

CHANGE REACTION

IF ALL GOES ACCORDING TO PLAN, BY 2008 FOUR NEW MUSEUMS DESIGNED BY FOUR CELEBRITY ARCHITECTS WILL FOREVER CHANGE THE FACE OF SAN FRANCISCO. BY SARAH LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE FLETCHER





The de Young's facade (this page) is designed to resemble an Impressionist painting of dappled sunlight. Beyond the entrance, much of the concourse is open to the public free of charge. "Imagine you're Rollerblading in the park a couple blocks away," says the AIA SF's Margie O'Driscoll. "You can stroll into the cafe, roll right by the Andrew Goldsworthy sculpture and experience incredible art along the way—how amazing is that?"





ABOVE: The tower, which has a free observation deck, offers a 360-degree view of the city and, like its predecessor, rises above the park. BELOW: Pritzker Prize-winner Renzo Piano's "green" design for the new California Academy of Sciences.

by famed Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta in his signature brightly colored reductive style, if enough money is raised to launch the project.

While big change always elicits resistance, the architecture of cultural institutions seems to be an especially tricky arena. Whether publicly or privately funded, museums have become like monuments, signifying the importance of art and culture in our lives and to our cities. "Art museums are one of the few noncommercial and nonreligious places in American culture where people can gather and share experiences," says Deborah Frieden, project director for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, of which the de Young is a part.

The de Young Museum, founded in 1895 in a structure left over from the previous year's Midwinter International Exposition, has a historic connection to Golden Gate Park. A second, more formidable building featuring an iconic tower was rededicated in 1921 to *San Francisco Chronicle* publisher M. H. de Young. While damage from the Loma Prieta earthquake forced the de Young to build a new home, many San Franciscans who grew up visiting the museum and memorizing its collections were averse to the kind of change that out-of-town architects might deliver. But if the shiny new building—a result of countless public hearings (56 about the construction of the tower alone) and an extensive collaboration between the architects and the curators—is any indication, the

If you want plenty of attention for your city and to attract hordes of visiting art and architecture enthusiasts, commissioning a big-name architect to design a new museum will guarantee plenty of both. There is one hitch, however: for every enthusiast spreading the hype, there's a naysayer voicing his or her disdain for the proposed design. With four internationally renowned architecture firms set to make their mark on San Francisco's cultural landscape over the next three years, the stir currently being caused by the new de Young Museum is only the beginning.

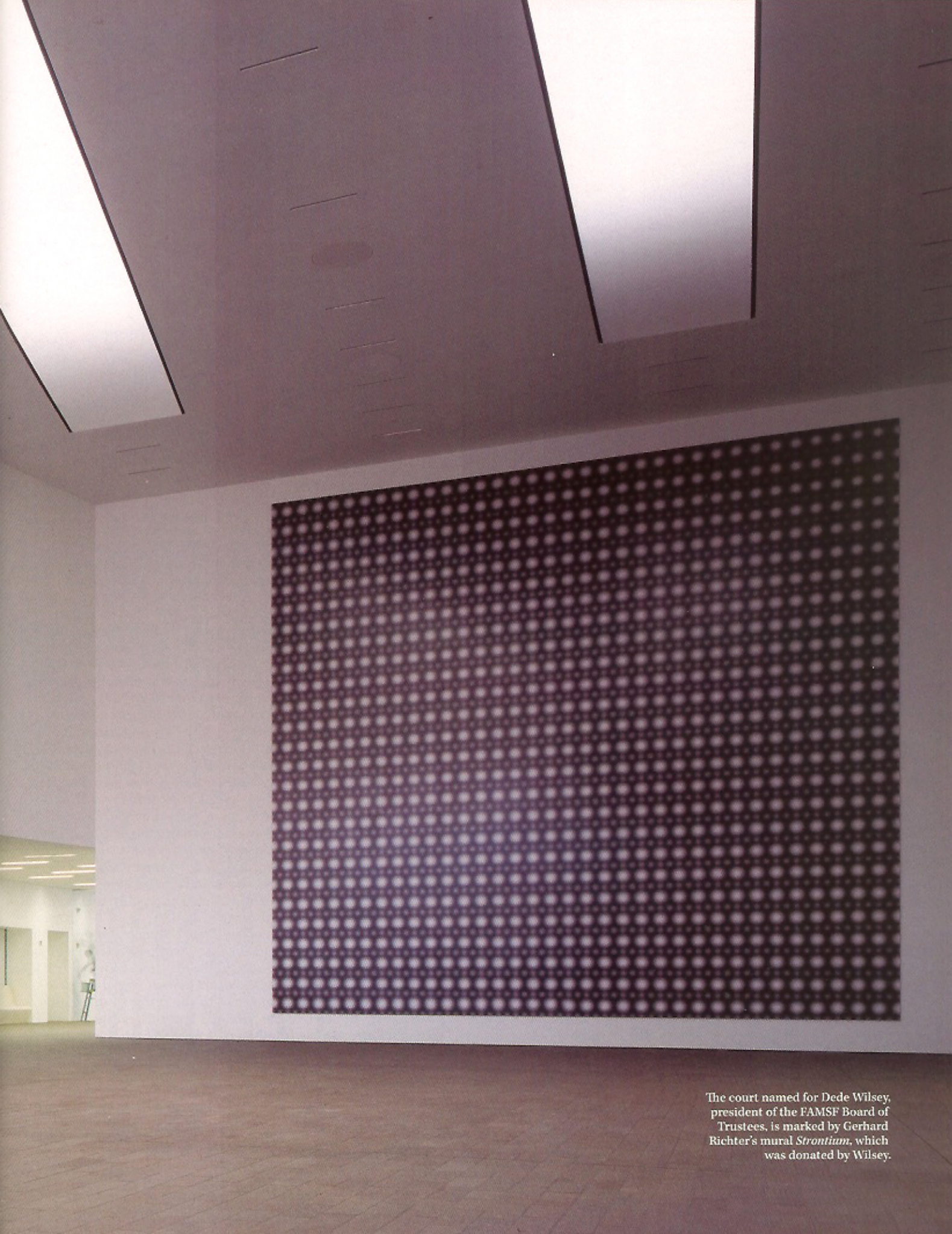
The first designer building to be unveiled—on October 15th—the de Young, with its twisting, towering beacon of copper in Golden Gate Park, was conceived by the Pritzker Prize-winning Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron. After prolonged scrutiny—due primarily to the museum's location in a public, and much-beloved, park—the board of the de Young overcame 10 years of bureaucratic hurdles to get its new museum built. Over the next couple years, the California Academy of Sciences, located just across the music concourse from the de Young, will undergo its own from-the-ground-up reincarnation. With a proposed design by esteemed Italian architect Renzo Piano, the glass-fronted structure built into a hillside and featuring an accessible "green" roof, will surely face some of the same hurdles.

