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Culture Lab Detroit pushes the boundaries of architecture, exploring placemaking in social space.

BY ANTWAUN SARGENT

This month, Culture Lab Detroit, the annual discussion series founded in 2013 by Jane Schulak that brings together artists, architects and theorists, will explore the idea of how expanding access to public spaces can foster opportunity. Among the speakers is Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami. “Our institutional identity is inextricably tied to the surrounding community. We seek to be one and the same,” says Sirmans, who will speak on a panel entitled “Sliding Walls: Reimagining the Architecture of Social Space.”

For Sirmans, sliding walls are not only about expanding a museum’s mission. “At Pérez Art Museum Miami, this means outreach, it means public programming, it means making sure all third graders have an experience at the museum with our top-caliber educators,” he says. “This idea could be seen in a museum’s architecture, which includes not just galleries, but also theaters, libraries, classrooms, cafes or spaces designed for leisure.”

Eva Franch i Gilabert, executive director and chief curator of Storefront for Art and Architecture, will also be present at the series as a participant in the “Stones Thrown: Art and Social Progress” program. “Storefront’s mission throughout the years has consistently been to exhibit, produce and connect alternative ideas that challenge the status quo,” she says. “Through our program of exhibitions, events, competitions and publications, we see our role as instigator within the cultural sphere very aligned with the stone thrower, but one that is loaded with very specific vectors of desire.

“There are two ways of waging wars: One is by throwing stones and one is by putting them next to each other. As an architect building cultural edifices, I am interested in both,” Franch i Gilabert continues. She says her remarks will focus on the production of social and collective forms that are not just perpetuations of existing forms of power. “To produce new forms that allow for human and environmental sustainability, that achieve higher levels of freedom and equality, and that empower those not seated at the decision-making table, might take more than just an aesthetic or a rhetoric; it might take a Trojan Horse strategy,” she adds.

While discussions around establishing more democratic future forms internationally take place at the Detroit event, the artist Gary Simmons will present an installation that explores erasure, public nostalgia and how walls can be used to reimagine the built environment. Simmons will reconsider the structures that define everyday interaction by wallpapering a site in the Motor City with musical flypaper, and his installation will incorporate ephemeral promotional posters—some even sourced from Detroit’s techno scene. “The Detroit music scene has always been interesting for me because of its invention and styles of different forms—its Motown, its bands like MC5, its techno and hip-hop. It’s got a great and rich musical tapestry.”

“I’m not sure where this inclusive, flexible architecture is headed,” says Sirmans, “but I’m excited.”



Culture Lab Detroit founder Jane Schulak

PHOTO BY LISA SPINDLER