

Frederick M. Nicholas— Art Facilitator

Fred Nicholas calls himself an "art facilitator." He has, in the past four years, used his lawyerly skills to aid The Museum of Contemporary Art at California Plaza and at The Temporary Contemporary as well as the art museum at Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills and the Bella Lewitzky Dance Gallery on Bunker Hill. Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees at MOCA, Nicholas is the president of The Hapsmith Company, a real estate management and development company. The Contemporary met Nicholas on March 31, 1986 to find out more about what it means to be an art facilitator extraordinaire.

When did you first learn about MOCA?

I learned about MOCA when it was first in formation in late 1980 or early 1981. Bill Norris was a friend of mine, so I became aware that a Mayor's Citizens Committee had been formed to develop a museum. I wasn't involved with it, but I was close to the edges.

I became involved on a serious basis in January of 1982. In 1982 I joined the architectural committee which was developing a design for MOCA. I was asked by Max Palevsky who was then the chairman of the committee and Bill Norris who was then president of the museum. They wanted me because I was a real estate developer and a lawyer with broad experience in construction and in organizing development activities.

Arata Isozaki was already chosen as design architect and was struggling to meet the design requirements of the architectural committee. The committee consisted of artists Sam Francis and Robert Irwin, former Director Pontus Hulten, Deputy Director and current Director Richard Koshalek, Max Palevsky and architectural consultant Coy Howard. The artists on the committee were dedicated to creating a superior exhibition space for the showing of art.

Influence from MOCA's architectural support group and the artists' support group began to surface. Both groups wanted a world class building and an unusual architectural expression. They wanted outstanding space to show art with

major emphasis on California daylight. So, there was much pressure to design a great building on a very difficult site.

Additional pressure was also being exerted by California artists to allow Isozaki the artistic freedom to create. Thus, when I came on the committee, there was conflict among the committee members as to how the building should be designed.

So, when I arrived there was little continuity. The architect had created five or six different concepts which were basically unsatisfactory to the committee. I recommended that we form a design and development team to aid the architect and that we retain the services of an experienced local architectural firm and a strong general contractor. I suggested that the design and development team consist of Isozaki, Gruen Associates, HCB Contractors and myself. That is the team that built the museum.

When I came onto the committee I was given the responsibility of expediting the project. The primary goal was to come in within our \$22 million budget for a "turn key" museum—a museum ready to begin operations when the key is received. We met our goal.

I organized the process in order to give Isozaki the support and freedom he needed to design. And in 1983, he came up with a marvelous design. I was delighted.

For over four years I have been in charge of the expenditure of all funds for construction and design. It has been an awesome responsibility, which will come to an end in April when the staff occupies the new building.

What has been your greatest source of satisfaction in working on this project?

The entire project has been the most satisfying I have ever worked on. It has been a problem-solver's delight. One key issue was the resolution of the site problem created by the two levels of Grand Avenue. It was solved by devising a seven-level museum building constructed over five levels of parking. The bottom of the museum is on lower Grand and is used for framing, crating and storage; the next level is a 165-seat auditorium; the galleries are on the



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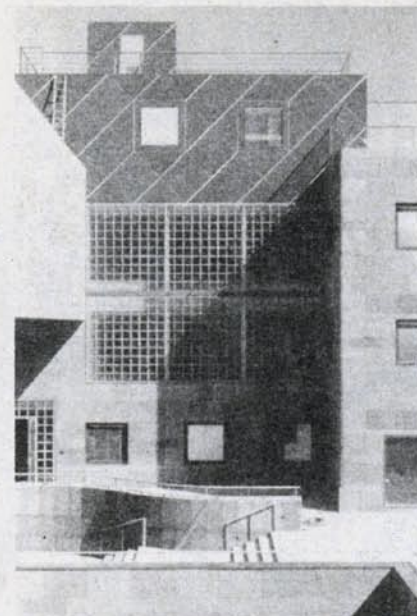
third level; the fourth is Grand Avenue and the next three levels hold the museum offices, library and board room.

It has been rewarding to see the structure develop into an outstanding building. Isozaki is a great architect. He uses simple geometric forms—the cube, the barrel and the triangle and transforms them with exotic textures and materials which have not previously been used in the United States.

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—Frederick M. Nicholas
Vice-Chairman
MOCA Board of Trustees

Some of the interesting materials used in the building are crystallized glass manufactured in Japan, India red sandstone quarried in India and cut in Japan, and onyx sheet mined in Mexico and cut in Los Angeles.



John Eden

The south wall of the museum's office block fuses grid geometries and a range of complementary materials that enhance the exterior with variegated textures, colors and lines. Says MOCA Trustee Frederick M. Nicholas, "I organized the process to give Isozaki the freedom he needed to design. And in 1983, he came up with a marvelous design. I was delighted."

Isozaki reveals his whimsy with the use of color and shapes in the design, as in the office structure cube and the ticket cube which he has covered with green oxidized aluminum cross-hatched with pink grout.

The flow of the galleries is particularly spectacular. There are seven galleries comprising 30,000 square feet of space all on one level, with the north and south galleries having almost 7,000 square feet each. This one-level concept for the galleries was developed by Robert Irwin. The ceilings range from 18 feet to 45 feet. Each gallery has a different variety of light; each skylight reflects light in a different way. Sixty percent of the gallery light is from skylights, 40% from artificial lighting.

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Is there a danger in MOCA's becoming criticized as a "cultural palace"?

The magnificence of this building is due to the brilliant design and not the opulence

of its furnishings and materials. Because MOCA is a total facility with cafe, bookstore, library, galleries, auditorium and offices, it will be a meeting and gathering place for art-oriented people. It can only titillate people, not upset them; therefore, it is a positive force.

This museum is a community effort; it was organized by art and business leaders with private, rather than public money. MOCA does not get direct aid from the city or county as does The Music Center and The Los Angeles County Museum, although the building did come through the Community Redevelopment Agency redevelopment of Bunker Hill. What MOCA has done is bring the private sector into a public institution, which will help it survive.

Museums, particularly contemporary art museums, are always criticized for being elitist because most people do not understand contemporary art. Many of the shows at MOCA are controversial; therefore, a large percentage of museum visitors will be disturbed by what they see. Such shows are important because they reflect the changes in our society, and they are educational. Picasso in his early days was a controversial artist.

Will MOCA be able to advance its educational mission in a city like Los Angeles where people don't habitually go to museums?

At this stage of its development, Los Angeles is not a cosmopolitan city. As yet, it does not have a central core, and its downtown does not measure up to other large U.S. cities. Los Angeles is desperately trying to develop a downtown core. I think that as people get used to seeing contemporary art and allowing artists and curators to have freedom of expression, they will begin to understand and appreciate it.

The experience we have had at MOCA thus far has been revealing. The Jonathan Borofsky and Red Grooms exhibitions had unprecedented reception. I have been to them five times and have noticed that most of the patrons are young—in their teens through 20's. Obviously, there is a quality in the shows which excited them, and I think it has to do with the circus-like atmosphere.

The curators at MOCA will have to devote time and effort to educate the museum's audience on what contemporary art is about. If they expend the energy, MOCA will be successful. Education is a critical role for any museum.