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Jeffery Warda and Briana Feston-Brunet, Managing Editors

Edited by Helen Bailey, Briana Feston-Brunet, Karen Pavelka, and Jeffrey Warda

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American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works  
727 15th Street NW, Ste. 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
info@conservation-us.org  
<http://www.conservation-us.org>

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## **EXPANDING INTO SHARED SPACES AT THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

**MARTINA HAIDVOGL**

### **ABSTRACT**

Teamwork and communication between curators, technicians, registrars, and conservators are invaluable in the preservation of media art installations. Furthermore, engaging artists in these discussions may be among the greatest contributions contemporary art museums can make to the future care and legacy of these works of art. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has been committed to such interdepartmental collaborations for some time. With the expansion of the museum scheduled to open in 2016, two zones of physical working spaces have been conceived and designed to reflect, affirm, and advance these practices of staging, documenting, and conserving installations. A series of adjacent and shared spaces—a black box studio, a media conservation studio, and technical workrooms—can be seen as the architectural analog for the activities of expert teams of media conservators, exhibition technicians, curators, registrars, and artists. This article explains one museum's response to the requirements of its rapidly growing media arts collection, its commitment to artists and rich interdisciplinary modes of operating, and how this culture will hopefully be served by the building's architecture.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) broke ground in June 2013 for its building expansion, which is being designed by the Nor-



Fig. 1. SFMOMA expansion: architectural rendering of the new building, view from above. Courtesy Snøhetta and MIR.

wegian-American architecture firm Snøhetta and is slated for completion in early 2016. To house the museum's growing collection, SFMOMA is constructing an expanded building that will include approximately 325,000 sq. ft., with seven levels dedicated to diverse art experiences and programming spaces, and enhanced support areas for the museum's operations. The building will provide approximately 142,000 sq. ft. of indoor and outdoor gallery space, as well as nearly 15,000 sq. ft. of art-filled free-access public space. The design more than doubles SFMOMA's capacity for the presentation of art while also complying with San Francisco's Green Building Ordinance, one of the most rigorous sustainable building standards in the nation (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

SFMOMA's collection of modern and contemporary art includes more than 29,000 artworks from both national and international artists and continues to grow steadily.

With a commitment to art from the Bay Area and California in particular, SFMOMA has built significant collections in painting, sculpture, photography, prints, drawings, and artist books, architecture and design, and media arts. As one of the first US museums to embrace time-based media artworks, SFMOMA hosts a dynamic collection of over 200 media artworks that spans the history of the genre and includes a large variety of technologies, among them video and audio installations, computer and software based art, slide projections, films, and websites.

#### ENGAGING MULTIPLE VOICES

SFMOMA staff has long been committed to working collaboratively and interdepartmentally. In particular with media art installations, teamwork and communication have proven to be invaluable in the conservation, display and interpretation of complex, multi-part artworks. Even

