

San Francisco Chronicle

It's not the same old Fort Mason anymore as Art Institute moves in

By Sam Whiting, August 27, 2017



Second-year graduate student Katherine Boxall arranges her work in her new studio space in the remodeled Herbst Pavilion. Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

On the first move-in day for the new San Francisco Art Institute at Fort Mason, Sherwin Rio arrived at 6 a.m. to unload a U-Haul full of art supplies and other items — drills, hammers, rope, paint, boxing gloves, ceremonial Filipino shirts, cans of Spam, and a double-wide easy chair. Eight hours later, he was still in his top-floor studio, staring up at the truss ceiling, listening to the seagulls and waiting for the foghorns to sound.

“I couldn’t get myself to leave,” he explained to a visitor. “There is something about the light and the history of this building that draws me out of myself.”

On Monday, Rio, a second-year graduate student from Florida, will be joined by 200 fellow students, faculty, curators and visiting artists as the \$50 million campus opens in an old Army shed atop Pier 2, formerly Herbst Pavilion.

With the move, the art institute will vacate its graduate campus of 15 years on Third Street in Dogpatch and join a burgeoning arts scene far from the city's South of Market core. For the first time since it opened in 1977, Fort Mason Center is a fully realized destination for the arts. It presents exhibits in its own new gallery, it is leased to capacity with 23 nonprofit arts and culture organizations, and it has been renamed Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, a conceit that would have been overstating things just a few years ago.

Anyone who has taken the summer off from the Friday night food trucks or the Sunday morning farmers' market at Fort Mason might be shocked at what they see Monday after passing through the repainted main gate, which has guarded the post since 1926.

For one thing, the 13-acre site on landfill, often empty and lonely in the western wind, will be populated by the type of art students who don't come just for a class and leave but are there all day, and sometimes all night. To keep them going, a coffee shop with outdoor plaza has opened at the gatehouse and any day now the first public art to be commissioned in the history of Fort Mason, a 16-foot steel loop-de-loop by Matthew Passmore, will be installed outside the entrance.

"It's the biggest change in our 40-year history," says Rich Hillis, a former city budget wonk in the mayor's office who arrived five years ago as executive director of Fort Mason Center. "There is no way to manufacture the interest that comes from having art students on our campus."

Hillis, 51, is also president of the City Planning Commission, and if Fort Mason were looked at as a traditional development, it now has its anchor tenant. The center is fully leased, and if Hillis could get his landlord, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, to free up another pier, he could probably lease that too.

You can walk along the elevated loading docks, and every swinging wooden sign you pass represents an artistic use. The Magic Theatre, Cowell Theatre, Blue Bear School of Music, the Mexican Museum, Museo Italo Americano, and the art campus for City College of San Francisco represent the old guard.

Newer signs advertise Embark Gallery, exhibiting only the work of students and graduates from Bay Area art schools, and the Interval, a quiet bar/library for deep discussion and single-malt Scotch. The SFMOMA Artists Gallery just reopened in a renovated space, and the center's own Gallery 308 opened two years ago in a converted conference hall near the main entrance.

The newest shingle represents the For-Site Foundation, the internationally known presenter of site-specific art, such as the 2014 Ai Weiwei installation on Alcatraz. It has moved its office here from 49 Geary and will use the Fort Mason Chapel for its next installation, "Sanctuary," opening Oct. 7.

One attraction is the rental rates, which average \$1.50 per square foot, estimated to be \$5 below market for the northern waterfront and the Presidio. The arts tenants' rents are subsidized by weekend fairs such as West Coast Craft, Photofairs San Francisco, FOG Design + Art, and the Guardsmen Christmas Tree Lot, each of which attracts thousands to the Festival Pavilion on Pier 3. Vendors' fees and sponsorships from these fairs also helped pay for the renovation of Pier 2.



All the piers were built during World War I to form the San Francisco Port of Embarkation. The war ended before the piers could be utilized, so there they sat until World War II.

Within nine days of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, an initial convoy sailed for Oahu, bringing the first troops and relief supplies. It was steady from then on, with 1.6 million soldiers and 24 million tons of tanks, trucks, munitions and food sailing from Fort Mason to the Pacific Theater.

