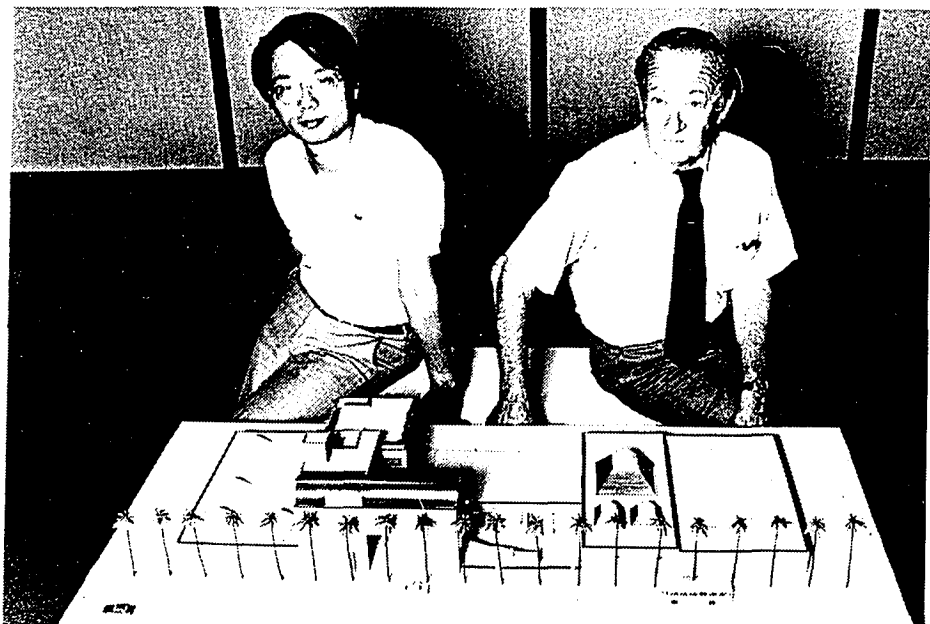


An Art Museum Draws Closer

JOHN DREYFUSS

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IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

Architects Hajime Yatsuka, left, with firm of Arata Isozaki, and Herman Guttman, of Gruen Associ-

ates, with model of new design for Museum of Contemporary Art, seen from Grand Avenue.

An Art Museum Draws Closer

Developer-Collector Pulls Project Off the Shoals

By JOHN DREYFUSS, *Times Architecture and Design Critic*

After an 18-month history so stormy it threatened to sink the entire project, a potentially excellent design concept has emerged for the Museum of Contemporary Art, to be built on Bunker Hill.

The concept, approved this week by the museum's trustees, promises a memorable yet unpretentious exterior, housing galleries that will be superb places to view art.

Genesis of the eminently acceptable design concept was a proposal made at the beginning of April for a

highly satisfactory interior (indeed, the interior design hasn't changed much in the nearly four months since it was proposed) and an exterior so mediocre and forgettable as to be intolerable.

That early concept was the product of a museum design committee and an architect at odds, neither of them doing credit to each other or to their own capabilities.

The new and successful design resulted from a new management

approach fostered by Fred Nicholas.

Max Palevsky, the museum's architecture committee chairman, invited developer/lawyer/art collector Nicholas to join his group early this year.

A no-nonsense leader who has mastered the enviable skill of being assertive without being abrasive, Nicholas worked for about four months behind the scenes to right the museum's listing ship.

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the deficiencies of that design" approved by the museum board.

As an example of a problem, he cited the pyramid form of the skylights, which he said have no relationship to their function of lighting the galleries below.

Herman Guttman, a partner of Gruen Associates, the

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His role was publicly acknowledged after the debacle surrounding the design concept released in April.

Critics roundly attacked the exterior appearance of the museum. Even architect Isozaki said it was unsatisfactory. He said elements of the exterior design had been forced on him by the architecture committee, and threatened to resign unless he could modify them.

On the other hand, Isozaki approved of some important interior design elements that basically were the work of the architecture committee. In fact, they represented an important improvement on Isozaki's early proposals for gallery spaces.

In the wake of the uproar over the April proposal, the architecture committee—which virtually had assumed the role of Isozaki's client—was disbanded.

It was replaced by a "building committee" composed of Palevsky, Nicholas and museum director Pontus Hulten.

Nicholas assumed a leadership role on the building committee, establishing for the first time smooth relationships between the architect and the museum staff—groups that had been held apart by the architecture committee.

Architectural Flourishes

Isozaki and Nicholas worked tirelessly with museum officials, notably deputy director Richard Koshalek and curator Marcy Goodwin. Hulten was in Europe from the end of May to mid-July, but Koshalek consulted with him by telephone about twice a week.

Painstaking research led to refinements of the interior plan. And, for the first time, there developed an exterior with more character than a small factory in Topeka. At last, the museum had a distinguished architectural signature.

The signature is dignified, not flashy. The Museum of Contemporary Art will be remembered for restraint, not pizzazz.

Two architectural flourishes stand out on the red sandstone building that will stretch some 336 feet along Grand Avenue, just north of a point above the 3rd Street tunnel.

