

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

BROOKS WALKER

SFMOMA Board of Trustees, 1982-present (2009)

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Interview conducted by Elizabeth Castle  
in 2006

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**Interview #1: February 21, 2006**

## Audio File 1

00:00:11:08

Castle

Mr. Walker, I'd like to begin by asking how did you become involved in the museum?

00:00:24:04

Walker:

I had a family involvement, to start with. As a matter of fact, my mother was on the Women's Board for years, when the Women's Board felt that they ran the museum. They probably did. I had an aunt that was on that board. Then my first wife got very involved with the museum.

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I was kind of dragged, kicking and screaming, into the world of contemporary art. It took me a while to really, really appreciate it. My first wife died. I'd been asked before to go on the board, and then, I decided: "Well, maybe it's something I ought to do." So I went on the board in '81. Three years later, in '84, I became chairman. I served as chairman for eleven years, till '95. During that period, well, when I started on the board, the museum was in the War Memorial Building, on the top two floors. It was really quite a small operation. It was not a very big deal. When I first got on the board, they put me on the finance committee, and I was startled to see the way they were financing the museum, because they had had some fund events that looked very much and felt like endowment drives.

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They called it the Fund of the Seventies, and they had the Fund of the Eighties. What they did is they raised as much money as they could and just put it in the bank, and then they spent it, a little bit every year. So they didn't have any endowment. When they got towards the end of the Seventies, they were about to fall off the cliff, and when they got to the end of the Eighties, they were really about to fall off the cliff.

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So we had a lot of work to do in trying to get a more normal— Well, to build up an endowment and get an annual fund drive that worked a little bit better. We were pretty much small potatoes, when I first got involved.

00:02:32:10

We finally decided that we were space bound. Every museum gets space bound sooner or later. We were space bound, and we needed to expand. We first came up with a concept of where we would take over the rest of the War Memorial Building. That proved out to be politically not correct in San Francisco.

Castle:

How's that?

00:02:55:20

Walker:

We had people picketing outside the museum. So we abandoned that idea and started looking around for a new location. After quite a few false starts, we finally settled on the location that we're at now and then started a major fund

drive and the building drive. I was chairman during all of that. In fact, I headed up the fund drive and was on the building committee. So I spent an awful lot of time, for about five years, during the period of getting the new building done.

Castle: I've been looking over how one raises that much money in that amount of time, and I'd definitely like to come back and talk in a little more detail about that. However, I just want to return to a few things you said when we just started. About how you got drawn into the world of modern and/or contemporary art. Could you expand a little bit on your feelings about modern art and how they may have changed over time? And what passion you have for it. How was that developed? Maybe you could talk a little bit about that for me.

00:04:08:09

Walker: Well, that's a good question. I'm not sure I actually have a passion for contemporary art, per se. It may not make much sense, but I probably have more passion for the museum as an entity, itself. I've been involved on the finance committee since I got on the board. I'm still the chairman of the finance committee. I've been more concerned about how the museum operated and that we could at least break even, and that we had enough endowment to do what we wanted to do.

00:04:37:27

I have not been heavily involved in the artistic side of the museum, if you will. I felt that that was really up to the curators and the director. It's not an area that I've spent a lot of time. Frankly, I'd say a lot of the work that we acquire with our accessions committee, I would have to say I probably don't understand. I'm not a total fan of a lot of what we're buying, but sooner or later, a lot of it ages well, and some of it doesn't age at all. I guess in total, I'm more interested and more involved in the museum itself as an entity than I am involved in what specifically we're putting on our walls at any one time.

Castle: So you were coaxed, enticed, forced—I'm not sure what the right word might be— by family, in some way. It sounds like you were drawn into the world by family.

Walker: Yes.

Castle: How did that occur?

00:05:37:20

Walker: When my first wife died, very young, she was forty-nine. She was passionate about contemporary art. I just decided I sort of owed her. It's a strange way to get involved. I'd been asked to go on the board before and had been too busy. Then I decided that this was something maybe I should do.

Castle: So in some ways, it sounds like you're describing a bit of in memoriam.

00:06:11:18

Walker:

A little bit, yes. I mean, that sounds a little corny, but something like that, yes. I would say that if my first wife had lived, I wouldn't have gotten involved with the museum, because she was involved and one of us was plenty. Those were the circumstances, anyway.

