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[Russia-Ukraine war](#) [Art market](#) [Museums & heritage](#) [Exhibitions](#) [Books](#) [Podcasts](#) [Columns](#) [Adve](#)

Museums
Archive

MoMA to expand again, but not for a generation

The property was purchased during the expansion project, and includes all the land west of the museum between 53rd and 54th Streets and Sixth Avenue

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MoMA has announced that it has acquired land adjacent to its current building with an eye towards further expansion. At a press event in May, director Glenn Lowry said that during construction of the main building, property immediately west of the museum became available, and that one trustee, citing a Japanese proverb, said, “When your neighbour’s property is for sale, buy it”.

Mr Lowry did not say how much the museum spent to acquire the property, which includes all the land west of the museum between 53rd and 54th Streets and Sixth Avenue, excluding the tiny Folk Art Museum that adjoins MoMA.

Most of the land is already cleared for development, but the little tenement that houses Connolly’s Pub on 54th Street still stands in the shadow of the museum. Mr Lowry said the museum is thinking of constructing a project on the new land, but notes that the air rights over

the space far exceed the gallery needs of the museum. Therefore, he says the likely outcome will be additional galleries with space above for commercial use.

The scheme would reprise the 1980s expansion of the museum by architect Cesar Pelli, which included galleries and the Museum Tower that continues to earn rental income for the museum. Developers have proposed joint projects, says Mr Lowry. He also says architect Yoshio Taniguchi designed the galleries and elevator core on the west side of the complex with a future expansion in mind. “We don’t feel any urgency with this”, Mr Lowry says. “We may wait for another generation.”

Mr Lowry also reported that the museum has had 1.2 million visitors since opening last November and is “on solid footing” having raised \$840 million of the \$858 million spent on the expansion. (Several hundred million is actually a repayable tax-free bond.) The education resource building, unfinished for lack of funds at the time of the re-opening, is slated for completion within 18 to 24 months.

In a separate development, last month MoMA accepted a gift of approximately 2,600 drawings by more than 400 international contemporary artists from the Manhattan-based Judith Rothschild Foundation. The massive collection—mostly post-1980 works in a variety of media by both established and emerging artists—is estimated to be worth some \$10 million.

The collection was assembled in 2003 and 2004 by foundation head Harvey S. Shipley Miller, a MoMA trustee who sits on the 25-member drawings department advisory committee that voted on 10 May to accept the gift. (Mr Miller did not attend or vote.)

He and his consulting curator André Schlechtriem worked closely with MoMA drawings curator Gary Garrels to shape the collection, which was assembled with the intention of offering it to the museum.

“Having seen the works, we decided unanimously to accept it in its entirety. There was no question”, says a committee member. The gift was made with few restrictions. Mr Miller requested that no works be deaccessioned for five years, but the committee elected to study the collection for a minimum of 10 years before disposing of any of the drawings.

MoMA’s practice—not an official policy—is to sell the work of living artists only to acquire superior works of art by that artist, and then with the artist’s permission if possible.

Museums

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Museum expansion

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