In the same time frame but on the other side of town, New York-based Daniel Libeskind was scheduled to complete a new home for San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum, adjacent to Willis Polk's 1907 Jessie Street substation near Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. That same neighborhood will also get a new Mexican Museum



"It's an icon," says Dede Wilsey. "People will come just to see the building, even though there is spectacular art inside."





The court named for Dede Wilsey, president of the FAMSF Board of Trustees, is marked by Gerhard Richter's mural *Strontium*, which was donated by Wilsey.



new de Young is destined to hush the dubious and the critical for at least another year.

Having completed the 1998 Dominus Winery in Yountville and the Tate Modern in London in 2000, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron understood both the strict organizational requirements of a museum and the site-sensitivity of Californians. Before drawing up any designs at all, the two architects spent six months in San Francisco learning about their clients, collaborating on the program provided by the board and discussing the needs of each curator and conservator. They went back to Switzerland with not only a detailed program for functionality but also a plan for making the design fit seamlessly into its bucolic surroundings.

The board's initial directives included a tower—as a nod to the former de Young and a place to house the museum's educational facilities—and a design that would incorporate Golden Gate Park. "Since we decided to stay inside the park, we wanted to bring the park inside the building," says Dede Wilsey, president of the Board of Trustees. Herzog and de Meuron did just that by stretching the structure like an open hand with glass-enclosed "fingers" that allow the park to poke into the floor plan. They upped the ante on the tower by designing a 144-foot structure that twists; the base sits on axis with the grid of the music concourse (the only gridded plot in the entire park), while the top of the tower torques to line up with the grid of the city's avenues.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the new de Young is its "skin." One of Herzog and de Meuron's specialties, the designers developed an innovative copper cladding that is more sculpture than facade. Inspired by their runs through Golden Gate Park each morning (the architects stayed near Ocean Beach during their visit), they used a photo taken of the sun filtering through the canopy of a tree as a template for the texture of the facade.

"After considering a few different versions of copper mesh, we got a call to say Herzog and de Meuron had a breakthrough," says

Herzog and de Meuron met with each of the curators and conservators to develop a visual chart that would account for the size and shape of every piece in the de Young's collection. Glass cases (above) were created for art by indigenous peoples.

Frieden. "They came in with this blown-up photo and said, 'We're gonna wrap the building in this...literally.' And everyone said, 'We love it, but how are you going to do it?'" The answer is a complicated process that began by enlarging the photo in black-and-white, pixelating the image, then creating a vocabulary of perforated and raised circles based on the positive and negative dots in the image. They enlisted A. Zahner, an architectural metals firm in Kansas City, to collaborate on a system that would computer-generate unique copper panels, which were left untreated so they'll oxidize and patinate over time from orange to red to purple and, eventually, to completely verdigris, blending in with the greenery around it.

After taking into consideration the concerns of the curators, the city, the park, the public, the board of trustees and the donors, the design process—if nothing else—became a lesson in democracy. Coincidentally, democracy was at the core of the very first directive from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Says Frieden, "Our collections are diverse—we have objects made by indigenous cultures from the ancient Americas and the Pacific Islands, a great collection of American paintings and decorative arts as well as textiles from around the world—and rather than accentuating this diversity, we wanted to present the objects equally, in a way that asks you to appreciate their beauty."

To that end, the galleries extend from the central wings, so that none of the collections seems like it's been relegated to the "outskirts" or basement of the building. The new museum appears vast, but it's meant to feel approachable and human-scaled. Many of the spaces—from the lobby concourse to the tower to the sculpture garden—are also free to the public. "I love the transparency—the idea of inviting people from the park to visit with this free invitation," says Margie O'Driscoll, executive director of the San Francisco AIA. "It breaks down the historic barriers of museums."

In a city that prides itself on democracy, the de Young has risen to—and above—the call for representation and sensitivity. Hopefully it has also paved the way for the architects of the other new museums as they attempt to conjure the spirit of San Francisco with their commissions. ■



The anything-but-imposing entrance to the museum leads into a two-story central court, from which all the galleries extend.