Museum modified

Contemporary's downtown museum gets new look, spaces.

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin
jvanryzin@statesman.com

With a flourish, the Contemporary Austin ratcheted up to a new level recently.

A $6 million renovation smartly retooled the museum's downtown Jones Center, a project that included the unveiling of a major outdoor installation that now graces the building's rooftop at Congress Avenue and Seventh Street.

Now, 7-foot-tall letters rim the Jones Center’s updated rooftop and read “With Liberty and Justice for All.”

In daylight, the iridescent, mirrored surfaces of the sans serif letters oscillate with color, shifting between shades of blue, purple, orange and pink. At night, the letters are lit from within with LEDs.

The sculpture — called “With Liberty and Justice for All (A Work in Progress)” — is by Jim Hodges, a New York-based artist born in 1957 in Spokane, Wash.

Perched above Congress Avenue — a thoroughfare dubbed the “Main Street of Texas” — and just a few blocks from the Texas Capitol, the phrase from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance carries undeniable potency.

Yet Hodges deploys language on a conceptual and symbolic level. Hence “With Liberty and Justice for All (A Work in Progress)” is not a directive so much as it is an invitation to think deeply about the ideas behind America’s democratic experiment.

“The building is literally supporting this aspirational line we all grew up saying. (The sculpture’s title) suggests that the idea behind that line is something to always be worked on,” Hodges told the noted journalist Dan Rather in a live interview at the sculpture’s opening two weeks ago.

“Art is the perfect vehicle to deliver all of us to a sense of shared humanity. And the art institutions themselves (are) the most important and most vital places in a community.”

The Hodges installation is but a part of the renovation to the architecturally distinctive Jones Center. Most dramatic is a new 21-foot-high canopy added to the rooftop, where the museum stages film screenings and other events. The canopy offers shade and rain protection, augmented by weatherproof curtains on a track that rings the rooftop.

The 21,000-square-foot Jones Center underwent a $6 million renovation in 2010, a sleek and sophisticated transformation designed by LTL Architects of New York. The museum again turned to LTL’s Paul Lewis to design the recent renovation.

Inside, the museum’s first floor was opened up, offices were relocated to the Contemporary’s Laguna Gloria location, and about 2,000 square feet of flexible gallery space was created. In total, the Jones Center now has 7,000 square feet of exhibit space — a volume that allows the museum to host a new level of traveling exhibitions and organize larger shows.

Less visible are significant upgrades to the Jones Center’s humidity and temperature controls so that they now meet strin-
In the newly expanded first-floor galleries, Sosnowska’s projects—"Antechamber" and "Face," among others—are on display. Each piece is intricately detailed and thoughtfully constructed to provide an immersive experience for visitors.

The museum has also made significant progress on the renovation of its Jones Center, which is scheduled for completion in 2017. This renovation will include the addition of a new first-floor gallery, allowing for more extensive exhibitions of contemporary art. The museum has also received a major grant from the Suzanne Deal Booth Prize, which will help fund the expansion of its sculpture park at Laguna Gloria.

The museum’s current exhibition, "Laguna Gloria Growth," features works by a variety of contemporary artists, including Monika Sosnowska. Sosnowska’s exhibit includes "Antechamber," a large-scale installation that explores themes of memory and place.

The museum has also welcomed new acquisitions, including a major gift from the Booth family, who have a long history of support for the museum. These acquisitions, along with ongoing exhibitions and educational programs, demonstrate the museum’s commitment to providing a rich and diverse cultural experience for its visitors.

In conclusion, the Austin American-Statesman reports that the Austin Museum of Art is continuing to grow and evolve, expanding its collections and programming to meet the needs of its community. As the museum moves forward, it will continue to be a vital cultural asset for the city and beyond.