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Chicago's answer to MoMA: Museum of Contemporary Art opens next month

Chicagoans have raised \$55 million for this major new museum

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The United States has more great cities than great museums of modern or contemporary art. Chicago, one of the country's greatest metropolitan centres, is a case in point.

The "city of broad shoulders" has until now supported only a modest kunsthalle, whose cramped quarters limited the scope of its exhibition programme and stunted the growth of its permanent collection. That will change dramatically next month, as the city christens what will certainly become one of the leading institutions in America dedicated to contemporary art.

The \$43-million structure, designed by Josef Paul Kleihues, is the first purpose-built home in the thirty-year history of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). Its 150,000 square feet—seven times larger than the previous building—will enable the museum for the first time to show its permanent collection and temporary exhibitions simultaneously. "The world of

contemporary art and the ideas which are central to it will have a first opportunity to be displayed in their full form in our city,” remarks MCA chairman Allen M. Turner

It is an immensely important event for the city, but one with national and international repercussions. The MCA becomes one of the country’s three largest museums focusing on postwar international art, joining the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Suddenly it finds itself on the same playing field with institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the great encyclopaedic museums which also collect and exhibit contemporary art. “The new large spaces enable us to physically support virtually any travelling exhibition any institution is currently organising,” declares director Kevin Consey.

Chief curator Richard Francis has co-curated a Jeff Wall retrospective with the Jeu de Paume and Whitechapel Galleries, and looks forward to collaborating with institutions such as the Tate, the Centre Pompidou, and the Kunstmuseum Basel. “We hope to distinguish ourselves by the scope and quality of our exhibitions” says Mr Consey, “not just imports, but shows we export to other parts of the world that can bring prestige to the city.”

It was three decades ago when a group of collectors founded the museum of contemporary art in a renovated one-storey former bakery, and began mounting shows of Pop and Conceptual artists like Oldenburg, Segal, the city’s own H.C. Westermann, and Christo, who wrapped the entire place in pink. Then there were shows like “Art by Telephone,” whose participants delivered the specs for their entries by phone; “White on White,” which surveyed art objects that are all white, and a Chris Burden performance in which he lay under a sheet of glass for forty-five hours. Among the artists who had their first museum show at the MCA are Flavin, Artschwager, H.C. Westermann, Lee Bontecou, Abakanowicz, Yasumasa Morimura, Lorna Simpson, Jeff Wall, and Beverly Semmes; those who had their first US museum shows include Enrico Baj, Tàpies, and Frida Kahlo.

In 1977, the trustees bought the three-storey townhouse next door and, after letting Gordon Matta-Clark carve up the floors and walls, reopened in expanded quarters. Gradually, local collectors, many of whom had exhibited their collections at the museum, began to donate works to form a permanent collection. The problem was that

there was no place to show them. In 1986, the board decided they needed a new building. Nine trustees committed \$5 million as seed money for the project which blossomed with

extraordinary speed. Before a plan or an architect had been selected, forty trustees pledged \$37.5 million.

Now, the MCA has surpassed its goal of \$55 million, and is closing in on \$57 million, and there is continued excitement in the funding community.

In 1988, the State of Illinois granted the museum use of the site of the National Guard Armory, slated for demolition. In 1989, the board appointed Mr Consey, who had led an expansion at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach, California. An international search for an architect drew more than 200 responses from which, in 1991, the committee chose Berlin architect Josef Paul Kleihues, whose projects include the Museum of Prehistory in Frankfurt (1980-86), and converting the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin into a museum of contemporary art.

Unlike other Chicago museums, the MCA is not on city land, so it is not entitled to any money from the municipal government. As Mr Consey sees it, "Because we have no tax-base support, we have to succeed as a business enterprise." To that end, the museum has built in a battery of revenue-producing features and activities: a 125-car parking garage, a book store and gift shop, restaurant and café, a 300-seat auditorium for special ticketed events, exhibitions for fees, and publications. Admission is hiked from \$5 to \$6.50. There are seventy special private events booked between 2 July and 31 December, including the Democratic Governors Ball during the Democratic National Convention.

