



MUSEUM EXPANSION

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

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NEW ENGLAND ART MUSEUMS ENTERED THE twenty-first century in a capital campaign and building frenzy, slowed only slightly by the recession. Yet museumgoers may rightly be skeptical: Once a campaign is completed and the capital improvements are done, how has the museum experience changed? A larger museum store and a café worthy of a review on Yelp may be great amenities, but what about the art?

First, the eye-popping numbers. In Massachusetts alone, the Museum of Fine Art, Boston (MFA) and the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), Salem account for more than \$1 billion in capital fundraising, even before successful completion of PEM's current \$650 million campaign. Major museum projects now routinely top \$100 million, easily surpassing the \$75 million campaign for the new Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), which opened in Boston in 2006. Formerly extraordinary endeavors, undertaken once a generation, capital campaigns now seem to be a permanent part of an art museum's development efforts.

After raising \$13.5 million to restore its historic gallery buildings, the Portland Art Museum in Maine is raising \$10.5 million to restore the Winslow Homer Studio. Just a few years after completing the Chace Center at a cost of \$43 million, the RISD Museum of Art in Providence is raising \$8.4 million to restore their original galleries. The PEM campaign—which will add 175,000 square feet of space and create the largest endowment of any art museum in New England—comes less than ten years after completion of the \$100 million campaign to build the Moshe Safdie-designed wing that doubled its exhibition space.

In general, this effort and expense has created a better experience for New England's museumgoers. Yet, alas, the impact is not all it could be. A major reason for new additions is to resolve the challenges presented by older buildings. Imposing classical entrances, often at the top of a long marble staircase, are off-putting and definitely difficult to make accessible. Amenities are inadequate for contemporary visitors.

Museums find themselves with an amalgamation of buildings constructed over time, resulting in confusing or awkward transitions. But the latest solutions are a mixed bag. The new entrance to the Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, behind the earlier building, is convenient to an ample free parking lot, and visitors enter an appealing new space with restrooms, coat racks and a small store. The Chace Center at RISD reorients the museum toward Providence's downtown and rehabilitated riverfront and also includes comfortable amenities. In contrast, the doors to the MFA's 1981 west wing are now restricted to use by groups, requiring a longer walk to and from the parking garage. And while the historic entrances on Huntington Avenue and the Fenway are finally treated with respect, both seem cramped and commercial, with little sense of the glories that await beyond the ticket desk.

The Renzo Piano Building Workshop has a reputation for resolving these challenges, creating a single "campus" at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Visitors have responded well to his dramatic addition to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (ISGM) in Boston and are anticipating the reopening of the Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) in Cambridge. Nevertheless, entering ISGM from the back (as one also

does at the Morgan) does not do justice to the original architecture of Fenway Court. And it seems unlikely that many will find their way to the new entrance in Piano's glass pavilion at the rear of HUAM since the Quincy Street entrance remains closer to public transportation and the campus.

Out of view, one result of these campaigns is better care for the collection. Building maintenance and collections management are both critical to museums' long-term sustainability but difficult to finance. Virtually all of these building campaigns include funding for stabilizing older buildings and improvements to both galleries and storage areas: upgrading climate control, lighting, and security.

The greatest gain for museum visitors has been the creation of temporary exhibition galleries and the commitment to filling those spaces with engaging shows. The number and diversity of special exhibitions available to New England museumgoers is now astonishing. Not only are museums able to develop exhibitions drawn from their own collections, they now have the facilities to organize or host major loan shows. The ICA/Boston went from having small galleries totally inappropriate for contemporary art to being a first-class facility for major exhibitions; New Englanders no longer need to travel for major thematic shows like *Dance/Draw* and *This Will Have Been* or important single-artist exhibitions. PEM has also built a major exhibition program in their new galleries: *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* and *The Emperor's Private Paradise: Treasures from the Forbidden City* are the sort of expansive exhibitions worthy of PEM's global focus. The beautiful new galleries at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, with the inaugural exhibition, *Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, promise comparable riches.

