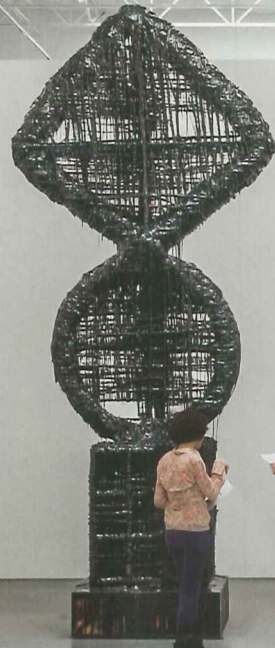


Texas Architect





A Tin Gallery

by Ben Koush

Project Sicardi Gallery, Houston

Client Sicardi Gallery

Architect Brave/Architecture

Design Team Fernando L. Brave, FAIA; Alp Bozkurt; Alejandro Brave; Bryant Alcantara; Peter Ho

Photographers Julie Pizzo Wood and Hester & Hardaway Photography



The Houston architectural scene has long been something of an anomaly, compared with the rest of the state. Unlike such well-known “Texas” architects as O’Neil Ford, FAIA; Frank Welch, FAIA; Ted Flato, FAIA; and David Lake, FAIA, Houston’s modern architects have not been preoccupied with creating a regional building culture. In fact, during a symposium at The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture in 1981, Howard Barnstone, FAIA, Houston’s best-known modern architect, casually compared regionalism to candy, or dope: “It gives you a big lift, then lets you down.” (*TA* Nov./Dec., 1981) Fellow panel members Ford, Welch, and Larry Speck, FAIA, weren’t pleased.

This is one big reason why Brave/Architecture’s recently completed building for the Sicardi Gallery is so intriguing. It is the latest example of Houston’s almost secret cohort of modern regional buildings, which Barnstone himself paradoxically instigated in the late 1960s. In retrospect, what Barnstone might have been criticizing was not the idea of an architecture

tied to a place, but rather a sentimental and simplistic regionalism that in its Texas iteration substitutes limestone, rough-hewn beams, and lone stars for a critical engagement with the conditions of modernity.

In 1969, along with his then-business partner Eugene Aubry, FAIA, Barnstone designed a building on the Rice University campus for John and Dominique de Menil’s newly created Institute of the Arts. Both the

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exterior walls and gable roof of the 60-ft-by-200-ft warehouse-like building were clad in sheets of cheap corrugated galvanized iron, commonly used on light industrial buildings in Houston at the time. The Art Barn, as it was affectionately known, was an unlikely oasis of culture for nearly 20



years. And yet, despite its long life, its popularity, and vigorous protests, the Art Barn was demolished by Rice in April 2014. By appropriating the ordinary materials and forms of Houston’s generic metal warehouses and then asserting the result as “architecture,” Barnstone and Aubry produced a subversive art building in the same postwar pop spirit that gave rise to Andy Warhol’s soup cans and Roy Lichtenstein’s comic strips. True to this spirit, the Menils exhibited works from their art collection in the Art Barn until they decamped in 1987 to a permanent museum building.

Once the Art Barn was in operation, these sorts of buildings — simple masses clad entirely in corrugated metal — began to multiply. Built mostly by members of the art community in marginal neighborhoods, where

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deed restrictions had either never existed or long since lapsed, these “Tin Houses” slowly became recognized as an architectural phenomenon by the 1990s. Fernando Brave, FAIA, was part of the wave. In 1994, he designed and built a Tin House for his family in Houston’s West End, the epicenter of the movement.

