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The Museum of Glass by Arthur Erickson
and Nick Milkovich, Bridge of Glass
by Andersson Wise and Dale Chihuly
The Collaboration Issue
Team Space Furniture
Partnering and Strategic Alliances

blown away

The Museum of Glass and the Chihuly Bridge of Glass attract cultural attention to the Tacoma waterfront and give residents a new source of hometown pride

by Danine Alati



Glass offers myriad functional applications—from shielding your home, vehicle, or plants from the elements to displaying storefront exhibits to containing your pint of brew. While glass as art dates back to B.C. times in early Mesopotamia, no one is sure where the first man-made glass was discovered. The Romans developed the art form, the Middle Ages defined stained glass, and in the 14th century the island of Murano became known for its glassmaking trade. Arriving in the New World in the early 1600s, the glassmaking industry evolved into its Golden Age in the 19th century, and soon major glasshouses like Steuben, Tiffany, and Corning began competing in America, paving the way for modern day artisans. But there has never been an American museum dedicated to contemporary art glass until now.

In July 2002 The Museum of Glass: International Center for Contemporary Art opened in Tacoma, Wash. The \$63-million, four-story structure, which took almost a decade of planning, includes exhibition space, an auditorium, a glassblowing hot shop, resource center, café, and museum store. Arthur Erickson Architectural Corp., based in Vancouver, B.C., led the design of this multifaceted project, and directed fellow Vancouver firm Nick Milkovich Architects and Tacoma-based Thomas Cook Reed Reinvald Architects (TCRR) on how to turn the design directives into a reality. “It was a

complex process. And there had to be a single outlook overseeing it,” explains Erickson, an architect known for his Modernist aesthetic. “We had sessions with the client, and we talked about abstract ideas. We then produced a number of different schemes, and in the process it became clear as to what direction we should take. There’s an exploration process until the design crystallizes, and then everything has to conform.”

Milkovich, who has been collaborating with Erickson since 1968, says, “We did the production of the design and shared the working drawings with TCRR [who tackled day to day responsibilities and dealt with local code issues]. It worked out fairly well. We had a good rapport”—a key element in such a complex project. Josi Callan, director and chief executive officer, Museum of Glass, adds, “Getting a consensus on what everyone wanted the Museum to be was quite difficult. Sometimes architects have very different ideas; beautiful forms must also function.”

Created as an exhibition and education space, the Museum boasts 13,000 sq. ft. of gallery with no permanent exhibitions. The 15-ft.-high walls provide a vast canvas to feature the work of visiting artists, who also share their expertise in the education studio. A 180-seat theater accommodates programs, lectures, and meetings, but the real hot spot of the Museum is the glass

The Museum of Glass’s exterior facade includes a 90-ft.-tall cone (below) that tops the glassmaking area and lends a striking iconic element visible from the highway. The minimalist design of interior gallery spaces (left) allows the work of visiting artists to shine.



production center—or Hot Shop Amphitheater—which seats 145 visitors to observe artists blowing and casting the pieces. A 90-ft.-high steel cone that rises up from the Museum roof tops the Hot Shop. Inspired by the wood- and coal-burning structures that easily identify mills of the Northwest, the cone denotes this production area by tilting at a 17-degree angle up into the Tacoma skyline.

The building's interior is kept minimal; because of a very tight budget the interior design scheme was limited. "We used few materials and colors to maintain a sense of integrity," Erickson says. The architect's signature use of concrete, coupled with glass, completed the simple aesthetic. Patterned precast concrete prevented the design from becoming too bland, and use of aggregate materials lent a warm tone. Erickson was disappointed that the interior structure looked so

industrial. But stark interiors are actually beneficial, not detracting from the plentiful, vivid artwork—fine glass pieces even spill out of the gallery space onto exterior terraces.

