

ART



REACHING BEYOND: William Moreno, director of the Claremont Museum of Art, plans to put a diverse spin on local artistic tradition.

Bent on a cultural angle

Advocates wanted a new museum in the mix for Claremont's downtown expansion. An abandoned packing house proved to be just the place.

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
Times Staff Writer

FOR as long as most Claremont old-timers can remember, the College Heights Lemon Packing House has been a fixture on First Street. Built along the railroad tracks in 1922, the corrugated metal structure was designed to store and pack huge quantities of fruit. With vast open spaces, iron trusses, saw-tooth skylights and a 400-foot loading-dock, the building served its intended purpose for half a century. But as citrus groves gave way to urban sprawl, it became a symbol of the town's history, one that eventually fell into disrepair and was slated for demolition.

But things change, even in this quiet college town where cozy homes nestle on tree-lined streets and the old-fashioned downtown business district, known as the Village, has survived the arrival of Starbucks. The packing house is being revived amid an expansion project that will transform the Village and double its size. New construction will give downtown a hotel, a multiplex theater and lots of shops, but the heart of the project is the refurbished packing house.

It's a victory for Claremont preservationists, but it's also a badge of honor for art aficionados and community-minded citizens who are seeing their dream of an art museum become a reality. When the old industrial building begins its new life, it will house an entire community of cultural and commercial enterprises — including the Claremont Museum of Art.

The museum will open April 15 with "A Conversation With Color: Karl Benjamin, Paintings 1953-1995," a retrospective of 46 works by an internationally renowned, Claremont-based maker of hard-edge abstractions. A smaller show, "Building a Legacy: Founding a Museum, Building a Collection," will present examples of donated artworks, making the point that the fledgling museum is a collecting institution as well as a showcase. Millard Sheets, James Fuller, Jean Ames, Harrison McIntosh, Milford Zornes and Roland Reiss are among the artists represented.

In packing-house terms, the museum's space is small — a mere 7,400 square feet including a shop, offices and basement storage. Lodged in the southwest corner of the building, the museum will share a roof with restaurants, a jazz club, a wine bar, a book store, a vendor of fresh fruit bouquets, artists' live-work spaces and the Claremont Forum, a community group that supports charitable causes, offers classes and presents public events.

But the museum's mission — "a regional museum of international significance" — is more expansive than its size might indicate. Artists who have taught or studied at the Claremont colleges or lived in the area will provide a continuing source of material for exhibitions, both historical and up-to-the minute. Samplings of rarely exhibited collections held by the colleges also will appear from time to time. But the museum has no formal affiliation with the colleges. It's free to chart its own course — in many directions.

"This could be a lot of fun," says Director William Moreno, envisioning an adventurous, ethnically diverse program. A native of Montebello, he spent the first 12 years of his career in financial services, then established an art consulting business and directed the Aguirre Gallery in San Mateo. He was director of the Mexican Museum



INTO SHAPE: The museum will open with a Karl Benjamin retrospective.



ABSTRACTION: Works of Claremont artist Benjamin will also include "@#15" (1968).

in San Francisco for three years before returning to Southern California, attracted by Los Angeles' vibrant art scene as well as the opportunity to start something new in Claremont. Moreno says the museum will build upon local artistic tradition but reach well beyond regional boundaries.

"What everybody doesn't want," says John D. Maguire, president emeritus of Claremont Graduate University and advisor to the museum's board of trustees, "is a mausoleum of old Claremont artists, a dead poets society. We want the museum to be edgy, international in outlook and really alive, to set it apart from other little civic or regional museums."

The building provides "the cool factor," says Steve Comba, assistant director and registrar of the Pomona College Museum of Art, who has advised the new museum's founders and organized the inaugural shows. "It's a classic remodeled space, so raw and industrial. For things that are refined, it exaggerates their refinement. The environment also enhances things that are lab-based or experimental."

The program is a work in progress, a position for a contemporary art curator has yet to be filled and the space is still under construction. Even so,



Images from Claremont Museum of Art
Karl Benjamin survey including "Markers" (1955).

