

PROJECTS | BUILDINGS BY TYPE | COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES | PERFORMING ARTS CENTER PROJECTS

Diller Scofidio + Renfro Reimagines the Humble Metal Shed as an Arts Hub at Rice University

By Patrick Templeton



Photo © Iwan Baan

Susan and Faye Sarofim Hall at Rice University by Diller Scofidio + Renfro.



Photo © Iwan Baan

The so-called Art Barn quickly took on an almost mythological status, which was cemented when, in 1970, Andy Warhol planted an oak tree in front of the facility. Though it was never meant to be a permanent addition, the metal box accommodated art studios and exhibitions for nearly five decades, and the Warhol Tree matured into a towering canopy. Art Barn also became the basis for Houston's "tin house" movement, an architectural trend of industrial, shed-like residences faced in corrugated siding, which often fare better in the region's heat and humidity than houses of wood or masonry construction. By 2014, however, Rice made the decision to tear down the Art Barn because of the mounting costs of upkeep and repairs. The demolition was met with fierce outcry—for example, *Dallas Morning News* critic Mark Lamster called it "an act of obscene vandalism."

For the better part of the next decade, the lot sat as a vacant grassy field. In 2021, DS+R won an international competition to design a new arts building that would replace the Art Barn and occupy its site, set just behind the Warhol Tree. In something of a homecoming, the project was led by DS+R partner Charles Renfro, a native Texan and an alumnus who received bachelor's degrees in both art and architecture from Rice. "It's so meaningful to come back to the university where you were trained as an architect to make a piece of architecture for the people who taught you art," says Renfro. "It just feels like coming full circle."



Photo © Iwan Baan

Conceived as both a tribute to the lost Art Barn and a new south entrance to campus, the three-story Sarofim Hall—next door to Michael Maltzan's Moody Center for the Arts—combines a Butler building typology with a pedestrian pathway, or breezeway, bisecting the long-span structure. Like those industrial warehouses, the exterior faces are largely windowless and clad in corrugated aluminum panels. Unlike those sheds, however, the two end facades are set back to provide a front "porch" to the west, finished in a steam-pressure treated bamboo decking, and a concrete loading dock and outdoor work area to the east.



Photo © Iwan Baan

In stark juxtaposition to the all-metal facades, the breezeway is lined in floor-to-ceiling glazing. One wall cuts down the longitudinal center of the building while the other angles from nearly corner to corner. At the intersection of these two planes, an expandable and flexible gallery/performance space occupies the ground floor, with an open-air “living room” on the second and a crit hall on the third. Overhead along the breezeway, ethylene tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE) replaces the aluminum sheets, allowing ample diffused daylight. Because of the intersecting planes of glass and the strong contrast between shaded and light-filled areas, the passageway is a dizzying but delightful visual cacophony. “The reflections were not expected,” admits Renfro, “but it’s this kind of kaleidoscopic moment.”



Photo © Iwan Baan

The primary stairs are open-air, ascending to and continuing from the living room area on the second floor. The space is furnished with sofas and dining tables and provides a view of the Warhol Tree and the landmark Williams Tower in the distance. Working with environmental engineers, the architects oriented the angled wall to channel breezes coming off the Gulf. “We bet big on the fact that Houston’s climate can be worked with,” says Renfro. Indeed, during a late-fall visit, when daytime temperatures can still reach the upper 80s, the space was surprisingly cool.



Photo © Iwan Baan

Visual arts and performance spaces, including various studios, galleries, photography and film-editing labs, workshops, and a cinema, are distributed throughout both halves of the building and across all three floors. The studios are marked by their utilitarian quality: high ceilings and open spaces with concrete floors and pinboard walls. The idea is to provide flexibility for art students to create their own workspaces rather than a rigidly defined showpiece. “I was a painting major, doing big abstract expressionism using my whole arm to put paint on huge canvases,” says Renfro. “That’s how I knew what this place needed.”



Photo © Iwan Baan

Even the front facade is designed so that artwork can be bolted into it or videos can be projected onto it, activating the porch area with student work. In roughly the center of the symmetrical steel-framed awning, in a square cutout in the wood decking of the front porch, there is a small oak sapling—the “Renfro Tree,” dedicated to the architect and alumnus by the university’s art faculty.

