

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

The New York Times

May 11, 2010

By Carol Kino

Giving Museumgoers What They Want



Jeff Warrin/Oakland Museum of California

A Robert Hudson sculpture in the California art gallery. Exhibits can be modified easily, to keep things fresh for return viewers.

Oakland, Calif.

In the last 20 years or so, “engage the public” has become one of the most common mantras of the museum business, an injunction to curators and designers to court their audiences with ever more seductive video displays, computer interactives and exhibition architecture. But here in a crime-challenged corner of the Bay Area, a modest civic institution dedicated to the art, history and natural sciences of California has been focused on its own version of that mission for a good deal longer.

The Oakland Museum of California was known as “the people’s museum” even before it opened in 1969, in part because it took pains to consult with and otherwise reach out to its intended audience. Nearly four decades later, when the museum embarked on a four-and-a-half-year, \$62 million renovation, its goals included an expansion of the art galleries, a rethinking of

exhibits that had changed little since opening day and architectural improvements. But more than anything, said Lori Fogarty, the museum's director, the renovation was seen as "a huge opportunity to rethink how we're engaging the community."

Now that it is mostly done — the museum reopened on May 1, with only the first-floor science galleries still to be rehabilitated — that rethinking is being put to the test. Can a 21st-century upgrade raise the level of public engagement of a project that was already as determinedly populist as the original Oakland Museum?

The museum was initially conceived as a grand social experiment to rejuvenate the city center by melding the city's history, science and art institutions into a single complex. Financed by a \$6.6 million public bond, it sought to incorporate some of the era's most forward-thinking ideas about museums by bringing objects from different disciplines together and using them to tell the story of a region. Individual object labels were jettisoned, and docents were trained to encourage visitors to discuss the work. And its ultramodern building, designed by the architect Kevin Roche to suggest a Babylonian terrace garden, had from the start been conceived as not just a public space but also a community center.

Because Oakland's population was about 40 percent black while the museum's governing board was entirely white, the director set up a 51-member Community Relations Advisory Council to make sure that a representative range of local voices was heard.

At first, this effort at engagement backfired. Oakland, the birthplace of the Black Panther Party, was a hotbed of leftist radicalism and political turmoil; the year before, Huey P. Newton had been tried at the courthouse across the street in the killing of a police officer. A few weeks before the museum's opening, when the governing board learned of the advisory council, the museum's director was fired, a move that prompted weeks of protests and picket lines.

But the presence of some sort of local advisory group remained central to the museum's operations — members often came up with ideas for exhibitions and events — and in the 1990s these groups began to proliferate. The museum now has Latino, African-American, Asia-Pacific, American Indian and schoolteacher advisory councils, whose volunteer members consult with the staff on a range of matters like collection acquisitions and membership development. Community engagement received an additional boost after Ms. Fogarty was hired away from the Bay Area Discovery Museum, a children's museum she was running in Sausalito, in 2006. (She had previously been the deputy director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.) When she arrived, a relatively modest \$24 million redesign was already being planned, but Ms. Fogarty urged the board to take things further.

"I really felt this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for any museum to have 90,000 square feet of gallery space to rethink and reinvent," she said. "I wanted us to be a new model for museums and try a lot of new approaches." The board was persuaded, and Ms. Fogarty, who started out her museum career as a fund-raiser for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, began a capital campaign whose goal soon escalated to \$62 million, a figure she said she had finished raising in mid-April.

To serve as the lead creative consultant on the project, she tapped Kathleen McLean, an independent consultant known for innovative, interactive displays, including "Daniel's Story," the children's exhibit at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. (In 2006, the Association of American Museums named her one of the country's 100 most influential museum professionals of the last century.) As it happened, Ms. McLean had begun her career at the Oakland Museum in 1974, as a curator of community-generated shows. When offered the chance to return, she leapt at it.

Part of the plan Ms. McLean and the museum staff devised involved creating exhibits that could be modified easily. Unlike San Francisco and New York, "we're not a tourist destination," Ms. Fogarty said. "We need to have our local community come back, so our big challenge is to have people see that there's something different every time."

In the history galleries, that means presenting the objects and environments on inexpensive plywood stage sets that can be broken down quickly and redesigned. In the art collection

galleries, it means ensuring that the work and the wall texts change frequently. “We want to emphasize that our galleries are not an encyclopedia, but an exercise in storytelling,” said René de Guzman, the former director of visual arts at the popular Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, whom Ms. Fogarty hired as the new contemporary art curator.

The process they devised to achieve this was “not linear” and “much more messy” than the typical museum exhibition plan, Ms. Fogarty said, which is usually dreamed up by the curator, carried out by a designer and then presented as a fait accompli to the education staff.

Instead, teams of curators, educators and designers hammered out concepts and then, after running them past advisory councils, scholars and others, reconvened to finesse and consult again, over and over.

Ms. Fogarty said that her staff had also sought a dizzying amount of public input from the start. “I figure we’ve had more than 3,000 people and at least a couple of dozen different groups working with us on the project,” she said, from community committees to individual members of the public who happened by at the right moment. (Although the history and art galleries closed in September 2008, much of the museum remained open through last August.)

Through polling and canvassing, the staff members discovered — to their surprise — that their visitors welcomed wall texts. “They wanted more information, and they were reading everything,” Ms. McLean said. “It’s an urban myth that people don’t read labels — they just don’t read really dull ones.” So they added more, some with background information, others with more personal observations by conservators, scholars, local artists and writers, all of which are signed.

Staff members also learned that their public, which is now heavily Asian and Hispanic as well as black and white, isn’t partial to the typical modernist space. At one stage, said Barbara Henry, the museum’s chief curator of education, a youth advocate group complained that the art galleries were reminiscent of a hospital: “They said this is not a place where they would bring their friends.” As a result, many of the walls are now brightly colored.

Because their public also cherishes interaction — personal as well as technological — there are many opportunities for visitors to contribute to the exhibitions. A room lined with California portraits includes a computer station where people can sketch their own faces, which then play continuously on a framed monitor that hangs within the display. In the “Is It Art?” lounge in the contemporary art section, visitors are invited to vote on whether three aesthetically appealing objects — an American Indian cooking basket from California, a three-foot-high knot of bunchgrass and a mixed-media sculpture by the California artist Gyongy Laky — are art objects. In the history galleries, the Depression section is stocked with Post-it notes on which visitors can write suggestions for fixing a broken social system. Elsewhere, they can pinpoint family origins on a world map, contribute their own memories of the 1960s or pick their own music in the 1940s jukebox lounge.

Despite these many opportunities to interact with the displays and objects, only some of which are under glass and behind stanchions, there has been no damage so far. During the 31-hour opening, which saw visitors lined up throughout the night to get inside, Ms. McLean said, “there were so many opportunities for vandalism, and nothing happened.” Instead, she noted, visitors were engaged in avid conversation, with each other and the staff — a striking contrast to the museum’s tumultuous birth.

“I kept on going around and saying to people, ‘This is it!’ ” Ms. McLean said. “ ‘This is the future of America — we can engage in civil discourse!’ ”