On the other hand, perhaps the biggest disappointment is how little has actually changed in museum installations. None of New England's art museums have altered how art is presented and interpreted in a significant way. The innovative 2007 expansion and renovation of the Detroit Institute of Arts prompted *Curator: The Museum Journal* to devote an entire issue (January 2009) to the project. Both the Oakland Museum of California and Dallas Museum of Art have recently undergone transformations that have produced significant books for the field (*How Visitors Changed Our Museum* and *Ignite the Power of Art*, respectively). *Connecting Cultures:*



Opposite: Kriebler Gallery through back garden at Florence Griswold Museum. Photo: Jeff Goldberg/Esto. Above: An overhead view of Calderwood Hall in the new wing of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Photo: Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

A World in Brooklyn at the Brooklyn Museum juxtaposes work from their vast collection thematically, shattering conventional ways of organizing, hanging, and labeling art. In contrast, New England museums seem to be locked into the interpretive techniques of the prior generation: juxtaposition of fine and decorative arts in the same gallery, cell phone tours, etc. There are notable exceptions and

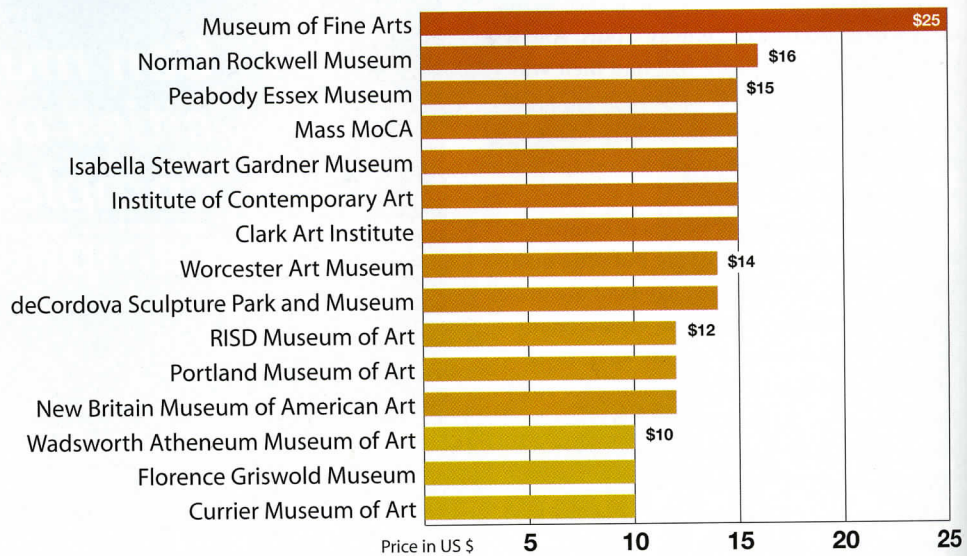
movements toward change. The Art of the Americas galleries at the MFA use technology in interesting ways and the 2012 *uCurate* exhibition at the Clark was a small yet laudable experiment. The press materials for the PEM campaign promise "new installations employing creative interpretive strategies aimed at increasing visitor engagement in art and highlighting connections among artistic and cultur-

al traditions" and planning towards that goal is underway. The Worcester Art Museum (see the Matthias Waschek column in this issue) is investigating new approaches to presentation of permanent collections.

While not much may have changed in the galleries, some bold New England art museums are not limiting themselves to those venues. Several are the stewards of important historic properties. Portland Art Museum opened the restored Winslow Homer Studio in 2012. With the completion of the Kriebel Gallery in 2002, the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, was able to return the Griswold House to its original appearance as the center of the Lyme Art Colony. Other museums have made significant commitments to educational spaces, including the lovely Museum Learning Center at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover and the Poss Family Mediathèque at the ICA. And, of course, Calderwood Hall in the ISGM is not only a worthy home for the museum's significant music program, but its creation has allowed the restoration of the Tapestry Room, which had housed concerts.

Perhaps the most visible impact of all this expansion, renovation, and re-invention is in rising admission prices. Successful campaigns aside, these expanded museums are more expensive to operate. Many museums, particularly those in Greater Boston and the Berkshires, now charge adult visitors \$15; at \$25, the MFA has reached New York prices. None have followed the notable example of Baltimore's art museums, the Walters Art Museum and the Baltimore

Museum Adult Admission



Above: A comparative graph of standard museum admission rates. This excludes family rates, memberships, etc. Note: Academic museums are typically free of charge. Below: A comparative graph of recent and open capital campaign goals from a sampling of thirteen New England museums. Graphs by Marcel McVay.

Museum of Art, which both dropped their admission fee in 2006, originally made possible by grants from the city and county. As director at two museums, Maxwell Anderson made the decision to drop fees at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and then the Dallas Museum of Art (which also instituted free memberships in 2012). Thanks to a 2003 gift from a local foundation, the Cincinnati Art Museum does not even charge for special exhibitions. In New England, only our academic museums are free.

All of this is good for museums, good for art, and good for the public. Yet one wonders what these trends might mean for smaller or niche art museums in New England. Can

museums in smaller cities or distant suburbs complete eight-figure campaigns? And if they cannot, will patrons continue to attend more modest exhibitions in aging or inadequate facilities? Our community-based museums are great assets, and it would be a shame if they were left behind in what has become a capital campaign arms race. ■

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Capital Campaign Comparison

