

# Asian Art Museum plans big expansion

**By Charles Desmarais**

Entering Northern California's ever-expanding museum real estate sweepstakes, the Asian Art Museum announced Tuesday that it will build an addition to its San Francisco Civic Center building.

The new "exhibition pavilion," as the museum calls it, is

being designed by architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who was born in Thailand and is based in Los Angeles and New York. It will encompass about 12,000 square feet, including a 9,000-square-foot gallery that will be among the largest in San Francisco. Also planned is a renovation of the museum's en-

*Asian continues on A8*



## FROM THE COVER

## Asian Art Museum plans to expand

*Asian from page A1*

trance lobby and classrooms, and a reorganization of existing collections galleries and other spaces.

The addition “will elevate the museum to have a larger platform to present, not only art from the historical past, but also cutting-edge contemporary art, in a cutting-edge facility,” said Jay Xu, director of the museum. The project has a budget of \$25 million, all of it already pledged as private contributions, primarily from members of the museum’s board. That sum is a fraction of the amounts allotted for construction of the region’s largest new museums, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (\$112 million) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (\$305 million).

The pavilion will require approval by the San Francisco Planning Commission. A spokesman said the application will be submitted Wednesday.

Xu called the Asian Museum project “fiscally modest but, impact-wise, huge.” The museum will continue to conduct a capital campaign to add to its relatively small endowment and, perhaps, for embellishments such as a roof garden atop the new addition. Xu noted that both the building and the collection belong to the city of San Francisco. “We can think of it as a gift to the city,” he said, because the improvements will be funded privately.

**Began in old de Young**

The Asian Art Museum started life in the 1960s in a wing of the old de Young Museum building in Golden Gate Park. It moved to its current quarters, San Francisco’s former main library, in 2003. The limitations of the current building as a space for show-



Photos courtesy Asian Art Museum

The new “exhibition pavilion” is to be built on a site atop an earlier one-story addition, on the Hyde Street side of the building.



Akiko Yamazaki is chair of both the Asian Art Commission and the Asian Art Museum Foundation.

ing art are substantial, and stem from its original, library function. An elegant renovation and expansion, led by the Italian architect Gae Aulenti, was curtailed for financial reasons. With a reduced total of 6,500 square feet of temporary exhibition space, spread across three rooms separated by corridors and multiple closed doors (required to meet

art conservation standards), all but the smallest shows require a confusing and unsatisfying trip from gallery to gallery.

A contiguous space nearly 40 percent larger than all the current temporary galleries combined, with considerably higher ceilings, would substantially improve the visitor experience.

The new pavilion is to be

built on a site atop an earlier one-story addition, on the Hyde Street side of the building. Engineered to sustain added height, that original structure currently houses museum support functions.

**Experience with additions**

Yantrasast and his architecture firm, wHY, were selected for their experience in designing museum additions, Xu said. The architect and the director worked together on the installation design for the Asian collections at the Art Institute of Chicago, where Xu was chairman of the Department of Asian and Ancient Art before coming to San Francisco in 2008. Yantrasast’s latest commission, a renovation and addition to the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky., will open March 12.

Yantrasast praised the current building, saying his task requires “an inside-out way of thinking.” “This will be acupuncture architecture, not plastic surgery,” he said. “The

Gae Aulenti design has really done its job. But the old building didn’t quite give the flexibility the museum now needs to make the vibrancy of the Asian Art Museum apparent to all.”

As a city museum, the Asian is governed by two boards. The chair of both the Asian Art Commission and the Asian Art Museum Foundation, Akiko Yamazaki, emphasized the diversity of the museum’s audience and supporters, saying, “We pride ourselves in being a museum for all.” At the same time, commission vice chair and foundation president Timothy Kahn pointed out that “the combined populations of Asian countries account for more than 60 percent of the world’s population. Art is the universal language of a global community.”

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic.  
Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1