

S.F. Makes Fresh Start With New Auditorium

BY PENNY WILLIAMS & RON BAIRD

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San Francisco members had long wanted a large auditorium inside their culture center — and they were going to get one. But new laws passed after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake put those plans on hold. Though the culture center fared beautifully during that quake (only one apple fell off the altar) and remained seismically safe, the new laws would have required an expensive retrofit if a 500-seat auditorium were built inside and the building's designation changed from "office" to "assembly."

The solution: Build a new structure next to the center, across the parking lot. This weekend marked the opening of the new Ikeda Auditorium after a year of construction.

Many members commented that this building feels like a new beginning for the SGI movement in San Francisco. Kiyoko Thoma arrived in San Francisco in 1958 and stood with SGI President Ikeda at the historic Coit Tower visit in 1960. "This is our first brand new building," she said, after she helped cut the ribbon for the opening ceremony Friday night. Every building the members have met in before this weekend had been used previously for some other purpose. The culture center, for example, had been at one time the first women's college in the area and had later housed medical offices.

The new three-story auditorium blends in with the surrounding neighborhood of parks and rolling inclines. Over the reception area when people enter is a metal pyramid with a skylight at the apex. This level also has a conference room and other rooms yet to be assigned. The auditorium, with a seating capacity of 545, is down a flight of stairs that follows the slope of the land. There are two multipurpose rooms also on this level. One level below is a parking garage with 23 spaces for people who need to use an elevator to enter the building.

The Gohonzon room has an expansive feeling. There is light wood paneling complimenting the grey and soft green tones of the walls, seats and carpet — very similar to the color of the eucalyptus trees prevalent in the Bay Area and the colors of San Francisco bay waters. The roof is arched with recessed lighting; there are skylights and an opaque window behind the altar.

"I was bowled over," said Donna Parton of Sacramento, Calif. "The natural lighting creates a whole new feeling." The altar is also of light wood and simple in design. Some people said its shape resembles Coit Tower.

Jonetta Leek, San Francisco #1 Joint Territory vice women's division chief, observed that since the opening of the culture center in 1989, the surrounding neighborhood has been transformed from a car dealership and grocery store into coffee and bagel shops, a McDonald's, clothing stores, a supermarket, a video store, an office supply store, a bookstore and a newly landscaped city park with playground and soccer field. (An open house for the local community is being planned for April.)

"My grandfather didn't want me to come to meetings in this part of town," said Jason Ortiz-Williams. "We are beginning to beautify this area and make the barrio a better place to live. The architecture of this new building is so inspiring and the energy is really high."

Rogers Long, who began practicing in 1967, shared a bit of the organization's history in San Francisco. "We started in somebody's living room," he said. "I was so worried about my shoes because we had to leave them outside in the hall. They were my only pair. Propagation was the most important thing. We had meetings at all times of the day and night."

The first center of activities was Sachiko and Sam Garcias' house on Cole Street and

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30th Avenue. Mrs. Garcia was the first district chief in San Francisco, appointed by President Ikeda on his visit there in 1960. There was also a community center in Daly City, but that, too, was used by another religious group before the SGI-USA.

“This feels like a new start,” said Mr. Long.

Bernie Mraz from Monterey, Calif., said: “This is overwhelming. I’ve never seen anything like this except in Japan.”

Diana Miller from Palo Alto, Calif., said: “It looks expansive and alive, and I feel like San Francisco will become a world leader for kosen-rufu. I think this new building will foster more excitement and activities and will really encourage guests.”

Jose Ganutan from Vallejo, Calif., performed as a part of the Mystic Flava dance group. “Everybody made me feel comfortable so I could perform,” he said. “I was astounded. I feel this [building] is going to impact the movement a whole lot.”

Kay Rood, San Francisco #1 joint territory women’s division chief, said: “Seeing everything I have in the last two days, the members are really aware in their lives of the benefits from sharing this practice. This building displays a dream come true that we couldn’t have imagined 10 or 20 years ago.”

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