Castle:

Well, you describe yourself as the financial pragmatist that comes on board, the person who lets the artists and the curators and such get together and create the world. But you made it possible. And you were saying, there was no endowment for the museum.

00:06:50:20

Walker:

Well, yes, I was much more concerned with and involved with the financial health of the organization.

Castle:

When you first came on board, you were on the finance committee. Could you tell me a little bit about [your responsibilities] when you first began to work with SFMOMA? What did your duties entail? What did you actually do? How often did you meet? What were the discussions like?

00:07:24:02

Walker:

We probably met every other month, the finance committee. What I did shortly after I got involved is I started worrying, because they had this crazy— They were finishing off the end of the Fund of the Eighties, and— Well, they were in the middle of the Fund of the Eighties, actually. It was clear that it wasn't going to last for the eighties, the way they were spending it, and they didn't have any real plan to do anything else. So I spent a lot of time worrying about it. Then when I became chairman, which was only three years later, I— In fact, I was president before, but the chairman is the chief executive officer of the museum and the president does whatever the chairman asks him to.

What we really started doing was really working on attracting new trustees. We were particularly looking for trustees that had the financial wherewithal to be generous to the museum. The fund drive that started ten years later, almost, was started then, when we started really going after new trustees.

Castle:

And what year was this?

00:08:39:03

Walker:

Well, it was '81, when I first got involved, and then it was '84, when I was chairman. We probably spent five years of getting new trustees and thinking about trying to figure out how we would expand the museum at the same time.

00:08:59:04

Castle:

How, at the point where you're doing the major drive for the building, that sounds like a tremendous amount of work. Can you give me a sense of how labor intensive this experience is?

00:09:13:20

Walker:

Well, I think, certainly, for whoever heads it up, it's pretty labor intensive. They hired an outside consultant, and I worked with him. Oh, I'd say, three days a week, at least. I made most of the pitches for the senior money. Now, we had some very generous trustees, so really, before we started, we had \$4 or \$5 million commitments. We didn't even have a location, at that point.

Castle:

Let's go back and trace that element out, of you coming on board. It sounds a little bit like you come on board a slightly financially leaky ship, if you will.

00:09:57:00

Walker:

Well, that's what I found out when I got there.

Castle:

You weren't aware.

Walker:

In my opinion— No. I think that there were a lot of people on the board that really weren't there because they were very interested in the financial operating side of the—of the company. They were there because of the museum; they were there because they liked the art. So there was not a great awareness on that. There was another businessman, who was the chairman of that finance committee, and he's the one that really started pointing up to me very quickly that we had a real problem here, as far as how we were going to survive down the road.

Castle:

You were talking about how the old building, basically, you were running out of space to put the artwork up.

00:10:45:13

Walker:

Yes, and if you run out of space, then you can't get anyone else to give you art, because if it's not going to be hung on the walls, they don't want to give it to you. We felt that if we were ever going to have a really first-class contemporary museum, we had to have a lot more space.

Castle:

You were mentioning at first, it sounds like there were a lot of challenges in both your first idea for expanding in the space you were in and then moving to the new building—that came with being part of the greater San Francisco community. What was going on that caused the protest response that happened in San Francisco?

00:11:25:11

Walker:

Oh, when we tried to expand the museum. But we would have wound up taking over the auditorium in the building. It turned that there had been some— well, Isaac Stern had had one of his first—going way back—had had one of his first violin performances on the West Coast there, so the idea that we would take over that auditorium as a part of the museum was probably the most contentious part of the whole thing. This was just one of our attempts to expand. We spent a lot of time looking at all sorts of space expansion alternatives. At one time, we decided that no, we'd stay where we were and

we would open a satellite, a second museum. We looked at a lot of space for that.

00:12:25:02

Then frankly, finally, when they really started the redevelopment area, we worked out a deal with the developer, which was Olympia & York. We were going to be the first four floors of a fifty-storey office building on Market Street. We spent a fair amount of time and money. We had a design for it. The more we got into doing the design, the more we realized that we were going to have a very compromised museum space for exhibitions because the pillars that held the floors above us had to come right down through our space, so it was not ideal space.

The nearer we got to the thing, I think Olympia & York began to realize that it wasn't really ideal to have a museum as a tenant for four floors in their office building. So they actually called a meeting in which they told us that they were not going to go ahead with the deal. We were out of it. So we yelled and screamed, brought in an attorney and talked about what they needed to do to get along in San Francisco. They had the space allocated to them by the Redevelopment Agency, that we're on now. So we finally actually took over their rights, whatever they were, to that space and worked out a program with the Redevelopment Agency to actually get the fee title for that land. So the building is now built on land that it's not leasing, but it owns.

