



Photographs by K.C. ALFRED San Diego Union-Tribune

Redesign with a respect for history

THE ARTFULLY EXPANDED MCASD IN LA JOLLA LEAVES ITS PREVIOUS SELVES ON PUBLIC VIEW

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IN 2018, DOZENS OF CRITICS and scholars signed an open letter to the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego condemning a proposed renovation and expansion of its La Jolla building by New York-based Selldorf Architects, calling it “a tremendous mistake.” Four years out, that renovation and expansion is complete. ¶ The short of it: The critics were wrong. ¶ The redesign, led by the firm’s founder, Annabelle Selldorf, has gracefully unified a jumble of buildings from various eras, added 30,000 square feet of gallery space and reoriented the structure to the stunning feature it had long turned its back on: the Pacific Ocean. ¶ On the northern end of the property, a new public art park boasts terrific views of the water. It’s an infinitely better use of the space than what was there prior to the renovation — MCASD’s parking lot and a dumpster. It had to be the most extravagant dumpster real estate in all of California. ¶ The museum, which reopened to the public on April 9, now has a more prominent entrance, improved circulation routes and greater accessibility.

It has also made critical improvements to back-of-house functions. In the old building, for example, the freight elevator opened right into the middle of a gallery, which meant that, for aesthetic purposes, drywall was frequently used to hide the infrastructure. Getting art into and out of the museum required — quite literally — ripping out walls. Now the freight elevator leads to a transition space between galleries and is protected by a large panel that can be easily opened and closed.

It’s been a long road. MCASD’s accretion of buildings began life as a residence designed and built by early Modernist Irving Gill for philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps, completed in 1916. By the 1940s, it had been converted into an art center. As its needs grew, so did the architecture. In 1950 and 1960, expansions by San Diego firm Mosher Drew added gallery space and a theater.

Another expansion in 1996 by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, founded by famed postmodernist Robert Venturi and his partner Denise Scott Brown, removed portions of the Mosher Drew design and rebuilt Gill’s graceful facade, including a lovely, arched sunporch, which they framed with pergolas of bold Doric columns. The additions included a cafe, a sculpture garden with ocean views and a new entrance: Axline Court, a star-shaped atrium with decorative fins that descend from the ceiling.

The atrium brought a splash of postmodern drama to an otherwise low-key structure. By 2014 MCASD was ready to again expand since space was needed for its permanent collection.

Selldorf’s plan reimaged the theater as a double-height gallery space and extended the

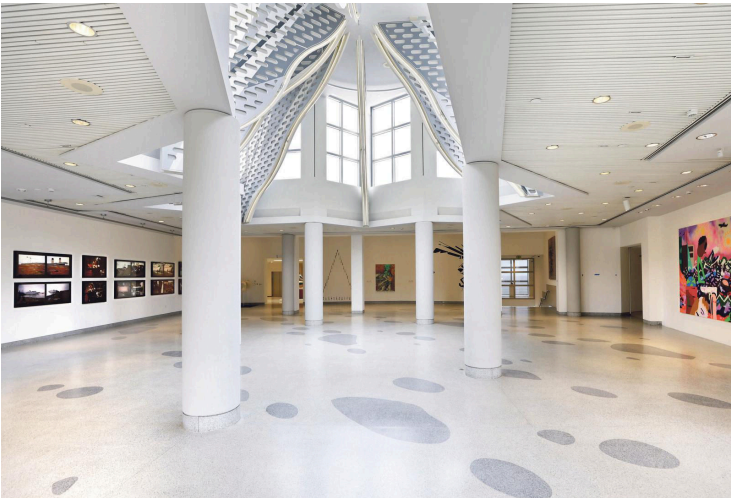
exhibition areas into an adjacent property. But controversy emerged with the plan to relocate the main entrance to the new wing and remove the pergolas by Venturi, Scott Brown (now known as VSBA). The open letter alleged that the moves would turn Axline Court into an “empty atrium” and that relocating the entrance was “a slap in the face to Gill.”

Neither of those eventualities has come to pass.

Axline Court remains its exuberant postmodern self and still functions as a critical juncture. It is a vital connection between the museum’s northern and southern wings — currently the site of an installation by artists from San Diego and Tijuana. It also serves as a free public gallery and point of access to the ocean-view terraces and sculpture garden on the western side of the building — no admission necessary. At night, the atrium’s neon lantern remains visible from the street.

And the Gill facade? It *pops*. In fact, it’s hard to imagine that it might be overlooked next to the cafe and new ocean-view art park. Judicious plantings prevent the structure from being overwhelmed by the scale of what is now MCASD’s longer, albeit still low-slung, facade. Removing the Venturi, Scott Brown pergolas has made Gill’s design more visible than ever.

Ultimately, Selldorf and her team found a way of elegantly knitting together spaces from the various historic eras, allowing each era to shine. To walk along Prospect Street and Coast Boulevard is to go on a tour of 20th century architectural history: Gill’s intimately scaled early Modern work, Mosher Drew’s Midcentury boxes and Venturi, Scott Brown’s arched facades in-



spired by Gill’s architecture. Selldorf added her own vocabulary in the new wing: simple board-formed concrete volumes clad with travertine, which give the new building a sedimentary feel, a visual nod to the coastal cliffs on which the museum sits.

A principal charge of the renovation, says MCASD Director Kathryn Kanjo, “was to be mindful of who we are, of our

history, and opening it up.”

The \$105-million renovation was led by Selldorf, with a team of designers and architects from her 70-person New York City office, including Sara Loperogolo, Wanda Willmore, Ryoji Karube and Corey Crist. The San Diego-based LPA Inc. served as executive architects.

The MCASD project is one of two recent museum revamps in

MCASD’S expansion adds a public park, top, and opens rooms to ocean views. The design by Selldorf Architects honors the structure’s past by retaining a 1996 postmodern lobby as a public gallery, second from bottom, and gives a 1916 Modern sun porch renewed prominence.

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San Diego that stand out for their surgical dexterity and artful restraint. A \$55-million renovation and expansion of the Mingei International Museum by LUCE et studio, a six-person San Diego firm founded by Jennifer Luce, has added 10,000 square feet of space to the nearly four-decade-old craft and design institution in Balboa Park. And it’s helped transform the museum’s relationship to the public spaces around it.

The makeover reimagines a structure that could have been trapped in historic amber had the architect or the museum’s leadership, led by CEO and Executive Director Rob Sidner, been less ambitious.

The MCASD and Mingei renovations are different projects at different scales, but they share certain qualities: difficult sites (both sit on steep lots with grades that drop by at least a story), historic architecture that needed to be upgraded for the 21st century, even as key aspects needed to be preserved, and the conversion of insular structures to better engage their California environment.

Both projects, in fact, are thoughtful about the ways in which they integrate fresh air and the outdoors into the museum experience, rather than simply encasing visitors in vast tombs of HVAC.

The niceties don’t come at the expense of the museum experience. At MCASD, I was struck by Selldorf’s thoughtful sightlines, the ways in which the dimensions of the spaces vary to accommodate works of different scales, the shifting amounts of daylight that penetrate the different galleries, the windows that frame trees and slivers of ocean, the doorways that offer portals from the architecture of one era into another.

In 2016, when Selldorf was conceiving MCASD’s design, I asked her what it was like to reimagine a campus that held works by so many notable architects. “You do it with a trembling hand,” she said. “And you try to do everybody justice.” Her hand did not tremble. MCASD is a better experience for it.