

Project Background

The Center for Wooden Boats is about 30 years old. Annual visitor counts are 60,000 to 70,000. Its mission is a gathering place for the community, with access to the water, and educational outreach for urban youth. In the last ten years, there have been increased levels of growth. The center has expanded programs to meet demand. The neighborhood is growing and values are increasing. We are very fortunate to be part of SLU Park and MOHAI in the Armory Building. The Center is very constrained for space, while its programs and interest in it our expanding. The SLU population is expected to grow with residential building and corporate campuses.

Programmatic Goals

The Center for Wooden Boats is not just a museum. A lot of activities must fit into the expansion. In 2005, Mithun was hired to create a program analysis, which suggested a need for 30,000 square feet to meet demands for expansion. The last few years have been spent whittling down programs to work within a smaller space. Currently the building has 10,000 feet. The basic components are:

A Restoration Center is a shop open to the public, to achieve the goal of accessibility. It features storage and a tool shop, and an open space for bringing boats in and out.

A Learning Center, which features a classroom focused on youth classes.

An Interpretive Center for museum-related activities, housing an archive room, models, historic tools, library, administrative and support functions, and the front desk and entry.

The proposed building and its context – the Park

The overall massing of the building is intentionally simple, referencing the working boatbuilding sheds that are indicative of the region. Essentially a simple, gable-ended barn in form, the building is oriented as close to an east-west aspect as the limited pentagonal site will permit. The southern side of the building runs parallel to the southern edge of the site, abutting the footpath along that side. The ground floor is eroded at two of the corners to create an “L” shape in plan; this enables the (maximum permitted 6,000 sq ft) footprint to fit. It also provides a shape that supports a functional programmatic arrangement. A covered courtyard area at the southeastern corner will act as the main entry for the building. The intention is to respond to the existing park path network and capitalize on the intersection of two paths under the roof overhang, providing a natural and intuitive point of entry.

On entering the building the visitor will be greeted by a staff member at the entry desk positioned in the middle of the visitor center. From that position the staff member has a direct view of all the CWB facilities at SLU, including Lake Union itself. More views are offered from the stair landing overlook that takes visitors up to the second floor, which houses a larger classroom and some CWB administration offices. The building is designed to allow maximum flexibility, as the CWB does not yet know its future needs. If desired, the entire second floor could conceivably become one open plan space.

In keeping with the simple form of the building, the material palette is intentionally restrained. Untreated timber, clear coated steel, concrete, and metal standing seam roofing will form the main stays of the design. Rather than competing for attention with the exhibits, the intention is to provide an appropriate backdrop for the collection of historic boats. The material selection is one that will weather naturally, allowing the CWB members to focus efforts on maintaining their boats, not their building. Again, referencing traditional boat yards and sheds, traditional graphic treatments such as sign painting are being considered so that the signage becomes an integral part of the building.

A double height space in the visitor center and entry courtyard allow for the hanging of boats and exhibits, and in the restoration boat hall the extra height provides the flexibility and function needed for working on boats. Gallery spaces on the second floor will allow these spaces to also be enjoyed from above.

The building will harness the Center's philosophy of "shorts and sweaters" and will be passively ventilated; it will also achieve LEED Gold. As natural lighting is a core part of the design, glazing will be maximized to the greatest extent that is practicable - especially to the south. The glazing to the boat hall will be modulated by movable steel and wood screens. The building's users can raise and lower these to control light levels and solar heat gain. This will also allow the hall to become a more private space when desired, for example during winter evenings where it otherwise might feel exposed.

The positioning of the building, with the long elevation facing south, provides the best solar orientation available to the site; for natural light, solar heat gain and the PV ready roof. It also allows the most dynamic aspects of the building's program to be housed on the south - and most public - side of the building. The restoration boat hall, visitor center and main entry will have extensive glazing on the ground level, revealing the CWB and its work to the park, Valley Street and city beyond.