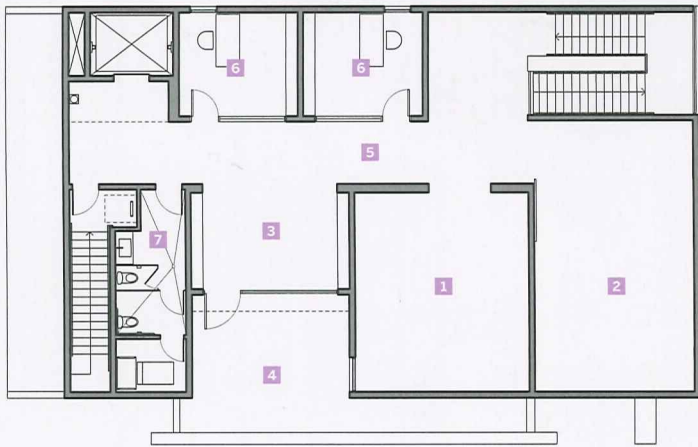
That same year, after relocating from Buenos Aires to Houston, María Inés Sicardi opened her eponymous gallery to display Latin American avant-garde art. She began by operating out of a 700-sf space in a small Montrose office complex on Kipling Street where she was able to show prints and small paintings, but not much else. In 2001, a move next door

Previous spread *The Sicardi Gallery is located in Houston’s Montrose district and shares a parking lot with the Menil Collection.*

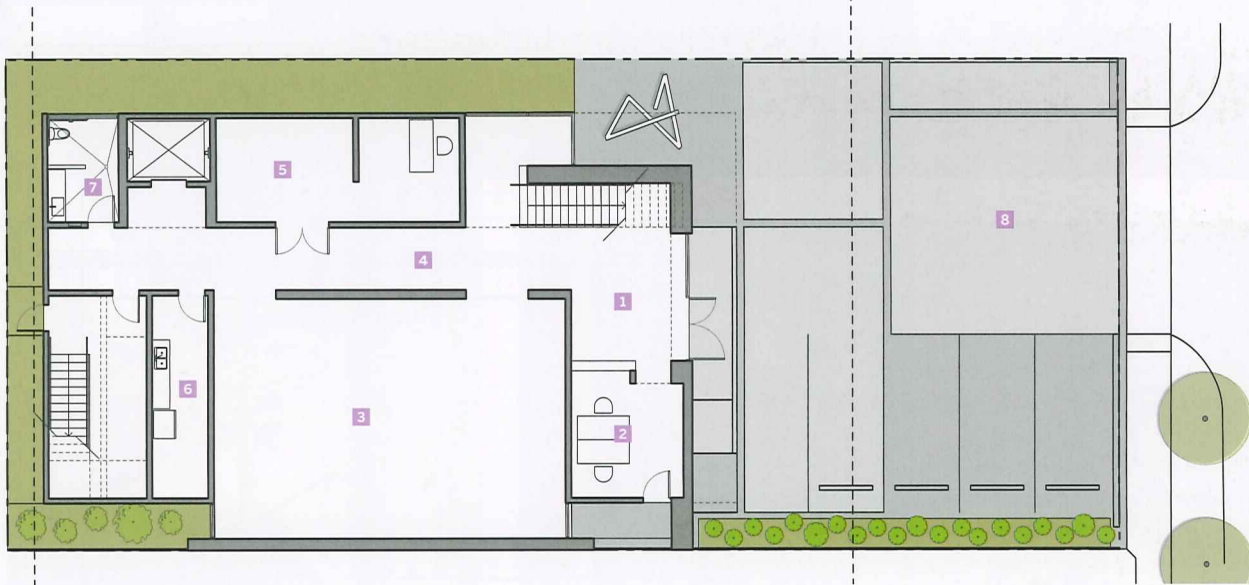
Above *The 16-ft-tall main gallery was designed to accommodate large artworks.*

Right *A 7-ft-wide corridor runs the length of the building. The space allows for easier movement of the artwork and serves as an ancillary exhibit space.*

