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# Into the Fold

ACCORDING TO THE ARCHITECT, OKLAHOMA CITY'S EVOCATIVE NEW ARTS CENTRE COULD "ONLY BELONG HERE"

WORDS \_Tim McKeough

PHOTOS \_Scott McDonald

When Rand Elliott was tapped to design a new home for Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, he was intent on conceiving a structure that was uniquely of its place. But rather than looking to the region's vernacular landscape or cowboy past, the local architect and principal of his eponymous studio settled on something more ethereal: Oklahoma City's wide openness and radically unpredictable climate.

"They say the weather here is like riding a bucking bronco," Elliott explains, noting that summer-like sunshine can shift to bowling ball-sized hail within 24 hours. "You either like those huge shifts or you don't. But for natives of Oklahoma, it goes with the territory. I wanted to go beyond the history of the state — the Dust Bowl, the bombing of 1995 and the oil and gas swings — to find something that was more poetic and timeless."

The resulting concept, dubbed "folding light," is an angular, 5,009-square-metre building with a zigzagging footprint designed to reflect the region's changing light conditions, shifting from gold and blue to violet and pink.

Rising vertically from the ground to the top of the four-storey structure, breaking only to provide openings for windows and doors, 16,800 recycled aluminum fins wrap the exterior and define the complex. At the southwest corner of the building, these fins are widely spaced to create the semi-transparent, full-height "Lantern," which beckons passersby from nearby Broadway Avenue when illuminated. Elsewhere, these features similarly spread to double as balusters for an elevated terrace. The components have nine unique profiles and are bright dip anodized to reflect light in a multitude of fashions.

Oklahoma Contemporary's mission is to serve as far more than simply a place for exhibiting art. In addition to housing reconfigurable galleries, the building is designed to stoke community engagement and art production with studios for dance, photography and digital design, a theatre, flexible event spaces and numerous classrooms. A separate renovated studio located near train tracks

The darting footprint of Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center sports a custom facade of bright-dip anodized aluminum fins that capture the region's ever-changing weather.





on the eastern edge of the site is a hands-on maker space fitted with equipment for producing ceramics and weaving as well as metal and wood sculpture.

Riffing on Elliott's concept of light, the institution's curators organized a blockbuster exhibition for the opening, entitled "Bright Golden Haze" (a quote taken from the musical *Oklahoma!*) and featuring works by international heavyweights Olafur Eliasson, Teresita Fernández, Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Leo Villareal. The team completed every punch-list item, hung the art and set their opening date for March 13. Then the coronavirus pandemic struck.

"The day we were supposed to launch with a thousand-person celebration, we had to close our doors" and delay the opening by months, says artistic director Jeremiah Davis. As the world eventually gets back to normal, he hopes that the new creative hub will serve as "a salve for the community."

Elliott, meanwhile, is confident that the structure captures the Oklahoman spirit, even if momentarily closed. "This building wouldn't be comfortable in Utah, Iowa or Florida," he says. "It belongs only here."  
[randelliottarchitects.com](http://randelliottarchitects.com), [oklahomacontemporary.org](http://oklahomacontemporary.org)

**ABOVE:** Overlooking the capital city, the dance studio is among the centre's many public-oriented spaces aimed at fostering community.

**RIGHT:** Linear LEDs emphasize the verticality of the dynamic central stair, fitted with striated clear polycarbonate balustrades that reference the metallic fins outside.

