

Conundra attempts to sort out some of the more complex questions facing architects and planners.

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When should museums build new, and when can creative partnerships and reuses work just as well? Can architects help museums learn the difference?



UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The American Museum of Asmat Art's Two Women Fishing, by Primus Oambi. The piece was purchased with funds from the 2009 Spirits of Solstice Fundraiser.

BY FRANK EDGERTON MARTIN

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) is a national model for how art museums can integrate diverse cultures while creating new and varied exhibits that are relevant for our time. But today such iconic art museums are just one option for reaching audiences. Curatorial strategies for what to collect, how to interpret objects, and how to exhibit them continue to evolve. Although museums endure over generations, their paradigms for artistic quality and exhibition best practices are subject to change.

Hence the conundrum: How do cultural institutions know when to build a brand new museum wing or a new interpretive center, and when to instead reuse an existing building? When are curatorial demands for a Big Design Statement or high-tech black-box galleries absolutely essential to the mission, and when are they really expressions of curatorial assumptions that could be completely different in a generation?

These questions matter because, at the end of a major recession and the beginning of global climate change, we all need to learn to live with less. The design professions are deeply challenged to find new service roles in this changed economy. Rather than being advocates for bigger schools and gleaming new museums and interpretive centers, architects should offer a new kind of design service for the arts: helping curators and directors meet their programs without building lavishly, or maybe at all.

Reduce, Reuse, Co-locate

With their experience in programming, life-cycle costs, co-location, and exit strategies for corporate clients, many architects are well suited to facilitate this new museum thinking. In fact, Minnesota already offers a few fine examples of creative reuse, including Carleton College's just-opened, Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle-designed Weitz Center for Creativity, which incorporates the renovation of an old high school near campus. Then there's the marvelously effective Museum of Russian Art by Julie Snow Architects. Who would have thought a Spanish Colonial Revival church in a South Minneapolis neighborhood could become a museum devoted to the art of Russia? And the creative thinking didn't end there: Rather than

build its own parking lot or ramp, the museum shares parking with the Mayflower Church across the street, adjusting its hours to open later on Sundays.

Home Economics

The Minnesota Museum of American Art (MMAA) and the University of St. Thomas' American Museum of Asmat Art share experience in the dilemma of when to build big and when to adapt in more humble ways. MMAA has St. Paul roots dating back to the 1890s, when it was founded as an art school. Even though it has a lauded history of exhibitions and a permanent collection of 3,700 artworks by artists including Thomas Hart Benton

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DON F. WONG

The Museum of Russian Art found a home in a 1935 Spanish Colonial Revival church in South Minneapolis. The creative and elegant reuse has been a smashing success.

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and Mike Lynch, the MMAA currently lacks a permanent home. This condition results, in part, from a saga of failed fundraising efforts to build a custom facility in downtown St. Paul. For decades, MMAA's challenge has been to find a home that can build attendance appropriate to the quality of its collections.

MMAA director Kristin Makhholm and board member Tom Hysell, AIA, spoke with *Architecture Minnesota* about their facilities planning and what lessons the museum's history may offer to architects. "We are in a fascinating and protean stage of getting back up and running for good," says Makhholm. She is not afraid to acknowledge the missteps of the past and the need to "get it right" this time. Hysell explains that MMAA recently completed a strategic plan and is now issuing a request for proposals for a business plan. Both know that architecture comes only at the end of a long planning process that examines audiences, mission, and funding.

Since 1995, the museum's collections have been stored at a site remote from staff offices. The bottom line for Makhholm is that galleries, classrooms, offices, and storage must all be in one place—and that that location should be in St. Paul. "Otherwise, everything is on the table," she says. The board is actively looking at buildings to repurpose, with many options available downtown and in surrounding neighborhoods.