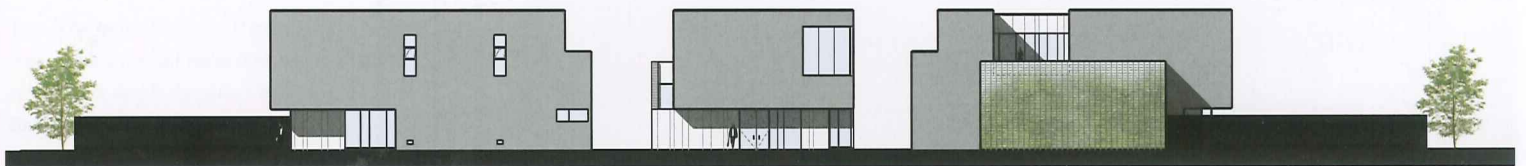




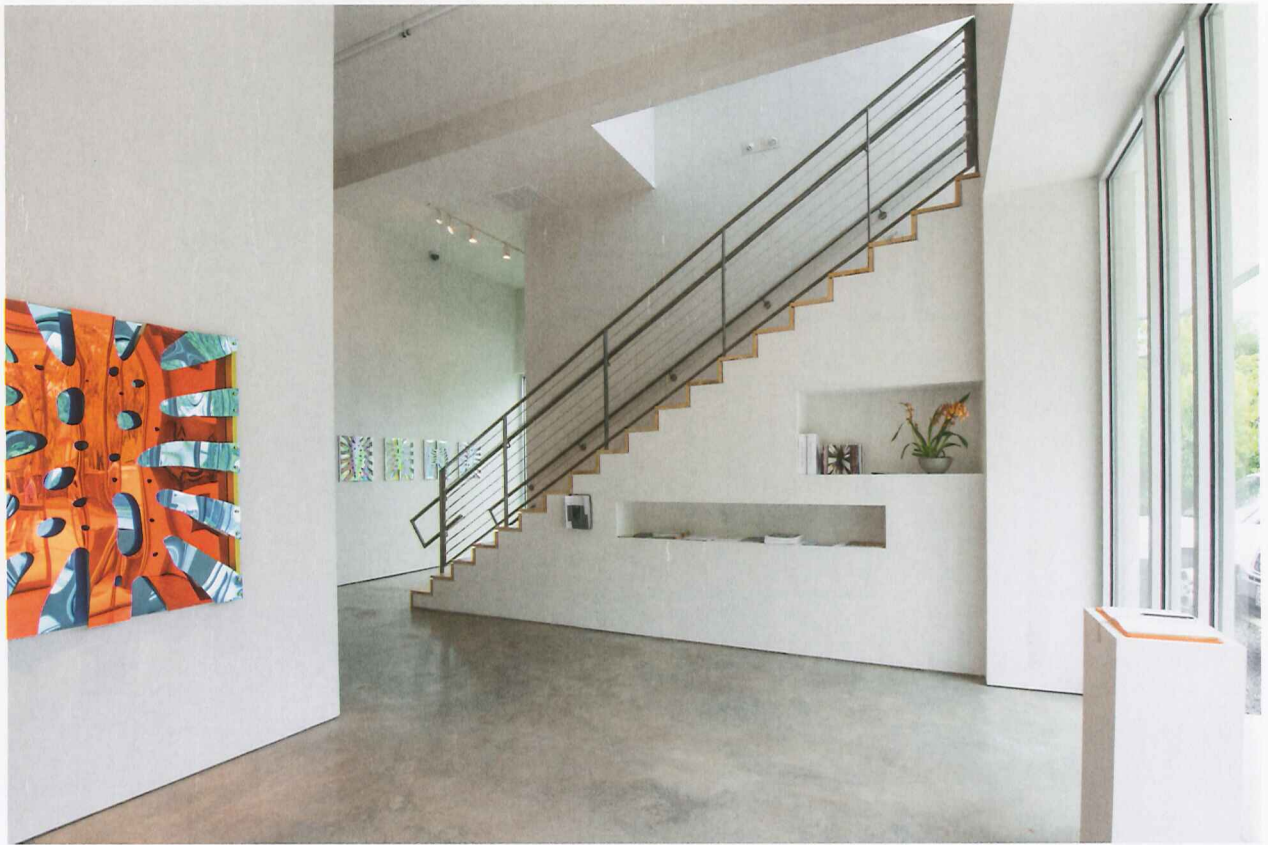
SECOND FLOOR PLAN
 1 VIDEO GALLERY
 2 FRAMING/WORKROOM
 3 LIBRARY
 4 TERRACE
 5 CORRIDOR
 6 OFFICE
 7 BATHROOM



