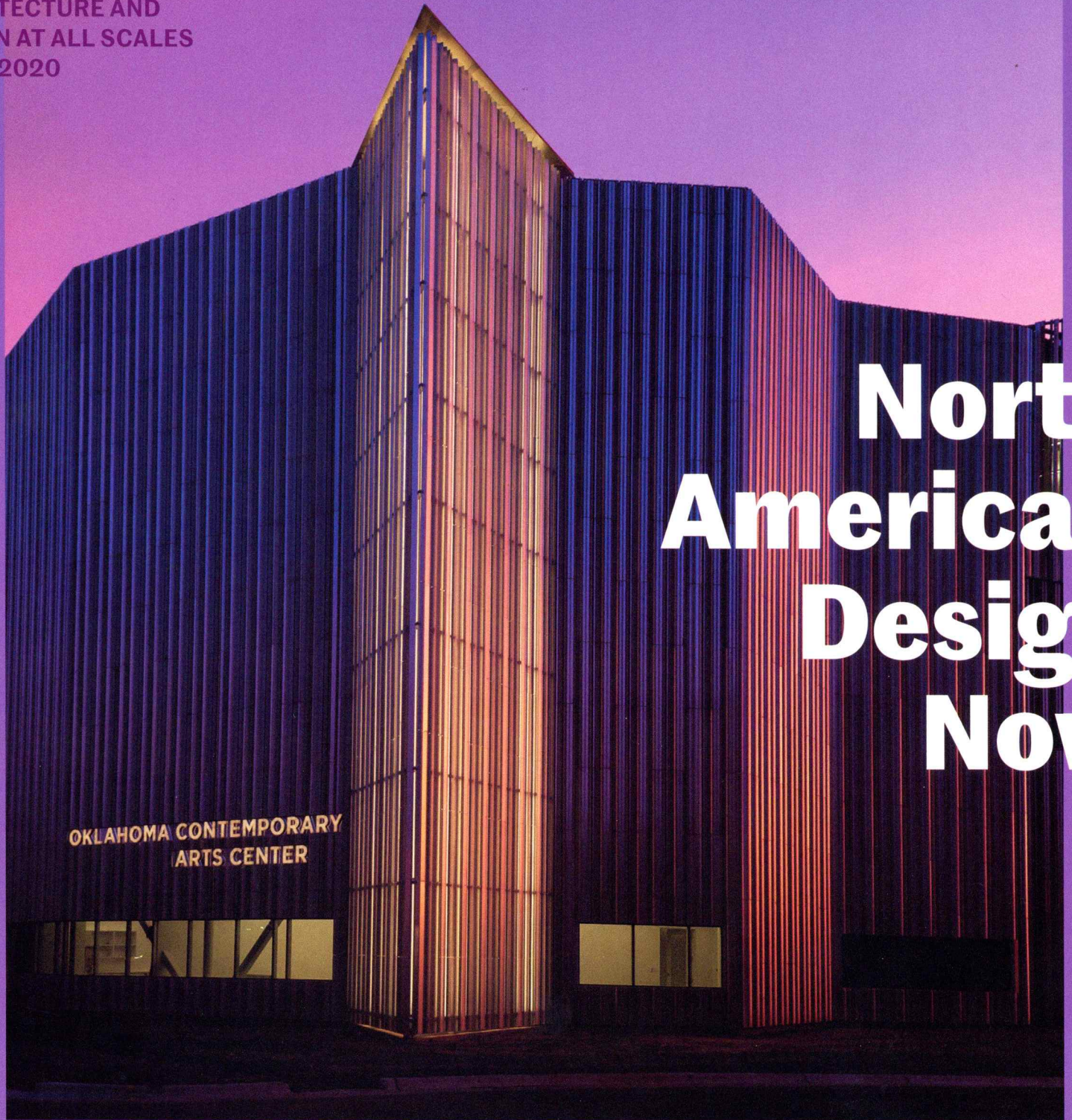


METROPOLIS

ARCHITECTURE AND
DESIGN AT ALL SCALES
March 2020



OKLAHOMA CONTEMPORARY
ARTS CENTER

**North
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Design
Now**

The Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center (OCAC) has recently moved into new digs. Designed by the local firm Rand Elliott Architects, the four-story building is a commanding presence in Oklahoma City's Automobile Alley neighborhood.



