Art Museum Two-Step

The museum of modern and contemporary art that Harvard plans to build in Allston will have to wait. In September, the Harvard Corporation decided that the project, once fast-tracked for rapid construction ahead of Harvard’s 50-year Allston master plan, was not so pressing a priority as the renovation of 32 Quincy Street in Cambridge, home to the Fogg and Busch-Reisinger art museums. The roof leaks at the Fogg, and the building is more than 50 years overdue for attention to its antiquated electrical, plumbing, and climate-control systems.

The Harvard University Art Museums (HUAM) had focused on the Allston project as a way to address the absence of modern and contemporary art exhibition space on campus—a serious structural deficiency for an institution whose collections rival in size those of the public museums of Chicago and Philadelphia. But last March, the Allston project was put on hold for at least a few months in order to allow the neighborhood community time to focus instead on plans for a science complex (see “Off the Fast Track,” May-June 2007, page 64). Residents raised “legitimate, valid” concerns, says Cabot director of the museums Thomas W. Lentz, who nevertheless felt most issues could have been “resolved through the design process.” (One community objection centered on the amount of public gallery space as compared to non-public space in the original design).

Now, with a comprehensive review of the arts at Harvard under way, with its own implications for Allston (see page 51), Harvard will instead proceed with the Quincy Street renovation, a massive and complex undertaking that will begin on June 30 with the yearlong process of emptying the building of all its artwork and staff. (Artworks and personnel will move to an offsite location in Greater Boston.) Construction is expected to begin in late fall 2009. The project will be extraordinarily expensive, not only because of the multiple moves of objects and personnel required, and the challenges of working on an urban site, but also because of the building’s landmark status, the need to capture underground space, and the requirement for complex fire, security, and climate-control systems. The total cost may run a few hundred million dollars.

When 32 Quincy Street reopens in 2013, it will serve as home to all three of the University art museums: the Fogg, the Sackler, and the Busch-Reisinger. (During the closure, HUAM will use the nearby Sackler building, one-third the size of the Fogg, for a limited installation of artworks from all three collections.) Architect Renzo Piano is working on the plans, now in the conceptual phase, as the museum seeks approval from Cambridge boards and community groups. Once the renovation is complete, all the collections will be represented in the new building, but only some of the staff and the collections will return. The Fine Arts Library will move to the Sackler building, joining the already-resident history of art and architecture department. Gallery space in the renovated Fogg will increase, but office space will be reclaimed, so only the curatorial, conservation, and director’s staff will remain.

With one of the great collections in the United States, “Harvard is not only in the major art-museum business, it is in it in a very big way,” says Lentz. “We want to make the collections far more accessible than they have ever been in the past...for all students.
Eric S. Maskin ’72, Ph.D. ’76, and Roger B. Myerson ’73, Ph.D. ’76, shared the prize with Leonid Hurwicz, G ’41, for “mechanism design theory”—essentially, studies of when markets work and when they do not, and ways of modeling the conduct of auctions and other allocation systems given differences in the information available to individual participants, their differing incentives, and other issues. The work has applications to problems ranging from auctioning rights to emit carbon dioxide to matching organ donors with recipients. Maskin studied mathematics as an undergraduate, and Myerson applied mathematics. Both did their graduate work in applied mathematics. Maskin was a professor of economics at Harvard from 1985 to 2000, before moving to the Institute for Advanced Study. Myerson was at Northwestern University from 1976 to 2001, when he moved to the University of Chicago. Hurwicz, now Regents Professor emeritus of economics at the University of Minnesota, studied at Harvard briefly after immigrating to this country following the outbreak of World War II.

- Peace. Al Gore Jr. ’69, LL.D. ’94, former vice president of the United States, was named co-recipient of the prize, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—recognition for his work in publicizing and prompting action on global warming. Among the scholars who played leading roles in the panel’s work are Daniel J. Jacob, Vasco McCoy Family professor of atmospheric chemistry and environmental engineering; James J. McCarthy, professor of biological oceanography; Steven C. Wofsy, Rotch professor of atmospheric and environmental science; and Robert Stavins, Pratt professor of business and government at the Kennedy School of Government. The four were recognized by Dean Michael Smith at the first Faculty of Arts and Sciences meeting of the year, on October 16. (For previous coverage of their work, see “The Great Global Experiment,” November-December 2002, page 34, and Harvard Portraits of McCarthy [September-October 1992, page 71] and Jacob [May-June 1995, page 63].)

- Literature. Doris Lessing, Litt.D. ’95, the English novelist best known for The Golden Notebook, was recognized as the laureate, “that epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire, and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny.” Detailed descriptions of the laureates’ work are available at http://nobel-prize.org.

Lentz’s vision is to use the museum collections as a resource to “teach through works of art in ways that the rest of Harvard can’t. If works of art are viewed as more than just pretty objects,” he explains, “if they are understood as the material embodiment of ideas and values and traditions and emotions and attitudes, then all of a sudden a collection like this turns into a very powerful educational and teaching resource. What we are trying to do is reposition the museums within Harvard’s educational mission.”

This vision for renewed curricular engagement is driving the physical plan. “We are moving to a two-site operating model,” Lentz says. “When I first came here, we tackled in a very fundamental way the question of whether to maintain a presence in Cambridge, “because we will never have the space we need here: the site is too tight.” After much discussion, “we decided unanimously we’d be insane if we ever moved from this location...[W]e’re in the center of a visual-arts corridor that sits right on the edge of Harvard Yard: Houghton Library’s rare books and manuscripts; the Barker humanities center; the Carpenter Center, where the practice of art takes place; Sever Hall’s brand new facilities for film and video; the film archive next door; and the Graduate School of Design.”

In addition, he points out, “We have this great mission—we are not driven by attendance or revenue generation. We are all about teaching and research and education and learning.” Recognizing the limitations of the Cambridge site, Harvard will try to maximize its utility, rather than move all the collections to a new museum in Allston. “When the dust settles and Renzo Piano is through, we’re going to have in place what we think is going to be, in many ways, a different kind of art museum,” Lentz says. “It is going to be an integrated balance of exhibition galleries, study centers, classrooms, seminar rooms, lecture hall, auditorium, as well as, in the Straus Center, one of the great conservation laboratories in the world. So in many ways, we are setting this up as our major public presentation and teaching platform.”

Lentz hasn’t forgotten Allston, where HUAM already has a public-education program underway with the Gardner elementary school. Allston will be “a really healthy thing for this museum,” he believes, “because we are going to have to go out and engage with and build an entirely new audience over there. At a time when the visual is so privileged in this society—think of how information is conveyed and communicated—not having the tools and resources that help people foster critical looking and thinking skills, I think, is a huge deficiency.”