SITE AND FIRST FLOOR PLAN
 1 ENTRY
 2 OFFICE
 3 GALLERY
 4 CORRIDOR
 5 COLLECTIONS
 6 KITCHENETTE
 7 BATHROOM
 8 PARKING



Right A sculptural stair links the two levels of the gallery.



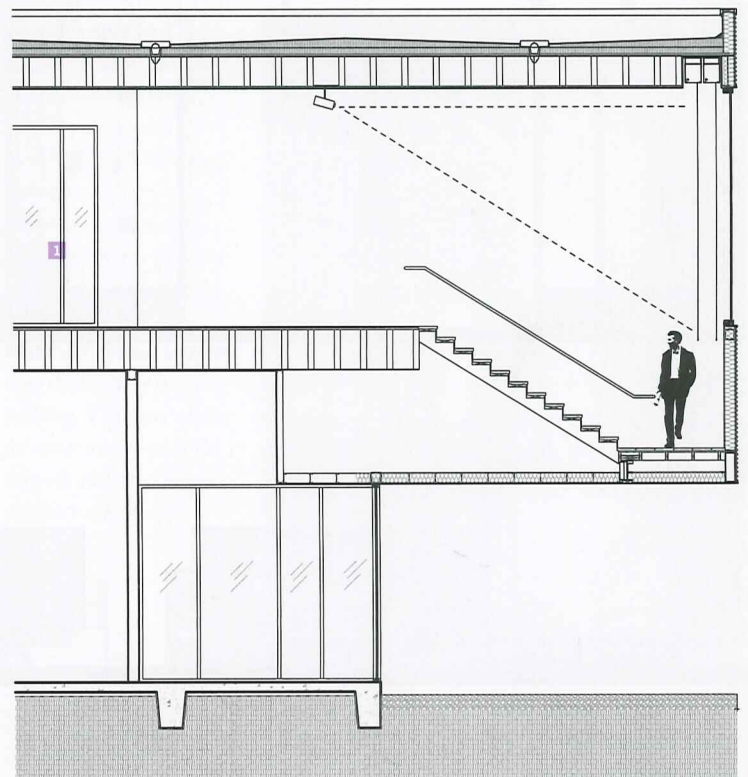
to the McClain Gallery building on Richmond Avenue, a 1,700-sf space with 14-ft-tall ceilings, allowed Sicardi to show more spatially demanding works by such artists as Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), Carlos Cruz-Diez, and Jesús Rafael Soto. Her appetite whetted for presenting still larger works — and prompted by a fear of disruptive Metro light-rail construction — Sicardi prepared to move again. Brave designed her current gallery space, which was completed in 2012.

According to Brave, a fellow transplant from Argentina, as Sicardi searched for a suitable site along local thoroughfares, she kept coming back to West Alabama Street. She was attracted by its manageable traffic and proximity to the Menil Collection. The property she ultimately acquired is directly

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across from the museum's parking lot, and she worked out an arrangement with the Menil Collection to allow visitors to park there during art openings.