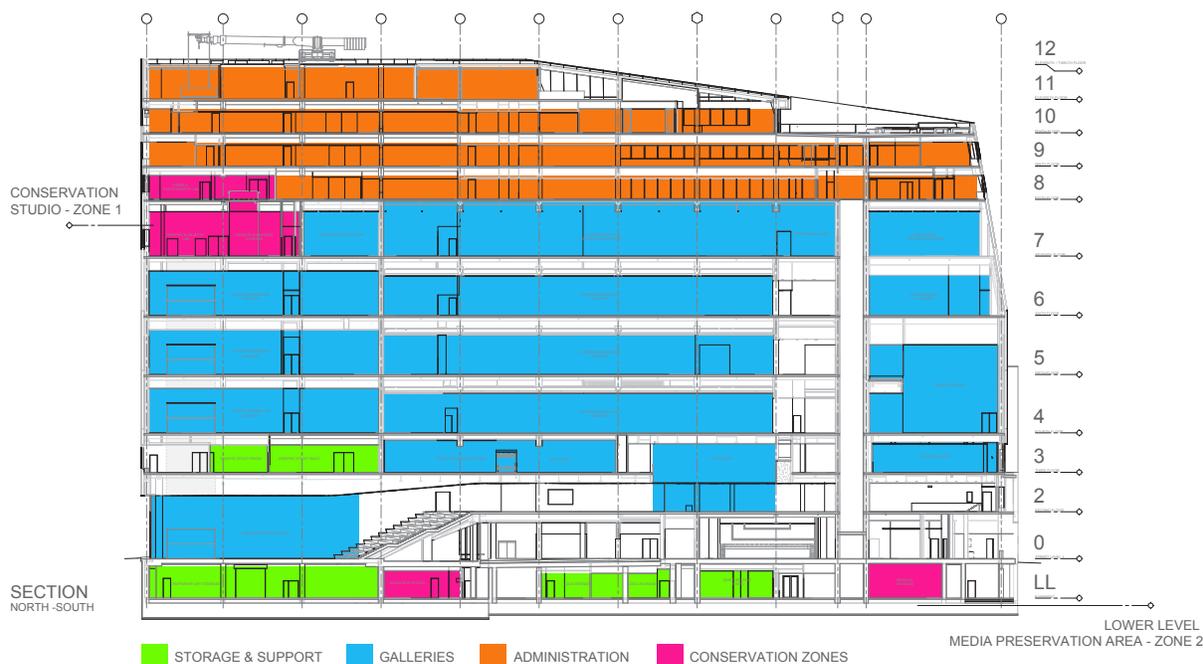


Fig. 2. SFMOMA expansion: section drawing marking the two zones for media preservation. Courtesy of Samuel Anderson Architects.

more, the museum is committed to enduring and trusted relationships with artists and to involving them in thoughtful dialog about their art. Engaging multiple voices is integral to SFMOMA’s working processes and these practices are manifest in a number of ways throughout the museum, from monthly Team Media meetings to exhibition planning as well as acquisitions research.<sup>2</sup> These modes of operating prosper through multi-voice, documentary records. Curators, registrars, exhibition technicians, IT specialists, intellectual property managers, conservators, outside experts, and artists contribute to compiling a record for each work that includes the following essential components: a curatorial description, a technical narrative, installation documents and images, a statement of preservation requirements, existing artist interview transcripts, correspondence, exhibition and loan histories, and contracts. These records are seen as an organic and ever-growing source of information. SFMOMA’s approach to information management acknowledges that records relating to artists and their works will be revisited and expanded over time, as knowledge deepens through activities such as research, imaging, conservation, exhibition, and publication.

This collective of expert voices helps to address the many different aspects of the life of an artwork. Moments of actual exhibition and display might rank as the most important to address challenges and open questions and revisit them over time. Installing a work with the artist and maintaining it over the course of an exhibition is a rich and crucial opportunity serving its legacy.

**CREATING COLLABORATIVE SPACES**

With the expansion of the museum, SFMOMA staff members—who were directly engaged throughout the whole planning phase—began to explore the potential of extending the benefit of collaborative operating modes and multi-voice documentary records by designing and situating new functional spaces to support this work so critical to the preservation of contemporary art. This exploration also embraced the museum’s financial imperative to utilize costly urban real estate to its maximum efficiency. Two innovative zones serving the conservation, display, and interpretation of media arts emerged from these interdepartmental conversations (fig. 2):

1. A time based media workstation is situated within the conservation department, where five disciplines are represented: paintings, objects, photography, paper, and time-based media. Located on two consecutive floors, the conservation department is directly adjacent to staff offices on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor and accessible to the galleries on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor via the collections workroom. This workroom is a newly-conceived, 600 sq. ft. project room designed to function as a studio space for visiting artists, a conservation laboratory, an interview suite, and a classroom and meeting space for students, scholars, and staff.
2. On the lower level of the museum building, a series of five spaces have been located to accommodate staging, studying, and documenting installations, as well as object photography, image post-production,

interviews, digitizing and migrating media, designing exhibition formats, equipment repair, and storage.

### THE BLACK BOX STUDIO

Shared between the museum’s conservators, exhibition technicians, and photographers, a black box studio will provide ample space to serve two core activities of the museum’s program: staging installations for exhibition preparation, documentation or acquisition, and photographing works of art (fig. 3). With conditions designed to simulate the galleries, the black box studio will feature the following characteristics:

- It will measure 1120 sq. ft. with 12 ft. ceilings.
- A retractable, light-tight and acoustically-treated wood panel system will divide the space equally

