

# REVITALIZING THROUGH EXPANSION

By Carol Kino

*Since the recession, a host of museums throughout the country have renovated their spaces, to the benefit of their local communities.*

**T**hese days, it's almost hard to find a major American museum that does not have a vast building project underway. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has closed its doors until 2016 to undertake an expansion by the Norwegian design practice Snøhetta. Next summer, the Aspen Museum of Art will reinvent itself in a purpose-built space downtown designed by Shigeru Ban. And in 2015, the Whitney Museum will decamp its iconic Marcel Breuer building for a glossy new edifice in the flood-prone Meatpacking District, masterminded by Renzo Piano—the man behind the expansions of the just completed Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and the Harvard Art Museums (to name a few of his accomplishments).

Other museums with buildings newly completed or in progress include the Speed Art Museum in Louisville; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Queens Museum of Art; and the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill,

New York. And of course there is the Museum of Modern Art, which seemed to begin pushing for a new five-building campus as soon as the paint was dry on its 2004 Yoshio Taniguchi revamp.

Yet seeing as we are barely out of the 2008 recession, it's hard not to wonder if it might not be too much, too fast. For while some expansions certainly end up working as they were intended to, improving the museum's efficiency and amenities and offering more space for visitors as well as art, the path to those soaring new galleries in the sky—ideally accompanied by a top-notch restaurant with sweeping views—isn't always smooth.

Witness the last big building boom, when the Milwaukee Art Museum put up a spectacular new pavilion in 2001 by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava—a project whose aesthetics were widely admired but which cost \$25 million more than planned. And who can forget New York's American Folk Art Museum, which nearly bankrupted itself trying to pay for a new bronze-paneled building by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien? While it, too, was praised by critics after



The Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York, designed by Herzog & de Meuron.

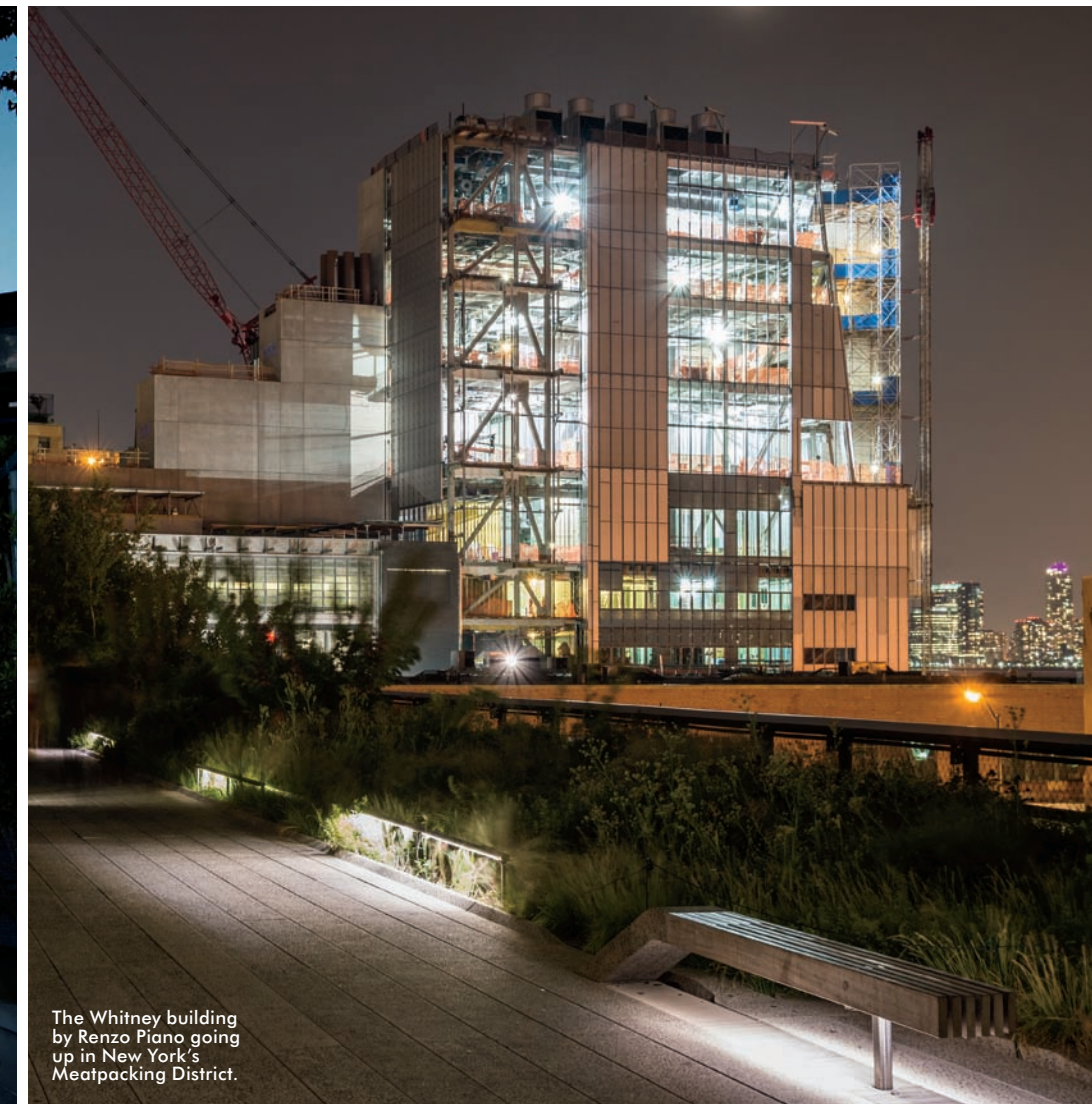
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Installation view of "The Presence of the Past: Peter Zumthor Reconsiders LACMA."



