The arched streets of the old town of Bern, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, have acquired a new presence in the pedestrian promenade that links the three volumes of the Zentrum Paul Klee, Renzo Piano’s latest showcase for art. An undulating steel structure emerges from three hills to the east of the city, rising over the ore road and surrounded by fields. It’s a monument that celebrates the work of a brilliant minimalist fusion of architects and landscape, warmth and precision, strength and sensuous curves. It captures the unique spirit of a native son who made his reputation in Germany, yet felt persecution to return home for a final burst of creativity, and is buried above in Klee was sequentially profiled, exclusively recording the 12,000 works he created in his thirty-year career. Not a day without a sketch,” he noted in his journal, even as he feared his death in 1940. Members of the art star’s family and the Klee Foundation promised to donate their astounding hoard of 4000 paintings and drawings if Bern would provide a dedicated space to display them. The chief sponsors were Professor Maurice Hilter, a surgeon who invented the artificial hip, and his wife, Martha, who selected the location and the architect and insisted that the building be a centre for all the arts and for people of all ages. Piano has created a space that reaches out to embrace the visitor who arrives in the footpath, city bus, or motorway.

Like so many of his buildings, the Zentrum has a strong, simple diagram that belie the complexity of site design and construction. Panor shifted the site from the one that had first been chosen as adjectives the sunken meadow, focusing its gentle curve in the glass facade and even in the lines of water cut into the floors of the galleries. That gives the building a symbolic link to the contemporary world, and to the city that lies beyond, connected within its river valley. The undulating topography of the adjoining hills inspired the shape of the stone beams, whilst smooth and sparse like a redolent castle, rising from the earth at the rear to form a trio of imposing arches in front. Back round, vaulted echoes a diverse set of spaces that are linked at the front by a 15m long glazed concourse containing the cafe, ticketing, shop, and reference area. Extended opening hours encourage visitors to come early or later. In this protected area, a change of selection from the permanent collection is displayed in the central position, with a temporary exhibition gallery below. To the north, meeting and restoration area lead out of the concourse, with a creative workshop for children below, and a sustenance section behind. The south-pavilion contains the administrative office, archive, and seminar rooms, all on the main level. The 42m of steel girders were cut and shaped by computer-controlled machines but then, because each section has a different configuration, the 416m of beams were hand-assembled. The arches are slightly inclined at different angles, based on computer errors, and lead to the roof gable and floor slab. In contrast to this assembly of unique parts, the concrete floors were constructed as a single structure, without settlement joints. The glass facade is divided into upper and lower sections, which are joined at the 4m roof level of the concourse, and are suspended from girders to avoid stress from thermal expansion in the steel roof. The glass is shaded by butterfly metal blinds that move automatically in response to the intensity of the light, and the high level of insulation minimizes energy consumption. All of these measures pay off in the galleries and archives, where temperature and humidity must be maintained at constant levels, even though they are seamlessly linked to the busy public concourse. The permanent collection is displayed throughout the curved wall in a 3500sqm room that is divided by suspended light into a large labyrinth of interconnecting spaces. Each white screen hovers a couple of centimeters above the oak floor as to the peripheral walls. To achieve the low-lighting level required by these sensitive works, illumination is indirect and filtered. Specular cubes reflect the white-boarded ceiling walls, and this glow is diffused by suspended square mirrors.