



ART

Hirshhorn museum plans major renovation once sculpture garden reopens

This modernization of the Hirshhorn's interior and plaza will be the largest physical reimagining of the museum in its history

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The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden will undergo a major renovation of its interior and plaza, the largest physical reimagining of the museum in its history. The renovation, which is likely to begin in 2025, could keep the museum's interior attractions closed for two years.

Seldorf Architects, which specializes in cultural spaces, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) — where Gordon Bunshaft, the original architect behind the museum's building, was a partner — will lead the modernization efforts, Hirshhorn officials told The Washington Post.



Still in its planning stages and with a budget to be determined, the project aims to increase museum accessibility; update infrastructure including bathrooms and elevators; and create more space for art, programming and education. It comes at a time of significant changes to the Hirshhorn, which just finished replacing the building's concrete exterior and roof. In November, the museum will break ground on the long-awaited and much-debated redesign of its sculpture garden, which is expected to take 18 to 24 months to complete. This third and final phase of revitalization will commence after the garden reopens.

"This is a transformational moment for the museum because we are nearly 50 years on and we haven't done major work on our campus in decades," Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn, told *The Post*. "It's really about re-envisioning the museum for the 21st century."

In doing so, they won't stray too far from the past. The distinctive 1974 Brutalist-style building is "made with a certain philosophy that we still hold dear," Chris Cooper, design partner at SOM, said. Given the firm's close ties to Bunshaft and Selldorf's expertise in museum design, "We didn't feel that we would be afraid of the building, but we felt like we could come and work to project it into the future," he said.

Conversations about what it means to be a 21st-century museum typically raise philosophical questions about ethical collecting, diverse representation and the stories museums tell. Physical matters — where bathrooms are located, how easy it is to enter the museum, the height limit on art — might not sound as interesting. Yet, they can have a profound influence over which visitors and what artworks end up inside.



As a free, modern and contemporary art museum on the National Mall, the Hirshhorn is a rare place where accessibility meets avant-garde, a museum that draws art aficionados and stray tourists alike. In some ways, it already reflects what a museum made for this era can look like. These physical updates follow record-breaking shows including 2017's "Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors" and 2019's "Raphael Lozano Hammer: Pulse," which reflected contemporary art's potential for wide appeal. With the revamp, the Hirshhorn hopes to attract more young visitors by making the museum — occasionally likened to a fortress — warm and approachable.

"The most important thing is to connect to people and to do it in such a way that at every turn, you feel utterly welcome," Annabelle Selldorf, an architect and founder of Selldorf Architects, says.

For Selldorf, this means lowering barriers to entry. She notes that, currently, the museum has revolving-door entrances, one small public elevator and narrow escalators — all of which could be difficult to negotiate for individuals with disabilities. "We want to think about this holistically," she says, voicing her hope that "everybody gets to have the same experience as much as possible."

Although years of work and decisions lie ahead, Chiu says right now they are thinking most about the Mall-facing entrance to the museum, which will welcome more visitors after the sculpture garden is complete. It's critical, she says, because "it is that first encounter with the museum. For a majority of visitors, it is their first time to a modern and contemporary art museum."

Chiu and the designers envision a seamless, art-filled journey from the National Mall, through the sculpture garden, onto the plaza beneath the building, and into the museum's glass lobby and interior galleries. Inside, they hope to create a balance between experiencing the expansive, curving architecture and retreating to more-intimate spaces. Even as the circle-shape facilitates forward motion through the museum, they are working to increase what museum professionals call "dwell time" in places such as the Lerner Room, which looks out onto the Mall. "We need to be thinking about, how can we give over more of our building to the public?" Chiu said.

Designed in the 1960s to house the art collection of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, an oil and mining tycoon, the Hirshhorn's doughnut-shape concrete building was met with the kind of skepticism received by anything that is a little ahead of its time. Critics accused it of "pompous monumentality" and "environmental abuse." They lambasted its rotund concrete exterior, likening it to a "bomb shelter" and a "maimed monument."

Over the years, though, the museum's idiosyncratic circular shape has proved a strength, inspiring installations suited to the round — such as "Andy Warhol: Shadows," where paintings in the series stretched uninterrupted for 450 feet, and "Mark Bradford: Pickett's Charge." Its heavy concrete cylinder has become its signature. "I never fail to be amazed of how it sort of commands attention," Selldorf says. "It's magnetic."

Informed by a love of sculpture shared by Bunshaft and Hirshhorn, who was known for his collection of Henry Moores and Auguste Rodins, the museum functions as a work of three-dimensional art. "It's an important building in that it's a sculpture itself. And so there's great sensitivity toward maintaining the essence of the building," Cooper said.

Cooper points to the crisscross escalators, the glass lobby and the contrast between the mostly windowless exterior and light-filled interior as elements that define the Hirshhorn. Above all, Cooper and Selldorf say, the Hirshhorn is a simple geometric idea: a cylinder floating above a square. "That's pretty elemental and in a really fantastic way, because everybody gets that," Selldorf says. "You see that from afar, and you immediately understand the spatial setup."

As they decide on changes, Chiu says they will hold public meetings as they did with the sculpture garden.

Since its founding, the Hirshhorn has expanded its mission to include contemporary as well as modern art. Chiu looks forward to being able to cater to large-scale works and new, innovative artistic media. "There are all these assumptions that we once had about artworks — that paintings need a white cube, video art needs a black box, performance art needs an auditorium," she says. "And in fact, that's not the case at all. There is a much greater sense of cross-genre art presentation. And it requires greater flexibility."

The renovation may also make room for visitors to see more of the permanent collection. Currently, the museum's holdings are rotated in short- and long-term exhibitions. Chiu points to Sondra Perry's "Graft and Ash" and Kusama's Mirror Rooms as examples of works she'd like to put on display more regularly.

In Cooper's words, the new project boils down to "more art, more art, more art" with the hopes of bringing more viewers to that art, too. "We want people to come into the museum," says Selldorf. "And if they only come in to look around for a little while and never make it all the way to the top, they're welcome still."