



MANOLO YLLERA

LORD NORMAN FOSTER

THE MAN SET TO TRANSFORM SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

By Pam Kragen
UNION-TRIBUNE

On Saturday, San Diego Museum of Art will open an exhibition showcasing the architectural vision of Foster + Partners, the London-based architectural firm that will redesign the museum's West Wing in 2026.

The exhibit, "Foster + Partners: Architecture of Light and Space," was created to give San Diegans a taste of the global company's history and accomplishments. It will feature models and drawings of project created around the world by the renowned firm, which was founded in 1967 by Lord Norman Foster, who at age 89 continues to actively serve as the company's executive chairman.

The 89-year-old British architect talks about his inspirations, his foundation and his creations, which will be showcased in an exhibit opening Saturday in Balboa Park

Foster is one of just 47 architects worldwide who have received the prestigious Pritzker Prize, awarded annually since 1979 to living architects whose work has "produced significant contributions to humanity and the built environment." He earned it in 1999, the same year Queen Elizabeth granted him a life peerage as Baron Foster of Thames Bank.

Some of Foster + Partners' most famous international designs are Apple's corporate headquarters in Cupertino, the revamped Reichstag building in Berlin, the Century Tower Bunkyo-ku in Tokyo, the Hearst Tower in New York City and both the Gherkin office building and Millennium Bridge in London.

But San Diegans may be most interested in how Foster has built or reimagined muse-

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The distinctive Gherkin building in London, designed by Foster + Partners, opened in 2004. **IMAGE.NET**



Apple Park, the campus for Apple Corp. in Cupertino, was designed by Foster + Partners. **TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE**

FOSTER

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ums spaces around the world, including the Norton Museum in West Palm Beach, Florida; the Carré d'Art museum in Nîmes, France; the Museo del Prado in Madrid; the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich, England; and the stunning Grand Court at the British Museum in London.

Foster + Partners' plans for the redesign of SDMA's West Wing are still in the proposal stage.

But who is Lord Foster?

On Sept. 9, hundreds of San Diegans had the opportunity to hear him talk about his life and inspirations at a pair of afternoon events in Balboa Park moderated by SDMA Executive Director Roxana Velazquez. First, he spoke to a small gathering of San Diego Museum of Art employees, members and patrons, then to a much larger crowd that included dozens of clearly excited architecture students from San Diego and Tijuana.

Foster — spry, fit and sharp as a tack — seemed delighted at the questions posed by the students.

During both events, Foster told the audiences that his passion for architecture grew out of a childhood love for sketching and a lifelong fascination with airplanes, automobiles, helicopters, bicycles and even cross-country skis. “All my passions,” he said, “are interconnected.”

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve been fascinated by drawing,” said Foster, who was born June 1, 1935, in Manchester, England. “My first memory of sketching was in 1943 or ’44 when I drew model airplanes made with tissue paper, wood and rubber bands.”

At 16, he dropped out of school to work in what he described as “Dickensian” conditions in the finance department of Manchester Town Hall. The work was so boring, he said, he spent all of his free time in the town library studying architecture books, like Le Corbusier’s famous 1923 book “Toward a New Architecture.”

As a test of his growing skills, he entered an architectural drawing contest at age 18 and won the prize of 100 British pounds for his depiction of a medieval windmill. After serving two

years in the Royal Air Force in the mid-1950s, he began his studies in architecture.

After earning a degree at the University of Manchester, he earned his master’s degree at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, studying under Paul Rudolph, Serge Chermayeff and art historian Vincent Scully, who wrote the influential 1969 book “American Architecture and Urbanism.”

Before starting his own firm, Foster told the audience that he traveled the United States, studying everything from farming machinery in the Midwest to the Modernist rectangular steel-and-glass Eames homes in Southern California, designed by the L.A. architecture team of Charles and Ray Eames.

In 1967, he launched his own firm, which would come to be known as Foster + Partners. The company’s projects are known to maximize natural lighting and feature open floor plans with an emphasis on outdoor green spaces and water elements, glass walls and roofs, pedestrian plazas and accessible entryways. They also incorporate sustainable building techniques and energy-efficient materials.

Although there are similar features in many Foster + Partners projects, Foster said last month that his company has “a conscious absence of style.” “We’re trying to create a backdrop for the works of art, to create a backdrop for the community and bring spaces to new life.”

He said that the heart of every project his company takes on is not the building itself but the people who will occupy and use it. “Architects are conditioned to think about buildings, but that’s secondary to public space — that’s the urban glue that binds structures together.”

Last week, Foster answered several questions from the San Diego Union-Tribune by email from his home in London. The responses have been slightly edited for length and clarity.

Q: In the early years of your architectural career, you were influenced by the open-plan, light-filled designs for the Eames homes in Southern California in the 1940s to 1960s. Can you explain why those two



Foster + Partners' Great Court at the British Museum in London, completed in 2000.

FOSTER + PARTNERS



Inside the new dome of Berlin's Reichstag government building, which was renovated in 1999 by Foster + Partners. **AP**

elements — light and space — have inspired you?

A: Light and space have always been guiding forces behind design. They are part of a wider embrace of nature with a consequent emphasis on views and natural top light. Of course, there are other considerations such as the social dimension of design — its power is to improve the quality of life and address issues of equality and accessibility.

The (Eames) Case Study briefs fit into that narrative, not just because they were about light, lightness and space, but because they shared a quality and elegance, that was achieved on modest budgets, and with the use of off-the-peg components.

Q: You are also a Royal Air Force veteran and pilot. How did seeing structures and communities from the air influence the way you design buildings from the ground up, as well as your use of glass windows and walls to see the world outside?

