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A New Arts Destination Near Marfa Quietly Takes Shape

The founder of an insiders' art fair in the Texas town is now planning a bigger cultural center, in the desert, for visitors year-round. It will open in the fall.

By **Jacoba Urist** Feb. 17, 2021

Marfa, Texas, has long been an excursion for fans of the artist Donald Judd's minimalism. The town is home to the Judd Foundation, which maintains Judd's living and work spaces, and the Chinati Foundation, a museum created by the artist.

But for the last year, Michael Phelan — a contemporary artist who has lived in Marfa full time since 2014 — has been quietly planning another destination within miles of both sites: Marfa Invitational, an interdisciplinary, year-round arts and cultural foundation, set on five acres of high desert. While it is expected to be completed this fall, people who attend his art fair (previously known as the Marfa Invitational) in April can tour an inaugural display by the artist JPW3 (J. Patrick Walsh) at the new site.

Phelan has designed a pair of identical exhibition halls, made of pre-engineered steel, totaling 15,000 square feet — each with 150 feet of roll-up aluminum and glass doors for an open-air experience. The pieces of the building are being fabricated in El Paso and will be assembled and constructed in Marfa on the foundation's site. While prescient, the plans were conceived pre-pandemic.

The buildings will accommodate a variety of programming, like visual art and sculptural installations, as well as talks, performances, films and fashion shows.

Phelan founded the Marfa Invitational — a small-scale, insiders' art fair — in 2019. It was canceled twice in 2020 because of the pandemic, but will return in April and be known simply as the Invitational.

His mission for the year-round destination is "to present a very intimate gathering," Phelan said. He anticipates tens of thousands of visitors to the new location in its first year.

With a population under 2,000, the town has limited hotel and Airbnb rentals. "One of the beauties of the infrastructure" in Marfa, he added, is that it controls attendance "given the limit of accommodations."

Correction: Feb. 19, 2021

An earlier version of this article described incorrectly the Chinati Foundation. It receives public funds; it is not a private museum.

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