

# BLVDS<sup>LV</sup>

PEOPLE • CULTURE • LIFESTYLE • FLAVOR

THE MODERN  
CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

## THE *Launch* ISSUE

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New art museum could be Vegas' game changer

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# CULTURAL AMBITIONS

New art  
museum could  
be a game  
changer for  
Las Vegas.

*Written by Tony Illia*  
*Illustrations by AssemblageSTUDIO*





# CENTER FOR CREATIVITY





## CULTURE

A planned contemporary art museum for downtown Las Vegas could be a cultural game changer, establishing a complex dialectic with the city's past, present, and future social history. The building itself could be hugely influential, potentially forging a new architectural heritage for Las Vegas. The identity and branding of cultural institutions are increasingly intertwined with their facilities. New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for example, is housed inside an iconic Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece. The building's distinctive inverted ziggurat, alternately known as the beehive, is arguably more famous than the institution itself. Yet, the two are consanguine in the popular consciousness.

The Modern, as it's being called, is the city's first stand-alone art museum built from the ground up. The short-lived Guggenheim Hermitage occupied space inside The Venetian Resort, and the shuttered Las Vegas Art Museum rented space inside the West Sahara Library. As a result, the community's collective hopes and cultural ambitions ride on the museum's success. It's a tall order placed in the capable hands of Las Vegas architect Eric Strain with AssemblageSTUDIO, which is responsible for the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort Visitor's Center and Mesquite Fine Arts Center.

"This is the project that every architect dreams of," Strain said. "It's an opportunity to build something unique to downtown Las Vegas as opposed to taking what others have done elsewhere and bringing it here. This will be something authentic to Southern Nevada."

Indeed, The Modern's design scheme is wholly original, bold but nuanced, daring yet elegant. The plan calls for balancing two offset rectangular volumes, stacked one atop another, at the northwest corner of Charleston Boulevard and Third Street. The rectilinear building shape makes exhibition installation easy and convenient. A handful of angled struts





provide added structural support while visually enticing passersby. The building, which forms a right angle, makes the most of its irregular triangle-shaped plot by using geometry to maximize every inch of real estate available. I.M. Pei used a similar solution when faced with a trapezoidal site for the National Gallery of Art's East Building in Washington D.C.

However, The Modern's skewed building volumes carry additional allegorical significance beyond aesthetic appeal by aligning with the original 1905 city planning grid and its 1960s contemporary counterpart along Charleston Boulevard. It's a conceptual

nod marrying the city's historical past with modern day Las Vegas for something new and daring, clever and resourceful. The museum exterior makes a similar reference by using a dimpled stainless steel skin embossed with oversized images from Red Rock National Park.

The resilient building material embodies a futuristic machine age while paying homage to Southern Nevada's rich native landscape with Banana Yucca, Anasazi petroglyphs, Aztec sandstone, and Creosote bushes. The material creates a playful dynamic surface of radiant hues and shadows, which change complexion

throughout the day, engaging visitors, pedestrians, and motorists. The building will use 70,000 square feet of Zahner-fabricated steel panels with peekaboo reveals and minimal glass to protect artwork from scorching sunlight.

Juxtaposition of the natural and manmade worlds thematically permeates the building. The upper volume, for instance, uses space-age fabricated metal whereas the base relies upon conventional stone and concrete. Spread over five levels, the 60,000-square-foot museum is organized around a sky-lit central corridor that acts as a pivot point for the two off-center volumes. The first two levels are





## CULTURE

connected by a free-standing helical staircase similar to one found inside Oscar Niemeyer's lobby inside Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. The monumental serpentine stairs act as a floating sculpture, artistic yet functional, encouraging visitor interaction and investigation, while drawing people into the space.

Meanwhile, the top level uses a louvered roof inspired by Renzo Piano's "flying carpet" concept, allowing carefully refracted natural light into sun sensitive galleries for diffused illumination without fear of artwork damage. The museum's skillful interplay between indoors and out, or natural and manmade, continues

with a 14,000-square-foot rooftop garden plus an outdoor balcony space along the north face created by the building's cantilevered intersection. There is an additional sunken ground-level sculpture courtyard for receptions and informal gatherings that opens into a basement level accessible by rolling glass doors along the northern exposure. Across the street, Luminous Park is a landscaped interactive public space, designed by Gensler who served as master plan architect for CityCenter. The one-and-a-half-acre parcel will feature interactive exhibits, walking paths, luncheon nooks, and community gathering spaces.

A nonprofit board of community leaders and philanthropists is providing the grit and determination needed to make The Modern Contemporary Art Museum of Las Vegas a reality. Programmatically, the museum will be as magnetic as the building itself. The Modern shuns a stereotypical art container model for something far more aspirational and compelling.

"We want to nurture creativity, cultivating the next generation of homegrown artists," said gallerist and board chairman Brett Sperry who is donating the museum's three-acre parcel. "We will be engaged in the community, appealing to people of all ages and backgrounds, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and income."





The Modern will have a 15,000-square-foot "Center for Creativity" with computers and fabricating tools for aspiring fashion, art, furniture and industrial designers, acting as a workshop and artist incubator. It will provide courses, lectures, and lab instruction about multidisciplinary design fundamentals, developing concepts into self-sustaining business strategies.

Meanwhile, there will be 35,000 square feet of museum galleries, spanning three floors with two to three rotating exhibits annually from established and emerging contemporary painters, sculptors, collagists, and photographers. Additional amenities include a retail gift

shop, a bistro, ticketing counter, and events spaces.

"This is something Las Vegas is really ready for," said museum board member Katie Binion O'Neill. "The city has come of age and evolved into a real community."

The Modern could be transformative for downtown, with the building symbolically serving as the prow of a ship, leading the 18B Las Vegas Arts District into a bright, shiny future, full of promise. A fundraising campaign is underway to generate \$29 million for building construction and an endowment. The project has already received \$2.4 million pledged in land and cash donations. AssemblageSTUDIO has

informally spent three years and 2,000 design hours producing a dazzling design that seduces the public and donors alike. Construction could begin in late 2014 or early 2015, depending on fundraising, with completion to occur 18 months later. [themodernlv.org](http://themodernlv.org)

