

# Painting a New Landscape

An exhibitionist museum, tower and gardens expand the notion of museum space

**W**ith its elegant low-slung copper-clad building in a sophisticated garden setting and gravity-defying, twisting tower, the M.H. de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park will achieve every museum's goal — to educate the public — about art as well as architecture.

Not since Frank Lloyd Wright's futuristic Marin Civic Center was completed in 1977 has the Bay Area seen a significant new civic structure that does not affect a classical or postmodern pose. For architecturally conservative San Francisco, it's the equivalent of St. Louis' 1960s stainless steel arch, a gateway to bigger, more exhibiting ideas in a post-Bilbao Guggenheim age.

The former de Young building, a remnant of the 1894 Midwinter International Exposition in Golden Gate Park, was an Egyptian-style pavilion that had been gradually expanded. It acquired its emblematic Spanish Colonial Revival tower in 1911. Having barely withstood the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, a new home for city-owned museum became imperative.

The new 293,000-square-foot museum, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Herzog & de Meuron and erected by Fong and Chan Architects, is a distinctive example of modern architecture in a city ill-exposed to the genre.

At the de Young, the architects and engineers — at a time when computer modeling allows limitless forms — used modernism's linear vocabulary in unexpected places and state-of-the-art construction techniques. There is a strong likelihood that the combination of three types of base isolators under the metal frame building and invisible cables used as vertical stays threaded through the concrete tower will influence how future residential and civic buildings are built.

That was not a particular focus of the designers. "We simply wanted to abstract physical qualities of this site," says architect Pierre de Meuron, speaking from his office in Basel, Switzerland. "It is a museum in the park."

Herzog & de Meuron have recently created other site-specific museums such as London's Tate Modern and an addition for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. For the de Young's disparate collections — art from the Americas, Europe and Africa and Oceanic and textile arts — they first considered separate pavilions.

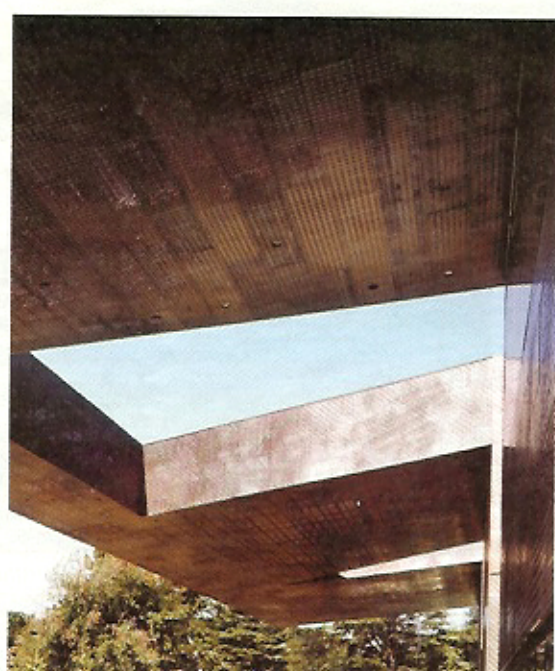
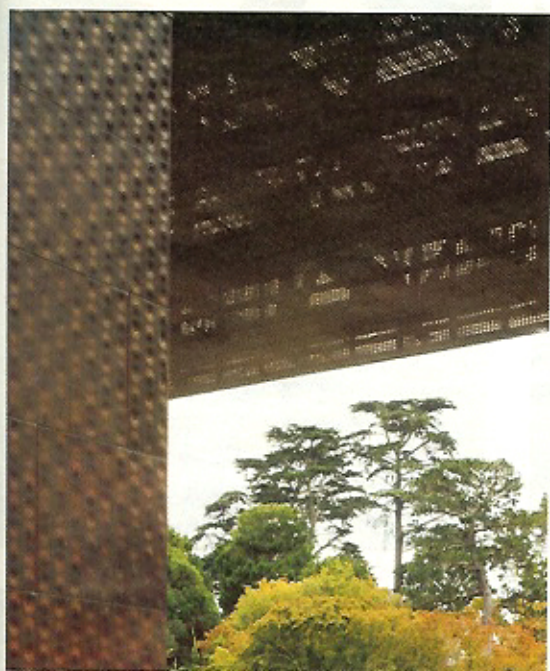
Instead, the two-story museum, built over basement galleries for traveling exhibitions, comprises three horizontal bands interspersed with courtyards and roof-to-roof terrariums. This would have been improvement enough, but its ninety, 144-foot tower — reserved for education programs, classrooms, a library and parent training — puts the de Young on the architectural map.