Fire

Light is a recurring motif inside and out of
Oklahoma City's new cultural landmark.

in the

By Osman Can Yerebakan
Photography by Josh McCulloch

Belly

The new Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center (OCAC) in Oklahoma City is a tough building. The sensibility is aloof and the form expressionistic, improbably combining elements of industrial sheds and houses of worship, to say nothing of the serrated facade, pieced together from 16,800 three-inch-wide aluminum fins, blind-fastened (screw-free) in nine different variations. It's that hard outer shell that communicates the toughness.

But the architecture also works against this impression. Varying in depth, the fins brilliantly capture the light and hues of the Oklahoma skies, which soften all those hard edges. "We wanted sun to touch the building during the day and let it glow at night," explains Rand Elliott, whose namesake Oklahoma City firm is behind the design.

The extruded aluminum, all 37 miles of it, functions as a luminous mirror, shifting colors throughout the day, from the oranges of sunrise to the pink shades of sunset, with brushstrokes of sky blue and white moments of clouds. At night, the stars and the moon dot the building's sawtooth surfaces, which serve to focus the



The building shell comprises 37 miles' worth of custom-fabricated aluminum, whose outer surface was bright-dipped to increase its reflective capabilities.

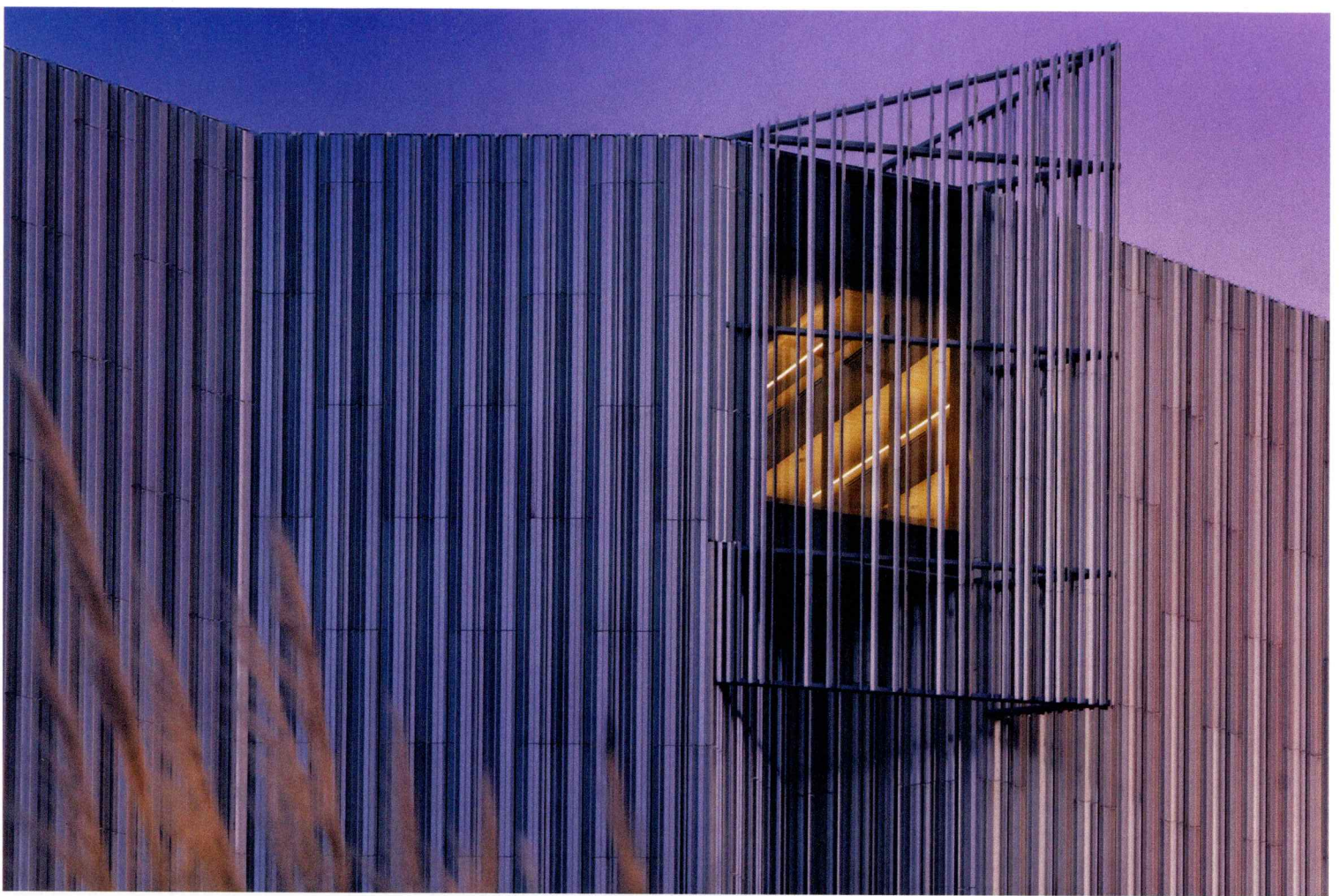




single beam of artificial light that marks out the building's most emphatic moment. Elliott compares this triangular prism to a lantern, reinforcing the expressionist effect.

The institution's leadership attaches great meaning to the museum's striking silhouette, seeing it as a gateway to the city's arts district. The new site opposite Campbell Art Park is a far cry from its predecessor: For three decades, OCAC sat quietly amid the state fairgrounds at the western edge of town. In the past few years, however, curatorial and exhibitions director Jennifer Scanlan has helped carve out a new identity for OCAC, having pulled off several successful exhibitions, including solo shows by Jeffrey Gibson and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh. The feeling of change and momentum was further galvanized by the recent opening of a new streetcar line that stops directly in front of the museum. "If you have 10