00:13:59:07

But working with the Redevelopment Agency, they're a bunch of bureaucratic people, it took a lot of time, again, to get that deal finally ok'd.

Castle:

Well, redevelopment is quite a big issue, certainly, in the Bay Area in general, particularly in San Francisco. It sounds like a wonderfully well phrased way to put what sounds like it was a lot of work for you.

00:14:21:23

Walker:

It was a lot of annoying detail because they were not easy to deal with. But we finally got a good deal from our point of view. And, I think, a very good deal from theirs. Our main argument at the time was that they ought to give us the land, because we would vastly improve the value of all the land around it. Which is exactly what's happened.

Castle:

What were their concerns at the time, that they were articulating?

00:14:46:27

Walker:

Oh, giving any of their land away to a private entity. Typical political correctness sort of thing. Were we going to run the museum in the right way? We had a lot of arguments about how much minority participation we had to have in the contractors and a whole lot of San Francisco stuff. That we worked out. It was mostly just very time consuming. The other one who I'm sure you're going to interview, Gerson Bakar, was really the chairman of this real estate committee. He's a very experienced developer, and we worked

together, I would say, for five or six years, almost like a partnership. We spent a lot of time together.

Castle: And you both brought a certain set of skills and tenacity.

00:15:36:11

Walker:

Well, he brings a developer's skill, which is he believes that anything is possible. And I, the finance skill that believes we better look out about everything along the way. So we were a pretty good partnership. He was the real pushy entity to get things done and to go ahead and to work on it. I think you'd have to give him major credit for getting the building site and then getting the building in.

Castle: Well, that brings me to another question I was interested in asking you, about key players, if you will during your time, and later, however, you'd best like to answer it. But who were the individuals that you worked with in part of the museum administration and/or the trustees that you think are significant to mention?

00:16:31:05

Walker:

Well, Gerson is by far the one I spent the most time with, working with on the whole building project. Once we really started going, started to build the building, Elaine McKeon, of course, who was president for a large part of my term as chairman and then has served for eleven years as the chairman. She and I spent a tremendous amount of time together, basically, on staff issues at that point, and on trustee issues. Trustees take a lot of time.

Castle: What does that mean? In terms of—?

00:17:16:05

Walker:

Well, every trustee is there because, you know, they've been asked to join, but a lot of them can be very difficult. They think they know all they need to know about how anything should be done around the museum, or they get very involved with one curator or something else. So it's just a lot of little personal problems come up, and they just have to be handled properly. Because these trustees can always vote with their feet if they don't feel they're being handled properly. You don't want to lose your trustees, but you've got to keep them so that they don't get into the hair of the staff so much that it becomes a real problem.

Castle: It's a rather delicate dance.

00:17:55:17

Walker:

It is. It is a very delicate dance. It's exhausting, I would say.

Castle: So you mentioned briefly before, the role of the president and the chairman, I think, always takes a slightly different articulation, depending upon what organization we're looking at. In this case you worked closely with Elaine.

00:18:18:06

Walker:

And before that, with Evie Haas. There had been a history for quite a while. If the chairman was a woman, then the president was a man, and vice-versa. Usually, the woman had a tendency to spend a lot more time with the trustees, the bulk of whom were women, also. That went back to the old days when the trustees were a handful of men, and they were only responsible for the financing. The Women's Board was all women. They really were involved in helping the manager run the museum. So that we had a history of that. So until fairly recently, they've been men and women, either one way or another. In fact, I was president under Evie, and then when I first became chairman, Evie became president, which was very nice of her to do, because she was moving back down hill, if you will. That worked.

Castle:

Was it a policy, or just an unwritten policy, that you would balance between men and women?

00:19:29:17

Walker:

Unwritten. That was an unwritten policy. Just the way it seemed to work the best, I don't know. You don't want to have too many policies, right? You could always change your policies anyway, but, you know, you have to fit the round pegs in the round holes. You can't tell exactly. Oh, I can think of other examples about the difficulty with trustees. Right after I became chairman, we had an exhibition, and we had a local artist whose name I've forgotten right now, but it was a big brouhaha about some of the work that he wanted to install, that we thought was a little too controversial.