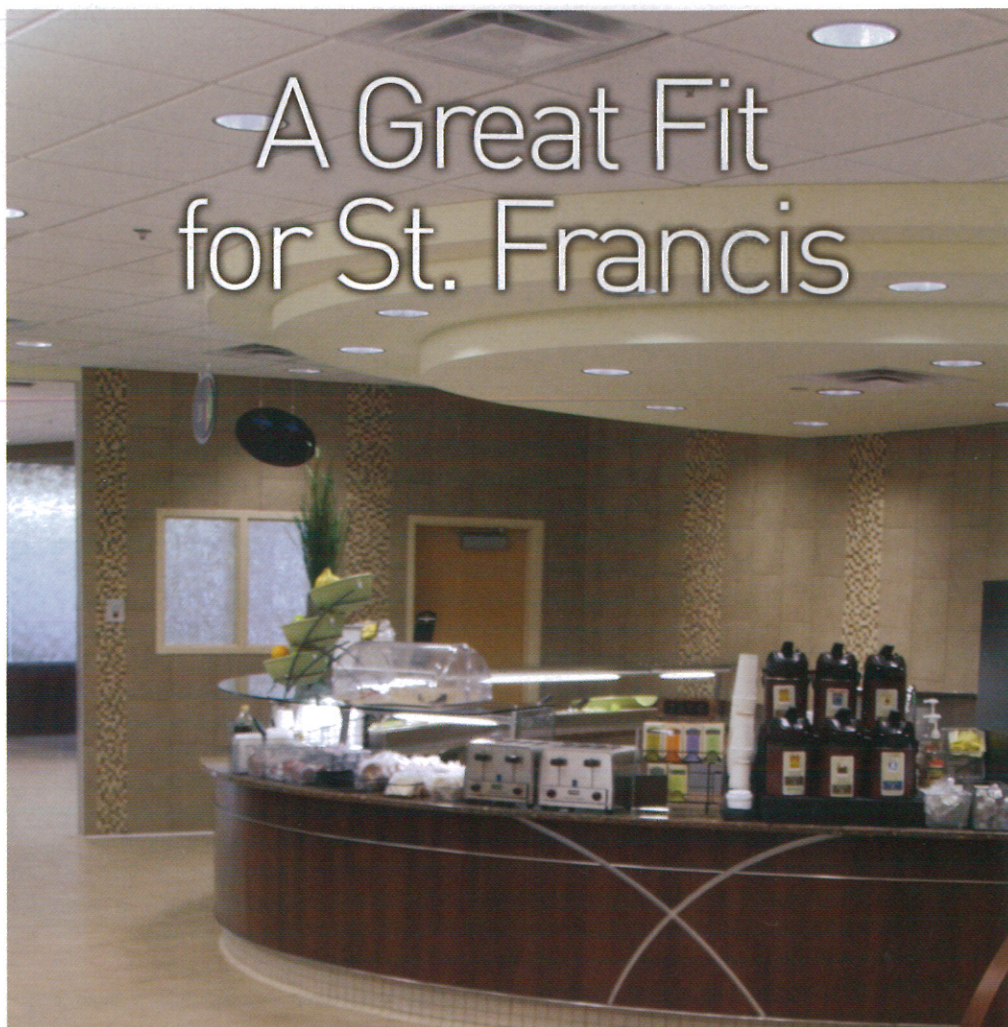
During this time, MMAA's exhibitions program remains active. In September, a show of collection highlights called "Our Treasures" will open at the Tweed Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota Duluth, after which it will travel to the Hillstrom Museum of Art at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Back to School

Creative facilities sharing can help small and very focused collections survive. This winter, the American Museum of Asmat Art (AMAA) will open a permanent exhibit space in the new Opus-designed Anderson Student Center at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. But AMAA isn't new. Its collection has been housed at St. Thomas since 2007, with the curators using the downtime to study and catalog the works—Asmat woodwork, clothing, and woven fiber collected by Crosier Fathers and Brothers missionaries during the 1960s, when the Indonesian government banned the creation of sacred art forms.

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A Great Fit for St. Francis



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Shakopee

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Pietre Etrusche floor and wall tile combines the look of refined porcelain stoneware with durability to withstand abrasion, wear and stains: ideal for a high-traffic food service facility. Vertical mosaic inserts, Quadec wall corners and Dilex cove bases add eye-appealing and avant garde design elements, a nice fit for St. Francis.



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AMAA director Julie Risser explains that several years ago the Crosiers, who have a monastery in Onamia, Minnesota, discussed donating the entire collection to the MIA. But with so many cultures and periods to exhibit, the MIA only wanted signature objects. The collection then sat in suburban rental space until 2007, when a joint agreement between the Crosiers, the Diocese of Agats, and St. Thomas gave the collection a permanent home as part of the university's art and architectural history programs. Now students have an invaluable opportunity to study the artifacts and curate exhibits.

Meanwhile, the construction of the new student center affords the museum a 1,500-square-foot gallery space at the heart of campus. Here's a case where a small, specialized museum found a home in a relatively large university, eliminating the need to fundraise for and build an elaborate new facility. AMAA's challenge, of course, will be to reach out to the larger community from inside a larger institution.

Specialized, Small, and Quirky

In the past decade, Minnesota has seen the opening of several ambitious new theaters and museum expansions. Was new construction the right choice for all of these projects? When is the quest for novelty justified, and when does it expend great resources unnecessarily? In addition to landmarks designed by renowned architects, cities need a constellation of smaller, specialized, and somewhat quirky museums like the American Museum of Asmat Art and the Hennepin History Museum in Fair Oaks Park, where you can get to know the staff and where students get hands-on experience.

Although they don't all need signature facilities, most museums do need a lasting home, even if a humble one. Architects can help here in envisioning new exhibit spaces in old car dealerships, theaters, storefronts, offices, student centers, and other surprising places. The profession can work with curators to challenge their assumptions, to run cost-benefit analyses on exhibit venues, and to consider strategic space sharing with other museums and even private businesses. Why couldn't a museum of electronics be housed in a working factory? Minnesota is better off with a broad fabric of museums that are sustainable, local, and lasting. **AMN**

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