



The Migratory Museum

Is the Search for Greener Pastures Worth the Risk?

BY JOELLE SELIGSON | The Mount Horeb Mustard Museum is leaving Mount Horeb. After years of financial strain, founder Barry Levenson is packing up his collection—more than 5,000 jars, tubes and bottles of mustard—and moving from this tiny Wisconsin town to Middleton, a Madison suburb 18 miles away. *Money* magazine has repeatedly ranked Middleton as one of the best places to live in the United States, an honor never bestowed on Mount Horeb. The latter is a “very cute town, but also

very isolated and very much affected by the weather,” Levenson says. “For the first five months of year we just don’t get many visitors because it’s off the beaten path.”

So Levenson is uprooting the museum from its home of 17 years. Equipped with a new, larger space, he will change its

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name to the National Mustard Museum. The museum will do more, for more: Attendance numbers are projected to rise in Middleton by at least 15,000 visits annually. “Ultimately the function of a museum is not just to display things and have exhibits there but to have people come to it. It really is like the tree in the forest,” Levenson observes. “If you have a museum and no one comes, does it make an impact? I think the answer’s pretty obvious.”

Throughout the years, museums standing on shaky ground—figu-

ratively and literally—have decided to relocate. But much of the public love for museums is tied to their sameness, the sense that they will preserve and protect what they hold and remain in place for posterity. Some say this is simply a matter of course. “It’s ironic: The public likes museums because they seem to be places



of stability, but in fact museums will always change,” comments Gail Lord, co-president of the museum planning firm Lord Cultural Resources. Others, however, insist that museums should stick out the rough patches in order to stay where they are.

Either way, the stakes for uprooting an institution can be high. So what convinces a museum to make a move? And is the search for greener pastures worth the risks?

Many moves are motivated by the same factors that inspired Levenson: the promise of new audiences, a fresh start and room to grow. “It has to do with collection growth,” says Barry Lord, also co-president of Lord Cultural Resources, which has helped guide several institutions through relocations—such as the Please Touch Museum, which opened in a more spacious site across town in Philadelphia last fall. “That’s really one of the key issues. Having 95 percent of the collection in storage all the time doesn’t do anyone much good.”

Moves are also driven by the need for more appropriate settings. The ICA Boston opened in its current waterfront location at the end of 2006, after spending almost 30 years in a late 19th-century police station; the museum still had a holding cell installed in its sub-basement. The structure, located in Boston’s Back Bay, was “a formidable building, designed to keep people out—and it successfully did that for our entire tenure there,” cracks director Jill Medvedow, who oversaw the move. “The ICA was in many ways striving to be marginal, a line I used over and over in our campaign to persuade people that [the move] was the right idea.”

The ICA’s decision to relocate to the largely deserted Seaport District—it was “mostly parking lots,” Medvedow recalls—was considered a risky one by many. “Up until the day we opened we were surrounded by infinite skepticism,” she says. In the end, she asserts it was a risk that has paid off “handsomely.” Moving into a specially designed, landmark building facing the Boston Harbor gave the museum room to form its first permanent collection, and the opportunity to attract some much-needed attention.

Since the move, the ICA’s annual visitation has shot up nearly tenfold.

Levenson is also seeking a more suitable home. The Mustard Museum’s Mount Horeb location was a former hardware store given an ad-hoc museum treatment. The Middleton museum will have more a more traditional setup. “We’re starting from scratch with a totally new space,” Levenson says. His plans include designing a new logo, increasing staff numbers, implementing better lighting and introducing new, interactive exhibits—such as computer-generated quizzes about mustard and a display tracing the condiment’s origins.

Levenson isn’t sure that he would have bothered with such upgrades in Mount Horeb. “All museums talk about reinventing themselves ... and sometimes that’s not easy. Sometimes you just end up reshuffling the deck,” he notes. “When you move you really have to reinvent yourself or else you’re passing up on an opportunity. We see this as an opportunity to improve the quality of the museum experience that visitors have.”

And in Middleton, visitors should be easier to come by. There are nearly 1,000 hotel rooms within a mile of the city’s downtown area, as opposed to about 50 in Mount Horeb. Middleton, too, seems to be banking on the Mustard Museum as a tourist lure. While it was Levenson’s idea to move there, the city has embraced the idea wholeheartedly. The Middleton City Council voted to provide \$1.4 million to help develop the downtown building that will house the museum, as well as up to \$50,000 for the museum’s relocation expenses.