Castle:

In what way?

00:20:09:03

Walker:

A lot of people would have considered it just extremely sexually violent. We didn't want him to hang one of the paintings, and he didn't even want to hang any of the paintings. So we're having a board meeting in the War Memorial Building, and you could hear this noise outside. There was a little picket line going around in a circle, being led by one of our trustees, who happened to be a gal who had married a sports announcer in San Francisco, whose name was Walker. So her last name was Walker, too. The press just loved this. The next thing was a headline in the arts section of the *Oakland Tribune*. It said "Walker Versus Walker." That was an example of what we were going through in those days.

Castle:

How did you handle that, do you remember?

00:21:11:21

Walker:

Well, we just kept working around with it. She finally left the board. Of her own volition, but that was an example of how the trustees were really getting. She was a very avid art collector. She had inherited some money, and she just cared totally about the art. But any time any management thing came up that she wasn't comfortable with, this would be her reaction, was to go down and

picket the institution. We finally have emerged a change from that, where the trustees that are just more trouble causing than they're worth have run away now. But we had some tough times like that.

Castle: Any others that are coming to mind?

00:22:04:03

Walker: No, that was the only one. I haven't thought about that for quite a while either, this was a long time ago.

Castle: How long did that go on, do you remember?

00:22:13:08

Walker: Oh, on and off, probably for a year.

Castle: Really?

Walker: Yes. Oh, yes. She and a small group of trustees, in conjunction with a curator, our older curator of photography, who for a while there, was acting director, because the old director had left, they were really very actively trying to get me replaced as chairman. It was a little difficult time.

Castle: So what year was that?

00:22:51:26

Walker: '84, '85, around in there. I think I hadn't been chairman very long.

Castle: Was Henry Hopkins still there?

00:23:03:04

Walker: He was there for part of the time, and then Henry Hopkins had really done a great job building this little tiny museum up to a considerably bigger size. To some of us, it seemed that he had built it up to an organization that he wasn't really— It was not easy for him to run. But it wouldn't have gotten to that size without the work that he did. He was a curator who had come up to finally being a chairman. Well, a director, rather. But he wasn't a particularly good manager. So we asked Henry to leave. Van Deren Coke, was his name, was the director of photography forever there. So he was the acting director for a while. He was leading the insurgencies to change the board-level management, too. But it didn't happen, so they outlasted him.

Castle: Were you involved with bringing in the next director?

00:24:13:23

Walker: Yes, very much so. Yes, definitely.

Castle: Could you tell me a little bit about that and your interpretations?

00:24:19:04

Walker:

Well, we had a headhunter. We had a bunch of names, and we finally got down to a couple. They weren't particularly interested in the job. We were still an upper-storey museum in the War Memorial Building, we weren't very well known, and nobody knew much about us. So the candidates that looked the best were really pretty reluctant; they weren't very interested.

00:24:46:24

We finally got down to thinking that Jack Lane would be the best, and he really finally turned us down. About the same time, we had been working a lot on this, on the building site concept and so forth. So we finally went to the board and passed a resolution that we were going to build a new building.

00:25:13:04

We didn't have a site yet. We went back and contacted Jack Lane again and said, "Look, the board has agreed to build a new major building." I think we had three \$5 million commitments. They were verbal commitments, but we at least had some credibility there. And on that basis, he was willing to come with us. We started with that, and he came with us with the interest of building up the collection.

00:25:47:11

Oh, yes, we also had to commit that we would have X million dollars of money for acquisition. I can't remember what that number was now, but it strikes me it might have been \$4 or \$5 million. We had no acquisition fund, either, at that time.

00:26:05:12

So Jack came with us, with a real interest in being involved in building the new building. He was a very integral part of the whole— He was with us ten years, and that was just about the time that we got through building that building.

Castle:

What was your experience like, working with him?

00:26:22:27

Walker:

Well, overall, I would say pleasant. There's always a little bit of a problem with a museum board and a museum director. They don't always have exactly the same agenda. The museum directors, by their natural interest is going to be very interested in his image in the art world. That means particularly, the collection and the exhibition program. He's apt to feel, first of all, that the board ought to stay completely out of that area. That's very common in particularly in modern and contemporary museums, that the staff just makes all the artistic decisions, and the board raises the money.