After sailing home at war's end, almost all of the returning GIs arrived at Fort Mason's piers, Art Institute President Gordon Knox said in an interview at the main campus on Chestnut Street. "Some of them trotted that little mile up the hill, walked in here, signed up with Ansel Adams and used the GI Bill to become some of our key photographers."

When the Army base was decommissioned in 1972, it became part of the GGNRA, the first urban national park in the country. The nonprofit Fort Mason Center opened in 1977 and once you pass through those gates, you are on national park soil.

The primary motivation for moving San Francisco Art Institute's graduate school to Fort Mason was to reduce the crushing commute from the Tuscan-style main campus on Russian Hill to the graduate student studios in a dark industrial building south of AT&T Park. That drive could take an hour or more, while the commute from Russian Hill to Fort Mason can be done on foot.

"It's a lovely 1-mile walk from here," says Knox, who plans to lead the way by example. "If I were carrying paints or in a hurry, I'd jump on one of the shuttle systems that we will be inaugurating for this."

The school will offer Lyft rides and eventually shuttle buses between its Russian Hill and Fort Mason campuses, Knox said, "part of the concentrated effort to unify our two campuses into a single cultural entity."



Gordon Knox, president of the San Francisco Art Institute, at the San Francisco Art Institute's new campus inside the remodeled historic Herbst Pavilion at the Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture. Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

While Knox embraces the move, the deal was actually negotiated by his predecessor, Charles Desmarais, now The Chronicle's art critic. The pier had already been retrofitted, reroofed, rewired, replumbed, re-windowed and repainted, at a total cost of around \$30 million. The art institute came up with \$19 million for the work.

Under the design of Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects, the interior is split-level, with central staircases and 170 studios that don't have doors and walls that don't reach the ceiling.

"When you walk around, you can look straight through it," says Knox, 62, "even when it is densely packed with art students and faculty."

Three galleries will open to the public in November, with work by both student and professional artists. Also coming is sound artist Bill Fontana's "Landscape Sculpture with Foghorns," which he recorded on Pier 2 in 1981.

Already installed at the top of the central staircase is a large painting in a weave pattern by institute graduate Alicia McCarthy. This was done in spray paint, McCarthy's chosen medium and what almost got her kicked out of school for tagging the walls of the Chestnut Street campus when she was a student.

Everything about the Fort Mason campus reaches outward to attract art patrons to visit the graduate studios. Anything will be an improvement over the Dogpatch campus, which was walled off and required a card key for entry.

“It was dark and oppressive, and there was no signage,” says Katherine Boxall, a second-year graduate student in figurative painting from Ottawa. “Being in an area that is so much more public is an opportunity to show people what we are doing.”

The entire graduate studio program, along with undergraduate painting classes and honors studios, will shift to Fort Mason, where Knox foresees a good fit with the existing City College art school. The Art Institute should also be good for business at Goody’s Cafe, which has an old-time screen door at the entrance and a connecting hall to Readers Bookstore, operated by the Friends of the San Francisco Public Library. Flax art supply store, which opened two years ago, has assembled class kits for the institute and has been restocking brushes.

“It will be nothing but good for Flax,” said store manager Jared Lindenberg. “We’ve had great success with City College, and I see it duplicating with the Art Institute.”

The Interval, operated by the far-thinking Long Now Foundation, is already a citywide destination for the intelligentsia, and a beer hall-style restaurant is rumored to be moving in next to it.

“We will bring an increased flow on a daily basis of youthful and contemporary artists, art students and art consumers,” Knox promises.

Fort Mason Center attracts about 4,000 people a day, and that is without a designated Muni line. Only the 43-Masonic stops there, and that is after a meandering route on the west side. The 30-Stockton requires a hike.

But Hillis can see a way around that. In Muni’s 20-year capital plan is the long-awaited F-Market & Wharves streetcar extension that was supposed to be done in time for the America’s Cup four years ago.

The line now ends at Fisherman’s Wharf, but could be extended from there to Marina Boulevard, by the Marina Safeway. An Army railroad tunnel through upper Fort Mason is already there. Hillis can imagine the colorful antique streetcars coming out of the tunnel at a new portal within Fort Mason and then turning in a dramatic loop before snaking back into the tunnel.

Even without the streetcar line, “You have a rich history, a vibrant arts community and a beautiful view of the bay,” says Rio, the grad student in his studio. “Those are three things I feel are quintessentially San Francisco.”

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