



ART & DESIGN

On Elite Campuses, an Arts Race

By JAMES S. RUSSELL NOV. 13, 2014

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Closed for six years, the Harvard Art Museums reopen here Sunday after a radical overhaul by the architect Renzo Piano. He saved only the shell of the chaste, red-brick Fogg Museum and its interior courtyard, extending it upward in sheets of glass and elegant trusswork. Galleries wrap the new public space, but so do a materials lab, an art-conservation suite and a study center, where students, faculty and visitors can learn from the collection of 250,000 objects.

It's an intricate puzzle piece, serving many agendas, the fruit of a tortured history and about \$400 million. The renovation survived the economic crash, when Harvard stopped a billion-dollar lab complex that was to inaugurate a campus expansion in nearby Allston. "We were the only ones to come out of the tunnel," said Thomas Lentz, the museums' director, on a recent walk through the building.

Such faith in the arts is not confined to Harvard. Elite campuses across the country have emerged from the recession riding a multibillion-dollar wave of architecturally ambitious arts facilities, even as community arts programs struggle against public indifference. The current tide of building developed over years, as universities reassert the essential value of the arts to a well-rounded education, aided by deep-pocket alumni willing to underwrite elaborate new facilities "for noble and not always so noble reasons," Mr. Lentz said.

Campus museums and arts centers, offering performances and public

exhibitions, are intended in part to help schools mend strains with their communities while appealing to students who “expect an advanced university to have an art museum as part of what they offer, especially in a world where the visual is so foregrounded,” Mr. Lentz added.

But the seeming boom also comes at a time of unprecedented criticism of how colleges teach and how they spend money, and amid a push to measure what students learn. “Arts occupy somewhat contested ground at Harvard,” said Mr. Lentz, whose puff of white hair matches his translucent round glasses. “They are debated, as is the role of humanities here and everywhere. “

Yale set the bar high in the 1990s with its half-billion-dollar master plan that included renovations and new buildings for art, art history, architecture, music and theater. The capstone was the \$135 million overhaul of the Yale University Art Gallery in 2012. Ennead Architects restored and merged three obstreperous buildings of varying ages. The project allowed curators to put so much on view it was as if a great metropolitan art museum had materialized out of thin air. Attendance has doubled to more than 200,000 annual visitors.

Stanford University is building an entire arts district around its Cantor Arts Center to boost the tech haven’s arts bona fides. Along with a concert hall that would be the envy of any big city is the Anderson Collection, a home for a trove of postwar modern and contemporary art that opened in September. Due in 2015 is a new art and art history building with long ribbonlike wings for both scholarship and art making, each with its own grand stairway.

The University of Chicago signaled a higher profile for studio art, film, theater and music with the 2012 unveiling of the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. And at Rice University, a leading research institution in Houston, classical singing students will benefit from an anonymous gift that spurred the design of a new opera theater by Diller, Scofidio & Renfro. “They realized that opera — uniting music, theater, scenic design, lighting — is the most truly

interdisciplinary art form,” said Charles Renfro, a principal.

Some of these projects have gone through years of struggle that pushed costs to startling heights. Recently, Princeton University won a long fight to relocate its New Jersey Transit rail station, making its 140,000-square-foot Lewis Center for the Arts a prominent new gateway to the campus. The complex will ease access for arts patrons, but opponents argue it will sacrifice access to the town’s commercial center.

Scheduled to open in 2017, the center, by the architects Steven Holl and Chris McVoy includes a theater, an art gallery and orchestral rehearsal space. Windowed cutouts in the structure will let passers-by look in on an orchestra practicing or dancers rehearsing.

“I hope a molecular biologist passing through might look up from his screen and see something that he becomes interested in,” Mr. Holl said.

Princeton’s arts commitment became a \$330 million redevelopment with Mr. Holl’s building and the relocation of the transit hub — a total of 22 acres.

Not everyone is on board. The university is building “a beautification project,” said Stanley N. Katz, the director of Princeton’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies. “So far as I can tell, the expansion contributes in only modest ways to the intellectual mission of the university.” The prominent refocusing on arts is to some extent lip service, Mr. Katz added. “Arts appeal to certain wealthy alumni who are more likely to give money to this sort of thing than something else.”

For his part, Princeton’s president, Christopher Eisgruber, argues that the alumni and campus community “believe we must make it possible for the human spirit to soar.”

