

On the Town

Renovation adds space and commitment to the arts in Pasadena.

By SCARLETT CHENG
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“As with so many renovation projects,” says Scott Ward, sitting amid new construction at the Armory Center for the Arts, “it began with, ‘Well, wouldn’t it be great if we could utilize that storage space...?’ Then it just expanded and expanded.”

It is a couple of weeks before Saturday’s official unveiling of an extensive remodel at the Armory, and Ward, the executive director of the exhibition and art education center in Pasadena, is monitoring banging hammers, buzzing drills and the rest of the rush to finish the nine-month project.

Outside the nearly finished offices, he finds architect Don: a Vaccarino on the new mezzanine that bisects the center’s vast two-story central space. Vaccarino helped transform the building once before, when the arts organization took possession in 1987.

“You don’t often get a chance to redo something you did 15 years ago,” she says, looking happily from rafter to deck as her latest plan for the center takes shape.

From this section of the mezzanine, you can see into the exhibition space on the building’s south side and into classroom space on the north side. Right now, the workers in both areas are dappled by brightly colored light. As the work on the renovation goes on, an

exhibition celebrating the rejuvenated space is also under construction, and it involves using the overhead skylights to create a stained-glass-window effect.

All morning, artist Jane Mulfinger has been up on the roof covering the skylights with a patchwork of old clothing—mostly bright blues in the front skylight, hot reds in the rear. Mulfinger calls her work “Armory as Cathedral.” It’s one of 11 installations commissioned by Jay Belloli, the Armory’s curator, for “New Work, New Spaces,” which opens Saturday.

From time to time, Mulfinger descends to the mezzanine to get a viewer’s perspective. “I didn’t know what to expect,” Vaccarino tells her on this trip, “but it really transforms the whole space; the colors are caught all over.”

Pasadena’s Armory Center for the Arts traces its history back to 1947, when the Pasadena Art Museum formed an education department. In 1974, the department became the Pasadena Art Workshops, and when the 1930s-era Armory building was made available by the city of Pasadena, the group moved there and renamed itself accordingly.

“The building had been a badminton club,” recalls Vaccarino, of her first go-round with renovating the space. “It needed an enormous amount of work.”

However, the budget for converting the building was limited to \$600,000. Programming was also more modest then. When the renovation was completed in 1989, the center had eight full-time employees and an operating budget of

\$500,000; today there are 24 employees, plus nearly 100 part-timers and teachers, and a budget of \$2 million.

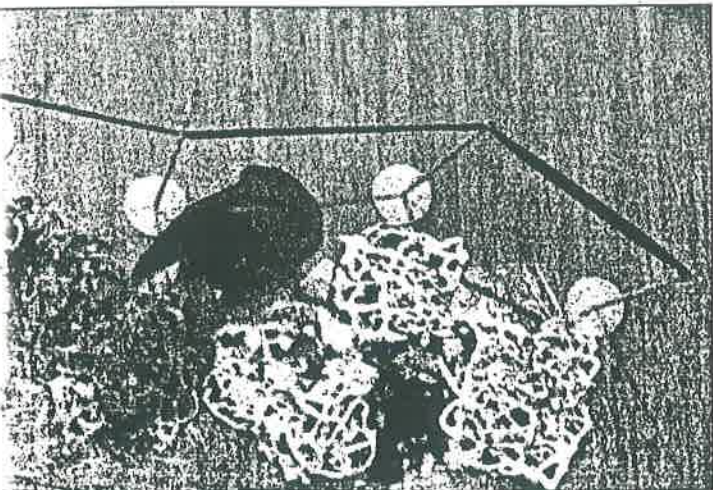
The lease was up on the Armory last year, and the center’s board members considered other options before deciding to enlarge and upgrade the 21,400-square-foot space. They liked its location, at the north end of Pasadena’s Old Town night life and shopping district, and a subway stop is scheduled to open across the street in 2003. And the building was already familiar to art lovers as a place to see contemporary regional work, to music lovers as the site of open rehearsals for the Southwest Chamber Music ensemble, and to art students from children to adults.

