

# Behind the Scenes

## From the Ground Up: Working with Snøhetta

### An Interview with Deputy Museum Director of Curatorial Affairs Ruth Berson

In 2010, following a comprehensive international search, SFMOMA selected the award-winning architecture firm Snøhetta to design a building expansion that will more than double the museum's galleries and public spaces. The project is slated to break ground next summer and open in early 2016. Snøhetta's dynamic and imaginative body of work demonstrates an outstanding commitment to innovation combined with a compelling philosophy centered on "architecture of engagement," which conceives buildings as interconnected with their neighborhoods and surrounding environment.

The design unveiled thus far—available at [sfmoma.org/expansion](http://sfmoma.org/expansion)—has been met with great enthusiasm by critics and community members, and we look forward to releasing more details in November. In the meantime, we talked with Ruth Berson, who leads the SFMOMA team, about the design process.

#### How does Snøhetta work? What are some aspects of their approach that have made an impact on this project?

Snøhetta's sensibility is rooted in a deeply collaborative working style, visionary concepts, and environmental sustainability. Their practice is centered on multiple professions working together to explore differing perspectives, and their team is composed of designers from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

The firm is committed to designing an expansion that not only serves our visitors well and showcases the breadth of our collections, exhibitions, and programs, but also will be cherished by the city, its residents, and visitors. They envision this building as a real cultural addition to San Francisco, one that will better connect SFMOMA to our broader community.

#### How do the architects translate abstract ideas about how the museum should function into concrete architectural features?

At the beginning of this process we involved a variety of voices, internal and external, and asked, "Who do we want to become as we grow?" We coalesced around a vision to be more transparent, more welcoming, transformative, and magnetic. We talked about the types of experiences we wanted to provide, from visitor amenities to the interpretation of what we have on view. Every single piece of this work found expression in the new building. For instance, we've created a lot more space to experience art, even before you purchase a ticket. There will be more galleries to show

the permanent collection and for special exhibitions; more places to sit, to converse, to eat; for families, for students and teachers, for artists; and for screenings, performances, and events. There are even more outdoor experiences with views of the city, too.

#### What have been some challenges to this process so far?

Perhaps an obvious challenge is the tight footprint of the expansion site and how to integrate Mario Botta's beloved building with the new expansion. There are so many stakeholders: it's not just the museum and the architects. There's a real sense of responsibility that we feel to our members and our community, both local and international, not to mention artists, and our staff and trustees. The city, the region, and the world have their eyes on us and as this project is intended to last for generations, we want to get it just right.

#### How did Snøhetta get to know San Francisco?

As they are an Oslo/New York-based firm, it was very important for Snøhetta to get to know not only what was unique about SFMOMA, but also about our region and its geography. They've done a tremendous amount of research, including multiple trips here, taking countless photographs, to understand what makes San Francisco unique and what role SFMOMA plays in it. This has translated directly into their ideas. For example, in designing the exterior cladding, they are inspired by the unique combination of fog, water, and sunlight we have here. This special place has clearly gotten into their bloodstream.



Snøhetta, SFMOMA Expansion Aerial Southeast Facade; courtesy Snøhetta

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