

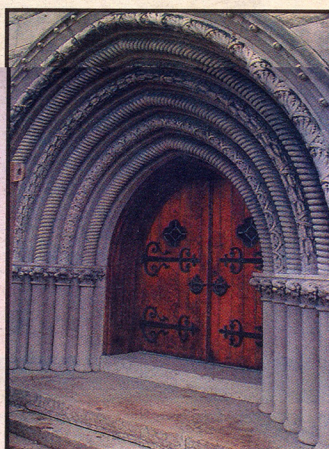
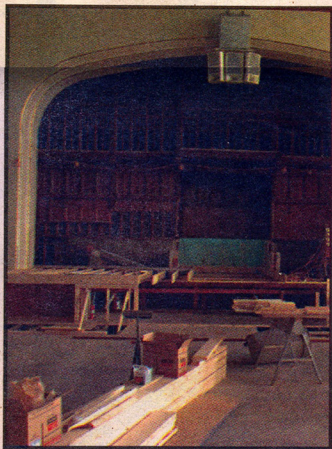
THE Other PAPER

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Columbus's News & Entertainment Weekly

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'I hate all the Cowtown crap'



Photos by Dan Tritschuh

Tom Starker wants his **Bar of Modern Art** to be the most sophisticated Columbus nightclub you've ever seen. **If he lets you in.**

A roll of the dice in a sacred space: To succeed at the old First Baptist Church, Starker will need to lure people from more established entertainment districts

By Jordan Gentile

In the late 1970s, a couple of steakhouse owners named Steve Rubel and Ian Schrager realized you could create the hottest nightclub on earth with just the right mixture of tyranny and meritocracy. The rich and famous got in to Studio 54, their landmark club, automatically. Everybody else had to beg, and only those deemed "interesting"—through their personalities or attire—were granted access.

In this new system, doormen for the city's hottest clubs were so powerful they became celebrities in their own right. With a nod or a wave, they could make

your night or destroy it.

For a number of years during the 1980s, Hilliard native Tom Starker was one of them. He kept the throngs at bay while constantly replenishing a club's supply of cool people.

"There was an art to being a doorman in New York City," said Starker, who worked at Area and the Palladium and eventually ran his own hit club, Saturdays. "It's about being able to look outside and say, 'I need this element in here because there's a little too much of this other element.' It's about creating a room."

Now Starker is back in Columbus, and he's trying to bring that velvet-rope experience home. His new club, the Bar of

Modern Art—still in the dusty phases of construction—is scheduled to open in just two months.

The concept is astonishingly grand. Starker wants BoMA—a riff on the Museum of Modern Art's famous acronym—to be a multi-sensory extravaganza that combines music, cuisine, dancing and art. He promises the swankiest rooms, an upscale executive chef and an art gallery that he hopes, in time, will be considered among the city's best.

"I want BoMA to tingle all your senses," Starker said.

To accomplish all of this under one roof, he's setting the whole thing in a massive, renovated church on East Broad Street.

But can any nightclub, let alone one of such ambition, succeed in the sleepy Discovery District? Will art that's sold in a nightclub really be any good? And will enough notable figures patronize BoMA to lend it the exclusive cachet Starker desires?

Even Bret Adams, the Columbus sports agent who's heavily invested in the \$3 million project, couldn't believe the plan when Starker first brought it to him last year.

"My reaction was, this is Columbus," he said. "It's not New York, it's not L.A. It's a conservative town."

"I thought they were crazy."

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BoMA will need to 'create a niche'

But that was then. Months later, after Adams had listened to Starker preach BoMA's religion and he'd toured the sacred space—the abandoned First Baptist Church just west of the Columbus Museum of Art—where the ex-bouncer wanted to put the club, the skeptical sports agent was converted.

He bought the church property for \$1 million, agreed to renovate it for twice that amount and is now leasing the space to Starker, who will run the establishment with his business partner, Pamela Theodotou, an entertainment lawyer from Columbus.

Adams also introduced Starker to Chad Tooker, an ambitious young arts promoter who'd made a name for himself working at local galleries and creating ShowColumbus, a Downtown art fair. If Adams had initial reservations about Starker's vision, Tooker understood it from the start, and he was promptly hired to be BoMA's gallery director and curator.

Tooker concedes that BoMA looks a bit unwieldy. "It may seem to most people—and even some of us who are involved in it—that we might be overextending," he said. But the blending of serious art and booze, he believes, was an idea whose time has come.

"Many people are somewhat intimidated by the traditional art-gallery situation—the tight, enclosed space, the pressure to say something profound in the company of your significant other," said Tooker. "And then there's the pressure to buy when confronted by a gallery associate."

"The nature of BoMA really alleviates this. You can always pretend for a second that you're just there to unwind and have some drinks. There are plenty of alternative distractions."

There certainly are. The folks at BoMA are keeping all the rough designs for the interior space under lock and key. But Starker talks openly about how the church's convoluted architectural scheme will enable the nightclub's look, sound and vibe to be different from room to room, just like the legendary New York clubs.

