

Pier 24 photo center captures fans



Photo: Spencer Brown

Shutterbug shrine: Pier 24 is a model for developing decrepit piers, says Snellgrove.

Pier 24 Photography is putting a sharp focus on how San Francisco deals with its dilapidated piers. In the two years since it opened, the nonprofit center dedicated to photography has become a draw for serious photography collectors and scholars around the world, a hidden — not to mention free — gem that juts out into the water next to the Bay Bridge. The 28,000-square-foot center, which houses the Pilara Family Foundation's collection, is the largest space in the world dedicated exclusively to exhibiting photography.

SFMOMA Director Neal Benezra said Pier 24 “has already had an enormous impact on the city's cultural landscape” and is the envy of museum directors he has spoken to around the world.

“This is a city that boasts a tremendous group of collectors of photography, and Andy and Mary Pilara (of the Pilara Family Foundation) have one of the most extraordinary collections of photographs in the world,” said Benezra. “To have a space dedicated to photography collections and exhibitions and events and lectures has been extraordinary. It has become a centerpiece of photography in the city.”

Developer Simon Snellgrove of Pacific Waterfront Partners, which developed the project for the foundation, thinks the project offers a model for the redevelopment of other decrepit piers in danger of falling into the sea. He was originally approached by philanthropist and investment banker Andrew Pilara, who needed a warehouse to store his collection.

“He wanted very cheap space. (Pilara) said ‘Just a warehouse, nothing fancy.’ Of course I got to know him, and his idea of nothing fancy was a little different.”

Snellgrove first took Pilara to the Presidio and a few other options before showing him Pier 24. For 10 years, the Port of San Francisco futilely tried to find a use for Pier 24. Failed projects ranged from a mixed-use retail center, a Willie Mays-focused museum, a women's museum (as part of a larger Pier 26 development) and a hovercraft landing that would have connected to San Francisco and Oakland airports for air freight transport. It was used as storage for skateboard ramps from the X games. It has otherwise been vacant since the 1980s.

The Pier 24 project, paid for by the foundation, cost \$12 million, of which \$7.7 million went to core and shell improvements. As the building was partially condemned, the scope of work also included piling and foundation repairs, structural improvements and exterior building envelope repairs. The pier, part of which had been condemned, is now a sleek climate-controlled hybrid of storage and exhibition space, while maintaining a gallery-like aesthetic.

Pier 24 is open Monday through Thursday by appointment; Fifty visitors are allowed in at a time; all the slots generally fill up at the start of each month. Pier 24 is also visited by about 40 school groups a month. Snellgrove said he is hoping to develop the two piers to the south — piers 26 and 28 — to become museums for the Chinese American Cultural Society and possibly the International Women's Museum or another cultural group. Snellgrove said that the projects would be eligible for historic tax credits as long as the port is willing to sign a long-term, 40-year lease.

"Everybody gets it that with these historic assets we need to find ways to finance the historic rehabilitation because the city and the port don't have the money. The takeaway (from Pier 24) was to think outside the box for uses," said Snellgrove.

For those who have not taken the time to visit Pier 24, it is surprising to see so many world-famous photographers in one place: Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus, Larry Sultan and Cindy Sherman, among others. The current exhibit of portraits, "About Face," includes Hiroshi Sugimoto's series of Henry the VIII and his wives and hand-painted family portraits from Brazil.

Pier 24 has about 20 docents. The photographs are not labeled, nor are there biographies and other information. "We want people to experience the space through the visual information first," said program manager Seth Curcio. "If they elect to get additional information (then) they have a few means of doing that. They can refer to the gallery information books and three docents on the floor for every group."