

# The Best Architecture of 2022: From Symphonic to Serene

The year's best built creations include a pair of California museums, a wisely updated concert hall and a heartbreaking memorial to the victims of a mass shooting.

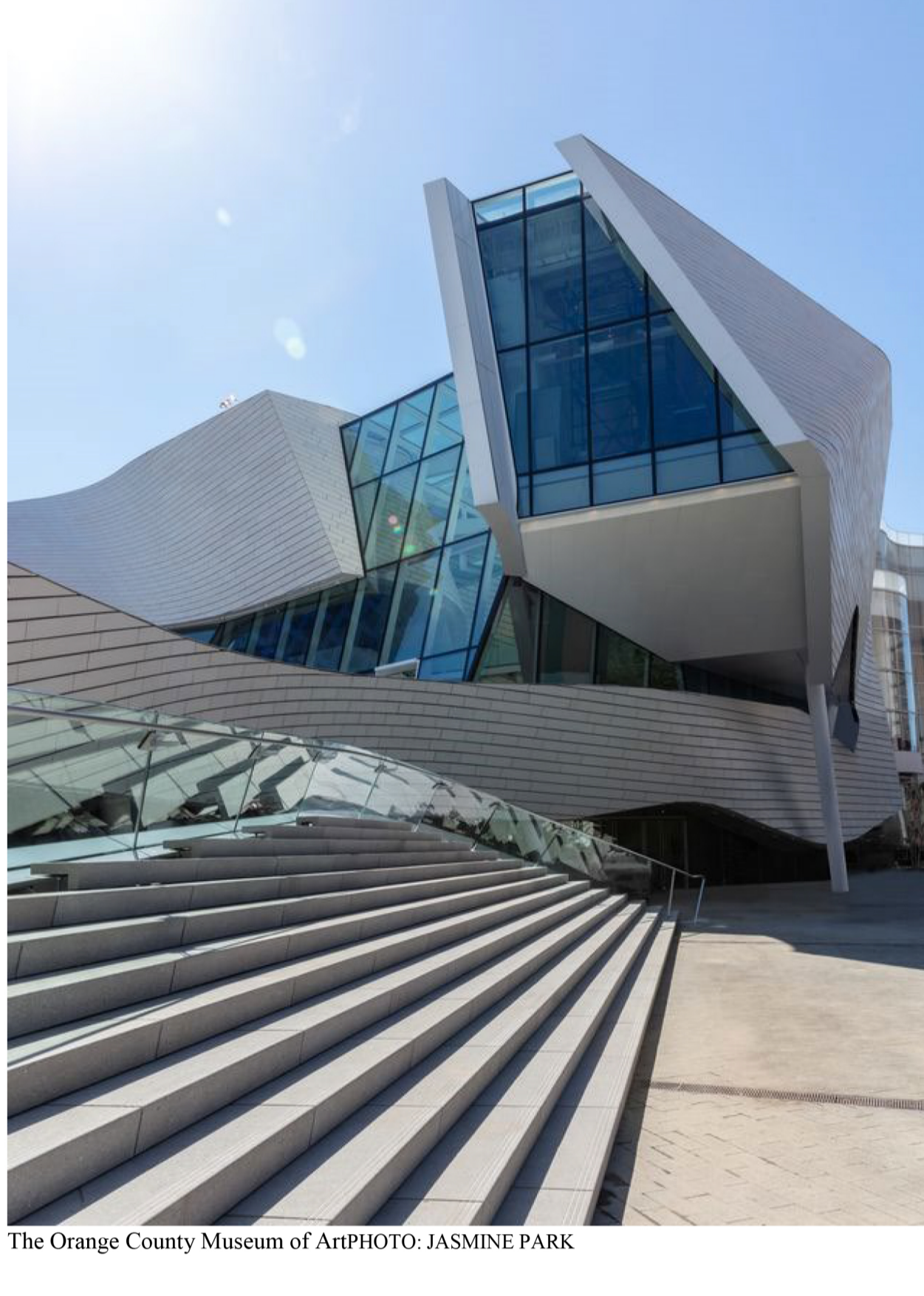


Oceanfront view of the Museum of Contemporary Art San DiegoPHOTO: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO/BREADTRUCK FILMS

