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# Bay Area art world prepares for year of promise and challenges

By Charles Desmarais By Charles Desmarais | November 23, 2015 | Updated: December 2, 2015 12:44pm

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Photo: ©Henrik Kam

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## IMAGE 1 OF 18

**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art:** Opens May 14, 2016. SFMOMA's opening after a three-year redesign and rebuilding is a major international event. The 100-year loan of a great private collection of contemporary art, assembled over 30 years by Gap founders Doris and Donald Fisher, was the impetus for adding space, designed by Snøhetta architects. While they were at it, however, museum leaders took the opportunity to expand in myriad

directions, adding 10 stories of new galleries and support areas, including an expansive new Pritzker Center for Photography. A separate Campaign for Art added an additional 3,000 major gifts of art from 200-plus donors. The museum will be free to visitors under 18 years old, and programs for children and families will grow in a new Koret Education Center. <http://sfmoma.org>

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San Francisco, this is your moment.

The coming year in the Bay Area art world will be a nearly nonstop celebration of truly grand openings, the midpoint of a three-year building binge of at least 10 art museums and related capital projects.

The cost will total close to \$1 billion to add the equivalent of well over five city blocks for the display, storage and teaching of visual art. And all that is on top of an already rich inventory comprising a dozen or more significant art museums serving Northern California.

But 2016 may also be the year in which we are forced to confront a perplexing challenge: In a city awash in the money that has made all this possible, will we focus on sustainability? Or will it all simply burn bright until the fuel runs out?

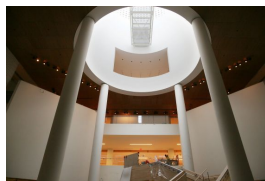
I don't mean just finding the money to support all this new infrastructure; let's assume plant maintenance has been factored into future costs. Yet the same fabulous Bay Area wealth that brought about this building boom has created new challenges for middle- and lower-income people here. And it is in those economic strata that most artists — and even the majority of their gallerists and other arts professionals — spend their lives.

Museums, of course, have no greater responsibility than the rest of us to help lift all fiscal boats. I'm thinking now about art. The new buildings will have the capacity to handle a lot of it. As an audience, we will benefit with ever better collections of great works properly housed,

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## A CHANGING ART LANDSCAPE

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**10 upcoming Bay Area art projects**



**SFMOMA to reopen in May as largest museum of its kind in U.S.**

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and expansive exhibitions from across the globe presented to entertain and educate us.

Here is the question, though: What if the great art of the world is brought to our doorsteps, but artists and the small nonprofits and galleries that nurture them are driven away by the realities of the local economy? Are we to become a community of consumers (connoisseurs!) of the best imported art and ideas? Or can we find a way to continue to be, as we famously have been for more than a century, *generators* of culture?

## **Hugely ambitious**

When the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art reopens May 14 after three years of expansion, it will have raised \$610 million for the project, which includes a whopping \$245 million addition to the endowment for future operations and programs. At 460,000 square feet — up from 225,000 — the expanded building is the largest museum of modern and contemporary art of its kind in the United States. The galleries — mostly finished but still empty of art when I toured them in October — promise to be sublimely well suited to the mainstream painting, photography and sculpture that make up the museum's primary holdings.

Yet a little more than 2 miles away, on an unremarkable corner in the Mission District, stands a freshly painted, modest Victorian house that embodies what may be the best hope for the future of art and art museums in San Francisco.

This is 500 Capp St., the former home of the late artist David Ireland (1930-2009). Peeling back, shaping and treasuring bits and pieces of the house itself, and the hoarder's cache he found inside when he purchased it in 1975, Ireland turned it into a singular environment that is one of the most important works of installation art anywhere.





Ireland's is hardly a household name beyond local artists' bars and hangouts, even among people who pay close attention to contemporary art. There are, however, many artists around the world whose methods and materials have been influenced, either directly or virally, by his Zen-like approach to the humble leftovers and discards of quotidian life. (The interior-design world, infatuated over three decades with adaptive reuse and "shabby chic," also owes a largely unacknowledged debt to Ireland's house, and to his more public renovation of a suite of rooms at Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin.)

Tiny 500 Capp St. is a single-artist "house museum." But it's also a uniquely San Francisco experience, treating a subject of international significance that can be truly understood only by visiting and experiencing the place. And its preservation is no mere accident of history. It's the result of the passionate patronage of one enlightened person, Carlie Wilmans, scion of San Francisco's famously generous Wattis family. After an entire life surrounded by art, she told me, "When I came into this house, it was almost like art started to make sense for me." It was "a gift of desperation," she says, "having to save this house."

### **Protecting the art**

"Patronage" is a problematic word, with its gendered semantic roots and its whiff of feudal dominion. How else, though, to describe the sense of almost parental responsibility and ownership — not of an individual, but of a set of ideals and ideas — that would drive someone to such fierce protectiveness?

## A changing landscape

Ten new facilities opening in the Bay Area will change the face of art in Northern California.

