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## SO-IL Adds California Museum to its Portfolio

Design-build competition a first for the New York-based architecture firm

By **LAURIE LAULETTA-BOSHART**

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SAN FRANCISCO - Known for its inventive and whimsical design concepts, SO-IL was garnering notice inside and outside the industry for the way it approached projects, most notably, cultural and urban spaces. In 2009, the studio won the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 Young Architects Program commission to design a temporary summer pavilion for the open-air courtyard in Queens. Using 30-foot-tall poles connected by a net canopy and brightly colored exercise balls, the group's submission, "Pole Dance," was a hit. Following that win, SO-IL was on the map, and commissions for cultural institutions began rolling in.

Three years later when the University of California, Davis commissioned an international competition to select a team to design and build its new educational art museum, SO-IL made the decision to pursue it. "We had experienced some success with our museum work and the opportunity with this project intrigued us," says SO-IL founding principal, Florian Idenburg.

Named for its major benefactors, Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem, the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art was intended to be an educational arts museum that had a real sense of place on the rural, agricultural campus, just outside of Sacramento. The university determined an international design competition was the ideal method to entice the best teams.

UC Davis had employed the design-build delivery method before, but the international design competition was a first for any of its projects. The university established early ground rules for submission: interested architects were required to partner with California contractors who had a portfolio that included museum experience. Architects began jockeying for position to team with qualified contractors, which narrowed the field considerably. “I think there was some hot and heavy matchmaking going on during this time,” says the museum's founding director, Rachel Teagle. In all, 19 teams submitted prequalification packages in September 2012. The pool was short-listed to seven, and then three finalists were selected to submit proposals. Each of the three finalists was paid a stipend of \$125,000.

After a comprehensive, public process that included fully developed designs displayed on campus for a month, town hall meetings and presentations, as well as social media input and voting, the university named the winner in early 2013. The vote was unanimous. The winning team was comprised of Whiting-Turner Contracting Company out of Sacramento, SO-IL from New York and Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, based in San Francisco.

### **Design-Build Delivery**

A delivery method that is gaining in popularity among an increasing number of client types, the design-build process is a method of project delivery where one entity—the design-build team—works under a single contract with the project owner to provide design and construction services. On the Manetti Shrem project, SO-IL and BCJ worked collaboratively with contractor Whiting-Turner.

“We both simultaneously pursued a partnership with Whiting-Turner during the prequalification phase,” says BCJ principal, Karl Backus. “We realized that the complement of our skills would lead to a very good team, and that on our own, or even with other kinds of partnerships, it would not have been as successful.” SO-IL took the lead on the concepts and early design phases, while BCJ ran the technical side of the project. “It was a very integrated approach,” says Idenburg. “I think we were very complementary.”

### **Inventive Design Concept**

The winning project struck a cord with Teagle, who felt that the building concept was so specific to place, and looked so native to Davis, that it seemed as if it had always belonged. SO-IL and BCJ were also the only team that proposed an unconventional, one-story solution to meet the accessibility and openness mandate for the new museum.

"For me personally, what resonated with SO-IL and BCJ's approach, was that we asked for two very specific things in our program: we wanted the architects to really think about our incredible history of achievement of the arts that has happened at UC Davis, and we also wanted a very aggressive allocation of education spaces in the museum," Teagle recalls. "The winning team took a very clear and elegant approach to our programmatic prerequisites."

Teagle also admits that she was very interested in finding an up-and-coming architect, and felt the design-build competition opened up the field for that kind of respondent. The founding director refers to the early days of UC Davis when the campus provided a platform for a roster of artists with untested talent, like Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson and William T. Wiley. "They were on the cusp of becoming famous and UC Davis gave them a platform on which to be successful," she says. "And we were hoping we could provide the same for the architect of the museum."

## **SO-IL**

New York -based architecture firm, SO-IL, which originally stood for “Solid Objectives-Idenburg Liu,” but now uses the moniker on its own, was founded by husband and wife team, Florian Idenburg and Jing Liu. Idenburg had been working at SANAA, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, while Liu worked for international firm KPF, before the couple launched the business in 2008. They brought on Ilias Papageorgiou, a student of Idenburg’s at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, who was named a partner with the firm in 2013. The office had won commissions in New York and the Netherlands and quickly became known for its inventive design concepts. But the design build competition was something new for the firm.

“The design build structure is something that most people on the team personally didn’t really have experience with,” says Idenburg. “For the people involved, it was the first time and that took a little bit of learning.” With the design competition came a fixed budget, which was also a challenge for SO-IL. “You agree to design, but also to do it within budget,” Idenburg says.

To stay within the fiscal parameters, SO-IL worked with specific software to write a program that would inform the architects of exactly where the cost would end up, no matter what was changed in the design. “The software is describing what you need to do, and then generating outcomes,” Idenburg says. The ambitious design called for a dramatic canopy that includes 50,000 square feet of perforated aluminum triangular beams supported by 40 steel columns. Idenburg and his team worked early on with the fabricators of the grand canopy to understand the linear square footage price of each beam and the connections. “We quickly established a set of cost parameters and used them during the design process to know and to check the life of where we were within the budget itself,” he says. The overall project budget was \$30 million and construction took approximately 18 months.

Idenburg believes much of the risk in a design-build project is transferred from the client to the architect and contractor. “There were moments where we were faced with challenges and we had to come up with solutions that we weren’t necessarily super excited about. And we had to do it all within a very aggressive budget,” he says “The risk was on us to deliver and stay within budget.” Also, the architect functioned as a subcontractor to the builder. “We always work very closely with our contractors, but this arrangement was a little different.” But Idenburg admits that having a fixed budget can be an advantage, since there are no surprises. And as a project overall, it was very expedient.

Ultimately, Idenburg was pleased with the finished product. “In general, I must say, it has actually been quite a good experience, specifically because of the expediency. I am very satisfied with the outcome.”

The 30,000-square-foot-space was completed in November 2016 and is already being heralded as groundbreaking.

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