Now, 18 years later, a celebration of the Weisman’s 8,100-square-foot expansion, also designed by Gehry, was under way. And yes, Frank was inside the museum, across from the new Target Studio for Creative Collaboration, accepting congratulations from the crowd. When a well-wisher commented that he must be immensely pleased with the fulfillment of his original vision for the museum (an addition was part of the museum’s building plan from the get-go), he beamed and said, “Of course.”

The crowd was abuzz. On a temperate October evening, as arts patrons hobnobbed beneath the Weisman Art Museum’s wavy new entrance canopy, word spread that “Frank” had arrived. That would be Frank Gehry, FAIA, of course. In 1993, the original 47,300-square-foot museum he designed opened to fanfare at the University of Minnesota, with its dramatic west façade of abstract, steel-clad turrets, angles, towers, cylinders, and other curved forms glistening above the Mississippi River.
He then began talking about a possible next phase: a café overlooking the river. “We could redo that façade,” he offered. “Whenever Lyndel’s ready, we’re ready.”

Lyndel King, the Weisman’s director and chief curator, along with her staff, will no doubt wish to relish and fully engage the expanded museum before taking on another construction project. “We do have a sense of completing the vision we...
The first Target Studio exhibit was composed of the drawings, models, and process boards submitted by the four finalists in the Plaza Design Competition (see sidebar on page XX). The plaza being re-envisioned lies just outside the Target Studio window, bracketed by the Science Teaching & Student Services building to the north and Washington Avenue bridge to the west.

While the studio is clad in brick with a stainless-steel-panel canopy, the four new rectangular volumes on the east side of the building, which house the new galleries, are clad in the same brick.

started about 20 years ago,” says King, adding, as if considering future phases, “This design certainly seems like the museum is more finished.”

The sinuous metal canopy, which King calls the “one new, dramatic, stainless-steel move” in an expansion that’s largely brick boxes, accents the new Target Studio. An education space for the teaching museum, the studio has an enticing catwalk along the ceiling perimeter that could showcase performance art, musicians, or installations.
The four new rectangular volumes on the east side of the building, which house the new galleries, are clad in the same brick that formerly lined the east façade.

A Competitive Start

So what activities and exhibitions does the Weisman have in mind for its new Target Studio for Creative Collaboration? The first show—the results of a competition that charged four interdisciplinary teams with redesigning the bridgehead plaza outside the Weisman’s main entry as a vibrant public space—gave a clear answer. The exhibition displayed the collaborative work of architects, landscape architects, artists, and engineers on tables and walls, flat screens and iPads. And it invited museum visitors to contribute their own ideas and drawings on sketch paper.

The subject matter, too, was a perfect fit for the studio, because the plaza in question lies just outside the gallery’s large windows. In fact, one of the directives to the teams was “connect [the plaza] to the [studio] and its programs through new media and other means.” The iPad videos showing team discussions were a good start.

The teams, led by 4RM+ULA (page XX), Coen + Partners, VJAA (page XX), and SEH, respectively, made separate presentations to the jury and to the public on October 26. The following day, the jury announced the winner: the VJAA team, which included design-research collaborative HouMinn Practice and artist Diane Willow. For more on the competition and the winning entry, visit www.weisman.umn.edu.
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Embedded in the Woodhouse Gallery’s high ceilings are skylights that bathe the space in daylight regulated through fritted glass, mesh scrims, and shades.

Weisman while with Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle. “During the first phase, we created layout possibilities for future expansion,” says Cook. “This time we elevated the expansion space off the ground.”

Spanning the interior of the new brick boxes is the expansive Woodhouse Gallery, where the Weisman now exhibits its long-stored collection of American art. Embedded in the high ceilings, where Gehry’s abstract, cathedral-like roof forms are in full view, are skylights that bathe the gallery in daylight regulated through fritted glass, mesh scrims, and shades. The gallery is intimate enough to keep one’s focus on the art, yet it also invites the viewer to gaze upward to appreciate Gehry’s unique architectural vocabulary.

“People have said Frank’s architecture competes with the art,” notes King. “But we think Frank’s created the best environment for looking at art. He accomplishes this through the volume of the rooms, the proportions of the space, the way he handles the skylights. He’s created an emotional environment that lets the works of art do their best.”

On the north end of the Woodhouse is the Edith Carlson Gallery. Here the lower ceiling and absence of skylights creates a defined space for exhibiting and viewing prints and drawings. Tucked next to the Carlson Gallery, the Weisman’s singular collection of Korean furnishings and cultural artifacts is displayed on curved risers. On the south side of the museum, the Hodroff Gallery (ceramics) beckons visitors with a large vertical window overlooking the river.

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VIDEO FEATURE: See more of the Weisman Art Museum’s new addition at architecturemn.com
Return Engagement

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The new galleries at the east end flow seamlessly from one to the other, creating a new sense of balance in the museum’s circulation, Cook points out. The mostly untouched west end has always provided visitors with a variety of ways to loop between the entrance, auditorium and event space, and the Davis Gallery. But prior to the expansion the east wall of the Davis Gallery had seemed a sudden end point, a terminus. “You always got the feeling that there should be more,” says Cook.

In the expansion, the wall that formerly divided the Davis Gallery is gone, and the east wall opens to the new exhibition spaces, whose circulation flow mirrors that of the museum’s west side. The design team also brought the hallway to the north of the Davis Gallery forward, so that the popular, large-scale Pedicord Apts. exhibit could be installed behind the wall.

“The new galleries give Lyndel much more freedom and flexibility with her shows and programs,” says Edwin Chan. “I’m looking forward to seeing how she uses the museum in the next few years.” Some of those visits, he adds, might incorporate planning another expansion. “We’ve generated a lot of ideas over the years,” says Chan.

“One of the programmatic elements we initially talked about for this phase was a café that would extend toward the river, which Lyndel really wants,” he continues. “Unfortunately, we weren’t able to incorporate the café into phase two. But it’s under consideration for the future.”

Meanwhile, the Weisman has become an even more dynamic presence on campus. “The architecture announces to the students, ‘This building is about art, and it’s right in the middle of your life. You don’t have to love it, but you have to deal with it,’” says King. “Great art is like that, too.”

The building isn’t as shocking as it was in 1993, when “Frank was a well-known architect but not yet a rock star,” King continues. The “swoopy” forms of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which followed the Weisman, brought Gehry worldwide fame.

Still, says King, the building “is pretty far out. And the new canopy is our swoop, a nod to Frank’s architectural innovations since the original Weisman opened. With that canopy, the building is now truly a part of our permanent collection. In that way alone, the building is a huge success.”

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