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more minutes before your train arrives, pop in and tour the exhibition or flip through art and design books at the library,” says artistic director Jeremiah Matthew Davis. OCAC’s goal, he adds, is to embed itself in a local culture that is slowly but surely changing.

To many, Oklahoma might seem to be the very picture of the American heartland: politically red, culturally traditional, and fiscally conservative. It’s among the country’s top wheat producers, and agricultural signifiers have long formed the basis of the state’s identity. Oil fields and infrastructure, the onetime motor of a booming economy, also lodged themselves in the local iconography. But rural areas are rapidly declining in population, hemorrhaging people to the state’s four largest cities, whose metropolitan regions are growing by the year. Towns are competing for their share (they were

largely behind the state’s legalization of medical marijuana in 2018), and culture has proved effective in attracting transplants. For instance, Tulsa, whose population is second only to that of Oklahoma City, the state capital, has cultivated a small community of artists and other creatives gathered mainly around the reputable Tulsa Artist Fellowship; among the program’s generous benefits is affordable lodging.

For its part, Oklahoma City has continually worked to reinvigorate its downtown. Many new urban amenities have recently appeared on the scene, including a new 70-acre public park and pedestrian and bike lanes. These and other public works, including the upgrading of municipal schools, have been facilitated by funds raised through the Metropolitan Area Projects program, a five-year, one-cent sales-tax initiative first

There is an expressionistic quality to the architecture, especially in how it “captures” sunlight (opposite). The floor plan, too, is characterized by odd angles, following from the architects’ wish for an “anti-90 degree” layout. Extruded at different elevations, the angles form distinct elements (this page) including a terrace and a light tower (which Rand Elliott compares to a lantern).



launched in 1993 and renewed several times since, most recently in December. In that time, public dollars have successfully rebranded the downtown core (reeling after the 1995 bombing) and neighborhoods like Bricktown, where towering neon signs rising from repurposed warehouses echo the heydays of the oil economy (now euphemized as “natural gas”).

