VCU's landmark ICA arts building opening delayed until spring 2018

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ICA museum at the corner of West Broad and Belvidere streets on Wednesday, June 28, 2017.
JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

The opening of Virginia Commonwealth University's landmark Institute for Contemporary Art is being delayed until spring 2018 — months later than the original Oct. 28 planned opening.

Officials announced the postponement Thursday and said the delay was due to a "revised schedule for the completion of construction and acclimatization of the new building before the art can be installed."

A new opening date for the $41 million uniquely styled building at Belvidere and Broad streets in Richmond hasn't been determined.

VCU had announced the October opening date — and opening exhibit — during a media event in New York City in February that attracted reporters from national and international publications. The university reiterated that opening date during a sneak peek held in late April.

But now officials say the 41,000-square-foot building's humidity and temperature levels need about three months of monitoring before artworks can be brought in.

"We have 43 geothermal wells underground on the site that are doing the heating and cooling for much of the building. And we also have four rooftop gardens that are helping to really absorb the rainwater and purify it and offset some of the carbon emissions in the area, as well," ICA Director Lisa Freiman said.

"So it's a very environmentally sensitive building. It's a complicated building in terms of its engineering, and so we want to make sure that all parts of it are ready to go so that we can have balanced (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) in our galleries. ... We have HVAC turned on in part of the building but not all of it yet," Freiman said.

Once the HVAC system is on in the entire building it will take about 12 weeks of monitoring temperature and humidity levels to ensure the building is properly climatized, Freiman said.

Materials used in making art — wood, glue, paint and cloth — can be damaged if continuously exposed to temperatures or humidity levels outside of certain ranges.
“The other thing is ... there is a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done on the operations side of getting up and running in the space itself,” Freiman said.

“It’s not just a building that we are opening, but it really is an institution. We are thrilled to have an extraordinary architect and a beautiful building as a landmark, but the mission part of this is very much focused on the exhibitions and programs and making that available for student engagement and public learning,” she said.

VCU spokeswoman Pamela Lepley said a new opening date will be announced later.

A capital campaign has raised $36 million in private money for construction of the $41 million building. An endowment campaign also is ongoing.

“Everybody is sort of disappointed that we have to have a conversation about delaying a scheduled opening and picking a different date,” said Steve Markel, vice chairman of the Henrico County-based specialty insurer Markel Corp. Steve and Kathie Markel are ICA capital campaign co-chairs with Pam and Bill Royall.

“I had the pleasure of walking through ... The architecture and design — it’s really breathtaking to see the building itself. It’s frustrating that we have to wait any longer, but it’s very clear that this is the right thing,” Markel said.

The ICA’s Markel Center is named for the Markel Corp., a major contributor to the ICA.

This is not the first time the project has faced delays.

VCU hired internationally acclaimed New York-based Steven Holl Architects in 2011 to design a building that will be a gateway to the university.

VCU broke ground on the building in June 2014.

It initially was scheduled to open in 2016.

But construction on the project stopped for five months in 2015 while VCU officials negotiated a reduction in higher-than-projected contractor fees for the project’s geothermal wells, foundation and the building.

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