Unlike Santiago Calatrava's twisting Turning Torso residential tower design in Copenhagen, this one has a specific rationale that goes beyond engineering gymnastics. To determine the shape of the tower, its height and the way it would turn toward the city grid, the architects went up in a crane and worked out nearly a dozen variations. "We fought hard for the height of the tower. It was critical to view the park in relation with the bay, ocean and city," says de Meuron.

The new de Young museum's entry courtyard, as seen from an opening in the building, brings the outdoors in. Right: The twisting Tikal-like tower rises nine stories, providing sweeping city views from an observation floor up top.







Left: the canopy cantilevers toward the Japanese Tea Gardens and outdoor sculpture on the west side of the de Young. It acts as a porch that casts dappled shadows onto the cafe courtyard below. Sculptor Zhan Wang's stainless steel Artificial Rock, above, contrasts with angular openings in the copper canopy.

The tower twists from a rectangular base to a parallelogram form at the top. The base is aligned to the park grid, and the top is turned 37 degrees to align with the grid of downtown city streets visible for the first time from Golden Gate Park.

For Bret Lizundia of the engineering firm Rutherford & Chekene, the different tower designs were exciting because it meant experimenting with unusual bracing systems. "One day I got an e-mail from Basel saying, 'We've got a new tower.' That was the stacked-box idea. If you stack drawers and rotate them just a bit each time, you would have a tower that would be leaning out and oriented differently at the base and at the top," says Lizundia. That sort of idea was eventually built, and Lizundia's firm worked out the central cast-concrete elevator shaft, the 6-degree rotation for each level and the parallelogram shapes of each of the upper floors. "The long sides get closer and closer and ever steeper. The less wide windowless walls are stepped and provide shear strength. To keep the leaning tower standing, steel cables were threaded through the concrete walls and fastened at the base.

"A twisting stepped concrete tower in seismic country is unique," he says.

"Yet the tower structure is quite visible," says project director Deborah Frieden. "The fire escape stair is visible under the copper, and you can see people come down it." The skins of many of Herzog & de Meuron's structures in Europe and Napa — where they designed their first building in the United States, Dominus winery — are subtle metaphors that allude to the building's purpose or setting. The slender winery building has walls made of rocks contained in wire gabions used for fencing in vineyards.

Similarly, the de Young tower and the main building are completely covered with 7,200 copper panels that are embossed, debossed and perforated to evoke dappled patterns of light and shade under the park's tree canopy. On the outer skin, this leitmotif is less obvious, but from inside the building the punched metal panels evoke the lacy look of leaves against the sky.

As the copper building ages, it will turn verdigris, like the redwood and copper windmills at the west end of the park. A glass-walled observation gallery at the top of the tower has panoramic views from which you can look down at the copper-clad museum roof (its fifth façade, according to architect Jacques Herzog) that makes the building's plan easy to understand.

The roof reflects the structure's rectangular footprint and the three long

wings within it that join at certain points. At these junctures, visitors can cross from wing to wing without exiting. The voids between wings form interior courtyards and double-height skylit terrariums that are like fingers of the park delicately slipped into the building glove.

