

Art museum looking for building partner

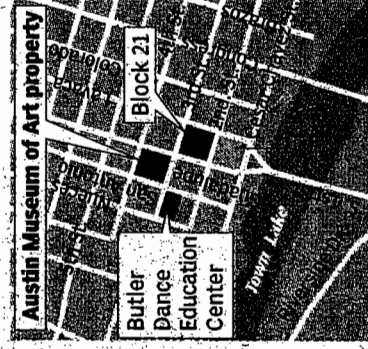
By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin
AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

For the third time in 20 years, the Austin Museum of Art has proposed a permanent downtown municipal art museum.

But instead of a gleaming building covering an entire city block, museum officials said Friday that the new venue probably will occupy a portion of a mixed-use development on the museum-owned block at Fourth and Guadalupe streets.

Wednesday, museum leaders invited more than 40 international developers to apply as potential partners.

Board member Jack Tisdale said trustees hoped to pick a developer by January. Once selected, the developer would build, and help pay for, a mixed-



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use project, including a museum, that could be opened in 2009.

Museum Executive Director Dana Friis-Hansen said she planned to start with a 40,000-square-foot museum space.

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possibly expanding to 75,000.

Either size is significantly smaller than 140,000-square-foot building designed by noted architect Richard Gluckman and once advocated by museum leaders. However, it is larger than 18,000-square-foot temporary space the museum occupies in the former bank lobby at 823 Congress Ave.

Friis-Hansen said that a smaller venue fit with a more reasonable trajectory for future growth. He also said that the museum has spent the last several years reshaping its increasingly populist mission and expanding its audience.

He noted that the \$66 million Gluckman building had been conceived without a realistic plan for how to support it financially or develop sufficient programs for it.

"We needed to grow a museum first before we could grow a building," Friis-Hansen said.

The museum's annual attendance is more than 260,000, its annual budget is \$2.8 million. The Gluckman building was projected to cost \$9 million a year to operate.

"This is the best prospect for us to get a museum downtown, and it's also fiscally prudent," Friis-Hansen said. "And we're really looking forward to participating in the cultural synergy emerging in that part of downtown."

Recently, Ballet Austin announced it would transform a former printing facility at Third and San Antonio streets into a multistudio dance education center. And the Austin Children's Museum, is headed for a mixed-use development on Block 21, north of City Hall.

Tisdale said that a museum project budget had not been determined, and he would not name any developers on the list of invitees. "We want to remain flexible at this point and be open to any ideas and possibilities developers propose," he said.

The museum would consider sharing its block with residences, offices, hotels and retail, or some combination, he added.

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Dana Friis-Hansen

Executive director of the Austin Museum of Art

Tisdale also declined to speculate what kind of financial, lease or ownership arrangement the museum might strike with a private developer.

"Obviously we want to drive this project," he said.

Board President Bettye Nowlin said the museum was seeking to capitalize on a hot residential market.

"We couldn't let this real-estate cycle pass," Nowlin said. "We realized if we didn't hit this one, it would be a long time before the next one starts."

In downtown Austin, developers have 14 residential or mixed-use projects in various stages of the planning pipeline. Many are high-rises, with the tallest proposed buildings 36, 40, and 41 stories.

The museum's mixed-use project would tie in with the city's larger goals for developing the area, including nearby West Second Street, where retailers are joining AMLI Residential Properties Trust's upscale 220-unit apartment project in an emerging retail, residential and restaurant district and where the city is negotiating with Stratus Corp. for a major residential, retail and office project on Block 21.

Though the museum's project will not be driven by a headline-grabbing search for a

world-famous architect, leaders said design was still a leading concern.

"Aesthetics are as important to us as the bottom line," Nowlin said.

The first time the institution, then known as Laguna Gloria Art Museum, tried to build downtown was the early 1980s. In 1985, voters approved \$14.7 million in tax-supported bonds to build the project.

However, by 1990, the real estate bust of the late 1980s sent fundraising into a tailspin, and bickering among arts groups over city funding of the project caused the City Council to rescind its support of the then public-private venture.

Plans by famed architect Robert Venturi of Venturi Scott Brown of Philadelphia were scuttled, though some \$3 million was spent on design and administrative fees.

The museum next made a bid for a new downtown home in 1995, after it moved to its current temporary location. By 1998, Gluckman was chosen to design a starkly modern building. The museum returned the remaining \$13.7 million in city bond money after leaders announced that they wanted total control of their project and its land.

The high-tech economy fizzled, and an abrupt departure of then-director Elizabeth Ferrer in 2002 led supporters to retreat.

The museum suspended its capital campaign after collecting about \$14.25 million in donations. All but \$860,000 of that was spent on architect fees and other expenses. Under Friis-Hansen's leadership, the museum officially shelved the Gluckman project in 2004.

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Shonda Novak contributed to this story.