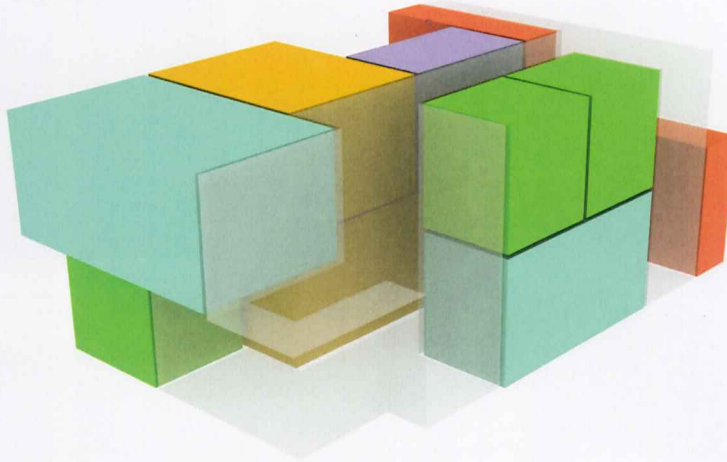
Sicardi's design requirements were almost entirely based on accommodating artworks that were too large for the gallery space on Richmond Avenue. The new building contains 5,900 sf divided into two floors. Ceilings on the first floor are 16-ft-tall, and they reach 12 ft on the second level. "She's built a little museum," said Brave, looking around the big first-floor gallery. The rest of the building mass was determined by code setbacks and easements, which are responsible for its boxy, carved-away