00:27:17:24

So you get into a little conflict of where the director is pushing for something, and you think really, it's not something you can afford. That's the pulling and hawing that goes on all the time.

Castle:

Where there any specific instances you remember, where that type of conflict arose, and how you resolved it?

00:27:41:24

Walker:

Well, what happened, I had a guy who's now dead, Toby Schreiber, was chairman of our finance committee. Every year we would sit down and really go over the director's budget for the next year and, to a certain extent, tear it apart. That was where the tension came, because we would inevitably be given a budget that either was overly optimistic about where income was going to come from or, we thought, overly lavish on where the expenses would go. So it was an annual battle. Eventually, we prevailed, in terms of that at the end of the year, you had to have paid for what you did.

Castle:

Let's return a little bit to the building campaign. From the very earliest beginnings, you were involved with this process. How did you raise that money? How do you pitch to somebody? How do you bring them in? How do you get them on board?

00:29:01:04

Walker:

I think it's a very personal thing, because a contemporary museum is not everybody's cup of tea. So you're not going to have a broad fundraising with the general public. Most of our money came from the board. As I say, we'd been building the board for quite a while before we started the campaign. The major contributors, or the ones that had said they would contribute, who'd committed, I put them all on the architect-selection committee. So they were all very involved in the selection of the architect and the design of the building. So it became their project. I'm sure they all feel very strongly that they have great ownership in the thing. I think that's essential when you're doing a building project. That worked. Now, the danger in that is that everybody's got different opinions about architecture, or an architect. Everybody on that committee could walk with their feet if they didn't like it. It happened in L.A. that the chairman of the architecture committee, when they were going to do the LA MOCA, didn't agree with the rest of the committee on who should be hired, and he went. He had the largest verbal commitment, and he just left. He left the museum. He didn't get his architect; he wasn't going to play ball. There's always a risk of that, but we wound up with unanimous agreement on the architect, Mario Botta.

Castle:

How did that come about? Unanimous when people, as you say, can vote with their feet and obviously have money at stake. What was it about Mario Botta that allowed for this unanimous agreement?

00:30:56:29

Walker:

Well, I think several things. First of all, we went through a very elaborate procedure, with outside help. Had a list of every architect anybody wanted to suggest. Then we had a team of one museum director from— We built a team that took this list and broke it down to about eight or ten names. Then the committee took over. We had presentations of six architects.

00:31:26:27

Then a committee went out and visited the sites of some of the work that they'd done. With hindsight, I think that one of the reasons that the committee

was unanimous very early and very long with it. None of the other finalists, when we really looked at it, [felt] quite right. I think we really only had one candidate, from most of our point of view, from a pretty early position. We had Frank Gehry in there. He didn't really want to do it, and we were worried about whether he could, because he'd just started this very big job down in Los Angeles, on the Disney [symphony hall], and we knew that was a bigger job than his office was really set up to do. I also am not at all sure that most of us felt that Frank Gehry's style would have fit in with San Francisco that well. Then some of the others just weren't contemporary enough. The buildings looked a little— One of them was a great building, but it looked more like a library or something like that. When we saw the work that Mario had done in Switzerland, where it's just elegant but it had a modern feeling, it just looked like it was going to last. You'd be happy with it fifty years from now. We all agreed on it, so it worked out very well. At that point, you had all the major donors as really major stakeholders in the thing, and I think that's what made the project work.

Castle: I read in a piece, a brief intro piece that you wrote, that there was a trustee that had pledged a \$10 million challenge grant. That was early on in the process? Now, correct me if I'm wrong. I might have gotten the number wrong. That seemed like a huge way to jump-start the campaign.

00:33:44:01

Walker: We started out, we had three \$5 million commitments. Then later on, we went back, after we had gotten everybody that we thought could be a million-dollar donor or a little more, we went to several of them and got them to increase. By then, everybody had their bit in the teeth, and we were going to get this thing done, no matter what.

Castle: So people were more invested in it, and maybe willing to consider their donation?

00:34:17:00

Walker: Right. The major donors, most of them, also were willing to go talk to other people. And of course, when they'd made a very large commitment, it was easier for them to talk to someone about a million-dollar commitment.

Castle: It was a little bit of a blossoming effect, where you maybe would make an appeal to a certain trustee, and then that person would in turn talk to others.

