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New wing of Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum gets fine tuning

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To the untrained eye, the new wing of the Crocker Art Museum appears almost finished. Dust a bit here and there, mop the floors, polish the glass, touch up the paint – and start moving in the artwork.

Not quite yet, says architect Gerry Gendreau.

A glass railing and various reveals need to be aligned. Some handrails aren't properly connected. Kinks in the walls must be addressed.

"Unfortunately, all I see are mistakes and the things that need to be fixed," says Gendreau, who has been working and living in Sacramento off and on for 10 years. " 'Perfect' is an illusion, but we do the best we can to try to get it as close to the design intent, and we try for it to be as perfect as we can make it.

"Perfection is a goal, not an absolute."

He has given the contractor five weeks to take care of everything on a long and detailed checklist.

That done, in early April Gendreau will turn over the then almost-perfect 120,000-square-foot building to the Crocker staff.

Then the new structure must be conditioned – a certain humidity level and temperature maintained for 30 straight days – before move-in can begin, sometime in June. The Crocker will close down entirely during the move.

The reopening of the "new Crocker," with the sparkling, \$100 million modern wing sitting alongside Edwin Bryant Crocker's charming Victorian Italianate gallery, is set for Oct. 10.

"It's a shorter time frame than we wanted," says museum director Lial Jones. "We wanted six months and it'll be four, if we're lucky. If we have to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we will make the opening date."

And Gendreau, associate partner with Gwathmey, Siegel & Associates Architects, can't wait.

He's been with the project since 2000, when the New York City firm presented a master plan to the museum's design committee.

Firm principal Charles Gwathmey, who died last summer, was a renowned modernist designer and one of the New York Five, a group of architects famous for favoring white buildings and clean lines.

The Crocker's new wing pays homage to and borrows from the 1872 Victorian commissioned by Crocker and his wife, Margaret, for their growing art holdings, gathered mostly during the family's Grand Tour of Europe that began in 1869. They also collected the work of California artists.

Theirs was the first private art gallery west of the Mississippi River and is the longest continuously operating art museum in the West.

In May 1895, Margaret Crocker presented the gallery and the art collection to the city of Sacramento and the newly created California Museum Association, in trust for the people of Sacramento.

Their Victorian gallery was as modern in its day as the new wing is today.

"It's a challenge in many urban environments," says Gendreau. "How do you make relationships between existing buildings and create something which is fresh and new and, in our world, contemporary, and yet respectful of the existing building?"

"The premise was that we would not try to replicate it but draw cues from (the Victorian) into the new building."

The structures are both three stories tall, and sightlines of each line up across the dividing courtyard. The new wing has a porch that mimics, in modern terms, one on the Victorian.

The architects borrowed from the historic building's gray exterior, sheathing the new wing in zinc panels, which will weather and develop a pewter patina, and panels of white-painted aluminum, in keeping with Gwathmey's taste.

The top floor of the new building is where most of the galleries will be located, safely above potential floods. The tallest has a 21-foot ceiling, and some galleries receive natural light, unusual for a museum. The oak floors, from a sustainable forest, are acoustically treated to minimize the jarring sound of heel strikes.

Windows here and there will offer museumgoers views of the city, including Crocker Park across the street and, most strikingly, the existing historic gallery to the east.

"I like to think of the new building, in a sense, as an urban collage of many different pieces that have gaps between the pieces," says Gendreau, "... and they become spaces that refer to the existing building. So as you walk around the (new) building there are all these little peeks in between these fragments that keep giving you a referential look back (to the Victorian), which is terrific."

Most important, the new wing – to be called the Teel Family Pavilion, acknowledging a \$13 million donation from the Joyce and Jim Teel Family Foundation – will quadruple gallery space for temporary exhibitions and have three times the gallery space for the Crocker's permanent collection.

Until now, the museum has been able to show just 4 percent of its collection at any time. Thousands of art pieces have spent decades in rented storage containers. Spacious second-floor storage will allow the Crocker to have its entire permanent collection on site for the first time.

Gendreau's favorite space in the new wing is the common area on the first level, where the public

can enjoy, without paying admission, a cafe with indoor-outdoor seating, a larger museum store and a cozy auditorium with plush red chairs for 250 people.

"This then will become, we hope, a point that the city of Sacramento sees as a living room, a melting pot," says Gendreau, "where you can meet your friends for a drink or bite to eat, maybe catch a lecture or small concert performance in the auditorium."

Perhaps the area's most impressive feature is the uninterrupted glass wall that overlooks the 7,000- square-foot courtyard and the original art gallery.

A simple, 32-foot-long granite fountain set in the courtyard will offer a splash of white noise to muffle traffic noise from nearby Interstate 5. And the new wing will shade the courtyard from afternoon sun, making it a pleasant place for a fundraiser or dinner party even during the worst of Sacramento's summer heat.

"I think it's everything I could have asked for," Marcy Friedman says of the new wing. She's been involved with the project from beginning, and she and husband Mort Friedman, a Sacramento attorney and developer, are among the major donors.

"Architecturally," she says, "it's extraordinary. And it's an extremely well-put- together fit for Sacramento."

"I think it's a fabulous building," says museum director Jones. "It's been designed on the outside to minimize its scale, its volume, and the space inside is very exciting. I'm heartened by colleagues from other museums who say this is one of the best art museum buildings they've seen.

"I can't wait to get in there and get art on the walls."

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