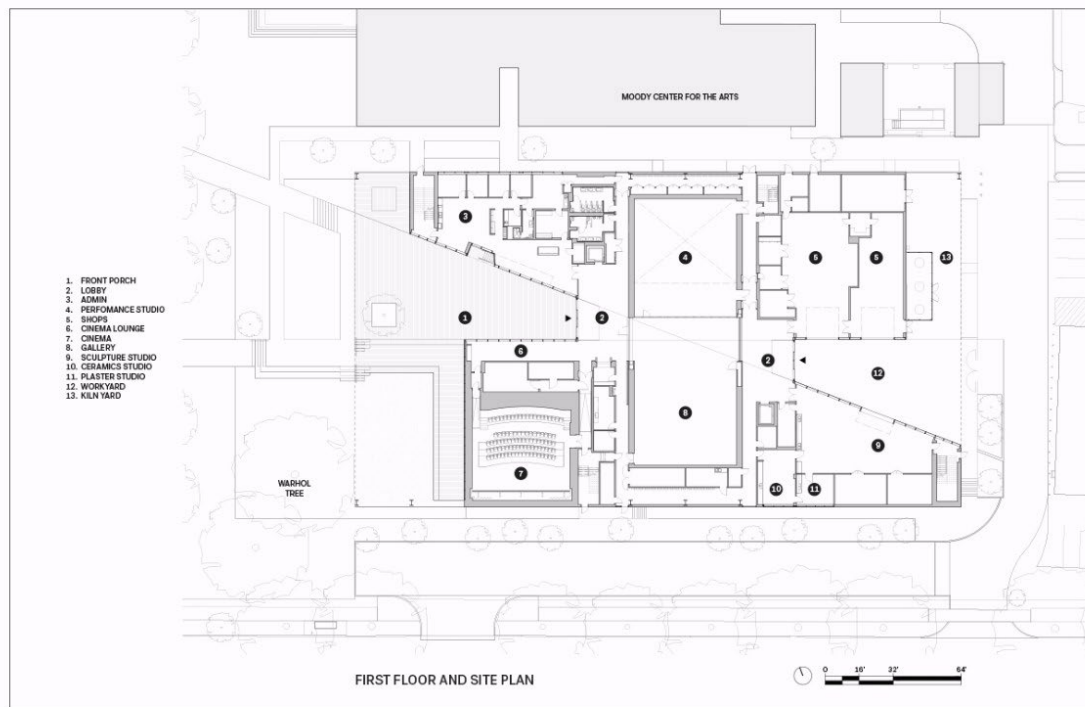


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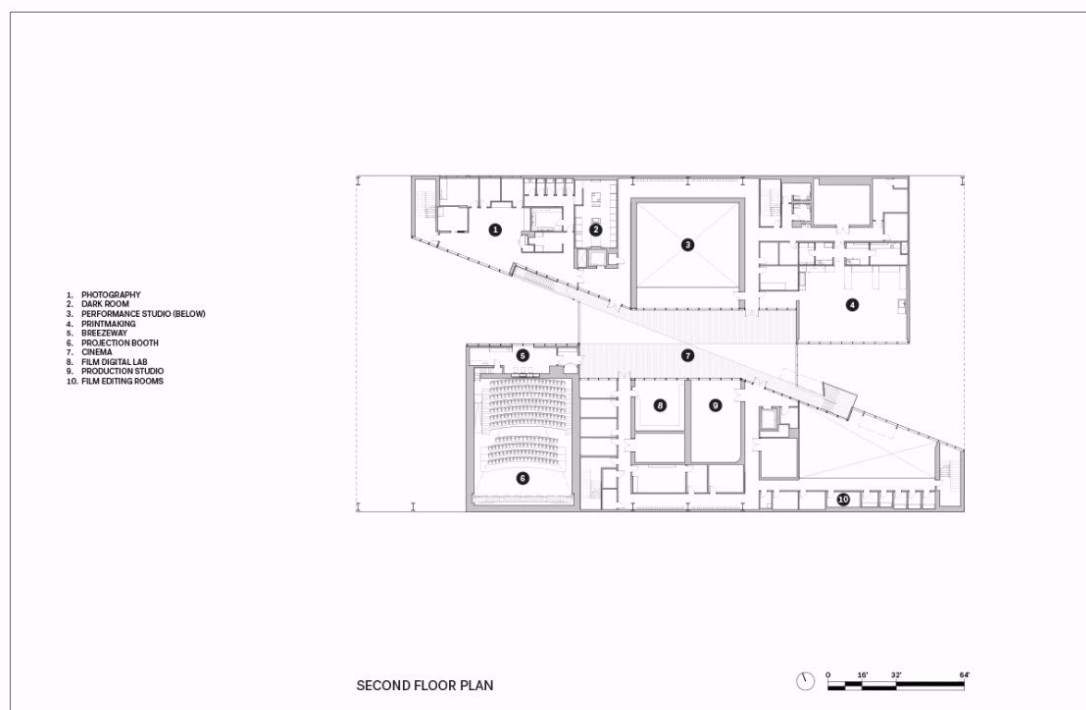


