

CREATING AN ART MUSEUM DOWNTOWN TAKES MORE THAN A BUILDING

Geoff Carter Thurs., Oct. 13, 2016 (12:01 a.m.)



The good news is that, if all goes to plan, a fine art museum will eventually open Downtown. According to two board members of the provisionally named Art Museum at Symphony Park—board chair Katie O’Neill and executive committee member Michele C. Quinn—the project is moving forward on a tentative six-year timeline; a recent drive intended to raise \$1 million in seed capital ended up raising \$2 million, and the City of Las Vegas has promised \$1 million in matching funds and a pad of land adjacent to the Smith Center, the exact location of which has not been determined. O’Neill and Quinn anticipate that the AMSP will be 100,000 square feet in size and architecturally striking.

The not-so-good news is that Vegas’ residents are leery of cultural projects that cost them money. Dozens of “not my tax money” complaints popped up regarding Ugo Rondinone’s land-art piece [“Seven Magic Mountains,”](#) which didn’t cost Vegas taxpayers a dime. (Perhaps we can increase public support of a museum by calling it an “art stadium.” Feel free to hashtag that one.)

More to the point, locals don’t quite seem to get why we need an art museum. That’s job one for O’Neill and Quinn. It’s not about building a museum, at least not yet; it’s about building up the idea of a museum. Yes, money needs to

be raised—at least \$85 million is needed—but additionally, partnerships must be forged with businesses and organizations, and a fine art museum culture has to be created almost from scratch.

“We’re introducing an art museum to people who’ve maybe never even walked in the doors of an art museum before,” O’Neill says. “We get to open a museum from the ground up, and we can make it a museum that really speaks to our community.”

“Once the doors are opened, I don’t think we’re going to have that many obstacles,” Quinn says. “I think this community is starving for this sort of engagement.”

“There’s going to be heavy programming, spaces for people to hang out, dining options, retail, lounges, educational facilities,” O’Neill says. “Really, I think the biggest challenge we have is the *history* of bringing an art museum to Las Vegas.”

It’s not an insignificant challenge. Even though Vegas has had comparable art centers in the past—Las Vegas Art Museum, the Nevada Institute for Contemporary Art and the Guggenheim/Hermitage at the Venetian, among others—the physical and cultural scale of AMSP is like nothing we’ve seen outside of a casino. And the fact that Guggenheim couldn’t make a go of things here—friggin’ *Guggenheim!*—only fuels the naysayers.

O’Neill and Quinn are ready to put out those fires. “If you have questions, if you want to criticize, ask the questions,” O’Neill says. “We want to answer, and we will be the first to tell you when we’re not there yet.”

Meaning: It’s not time to talk about the art, which hasn’t yet been collected; the balance of that \$85 million, which hasn’t been raised; or the building itself, which can’t be designed until they know where it’ll be built.

“We’re not going out telling people, ‘We’re building an art museum,’” O’Neill says. “What we’re saying is, ‘We are creating the best possible platform for an art museum to succeed in Las Vegas.’”

This steady but deliberated approach is how AMSP’s potential sister museum, the [Nevada Museum of Art](#) in Reno, came to occupy a 70,000-square-foot, Will Bruder-designed building after some 72 years of operating in spaces that weren’t originally built for it. (O’Neill and Quinn plan to bring one of NMA’s recent shows, the Nevada-centric *Tilting the Basin*, to Las Vegas in January; the venue is yet to be announced.) NMA director of communications Amanda Horn says Vegas’ work is pretty clear-cut.

“When you’re doing a capital campaign for your funding, it’s rather aggressive; you have to hit the ground running every day to get people on board. And you [need to] make it about the community, too,” Horn says. “To be done right and be done well, it’s something that has to be ... an organic endeavor. It’s a little bit like comparing apples to oranges to compare Reno to Vegas, but not entirely. It was this long, slow building up over decades to continue to push the vision, and to continue to grow as this community grew.”

That said, Reno doesn’t have the Bellagio Gallery of Fine ; it doesn’t have Jeff Koons art on its casino floor, as Wynn resorts do; it doesn’t have a James Turrell installation hidden away on the third floor of a Louis Vuitton store (the must-see ["Akhob,"](#) at Crystals). That raises another often-asked question: Why hasn’t local gaming, which seems to have strong interest in fine art, simply opened a stand-alone museum themselves?

“They can’t open a museum without the team behind it running it properly,” Quinn says. “It goes back to viability, [and] I think we now have that. It’s not meant to be a philanthropic money pit. It’s meant to, with the benefit of donations, be self-sustaining.”

As for the *why* of the Art Museum of Symphony Park, it really is about more than bragging rights, or making Vegas into “a real city.” Our need of a fine art museum, O’Neill says, was demonstrated to her once again on a recent weekend, a few miles south of town at Ugo Rondinone’s seven towers of colorful boulders.

“I was out there with my girls for about a little over an hour,” she says. “I think over a hundred people came and went within that hour. I saw people engaged—so many kids, so many families. Everyone was stacking up rocks, taking pictures. *That’s* what it is. I’m really grateful that ‘Seven Magic Mountains’ is here for my family.” Just imagine how she’ll feel about our #artstadium.