Shoheietsu's expansion of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, seen from Yerba Buena.



The Whitney building by Renzo Piano going up in New York's Meatpacking District.

opening in 2001, it failed to boost attendance as hoped. The museum now occupies a smaller space farther uptown, and the building, sold to MoMA to pay off debts, may well be razed in the larger institution's march to dominate West 53rd Street.

Yet many observers, like the museum consultant David Gordon, note that expansion has long been a museum byword. "For the last 30 years, we've seen a trend of art museum expansions," he says. "You can make the case that this is a reversion to the trend that was interrupted a little bit by the 2008 recession." Partly it's the so-called "Bilbao effect"—the notion that a flashy new starchitect-designed space, like Frank Gehry's 1997 Guggenheim Bilbao, can boost the local economy. But Gordon, a British expat, believes this "very American, bigger-is-better, supersize-me" idea goes back to the 19th century, "when all American cities worth their salt were building great municipal museums to show that they were interested in the higher things in life."

Gordon, who became Milwaukee's director in 2002, just before the construction shortfall became clear, points out that civic pride motivated that expansion, too. "We didn't want to just be known as Beer Town and Cheese Town." And despite a rocky start, the gamble ultimately worked: Attendance has doubled, the budget has been balanced since 2003, and the new addition helped the museum transform its local image while also redefining Milwaukee in the world's eyes.

So what are the underlying reasons that many museums today feel such an urgent need to expand?

Gail Lord, cofounder of Canada's Lord Cultural Resources, one of the world's

oldest and largest museum planning firms, believes it's largely motivated by collecting priorities. "Modern and contemporary collections are growing," she says. "Contemporary art is big, with requirements for installations and digital media that are quite complex."

Art consultant Allan Schwartzman agrees. "There's been a tremendous expansion over the last few decades in the size of art collections," he says. "There was a period where museums were happily expanding those collections without thinking so much about how and where they could present them or preserve them for the future." Today, however, "a lot of the expansion you're seeing is growing out of real

*"One of the things I've found is that if you have a great idea, financial support will follow."—Neal Benezra*

need," he adds. "And for museums to continue to attract major patronage, they have to have the space to be able to display things."

Indeed, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's expansion took off after the museum struck a deal with Don and Doris Fisher for stewardship of their collection—one of the greatest private contemporary-art stockpiles in the world. Director Neal Benezra says he was planning some sort of expansion as early as 2007, but

"when the Fisher collection agreement came into being" two years later, just days before Don Fisher's death, he adds, "we in effect expanded our expansion plans." The new addition will also provide more space to show the museum's own (extensive) photography holdings, as well as its permanent collection.

"One of the things I've found is that if you have a great idea, financial support will follow," Benezra says. "We're going to lift ourselves into really the first rank of those great museums in New York and London and Paris, and that's been inspiring to this community. They're not just writing checks. They're very engaged and passionate about it." (The museum's \$610 million capital campaign is already 90 percent funded.)

Indeed, deeply committed stakeholders, from docents and the local school board to trustees, seem essential to making an expansion work. That's what Director Terrie Sultan learned soon after arriving at the Parrish Art Museum in 2008, charged with raising \$80 million for a new building—30 interlocking pavilions designed by Herzog & de Meuron—that would triple the exhibition space of its original Southampton building. The recession soon toppled that ambition, and Sultan, together with the trustees, the architects, and the staff, was forced to regroup.

"We recognized that there were essentially two choices," Sultan says. "One was to wring your hands and tear your hair out. The other was to be very proactive. We basically just started over." The building they opened last year, a lean, barnlike structure in Water Mill, had a price tag of \$25 million and was carefully thought through to be easier and cheaper to maintain. The new space, together with a

revamped exhibition program focusing on the East End's rich artistic legacy, has helped woo the locals. Visitors and membership have more than doubled.

"We hold our collection in public trust, which means the public needs access to it," Sultan says. "And if you're in a building with only 4,000 square feet of exhibition space, you're not serving your community."

Another important rationale, of course, is to bring an aging physical plant up to date. That's why Michael Govan, the CEO and director of LACMA, says his planned project, by the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, "is not really an expansion per se—it's an improvement." The idea is to retain the square-footage of the museum's boxy Pereira and Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer buildings and fill it with a structure that will expand the exhibition space nearly fivefold. It will also offer improved energy efficiency, climate control, and handicapped access, Govan says, as well as satisfying earthquake retrofitting needs.

"You could never achieve these efficiencies without rebuilding the entirety of the system," Govan says. "So that's where the new building really comes into play. I would say it's a very post-financial-crisis, 21st-century plan." In energy costs alone, he adds, it should net savings of \$3 to \$6 million per year—although one could also argue that the cost of programming the new galleries may well offset those savings.

Certainly, neglecting to consider what happens after the building goes up is one of the greatest expansion pitfalls. "Once the enthusiasm for a building gets going, no-one wants to hear about operating costs," Lord points out. "Therein lies the great potential tragedy."

But in the end, as Sultan says, "There's nothing better than a purpose-built, fresh, clean, fabulous building." Just make sure you've thought it through clearly first. **ABMB**

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