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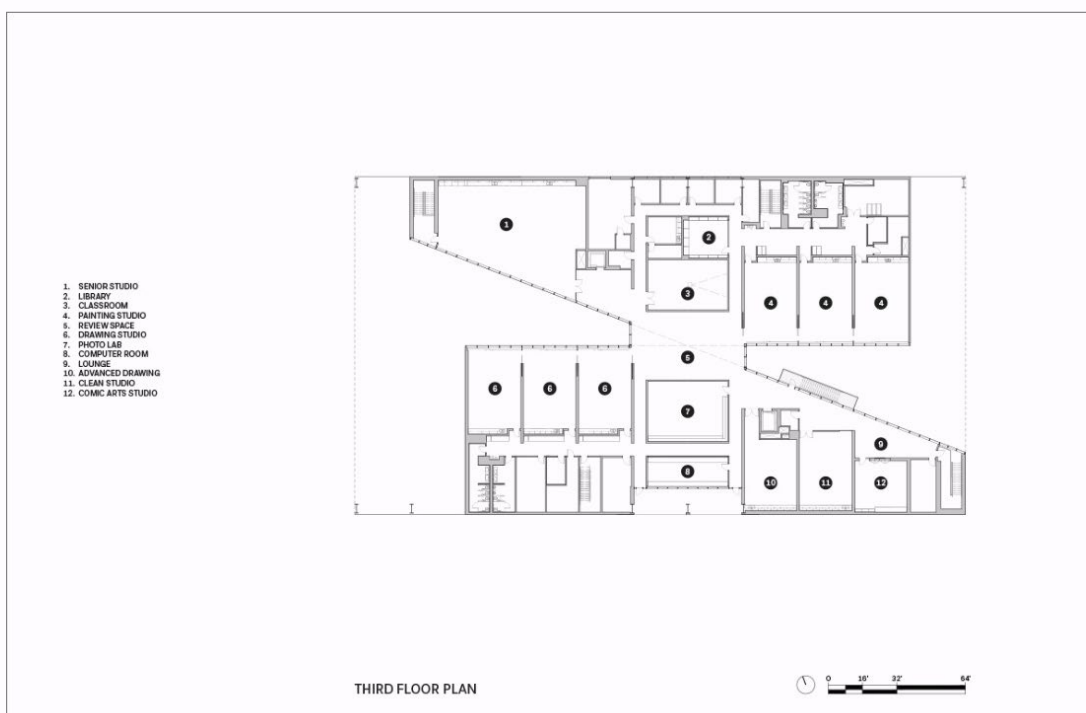


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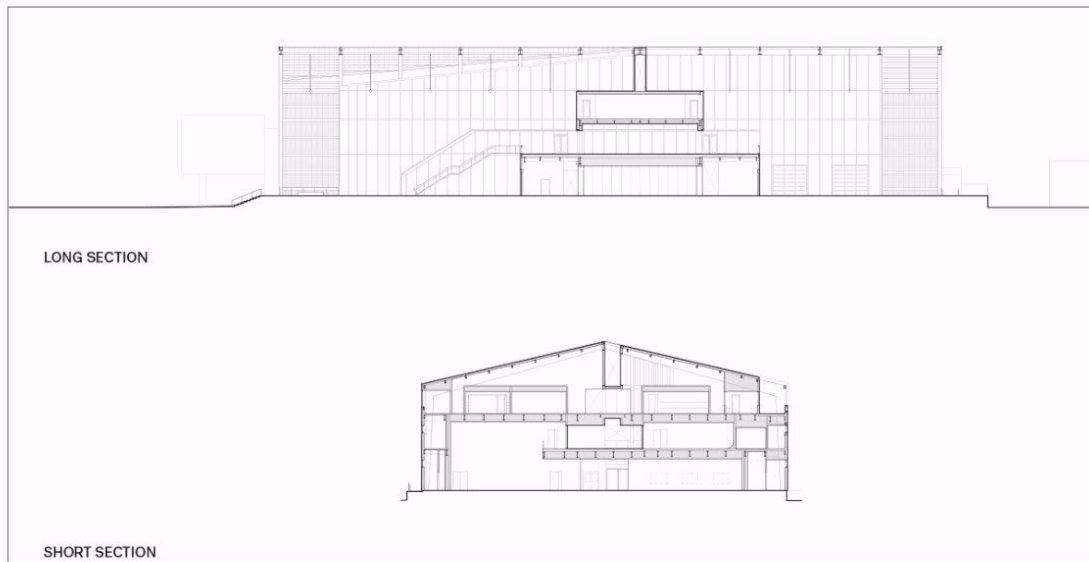


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