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People Power

The Oakland Museum of California—a groundbreaking building designed by Roche Dinkeloo in the 1960s—gets a loving and respectful renovation by Mark Cavagnero Architects.

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1 comment

When the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) hired a new executive director in 2006, it was looking for someone to lead a modest renovation and capital campaign. The 1969 building was a milestone in environmental-modern architecture, and it was made of sturdy cast-in-place concrete. It hardly needed a radical facelift—just a few tweaks to address some functional difficulties that had developed over the years. But the retrofit took on the tenor when the museum chose Lori Fogarty for the directorship. A 12-year veteran of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the former director of the Bay Area Discovery Museum, a children’s science museum in nearby Sausalito, Fogarty was uniquely qualified to lead an institution that is really three museums in one, with galleries devoted to the art, natural science, and history of California. With her diverse background, she was also a broad thinker who saw the renovation as more than a spit shine. “It’s so unusual to have a multidisciplinary institution, and the story of California was never really told in a way that made the link between the natural environment, the cultural history, and the artistic history,” she says. “I saw a huge opportunity.”

Thanks to a successful fund-raising campaign led by Fogarty, the museum was able to complete the renovation of all three departments as well as the museum store, theater, restaurant, and educational spaces. The bulk of the \$62.2 million project, including the art and history galleries, was finished in May. (Phase two, the science gallery and education facilities, will reopen in 2012.) The changes are subtle from the street, but once you enter the build-ing, the project’s significance becomes clear: the renovation has clarified the OMCA’s purpose as a modern, cross-disciplinary cultural center.

Fogarty’s vision drew on Kevin Roche’s original design for the museum. The city of Oakland hired Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates in the early 1960s to design three new buildings on a four-block site for the historic collections of the Oakland Public Museum, the paintings and sculptures of the Oakland Art Gallery, and the scientific specimens of the Snow Museum. Roche’s innovation was to house all three in one concrete modernist Babylonia, a series of terraced galleries and gardens that he envisioned as a kind of indoor-outdoor urban living room. Since the museum was free to the public, Roche gave it five street entrances so people could come and go as they wished. The sprawling, multilevel plan was connected by courtyards, open-air walkways, windows, and glass doors. When it opened in 1969, Ada Louise Huxtable called it “one of the most thoughtfully revolutionary structures in the world.”

“The people’s museum,” as it was known, quickly became synonymous with the radical populism of its time and place: late-’60s Oakland, home base of the Black Panthers. During construction, protestors gathered at the Alameda County Courthouse across the street to support the Panther leader Huey P. Newton, who was standing trial in the killing of an Oakland police officer. The protests arrived at the museum’s doorstep when its founding director, J. S. Holliday, was fired shortly before the opening for attempting to install a racially diverse citizen council to advise the all-white museum board.

Likewise, Roche’s design questioned the established codes of civic culture. In tucking the building partly underground, beneath three terraced levels of roof gardens on a sloping site, he threw down a challenge to the monumental nature of public buildings of the time. The museum’s profile was not an impressive facade but a welcoming, park-like garden, designed by Dan Kiley, that inspired a generation of landscape architects. “This was different than just a garden done on top of a building,” says the landscape architect Peter Walker, a close friend of Kiley’s. “Here the building and the landscape were integral. You couldn’t go into the garden without being conscious of the interior of the building, and vice versa. There’s been lots of yammer for a number of years about indoor/outdoor living, which was a big thing particularly in the Bay Area among landscape architects, but this was a real expression of that, done on a civic scale.”

But the reality failed to live up to many of the design’s ideals. Roche’s utopian vision of patrons passing freely in and out was challenged by typical museum concerns over security and light and climate control. Doors to the gardens were bolted and windows partially covered by walls. The terraced overlooks he had created from one floor of the building to the next were deemed a fire hazard and blocked off with metal shutters. In the early 1990s, the museum started charging admission, but since there was no main



A bold new way-finding system by SOM brings some levity to the Oakland Museum of California’s concrete exterior and helps visitors navigate its complicated, multilevel floor plan. Courtesy Mark Cavagnero Architects



entrance, many visitors couldn't figure out where to buy a ticket. People sometimes came into the galleries without paying, and often left without visiting the museum store, tucked away on the lowest level of the three-story building. The interior galleries came to need updating as well. The 11.5-foot ceilings were too low to show many of the museum's most important works, its collection of large postwar abstracts and installations.

Even more problematic, there were few amenities for one of the museum's prime users: elementary-school students studying subjects like California's native peoples and the Gold Rush—45,000 of them a year, 25 percent of all visitors. Another of Roche's utopian ideas, apparently, was that it didn't rain in California, since he left common areas like the staircase—the functional spine of the building—uncovered. Unfortunately, the rainy season in northern California happens to coincide with the school year, so every winter, packs of drenched schoolkids would come through the galleries with their wet backpacks and jackets. There was no place to dry off or store their things, no place to eat lunch out of the rain.

To handle all of these issues in a city-landmarked building that couldn't be radically altered, the museum chose the San Francisco firm Mark Cavagnero Architects. (Roche Dinkeloo submitted a proposal, but Fogarty says it included adding a fourth floor, which went beyond both the museum's ambitions and its budget.) Known for civic projects and sensitive renovations of landmarks like the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Cavagnero approached the renovation with a light hand. "Many architects consider it the iconic post-World War II building of northern California," he says. "Knowing that had me very cautious and careful. My hope was not only to not diminish that iconic value but in some very surgical ways to augment it."