00:34:44:28

Walker: When we first started, we hired a local firm. The first thing they wanted to do was a credibility study. We already had three \$5 million commitments. They still want to do a credibility study, and I thought: "Well, it's really silly." But they insisted on it. It turned out to be a very good idea because what they did was interview all the key trustees and a handful of people that were important to the museum, but were not trustees.

00:35:18:10 They came back with a lot of negative comments about my management style, which was not totally open and I didn't have much patience with committees and so forth. So we had to change a lot of stuff. We did that first. But as a result of that, the young man that was doing the study had a lot of insight about our individual donors—or potential donors.

00:35:50:21 He was very careful that he didn't reveal exactly what they'd said. But at the same time, he could give us really good advice on how they ought to be pitched, and who perhaps should talk to them. Because they'd been very open with him, and they'd been relatively critical. So he was invaluable. I spent a lot of time with him, strategizing on who we would next approach and how we would approach them, and even to some extent, how much we'd ask for.

Castle: Who was this person? Can you identify him?

00:36:27:00  
Walker:

I forget names all the time. He's from around here. He may've been retired now. He finally worked as the development director at the symphony. He had his own private firm, but it was really he and one young woman that helped him a little bit. It was a very small firm. I'll think of his name in a minute.

Castle: I think this is what you refer to in the article as “the quiet planning study.”

00:37:17:14  
Walker:

Well yes, that's what he came up with, yes. We had 70 percent of the money raised, before we, quote, “announced” we even had a campaign. Which is the way you do it. I mean, everybody in the business of being a consultant has pretty much the same advice packages. But this guy just happened to develop very good rapport. Chris Hess.

Castle: Chris Hess.

00:37:42:26  
Walker:

Chris Hess. He had developed very good rapport with a lot of our trustees and potential trustees, and they would speak very frankly to him. He became a great adviser on how to pitch them and so forth.

Castle: What would you say from your experience in talking with trustees, especially during this period— As you said, there's not really a way to make a broad appeal, because of the nature of modern and contemporary art, but what were their motivations? Why were people so interested and willing to give such a significant sum of money to see this museum grow?

00:38:19:18  
Walker:

Well, basically, our major donors were all collectors. So it's simple enough. They were collecting the same art that the museum was collecting, and they have a lot of collections that we're hoping are going to come to the museum. I think that people who collect seriously—and not just because they've got one

wall open or something, but they just collect art, without knowing where they're going to put it—at some point, always begin to want to have a plan as to what's going to happen to that art down the road. If they've spent, you know, a lot of their lifetime energy collecting it, they're not too interested in leaving it to the heirs, because the taxes are so high, and then the heirs will just sell it, and so their whole collection goes away. So they have a tendency to want to be sure that they've been involved in an entity that they think might be the place for it to reside after their death. That's in fact, all of them were very interested in contemporary art.

Castle: You unanimously chose Mario Botta to design the building. Did you have much input into what the building was actually going to look like? Because it's quite a landmark.

00:39:50:15

Walker:

The committee did. I would say that particularly Gerson Bakar, again, was very influential in this. The first thing that we did—which was, again, we told Mario about— It wasn't traditional. We told Mario who we wanted him to use as the local architects, who have to be, you know, familiar with building codes and design and so forth. He sent one young man over from Switzerland. But we told him who we wanted him to use, and then he, of course, immediately rebelled at that.

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He wanted to do it himself. The danger, from our point of view, was that it's system responsibility. If we're picking the local one, then if things go wrong, it's not his fault. But he finally agreed that they would be good to work with, and they worked very well together. They worked very well together.

Castle: Who was this?

00:40:44:10

Walker:

We made the decision, the committee, but it was Gerson and I and a couple other members of the committee. Tom Swift, who is gone, had been a major office building developer. He spent a lot of time on the actual management of the construction process. More than any of the rest of us, by far. We hired Bechtel to be the management clerk, but Tom was just on it all the time. So we built it right on schedule. It was a low period in the economy nationwide, but locally too. It was very easy for us to get contractors and subcontractors; all of them were looking for work. We were able to bring the building in right on time, and right on budget. I'd say major credit for that would go to Tom Swift. Who has since moved away from the area, so he's not around in the museum anymore. But it was something that he did anyway, as his regular business, on the office building that he was involved with, and so he just brought his expertise to us for free, and he did a great job.

Castle: I saw that it said the museum opened on the actual day of the sixtieth anniversary of the SFMOMA.