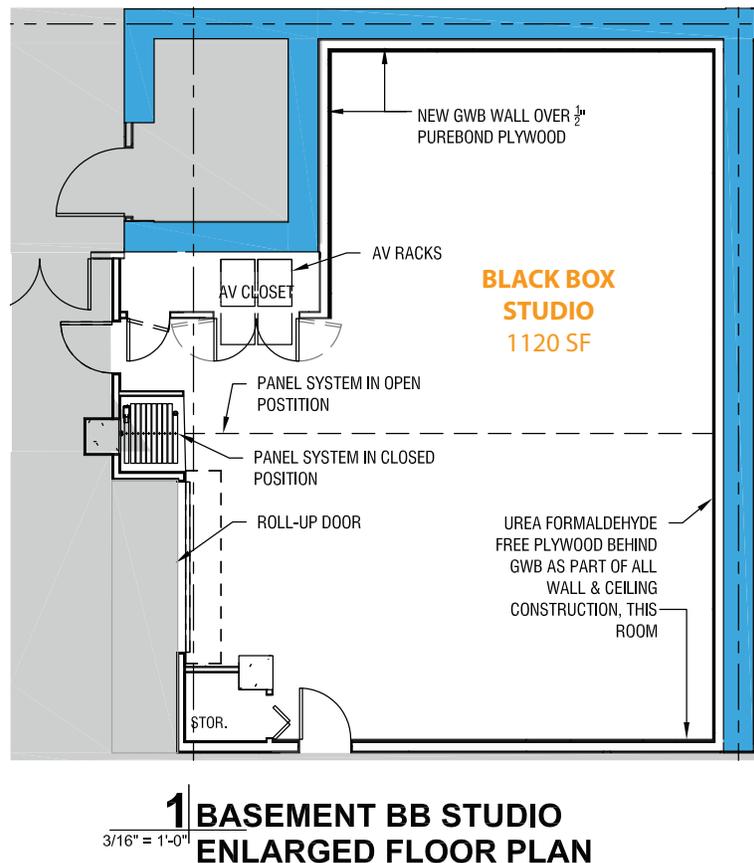


Fig. 3. SFMOMA expansion: basement floor plan. Detail: Black Box Studio. Courtesy of Sngghetta.

so that it can be used all of the time for photography on one side and for staging installations on the other. The retractable wall enables the occasional need for either activity to expand into the entire space.

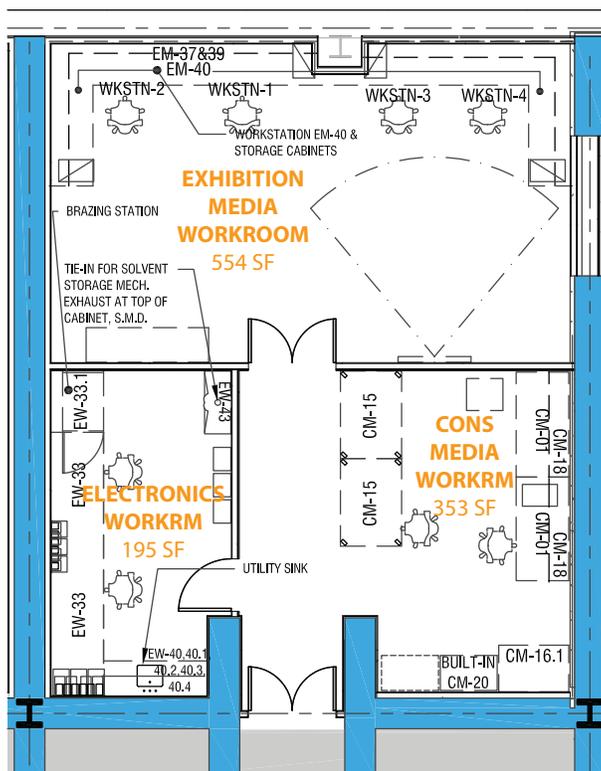
- A man door and separate light switches on each side will allow both areas to operate independently.
- A roll-up door will be located on the photography department's side to accommodate large objects.
- In either area, eight floor and three ceiling outlets on individual circuits will fulfill the power and data requirements for the anticipated activities. They will be isolated from the general building power.
- White walls and a movable grey curtain will accommodate flexible wall colorings for different needs.

A significant challenge awaits in terms of organizing the times of sharing the entire space. However, this room will maximize SFMOMA's potential and provide a great opportunity for visual and in situ documentation, collaboration with artists, and therefore care of the museum's collection.

### THE MEDIA SUITE

The media suite was designed to actively support the established workflows for media conservators and exhibition technicians (fig. 4). The suite is comprised of three areas:

1. A time-based media conservation workroom, where treatment, condition reporting, digitization, quality control, digital editing, and encoding will take place.