One flourish will be a four-story, 86-foot-long element capped by a copper-clad barrel vault—a Quonset hut shaped roof. A 44-foot-wide, 26-foot-high gateway to the museum will pierce the four-story building.

The second flourish will be a series of pyramid-shaped skylights that will be visible atop rectilinear parts of the museum.

Although the structure will be longer than a football field, will avoid an overbearing presence by maintaining a low profile (most of the building will be less than 18 feet above street level) and by virtue of a 64-foot-wide sunken court that will more or less equally divide the museum so it will look like two buildings rather than one.

A grand stairway will lead to the sunken court, where there will be a small cafeteria geared to providing refreshments rather than meals.

From a lobby off the court, a couple of subtle ar-

chitectural suggestions will tempt visitors along a nicely organized circulation pattern through the museum.

Directly in front of the entrance will be an undulating cloakroom and information desk counter that will subtly guide people to their right. To enter galleries on the left will require descending four steps. Getting to galleries on the right will involve no stair climbing.

The steps and undulating counter, combined with the propensity for people to turn right in public places (seats often are easier to find on the left hand side of movie theaters), mean that visitors probably will enter the museum through galleries to their right.

Once they have taken that step, viewers will find themselves following a natural path through all the museum's more than 30,000 square feet of gallery space.

Particular attention has been paid to the 60 or 65% of that space that will be naturally lit through various kinds of skylights. The exact nature of those skylights is still being refined.

Almost all the circulation pattern will be through gallery areas. There are only two hallways interrupting that space. Both are 10 feet wide. One is 36 feet long, which is acceptable. The other is 68 feet long, which is undesirable.

There will be a good mix of large and small spaces (one gallery is more than 41 feet high), and large galleries will be divisible into smaller exhibition spaces through use of floor-to-ceiling partitions.

Below the gallery level will be an auditorium with about 250 seats, and various work and storage areas. While the work and storage rooms will not be open to the public, it is worth mentioning that they are exceptionally well conceived: a virtue of the cooperation between the architect and museum staff.

Special Character

At street level, behind the four-story gateway building through which one will enter the museum, a bookstore will be tucked under a three-story structure filled with offices for museum staff.

The gateway building itself will house a reception area, a two-story high library and a board of trustees room. The barrel vault ceiling of the library and board room will give those volumes special character.

The top of the three-story office structure behind the gateway building will provide a roof garden for museum functions.

Not everyone is happy with the latest museum design concept. Among critics is Max Palevsky. Palevsky, along with museum board president Judge William Norris and trustee Leopold Wyler, comprised the minority in the 15-3 vote to approve the design concept.

In a prepared statement, Palevsky praised contributions to the museum by artist Robert Irwin (who this week resigned from the board of trustees with a 67-word letter that gave no reason for his leaving) and architectural designer Coy Howard, who was a member of the now-disbanded architecture committee, and continues as an adviser to the museum.

Then Palevsky said that "our task now is to deal with

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Los Angeles-based architecture firm with which Isozaki is collaborating, disagreed with Palevsky.

"I think that (Palevsky's allegation) is incorrect," Guttman said. "What Isozaki hopes to do is limit the light entering the galleries and achieve with sloping sidewalls (a continuation of the plane of some skylights) the creation of the least amount of shadow on the walls below."

The museum is scheduled to open in 1984, but developers of the \$1.2-billion project of which the museum is a part are having trouble getting money, and the start date is in doubt.

Museum officials are exploring with the developer the possibility of starting construction of the museum and an underground parking structure early next year, before other parts of the mixed use development begin.

In any case, the museum has a trump card. For months it has been developing the concept of a "Temporary Contemporary" to be housed in city buildings on Central Avenue, just north of 1st Street near the intersection of 1st and Temple.

This week, at the same meeting where they approved

the museum design concept, the trustees unanimously endorsed the concept of the "Temporary Contemporary."

Architect Frank Gehry, who is expected to design the facility, has completed a feasibility study of the garage and warehouse where the temporary museum may be housed.

"The 35,000 square foot building can be readily adapted to museum use because it is a post-earthquake ordinance structure," Fred Nicholas said. "The other (about 15,000 square foot) building we'll have to do some work on."

Nicholas said Mayor Tom Bradley, City Administrative officer Keith Comrie and Community Redevelopment Agency Administrator Ed Helfeld are all enthusiastic about the "Temporary Contemporary."

The two buildings being considered for the temporary museum are part of a city redevelopment area, and are slated for eventual demolition. Nicholas wants to rent them for \$1 a year.

Nicholas said almost \$1 million in grant money has been pledged for the temporary museum, but declined to say who had made the pledge or pledges.

He said artist Sam Francis, who is on the museum board, is organizing a fund-raising project for the "Temporary Contemporary" in which between five and seven "world famous artists" will provide pictures for portfolios to be sold for \$10,000 each. Nicholas said he expects about 175 portfolios will be sold.

So it appears that, no matter when the Museum of Contemporary Art opens on Bunker Hill, there is a good chance that Los Angeles will have a downtown art museum within a year.