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VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art: 'the most structurally complex building I have ever been associated with'

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By Katherine Calos



The VCU Institute for Contemporary Art is being constructed at the corner of West Broad and North Belvidere Streets Wednesday, June 29, 2016.

The Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University is beginning to take shape on the corner of Belvidere and Broad in a project whose stunning design has produced confounding complexity.

The man overseeing the job now is Richard Sliwoski, whose previous projects included the Virginia State Capitol renovation and underground addition completed in 2007 when he was director of the Virginia Department of General Services. He retired from DGS in October and became interim associate vice president for facilities management at VCU in December.

"It is the most structurally complex building I have ever been associated with," Sliwoski said this week. "I'm 65, and I've been down the road a bit."

He has no doubts about the ultimate result.

"It is going to be magnificent," he said, "an iconic building not only for Richmond but in the nation."

Sliwoski's other projects for the state included renovation of the Ninth Street Office Building as part of a long-term plan to update or replace buildings around Capitol Square, including the General Assembly Building and Old City Hall.

He said none of them was like the ICA.

"It's the forking effect you have for the building that makes it complex," he said, "and internal radiuses for the walls that will take quite some craftsmanship to get. We're well on our way with those."

Before Sliwoski took on the ICA project, construction came to a halt for five months last year while VCU officials negotiated a reduction in contractor fees that came in above projections.

The building designed by New York-based Steven Holl Architects will be a signature gateway to the campus and its top-ranked art school.

At a September meeting of the VCU board of visitors, the total cost of the project was estimated at \$41.19 million, up from \$36.8 million. The \$4.39 million increase was attributed to subcontractors estimating higher costs in response to the final construction drawings for the project's geothermal wells, foundation and building. The ICA has less than \$2m to raise to reach the \$36.8m capital campaign goal, according to ICA officials. Additionally, the University will contribute private funds (non state, tuition and fees) toward the project.

Sliwoski estimated that the project is about 40 percent complete at this point. Heating and air-conditioning equipment has been dropped into the basement. Steel work should be finished by late July or early August. The metal skin on the building's exterior will probably start to appear in September. The building should be closed in by late November.

With walls going up about 30 feet high, some sections of the building have reached their full height. The second floor gallery is still rising toward the building's top height of 72 feet.

Plans for a topping-out celebration are under discussion for late summer. "We want to do something that will engage the campus," said Maura Scanlon, director of communications.

Work has also proceeded on staffing and programming for the new museum, which will not have a permanent collection. The senior team is in place, and directors are focused on hiring supporting positions. Programming for 2017, 2018 and 2018 is under development. An opening date in 2017 will be announced in a few months, Scanlon said.

Current staff totals 11 full-time people. The search is on for an assistant curator and associate director of academic programs for students and faculty.

"We are incredibly proud of the team we've built," said Jaime Baird, ICA director of administration. "We look forward to doubling our staff size in a year."

Sliwoski said the construction project has developed a good rhythm.

"It's a pretty great cohesive team," he said. "With any project, there are always issues or things not anticipated. We meet weekly for an hour with everybody on the team, figure out what the snag is."

Recently, for instance, there was an issue with a thermal break, which will prevent sweat from forming behind the walls and possibly damaging the building and artworks. The team was undaunted, Sliwoski said.

"There are solutions."