Textile Design** Cindy Sirko

**Courtyard** David Dew Bruner Design

**A/V Contractor** Electrosonic

**Security Contractor** Tritech Communications

**Rendering** VUW

**Size** 50,000 gross square feet (existing), 47,700 gross square feet (new construction)

**Cost** \$67 million

## Materials and Sources

**Wallcoverings** Designtex (felt) [designtex.com](http://designtex.com)

**Drywall** Knauf Drywall (perforated drywall) [www.knaufdrywall.co.uk](http://www.knaufdrywall.co.uk)

**Flooring** Fusion Floors (poured urethane) [fusionfloors.com](http://fusionfloors.com)

**Carpet/Carpet Tile** Bentley Prince Street [bentleyprincestreet.com](http://bentleyprincestreet.com)

**Glass** Competition Architectural Metals

**Lounge Seating** Moroso (Osorom seating) [moroso.it](http://moroso.it)

**Cafeteria, Dining, Auditorium Seating** Viccarbe (Aspa tables) [viccarbe.com](http://viccarbe.com); Materia (Mayflower Stools)

[www.materia.se](http://www.materia.se); Irwin Seating Co. (theater seating) [irwinseating.com](http://irwinseating.com); Maharam (upholstery) [maharam.com](http://maharam.com)

**Student Orientation Cushions** Quinze & Milan [quinzeandmilan.tv](http://quinzeandmilan.tv)

**Conference Table** Asplund (Bermuda Mega table) [asplund.org](http://asplund.org)

**Chairs** Dynamobel (Dis chairs) [www.dynamobel.com](http://www.dynamobel.com)

**Custom Curtain** Rose Brand (designed by Cindy Sirko) [rosebrand.com](http://rosebrand.com)

**Desks** Howe (Tutor) [howe.com](http://howe.com)

**Chairs** Vitra (Sim, designed by Jasper Morrison) [www.vitra.com](http://www.vitra.com)

**Architectural Woodworking** MillerBlaker [millerblaker.com](http://millerblaker.com)

**Signage** Graphic Systems Group [gsnyc.com](http://gsnyc.com)

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