

UT Dallas Plans Substantial Cultural District



DALLAS—With creative innovation top of mind, a team headed by global architecture and design firm Morphosis will design the new Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenæum, a 12-acre cultural district for the University of Texas at Dallas (UT Dallas). The leader in sustainable design, Buro Happold, has been selected for mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineering and to spearhead LEED/sustainability consulting for this major expansion of the university's arts programming, which includes three new buildings.

Designed by Morphosis, the firm behind such acclaimed works such as the Perot Museum, the Athenæum will bring a second location of the Crow Museum of Asian Art as well as a performance hall and a planned museum for the traditional arts of the Americas. It also adds a new parking structure and a central plaza that serves as the heart of the masterplan, creating "a new gateway to the university as well as a destination for students, faculty, staff and community to foster engagement in the arts and learning," according to UT Dallas.

Known for rigorous research and innovation, Morphosis prioritizes performance-driven design that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Buro Happold's contributions will support these goals through integrated mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (MEP) systems engineering and overall sustainability and LEED consultation. The firm's role in early phases of planning and design is to be a creative driving force in terms of the MEP systems, says Buro Happold. "For the later stages in the project, we will adopt a consulting role to help navigate solutions for the local engineering firms and ensure that sustainability goals of the client and owner are kept throughout all phases of the project," adds the firm.



Made possible by a generous \$32 million gift from the O'Donnell Foundation, groundbreaking for the Athenæum took place in mid-May, with a projected completion date in 2025. The general contractor and construction manager is The Beck Group.

UT Dallas selected Los Angeles-based Morphosis to design the Athenæum in late 2019. "The firm created a cohesive vision and masterplan for the Athenæum, where architecture and landscape combine to form a dynamic new district with a distinct identity that establishes UT Dallas as a cultural hub," according to UT Dallas. "The heart of the project is defined by a



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two-acre plaza, flanked by new buildings on the east and west sides, that will feature landscaped gardens, tree-lined walkways, paved open spaces with benches and water features, an amphitheater, and contemporary sculpture from the Crow Museum's collection." The open space and landscape design serve to knit together the various buildings within the district and to create an important link to the rest of the campus.

"As an expression of human intellect and creativity, the arts play an important role at UT Dallas by enhancing the University's focus on science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and management," said UT Dallas President Richard C. Benson, the Eugene McDermott Distinguished University Chair of Leadership. "But to ensure that UT Dallas develops versatile individuals, we must integrate the arts fully into our vision and the experience of our students."

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For site access, this can be accomplished with well laid-out civil and landscape design elements such as driveways, curbs, walkways, and plantings to effectively control vehicles and people while still providing a welcoming school campus. For the building façade and interior security areas, this can be accomplished with architectural finishes and design elements. An entrance vestibule can provide visitor management and interior security while also offering well lit areas and pleasing architectural finishes.

SCN: *In what ways can you collaborate with your project partners in order to optimize a safely designed school?*

As mentioned above, communication is key. This requires an understanding of project goals that have been coordinated with design professionals, school administration, teachers, students, community members and even local law enforcement. A security risk assessment is also a useful tool that can help bring all of this communication together.

During the design process, it is imperative for the professional design team to also understand the goals and process of a specific school. This requires communication between an architectural, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, civil engineering, and information technology team.