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## ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

### NEW LIGHTS, TEXTURES AND VISIONS FOR DOWNTOWN TAMPA

BY BENDY HILLOV

Poised in a graceful sculptural stretch above Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park, the new Tampa Museum of Art has finally risen, after years of planning and not a small dose of drama, in a sign of resurgence for downtown. And what a sign it is. Elegant and sleek, the building marks a reimagining of the city that leaders and boosters have promised for a decade. Indeed, in recent years the project was likely the most famous noncontroversial museum in the nation; critics publicly aired controversy over directors, design and fundraising threatened repeatedly to derail plans for the new facility. The troubles seemed chronic, insurmountable. Today, though, the new museum is complete, gleaming on the edge of the Hillsborough River, silencing the naysayers and giving the dreamers reason to rejoice.

For longtime Tampa residents, the new museum is a dramatic change, reshaping the landscape not just of Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park, itself redesigned and newly reopened, but of downtown altogether. Gone are the blank, unwelcoming steps and the vast white box that for so long dominated the riverside. Instead, clearly visible from Ashley Drive, from the Kennedy Boulevard bridge, and from points between and beyond, the new structure shimmers, its metal facade creating a sense of movement and energy.

Designed by San Francisco-based architect Stanley Saitowitz, the museum's 66,000 square-foot begin with a three-story atrium and lobby that dissolve the boundary between outside and in. Skylights and windows soak the space with natural light, the minarets of the University of Tampa in view just across the water. A canopy of sorts reaches out from the building toward the new Glazer Children's Museum to provide cover for an 18,000-square-foot patio. And on the river side, vast green space unfolds, sparking images of picnics and evening gatherings, and a dog



The new 66,000 square-foot Tampa Museum of Art, Corcoran Center, perched high to the new Curtis Hixon Park and the Hillsborough River, is designed to balance form and function. At night the new museum illuminates downtown Tampa.



"We've created a centerpiece  
in downtown and the museum  
is a catalyst for change."

**Cornelia Corbett**  
TMA Immediate Past Board Chair



park waits for visitors on the north edge of the building.

Dissolving boundaries is a key ingredient of the museum's mission — and not just in a physical sense. As the city begins to emerge from the economic crisis that silenced construction and growth for the better part of two years, the tentative residential and retail uptick of mid-decade is showing signs of resurgence downtown. Creating a space that not only showcases a world-class collection but fits into the neighborhood fabric, enhances it, and helps it develop is the core of the new Tampa Museum of Art.

Executive Director Todd D. Smith has settled into his role after almost a year and a half at the helm, and he couldn't be prouder or more enthusiastic about the new building and the era ahead. "We see this as the perfect moment," said Smith. "The museum is the second of three cultural institutions to open in the Tampa area in 18 months. We are the only city in the country able to do this, coming out of a pretty nasty period in our economic lives, and as an aggregate we are really changing the landscape of downtown in a way that I don't think anything has in 20 or 30 years." He credits a partnership among the political, corporate and private sectors for the success of the facility and for the piece-by-piece facilitation of the cultural arts district.

Teamwork hasn't always been a driving force behind the museum, but the squaror had mostly subsided by the time Smith arrived in Tampa. In fact, he never set foot inside the old building, which was razed in January 2008. And that's probably not a bad thing. "I had no point of comparison," said Smith. "It's always been all about this project, what it could do and how it could do it, versus how to relate to an older institution and an older building and the issues that surrounded that space."

Involved with the Tampa Museum of Art since 2002, Cornelia Corbett has been instrumental in getting the museum constructed and helped navigate the museum board through much of the controversial time. Her husband, Dick Corbett, surprised her at Pavilion 2008 with a large financial gift that included adding her name to the museum — The Cornelia Corbett Center. "I had no idea and it was a total surprise," said Corbett. "With all the trials that we had been through, it was pretty special."

Tampa City Council member Mary Mulhern, whose pro-election career in the arts deepened her interest in the tumultuous history of the museum, shares Smith's optimism



The expansive three-story lobby offers panoramic views of downtown Tampa. The top floor houses a museum store, the 3,000-square-foot lecture hall. The entire complex will serve as a gathering place to meet friends for lunch, drink or cocktails. The galleries are on the second floor.



"The museum should lead creativity and shape the conversation about what aesthetics should be, and about understanding what's around us every day."

