When a museum has no walls

By John King on May 7, 2014 at 11:25 AM

The view today of SFMOMA's new wing … (Henrik Kam/SFMOMA)

What is a museum when said museum does not physically exist?

That’s the open-ended question being explored by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as it spends three years without a home in which to stage exhibitions. And while there’s no succinct answer, the topic became the underlying theme for Tuesday’s SFMOMA program “Urban Art and Place Making” at SFJAZZ Center.
Planning began in 2010, and the museum doors closed last May so construction could begin. They’ll reopen in spring of 2016 to a structure twice the size, with a new wing rising behind the familiar — dare I say **iconic**? — red-brick destination with its granite skylight.

“People are looking at buildings and institutions not just as objects, but as parts of a process,” said Dykers, who earlier defined architecture as “where people collect and gather in social conditions.”

Dykers shared the expected images of how the cliff-like new wing with its sloping white walls that will join the rigid red brick of **Mario Botta**’s creation from 1994. But he also stressed the incidental spaces — discreet stairways and upper-floor nooks, “a number of different places where kissing might occur,” as opposed to staid modern notions of a museum as a container that seemed to “float in from Mars and there’s art on the wall that hums.”

Art’s shaping of place was addressed more directly by Shannon Jackson, director of the Arts Research Center at UC Berkeley, who spoke after Cheryl Haines of FOR-SITE Foundation, the instigator of such delights as the trio of Andy Goldsworthy environmental artworks in the Presidio.

“Place-making means dealing with the fact that many people will enter with different visions of what that place might be,” said Jackson, who described the resulting debate as “a perpetual tension, but a productive tension.”

Tension is high in today’s Bay Area, with an economic boom that translates into high housing prices and commercial rents — “The effect of the technology sector on our cultural landscape has become particularly urgent.” But Jackson pointed to initiatives where arts groups have found unexpected settings in which to work, such as the Mid-Market corridor, and voiced hope that larger cultural institutions will join smaller ones to forge “mutually supportive systems and values.”

Along these lines, Jackson praised SFMOMA for how it has used its exile from Third Street to display art in an ever-wider range of venues, collaborating with nonprofits that in other regions might be rivals.

“I know Craig and Snøhetta are working hard to finish the (new) building, but what’s interesting to me is how SFMOMA took temporary homelessness to be an interesting condition, rather than a destabilizing one,” Jackson said. “My hope is that it will never forget the wider arts ecology that made this possible.”

Dykers smiled.
… And how it will look in 2016 (MIR and Snøhetta)
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