By Michael J. Lewis  
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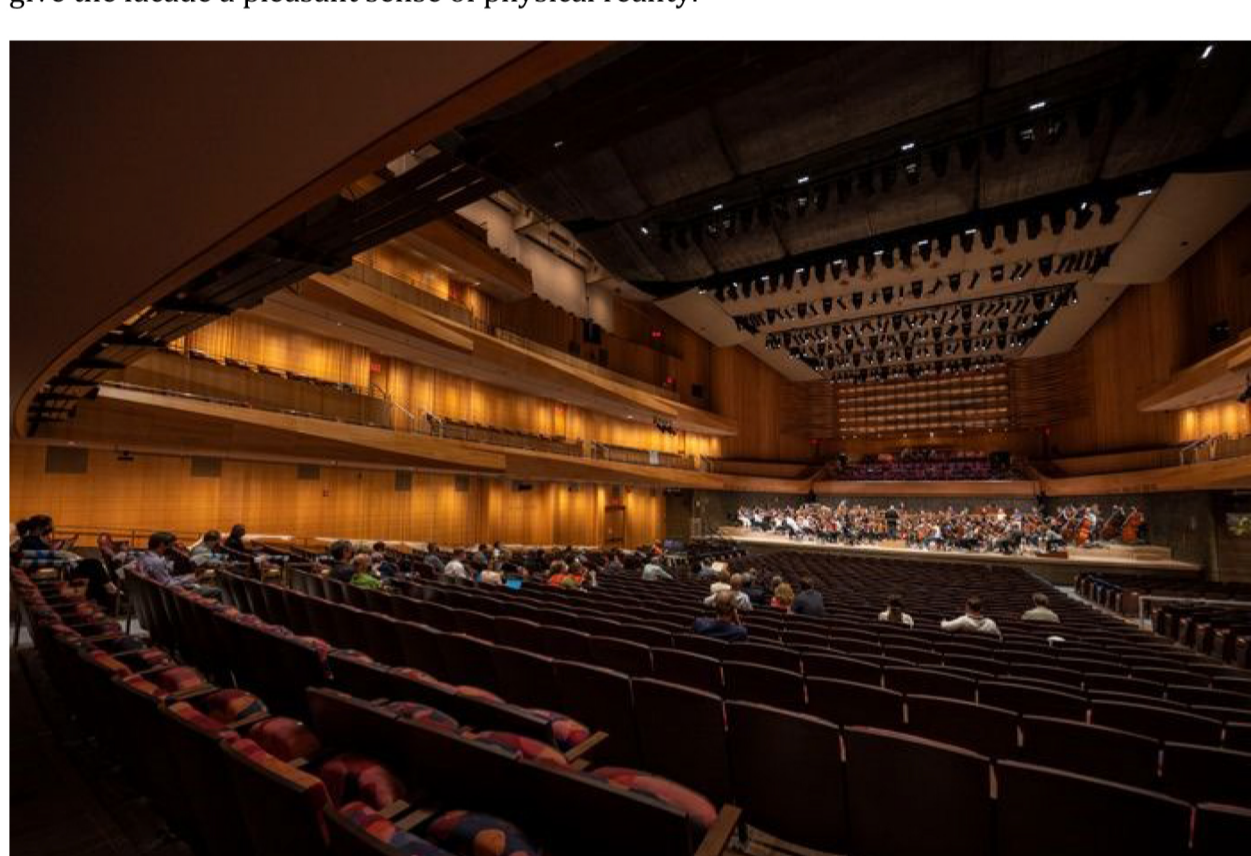
The gestation of an elephant is nearly two years and that of a building even longer. And so the cultural and economic upheavals of our past two years have not yet begun to express themselves in architecture. The notable buildings of 2022 are a time capsule from a world that had never heard of Covid-19, George Floyd, and a good many other things. They are certainly self-assured, and whether that comforts or irks will depend on the viewer.

A pair of museums, both in Southern California, show what can be done when architects see through the minutiae of a program—that itemized list of spatial and technical requirements—to grasp the kernel of the problem. That of the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego**, as Selldorf Architects understood it, was to exhibit California's art in a Californian way—i.e., relaxed, without pretense or formality, and open as much as possible to the sea and sky. The museum sits on a steep bluff overlooking the sea to the west, a setting where a little light goes a long way. Here the discreetly placed windows and skylights bring in just enough sunshine, giving you the physical sense of the atmosphere in which the art was created.