'A Conversation With Color: Karl Benjamin, Paintings 1953-1995'

Where: Claremont Museum of Art, 536 W. 1st St., Claremont

When: Opens April 15; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Mondays; closed Tuesdays

Ends: June 25

Price: Free through May; \$3 thereafter

Contact: (909) 624-3591,
www.claremontmuseum.org

a big red-and-black sign splashed across the upper west side of the building — in clear view of Metrolink riders — proclaims the Claremont Museum of Art.

"This has been a gleam in the eye of some Claremonters for a full 20 years," Maguire says. "It's a remarkable story of core citizens never losing their dream and a series of circumstances that allowed us to move forward."

Village expansion as catalyst

THE force behind the project is Marguerite McIntosh, a retired French teacher and indefatigable arts promoter who has lived in Claremont for more than 50 years with her husband, ceramist Harrison McIntosh. But she credits the late artist Marion Stewart with passing along a friend's suggestion about establishing a museum.

At first, the idea was to create a showcase for local artists' work at the Padua Hills Theater, a historic building in an artist-heavy residential area north of Claremont. Marguerite McIntosh presented the proposition to the Claremont City Council in 1987. The city eventually purchased the theater from Pomona College, which had received it as part of a bequest. But years of meetings and restoration failed to produce a museum, largely because of the building's physical limitations and remote location. The city began renting out the

theater for weddings, receptions and other events while the museum idea languished.

"What jump-started this," Maguire says, "was the city's decision to do an eight-square-block Village expansion. It was hugely controversial because it doubles the downtown. The preservationists rose up and said, 'We will cooperate only on the condition that you save the historic citrus packing house.'"

Architect Mark von Wodtke, of Claremont Environmental Design Group, was among them.

"I had worked with the building since the 1970s," he says. "I knew that it had the potential to be something pretty special. It also has a very interesting cultural history in the community. A lot of people remember going there to buy fruit or taking their produce there for packaging."

The city had taken over the building in lieu of back taxes and closed it because of safety concerns. But Von Wodtke had worked with previous owners of the defunct packing house who had leased some of its space to a food co-op and other tenants.

"When the city announced it was going to take the building down, about five years ago, I did a study with students that I taught at Cal Poly about what it might become," he says. "We published that in the Claremont Courier and got a movement going to preserve it." He hadn't thought of locating the museum in the packing house, but the study included space for an art school and galleries.

The city eventually struck a deal with Jerry Tessier, president of Arteco Partners, a Pomona based developer of arts communities and adaptive reuse properties, to develop the packing house. Tessier now owns the building and is financing the refurbishment, with Von Wodtke as architect.

"I love the space," Von Wodtke says.

As the movement to save the historic building gathered steam, McIntosh saw an opportunity.

"I went back to the City Council and told them that we really needed a Claremont Museum of Art and that it should be downtown," she says. She knew that she needed help, so she enlisted Frank Chabre, a neighbor and retired vice president of Rockwell International.

"There are few opportunities to use what you know to help the community," says Chabre, who has been working on the museum for three years. "This turned out to be an almost perfect fit. I had a lot of experience organizing programs and projects and doing business planning, and I have enjoyed learning about the art world."

A year after Chabre joined the effort, McIntosh approached Maguire, who had led the Claremont Graduate University for 17 years.

"That's where Frank and I began to play our respective roles as senior partners in this thing," Maguire says. "I said, 'Frank, you get the ideas and I'll get the money.'"

The museum now has a 25-year lease on its space and pays \$9,000 a month in rent. The business plan calls for a \$1-million annual operating budget and a \$3-million endowment. An anonymous gift of \$750,000 launched a fundraising drive. The B.C. McCabe Foundation of Whittier contributed \$100,000 and many individuals pitched in. With about \$1 million in hand, Chabre and Maguire expect several foundations to make grants to the museum after it is up and running.

But why does Claremont need this museum?

McIntosh has printed a list of reasons, beginning: "We are a city of arts and artists."

Comba answers the question by citing "the Starbucks principle." "Some people feared that Starbucks would kill Some Crust," he says, referring to a popular downtown bakery. "It didn't. Coffee consumption has tripled. The more art institutions you have, the more people come to consume art."

suzanne.muchnic@latimes.com