

# Arts in the

# Wilderness

Ensamble Studio created three concrete structures for the newly opened Tippet Rise Art Center in Montana.

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The Olivier Music Barn (left) marks the entrance to Tippet Rise Art Center.



# Montana

is one of the largest and least populated states in the USA. Barely a million people live in an area larger than Germany, and most are concentrated in a few cities. That allowed Peter and Cathy Halstead's foundation to assemble a ranch of 4,600 hectares from 13 summer pastures and create Tippet Rise, a unique stage for the arts that opened to the public this summer. Inspiration came from Storm King sculpture park in mid-state New York and music festivals around the world, but the Halsteads were also determined to preserve and enhance the extraordinary beauty of the grasslands and canyons that roll away to the Beartooth Mountains. To the south is Yellowstone National Park with its geysers, rushing streams, wolves and bison. As the state license plates proclaim, this is Big Sky Country.

'We are in love with nature,' says director Alban Bassuet, 'so we thought hard for five years about architectural interventions on the land. What, where, how many? We considered many options on siting to be sure that we didn't turn the wilderness into a garden. It was a virgin site with no buildings, roads or utilities. We generate solar power for electricity and to pump the water we've collected – a zero-carbon operation that has a minimal impact on the land.'

Before moving to Montana, Bassuet worked for Arup in New York, creating performance spaces with Sound Lab director Raj Patel, and they collaborated on the master plan for Tippet Rise, laying out gravel roads, constructing underground geothermal and hydrology systems, siting sculptures and designing concert venues. Four architecture firms were invited to compete for new structures, but their proposals seemed too conventional, and the choice fell on Ensamble, the Madrid-Boston firm headed by Antón García-Abril and his wife, Débora Mesa. They became part of the team, designing a series of cast concrete structures that would reflect sound and serve as markers in the landscape. Domo, largest of the three that have been realized thus far, shelters recitals for audiences of a hundred or more. >

Beartooth Portal, like Inverted Portal, is a cast concrete structure that reflects sound and serves as a marker in the landscape.





## ‘We didn’t want to turn the wilderness into a garden’

Tippet Rise is a cultural resource for residents and a destination for arts lovers, who fly to Billings, drive at great speed on the interstate freeway, slow down on winding roads and trails, before coming to rest behind a grassy berm. They glimpse the roof of a barn, clad in Corten, rising beside a black steel Calder stabile. Within the familiar form, Bassuet has distilled the essence of legendary recital halls, from the Maltings Snape for which Benjamin Britten was impresario, to the music room of the Esterhazy Palace in Hungary where Josef Haydn was resident composer. Rough-textured posts and beams support walls and a stepped ceiling vault lined with smooth larch boards that feel and sound like the inside of a musical instrument. Clerestories pull in light to either side, and a picture window to the south frames a stunning view while releasing low-frequency sounds. The Olivier Music Barn is a masterpiece of understatement – warm, reverberant and luminous – providing ideal acoustics for performers as well as an audience of 150 on director chairs and wall benches.

Off to one side are accommodations for visiting artists, and Tiara, an outdoor recital space comprising a lightweight wood frame and plywood sound reflectors. It’s a concert shell stripped to its essentials. Site-specific art works – by Patrick Dougherty, Stephen Talasnik and two heroically scaled steel constructions by Mark di Suvero – are strategically positioned off the 14-km trail that leads to Domo. This is a three-legged monolith that grew from the seed of Truffle, a tiny guest cabin of roughly poured concrete that Ensamble created near Santiago de Compostella in 2008 (*Mark 27*, page 44). That first experiment was conceived as a dialogue between architecture and nature, rooted in the land. The tilted slabs of Inverted Portal and Beartooth Portal develop that idea, serving as markers in the much grander expanse of Tippet Rise. Domo is part structure, part sculpture, evoking a rock outcrop that has been carved and polished by wind and water. The western deserts are full of such natural phenomena, and Ensamble has channelled their organic shapes and textures. >





# **‘Part structure, part sculpture, Domo evokes a rock outcrop, carved and polished by wind and water’**

The construction of Domo demanded a mix of hand-modelling, digital scanning and heavy lifting. Bulldozers compacted a block of gravel and earth, 4 m high. A back hoe excavated three hollows, and a cage of rebar was assembled within each. Plastic blocks held the rebar clear of the earth before they were craned out and linked together. The design team draped the hollows with folds of plastic sheeting, replaced the armature and poured in pigmented concrete. When this was set, the gravel and plastic were removed to reveal an uneven polished surface that distributes the sound in every direction, allowing an audience to move around the performers, rather than face them head-on. The undulations pull in light and frame a panorama rimmed with snow-clad peaks and studded with the black specks of cattle grazing far away. Grass has begun to sprout from the rough concrete top, making it an integral extension of the ground it sits upon. ‘There’s nothing sadder than an empty building,’ says García-Abril. ‘Our structures are never empty – you can people them in many different ways. They are viscous and tactile, which changes the perception of scale.’

Architecture that engages the landscape enriches the experience of music-making and art, attracting a wide range of talent and loans from major museums. Tippet Rise is open to the public four days a week for hiking and tours in electric vans. The first seven weekends of music were sold out, mostly to locals, and programming is likely to expand in the years to come. Ensamble has planned an ambitious new structure, and there will be more art works and educational activities. For the Halsteads, this is the culmination of a lifetime of travel, creativity and support for the arts. She paints, he has played piano since he was five (though his father hated music and turned his first piano into a desk while the boy was away at school). Now he collects vintage Steinways, including Vladimir Horowitz’s favourite, and the hills of Montana are alive with the sound of music. —

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The three-legged monolith Domo shelters recitals for audiences of a hundred or more. The uneven polished surface distributes the sound in every direction, allowing the audience to move around the performers.

Photo [André Constantini](#)

