
Portland Art Museum's expansion gets attention; will it also get donations?



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By **Bill Lascher**

Ten years after becoming the **Portland Art Museum's** chief curator and director, Brian Ferriso finally feels comfortable enough to ask deep-pocketed Portlanders to do something they rarely do: Spend millions on the arts.

Last month, the museum announced [plans to raise \\$50 million](#) to renovate the museum and another \$25 million for an endowment to help pay for its operations. Though the proposed design didn't elicit gasps among architects and critics, the museum got the art world's attention by also announcing that for at least the next 20 years, Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel, the children of 20th-century painter and former Portlander Mark Rothko, will loan the museum paintings by their father from their private collection. The paintings will be displayed in the glass-walled centerpiece of a proposed expansion for the museum, to be called the Mark Rothko Pavilion.

The proposed redesign addresses nearly universal complaints that the museum's mystifying layout prevents visitors from seeing much of its collection. The redesign's central feature is the Rothko Pavilion, which would connect the museum's 1932 [Pietro Belluschi](#)-designed main building and the Mark Building, a boxy former Masonic Lodge acquired by the museum in 1992. Aside from enclosing an open-air walkway between the two buildings in glass and providing new gallery space in the Rothko Pavilion, the museum plans to add a glassed-in grand staircase that would make it easier for museum-goers to move from one floor to another and between each of its main building.

"The next investment is the first time since 1932 we've looked to the future with contemporary architecture," Ferriso said.

All of the changes revolve around a central goal: improving how visitors experience art. Many of the proposed changes are subtle. Floors will be aligned, bathrooms will be added, and accessibility will be improved. Ferriso says that half of the museum's current visitors don't visit the Mark Building because it's not clear how to access it. But he takes care to emphasize that the redesign won't take away from the museum's existing buildings.

"In many ways I want the structure to be contemporary, respectful, identifiable, but not overwhelming," Ferriso said. "I think the Belluschi building is too much of an icon and too precious to compete with it."

The museum also announced last month that Chicago-based [Vinci Hamp Architects](#) will design the expansion. Though a local architect of record may be engaged, the museum opted for Vinci Hamp because of its extensive portfolio of renovations in architecturally significant buildings, including several art museums, and because Ferriso was pleased with the firm's work on four

exhibits at the Portland Art Museum as well as collaborations in previous positions he held at museums in Chicago and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Vinci Hamp's president, Phil Hamp, said his firm's challenge will be acknowledging the character of the existing buildings while improving their functionality for visitors.

"You want to respect the work of those architects from 80 to 90 years ago, and yet to do something that's in its own way timeless, but of our time, of the 21st century," Hamp said.

Los Angeles Times architectural critic Christopher Hawthorne said it was evident that reorienting how visitors approach and transition through the museum is the institution's focus.

"It does so using an architectural language that is rational, transparent and largely self-effacing: there is zero interest here in the sort of form-making or material palette that calls attention to itself," Hawthorne said, comparing it to other recent art museum projects in Boston and New York. "But the devil in this kind of project is always in the details -- and in the execution."

The concept might be winning support where it counts. In 2012, when the museum hosted an exhibition of Rothko's work, his children were encouraged by an outpouring of positive feedback. That strong support for Rothko's work in the place where he arrived after immigrating from Latvia, and at the museum where he had his first solo show, resonated, and the Rothkos maintained a dialogue with Ferriso. When he described the expansion's concept to Christopher Rothko, the museum director "didn't have to get more than five words in."

"I thought the idea that they were going to have this very open space that welcomes you as a public space and then invites you to go whatever direction you want to go in the museum, I think is a very 21st-century way of building public spaces," Christopher Rothko said.

But he emphasized that the museum will fail at its mission regardless of what's in its collection if it doesn't engage the public.

"I'm hoping that the expansion will attract more and more gifts to the museum and help them build their collection, which for any institution is an ongoing process, but it's something that I think the Pacific Northwest is increasingly doing, and hopefully Portland is going to share in that," Rothko said.

Though the museum hopes to break ground on the expansion in 2018, it has so far raised less than half of its capital goal, \$22.7 million, through two \$5 million donations, a few around \$1 million, and an anonymous \$8 million gift that made the Rothko Pavilion possible. The museum has a respected team of fundraisers, including chief advancement officer J.S. May, who won a prestigious fundraising award from the [**Association for Fundraising Professionals of Oregon and Southwest Washington**](#) earlier this month, but to reach its \$75 million total goal, it must crack Oregon's historic stinginess about making large contributions to the arts.

According to a [**database from the Chronicle of Philanthropy**](#), Oregon-based arts-oriented nonprofits received only six sizable bequests in the past decade. At the same time, Oregonians didn't give large donations to arts organizations anywhere, even as they've given tens of millions to universities and hospitals.

On the whole, Oregonians are more generous than others in the U.S. According to statistics in the [**2016 "Giving in Oregon" report**](#) from the Oregon Community Foundation, Oregonians give a higher percentage of their income than others in the U.S. But the same report, which reflects data from 2014, shows that only 6 percent of the \$2.1 billion Oregonians gave that year went toward the arts.

"The Portland arts community and the Portland nonprofit community is underfunded compared to a lot of other cities with whom we would like to be comparable," said Kris Anderson, a nonprofit consultant and co-author of [**"State of Giving: Stories of Oregon Volunteers, Donors, and Nonprofits"**](#). "So it's always a challenge to get to donors first and to make the most ardent and visionary case."

Anderson, who is also the executive director of the Portland Clinic Foundation and the interim executive director of Rediscover the Falls, said one of the challenges for fundraising campaigns is helping corporate donors from emerging tech, apparel and design industries, who tend to focus their giving at the national level, become more aware of local arts organizations. Fundraising here still relies heavily on older, wealthy philanthropic families who need extensive courting over time, and Anderson said Ferriso has done that very well since arriving in Oregon.

Still, Anderson said it is atypical for a nonprofit to go public about a fundraising campaign with such a small a share pledged toward its target. But she said it's sensible of the museum to try to simultaneously raise capital and endowment contributions.

"This is an interesting opportunity for the art museum to position itself as forward-thinking and position its collection as accessible and exciting," she said.

Ferriso stressed that his team has estimated the expansion's cost conservatively to make sure unexpected costs don't derail the project, and that work won't start until it's fully funded.

"You'll hear about many museum projects that are over-budget," Ferriso said. "You'll hear about many museum projects built and then they can't afford to run it."

Meanwhile, the new design won't radically alter Portland's architectural fabric, but some nearby residents -- especially occupants of the Eliot Tower immediately across Southwest 10th Avenue from the museum -- worry they'll lose access to a walkway between the two existing buildings. The city currently requires the path to be open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. When the Rothko Pavilion opens, pedestrians will be able to walk through it, but the museum will ask the city if it can keep the pavilion open only during museum hours. Neighbors worry that means they won't be able to use it for commutes or to reach places like the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall and the Oregon Historical Society.

Ferriso said he recognizes the neighbors' concerns, but whatever's lost by closing the walkway an additional 25 to 30 hours is outweighed by the community benefits of improved educational and cultural opportunities at the museum.

Wendy Rahm, an Eliot resident who is a museum patron and a member of the board of directors of the Architectural Heritage Center, worries the museum isn't listening to stakeholders in her building.

"I think it's gorgeous," Rahm said after attending a presentation about the proposed expansion. "My problem with this is that plaza is a pedestrian-oriented oasis in our very increasingly dense city. It is an asset to this part of town."

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