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The 'Art' of Entertainment

BoMA Shakes Up Columbus Nightlife

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The 'Art' of Entertainment

The Bar of Modern Art — BoMA — bets big on Broad Street

By Patrick Preston Photography by Mike Elicson

When Tom Starker opened the doors of The Bar of Modern Art, or BoMA, for business last month, the moment marked two important milestones in Columbus history: the birth of BoMA, and the death Columbus' cow town image. For the record, cow towns do not have a 23,000-square-foot restaurant and nightclub that doubles as an art gallery.

Fifteen months after committing to spend more than \$3 million to revamp the former First Baptist Church on East Broad Street, Starker and his team of owner-investors have created a nightlife project of scope and size unlike any that Columbus has seen. As they make their case that Columbus residents deserve the finer things in life, BoMA is attempting to bring Columbus' after-

hours scene into the same tier as cities like Chicago and New York. The only question remaining is will it work here?

"If we dropped this club into any other major city it would be a monster. I hope that Columbus embraces this and appreciates what we've tried to do here," Starker says with cautious optimism. "The restaurant industry is very developed here. The nightlife industry has had its shining moments, but we haven't had consistency. We don't want to have a one- or two-year run. We want to have a 10- or 20-year run. I think Columbus has been waiting for this. I know I have."



THE BUILDING

In the world of nightclubs, there is big and then there is BoMA big. At 23,000 square feet, the former church is beyond big. It's massive. With three-levels, seven rooms, and one of the largest dance floors in Columbus, BoMA can hold nearly 1,100 people at one time.

The owners say the 38,500-watt state-of-the-art sound system is the best in the city. But what makes BoMA unique is the opportunity to change rooms and change noise environments, allowing two people to do what is difficult in most nightclubs: to carry on a conversation without yelling.

A facility so large can work for and against a nightclub. Early crowds in the several hundreds, which would fill most Columbus nightspots, have discovered plenty of open space to spread out and wander, creating an empty effect for those who find comfort in feeling crowded. But Starker describes the building as "the coziest 23,000-square-foot club" he's ever seen.

Until the day arrives when BoMA is the place to see and be seen, the main attractions will be the building itself and the artwork. Starting with the main level, the wide dance floor – known as The Sanctuary – features a new hardwood surface in an area formerly occupied by church pews.

Each of the building's seven bars, including two within view of The Sanctuary, are works of art in themselves, having been designed and created by commissioned artists. The most eye-popping is the metal bar created by mixed-metal sculptor Chris Mohler of Columbus. Across the room, the glass bar is the work of Columbus College of Art and Design professor and master glassblower, Dawson Kellogg. In total, more than 100 pieces from nearly 20 visual artists are displayed, the majority with ties to central Ohio.

One of those artists is BoMA co-owner Pam Theodotou. Her black-and-white photographs from America and Europe hang on BoMA's second level, in the area overlooking what's called The Great Room. Works by Theodotou share the spotlight with those of renowned photographer Dennis Stock: his collection of James Dean portraits captured in Dean's home town of Fairmount, Indiana.

Theodotou says the church's size transformed the restaurant and bar concept into a 'neo-museum', in that the abundance of space enabled BoMA to create differing environments throughout the building.

"We realized we had three full businesses: an art gallery, a nightclub, and a restaurant," Theodotou says. "They're all under one umbrella and they work seamlessly together."

Starker and Theodotou opened the art gallery and nightclub ahead of the restaurant, which will serve eclectic American cuisine with ethnic flavorings as prepared by Puerto Rican executive chef Alex Rodriguez. And Starker says the dinner hours will provide the optimum viewing of the artwork, as daylight fades into night.

The experience of dining, drinking, dancing, and appreciating art come together under the stained-glass image of Jesus from above. So much is going on that on first visit, or even the second go-around, it's difficult to fully grasp all that is at play inside of the building. The details that go into a facility of such size and style become more apparent upon each return trip.



ABOVE: The view overlooking The Great Room, regarded by many early visitors as the building's best room, and featuring the photography of Dennis Stock. **BELOW:** Dressed for dancing, patrons enjoy the artwork in the room known as "The Studio." **OPPOSITE PAGE—TOP RIGHT:** Ladies wait for their drinks at the metal bar, designed by local artist Chris Mohler. **RIGHT:** Peering down into The Sanctuary, BoMA's main gathering spot and dance floor. **BOTTOM LEFT:** BoMA owner Tom Starker hopes his investment pays off.





THE HISTORY

Last month's grand opening was as much of a celebration of all that BoMA's ownership group had endured, as it was a celebration of things to come. Starker candidly advises anybody else, who might be considering rehabilitating a church which is more than a century old, to reconsider.

The past 15 months, since the owners bought the property for nearly \$1 million, have been challenging – and costly. But BoMA's back story pre-dates last year. Rather, it begins in the late 1970s with Starker, the Northland High School graduate who flirted on and off with classes at Ohio State University.

After running the successful campus nightspot Mean Mr. Mustard's, Starker moved on to New York City in the 1980s where he worked the door at some of the most exclusive clubs in the 1980s, including The Palladium and The Lime Light.

Wielding the power to admit the rich and famous – and deny the masses – turned Starker and other NYC doormen into celebrities, themselves, with status and stories to tell.

"You couldn't walk into a restaurant and pay for a dinner, or [walk into] a bar and pay for a drink," he says. "Let's put it this way, I've had offers to write a book."



