

Whitney's billionaire chairman of trustees steps down

Leonard Lauder's decision to leave the institution coincides with launch of \$680m fundraising campaign

JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN
1st July 2008 00:00 BST

As the Whitney Museum gears up for the largest fundraising drive in its history, Leonard Lauder, the institution's greatest benefactor and fundraiser in recent decades, has stepped down from his position as chairman of the board of trustees.

Mr Lauder, 75, is chairman of The Estée Lauder Companies, the cosmetics corporation founded by his mother, and has a net worth of \$3.2bn, according to Forbes. He has donated hundreds of millions of dollars in cash and art to the museum since joining the board in 1977, and has been chairman since 1994. To fill his shoes the board has named two co-chairmen: Robert J. Hurst, the Whitney's president since 2002, and Brooke Neidich, who has been vice-chairman along with Neil G. Bluhm, newly elected as president.

Although Mr Lauder remains a voting member of the Whitney board, the billionaire's decision to relinquish leadership at the crucial moment when the museum launches a \$680m campaign to build and endow a new building by Renzo Piano, may be related to the expansion plans.

In a press announcement about the Piano-designed museum in New York's Meatpacking District released on 1 May, the Whitney described the future building as the museum's "second site" but made no mention of a continued use for the Whitney's current home, the Marcel Breuer-designed landmark on Madison Avenue. Mr Lauder apparently anticipated that the board might

decide to vacate its Upper East Side flagship, and he took steps to make sure that it would not.

In March, he gave the museum \$131m through his American Contemporary Art Foundation, a non-profit organisation that has funnelled art and money to the Whitney. As a condition of the cash gift—the largest in the Whitney’s history—Mr Lauder reportedly stipulated that the museum must not sell its Breuer building. He declines to specify the confidential terms of the gift, but the fact that it carried such a condition indicates that he felt it necessary to legally block the board from abandoning the Breuer site and moving to the much larger Piano building.

The Whitney’s director, Adam Weinberg, has since stated that the museum plans to operate both facilities concurrently, though it is not clear for how long. Work on the Piano building is to begin in spring 2009 with an opening in late 2012.

Mr Lauder would not discuss his gift or whether his departure was precipitated by a divergence with the board’s vision for the museum’s future. In an email to The Art Newspaper, he explained that business and personal responsibilities were demanding his attention. “Our company is in the middle of a major management realignment [and] I’m now back in the middle of things in helping the top management team order their priorities,” he wrote. “In addition, for the first time in our lives, my family urgently needs my attention,” he added.

His wife, Evelyn, who has raised tens of millions of dollars for breast cancer awareness and research, suffers from the disease. “Both the company and my family needs have put me in a position that requires me to free up time. I’ve scaled back the active roles I play in the few not-for-profits,” he explained.

The museum’s 45-member board has other powerful members. Mr Bluhm is the billionaire founder and president of Chicago-based JMB Realty and also a board member of the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr Hurst, a trustee for 14 years, is a senior advisor to Crestview Capital Partners and former chairman of investment bank Goldman Sachs. Ms Neidich, a trustee for nearly a

decade, is the wife of Daniel Neidich, a partner at Goldman Sachs.

Meanwhile, the museum also wants to hire a deputy director. A spokesman said the position is “an expansion of duties formerly held by the chief of staff, and does not represent a restructuring of the management tree.” However the job description portrays a more significant role: “As the senior member of the staff management and policy-making team, the deputy director has general responsibility for museum-wide activities and initiatives, and acts as liaison with museum staff, departments, trustees, community and external contacts.” Mr Weinberg abolished a comparable post when he took over as director in 2003 in order to have direct access to curators and department heads.

 *Appeared in The Art Newspaper Archive, 193 July 2008*

More Archive Topics **Appointments & departures** Museum trustees

Fundraising Lauder Initiative American Museums