00:42:12:08

Walker:

Yes, I don't remember that we hit the exact day of an anniversary. We didn't work back from that date, that just happened. Once we had enough money in hand and had the architect, and the design was done enough to start construction, then it was a matter of just taking what the normal construction cycle would be, to come out with the date of when we expected to be finished. Usually, you know, you'll get a little slippage, both in dates and in cost, but we didn't. So we wound up opening when we intended to, but we didn't pick the anniversary date and try to work back and get everything done to get to it. It just happened.

Castle:

How would you say the museum changed, in what way? Once the building is open and you move, how is SFMOMA different? What's happening to the space or the vision?

00:43:16:16

Walker:

We just moved up a tremendous number of grades from where we were, as far as our image nationally and internationally. Also, as far as our image, you know, to ourselves. It was a classic concept that if you build it, they will come. That's what happened with the art.

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By the time we got the building finished, the building was so much better than the art collection that it was really quite evident and quite dramatic. So some of our trustees started giving us works or giving us— Phyllis Wattis gave us a lot of money to buy works in conjunction with the curators, to fill major holes that we had. And of course, our exhibitions attracted a lot more attention in the building than they had in the old place. So we just moved up into a whole different level of respect, of feeling, of enthusiasm of the trustees for what was going on.

Castle:

I know that you've mentioned that you focused much more on the financial end, but do you recall any particularly significant acquisitions during that time, especially those "filling certain gaps." Do you recall what those gaps were and how they were filled?

00:44:43:23

Walker:

Well, there's always gaps. There will continue to be gaps. Well, let's see. With Phyl's help, I don't know that I could say any one or two that were that outstanding. There probably are a couple that were more outstanding than any others, but we acquired a lot of art during that period.

Castle:

In the new building, when you say you're jumping in stature, both locally, nationally, and internationally, where would you put yourself, within the hierarchy, if you will, of museums?

00:45:32:11

Walker:

Well, if we were going to do a hierarchy, we would stick to modern, contemporary museums of art. Certainly, we're below New York MoMA.

We're probably perceived as pretty much level with the Walker [Art Center] in Minneapolis—which I happen to be on the board of, too, because I'm a Walker, originally from that part of the world. But I don't spend any time at that at all. I think above LA MOCA. We're quite a bit bigger operation than the Walker, even with the expanded building there now, as far as our operating budget and so forth. But as far as exhibitions and so forth, I think we're very much on a pretty level plane with the Walker.

00:46:25:04 We're more and more now starting to work even closer with them, and we've acquired some pieces of art together, and sharing them, which I think is a coming thing for a lot of contemporary museums. It's a question, as long as you have access to a painting part of the year, does it make any difference whether you own all or half of it?

Castle: Is this something that's more of a new trend?

00:46:51:25 Walker: Yes, it is. I would say that, before, museums were very hung on the ownership of it. They wanted to build their collection, and that meant they had to own it. But now I think more and more, they think: "Well, you can still build the collection, even if you've got a partner in the ownership." I think that'll be very much a continuing trend from now on.

Castle: Do you have a vision for the museum? What is that vision, and how has it changed over time, and what might it be now?

00:47:36:04 Walker: Well, it's a very good question, and I'm not sure how to answer a vision question. You know, corny things, like we want to be the best we can be, and we wouldn't like to lose our place in the international world of how modern, contemporary museums are regarded. We have an interesting problem in San Francisco. The demographics of San Francisco are changing very rapidly. We are contemporary art, and our collection doesn't appeal so much to the new demographics. The question is how we can become a little more relevant in our own community. That's a continual problem, I think.

Castle: When you're talking about changing demographics, it's a recognition of the increasing "browning" of California, the increase in people of color?

00:48:39:26 Walker: Well, and I think particularly the Hispanic increase in the whole state, but in this area, also. We have some very excellent Hispanic art. There's more that we can do with that, but we would like to see more of the typical population of San Francisco in our museum.

Castle: So you face the challenge of finding a way to both appeal to and incorporate those community needs.

