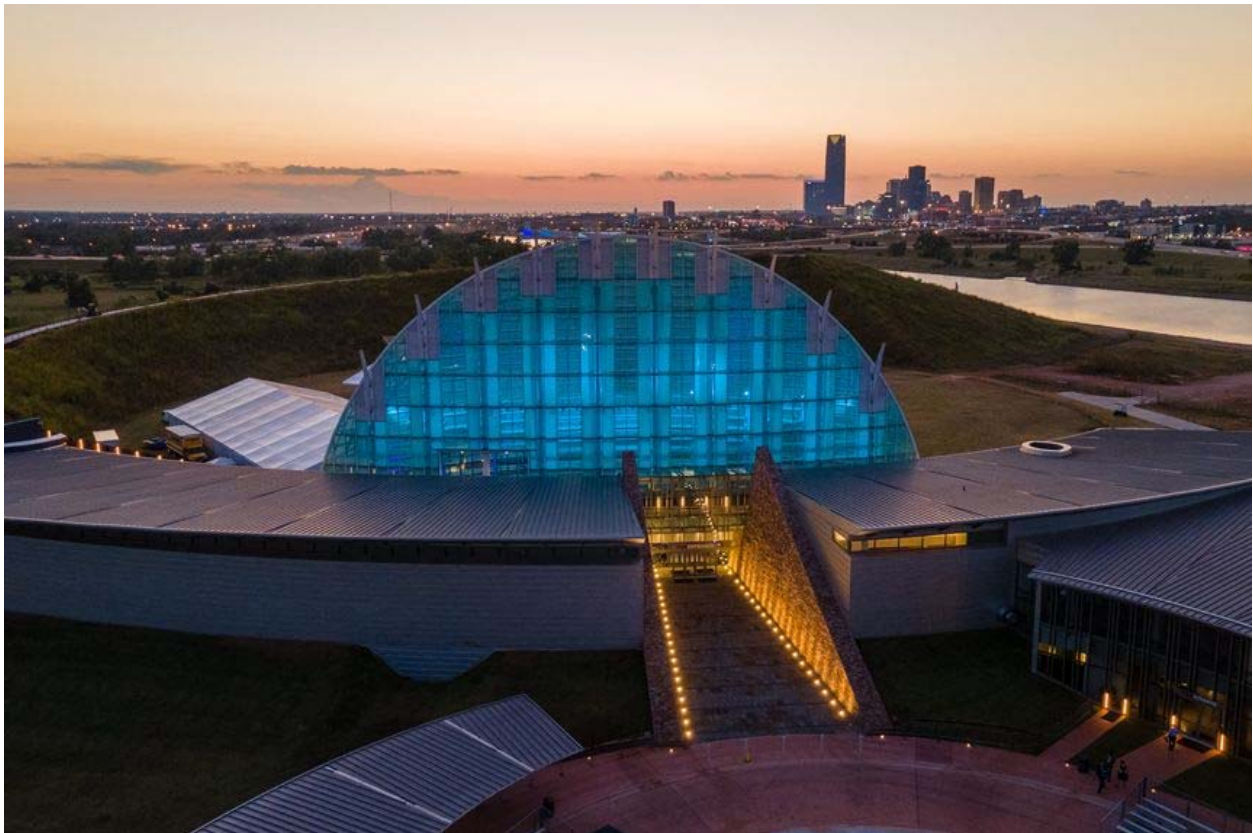


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Building a Complex History at the First Americans Museum

The 175,000-square-foot, \$175 million project, designed by Johnson Fain, honors the rhythm of the seasons, outdoor life, the significance of the sun, and the importance of dance.



Aerial shot of the First Americans Museum | PHOTO: FIRST AMERICANS MUSEUM

By Michael J. Lewis

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Oklahoma City

Seen from above, the First Americans Museum is the union of two circles—a large one made of raised earth and a smaller, looser one described by two curved pavilions—the whole arrayed on a strict east-west axis. It makes a festive impression, but it would be perfectly understandable if it expressed bitterness and sorrow. For the majority of the 39 Native American tribes now living in Oklahoma were forcibly relocated there during the 19th century, and that trauma is the one thing they have in common. Yet while the building

cannot help but acknowledge that tragic history, its overall character is surprisingly celebratory, even joyous.

