

## MAKING ART SPACES, BUILDING COMMUNITY: DEBORAH FRIEDEN, MFA '76

by Sarah J. Stevenson, MFA '04

When Deborah Frieden was an art student at Mills, she had no idea that 15 years later she'd be overseeing the renovation of one of the West Coast's premier art museums.

"I didn't even know people did what I do now when I was going to college," she says, "and I never dreamed I would have an interest in it."

At the time, Deborah worked in the Mills Art Gallery, then went on to coordinate independent films in San Francisco. From there, her organizational talent led her to work for an up-and-coming law firm, managing its expansion and remodeling efforts. After ten years of soaking up knowledge about the legal and contractual aspects of her job, she was hired by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to manage the restoration and expansion of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor.

However, it was Frieden's work as project manager for the rebuilding of the de Young Museum that was her true *pièce de résistance*. All of the planning and implementation, from the budget to the hiring to the architectural selection process, was included on her impressive list of responsibilities. And the job wasn't easy.

Two state bond measures that would have supplied critical funding to the project, one in 1996 and one in 1998, failed to pass, so the Board of Trustees sought private funding. Luckily, the community was on their side.

"We ended up with over 6,000 individual donors to the project of a thousand dollars or more, including many community members for whom a thousand dollars was a significant contribution."

The other major obstacle was the architecture. The firm Herzog & de Meuron had created a design whose subtle detail was difficult to communicate to the public. Moreover, not everyone was convinced that the new de Young should have a tower.

"When we held workshops with the public, the public told us that the tower was an iconic element of the museum," Deborah points out. Despite some heavily publicized criticism of the design, she says that most people do love the place—now that they've had a chance to experience it.

"The architects worked very hard to make the visitor experience quite thrilling and diverse, so that you have lively spaces, you have quiet spaces, contemplative spaces, and daylight spaces and dark spaces and dramatic spaces. . . . I think part of people's fear of modern architecture is that it's going to be cold and impersonal, whereas this building is anything but that."

The tower was dubbed the Education Tower, in honor of one of the primary roles of the museum in the community. Classrooms, teachers' resources, a lecture hall—Deborah helped ensure that all of these were included in the architects' design, so that the de Young could play a vital role in community arts education for many years to come. Moreover, she says, "It has put San Francisco on the architectural map."

Now, Frieden has reached another moment of change in her career. In the fall, she began a prestigious one-year fellowship in Cambridge, Massachusetts—the Loeb Fellowship—which is for "mid-career professionals who have had an impact on the built or natural environment."

Frieden welcomes the opportunity to use her skills in new ways. She hopes to study a range of subjects, including courses on photographing the urban narrative, urban planning and public discourse, and nonprofit management. Despite her years of experience working on high-profile projects for one of the most culturally active cities in the country, she still maintains a down-to-earth, even humble, outlook on the changes in her life.

"It's very exciting," she says. "It's a huge change to leave your work and your home and your life and just drop out for nine months, come to Harvard, get settled, and become a student again." But no matter what comes next for Deborah Frieden, it's certain to enrich the community around her.



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