

Anchorage Museum Common at Rasmuson Center *Anchorage, Alaska*

The Anchorage Museum Common serves as the new front door to one of the city's most important institutions. It also is a new place for people to gather and appreciate the urban space that features art, sculpture and an urbanized nature.

Anchorage is the northernmost major city in the United States. It sits perched at the head of Cook Inlet, and sprawls across the foothills of the Chugach Mountain range – marking the threshold of a vast wilderness. Flying over this dramatic landscape, the design team began its investigation by asking, “How do we develop a compelling landscape aesthetic in a place surrounded by such unparalleled beauty?”

The unified goal of the design team was to heighten awareness of, and appreciation for, the museum's extraordinary natural surroundings. The team agreed on certain key parameters that defined the design trajectory of the project. First, the landscape would need a bold, physical presence in order to provoke interest and curiosity from the wide avenues, parking lots and busy streets that formed the existing boundaries of the site. Secondly, the landscape must remain a flexible civic open space, and the design must avoid ascribing any particular programming activities to the site. Finally, the park should express a “civilized wild” by using a balance of native plants and culturally significant horticulture.

Inspired by the unique coastal lowland landscape, the design concept that emerged became a modernist deconstruction of the deciduous birch forests that surround Anchorage. The signature tree of the project, the paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), is not only a prolific native species; it is also one of the most culturally significant and ecologically important trees in the South-central region of Alaska. When massed together as a virtual forest, the birches become a living, dynamic element that fully complements the material, form and scale of the new building expansion. Altogether, 285 salvaged birch trees, on a graduated grid, are the primary canopy for this urban forest. The grid tightens as it moves away from the entrance promenade. The vertical white lines of the tree trunks accentuate the clean lines of the museum's architecture, and form a veil that functions similar to the building's semi-transparent skin. Below the light canopy of the birches, a simple understory-planting palette affords the park openness and visual accessibility at eye level, while the sharp contrast between forest and urban streetscape creates a tension that provokes interest and draws people from the outside edges inward.

The Walk of the Birches is a curvilinear pathway, like a river's oxbow, meandering its way through the forest. It weaves, unchecked, through the forest landscape, while all the other axial walkways are superimposed over it, just as Anchorage was built up and over the existing landscape. The transparent building mirrors the changing light and shadow of the open sky, as well as the fleeting colors of the seasons. In fall, the birches transform the site by donning a shimmering cloak of gold. Carved into the forest are several rectangular lawn panels. These green rooms become theatrical settings for gatherings, celebrations and performances – as well as outdoor galleries for sculpture and other artwork. The largest of these spaces is the Green, which generously spills out from the museum's new primary entrance into the heart of the site, surrounded on three sides by the Birch Forest. Like the other three smaller rooms, it is flexible and easily adapts to many different uses, including ice-skating.

The dense planting of birches creates habitat in the city and, at a subconscious level, helps visitors create a strong mental connection with the surrounding landscape. Much like a botanic garden exhibit, an unusual configuration or display of native plants offers a new perspective and way of learning about the function of a given species. This provides visitors and locals alike with a deeper appreciation of nature in the city, which will in turn inspire a greater curiosity about the extensive and diverse nature of all of Alaska's landscapes. This new civic space is emblematic of the city's heart – where art, performance, landscape, history, nature and culture converge to welcome visitors and locals alike.