But what about the local communities that moving museums leave behind? Mount Horeb (population: 6,500) has long depended on the Mustard Museum to bring in tourist dollars. The town has become synonymous with the museum, Levenson says, adding that many visitors trek out to the institution on an annual basis. Townspeople have largely reacted to the move with “disappointment,” he admits. “But I think any institution realizes

that its first obligation is to its own survivability.”

“There is a responsibility to the community, but there are other responsibilities as well,” he goes on. “I don’t think it would serve Mount Horeb to say, ‘We’ll be stubborn,’ stick it out and then fail. We have to look at it realistically and in a little bit of a cold, dispassionate way. ... Survival has got to be number one.”

Sometimes the issue of survival arises in more literal terms. The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) has been planning its move since a survey, conducted after the Loma Prieta earthquake slammed the San Francisco Bay Area in 1989, found the museum wasn’t seismically sound. Large bracing columns were put in place as reinforcements, but the building’s seismic rating remains poor.

“The worry about seismic incidents in this area is a real concern,” says Director Larry Rinder. “There is almost certainly going to be a major earthquake here in the next 30 years.”

The cost to completely retrofit the museum’s concrete structure, sited on the southern edge of the University of California’s Berkeley campus, would be astronomical and would severely limit the museum’s exhibition space, Rinder says. In addition, the institution’s collections have grown substantially since it opened nearly 40 years ago.

The museum opted to start afresh. BAM/PFA is hoping to open its new building, designed by Japanese architect Toyo Ito, in 2013 or 2014. Its foundation will resemble a honeycomb of steel, spreading the structure’s weight evenly to mitigate the risk of earthquake. As an added bonus, the University of California has provided the forthcoming building with what Rinder calls a “tremendous” location, near the main campus entrance and on the same block as a BART station. About 10,000 people

are estimated to walk past the site daily, providing the museum with an “opportunity to be so much more part of the fabric” of Berkeley life.

Still, Rinder acknowledges that the museum’s current home will be missed. “It’s a signature structure; it’s memorable,” he notes of the museum’s rugged modernist building, which was completed in 1970. “Institutions do move and do change and one has to accept the dynamism of that reality, but there are people who love this building.”

The majority of museums are not intrinsically tied to their buildings and locations, however beloved they might be by the public. “Most museums are not historic monuments in that sense,” says Gail Lord. “They’re buildings that were built to house collections and programs and meet specific needs.”

But in certain cases the building is the museum, at least in some people’s eyes. The Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pa., is also seeking a change of scenery. Though not technically a museum—it was founded as a school—the Barnes, which holds one of the world’s most significant collections of post-Impressionist and early modern art, is a revered art destination. But about a de-

Opposite: A wall of condiments from the soon-to-be National Mustard Museum.

Below: The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston’s new space (left). The Museum of Arts and Design’s new building (right)—with breathing room away from MoMA.





Renderings of the Barnes Foundation's location in downtown Philadelphia, a move loved by some and protested virulently by others.

cade ago, the foundation was at a breaking point. “The Barnes was in danger of real collapse,” says Executive Director and President Derek Gillman. “A huge question mark hung over its future.” Run-ins with Merion neighbors, who objected to the loaded tour buses rolling through their residential streets, had led to pricey legal battles that drained the foundation’s resources. At the same time, the neighbors’ objections and the wishes of founder Albert C. Barnes, as outlined in his 1922 indenture of trust, have limited when and how many people can visit the collection (and, of course, pay to do so). It wasn’t until recently that the local township allowed the foundation, which is open to the public only a few days a week and then only by appointment, to admit more than around 60,000 visitors annually.

Five years ago, a judge approved the Barnes Foundation’s petition to deviate from its founder’s indenture, which stipulated that the collection should never leave the original grounds, and move to a site on Philadelphia’s Benjamin Franklin Parkway, a few miles away. “The peak reason that the board found for moving ... was that in Merion [the foundation] was so constrained by the neighbors that it was going to be impossible for it to survive,” states Gillman.

“We didn’t decide to move because the board thought it would be great to be in the center of Philadelphia,” he adds. “The board decided to move to keep the institution alive, to stop the collection from being broken up and stop the institution from falling apart.”

At the same time, Gillman notes that the foundation is moving toward something, not just getting away. When it opens in 2012, the Barnes in Philadelphia will closely resemble the Barnes in Merion in terms of its galleries, which will replicate the original’s scale, proportion and idiosyncratic layout; masterworks by Renoir and Matisse will remain juxtaposed with antique furniture and ornate door handles. But it will also, like the Mustard Museum, offer more: a café, a special exhibitions gallery, an auditorium. In addition, opening hours will no longer be as constricted, allowing some 250,000 people to view the collection each year. The move will allow the Barnes the capacity to “educate far more people because we’re not constrained in the same way,” Gillman says.