The upgrades include added central air-conditioning, retrofitting for earthquakes and an elevator for handicap access. Vaccarino suggested adding the mezzanine to the central space, which not only connects the front and back areas of the building at the second-story level, but also wraps around the north classroom side of the building. The mezzanine, with its own narrow gallery space and a new studio structure in the Armory’s former parking lot, together add 6,800 square feet to the center.

The total renovation package, including furnishings and new art equipment, is costing \$2.4 million. “It does show ambition, but it also shows an attainable goal,” says Ward. “We’ve already raised 98% of those funds.” For “New Work, New Spaces,” Belloli, the curator, handpicked 11 mostly mid-career

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Armory With New Arsenal



Jane Mulfinger

Armory: 11 Artists Represented in 'New Work, New Spaces'

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artists from the Southern California area. They are Lynn Aldrich, Marisa Alexander-Clarke, Geoff Allen, Deborah Aschheim, Enrique Martinez Celaya, Tamara Fites, Michael C. McMillen, Jane Mulfinger, Pae White, Steve Roden and Lisa Yu.

Belloli tapped some with specific locations in the Armory in mind, but the fact that there will be installations from the roof to beneath the floor is, as he says, "serendipities of the show." His first priority was simply "looking for artists who could do interesting works in the spaces I had available." With Mulfinger, for example, "it struck me right away that her work was wonderful, and then I thought she might be interested in the skylight."

Mulfinger, who has done large-scale fabric coverings before, agreed. The Santa Barbara artist mined used-clothing stores for months, picking out the raw material for the work—T-shirts, blouses, pants, pajamas, dresses, even a clown suit and evening gown—with color and density in mind.

"For me this work has a lot to do with making something extraordinary out of mundane objects," Mulfinger says. The personal but anonymous nature of the clothes is also important. "They all have

some kind of narrative," she adds, "but I'll never know what that story is."

On the mezzanine, Aschheim has created a fanciful 40-foot-long interpretation of how the eye works—with lit-up "rods" and "cones."

"It's like a giant retina for the building," says Aschheim. "It will show what's happening in your retina and brain while you're looking at it." Her intention was not a scientific diagram; instead, she says, "I want to share my sense of wonder about the whole process of how we see."

Aldrich, Lu and White will be among the artists whose work will be displayed on the main floor. Each has created new versions of

works done before. Lu's grouping of large white pots had been done for a backyard installation. White's candy-colored cushions wrapped in vinyl are meant to be used as seats. Aldrich, known for her use of garden hoses, has glued together several hundred lengths of a dozen varieties, mostly green, making a cylindrical bundle, 5 feet in diameter and 6 feet long. Plenty of hose, but not a drop of water.

"I envision it as a cut-off section of a big water main left high and dry," she says. "It's sort of a metaphor for human longing. There seems to be this huge abundance in our society; at the same time we seem to lack something."

McMillen, who has previously shown a predilection for excavated

spaces, was offered such an area in the foyer, part of which had been dug up to install new piping. His "Motel (Under the World)," set into a 4-foot-by-10-foot hole, 2½ feet deep, is the lair of a figure who sits in front of a TV set surrounded by salvaged objects, channel-surfing past seemingly unrelated images. "We don't know if we're looking into the future or the past," says McMillen. "It's definitely about media, and the corporate world of ours and the individual."

With the Armory building open again, Belloli and his exhibition

staff will have their hands full. The main gallery is slated for four shows a year; the community room, in the front of the building, will be used for six exhibitions. For now, they'll also continue to put up shows in the hangar in northwest Pasadena used as temporary exhibition space during the renovation, and two satellite spaces at One Colorado, in Old Town. All nearly double from what it was before the renovation project began.

Ward is certain the audience is there for an expanded effort in Pasadena. "We believe art is an essential aspect to a healthy life," he says. "People are really hungry to get involved."

Jane Mulfinger