Opening Date	Institution	Construction cost	Square feet Total	Gallery
Sept. 20, 2014	Anderson Collection at Stanford University	\$36 million	33,000	15,000
Oct. 6, 2015	McMurtry Building for the Dept. of Art & Art History, Stanford University	\$87 million	100,000	1,700
Nov. 14, 2015	Gallery 308, Fort Mason Center for the Arts	\$800,000		4,000
Jan. 15, 2016	500 Capp Street (David Ireland house)	withheld	3,552	
Jan. 31, 2016	UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive	\$112 million	83,000	25,000
March 2016	Minnesota Street Project	withheld	35,000	22,421
Spring 2016	Sites Unseen (public art projects)	\$2.7 million		
May 14, 2016	San Francisco Museum of Modern Art	\$305 million	460,000	145,000
Fall 2016	Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, UC Davis	\$30 million	30,000	10,100
Summer 2017	San Francisco Art Institute/Pier 2 Fort Mason	\$21 million	69,422	4,299
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$594.5 million</b>	<b>813,974</b>	<b>227,520</b>

Source: Chronicle research

The Chronicle

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The creation of a great art city, patrons like Wilmans and others show us, is not simply a matter of collecting great things, or constructing impressive buildings, as important as those activities are. It feels more than a bit ungrateful to say this, given the overwhelming generosity of so many people in this extraordinary time in our city, but financial donations go only so far.

Also needed is the kind of deep connection to artists that led Pericles to hire Pheidias to develop the Athenian Acropolis; the conviction that prompted Renaissance Italians to sponsor local guilds and workshops to create for the glory of God, city-state and family.

San Francisco, too, has seen high points of trusting familiarity between patrons and artists, the kind of symbiosis that gave us moments like the art and design fluorescence launched by 1915's Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the mural legacy of Diego Rivera and his local cohorts and students of the 1930s, and the more popularly and academically supported Bay Area Figurative movement of the 1950s and '60s.

The art resources of the Bay Area, both human and institutional, constitute an ecology, healthy only when its interdependent balance is maintained. Enlightened patronage and an appreciation of the worldwide importance of significant regional artists and art, like David Ireland and his house, are essential to that balance.

A third element will also be needed. For, as with our natural environment, an ecosystem — especially one threatened by stress — also requires deliberate and responsible management.

In many hours of interviews over the past month, I heard about numerous promising projects. But the concepts of broad planning, collaboration and coordination were never raised without prompting. The San Francisco Arts Commission is doing smart work to study and begin to address the housing and work-space needs of artists. Nevertheless, even the city's director of cultural affairs — though aware of the anecdotal evidence that San Francisco artists are moving across the bay — could not tell me who serves a city role like his in Oakland, or even if the East Bay has a similar body. (It does: the Alameda County Arts Commission.) And while Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf has far stronger arts credentials than most political leaders, she admits that her city — which cut back severely on arts policy staff in leaner times before her inauguration — only recently launched a process to design a cultural plan.

The **Open Space** blog maintained by SFMOMA (<http://openspace.sfmoma.org/>) lists 105 galleries in the Bay Area (significantly, the blog also keeps a list of closed galleries, which now number 30). The same blog lists 60 nonprofits, many of which are what Courtney Fink, co-director of Common Field (a national support group for artist support groups), calls “artist-centered” organizations. Increasingly, one finds evidence of threats to their existence with the rise in housing and work-space costs.

Along with the major museum projects slated to open in 2016 is a **substantial private effort** launched by San Francisco collectors Deborah and Andy Rappaport to address the loss of gallery space in downtown San Francisco and elsewhere. At the same time, it will prompt closer collaboration among the naturally competitive small businesses. Minnesota Street Project, in the Dogpatch district, will eventually divide 22,241 square feet among 10 galleries (eight have signed on). It's a for-profit effort, but it's designed to just break even as it creates a new base for the gallery owners. A second phase across the street will encompass approximately 30 artist studios of various sizes, as well as shared facilities like a wood shop, a



kiln and digital resources.

In contrast to such modest but potentially high-return efforts as 500 Capp St. and Minnesota Street Project, SFMOMA is gargantuan. But it's more than big. It is one of America's great museums. Its staff of more than 300 includes 19 curators, including an inspired Education and Public Practice group that plays a major content role at the institution. Many of these professionals, particularly among the youthful half of the team, are deeply engaged in the regional art scene, teaching at local colleges, attending events and exhibition openings, and otherwise contributing to the mix that makes a place great.

And yet, when it comes to the exhibition program, the museum has in recent years kept a curious distance from artists of the region. The museum has said that will change in the new building, and has announced special galleries for California art. That's a formula that makes me nervous. Such segregated presentations, like the biannual SECA Awards (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) show that is limited to regional artists, inevitably have an air of the provincial about them. I'd much rather see the museum restrict itself to showing artists who can stand the heat of direct comparison to the best of art from around the world. In a city and region that prides itself on its innovation — and that is so rich in talent — those artists are here.

Now let's find a way to keep them.

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## **A changing landscape**

Ten new facilities that will change the face of art throughout Northern California:

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is the big news, but it's not the only major new art facility in the Bay Area. Here are 10 projects that will change the face of art in Northern California.

*Visualization by John Blanchard*

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