Site & Meaning

Located on North Union Street in Alexandria, Virginia, the building is anchored to the edge of the Potomac, taking full advantage of the endless source of energy that the river provides. The building’s form derives itself from the interaction between structure and water. It borrows from the paradoxical behavior of water: the tendency to alternate between platonic spherical forms which occur through internal forces and the unraveling of the sphere in response to gravitational external forces applied to it.

The building itself is anchored at one end by a circular lighthouse that serves as a symbolic focal point for the city and provides light for boats and people to navigate towards the waterfront. The lighthouse serves as a central point where boats, people and water converge and are dispersed. Boats move towards and away from the lighthouse and the waterfront community. People move towards and away from the lighthouse and the building. The tides move water towards, through and away from the lighthouse. All three are led to the lighthouse by its guiding beam of light—a ray of light that is a product of the water itself. During low tide, water is released through the lighthouse’s inner vortex—a waterwheel harnesses the lunar energy. It is released as a single beam of a light into the sky with surplus energy stored for future use. This navigational instrument has a direct connection between participants in the city and the greater rhythmic pulse of the universe itself, echoed in the lunar sway over the tides.

The lighthouse also serves as a central repository for the energy gathered by the building’s two wings. The wing closest to the water unravels in response to the 4’ rise and drop of the tides, and borrows that energy to continually recreate an architecture in the image of itself. The wing of the enclosed portion of the museum serves as a barrier and helps contain the water that is released through the lighthouse.

The building functions as a place for structures engineered to move over water to merge with inhabitable structure along the water’s edges. The building provides a place for people to view boats, and experience close interaction with the surrounding environment.