

Year-old SFMOMA is a big draw, and a fine landmark

BUILDING IS PEOPLE-FRIENDLY, BUT GALLERIES NEED FINE-TUNING

By David Bonetti
 EXAMINER ART CRITIC

THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM of Modern Art has just passed its first year in its new instant landmark Third Street home. It was time to celebrate: Practically everyone loves the building; attendance is up, to a remarkable 800,000; and gifts of new artworks just keep on coming.

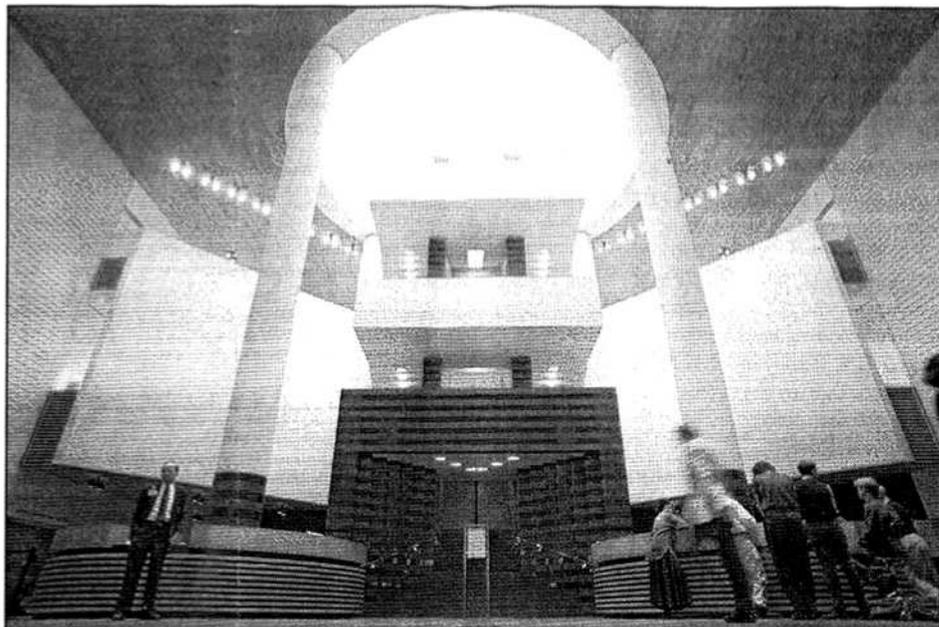
But it is also time to look back critically to see just how well the new building serves the museum's permanent collection and special exhibition program and how patterns set during the first year portend for the future. It's neither too late to correct mistakes nor to acknowledge successes so that they can be built upon in the future.

After a year of visiting it for all sorts of purposes — press openings, a black-tie dinner, a cocktail party, giving tours to out-of-town friends or just looking again at a special exhibition — I have to conclude that SFMOMA got a handsome, flexible and people-friendly new facility out of Swiss architect Mario Botta, but that it did not get a great work of architecture. In the new museum sweepstakes, Renzo Piano's Menil Collection in Houston and Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. remain the buildings to beat.

Botta's stepped-back, brick-clad building with the weird truncated cylinder cutting through its center is the architectural icon SFMOMA wanted and the anchor the new Yerba Buena Gardens arts district needed. Its atrium-lobby with its sculptural staircase rising halfway to the stars remains stunning even after dozens of visits.

But the galleries, a museum's most important spaces, are far from perfect. Proportions are surprisingly off.

The enfilade of galleries on the second floor in which the permanent collection is displayed is a particularly discomfiting series of rooms: Each room is too small for the height of the ceiling. (In the first three galleries, where prewar European art hangs, the ceilings are, in contrast, too low.) The passageways that cut through the center of the gallery spaces are too narrow for their height. These are the kinds of architectural subtleties that determine the quality of the museum experience as much as the kind of art on view.



EXAMINER / CHRIS HARDY

The light-flooded lobby, above, is a highlight. Third floor photo galleries, left, are better proportioned than some.



The exhibition galleries on the fourth floor that have been devoted to special exhibitions and large-scale recent acquisitions suffer from a placelessness. The recently closed exhibition of paintings by Willem de Kooning, which looked right at home there, helped create a sense of unity among the galleries in which it was installed, but in the other half of the floor, the galleries remain a number of discrete spaces, independent of, sometimes even hostile toward, each other.

There's not much SFMOMA can do about ill-proportioned galleries, but it can learn to use them better. The high-ceilinged gallery on the top floor was broken up so awkwardly during the year's first two shows that it hurt the way the work was experienced, but it has been redesigned surprisingly well for the current exhibition devoted to Bay Area architect William Wurster. The corrugated metal and recycled plywood rooms created for it might not be a model for future painting or sculpture shows, but its success demonstrates that SFMOMA can do better than it did during its opening.

The first year in a new building is a time for learning how to use it to best advantage, for trying out new ideas.

The area that needs the greatest rethinking right now is the problematic permanent collection. The euphoria of seeing the work in the new building, which, however you measure it, is a vast improvement over SFMOMA's previous Civic Center digs, helped one overlook the gaps, the mediocrities, the infelicitous pairings and the peculiar omissions from the opening installation. (The number of heavy-duty loans of promised gifts also contributed to the excitement.)

Now, however, the problems loom more glaringly. The biggest problem is right at the beginning. One enters the first gallery too quickly. One moment you're in a generously scaled hallway open to the razzmatazz of the atrium; the next, you're in a small, low-ceilinged gallery filled with salon-scaled fauve paintings. Museum visitors experience an initial disorientation before they adjust and then they move on. By then, they've most likely missed Matisse's "Woman with the Hat," SFMOMA's most important single work.

The five galleries in which prewar European art is on view cry out for reinstallation. That first gallery should perhaps be an orientation space with a sample of highlights from the entire collection: a Matisse, a Diego Rivera, a Philip Guston, a Wayne Thiebaud, for instance. The great "Woman with the Hat" needs to be given greater prominence. Currently hung poorly in a corner, it's almost thrown away.

A number of minor pictures should be retired — it's time perhaps for SFMOMA to think of a serious, major deaccessioning campaign. (With the proceeds realized, it might stop a gap or two.) Some of

the Matisses on view are so insignificant that it's almost embarrassing that SFMOMA feels the need to show them.

And with such a skimpy collection of prewar European modernism it makes no sense that such works as SFMOMA's two reliefs by Jean Arp and its Fernand Léger, its two André Massons and its Marcel Duchamp mini-retrospective in a box are not on view. Similar comments about galleries devoted to postwar art could be made as well. (Where is the David Smith sculpture, for instance? And not a single Frank Stella?)

In general, the installation of the permanent collection lacks any sense of fun or adventure. When you don't have a textbook collection like New York's MOMA, laying out what you do have in the standard chronological/national school/movement manner, you only bring attention to what you lack — and you tell a dull story.

SFMOMA has demonstrated that it can show its collection more interestingly than it has. In fact, in "System Aesthetics," a current exhibition drawn from the permanent collection, curators Janet Bishop and Robert Riley have mounted a lively show that brings together such unlikely fellows as Man Ray, Alfred Jensen, Bridget Riley and Jasper Johns. This modest exhibition, organized to augment an exhibition of video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka, could serve as a model for a thoroughly reconsidered installation of the permanent collection.