Not everyone follows the foundation’s reasoning. A group organized as the Friends of the Barnes Foundation has fought vehemently against the move, in the courts and on the street, arguing that transferring the col-

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lection will destroy its essence. “The Barnes is a unique institution. There’s nothing like it anywhere else in world. I know that’s an extravagant claim, but it’s actually quite true,” says Nancy Herman, a member of the Friends of the Barnes Foundation’s steering committee, who lives across the street from the foundation. Among the foundation’s inimitable characteristics, she says, is the fact that the surrounding 12-acre arboretum was designed specifically to highlight the paintings within. (The new location will remain surrounded by gardens but only 4.5 acres worth.) She also notes that the foundation in its entirety—the buildings, collections and grounds—is eligible for National Historical Landmark status but only if it remains in place, in Merion.

“The whole institution has to do with a particular period in our evolving awareness of painting as a country,” Herman proffers. “There’s also not another place like it in the country in the sense that there’s not another collection like it in the country. To disrupt all that to build what can only be a mediocre substitute for the foundation seems, to me, basically insane.”

For Philadelphia, on the other hand, it’s a win-win. In a press release following a banner-cutting ceremony on the Benjamin

Franklin Parkway last October, Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter was quoted as calling the Barnes move “one of the most important additions to our region’s cultural community to ever take place.” The year before, former Mayor John Street delivered a radio address titled “Looking to the Future,” in which he predicted that the Barnes’ presence on the parkway would have the “annual economic equivalent of three Super Bowls!”

The changing role of the city in American culture is directly tied to the movement of museums, says Gail Lord. She explains that, as U.S. cities have shifted from industrial to post-industrial to knowledge-based economies, museums have begun serving as economic catalysts in their own right, versus just as jewels in a city’s crown. “I’d argue that, if it weren’t for the changing role of cities, we wouldn’t be seeing these moves,” she says. “I think there are a lot of museums physically picking up and moving right now, and that has to do with the fact that cities are in a great generation of urban change and new urban ideas.”

There’s also the practical appeal of cities, with their public transportation and easy access. “We’re moving into an era when the environment is going to be one of foremost things in our thinking,” says Lord. “If a location requires a car, it’s not a good location for the 21st century, especially in a city.” Museums are thus clustering together so that tourists can visit an entire cultural vicinity at once. The relocated Barnes, for example, will be part of Philadelphia’s Parkway Museums District, which also includes the Franklin Institute, the Rodin Museum and the recently expanded Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The chance to be in closer proximity to fellow cultural institutions helped spur the Newseum’s move across the Potomac River, from Rosslyn, Va., to downtown Washington, D.C., last spring. “We have the perfect address now,” says Susan Bennett, vice president of exhibits and programs

and deputy director, of the museum’s new home on Pennsylvania Avenue. She notes that several other institutions are located in Washington’s Penn Quarter; the International Spy Museum, the Crime & Punishment Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum are nearby, to name a few. “So much of the challenge before was to get tourists in the D.C. area to make that leap across the river into Virginia,” Bennett says. “But now we have the tourists right here.”

Then again, some museums move to stand alone. The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) had what some might consider a prime streetmate—New York’s Museum of Modern Art—before it moved less than a mile away to reopen in Columbus Circle last year. “The fact is, in the case of an encyclopedic museum like MoMA, people don’t come out and want to go to another museum. They’re exhausted. We never got any traffic from the Modern,” reports Director Holly Hotchner. “A lot of the board was quite concerned that if we moved away our attendance would drop, but our attendance has quintupled in four months. That’s more attendance than being opposite the Modern for a full year.”

The extra breathing room has allowed MAD to more fully establish itself, says Hotchner, and welcome an all-new audience. “It’s probably fair to say that most people who come here had never visited the old location,” she says. “In a way, it’s like having a completely new museum.”

Levenson hopes the National Mustard Museum will experience this kind of renewal. But he also maintains that he plans to remain true to the essentials. “We’re not changing the mission. If anything, we’re strengthening its core,” he asserts. “It’s not a question of moving so we can have a better gift shop. The primary focus, at least for me, is to improve the museum experience for visitors. We’re still all about mustard.” ●

A new look and locale for the U.C. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archives.