At Harvard, Mr. Lentz, a scholar of ancient and Islamic art and a longtime museum administrator, arrived in 2003 believing that his biggest job would be to unite three museums: the Fogg (Western art), the Sackler (Asian, Islamic and Indian) and the Busch-Reisinger (German and northern European) on Quincy Street, each a fief occupying its own building. Instead, he found that “we had to rebuild not just collections but connections to the

university.”

Aside from facilities “that were crumbling,” Mr. Lentz said, “there had been a disconnect from the rest of the university. Very few students using the museum were from Harvard. We had to reposition the museum to a more central position with an educational mission, to be a bigger part of the cognitive life of the university, or we would have no traction at all.”

Mr. Piano had produced designs for new construction beginning in 1997, but the economic contraction cost Mr. Lentz a proposed contemporary-art building on Harvard’s Allston campus and 30 percent of his staff. As he consolidated the three museums in the tight Quincy Street site, though, Mr. Lentz said he was able to “migrate works from all the collections throughout the building.”

Vigilant neighbors pushed to keep the additions to the site invisible. After accommodating space for object study, curatorial programs and art conservation, Mr. Lentz was able to add only 12,000 square feet for exhibitions, increasing to just 43,000 square feet. That allows display of only a sliver of a collection comparable in size to those of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Three Harvard presidents have remained steadfast to the art-museum vision, assisted by gifts that have raised \$237 million of a \$250 million fund-raising goal from major benefactors like David Rockefeller and Emily Rauh Pulitzer.

By contrast, many public institutions are struggling to do more with less. James Martin, who teaches music at the private Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss., and has taught at the state’s public colleges as well, said that the public schools “are trying to get their culture offerings up to speed, but they are hard to fund.”

Too much focus on “a very specialized trade-school mentality” cost state schools promising students, he said. “Convincing the public to support arts is difficult in a state where there aren’t enough quality public-school programs for reading, let alone teaching music.”

Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, is that rare public

research institution that has put the arts front and center. It hired Mr. Holl to design a 41,000-square-foot building for a new Institute of Contemporary Art that will extend an arts-led downtown revitalization. Mr. Holl anchors the museum with a 72-foot-high torqued metal tower as a billboard for art. A tall glass-walled entrance invites visitors to a forum within for public events.

Art for art's sake is not discouraged, but departments collaborate in an entrepreneurial spirit: Engineering students sought out artists to improve the appeal of devices they had designed. The university drew attention when a student who graduate with a degree in sculpture designed molds of silicon and foam that a university pediatric plastic surgeon used to reconstruct torsos for conjoined twins.

Critics have argued that big arts-building investments are vanity projects, or that private donors should finance community arts organizations or scholarships instead.

The University of Chicago wants it both ways. For the Logan Center, Mr. Williams and Ms. Tsien provided two entrances, one that opened north to the campus and another facing south, toward poor neighborhoods which had long felt ignored.

The university also named Theaster Gates, the Chicago-based artist with an urban focus, as the director of its Arts and Public Life Initiative. The university helped him renovate a nearby abandoned commercial building into the Washington Park Arts Incubator, which displays the work of local artists and offers residencies.

"The incubator is really about what could grow in Washington Park," Mr. Gates explained via email, adding that it works synergistically with the Logan. Performances and displays of a 1960s Black Arts collective called Africobra, for example, were shared by the center and the incubator, as well as the South Side Community Art Center and the DuSable Museum of African American History.

He added, "We've been able to create the kind of cultural wealth that hasn't been seen on the South Side in a long time."

As recession-strapped universities began to regard their art collections as sources of ready cash that could boost sagging endowments, integrating arts education with other disciplines became a necessity. The outcry over the proposed sale of works from the Rose Museum of Art at Brandeis University in 2009 “raised red flags” about the need to make art more essential to the academic mission, according to Lisa Freiman, the director of Virginia Commonwealth’s Institute of Contemporary Art.

At Harvard, where scholars once ran the museums for other scholars, Mr. Lentz proudly notes that with the new study center, 12 classes have already signed on to study with objects that relate to classwork.

Arts will always fight the “alphanumeric bias,” Mr. Lentz said. For many in and out of academia, “if it is not text and not a number it is not considered knowledge.”

But the debates over how to balance the needs of scholars, students, the larger campus and the community, he said, “have driven arts to greater prominence.”

Correction: November 14, 2014

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of years the Harvard Art Museums have been closed. It is six years, not more than eight years.

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