00:49:05:10

Walker:

The thing we're struggling with right now is the question of popular art shows versus *significant* art shows, if you will. We are going to try to move a little more towards doing some more shows that will be popular and might not be considered high falutin' art. That's happening around the country. They're doing an Apple Computer-Steve Jobs thing in one of the New York museums right now. So the things like—which used to be discussed for years—would you ever do a exhibit of Disney plates, when they used to do everything by hand? They were amazing drawings. You know, millions of them for each Disney cartoon. That was always a question. Would you ever do a show of Disney plates? The answer was, "Oh, well, they wouldn't do that; that's not proper for a museum." I think that attitude is changing. That's one of the ways, if you want to broaden your base, you really have to broaden your programming. It's not easy to sell a cutting-edge contemporary art exhibit beyond the people that are already sold on contemporary art. They just don't understand it. You know, "My kid could do that."

So I think as far as vision for the future, I think that that is an important aspect of what we'd like to do in operating the museum. The other thing we worry about all the time is that we say you never have enough space, so how're we ever going to grow, past a certain amount? We've designed the museum so that, although we have one-and-a-half floors of office space right now, they're all designed so they would be excellent exhibition space. The building is a big square T, and there're two missing pieces on the back. We could fill those in and add to the space. That's pretty much the end of it. So at that point, if we found office space right near to the museum, we move everybody out, and we have just exhibition space in the museum. At some point down the road, we'll be space bound again, but we'll just have to live with that.

Castle:

I want to ask one clarifying question. I think we could also talk about this in further interviews down the line, but it's interesting that you always come up against changing times and changing notions of how you capture the interest of the public, whatever you are as an organization or an institution. As the museum of modern art. I think it's interesting because what you described was two different things. I want to see if it is two separate strains, the one notion of keeping up with popular culture, which to some, can be described as maybe more base and vulgar. Is that seen as different, though, than working with culturally relevant and ethnic-specific art? Because I think they're both two tracks that take a while to maybe be seen by a set of trustees, for example, as that which is relevant. Also, with popular culture, there is something to be said about what you put your stamp on, if you will.

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Walker:

Oh, yes, that's always been the concern, is to whether you're selling yourself too short. It's going to be a growing pressure for all museums, particularly contemporary, modern ones. We're all more and more driven by turnstiles. The turnstile produces all the earned income, whether it comes out of your

bookstore or your restaurant or whatever. The bottom line is all the museums have gotten larger and larger staffs, and so forth. They're not the comfy little places they used to be years ago, where they had a certain amount of endowment and a bunch of sleepy curators, and they might have put on a show once in a while, and if anybody showed up, that was fine, but it didn't make a lot of difference. The Walker, for a large part of history, didn't charge admission. Whatever their attendance was, they could make it up, they didn't charge anything, but that world has changed now tremendously. So we're all dabbling with this idea of, are we still doing shows that we're really proud of, as far as advancing the understanding and knowledge of contemporary art, versus shows that are popular? It's just a balance. You just have to work with it. I think no way you can generalize much about it.

Castle: So the stakes are high, it sounds like.

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Walker: Well, I think so. I think that you've got a danger that if you move too fast into trying things that are contemporarily popular, that you may lose some of your trustees who think, "That's not what we're here for." So yes, you've got to balance it.

Castle: Well, let me ask just one final question for today, and that's, in your perspective, what do you see is the relationship between SFMOMA and the people of San Francisco? What has SFMOMA done, and vice versa, for the City of San Francisco?

00:55:18:06

Walker: I think that probably, maybe the most important thing is that by locating the museum where we did, which was a— You know, this was on the other side of—not only on the other side of Market Street, it's on the other side of the world. We were the first entity that really turned that whole area around. The result of our being there has made a tremendous difference in what was—what at one time had been a slum area down there before the redevelopment came in. Just placing it where we did has been a big plus for that whole part of the city. It's a really growing part of the city right now. As far as the influence of our art or our shows on the city in general, it'd be pretty hard to say exactly what that is.

00:56:21:11

We have a very active program for school kids. So the teachers are in there all the time with kids. At Fort Mason, we've got an artist's gallery that carries only local artists. They rent them or sell them. Rent them to offices and things. Obviously, I think it's been a very big help for the local art community that are still not at the point that they really would get a commercial gallery to do.

00:57:01:01

So we've had as much influence as I think we can in with our very narrow, well defined interest in art, contemporary art.

Castle: And what's SFMOMA done for you in your life? How has it affected you?

00:57:22:11

Walker: Me?

Castle: You.

Walker: Or the city?

Castle: You.

00:57:28:28

Walker: I don't know, I think I'm just very delighted with the way the museum turned out, and so I feel proud of having been a significant part of getting the new building and getting it going.

[End of Interview]

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