The Orange County Museum of ArtPHOTO: JASMINE PARK

If Annabelle Selldorf concentrated on making great galleries, Thom Mayne's principal concern at the **Orange County Museum of Art** was context. This was not a simple task at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts, a clutch of preening theaters and concert halls, but rather than giving it yet another swaggering prodigy (of which Mr. Mayne has designed his fair share), he created something that is as much a civic plaza as it is a building. The outdoor public space seems to sweep up and glide across the top of the museum, taking up a full 70% of its roof, dissolving any sense that it is a closed and private thing; nor is this mere advertising, since admission is to be free for the next 10 years. Access to the rooftop plaza is by means of a broad flight of stairs, which Mr. Mayne says was inspired by that of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In fact, it is less a staircase than an amphitheater. At the same time, the building is handsomely detailed, with textured ceramic panels that give the facade a pleasant sense of physical reality.

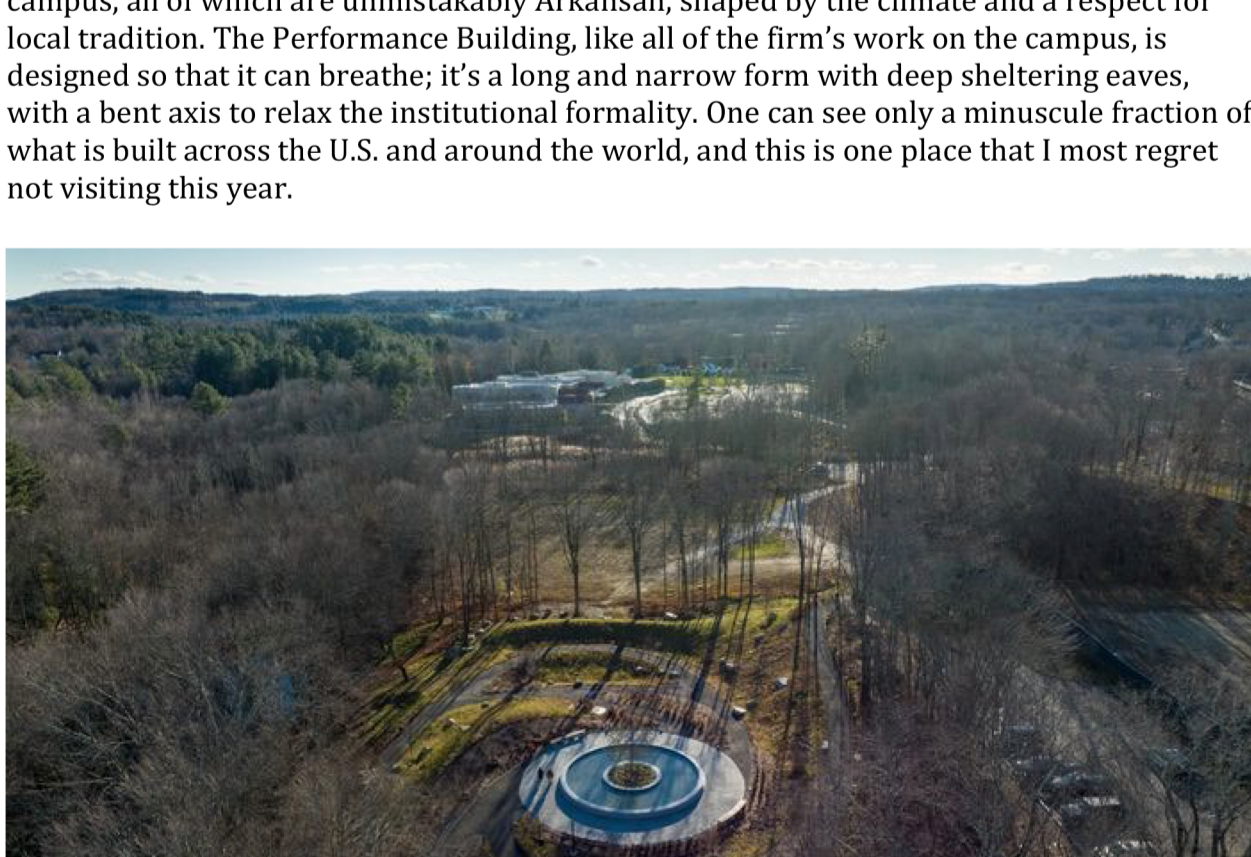


The New York Philharmonic rehearsing at David Geffen HallPHOTO: ANGELA WEISS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