Todd D. Smith  
Executive Director  
Tampa Museum of Art

for the future. "After a decade of trying to get the new museum built, we have an absolutely gorgeous new architectural gem on the Hillsborough River," said Mulhern. "It's very exciting for Tampa and especially for the downtown area. The museum, the children's museum, the park, and the expansion of the streetcar line are going to remake Ashley into a thriving cultural arts district. With the new downtown housing, it'll change the whole flavor of the area and make it a 24-hour place to be."

The museum and Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park are central to the notion of a 24-hour city, which has long been at the heart of downtown leaders' hopes. Developers, too, have focused on creating a vibrant, walkable neighborhood — a reality that eluded Tampa for years. Now, however, about 1,000 people live in the downtown area, restaurants and retail continue to set up shop.

Greg Minder, president of Intown Group, says the reconstruction of the museum and, especially, of Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park played a pivotal role in his firm's decision to build Skyspace, the 32-story residence just across Ashley, and Element, a 36-story residence a few blocks away. "Curtis Hixon Park becomes the backyard, the outdoor space for downtown Tampa — it's open space to play in, to entertain in, to walk your dog. People need that balance."

The economic impact of the arts is undeniable; the Tampa Museum of Art will draw visitors downtown to see blockbuster exhibitions and attend special events. But add residents to that number — people who live and work in the neighborhood, and stop by after work for a glass of wine in the cafe or pop in on a Saturday afternoon to check out the permanent collection — and the ante rises. "It's very likely that there will be companies that look at Tampa in a different way now and consider investing here. And a valuable place is a place that can support and encourage other good development," said Christine Bardick, president of the Downtown Partnership.

Beyond economic stimulus and a cornerstone for investment, the museum — any museum — plays a part in the social and cultural fabric of the community. With its soaring atrium and immense gallery spaces, the new Tampa museum creates a grand showcase for world-class art. It also provides a center for education and meetings, for socializing and dining. "Every downtown has a personality," said Smith. "I think our role is to help shape that in Tampa as it develops. The museum



The new museum is used as a home by the city's top 200 executives. It's a place where you can see the city's finest art and architecture throughout the museum including downtown, high-quality concrete and steel.

"Every great city has a thriving park system that creates a balance in an urban environment. Curtis Hixon Park becomes the backyard, the outdoor space for downtown Tampa."

Greg Minder  
President of Inlow Group  
and TMA Trustee



should feed creativity and shape the conversation about what aesthetics should be, and about understanding what's around us every day."

"One of the things I love about the museum," said Minder, who also serves on TMA's board of trustees, "is that it's going to invite in people who may not have intended to make it their destination, but will find themselves experiencing it anyway."

Smith agrees. "We're going to be able to help shape not just what happens inside but our history. We're creating something that will be a great cultural resource. And when you step back for a minute, you understand what this project has meant to so many people for so long. To see the realization of that — it's heady and mind-blowing, and it's once in a lifetime." **TD**

#### OPENING MUSEUM EXHIBITS

A collection of must-not-miss exhibitions will delight guests from the opening day. Through April 18, *A Celebration of Henri Matisse: Master of Line and Light* will be featured in the MacKreuzle Family Gallery with over 170 works.

The museum is also showcasing *The Hidden City*, an original exhibition where artists will share through their work the different aspects that make a city a city in the 21st century. On display are works by Doug Aitken, Peter Bialobrzeski, Donna Deane, Pedro Cabrita Reis and Do-Ho Suh. This collection is the first of four other exhibitions to be drawn from *The Morgan's Collection of Miami*, which co-curated the exhibition along with the museum itself.

In the Ferran Gallery, the Tampa Museum of Art's entire collection of Garry Winogrand's 1960s photographs titled *Women are Beautiful* will be shown for the first time.

From the museum's antiquities collection, more than 120 pieces of gold jewelry, painted pottery, and marble and bronze sculptures will be featured in *From Life to Death in the Ancient World* in the Lemnosopoulos Gallery.

The exterior of the Tampa Museum of Art will also display the luminous work of Leo Villareal which consists of digital light installations that will not only brighten the city of Tampa at night, but also become part of the museum's permanent collection. To provide visitors with more insight on Leo Villareal's different strategies, the museum will also be presenting some of his interior work.

—Orisara Mercader



Opening Exhibit: *A Celebration of Henri Matisse: Master of Line and Light*, Henri Matisse (French, 1869 - 1954)

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More details on Leo Villareal created the LED installation "The Cosmos" on the South facade.





"People make emotional investments in pretty places, and those come before any other investments."

**Christine Burdick**  
President  
Downtown Partnership