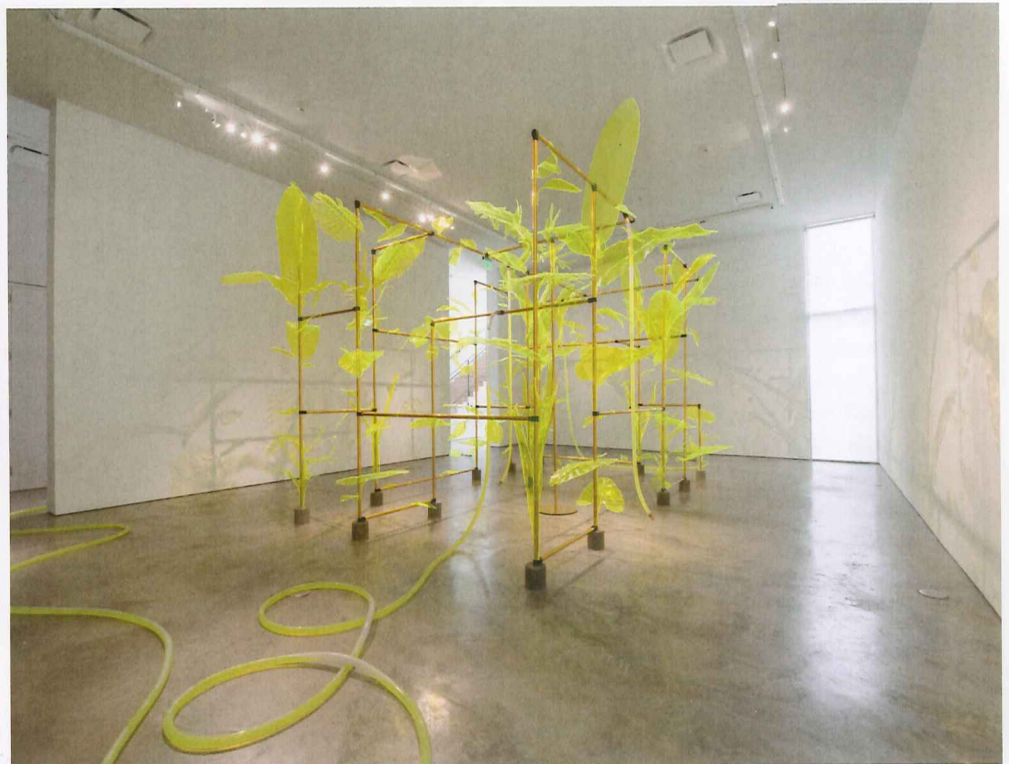
STAIR SECTION
1 OFFICE

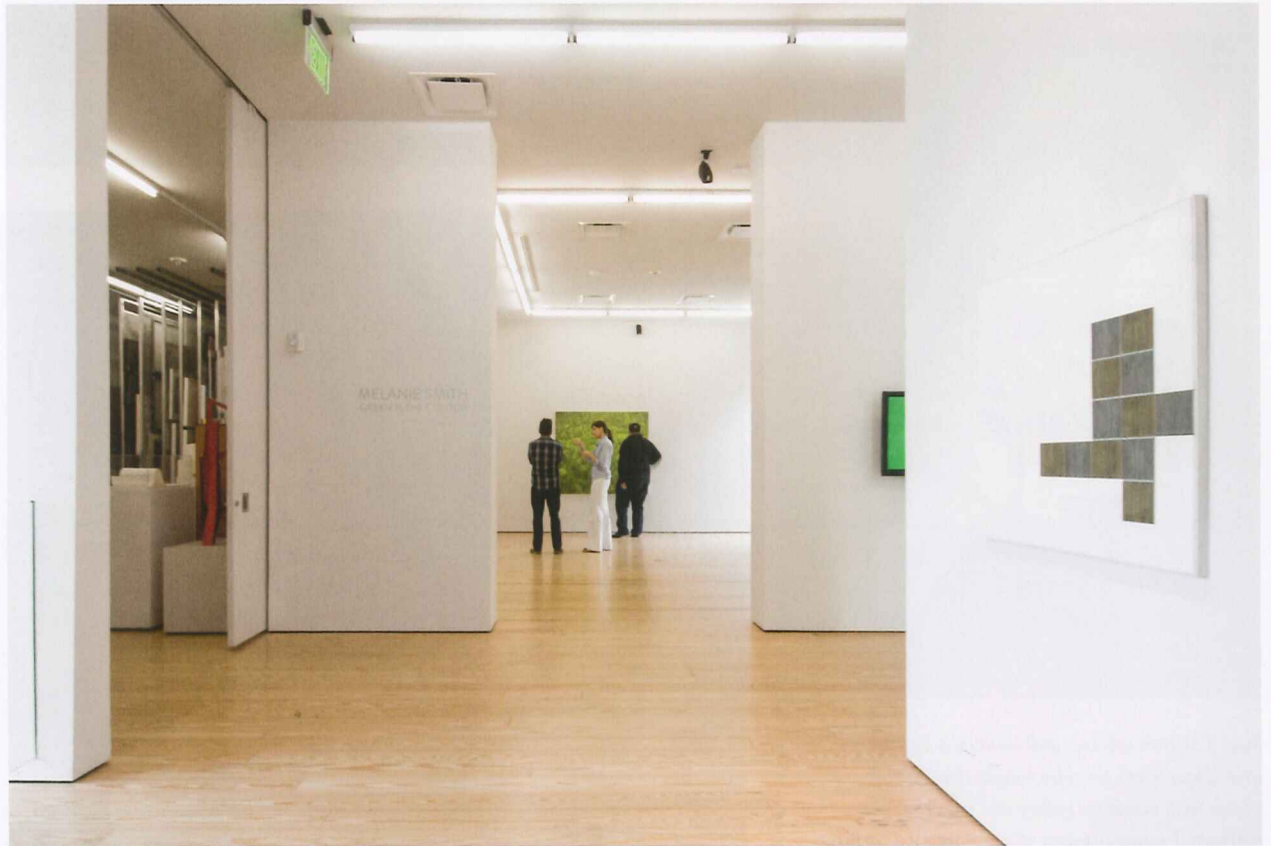
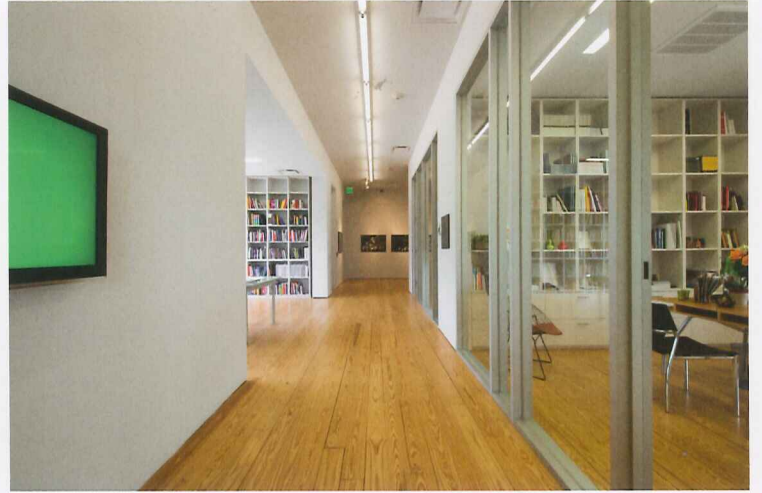