At New York's **Geffen Hall**, Diamond Schmitt Architects, along with Tod Williams Billie Tsien's Avertys, have now put the 60-year-old acoustic scandal of Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. The concert hall itself is a development of the gorgeous Musikverein in Vienna. But Geffen Hall has been updated in the spirit of Berlin's Philharmonie of the 1960s, which eliminated the formal proscenium and placed terraces of seating all around the stage. The building's hidden gem is the "Music Box," a double-height space on the northeast corner of the building, designed for private events or small performances. In effect it is a lushly upholstered pleasure pavilion, and a tent that has been sliced open to overlook Broadway. It shows Mr. Williams and Ms. Tsien in an uncharacteristically sybaritic mood, but then music ought to be primarily about pleasure.

Like Geffen Hall, New York's **Morgan Library & Museum** solves a nagging architectural problem, though an inadvertent one. After Renzo Piano enlarged the complex of buildings in 2006 and shifted its entrance to Madison Avenue, visitors found they had no reason to double back and see the facade of Charles F. McKim's original library on East 36th Street. That building was fronted by an unfriendly strip of lawn, missing only the lawn mower and "keep off the grass" sign. As part of its recent restoration, the library has been given a landscaped garden that at last matches its Italian Renaissance character. Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, the prominent British landscape architect, has graced it with public paths with bluestone pavers, bordered by bands of pebble mosaic, installed by Sicilian artisans using Sicilian stones. As beautiful as it is by day, it is even more extraordinary at night. Linnaea Tillett Lighting Design Associates has created a magnificently understated nocturnal experience that speaks to that part of our brain that navigates the nighttime, where dimly perceived shapes take on mysterious meaning. It reminds us that we do not need to illuminate our buildings with spotlights as if they were roadside construction projects.

The **Thaden School Performance Building** in Bentonville, Ark., is a 20,000-square-foot structure with three performance halls, serving a private high school. Completed in March, it is one of five buildings designed by Marlon Blackwell Architects for the Thaden School campus, all of which are unmistakably Arkansan, shaped by the climate and a respect for local tradition. The Performance Building, like all of the firm's work on the campus, is designed so that it can breathe; it's a long and narrow form with deep sheltering eaves, with a bent axis to relax the institutional formality. One can see only a minuscule fraction of what is built across the U.S. and around the world, and this is one place that I most regret not visiting this year.



An aerial view of the Sandy Hook Permanent MemorialPHOTO: JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

It would be wrong to judge the heartbreaking **Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial** on any criterion but this one: Does it offer solace and healing to those whose family and friends were among the 26 victims of the infamous Dec. 14, 2012, mass shooting in Newtown, Conn.? Here for once the municipal authorities showed flawless judgment. With only \$3.7 million to spend, they requested designs for something "natural, quiet, serene" whose "simplicity should communicate the great depth of our loss." They also ruled out any use of the numbers "12/14" or "26" as design elements, extensive use of metal, any references to a children's playground, or anything that was "ideologically overbearing." (Can that last requirement be included henceforth on every competition program?)

The result, designed by Daniel Affleck and Ben Aldo of SWA Group, is as gentle as could be. Within a wooded clearing, one descends gradually on curving paths to a central pool whose retaining wall gives generous space to the name of each victim. At the center of the pool is a sycamore tree, around which the water circles with quiet purposefulness, speaking of tragedy and of life. I visited it at dusk during a chilly November rain, and watched the only other visitor carefully place a stone on one of the names. He told me it was for one of the victims, a newly hired teaching assistant who had just gotten her "dream job." The dignity of this simple gesture, performed under the bleakest of New England skies, suggests that at least one creation of 2022 got it exactly right.

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