BoMA will boast a huge dance floor illuminated by jewel-colored lighting in the space where the church's congregation used to sit; a funkier dance floor geared toward younger clientele in the basement; a swanky second-floor art gallery; a dining room set alight by glass sculptures; and a small room for special guests that will hover over the whole establishment, allowing the big shots to gaze down on the masses.

Starker plans to offer VIP membership to what its website calls "creatives" from the art, business and media fields. As for the hoi polloi, Starker said, he won't be snotty about who gets into the club. But he will be choosy.

"You're going to have to *try* to get in here," he said. "I'd rather have 500 cool people than 1,000 people who don't fit in."

As for the art, Tooker promised to "be cutting edge and be progressive" in his programming, and to utilize the huge facility—not just the gallery, but all the rooms—to feature conceptual art, installations, film and video art, dance, fashion, and music.

So far, the artwork BoMA has secured for the club's opening is more conventional, to say the least. It includes a group of photographs of James Dean taken by Dennis Stock in the 1950s. Starker and Theodotou said they're also trying to acquire some celebrity-painted works for the gallery.

"That would be tough," said Chris Corso, the Columbus promoter who built Mecca and Red Zone into hit nightclubs.

"All the energy right now is on the edges of the Arena District, and within it."

Still, he said, if anybody can pull it off, it's Starker.

"Tom's a creative guy," said Corso, who employed Starker as a doorman at Mecca after he returned to Columbus from New York. "He might be able to create a niche."

Dan Foland, a high-end construction manager who met Starker in New York and is now helping the club owner build BoMA, concurred.

"It's not the location," he said "It's the person out front whose personality is

reflected in the nightclub."

Starker, Foland said, "used to amaze me. He could remember every soap opera star, every movie star, every photographer, every writer. The list could be 10,000 people and he knew exactly the right mix of people to make it interesting."

Starker is banking on his ability to do the same in the town where he grew up—and where he created his first successful club,

Mean Mr. Mustard's, in the late 1970s.

He returned to Columbus in 1994 when, he said, the Big Apple's club scene became too young and the sophisticated crowds began to melt away. The glamour had disappeared.

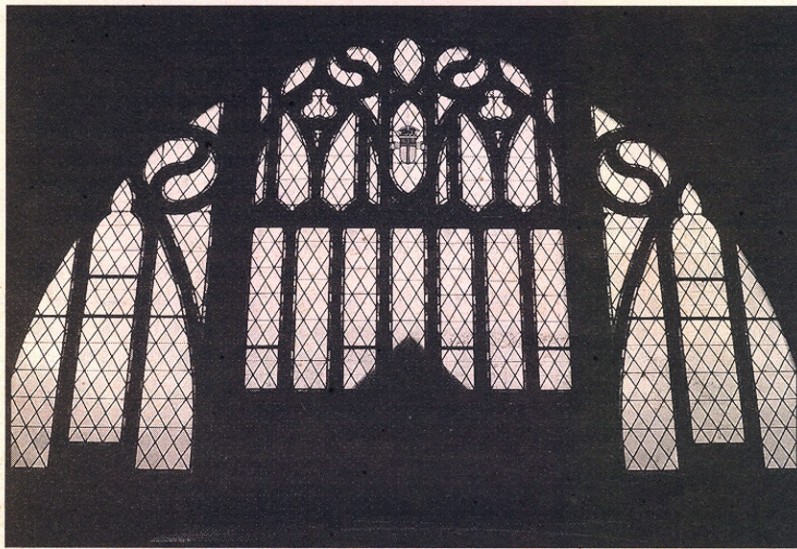
In the decade since, he said he's tried to recapture that upscale New York nightclub atmosphere here, seeking out prospective clubs only to have one deal after another fall through.

Now, with BoMA, Starker has a chance to get that old feeling back.

But to him, the club isn't just a tribute to his past. Rather, it's a new beginning for the nightlife of a sophisticated, culturally vibrant town that has regrettably never thought of itself as a Studio 54 type of place.

"I hate all the Cowtown crap that Columbus has been pegged with," Starker said. "And, you know something, sometimes I think the people that live here believe it."

"I want to take that sentiment and crush it and throw it out onto Broad Street and let trucks run over it. It's bullshit."



Dan Trittschuh

"You're going to have to *try* to get in here": One of BoMA's many stained-glass windows

"It will run the gamut," Tooker said. "When you're a retail space, you have to think, what will the public like? What's saleable? There's a certain amount of altruism that enters into it. But we are a business."

Given BoMA's challenging location, that kind of fiscal pragmatism might be useful in the coming months.

The Discovery District, which contains the art museum, the main library and the Columbus College of Art and Design among other scholarly institutions, boasts beautiful buildings, a highbrow vibe and a lot of history.

But the area shuts down at five o'clock on weeknights and remains desolate over the weekends. Because there's so little nightlife in east Downtown, BoMA won't benefit from built-in foot traffic, as new clubs in the Short North and Arena District do.

So the question is: Can one club single-handedly draw large groups of clubbers far away from where the action is?