

Hopes Grow for L.A. Art Museum

Developer Attempts to Pull Building's Factions Together

By JOHN DREYFUSS, *Times Architecture, Design Critic*

A basis for optimism is developing around the heretofore troubled relationship between the architect for the Museum of Contemporary Art and his client, MOCA's architecture committee, as well as some others involved with the museum.

The optimism centers on Fred Nicholas, a Beverly Hills developer, lawyer and art collector, who is emerging as a facilitator among a complex group of dedicated strong-minded men and women devoted to building and running the planned museum on Bunker Hill.

It is a high-powered group, including museum staff, trustees, the architecture committee and renowned Japanese architect Arata Isozaki.

And it is a group whose members have had trouble getting along.

Nicholas is building, with the apparent blessing of everyone concerned, an invaluable, smooth connection among the numerous individuals and factions striving to create the best possible museum.

The responsibility is enormous. If Nicholas succeeds, Los Angeles will have a museum of contemporary art second to few, and maybe to none. If he fails, Los Angeles will have, at best, a good museum.

'Extremely Smart Man'

It appears that the 61-year-old developer is the right man for the difficult job. Architect Frank Gehry, a staunch supporter of Isozaki's, and a man with a deep, enduring interest in contemporary art and the museum, said:

"He (Nicholas) is an extremely smart man, and he's sensitive. He's been involved in and interested in the arts as a collector (of primitive and modern works). He understands both the business and architecture of development. He knows all the players involved with the museum, and he has their respect. When I heard he was involved I thought it was too good to be true. I know he can pull it off."

Nicholas already has made quite significant progress toward "pulling it off." To understand how meaningful that progress is requires reviewing some of the museum's problems.

Since the first of this month, Tokyo-based architect Isozaki has threatened to resign, been required by the architecture committee to stop working on the museum design in his Los Angeles office, and he has even ceased working on the museum in his Tokyo office.

Pinpointing all the reasons for those and other serious museum problems is difficult.

However, contributing factors include:

—Cultural differences between Isozaki, Americans involved with the museum and "the American way of architecture," which is more open to overt confrontation than Japanese architectural practice.

—The fact that architecture committee chairman Max Palevsky is a forceful, sometimes abrasive man who knows about architecture, knows what he likes, and says what he likes and wants with conviction.

—Isozaki's slowness to provide schemes to the architecture committee, and the fact that the architect's early schemes both were over the budget and failed to solve important and obvious problems.

—The size and shape of the museum's site was changed a number of times during the design process, requiring major design changes.

—A need for the design to satisfy several critical entities, including Isozaki, the architecture committee, the city's Community Redevelopment Agency, and the developer (Bunker Hill Associates) with its architect Arthur Erickson. Bunker Hill Associates and Erickson are developing and designing the rest of the 11.2-acre project in which the museum will be a focal point.

—A feeling among museum staff members that they and their director, Pontus Hulten, have not received sufficient meaningful attention in design development.

Museum in Trouble

—The fact that Isozaki felt humiliated when a member of the architecture committee surprised him by recommending a new scheme for the museum (albeit in significant ways an improved scheme) at a committee meeting.

—A letter Palevsky sent Isozaki early this month that the architect interpreted to say he could review development of the museum's design and comment on it by phone or in person if he happened to be in Los Angeles "on other business." In other words, it appeared to Isozaki

that he had become a consultant rather than the museum's architect. It was after receiving Palevsky's letter that Isozaki stopped working on the museum design.

—Media reports and criticism that various persons involved with the museum felt were misleading, unfair and, in some cases, inaccurate.

The list could go on. The museum was in trouble.

Despite all the problems, the architecture committee and architect have come up with a design for the museum's interior that is exemplary in its excellence. The building promises to be a marvelous place to look at art.

On the outside, there are some architectural drawbacks, notably the structure's largely undistinguished appearance. That appearance is due, to a major extent, to design changes made at the insistence of the architecture committee. Isozaki publicly decried the changes.

But the existing design—called a schematic—is not necessarily final.

Last week the Community Redevelopment Agency approved the schematic design. George Davey, general manager for Bunker Hill Associates, said he expects his organization will follow suit on Monday, although there will remain "some technical conditions to be satisfied."

Further Design Development

Then the way will be open for further design development.

Nobody has worked harder to create a museum of world rank than the architecture committee. Its dedication is remarkable—one member said that for the last 18 months people on the committee have spent half their time on the museum design.

Working committee members are Palevsky, Hulten artists Sam Francis and Robert Irwin, architectural designer Coy Howard and Nicholas.

Nicholas said he joined the group early this year at Palevsky's request, and was asked "to do follow-through work." In other words, to make things run more smoothly.

