



Predock's Rock

The unconventional thinking of Antoine Predock is behind the design of the McNamara Alumni Center, which seems to arise out of the land, not sit upon it.

By Thomas Fisher

M

ost college campus buildings disguise their true purpose. They typically convey, with their sober facades and solid walls, the stability, order, and tradition that once characterized higher education as it passed on to students established knowledge and accepted truths. While the transfer of knowledge remains a key mission, universities also have another role to play, one of challenging assumptions, overturning theories, critiquing ideas, making discoveries. That more radical role, however, has

barely registered on the physical environment of campuses. We still like the look of tradition, despite the decidedly untraditional activities that go on within our buildings.

The new McNamara Alumni Center, University of Minnesota Gateway, dispenses with this disguise. Its designer, internationally renowned architect Antoine Predock, has taken the revolutionary role of the University seriously. Serving as the entry point and introduction to the University for alumni and visitors, the building does what so many campus structures have not done: express what really goes on here. And like all daring work, this building has attracted a lot of attention.

Located at the corner of University Avenue and Oak Street Southeast, on the site of Memorial Stadium, the new alumni center consists of two parts: a large, faceted and sliced, rock-like structure clad in granite, and a tall, slanted, plateau-like structure covered with copper. The rock resembles a geode—a stone that is split to reveal a cavity lined with crystals. Inside the alumni center's geode—the building's public space—are also hidden treasures: the voluminous Memorial Hall and the adjoining Heritage Gallery, linked by the reconstructed Memorial Arch, whose majesty is magnified by its 15-degree tilt. In contrast, the copper section represents cliffs and encloses an efficient, six-story modern office building with ample windows.

The main entry into the building is through a crevice between Memorial Hall and the Heritage Gallery. Flanking the entrance and much of the building will be groves of pine and aspen—some planted this past fall—an arboreal theme that continues on the inside of Memorial Hall, with its walls of light wood and a stream running behind a raised podium. Copper and wood also line several hallway and meeting-room walls on the main floor, bringing the outdoors inside.

To prepare for a design project, architect Antoine Predock assembles a giant collage of images and artifacts that capture the spirit of a place.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT RECK



A plaza, planned to replace the parking lot at the corner of Oak Street and Washington Avenue, will echo this north woods idea and presents a rare opportunity to return green space to this urban campus.

Predock, who grew up in Missouri but is now based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has done more than perhaps any other architect to integrate ideas about landscape into his buildings. Early in his career, he drew inspiration from the architecture of the Pueblo Indians, whose use of simple stuccoed forms recalls the stark desert landscape around them. In more recent years, Predock's evocation of the desert landscape where he works has become more direct, with buildings that have mesa-like form, cliff-like walls, and bare concrete or copper surfaces. "It is a kind of obsession that comes from living for so long where the landscape is such a preeminent thing," Predock says. "The timeless quality of the land interests me, the layers of geological time that show how momentary human acts really are."

This runs counter to the common assumption that nature and culture stand opposed to one another, an assumption that often underlies other architects' work. For Predock, culture—"the thin upper layer of geological time," as he calls it—remains inseparable from the land from which it springs. His buildings, accordingly, seem to arise out of the land rather than sit on it. Predock's view of nature also differs from the romanticized notions of it that still dominate our thinking. He uses words like *upheavals*, *eruptions*, *fissures*, and *fragments* to describe not only the processes of nature but the architectural forms he derives from them. The alumni center, he says, "is like a fractured monolith, part of the fractured geology beneath it."

Such unconventional thinking on Predock's part has resulted in a string of very powerful, award-winning buildings, many of them at universities—Arizona State, Wyoming, and several California campuses. But how does this thinking apply to an urban campus in a northern temperate climate like ours? What relevance do Predock's desert forms have for Minnesota?

"The geological realm in Minnesota is palpable," says Predock, "the Mesabi Range, the North Shore, Split Rock." The copper walls, the split granite face, the mountain-like forms arising out of the trees: with such features of the alumni center, Predock has adapted his Southwest sensibility to our northern landscape. The slope of the copper office block is like the North Shore cliffs, and the geode is like Split Rock. Similarly, Predock's sensitivity to Southwest culture—not just that of Native Americans, but of American pop culture—proved crucial to his success here.

"There is a rootedness to Minnesota culture—stone, wood, warmth, tradition, authenticity, the kitchen table, the hearth, mining," Predock says. He used his research on our state and his outsider's perspective to good effect: he produced a giant collage of Minnesota's land-based culture for his interview with the selection committee, a presentation so compelling that Predock, in association with local architect and alumnus Lew Moran ('78, '82), won the commission over several alumni-owned architectural firms. Moran is project manager for Minneapolis-based KKE Architects, known for its educational and institutional design expertise. Nearly half of its employees are University graduates.

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Predock never takes the context in which he works at face value, setting him apart from other architects who respond to the surroundings in which they build by matching the materials or massing of neighboring structures. "I imagine what has been before or what is unseen," says Predock. "There is so much more to honor, in terms of the context, than the buildings next door." What Predock wanted to honor in the alumni center is the dynamism of this University. "My sense of the University is that it is a place to fly, for great things to flower." The diagonal slits of glass that zip across the facade, the granite walls that angle off and lift up, the beckoning Memorial Arch that leans out over the main interior space—such things express Predock's perception of our University as a place that not only fosters intellectual adventure but is also a doorway to the future and a connection to what has come before.

Not even Predock believes that every building on campus needs to have such an expression. The effectiveness of the alumni center as the ceremonial entrance to the campus stems from its contrast with the buildings around it. Nor does the McNamara Alumni Center at all resemble the design proposed in 1990: a more traditional, brick-clad, semi-circular structure with the Memorial Arch embedded in its exterior. But Predock's design is consistent with the master plan's principles, and great universities know when to grasp opportunities, be it in the faculty they hire, the research they undertake, or the buildings they construct.

The alumni center does not express the ideas of Antoine Predock alone. While he and his Albuquerque firm developed the design—"an accretion of restless geology," as he describes it—Predock readily acknowledges that "a building like this can't happen without great clients, great colleagues, great contractors." Larry Laukka, CEO of the Gateway Corporation; Margaret Carlson, executive director of the alumni association; Jerry Fischer, president and CEO of the University Foundation; Moran of KKE; Tom LaSalle, the owner's representative; and the M.A. Mortenson Company, which has constructed numerous University facilities—all worked with tireless passion to build the alumni center, says Predock.

Predock knows that the size of the building has surprised some. "It is a big building, on a tight site, with a challenging budget," he says. "I couldn't make it a village [of smaller forms], so I let it become an object." Predock also acknowledges that some "will love the Gateway center and others will hate it." But that is as it should be, he says. "This building is about looking forward, about acknowledging and honoring all of the energy that goes on here behind the scenes." In the end, it stands not just as a physical gateway to this campus, but as a symbol of what really drives this University: experimentation. ■

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