The Denver Art Museum’s new exhibit “Case Work: Studies in Form, Space & Construction by Brad Cloepfil/Allied Works Architecture” is previewed by Megan Arder from Allied Works Architecture. The exhibit highlights the work of architect Brad Cloepfil, who designed the Clyfford Still Museum. Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post

The Clyfford Still Museum is, arguably, the most successful piece of contemporary architecture in Denver. Durable, deep-rooted and full of light thanks to its glass roof, the building is connected equally to the earth and the sky. Even folks who don’t exactly appreciate Still’s 20th century abstract paintings marvel at the home Brad Cloepfil designed to house them in 2011.

It didn’t come about overnight, as the new exhibit “Case Work” at the Denver Art Museum uncovers. Cloepfil and his team at Portland’s Allied Works Architecture spent long months thinking about ways to showcase Still’s work, taking inspiration from the artist’s use
of color and contrast, his jagged way of making lines, even his own reclusive tendencies. All of those things influenced the city’s new concrete icon.

With just a few objects, “Case Work” puts visitors inside the designers’ heads as they developed a structure that appears both humble and humbled down, urban and yet isolated, with a small forest of trees (still growing) separating it from the bustle of city life.

The show, which looks at all of Allied Work’s major projects over the last two decades, takes an unusual approach. Unlike most architecture exhibits, it’s not a lineup of numbered drawings or pretty models — those miniature doll houses design firms make so clients can see, as best they can, what their building will look like.

It is, rather, a show of various small things the firm manufactured in-house for its own staff to consider as it contemplated shape, flow, function and material; mysterious artifacts that sit on tables — and only partially resemble buildings — that were left over in the work of one of the country’s top firms.

They don’t always make sense, and the exhibit is, unfortunately, short on the kind of text that might help ordinary folks bring sense to them. But they are fascinating, nonetheless, and offer a clue into the way designers think.

And so we see a curving, overlapping configuration of bent walnut wood that established the mental groundwork for the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, and a rectangular block of fused glass that morphed into the Museum of Art and Design in New York City.

The materials of these idea generators don’t necessarily reflect what the buildings are made of, but their essence. Both of these structures are, in real life, made mostly of concrete. But they maintain the pliability and transparency those materials convey.

Interestingly, the objects that lead up to the Clyfford Still Museum are the opposite of the poured-in-place concrete the building is famous for. One is hacked out of a thick beam of Douglas fir, while studies for the room layouts are folded cardboard. Yet you understand how they combined to make the walls, halls and galleries.

Allied Works uses a variety of materials this way, making exploratory objects from plastic, plaster, steel, wax, brass, pine cones, silk thread, copper leaf and other things. The objects that were fabricated, for example, during the design competition for an addition to the Metropolitan Museum of Art resemble bars of soap in concrete, stone, glass and resin. The firm made curling rolls of paper-thin porcelain to contemplate the circular Ohio Veterans Memorial. The museum won’t be so delicate when it is constructed next year, but it will likely contain the visceral airiness of the fragile material.

Making these objects in-house is no simple matter. The firm’s shop proves ingenious and versatile, not just with materials but methods. Exhibit curator and DSM director Dean Sobel sizes up the effort in his catalogue essay with a river of verbs, noting the required “burning, stacking, carving, polishing, folding, drawing, gathering, ganging, cutting, boring, sawing, molding, casting, filling, tearing, braiding and on and on.”

While Sobel selected the show’s wares, it was assembled by Allied Works and it feels like a piece of free-standing architecture itself, even though it is ensconced on the mezzanine of the museum’s old North Building.

The team sets everything in gray metal frames, the size of doors, and you walk through and around them to see the goods. It is a structure within a structure. And inside of that are wooden display boxes, suspended by the frames, that hold the objects. With drawers that open and close and hinge, they are meant to look like suitcases; as if they might fold up, steamer trunk-style, so everything can be carted off to the next destination. (“Case Work” moves to the Portland Art Museum in June.)

This is an unexpected way of presenting work, though just what an architect would put together if you think about it. Cloeplif and company know space, they know how to define and control it, and their talents are well-shown here.

So are Sobel’s. This exhibit is a good idea and solves several problems. Architecture exhibits often fall flat in museums. Those building models never look as interesting as the buildings themselves, so why bother. But this show is about thinking, rather than constructing. It explains the process and makes it look fascinating.

The effort also gets around the Still Museum’s overbearing restrictions. Still, who died in 1980, insisted his works be primary at any institution bearing his name. The museum’s charter doesn’t allow it to show work by other artists, ever, so it is borrowing space at DAM next door.

The Still is pushing its mandate here in the best interest of the city. No other group or institution is taking an effective lead in making architecture interesting to the masses — not the museums nor the professional groups — and it shows in our buildings. We’re a lovely metropolis, but a little behind when it comes to design.

The Still has its building and it is using that, through talks, films and other events, to spark a crucial discussion here.

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