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Confronting history: New museum offers modern twists on the past

by Sarah Duxbury

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Architect Gae Aulenti is famous for taking an old Paris train station, redesigning it so that light became a chief attribute, and producing the Musée d'Orsay, one of the world's most celebrated museums.

She has done the same with a 1917 Beaux-Arts library in San Francisco, site of the new Asian Art Museum.

Confronting history throughout the renovation -- the site served as City Hall until the 1906 earthquake and was a graveyard for Gold Rushers prior to that -- only added to the inherent challenges of an eight-year, \$160.5 million, public-private-partnership project.

No record drawings of the original library existed, so trouble-shooting was one hallmark of the four years of construction.

"When doing historic rehabilitation, you always run into concealed conditions," explained Greg Johnson, project manager for, DPR Construction Inc. in this joint venture with LEM Construction.

One such "condition" was the fastenings in the grand hall. "They were iron and horse hair," Johnson said. "They used a lot of horse hair for fastening, and we hadn't seen that before. But you design around it."

The building's redesign retained distinctive elements like the grand hall, granite façade, main stairway, skylights and vaulted ceilings, all restored to their original condition.

It also freely added modern details and improvements, like the dramatic glass-enclosed two-story escalator that transports visitors from the rear of the new courtyard along the outside of the building to the third-floor galleries.

A more practical improvement, one that added to cost, labor and time, involved seismically retrofitting the building to withstand an 8.3 magnitude earthquake by installing 200 isolators.

"They are placed at certain points under the building," Johnson said, "and they're basically like Slinkies with a box on top -- the museum. When the earth shakes, the Slinkies shake, and the box stays still."

This newly secure, spruced-up building is a fitting home to the museum's \$4 billion art collection, one of the largest outside Asia. The 33 galleries spread over 29,000 square feet can hold 2,500 works of art, twice as many as the old Golden Gate Park facility.

Public and private funds made the project possible, with the largest private donation -- \$15 million -- coming from Korean-born Silicon Valley entrepreneur Chong-Moon Lee.

While Aulenti may have been the lead designer on the museum project, it was a truly communal effort, a "one-of-a-kind project to work on," according to Johnson. Two architecture firms, two construction firms, four engineering firms, numerous subcontractors and over 1,300 workers toiled more than 1 million hours to ensure that the new Asian Art Museum exceeds its building's former glory.