"The whole museum is an education," says director Harry Parker. "It teaches us that art is accessible and we can cross geographical boundaries."

"It is fluid and has many long views that allow you to look through from one gallery to the next," says Parker. "The visitor is forced to take a global stance."

Angled gallery walls, skylit and see-through galleries, eucalyptus wood-framed architectural vitrines to view things in the round, and long sightlines within the building demonstrate the museum's inclusive, flexible stance.

There is no requirement that you start at A and end at Z," says de Meuron. "You should be able to start at M if you want."

The understated main south entry leads to a capacious courtyard before the doorway to ticket counters. There are three other such points of entry all around the building.

"For the Tate also it was important to bring in people," he adds. "This was a similar approach. People don't just go in through one door. In all our museum concepts we want people to walk through and not be forced into galleries."

The tower library and study rooms near each collection allow viewers to delve deeper. "Any collection is only the tip of the iceberg," says Parker. "Yet, you seldom have access to all the information, X-rays and photos there are. Now we have 130,000 images, and our whole attitude to sharing has changed."

"In the textile departments we have a gallery where people can see examples of weaving. Several computer terminals will be windows into what's stored away," says Bob Futernick, associate director in the curatorial division of the Fine Arts Museums that include both the de Young and the Legion of Honor.

Educational opportunities abound. LCD monitors at each entrance show what's in the galleries and help to reduce signage. On the main level a theater/lecture hall and the Kimbell Education Gallery offer more experiential learning.

Landscape architect Walter Hood, who was selected to design new sculpture gardens, a children's garden that incorporates the historic Pool of Enchantment and an entry garden, chose eucalyptus and tree ferns for the



terrariums to mimic sections of Golden Gate Park.

Hood, an innovative landscape designer and professor at UC Berkeley, understood that the museum architecture alluded to the park's original topography of hilly sand dunes. The building interiors rise up ramps and fall down dramatic chevron-shaped stairs to the diamond-shaped Wilsey court, a central gathering space dedicated to museum board president Diane "Dede" Wilsey and her husband, Alfred. The copper roof also undulates gently and dips toward the West.

The vertical tower and a new sculpture garden under the 50- by 220-foot cantilevered brow on the side facing the Japanese Tea Gardens, serve as lenses to view the Frederick Law Olmsted-inspired park. From the tower's observation floor, visitors will get the kind of bird's eye view of Golden Gate Park that Manhattan's towers allow over Olmsted's Central Park. On the ground, Hood's thoughtful plantings screen off streets and other distractions so the eye is directed to the park's tree canopy.

"It's a Japanese technique to borrow from the landscape," says Hood.

"I suggested Walter Hood because he is always looking for the poetic moment," says Harrison Fraker, dean of UC Berkeley's College of Environmental design and adviser to the de Young building committee. "Herzog and de Meuron take you to primitive essentials: How to make a wall? Walter also says down paths with materials that make you see it anew."

There are archetypal ideas in Hood's design for the land around this unusual building. He has paths, mounds, patterns and holes, says Fraker. "It is sympathetic to what an artist like Andy Goldsworthy likes to do. Walter's wall studies come from crumbled walls and how nature captures them."

"The building scheme allowed the landscape to flow in," says Hood. So he placed black Sierra Madre slate chunks close to the building's east and west walls and fragmented the stone inside the terrariums, as if to indicate how sand, just yards under the park surface, was originally formed.

Hood's four unique gardens on each side are riffs on the diversity of the collection and the building's varied facades.

On the front, facing the concourse and the Academy of Sciences, he planted simple alternating bands of grass and concrete inspired by motifs in the de Young's textile collection. Alongside these bands he replanted century-old palms saved from the original de Young that add an informality to the site.

