

Rafael Viñoly

COLLECTIVE SOUL

AN INSIGHTFUL CRITIQUE
HELPED JANELIA FARM'S ARCHITECT
FIND HIS VISION.

The heart of the Janelia Farm campus—known as the “landscape building”—is a unique architectural surprise. Most of the massive structure is not even visible from the entrance, yet from within it is flooded with natural light and offers stunning views of the Potomac River and the countryside beyond. Internationally renowned architect Rafael Viñoly designed the structure to conform to the contours of the land. The result is a building at once entirely modern yet wholly inseparable from its natural setting. That concept was also a surprise for Viñoly. He started out with an entirely different vision.

At the groundbreaking, you said, “Nature is the centerpiece of research at Janelia Farm and the building follows that idea.” Explain nature’s place in your design.

We came up with this notion of integrating the building entirely into the landscape. When complete, the site should remain essentially “untouched.” Everything in this idea led us to enhance the view of nature. From an architectural perspective, things like the enormous amount of glass, the rooftop gardens, and placing the offices and corridors towards the open view work, but they are also completely interconnected with this idea. The structure is basically a series of steps terraced into the hillside and then a series of environments that undulate along the length of the hill’s curves where scientists work in connection with nature. I think that’s a pretty powerful idea. The entire composition looks like a natural thing. It looks like it has been there for many, many years.

How did you generate this idea of using the existing landscape as the guiding concept for the building?

At the beginning we had exactly the opposite idea; we planned to impose a grid on the landscape. Then we had an interview with [HHMI architect] Bob McGhee and the others in the competition interview committee, and they told us, ‘You’re completely wrong.’ I didn’t think so at the time, but the critique was so good it forced me to challenge our assumptions about how a building that satisfies the Institute’s objectives would look. This is so typical in architecture—really in life—that you try to do something exactly against the current until you realize you’d better go the other way. The final concept proved to be amazingly self-supporting. You know you’re on a good track in architecture when you don’t need to push too much. The thing sails on its own.

Is there a tension between the notion that this is a building about nature and about high-tech, advanced science?

At the end of the day, Janelia Farm is a highly technical structure. The requirements for services, air exchange, equipment, programmatic space, and flexibility in the lab configuration were enormously demanding. How do you design this huge, intricate machine to be part of nature? The drive to resolve that tension was built into the very idea of Janelia Farm. If you’re HHMI and you decide to make this enormous leap into the future, you could have chosen any place in the world to do it. Choosing this particular site determines something. You want all of these top scientists to move to the country. What are you going to do? Try to transform the country into a city? No, it’s the country. The Institute’s fundamental idea at Janelia Farm was that you are in an unconstrained connection through your work with nature. If the building is any good, it’s because this idea behind Janelia Farm is very good.

How do you as the architect measure the success of Janelia Farm?

Janelia Farm doesn’t need anything other than to produce great work and to provide a setting to produce that level of thinking. So what matters here above all is the building’s capacity to generate some level of happiness. When you’ve done this right, it’s not because the building becomes famous or noticeable. It’s because people take possession of it. I believe that a building’s audience, not the critics, is always right. If that audience at Janelia Farm, mainly the people who live and work there, is happy, then we were right in our idea. You can’t fake that.

INTERVIEW BY MARC WORTMAN. A native of Uruguay, Rafael Viñoly founded Rafael Viñoly Architects, P.C., in 1983. Its offices are in New York City and London.