



Anchorage Museum Expansion Landscape Design Overview

Many factors were considered when designing the Anchorage Museum site.

The site needed to respond to the architecture of the new expansion, museum program, adjacent streets and city, and regional context. Early in the design process the design architect, David Chipperfield, and the landscape architect, Seattle-based Charles Anderson of Charles Anderson Landscape Architecture, discussed how to approach the museum site design. Both designers agreed the site needed to:

- strike a bold presence,
- complement the architecture, and
- provide respite from the adjacent busy streets

The two boldest design moves were either to fill the site or to leave it empty. Because of the wide avenues, parking lots and open sky that surround the site, it was clear that the answer was to fill the site.

Birch Trees

Although the designers felt the site should be filled, the program of the site needed to be flexible and open. To achieve these seemingly opposite requirements, Charles Anderson Landscape Architecture looked back to one of the most enigmatic and dynamic icons of the Southcentral Alaskan landscape — the deciduous birch forests.

About the birch trees and site design:

- Paper birch is one of the most culturally and ecologically important and widespread native trees in the Anchorage Bowl, extending from Cook Inlet to the rolling foothills of the Chugach Mountains.
- Planted on a graduated grid, the birch trees complement the dramatic form, mass and semi-transparent skin of the building, and move from dense spacing at the west end of the site, to an airy spacing as it approaches the new building.

- The birch trees create a unified element that provides an animated, transparent screen between the street and the museum. Its staggered, syncopated spacings create multiple mutations of light and space, while still providing a formal cogency and simplicity to the whole site. A low, simple understory planting will accentuate the open space between the ground and the tree canopy, and focus the eye on the dancing shadows and the warm white of the trunks.

A Public Common

Clearings carved into the forest will be surfaced with turf and hardscape, creating areas for gathering, sculpture and group activity. The largest of these carvings becomes a civic common that generously spills out from the new museum entrance into the heart of the museum site. A series of benches line the northern edge of the civic common, providing a place to have lunch, meet friends, and capitalize on summer light.

The landscape creates a dramatic urban forest in the middle of the city. It is a singular visual statement, as well as an ambiguous terrain open to multiple interpretations.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. How will the Anchorage Museum landscape be maintained?

A. The museum will add a groundskeeper to its staff and contract with an arborist to care for the trees. Anchorage-based landscape architects from Earthscape also serve as a local resource. Built into the design are two elements that will help reduce maintenance issues: the site is predominantly filled with native plants that will require less upkeep over time, and the site is fully irrigated.

Q. Will the Anchorage Museum landscape be a safe place to visit?

A. Considering safety issues in the landscape design has been a high priority for Charles Anderson Landscape Architecture (CALA). One of the key elements of the design is to ensure that visibility is clear into and across the site. To achieve this, all trees will be limbed up to six feet and all shrubs will be no taller than three feet, providing open sight lines at eye level. Additionally, CALA worked with museum design firm George Sexton Associates on the site lighting design to provide safe levels of light throughout the site during the winter months.

Q. Is it prudent to primarily use one species of trees for the Anchorage Museum landscape?

What if there is a bug infestation or all the trees get a disease?

A. Charles Anderson Landscape Architecture selected the Paper Birch as the dominant tree because of its regional ecological significance and beauty. While it is true that insects and diseases can wipe out a stand of trees of the same species, this happens most often when the trees are stressed due to circumstances such as drought, restricted root space and compacted soils. The museum landscape design mitigates these kinds of stresses with a fully irrigated site and a large, open plant bed filled with native topsoil to ensure the birch trees are healthy.

Q. Where are the birch trees coming from?

A. About 250 birch trees were salvaged in summer 2008 from a few sites near Big Lake that are privately owned and will eventually be developed commercially. The trees will be cared for in a nursery until they will be re-planted on the museum site in 2009. The birch trees will be about 16 feet tall when first planted. Over the next 20 years, the trees will mature to 30 – 40 feet tall.

Q. Where can I learn more?

A. Please visit the museum's website at: www.anchoragemuseum.org for more information, including presentations by the building's architect, David Chipperfield, and landscape architect, Charles Anderson. Multiple public presentations over the last 3 years have included question and answer sessions that are reflected in these images and summaries.