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The Museum of Arts and Design Prepares for Its New Home

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

Arriving on her first day as director of the Museum of Arts and Design 10 years ago, Holly Hotchner was greeted by an eviction notice, a bookkeeper who said the museum could not make payroll and a rat scurrying across the floor of her sub-basement office. She had inherited an institution, then called the American Craft Museum, that was struggling with an operating deficit, virtually no endowment and stagnant attendance and membership. In fact, few people seemed to have heard of it.

Today the museum is no stranger to New Yorkers, if only because of the bitter preservation battle that arose over its purchase and planned renovation of 2 Columbus Circle, the 1964 "lollipop" building near Central Park designed by Edward Durell Stone.

When the Museum of Arts and Design finally opens its doors there in 2008, Ms. Hotchner says she hopes it will become known for what it does, not where it is.

The museum, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this fall, was founded as the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in a Victorian brownstone at 29 West 53rd Street by Aileen Osborn Webb, a leading crafts patron and benefactor.

In 1986, it moved to its current site, occupying four floors of a new building at 40 West 53rd Street, and was renamed the American Craft Museum. In 2002, the museum changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design to better reflect its focus, which now includes architecture, fashion, interior design, technology and performing arts as well as crafts, art and design.

The name change was controversial. "People in the craft camp felt they'd been abandoned," said Wendell Castle, a furniture maker whose work has been the subject of a solo show at the museum and who has served on the board. "But design is just a hotter thing than craft, so maybe they had to do that."

The Museum of Arts and Design's shows now tend to focus on postwar contemporary art. Currently on view are "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art," featuring artists who balance environmental concerns with aesthetics, and "Why? 25 Case Studies," in which recently acquired objects are accompanied by labels explaining why they fit into the museum's vision. Both run through May 7. In "Why?," visitors can also write their responses next to the pieces, which include "Aberrant Ascension" by Tom Eckert, seemingly a stack of restaurant china covered by a napkin, but actually carved from a solid piece of wood; hand-etched crystal glasses by Sol LeWitt; and a curvilinear sculpture by a Japanese bamboo artist, Morigami Jin.

"The guiding principle to how we started out as a craft museum is a deep appreciation for how materials and the making of things factor into the meaning of the piece," said David Revere McFadden, the chief curator and vice president for programs and collections at the museum.

The museum quickly outgrew its space on 53rd Street. There are no galleries in which to show its collection, now stored in Chelsea. There is no separate space for classrooms, visitors or artist studios.

"If we have a lecture, it is set up on uncomfortable chairs in the gallery," Ms. Hotchner said. "Most of the museum is a staircase. It really is very deficient as a public museum."

The purchase of 2 Columbus Circle was the culmination of a search that started several years ago. The museum first

considered merging with other institutions, then looked at alternative sites, including one on the Far West Side and the former McBurney Y.M.C.A. at 23rd Street and Seventh Avenue. The museum even considered going out of business, but decided that did not make sense.

"We needed to exist," Ms. Hotchner said. "There was no other craft museum in the United States."

In the 53rd Street space, the museum must close entirely for 10 to 14 days, three times a year, to install exhibitions, forfeiting admissions. Because of the limited space, installations must all be changed at once; shows cannot be staggered. In the new building, the museum will be able to have 10 shows simultaneously and display its permanent collection for the first time. The square footage will more than triple to 54,000 — 14,000 of which is gallery space — from the current total of 17,000 (including underground levels), with 7,256 of gallery space.

The retail area, where the museum sells one-of-a-kind objects by 1,400 artists from all over the world, will increase to 1,400 square feet from 800.

There will be an entire floor for education, a 155-seat auditorium and three demonstration studios, where the public can observe artists at work.

"The hope is that people will look at the process of making things, then go to the galleries and see objects, so that you're connecting that process to the objects," Ms. Hotchner said.

The museum's financial health has improved over the last decade. During Ms. Hotchner's tenure, the endowment has increased to \$3 million from \$1.5 million, the annual operating budget has grown to \$5.5 million from \$3 million, membership has increased to 2,300 from 1,313 and annual attendance has increased to 300,000 from 175,000.

But big challenges lie ahead, for example meeting an operating budget that will jump to \$6.9 million, an endowment goal of \$20 million, and attendance and membership goals of 450,000 and 3,200, respectively.

Jerome A. Chazen, the museum's chairman emeritus, said that during a nearly three-year fight with preservationists — including five lawsuits and two appeals — construction costs rose to \$40 million from \$26 million because of design refinements and an increase in the cost of materials. The museum has raised more than \$50 million in a three-year capital campaign, but says it will need \$65 million to support enhancements to the building's design and increase the endowment.

The building's redesign, by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture in collaboration with Gary Edward Handel & Associates, includes a new terra-cotta facade with varied kinds of glass — clear, fritted and translucent. Horizontal and vertical slots in the facade will bring light into the galleries and afford views of Columbus Circle and Central Park. The building's ninth-floor restaurant will return, with windows on three sides instead of one.

Mr. Chazen said that the board had held fast in its pursuit of the building. "It's been a real battle, and it's kind of too bad that it happened," he said. "We were really into the thing. There was kind of no turning back."

Ms. Hotchner, who was trained as a conservator, said she was generally sympathetic to preservationist concerns — just not this one. "A building is not a facade; a building is not a skin," she said. "The issue is this building never worked. The building has been empty much more than occupied."

Built as Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art, 2 Columbus Circle closed in 1969 and then reopened as the New York Cultural Center. Gulf and Western Industries bought the building in 1975 and in 1980 presented it to the city, which used it for the Department of Cultural Affairs and the visitors bureau.

Both moved out in 1998, and the building has been vacant since. In 2002, the city designated the Museum of Arts and Design as the site's developer. In October, the city closed on a \$17 million sale of the building to the museum.

While preservationists' complaints generated negative publicity, Ms. Hotchner said she tried to look on the bright side.

"At least many, many people know that there will be a Museum of Arts and Design at Columbus Circle, and you can't pay for that kind of marketing," she said. "I think they anticipate wanting to come see what will be there."