ABOVE: A couple dances to House music in The Underground. **BELOW:** A front view of The Underground's bar. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The glass bar, designed by CCA Professor Dawson Kellogg illuminates the room.

Returning to Columbus in the mid-1990s, Starker worked the door at Mecca and The Red Zone while contemplating his next move. In Columbus, Starker saw an opportunity to bring a taste of the big-city lifestyle to Buckeye country. He would find the partner he needed in Pam Theodotou.

An attorney who left the legal world to pursue her interest in art and music, the Upper Arlington native met Starker while working with him to promote

recording artists. They became friends and, when the time came for Starker to spell out his plans for bringing a BoMA-esque project to Columbus, Theodotou wanted in, largely because of Starker's vision.

"Tom is a master at what he does," Theodotou says. "He's had 25 years of being the best at what he does. Usually people have to keep up with me. It's a struggle to keep up with Tom because that man's mind never stops."

With investors lined up, the duo made their first attempt at opening a downtown restaurant with a focus on art in 2001. That year, Starker was in Orlando, Florida, seeking to hire a chef for the concept on the morning that would change everything: September 11th. As the country changed, the economy changed and Starker and Theodotou's plans were nixed by a lack of investor funding.

It would take nearly four more years for a second chance, but, in August 2005, with a bright financial picture and the enthusiasm to see the idea through to completion, BoMA's ownership group settled on the fifth location they considered, the First Baptist Church.

The church had seen better days before the congregation dwindled to well below 100. Starker and company saw an opportunity to create and preserve at the same time.

"If anybody else got this church it would probably be a parking lot right now," Starker says.

It's easy to appreciate the pride Starker feels in having protected the architectural integrity of the building and in earning the approval of First Baptist Church's former pastor. Starker even pledged to donate the church's pipe organ to St. Christopher's Church in Grandview. Getting to this point came with a price, however.

In many respects, the building was not in good



shape and the costs continued to climb beyond the \$3 million range, moving toward the \$4 million mark. It became clear during the course of construction that the building had even more usable space than previously thought.

"The project got larger and larger, and larger," Theodotou says. "We both knew it would be incredible if we could pull it together."

The added work, and a series of delays in obtaining permits, cost the owners the chance to open during summer months as was originally planned. As a result, Starker will be battling the elements in his first months working the door.

THE DOOR POLICY

Starker enjoyed the power of working the door in New York City so much that he is reprising his front-man role at BoMA, and bringing the big-city attitude with him. He says the goal is to create a crowd that's as diverse as the works of art inside; a mixture that adds energy and excitement, and eschews cookie-cutter style. If that means turning people away, Starker says so be it.

"I'm going to run this like a New York door. Wear what's in your heart. And, as long as it works, you'll get in," Starker says referring to customers' fashion senses. "I'm sure that some people are going to get

offended because they can't get in if it's too crowded. You don't want a crowd that's too young, too old, too many girls, too many guys. You need a balance. You need electricity.

"We'll need the young crowd – they create the energy that you need to have. But the people who get in will be very diverse. It's easier to make exceptions with the older crowd. The younger crowd will have a harder time getting in."

The official dress code simply states "Come in Style," leaving options from jeans to dresses and suits, and leaving the discretion with Starker to decide whether an ensemble fits the bill.

Some locals regard such a selective policy as elitist, and un-Columbus. Theodotou says the door policy will enhance the experience for BoMA customers.

"This is not the city of the 1960s where people may not have traveled out of Ohio," she says. "Columbus residents have been to New York and Chicago. When they go out, they dress well. I think that Columbus isn't giving itself enough credit."

Starker wants to get away from what he describes as a "collegiate feel" that he finds in every other Columbus nightclub. Instead, he wants BoMA to be more diverse and more discriminating.

"You don't have to be pretty to get in, but pretty helps," Starker jokes. "I want people to try for a change. When's the last time Columbus had to try? The bottom line, though, is if you have a good heart and your outfit works on you, you'll get in."

FINDING THE CROWD

As it competes head-on with Spice Bar, Sugar Bar and other established nightspots for young professionals and sophisticated urban-dwellers, BoMA's Discovery District location on the east side of downtown presents a choice for the Arena District crowd: barhopping or room-hopping?

The size and variously-themed rooms of the former church provide one-stop entertainment shopping once you get inside. That means one line to get in, one cover charge, one coat check. In colder months, the appeal of staying warm should help BoMA siphon customers away from the Short North and Park Street area. Starker isn't waiting for the crowd to find BoMA, though.

In an intriguing mix of marketing ideas BoMA's weekly line-up features nightly themes that stand out from other venues. Take, for instance, Tuesday's contemporary Christian music night. Starker says the market is there to support such an endeavor and the building's original purpose lends itself well to catering to Christians on a traditionally less-active social night.

Other nights focus on world music and fashion, while the wild card remains the artwork. Gallery Director Chad Tooker plans to rotate the exhibitions every few months, creating another reason for repeated visits.

Nervous and excited at the same time, Starker and Theodotou embrace the risk and now hope to find the reward. Starker says a woman approached him to gleefully say she no longer needed to go to Chicago for nightlife. Theodotou says she already has received a partial return on her investment.

"When other people experience through their own eyes what you have created, and they say, 'This is amazing; that's the moment when you know what you've done is amazing.'"