

A Conversation With . . . ArtExchange Executive Director Alex Slato

By TIFFANY RIDER
Staff Writer

With years of experience as an art executive professional working from South America up to North America, Alex Slato is enthusiastic about being the executive director of the ArtExchange.

To be located on Long Beach Boulevard at 3rd Street, the ArtExchange is a public-private sector project that Slato says will act as an anchor for the arts community in Long Beach, bringing the city's three museums, several art galleries and the artists themselves together.

Prior to his involvement with the ArtExchange, Slato studied mass media at the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello in Caracas, Venezuela. He later served as the executive director of Valor-Arte Gallery and Auction House in Caracas, where he says he increased annual gross sales revenue from \$500,000 to \$6.8 million, expanded international sales offices in Miami, Mexico City and Buenos Aires, and exported more than 3,800 pieces by Venezuelan artists to international markets.

Over the last seven years, Slato put his efforts into what he describes as a pillar of culture in the East Village Arts District – the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA). The founder of the museum, Dr. Robert Gumbiner, recruited him in early 2002 when he was working in Miami. There, Slato served as deputy director, associate director and vice president of exhibitions and special events. When MOLAA was in the rebuilding phase, Slato's goal was to put the museum on the map.

"For many years I traveled the U.S., went to every Latin American show, I did lectures on Latin American art and I sort of tied MOLAA to all different existing museums not only in the U.S. but in South America," he says. During the last few years of his work with MOLAA, Slato became a member of the board for the proposed ArtExchange project. Once the physical aspects of the museum were complete, the opportunity to get more involved with the ArtExchange came along.

"It was sort of a way to begin a new relationship with the city," he says. "Having all that experience building an institution and building the community support of a museum like this – for me it was just a great opportu-

Future Site of the ArtExchange

The ArtExchange will be a permanent and affordable space for artists including:

- Art Studios
- Hot Shop (glass blowing & ceramics)
- Gallery
- Multipurpose/Classroom Space
- Courtyard

Total Site Area: 15,000 sq. ft.
Building Area: 10,150 sq. ft.

Developed by the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency,
Mayor Bob Foster,
Councilmember Suja Lowenthal, 2nd District
www.LongBeachRDA.org

ARTX
ARTEXCHANGE • LONG BEACH, CA

For information, visit
ArtExchangeLB.org

LONG BEACH REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY
CITY OF LONG BEACH INCORPORATED 1871

Alex Slato is the executive director of the ArtExchange, which is scheduled to open in late 2011 on Long Beach Boulevard at 3rd Street in Downtown Long Beach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

nity. To take everything that I had from building a museum, and prior to that being in the arts, to now developing a space in the city."

Slato left MOLAA in October of last year after submitting his resume for the open position of executive director of the ArtExchange. He earned the spot in November.

"For me, it was really important because I was in a bubble. I know Latin American art is an important thing, but I hardly got to know the city. I saw that this was an incredible opportunity for me to get to know the arts in the city and really engage that," he says.

Slato's enthusiasm for the ArtExchange pours

through his passion for art and community. The goal of the project, he says, is to transfer knowledge and inspiration between artists and enthusiasts and create an art market for Long Beach.

The facilities will include about 15 art studios for rent, an art gallery, a shop for glassmaking and industrial art and a courtyard for events. Although the ArtExchange building will be a hub for artists, Slato says the ArtExchange isn't just about artists working inside the building.

"This is for the general artist in town," he says. "It's to create a synergy between artists, because we don't have a market in town, and we do not have an anchor in town."

Slato says he hopes to build and grow his ongoing relationship with California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) through his new position. In 2005, Slato brought an art student from the university to exhibit at MOLAA, and from there has continued to work with art students and graduates from CSULB.

"I'm looking at getting the best of the MFAs [master of fine arts] in a show," he says. "I'm ready to help the artists who are graduating to develop as well. The university and the ArtExchange are perfect complements. The university teaches the concepts and the theories; we're here to develop the practical part as well."

At the same time, Slato says the ArtExchange will serve as a connector for all other art institutions in town – from Long Beach Museum of Art to small galleries like Ascend Gallery.

"The exchange . . . is going to be an anchor for the community to come to learn about art, to develop their skills, but to also share talent, information and resources," he says. "It's going to become an economic catalyst. The train is here and the bus is here. This is not just for the downtown. This is a place for people from L.A. to take the train and come in and take classes. People from Orange County can take PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] and come in and take classes."

The idea for the project came into fruition after a case study done by the original founders of the ArtExchange concept – one of whom is California State Sen. Alan Lowenthal. An example observed in the study is The Torpedo Factory, an old manufacturing structure utilized during wartime that is now a popular tourist destination full of artist studios, where visitors can buy art and observe it in the making. The study involved traveling to The Torpedo Factory and other such places to understand how these art centers engage both artists and the wider community.

One main difference between the ArtExchange and The Torpedo Factory, Slato says, is that the ArtExchange will embrace all sorts of visual arts.

"A lot of The Torpedo Factory is traditional, and I think Long Beach is beyond traditional already," he said. "We have an incredible university with a huge school of arts and a great film school. Art and visual art has new media and new technology, so it's about keeping a balance with traditional arts, but everything that is coming out is using new technology."

Slato says Long Beach has a growing arts community that is coming together like a delicious stew.

"I like to always compare art with other things I love, like food," he says. "I think all of that is also visual, and it enhances the senses. You've got all of the ingredients chopped, you've got a wonderful soup and all you need is to thicken the stew. Everything is coming together. You can see it and you can

smell it, and you can see the flavors integrating in that meal. But those things you put in at the end to make it complete – the finishing touches – I think Long Beach is going through that right now."

Slato says the arts community is finally feeling support from the city in a more committed way than in previous years, especially with the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency's (RDA) investment in an area he says, "is in great need of cultural use to create connectivity."

The City of Long Beach approved an environmental impact report for the project, and a feasibility study has been completed. Slato says the architectural designs and drawings are being executed, with the RDA taking care of the brick-and-mortar capital expenses.

The focus for the ArtExchange now, according to Slato, is internal organization. This includes developing policies and procedures, internal structure and strategic and fundraising plans.

"It's up to us now to really look for the programming money and get everything started. That's the phase that we are in right now – building programs, getting the 2011 calendar ready, figuring out what's the opening exhibition. It's really a lot of fun right now."

Slato says the ArtExchange is about a year and a half away from completion and that he and the board are currently working on developing programming and exhibits as well as forming community partnerships.

On July 10, the ArtExchange is hosting its first fundraising event where it will give books from the now-closed Acres of Books back to the community. Attendees can fill an original fruit crate from the 1950s or 60s for \$25 with some of the 20,000 books left in the building starting at 3:30 p.m. The Summer And Music concert series is sponsoring a swing concert in the lot adjacent to the building starting at 5 p.m., along with a classic car show.

For more information on the ArtExchange, visit www.artexchangeLB.org or call 562/491-0278. ■