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SoMa alleys to become public art installations

By Sam Whiting

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Jessica Shaefer (left), Wendi Norris and Dorka Keehn of Sites Unseen plan to “activate” seven alleys, including this stretch of Natoma Street from Second Street to SFMOMA.

The new wing of SFMOMA has a picture window over Natoma Alley, and when the museum reopens in the spring of 2016, that view will reveal public art in the street that you can come down and touch.

The art in the alleys will not be part of the museum. It will be put there by Dorka Keehn and Wendi Norris, public art activists who have created Sites Unseen, an independent project to “activate” seven alleys in the Yerba Buena neighborhood.

By populating Annie, Clementina, Lapu Lapu, Minna, Natoma, Shipley and Jessie with sculptures, murals and installations, the goal is to draw foot traffic off the thoroughfares and onto the narrow side streets, thereby depopulating them of crime.

“What we have learned in public art is that plopping a sculpture in a plaza doesn’t necessarily solve the problem, because people will go behind the artwork to deal drugs,” says Keehn, a public art consultant who chairs the visual art committee for the San Francisco Arts Commission. “One of the ways

we've learned to activate a place is that not only do you put a piece of art there, but you continue to engage the public with activities around the artwork.”

There will be dance performances, film screenings, maybe food trucks, walking tours and an app. Expectations for Sites Unseen are high. High as “the High Line in New York,” says Norris, owner of Gallery Wendi Norris on Jessie, one of the alleys. “If you are going to Chelsea, you are walking the High Line and seeing what the art is there. It’s accessible for people from all over the world and all ages. We’re hoping we can have our version of that.”

To get there will require overcoming challenges not faced by that elevated railway track in Manhattan. For one, the seven alleys are not contiguous and most are not closed to automobile traffic. Crosswalks are not convenient. The temptation is to jaywalk from alley to alley; then there are the dangers lying in wait in the alleys themselves.

“It’s pretty gritty, and there is a safety issue here,” Norris says, while walking up Clementina, which connects Third Street to Howard by bending around a corner darkened by an old brick wall. “Building owners want something done about it.”

Sites Unseen is an outgrowth of the Yerba Buena Street Life Plan, which has closed off Annie, next to the California Historical Society, with seating beneath a trellis. Giving people a reason to sit and stay is the job of Sites Unseen.

“We are not doing anything that is just pretty,” Keehn says. “We are doing art that is going to be interesting and engage people. They are going to want to hang out, touch it, play with it.”

The project will roll out over three years, starting with Natoma, a marquee two-block alley that will connect SFMOMA to the tower at the Transbay Transit Center. Scheduled to open in 2017, it will be the tallest building in the center and provide an elevated public green, enhancing the High Line motif.

Keehn and Norris are the public art consultants for the tower, and have high plans to “create an art ecosystem,” Keehn says.

The budget for Sites Unseen is \$2.7 million, to be privately funded. Organizers have a long way to go, but Keehn cannot be underestimated, having raised \$6 million for the Bay Lights. Norris has run her gallery on Jessie for 15 years and wrote the initial prospectus for the alley engagement. They've added a third live-wire, Jessica Shaefer, as project director. She comes directly from Creative Time, the leading public art organization in New York City.

The first artist will be announced in April, following the inaugural meeting of the Sites Unseen Advisory Committee, which includes Frank Smigiel, curator of public programs at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Deborah Cullinan, CEO of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; and Nion McEvoy, owner of Chronicle Books.

Curators Keehn, Norris and Shaefer expect a combination of big national names and small local ones.

“It will have one curatorial vision,” says Norris. “You are going to walk around and have this really cool experience that links this neighborhood.”

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Online: To watch a short video go to: www.sfgate.com/entertainment/item/Sights-unseen-37795.php