Another of the fund’s beneficiaries, the streetcar line, was launched in December 2018. The tram bends west at the intersection of 11th Street and Broadway Avenue, away from the museum and its temporary pavilion opposite. The gleaming building is not exactly small; at four stories (lounge on level one, galleries on two, event space and offices on three and four, respectively) and nearly 54,000 square feet, it packs in a great deal of programming, with spaces for community

While angular, the floor plan never resolves into right angles, which is to say, the gallery and exhibition spaces reject the white-cube paradigm. “We are always injected into boxes, whether a house or a museum,” says architect Rand Elliott.

Opposite: groundworks at the museum, which reopens March 12. This page: Members of the Rand Elliott office pose in their Oklahoma City studio. Left to right: Cody Pistulka, associate architect; Rand Elliott, founder; and Bill Yen, principal.

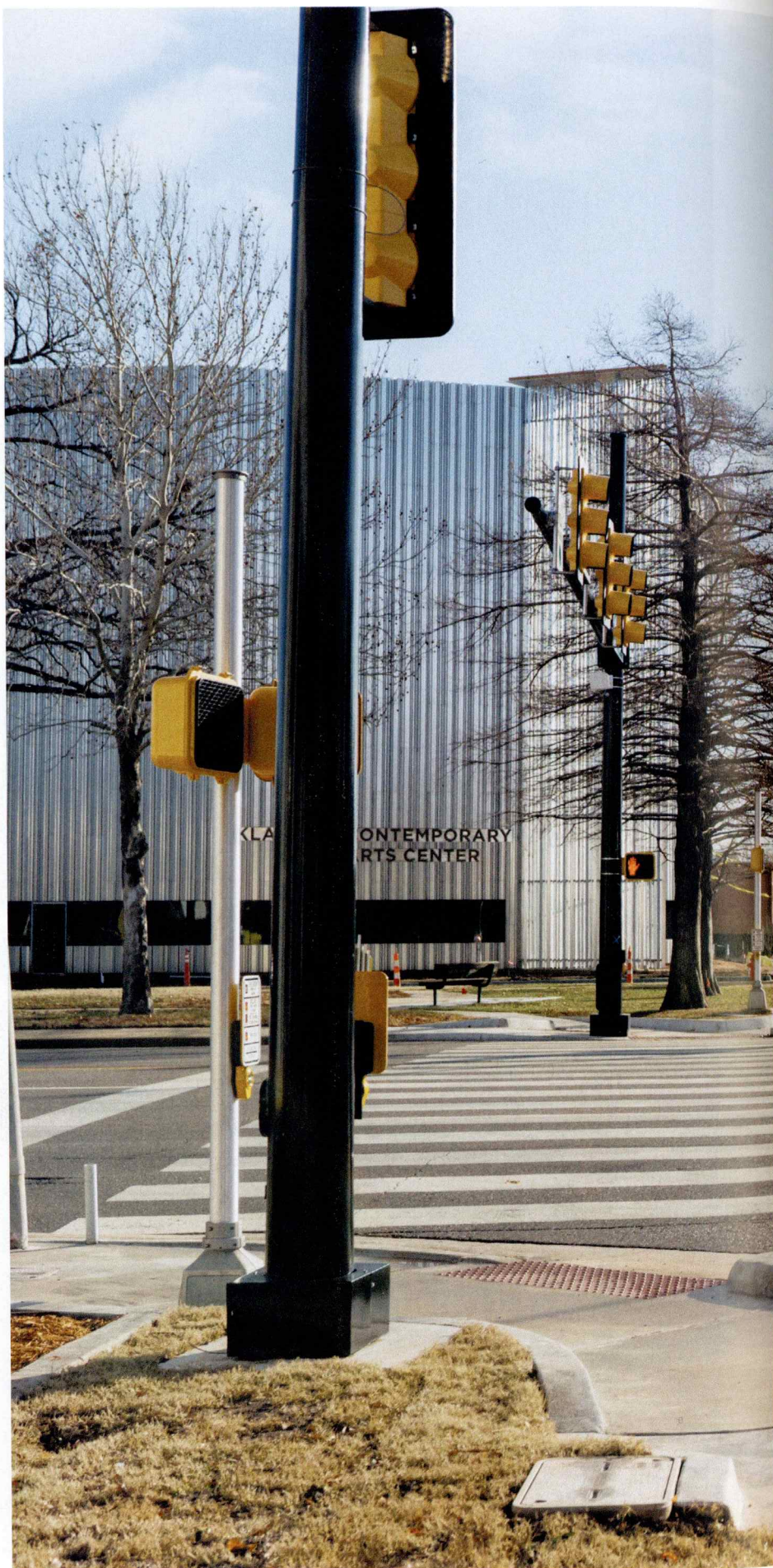


use, workshops, education, performance, and private events, all revolving around a 7,500-square-foot gallery. The institution, which reopens on March 12, bills itself as a community center with contemporary art at its core.

No doubt the architects have conceived the building as an object, albeit one mindful of its setting. For example, the entrance on the opposite side of the main road allows the building to stand in complete sculptural integrity, without the interruption of so much as a front door. But Elliott maintains that the decision is contextual, offering that in a car city like this one, ingress is coextensive with parking lots. Ettore Sottsass's electric *Ultrafragola* mirror (1970) graces the entrance from inside the museum library, which—with its 500-volume-strong collection on contemporary art, architecture, and design—is prominent in the plan. A corridor leading to classrooms doubles as an exhibition space for artists-in-residence working in the adjacent studios (which come equipped with everything from sewing machines to kilns). It terminates in a panoramic view of Campbell Art Park, emblazoned with Jen Lewin's glowing *Aqueous* sidewalk installation, the first public artwork to be commissioned by the museum.