These terraces, along with reflecting pools on the roof, a spiraling grand staircase that cascades down the exterior, and the building's signature cone position the entire building as a presence on the Thea Foss Waterway. The museum's locale marked an integral part of its design, since the building was commissioned as part of a redevelopment effort of the waterfront in downtown Tacoma. A 500-ft.-long Bridge of Glass links The Museum of Glass with the Washington State History Museum, Union Station, and Tacoma Art Museum on the south side of Interstate 705.

Conceived by master artisan Dale Chihuly and designed by Texas-based Andersson Wise Architects, the \$10.7-million bridge funded by federal, local, and private endowments marked a highly collaborative project that was completed on a parallel schedule with the Museum. Arthur Andersson, AIA, and Chihuly brainstormed about what the bridge would accomplish and built models to demonstrate their ideas. "But it looked ridiculous," Andersson recalls. "Fanciful pavilions had nothing to do with Dale's work. It looked like a caged bird." Influenced by the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy, they decided that the bridge would feature Chihuly's work, without being too over the top. "We looked at the strength of what Dale accomplished in his exhibitions in Jerusalem and Venice, and tried to convey that in this bridge—keeping in mind it's a public space, an outdoor gallery."

The Grand Hall (right) welcomes visitors to The Museum of Glass, where they may experience hands-on learning in the Education Studio (below) or watch the glass being blown and formed in the Hot Shop (opposite), a breathtaking space topped by a 90-ft.-tall cone.







Capitalizing on the concept of a 500-ft. long “room,” they designed varying degrees of enclosures. The Seaform Pavilion features kaleidoscopic, flowing forms from Chihuly’s Seaform and Persian series set atop the 50-by-20-ft. plate glass ceiling, which is backlit for a dazzling effect. Two 40-ft.-high towers called Crystal Gates—made of Polyvitro, a polyurethane material that can withstand the elements—denote the center of the Bridge. And an 80-ft.-long Venetian Wall, framed in simple, black, stainless steel and covered with the translucent glass, includes more than 100 Chihuly sculptures. The resulting displays, valued at \$9 million, “become an event,” Andersson says. For Chihuly, this was a unique opportunity to give something back to his hometown of Tacoma, a place where people feel a real kinship for him.

While Andersson acknowledges the arduous task of transforming a basic bridge into a traffic-stopping sight, he says, “It was most challenging to coordinate with so many parties: the city of Tacoma, Dale Chihuly, the Museum of Glass, and the federal and state governments. All groups were part of the decision-making process.” He continues, “There were many frustrating periods throughout the six-year-long process, but there were also many great moments along the way.” And the most satisfying is seeing people witness the bridge for the first time. “They are awestruck,” he says. “The real

magic is Dale’s glass. People can’t imagine seeing their city like this.” The revolutionary and highly successful Bridge of Glass exists as both an oeuvre in its own right and a link from the Museum of Glass to the waterfront.

Erickson and Milkovich corresponded with the bridge designers to keep each other informed, as the projects occurred concurrently. Milkovich recognized that “the greatest challenge in creating the museum was working with all of the people concerned to articulate the vision.” He adds, “It’s also difficult to marry the creative vision with the [lean] budget.” Josi Callan notes the two-fold goals of the overall project: to have a museum that focuses on glass and to create a cornerstone of the whole waterfront development. “And the museum along with the Bridge of Glass accomplishes that,” she testifies. “We are realizing that it’s a beautiful building that works well. And like a new home, we are now learning to live with it.”

This complex, convoluted project that at times was trying on patience, also became a highly anticipated, magnificent, groundbreaking art display not only for Tacoma or the state of Washington, but for the country. And as the first ever project of its kind, the Tacoma Museum of Glass and Chihuly Bridge of Glass has proven well worth the wait. ■



Andersson says that the most-intriguing aspect of the Bridge collaboration was researching how to put this kind of art in an exterior public place, a feat that was accomplished by setting thousands of Chihuly's pieces atop a plate glass ceiling in the Seaform Pavilion (above) and displaying more than 100 Venetian-style vessels in glass-encased shelves in the Venetian Wall. (opposite).