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JUN/JUL | 07

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After seven years of planning, the Crocker Art Museum's new \$85 million expansion is set to break ground on July 26. We talked with Charles Gwathmey, the project's architect, about the process, the design and why the Capitol will no longer be the only prominent white building in Sacramento. **by Rob Turner**

# Building Anticipation

## It's been a long road

for the Crocker Art Museum's expansion. The new building will more than triple the size of the existing space, bringing an additional 100,000 square feet to the museum. It's planned to open to the public in Spring 2010.

The architect, Charles Gwathmey of Gwathmey Siegel & Associates in New York, has long been one of the country's top architects. Among his best-known projects was the controversial 1992 expansion of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

**When did this whole process with the Crocker start?**  
September 2000.

**Is this an unusually long time for a groundbreaking to happen?**

This is our second-longest process. I think the Guggenheim was eight years. Ten to build. So this will be equivalent.

**Why do you think that is?**

I think the combination of the building being maintained by the city and owned by a private institution is one thing. And the other was that the fundraising time was extended. And the fact that we also proposed moving 2nd Street.

**Aside from the obvious objective of adding more space, what were some of your other goals with the look of the building?**

The materiality was important. You go around Sacramento and the only white building you remember is the Capitol. And so the idea of introducing white as a counter-pointal color to the polychromed existing building was interesting. It's an implied termination to the mall. So that sort of memory-bracketing

was interesting to us, as was the idea of using zinc, which is in the gray [color] family of the existing museum. You know we're repainting the original buildings, right? I think they're going to be much more articulate, much more in the original spirit. Nobody knows what the original colors were, so we're keeping them in the gray, white, green-gray, taupe tone, which we think is going to be much more lively, but still more subtle than what they are now. I think the other [inspiration] is that this used to be a warehouse district. Because you know gallery spaces, in their most basic sense, are big lofts with skylights, right? And if you look at the whole warehouse building and that whole ethic, there's clearly a reference to that and it makes the silhouette on that edge, which we thought was important to have, kind of a historical reference.

**Some of the earlier versions had a vertical design feature.**  
Oh, we had the tower. That became too controversial.

**Why was that?**

Everyone has a point of view about what a tower is. Is it a clock tower? A bell tower? So our tower, people said it was a clothespin, and we couldn't get them past it. I actually think in the end, compositionally, once we reevaluated the whole entry piece in the courtyard, it was really vestigial. It didn't add.

**So what do you think about the existing Crocker building?**

I think the third-floor galleries are pretty great—the idea of the English Gallery where you hang paintings above each other. The skylit building and the proportion of the space, which is really a grand hallway, sort of contradicts all these present notions of gallery space. And it's incredibly dynamic: you see those large-scale paintings hanging in that narrow space which has natural lighting—it's very impressive. It's a slightly eccentric building and

► An exterior rendering of the Crocker's front entrance, as seen from O Street.



► The interior of the main gallery will draw natural light from a series of skylights. This structure is influenced, in part, by the fact that the neighborhood was once known as the city's warehouse district.



Charles Gwathmey, the architect of the Crocker expansion project.

it obviously has references to Italianate architecture transferred to California at a time when this represented not only sophistication, but wealth. So as eccentric and esoteric as it is, I think it's terrific.

**Can you talk about your experience with the city government?**

I think there's no question it's not efficient. But there is a very clear process. The city required a certain amount of guaranteed money to be raised since it's co-run—the city maintains the building and the foundation owns the building. I think it took a while to get the mayor's endorsement of this being an important thing to do. It's been what it's been. We're just happy that it's finally going to be built. For a while there we were concerned it wasn't going to happen.

**And how was the design review process?**

When we first presented to the Design Review Board, we had a very tough time. And I think there were preconceptions about style. There were also preservationists on that board that were very concerned about a modern building and there was a lot of discussion about that. We tried to, on the second pass be, I think, more sensitive to the existing buildings and take more cues from them in terms of

precedence and talk about our building that way. We came back and the whole thing was like a love fest.

**I imagine there are few people as experienced as you in responding to the concerns of creating an addition for a classic museum.**

Institutions grow and institutions change, and the history of architecture has always been about additions and interventions. My whole strategy in that Guggenheim process was to refer back to Frank Lloyd Wright's original drawings and intentions. All the curators were against it. [They said] it was a terrible intervention into the "context of New York," that it didn't fit, that it should've been in the park. Because it was so avant-garde and so unique, it took time for it to be realized and accepted as a great building. Any avant-garde building or any new kind of thing, if it's valid, it's going to be accepted after a generation. And then it will be accepted forever. The important thing is to make great buildings. It's not about style, and it's not about referring to languages—it's about making the right building. And great buildings can co-exist. An historic building can co-exist with a modern building, and if they're both strong, the dynamic is that much more perfect. ♦

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