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DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

Contemporary Austin to upgrade

Museum plans \$3M renovation of its downtown location.

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The Contemporary Austin plans a \$3 million renovation of its downtown location at Congress Avenue and Seventh Street, museum officials told the American-Statesman.

The project, which will be announced Sunday, will add a dramatic canopy roof to

the architecturally distinctive Jones Center building as well as add to its gallery space through a reconfiguration of the first floor.

The renovations address two areas of concern that emerged as the museum's scope and activity level have greatly expanded in the past several years, said Louis Grachos, the Contemporary's executive director.

And, with a \$1.3 million grant from the Moody Foundation now in hand, as well as board donations and other

financing, the museum won't launch a capital campaign for the project, he said.

Last year, the museum announced a comprehensive master plan for its 14-acre Laguna Gloria site that will improve and preserve the waterfront, grounds and 1916 Italianate Driscoll Villa. With that major – and expensive – project looming in the not-too-distant future, Grachos said the board opted not to launch a public capital campaign for the Jones Center renovation.

Board members have

EXPERT REPORTING

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin has covered Austin's arts community for 16 years. Read previous coverage of the Contemporary Austin with this story online.

already pledged \$300,000 for the Jones Center improvements and have voted to arrange for a low-interest bridge loan to close any remaining gaps in funding.

“With interest rates at his-

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toric lows and a large project for Laguna Gloria on the horizon, our finance committee agreed that it would be prudent to take advantage of our ability to borrow the difference now, leaving existing resources alone," Grachos said, adding that no money would be drawn from the institution's \$22 million endowment.

It's a markedly different approach given Austin's history of protracted cultural capital campaigns. Indeed, over the course of several decades, one of the Contemporary's predecessor institutions – the Austin Museum of Art – launched several never-completed capital campaigns for a downtown building.

Grachos said the current strategy "allows us to move quickly and smartly to maximize potential for the Jones Center while minimizing the amount of time that it is closed to the public."

He added that the Jones Center will close in May of next year, with a grand reopening expected in mid-autumn. While the building is closed, the museum will continue its exhibits and events at its Laguna Gloria site, home to the burgeoning Betty and Edward Marcus Sculpture Park.

The 21,000-square-foot Jones Center underwent a \$6 million renovation in 2010, a sleek and sophisticated transformation designed by LTL Architects of New York. The museum has hired LTL for the current renovation, Grachos said.

The first and most publicly visual change will be the addition of a permanent canopy to the building's rooftop deck. With its screen the site of many film showings and its open-air space the loca-



Louis Grachos is Contemporary Austin's executive director.

tion for many public programs, the rooftop has incurred more use than it was initially conceived for, Grachos said.

The 21-foot-tall canopy will provide shade and rain protection, allowing for more year-round use. Upgrades will also allow the museum to install fans and heaters when necessary.

"With its prominent Congress Avenue view, the rooftop has really proved a popular location for our public programs," Grachos said. "And upgrades to it will also allow us to maximize rental income from it as well."

Secondly, the museum's first floor will be reconfigured and opened to add 2,000 square feet of flexible gallery space. In total, the Jones Center would then have 7,000 square feet of exhibit space.

Some current first floor staff offices will be moved upstairs, and other staff have already relocated to Laguna Gloria.

Less publicly visible will be improvements to the Jones Center that will allow the museum to stage and host larger works of art and bigger exhibitions. An entryway has already been modified to accommodate large art-moving crates, and a heavy-capacity electric lift between the lower and upper floors will be added so that large-scale sculpture can be taken to the high-ceiling second floor gallery.

The building's humidity controls will also be upgraded to meet more stringent museum industry specifications, allowing the Contemporary to

borrow delicate works of art from other institutions.

"These are the kind of improvements that will allow us to mount exhibitions that we haven't otherwise been able to bring to Austin," Grachos said.

Since the museum rebranded itself as the Contemporary Austin in 2013, it has presented increasingly high-profile exhibits by a roster of international notables, including Do Ho Suh, Robert Therrien and Tom Sachs – exhibits that have attracted national art world attention.

Also in 2013, the museum announced the establishment of the Marcus Sculpture Park, thanks to a \$9 million grant from the Edward and Betty Marcus Foundation. That money has already been put to use for several distinguished acquisitions at Laguna Gloria, most recently the iconic 33-foot-tall sculpture "Looking Up" by Tom Friedman.

Grachos, who had previously served as director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y., was appointed director in 2012.

The Jones Center building is layered with history. Around 1850, a three-story brick commercial building claimed the spot. By 1926, the extravagantly decorated Queen Theater movie palace took its place. Then in 1956, a Lerner Shops department store gave the building a mid-century modern look and added a second floor.

The building was empty in 1995 when the Texas Fine Arts Association bought and renovated the first floor for exhibition use. After renaming itself Arthouse, the organization renovated the building in 2010. It merged with the Austin Museum of Art in 2011.

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An architect's rendering shows the planned permanent canopy roof that is to be added to Contemporary Austin's Jones Center building in downtown Austin.

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