

Museum of Craft and Design Curator Says Pop-Ups Are Here to Stay

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When Brett Levine left the Visual Arts Gallery in Birmingham to become the first full-time curator at San Francisco's **Museum of Craft and Design**, he bid farewell to a permanent space and faced the realities of a wandering museum. Once located on Sutter Street in Union Square, the museum found itself homeless in 2011. Seizing the opportunity to expand its audience and function in a time of peril, the Museum launched a series of pop-up museums in temporary locations throughout San Francisco. In the past two weeks, it was announced that the Museum of Craft and Design will move into the historic American Industrial Center at 2569 Third Street.

Levine arrived in December 2011, and we spoke to him recently to see how he's adjusting to the life of a pop-up curator, and what the new space means for the future of the museum's pop-ups.

You've had some time to settle in to San Francisco after ten years in Birmingham. What are your impressions of the arts community here?

I find San Francisco to be a place where people are committed to art on a personal level. Programs

such as the Museum of Craft and Design's MakeArt projects illustrate that people view art as personally engaging. Our partnership with MakeArt at the Renegade Craft Fairs highlights that the art experience can be hands-on. That's not to say that people in Birmingham are not, but the sheer number of cultural organizations creates a city that is really dynamic. There's AIA, SPUR, SFMOMA.

This is a city committed to craft and design, and I find that incredibly exciting. My perception is that at every level -- whether from a city focus on new approaches to traffic calming, to the ongoing adaptive reuse of a building like the American Industrial Center, our new home -- there is a belief that design enriches our lives through our physical experiences of, and thoughtful relationships with, design.

You left a single permanent space, and now find yourself the curator of many temporary spaces. What are some of the challenges inherent in pop-ups?

I see one challenge for pop-ups: the capacity to secure a space around the city. The challenge is [then] finding partners who are excited about the idea of removing a rental space from the market for the purposes of allowing a craft and design event to engage the public. It is a moment in which culture shifts economics.

A permanent space can be oppressive. Exhibitions must adhere to the demarcations of the exhibition space, and the geographical boundaries of a museum. Are pop-ups liberating?

We have a high concentration of cultural institutions in a few areas in the city, so we like to look elsewhere, toward the city's edges, because it brings an opportunity that is rare. We view our expansion into the Dogpatch area as bringing cultural opportunities farther south on the eastern edge of San Francisco and creating new, accessible opportunities for the city as it expands south and east along the Third Street corridor.

But it is difficult to uproot your museum. The idea that we can engage communities a little bit longer allows us to formulate the kinds of relationships we think will be ongoing, whether we're in a pop-up space, like a shipping container, or a permanent space. We work closely with other community resources and locations in the communities in which we set up pop-ups. Our presence at the [Hayes Valley Proxy Project](#) resulted in a new, long-term partnership with Octavia Art that allows us to provide unique experiences to their users and enhances opportunities to work with them across our programs.

What's involved in a site selection?

We do a complete analysis when evaluating an area for a pop-up. Is the school system public or private? What community organizations are nearby? We can strategize ways to make our relations more formal, and that has probably been the key to our success. While access to students, public and private, is a key focus for our pop-ups, the accessibility of a school, whether public or private, would be only one criterion for choosing a pop-up location. Our museum is about access, and we hope to serve traditionally underserved communities in everything we do, but our objective is to create opportunities for engagement. We work with educational institutions in the vicinity of pop-ups to create outreach opportunities for their students, whether K-12 or university level

This talk of community partnerships was apparent in the museum's third pop-up, "Place Making: Installations at Hayes and Octavia." The exhibition was a part the Proxy Project, a rotation of culture and commerce. What sort of opportunity did you find in Hayes Valley?

Hayes Valley was really good for us in terms of its evolution as a diverse residential community. Diversity is considered across the range of its usual meanings -- gender, race, age, economics, education. For the Museum of Craft and Design, Proxy created the physical space by which the museum blurred the distinctions of interior and exterior, and by doing so we were able to literally directly engage our audiences without the barrier of a door. One thing that has become clear to me, as we locate other areas for pop-ups: Parts of San Francisco have the capacity to bring energies together. I think we look at areas that are going through change in terms of growth and infrastructure. We look to areas that have traditionally been underserved. I'm thinking about south of the city, but we view our focus area to be the greater Bay Area first, and then regional, national, and international audiences. This creates a unique cultural experience, which is good for us as an organization.

What do you mean by a "unique cultural experience?"

I regard access to a museum-driven experience, a site-specific installation, a performance or a lecture in any nontraditional museum space as a "unique cultural experience." Any of these push the opportunity to engage outside the traditional frameworks of a museum, and as such they are unique, culturally focused, and a personally driven experience.

The museum announced that it had secured a location in the American Industrial Center in Dogpatch. Does that mean pop-ups will no longer be necessary?

The pop-ups were born out of excitement and necessity, but it is something we remain deeply committed to. We can see that it allows us to reach out to geographic aspects of the community that are different from permanent locations. It energizes and engages different communities. No matter what happens in terms of a permanent site, we envision pop-ups being a key component in the way we engage the city, long term.

http://blogs.sfweekly.com/exhibitionist/2012/02/brett_levine_museum_of_craft_a.php