The First Americans Museum, a 175,000-square-foot complex built at a cost of \$175 million, opened quietly in September, a concession to Covid-19. It had an exceptionally long gestation. It began life in 1997 as the American Indian Cultural Center. A 184-acre site was found on the south bank of the Oklahoma River, consisting largely of derelict oil fields that first had to be cleared. As originally conceived, the cultural center would have offered something for everyone, “a historical museum, re-enactment village, outdoor amphitheater, art market, theme park, retail stores and a golf course.” (All but the first have fallen by the wayside.)

The project was given to Johnson Fain, a firm of Los Angeles architects, which continued to work on it over the decades as it was repeatedly delayed by funding problems. The firm was assisted by a great number of collaborators, including Blatt Architects of Edmond, Okla., the associate architects; Hargreaves Jones, landscape architects; and Donald Fixico, the prominent historian who has sought to overturn the image of the “downtrodden” Indian, which is conspicuously absent here.

Strong buildings come from strong ideas, and to distill the beliefs of 39 very different tribes into a unified credo is no easy matter. But a few constants emerged—an appreciation for the cyclical sense of time and the natural rhythm of the seasons, the role of life outdoors, the significance of the sun, and the importance of dance in ritual. At the same time, there was little tradition of monumental architecture, apart from the cliff dwellings of the Pueblo and the enigmatic earthworks of the Mound Builders, some of which were in Oklahoma. All these themes found their place in the building.

The path through the building, in a nod to history, runs east to west. The visitor arrives at a courtyard between the pair of curving pavilions, then moves west through a narrow stone passage to emerge into the vast and airy Hall of the People. The Hall is curved and one is startled to realize that it is but a segment of an immense circular mound, 1,000 feet in diameter, which rises in a clockwise spiral to a promontory 90 feet above the river. That linear procession of arrival, compression and release is virtually the only straight line in the entire complex. Otherwise, all the paths of circulation are formed by arcs of a circle. One is meant to dance through the building—not march, a way of moving with understandably unhappy associations.

Architects normally begin by designing the required spaces and the paths of circulation between them, which in turn determine the volumes and shape of a building. But it was the other way around for Johnson Fain, which had to squeeze its rooms into a predetermined two-dimensional shape. This is no easy task. It calls to mind Johann David Steingruber, the eccentric German architect who in 1773 published a book of Baroque palaces, each one cleverly fitted into the shape of one of the letters of the alphabet. Given a similar constraint, Johnson Fain performed adroitly. Even its pavilions have a dance-like quality, sitting lightly on the earth and sporting deeply overhanging roofs suggestive of airplane wings. What might easily have been rendered as the mournful last stop of the Trail of Tears instead gives a hopeful sense of uplift.

The real showpiece is the Hall of the People. A lofty lattice of steel and glass, it is an abstract version of a traditional Wichita grass hut. Architect Scott Johnson of Johnson Fain says he “liked the play of light and shadow” of the steel columns and their horizontal fins, necessary both for cross-bracing and for shade, and so “to accentuate that, everything was coated in white.” It is sheathed in panels of tinted high-performance glass, without which it would be as hot as a greenhouse in midsummer.

Its most spectacular moment, however, comes at the start of winter. On the day of the solstice, the setting sun casts its last rays through a tunnel cut through the base of the mound, directing its light into the hall, where it takes on a sacred glow. Here the building assumes cosmological significance, performing the same act as does Stonehenge, linking heaven and earth at just the moment when the great wheel of the year begins to turn again. All this is an astonishing achievement for an institution that began with visions of a “re-enactment village” and golf course.

—*Mr. Lewis teaches architectural history at Williams and reviews architecture for the Journal.*

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the name of the architecture firm behind the museum.



Winter Solstice at the museum | PHOTO: JAMES PEPPER HENRY

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