PROGRAMMING MODEL
 ■ GALLERY
 ■ OFFICE
 ■ LIBRARY
 ■ FRAMING/WORKROOM/STORAGE
 ■ SERVICE



Top The stair window will eventually be fitted with a drop-down screen for video installations, which will be visible from inside the gallery and from the street.
Bottom A corner window off the main corridor gestures to the gallery's future neighbor and provides a display space visible from the street.
Right The main gallery was designed to accommodate both two dimensional and free-standing work.







Clockwise from top left Second-level galleries with 12-ft ceilings and pine flooring are sized and finished for more intimately scaled artwork. Glass-walled gallery offices run along the east side of the second-level corridor. The windowless art storage space was originally intended for projection art. **Left** The library alcove opens to an outdoor terrace.

final shape. The exterior of the building is almost entirely clad in large-scale, silver-colored corrugated galvalume panels. The entrance is stucco painted white, and the fire-rated walls along the western property line are made of exposed concrete block. At the front elevation, a 24-ft-tall metal-wrapped volume, pierced by a single 12-ft-by-12-ft window, hovers serenely over a recessed 10-ft-tall lower section, which houses the main entrance doors. Although this arrangement seems to deliberately invert the actual interior division of the building, Brave explained that this was done on purpose to provide an entry scaled to people rather than to the art. The asymmetrical grid pattern of dark grey gravel embedded in the concrete paving at the front of the building will ultimately be continued to the property next door, where architect Dillon Kyle, AIA, is planning a new building for his practice.

Inside, the spaces are standard-issue art gallery. Walls are painted a uniform bright white. There is exposed, light grey concrete on the first floor and natural finished pine on the second floor. Lighting is deliberately crude. Linear fluorescent light fixtures in Dan Flavin-like, single-file lines are supplemented in a few places by track lights. The cool, uniform light they produce is currently popular in the art world. Sicardi had seen such arrangements in galleries in Rio de Janeiro and Paris before selecting it for hers. Despite the avant-garde appeal of this system, the generous and lofty galleries seem to deserve better.

The new “Tin” Sicardi Gallery building strongly suggests that the now 45-year-old Tin Building movement remains viable in Houston. Its elegantly resolved design and level of craftsmanship indicate a refinement of the cheeky bravado of its inaugural buildings. However, whereas the first Tin Buildings

resonated because they brought Houston’s industrial vernacular into the language of art, the Sicardi Gallery’s carefully composed, neo-modern elevations and graceful proportions begin to seem conservative. Drawing from the

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established architectural imagery of the International Style instead of from “non-buildings” with no style, this new building does not quite replicate the dialectical act that made the first Tin Buildings so captivating.

In 1994, Drexel Turner, who was the first to analyze the Tin Buildings as an architectural trend peculiar to Houston, wrote: “For all its virtues, latent and apparent, sheet metal — particularly in its shiny, corrugated form — has become something of an architectural comfort food, no longer shocking enough to antagonize the bourgeoisie but still vestigially progressive enough to signal intention and perhaps even deflect closer scrutiny.” Although almost 20 years have passed since his observations were published in *Cite* magazine, they still ring true. They suggest the difficulty of creating relevant architecture of place and bring to mind some questions: What scrutiny is being deflected? How can a regionally-inflected architecture stay one step ahead of the deadening effects of modern culture? Would it have been possible for this building to be as progressive as the art it contains? How far can the architectural language of a contemporary art gallery be pushed?

Ben Koush is an architect in Houston.