Light—natural, artificial, astral, atmospheric, glowing, piercing—is a recurring motif inside and out. New York-based artist Leo Villareal's site-specific sculpture, drawn from his *Star Ceiling* series, guards the entrance to the second-floor gallery. Visitors perch on zero-gravity chairs to watch the entrancing LED installation, which depicts an otherworldly and endlessly shifting night sky. Inside the gallery, the inaugural exhibition, *Bright Golden Haze*, offers further studies of the mysteries of light. (The show's title refers to the first line of *Oklahoma!*) For Scanlan, the OCAC curator, the single focus is meant to engender “a sense of place, whether an actual place or an emotional and mental state,” challenged by colonization, natural disaster, or trauma.

While angular, the floor plan never resolves into right angles, which is to say, the gallery and exhibition spaces reject the white-cube paradigm. “We are always injected into boxes, whether a house or a museum,” says Elliott about the OCAC's “anti-90 degree” layout. Instead, the



Situated at the northern limit of downtown, OCAC hugs a corner of Broadway Avenue, facing parkland and empty parcels of land.





irregular corners create curatorial opportunities for staging works (facilitated by movable walls), a point affirmed by Scanlan. “The works in *Bright Golden Haze* take advantage of Rand’s vision with art in different scales and mediums existing in their own sections,” she says. The opportunities extend onto the terrace, currently presided over by Robert Montgomery’s *The Stars Pulled Down for Real*, a neon billboard inspired by an Ezra Pound poem.

The artworks and the building both embrace surface as an interpretive frame, as well as a marker of regionality. OCAC’s new home not only reflects the city’s urbanizing tendencies but is imbued by them. “We couldn’t put this building anywhere else and have hoped to achieve a similar impact,” says Elliott. “This is a communal inspirational point reflected on the building’s surface.” ■

Oklahoma City has continually worked to reinvigorate its downtown. Many new urban amenities have recently appeared on the scene, including a new 70-acre public park and pedestrian and bike lanes, as well as a streetcar line.

In December 2018, the city opened a new streetcar system extending from the Bricktown neighborhood and the Loop to midtown (north of downtown). The line includes a stop at Campbell Art Park opposite the new museum complex.