The most prominent element of Cavagnero's design is the minimalist steel canopy that frames the Oak Street entry, keeping it dry and designating it as the museum's official street entrance. A similar enclosure—part steel, part glass—covers Roche's central staircase while leaving it open to light and air. The brushed steel is a lightweight counterpoint that emphasizes the strength of Roche's bold concrete forms. "This is not a willful design," Cavagnero says. "It's soft, like origami—just one step above a temporary structure."

He took the same tack with two new art galleries, soaring, light-filled spaces that add 4,400 square feet to the museum and provide height clearances of 20 feet but are barely visible from the street. To site the new spaces discreetly, Cavagnero built on two of Roche's underused sculpture courtyards, which were sitting idle, their doors bolted shut. Tucked behind the mature trees of the site's famed landscaping, the steel walls fold over the existing concrete foundation, their load insignificant: no columns required, no need to drill into the existing structure. Filtered-glass windows high up on the walls let in a balanced natural light that enhances the artworks without submitting them to sun damage.

For Cavagnero, part of what makes the building iconic is its strong statement about California indoor-outdoor architecture. Restoring Roche's garden views felt like an important move—but first he had to convince the curators. "We found we could do it by simply rethinking the gallery layout," he says, "putting the material that was less light sensitive along the window wall and using the interior layout to make baffles." Glass and ceramic artworks now sit by the windows, while paintings are protected by interior partition walls.

The redesign improves the museum's flow by moving functions around within the building. With multiple levels and entrances, there's no perfect place for central fixtures like the ticket booth, but Cavagnero found opportunities to make the middle floor the hub of the building. Museum staff had commandeered part of the Great Hall, an exhibition space, for storage and libraries. But with much of the collection digitized, these materials could be moved off-site and the hall reclaimed for public use. Likewise, the room that housed rakes, lawnmowers, and other landscape-maintenance gear was awkwardly located right in the thick of things, next to the Great Hall and restaurant. Cavagnero kicked out the yard tools and moved the ticket booth and store up from the bottom level. They're now closer to the Oak Street entrance, one floor above, and adjacent to the restaurant, the Great Hall, and the entrance from the parking garage. A bold new graphics system, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, further helps visitors to navigate the sprawling complex.

Each level of the museum houses a different department: art on the top floor, science on the bottom, and history in the middle. Roche's terraced layout, which created overlooks between the floors, was meant to join the three departments visually. Cavagnero's firm found a way to reopen those vistas by removing the old fire shutters and replacing them with glass partitions that meet fire codes. "I wanted to do justice to what I think is great about the building," Cavagnero says, "the core conceptual ideas that Kevin Roche had back in the sixties that still seem so relevant today: how to make a public building greater than the sum of its parts. Roche did that with amazing success."

The fire shutters weren't the only thing that had kept the departments separate. Coming from three different predecessor museums, the art, science, and history teams had continued to work independently up until Fogarty's arrival in 2006. She jokes that in her first year at the museum, she "forced" curators from each department to work together on a multidisciplinary exhibition called *The Edge*, about the spaces where California's suburban, urban, and natural communities collide. At first, she says, the curators struggled to adjust to one another's working styles, but soon they came to see the potential in working collaboratively. The exhibition became a test run of Fogarty's vision for the future of the museum. She proudly points out an installation in the newly refurbished art gallery, where William Hahn's 1882 painting *Return from the Bear Hunt*

is flanked by two interdepartmental loans: a .50-caliber Winchester rifle from the history section and a grizzly skull from natural science.

Despite the trouble it caused for the museum's founding director, the idea of citizen-advisers persisted. The OMCA became one of the first institutions of its kind to have community-advisory councils, and they still help guide the museum today. For the renovation, the museum gathered input from more than 3,000 members of the public. René de Guzman, the senior curator of art, and Barbara Henry, the chief curator of education, led user testing and prototyping to make the space accessible and welcoming to all kinds of visitors—from art collectors and scientists to those who had never been inside a museum before. Fogarty says the youth-advisory group asked, "Why do museums always have white walls?" They thought it felt sterile and unpleasant, like a hospital. So out went the classic white paint and in came lime green, lemon yellow, and sky blue. The exhibition-design team—led by Ted Cohen, Gordon Chun, and Dirk Dieter—also went out of its way to create a physically comfortable space. Instead of using standard off-the-shelf museum benches, they designed their own upholstered couches, lightweight movable seating, and "loaded lounges," where visitors can respond to questions (for instance, "What is art?"), listen to other visitor comments, read, relax, or even check their e-mail.

Still under renovation are the science gallery and educational spaces on the bottom floor, where school groups enter the building from the southern entrance on 10th Street. Cavagnero is moving the docent center down from the middle floor to better serve the students, and he has designed ipe benches with locking drawers where backpacks and jackets can be stored. Extending along a covered breezeway right next to the museum's koi pond, the benches will also double as a rainy-day lunch spot.

Phase two of the renovation may be well in hand, but Fogarty isn't done. There's one last section of the museum that hasn't been integrated with the others, and it's a significant one: Kiley's parklike landscaping, which includes some of the first rooftop gardens. There, she says, the museum could tell the story of important California concepts like agriculture, water, environmental leadership, and green technology. And indoor-outdoor architecture, of course.