A: In aviation and particularly with soaring flight, you are harnessing the natural forces of nature and aerodynamic flight offers important lessons for an architecture that seeks harmony with nature. But perhaps it is the aerial perspective that visually brings home the lessons of the compact city or building that can preserve nature and biodiversity, as opposed to much of the endless sprawl that consumes precious countryside. Even from a distance, you can also see that it is socially barren. We do not need to fly and look down to understand this, but when we do, the experience is truly compelling.

Q: Your company has been involved in numerous museum renovations and expansions around the world. Can you explain your approach in creating a harmony between older historic structures and modern elements?

A: The true challenge of renewal is to continue the historic tradition of change, but with a sensitivity to the spirit of the past. True tradition is all about creative continuity. I have always argued in favor of reuse and renewal of historical buildings, which can be given a new lease of life through

sensitive interventions.

Modern interventions in historic contexts often facilitate access, allowing more people to use and appreciate the old building in a way that would never have been possible previously. In this sense, they are the ultimate compliment recognizing the value of a building, while simultaneously ensuring it is viable for future generations.

Q: What unique design features do you like to incorporate into museums, as opposed to office or educational buildings?

A: While every project is a response to a range of different needs and each caters to its own diverse demographic, our approach to museums is driven by a desire to forge bold cultural programs, bring people together and energize the surrounding context.

Projects are often designed around a shared space, or multiple visually linked spaces, thus promoting contact between people using them. Permanent collections and visiting exhibitions, seminars and cafés and atria — combining these kinds of functions promotes interaction between visitors, staff, students and artists.

Q: Many of your most famous buildings incorporate welcoming, light-filled gathering spaces. You've spoken about the importance of creating community in your work. Can you expand on why that's important?

A: I have always believed passionately that architecture is a social art — a necessity and not a luxury — that it is concerned with the quality of life — the creation of benefits — about caring and sharing. Social concern is one of the most powerful driving forces of architecture.

We were the first to pioneer the idea of the ‘urban room’ within buildings. These spaces offer an analogous city experience — a place where public and private realms converge, boundaries dissolve, and different groups of people meet. It can be the spatial focus of a building — a courtyard or a foyer — but it is open and inviting, a place of linkage and connection to the world outside.

Q: I read that you call exhibitions of Foster + Partners

work “futurespectives,” rather than retrospectives because your company is continually evolving and exploring new ideas. Can you tell me some of the cutting-edge architectural ideas — perhaps involving sustainability or new materials — that you're most excited about?

A: The timeline of my practice corresponds with that of the environmental movement. Environmentalism is in the studio's DNA, and those core beliefs are shared by the architects who joined the studio many years ago, as well as the many younger generations who continue to be attracted to work with us.

Under the auspices of the Norman Foster Foundation in Madrid, I have been able to extend this reach through a program of educational workshops. Typically, these bring together 10 top graduates from around the world, with a similar number of mentors — each a world leader in their own field. On the theme of “Anticipating the Future,” with an emphasis on environmental issues, this program targets potential civic leaders of generations to come.

The Foundation, with its commitment to help younger generations anticipate the future, is also working with scientists at MIT on autonomous energy systems and, in particular, on container-sized nuclear batteries that could deliver safe, maintenance-free power.

More recently the success of the Foundations education program was led to the formation of the Norman Foster Institute and its first full time Master's course on Sustainable Cities. Uniquely, this combines the best of academia with hands-on practical experience working with cities on projects. I am co-directing this course with Professor Kent Larson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the course is recognized by the Autonomous University of Madrid.

Q: San Diego Museum of Art is at the very heart of Balboa Park, which was built for the 1915 Pan-American exhibition in a Spanish Colonial Revival style. The park's buildings have become iconic signatures of the city. When you have worked on renovations of buildings like this in the past, what is your approach

in terms of preservation versus innovation?

A: I touched on our approach to historical continuity briefly in a previous answer. At the San Diego Museum of Art, the original Spanish Colonial Revival style buildings designed by William Templeton Johnson are very much of their time.

Looking beyond matters of style, the designs are embedded in their context — the climate of San Diego and the natural greenery of Balboa Park — with shaded pathways that offer protection from the harsh sun, elevated terraces that encourage an indoor and outdoor lifestyle, as well as a sharp focus on integrating greenery and landscaping — all timeless ideas that are at the heart of good design even today. At an urban scale, the buildings define the remarkable Plaza de Panama and relate to the neighboring buildings in terms of scale to create a very special place for the city.

I have always maintained that forward-looking architecture needs to build on the past, not ignore it — the clues are all there! But we must also take advantage of new technologies to meet modern-day sustainability and operational standards.

Q: Armstrong Yakubu has been appointed to lead the design team for the San Diego Museum of Art project. He has been with Foster + Partners since 1987. Can you talk about Armstrong and how you will work with him to bring your vision for the museum to life?

A: I have worked with Armstrong, and we were both involved in the competition-winning design along with other key individuals in the team. Hands-on continuity from the beginning through to the end is important in all of our projects and we will continue to work together until the realization of the San Diego project.

Q: You will turn 90 next year. Do you have any plans to retire? And finally, what do you hope your legacy will be when (and if) that retirement day comes.

A: I see no reason to stop, and I leave all questions about legacy to the historians!

'FOSTER + PARTNERS: ARCHITECTURE OF LIGHT AND SPACE'

When: Opens Saturday and runs through April 27. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays (closed Wednesdays)

Where: San Diego Museum of Art, Gallery 18, 1450 El Prado, Balboa Park

Admission: \$20 adults; free for students, military and seniors 65 and over with ID, and youth 17 and under

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