**1** BASEMENT MEDIA SUITE ENLARGED FLOOR PLAN  
 3/16" = 1'-0"

Fig. 4. SFMOMA expansion: basement floor plan. Detail: Media Suite. Courtesy of Snøhetta.

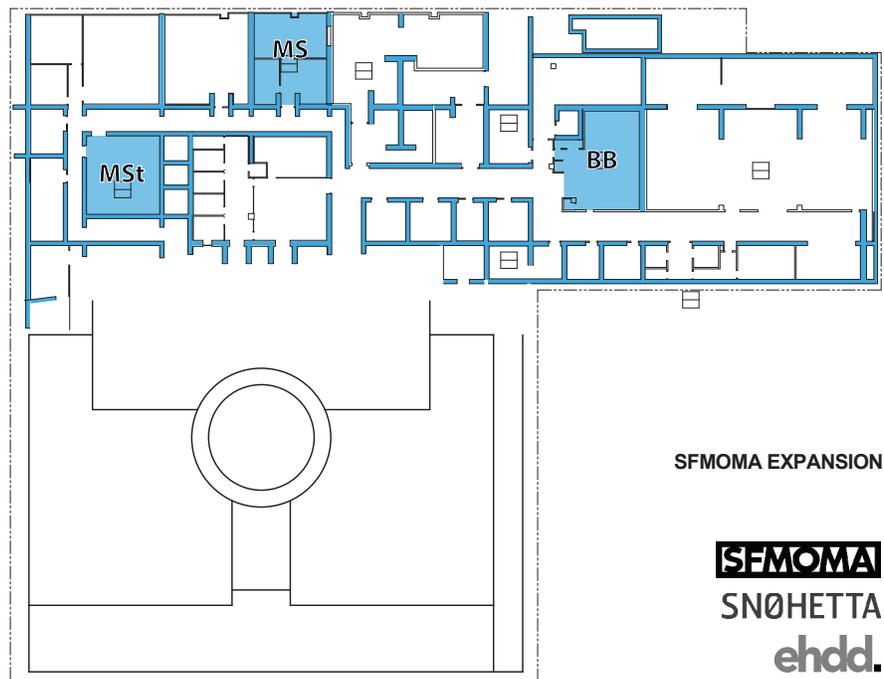


Fig. 5. SFMOMA expansion: basement floor plan, construction drawings. Black Box Studio (BB), Media Suite (MS), and Media Storage (MSt). Courtesy of Snøhetta.

2. An exhibitions media workroom, featuring four editing workstations and a large flat-screen monitor, where quality control, analysis, and preparation of digital files for exhibition will be conducted.
3. An electronics workroom—shared by both departments—with a solvent cabinet, a sink, and a brazing station, in anticipation of dustier treatments.

The rooms have been designed as open and connected as possible, underscoring the overlapping activities of the two departments. Sound will be controlled by cork flooring and an acoustical panel system on the ceiling. Similar to the black box studio, overall power requirements for the media suite were calculated based on equipment and performance needs and will feature three individual circuits in each room—isolated from the general building power. Data coverage will also be included. Restricted access to the media suite area will ensure a level of security that is consistent with other art vaults in the building.

Figure 5 shows an overview of the whole basement, with the locations of the black box studio, the media suite, and a new and larger media storage room marked within the architectural floor plan.

### CONCLUSION

All the spaces described are new to the expanded museum. With the media arts collection growing steadily, SFMOMA did not just grow out of its old building, the museum also needed new spaces that will accommodate collaborative ways of working with artists. Honoring interdisciplinary, multi-voice workflows, the areas have been designed and built for cross-departmental exchange. A culture of working together is thus manifest in our building's architecture.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

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1. In 2009, the City of San Francisco implemented sustainable building codes that required every new large-scale commercial building or any major renovation to existing buildings over 25,000 sq. ft. to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certification, water reduction of 30%, and energy-cost reduction of 15% (San Francisco Building Inspection Commission 2008).
2. Formed in 1993, Team Media is a working group of experts from various departments throughout the museum dealing with media arts. Meetings occur monthly, with topics ranging from very current matters regarding the museum's program to long-term preservation care questions of SFMOMA's media arts collection.

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Martina Haidvogel  
Advanced Fellow in the Conservation of Contemporary Art  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
151 Third Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
(415) 357-4029  
mhaidvogel@sfmoma.org