The building

The building itself, Kleihues's first in the US, occupies a 184 x 184-foot square within a two-acre lot at 220 East Chicago Avenue. It rises to a height of seventy feet above a main façade that borrows from Schinkel's Altes Museum, with a broad staircase flanked by huge blocks that someday will serve as sculpture plinths.

At the top of the stairs, one enters through revolving doors into a fifty-five foot-high atrium with shop, ticket counter, coat check, elevators, and so on. A corridor cuts straight through the centre of the building towards the sculpture garden and Lake Michigan. On either side of the corridor are eighty-foot square spaces with high ceilings for temporary exhibitions.

The fourth floor houses the permanent collection in four barrel-vaulted spaces covering 16,000 square feet. A system combining filtered sunlight and artificial illumination was designed by

the firm Ove Arup, who designed the lighting at the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing and the Menil Collection. Adjoining these galleries are spaces for works on paper and projects by emerging artists. Above them, on the fifth floor, staff offices wrap around the perimeter of the building, each with its own window wall. The third floor is a mezzanine that contains only some space for a video gallery.

Exhibitions

The programme of the new MCA begins with "Negotiating Rapture: the Power of art to transform lives" (2 July-20 October), which chief curator Richard Francis (right) explains is "about the search for a state which is beyond the everyday, a transcendent state." The show is intended "to establish the possibility for sensibility to" works by Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Bacon, Kiefer, Newman, Nauman, Beuys, Fontana, Viola, and Shirazeh Houshiary." The second major show, "Art in Chicago, 1945-95" (16 November 1996-23 March 1997), is organised by Lynne Warren, special projects curator, who has been at the MCA for fifteen years. And the third is "Performance Anxiety" (26 April-20 July 1997), an exhibition of participatory works, conceived by curator of exhibitions Amanda Cruz, who joined the MCA in 1995 after five years at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington.

The collection

In less than twenty years, the museum has accumulated 7,000 objects (of which 1,300 are works on paper and 4,000 are artists' books). Magritte, Matta, Picasso, and Bacon are represented, and a smattering of Abstract Expressionism, but the greater concentrations are of minimal and conceptual art, and art made in Chicago. The acquisitions fund is only "the low six figures each year," which makes the museum dependent on gifts. "Our trustees have wonderful collections which fall into our range," notes Mr Turner, citing Richard Cooper, who turned his former Weight Watchers office into a mini museum of post-1980 American art; Lew and Susan Manilow who have works by Kiefer and Fischl; Thomas and Frannie Dittmer, whose Refco Collection specialises in art with a sociopolitical message (see p.43). The new building means "collectors can give works of art with some expectation that they will be seen in a public space," says Mr Consey, noting that trustee Stefan Edlis recently gave a Jasper Johns, and Mr Turner a work by Baselitz. In 1994, trustee Gerald Elliot bequeathed 105 minimalist, conceptual, and expressionist works, including thirty-one Naumans (as residuary beneficiary, the museum reaped more than \$3 million from the auction of remainders); and in 1995, the Los-Angeles based Lannan Foundation, founded in 1960 by a Chicago financier, announced that the MCA

would be one of three museums to share the 1,500-piece collection, that includes works by Burden, Close, Irwin, Motherwell, Reinhardt, Stella, Still, Kienholz, Judd, Marden, Martin, Cindy Sherman, Richter, and Kiki Smith.

The inaugural selection, dubbed “In the Shadow of Storms: Art of the Postwar Era from the MCA Collection” (until May 1997), includes seventy-five works, selected and installed by collections curator Lucinda Barnes.

Opening events

The Museum of Contemporary Art raised \$2.7 million for opening year events, including \$250,000 each from American Airlines, Marshall Fields and Target Department Stores, Bank of America, Hal Riney and Partners, Sara Lee, and Philip Morris. Others companies gave \$100,000 or \$50,000. In exchange, each gets recognition on the museum map and guide, and their name associated with one of sixteen opening year events. For example, “Art in Chicago” is sponsored by Philip Morris; “Performance Anxiety” by AT&T, and the “Summer Solstice” celebration by Marshall Fields and Target. This last is the grand inauguration, an around-the-clock open house, free to the public, from 8pm Friday, 21 June, to 8pm the following night. There will be music and drinking; an aeroplane will create “artistic skywriting” in the sky above the museum, and in the evening there will be fireworks over Lake Michigan.

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