On the east side near the foot of the tower, Hood designed a children's garden using 19th-century Arthur Putnam sculpture as a kind of petting zoo of bronze lions, tigers, dogs and kangaroos. He also rebuilt the cartouche-shaped Pool of Enchantment as a 75-foot round turtle habitat. Sphinxes that belonged to the old de Young reappear nearby. In this wonderland, an asphalt brick road leads to a destination garden that is nothing but scooped earth, and another making path leads through machine-made fog.

On the west side, sculpture exhibitions will be arranged on a sloping lawn on the former site of the Asian Art Museum. A Noguchi garden and rows of formal white camellia Japanese-style hedges edge a wide path bordering the Tea Garden fence wall. It narrows to a walkway toward JFK Drive. There (because Golden Gate Park was always a park full of hidden gardens and follies, Hood explains), behind black bamboo, is the entrance to a folly by sculptor James Turrell. His Three Gems is a subterranean stupa-shaped dome with an oculus to view the sky. Three Gems is hidden within a dune Hood designed for the site long before Turrell conceived the idea. "He simply mined the hill for his piece," says Hood.

"The building concept gave me the opportunity to think of the back of the building as a garden as well," says Hood. In an area near loading docks where employees can gather, a cascade of earth is made to spill over gabion and rock retaining walls. On this new dune Hood planted bunny grass and other sturdy plants that were introduced to Golden Gate Park 100 years ago.

In general, Hood's plantings are simple, confined to the ferns, redwoods and eucalyptus that were already on the site. "The combination of redwoods with grassy sand dunes talks about the ecology of the area," says Hood. "Low



points were wet and the high points dry and that determined what could grow."

Redwoods, ginkos, mulberry and cypress trees will frame views of the park and bandshell, now fully visible from the de Young Cafe.

Park benches — wood draped over steel frames — designed by Hood blend into the conceptual spaces. But, Palme quartz-bulb street lamps from Artemide are distracting, like giant back-scratchers let loose amid this contemporary Jurassic landscape.

Hood picked a multicolored limestone from Yorkshire (also used in London's Trafalgar Square) as paving around the building. It comes from a quarry close to the home of British artist Andy Goldsworthy, who was commissioned to do a sculpture for the entry court. Once again, landscape designer and artist were able to collaborate. The sculptor used split boulders from the same quarry for "Drawn Stone 2005." Goldsworthy crafted a continuous fissure in Hood's pavers that leads into the entry court. It's an allusion to the seismic fault-line that rendered the old de Young obsolete. The single crack travels up across the first large boulder Goldsworthy set inside the entryway and spills down the other side where tributaries of cracks fracture the entire courtyard.

Hood's pavers also conceal a 3-foot-wide trench that surrounds the base-isolated building to allow it to shift as much as 3 feet off center during a quake.

The 220-foot-wide museum roof, which cantilevers out 50 feet toward the west side, is another engineering marvel. The giant brow dips gently above sculpture gardens and hovers over the cafe terrace. Its mass is more discernible from Hood's sculpture garden on the former site of the Asian Art museum. From here, you can see why some detractors have likened the form to a battleship on the bay. It is a deliberate feature, says de Meuron. "It is the counterweight to the vertical tower. It is something that makes a horizontal, protective gesture." The canopy, also sheathed in perforated copper, casts dappled shadows over the cafe courtyard overlooking Hood's landscaping and the sculpture garden.

"I love that porch. It is such a big move, but relative to Golden Gate Park it is small. Yet it becomes a porch for the whole park," says Fraker.

"This is a truly abstract and contemporary building. It is not a generic space. It is surprising how a modernist vocabulary is so space specific and program specific," says Fraker.

"There is a didactic opportunity in the comparison between how the de Young and what's to come at the academy will be put together," says Fraker, referring to the addition by architect Renzo Piano to the Academy of Sciences across the park concourse that is to be completed by 2008.

Piano's design incorporates a living roof to complement the park, whereas the de Young has enmeshed itself in the park.

"There's no doubt," says Fraker. "The de Young is an artistic tour de force and a destination on the West Coast." ♦

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