"I came in to expedite, to move, to pull all the factions together," Nicholas said.

Without public notice, Nicholas is doing what is expected of him. His emergence as a facilitator and coordinator is no sudden thing. The function has been developing subtly since he joined the architecture committee three and a half months ago.

More Active Role

As Nicholas takes a more and more active role, he is becoming increasingly crucial to the museum's potential success.

He, with Palevsky, was instrumental in defusing an explosive situation by arranging for Coy Howard to become the museum's "design coordinator" on the Gruen Associates payroll.

Howard was the architecture committee member who offended Isozaki by proposing an alternative scheme for the museum's design in a committee meeting. He has drawn fire for doing so from throughout the architecture community.

Gruen Associates is the local architectural firm that will provide working drawings, get papers through city departments and take care of other situations that require an understanding of Los Angeles' red tape. "We have nothing to do with the design of the museum," said Herman Guttman, a partner in the Gruen firm.

Howard will play an important role at Gruen, but will always have Nicholas as a buffer between him and Isozaki.

"If Isozaki comes up with something and it doesn't work, it will have to be reworked, and Coy's going to have a lot of input on that," Nicholas said. He added that any significant design recommendations will be submitted to Isozaki for approval.

Howard has labored diligently for the museum. His method of submitting the new architectural scheme lacked tact, but it did provide elements of a better design for the structure. He has a lot to offer, and his new position at Gruen will simultaneously give him a platform from which to work and keep him from having to deal directly with Isozaki. It is an ingenious solution to a difficult problem. Isozaki, Howard and the museum all stand to profit from the plan.

There will be other major changes.

Please see MUSEUM, Page 7

MUSEUM: Hopes Growing for L.A. Art Facility

Continued from 6th Page

From now on, Nicholas said, the architecture committee "will be used as needed." It was meeting three times a week when Isozaki was in town, and that frequency became "too confusing."

"When something comes up that we have to look at, we'll pass it by the committee members," Nicholas said. "I don't know if we'll have formal meetings."

Some of the museum staff is unhappy and angry that the architecture committee has acted more in the role of client than has museum director Hulten.

Traditionally, the director acts as client in a museum design situation. In an interview, Nicholas emphasized that "Pontus Hulten is the client. We won't preclude him from talking with Isozaki."

If the museum director indeed begins acting as the client (as opposed to the architecture committee filling that role), the change will mark a major and important transition in the relationship between Isozaki and the museum.

Nicholas made it clear, however, that he will keep informed about progress made by Hulten and Isozaki. He said the architecture committee must approve all major design developments, and ultimately the entire museum board must endorse the structure's design.

Although Palevsky sometimes has been an abrasive force on the architecture committee, he always has been the group's leader. He will continue in that position, and Nicholas will report to him. But Palevsky won't be taking as active a role, if only because he won't be spending as much time in Los Angeles as he has been.

"For business and personal reasons, Max will be spending three weeks of every month in New York for the foreseeable future, although I'll be in touch with him by phone two or three times a week," Nicholas said. The change in Palevsky's schedule will thrust more responsibility on Nicholas.

"He had to have someone to pass the baton to, and that was me," Nicholas said.

Another essential factor related to Nicholas' position is that Isozaki feels comfortable working with him.

"I think he is a very good coordinator. I find he is a very nice person. I find him good to work with," the architect said.

When told of Nicholas' developing responsibilities, Isozaki said, "If this is the situation, then it is very good for me and I can continue."

Nicholas also seems to be the right person to deal with the relationship among Isozaki, Gruen Associates and the museum's contractor, HCB Contractors.

That relationship is complicated and potentially dangerous because of possible conflicting interests.

Gruen and HCB both are associated with Bunker Hill Associates, the consortium developing the project of which the museum is a partially independent part. Bunker Hill Associates has the right to veto some aspects of proposed museum designs, and could exert pressure on the museum through Gruen and HCB.

But Nicholas has dealt extensively with both Gruen and HCB. In fact, Gruen is the architect and HCB the contractor for a 10-story building Nicholas is developing near the Los Angeles International Airport.

Nicholas believes that existing relationships among himself, Gruen, HCB, Bunker Hill Associates and others involved with the museum can be advantageous in terms of fostering cooperation.

Work is scheduled to start on the museum within five months. "We expect to break ground next September, if financing is available," said Martin Seaton, president of Cadillac Fairview/California Inc., the major partner in Bunker Hill Associates. "If financing is not available by September, we will continue working diligently to get it, and I expect we'll succeed."

While there is reason for optimism about the museum's architectural future, Nicholas must prove he can bring together the diverse and sometimes conflicting people and organizations involved.

Chances seem good he is on the way to doing the job.