Art museums primarily house... well, art. Some art museum structures may be designed and regarded as works of art themselves. But what role can a major art museum play in the reimagining of an entire urban downtown? How can a growing cluster of cultural institutions co-exist in an area bifurcated by a main thoroughfare, an interstate highway, and the multiple tracks of a major rail line, while also wedged against a commercial waterway? In this third article in his series looking at not-for-profits as urban neighbors, Professor James Hagy, Director of The Rooftops Project, talks with the Tacoma Art Museum’s Director, Stephanie Stebich, about the vision she and her board share for their own museum and the cultural arts district that they are helping to define.

For most cultural institutions, designing, building, and occupying its own quarters for the first time in the 78th year of its history would be plenty to accomplish and celebrate. For the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM), it was only the beginning in an ongoing commitment to redefine the historic center of Tacoma in collaboration with the city and its urban neighbors.

While the Tacoma Art Museum was founded in 1935, tracing its roots as the Tacoma Art Association, it did not begin to build a collection of its own until 1963. From those beginnings, today it owns more than 3,500 works, ranging from 19th-century European and 20th-century American art to extensive specialized holdings in the art of the Northwestern United States, Japanese woodblock prints, and 110 works of glass art by Dale Chihuly, a Tacoma native, many donated by the artist.

Originally housed at the College of Puget Sound, the museum resided in a rented downtown storefront (now a martial arts studio), a former jailhouse (now an office building), and then for more than three decades in a former Tacoma bank building (now medical offices). It was only in 2003 that TAM moved into its first purpose-built museum, designed by internationally recognized architect Antoine Predock. The building includes 12,000 square feet of gallery space, an education wing, and a balcony with spectacular views of both Tacoma and Mt. Rainier.

The site was acquired through the assistance of the City of Tacoma. The neighborhood already had both historical importance and current relevance, being close to landmarks like Tacoma’s Union Station, the U.S. Federal District
Court, and the Washington State History Museum, while being across the street from the University of Washington–Tacoma and a few blocks from the Tacoma Convention Center. A light rail line was just being installed along Pacific Avenue at the front of the property, and the Museum of Glass had moved into a new building next door the prior year.

At the same time, it was not your typical square parcel merely awaiting an imaginative interior space. While the property fronts on Pacific Avenue, the back of the parcel slopes to the east toward a major north-south interstate (I-705) and rail lines of the Burlington Northern—Santa Fe, no longer in active use, and eventually abuts a commercial waterway leading to Commencement Bay, a nearby deep-water harbor serving the Port of Tacoma, Washington State’s largest port. Parking at the bottom of the slope serves the Museum, other cultural institutions, and the Federal court.

Defining the Cultural District

Museum Director Stephanie Stebich helps us conceptualize the setting. “This is Pacific Avenue,” she explains, pointing to the western exposure of the site. “It was designed by the Olmsted Brothers as a great boulevard. You can take it up to Mt. Rainier.”

“The history museum was the one that started this, next door to us, then the Museum of Glass. That was part of a huge waterfront cleanup, dredging all of that. Housing went next to that. We followed with our new building in 2003. We have our own little triangle out here. We sit here on 17th [South of that. Housing went next to that. We followed with our new building in 2003. We have our own little triangle out here. We sit here on 17th [South 17th Street].”

Stephanie points out that the city’s investment in the district was critical. “In the last 10 years, Tacoma has seen a half-a-billion-dollar investment into the downtown. So that is the free light rail, the 705 interstate that connects us to I-5, which means that I-5 now brings people into Tacoma in an elegant way.

“There are the three major international world-class museums, brand-new. There are investments in the University of Washington–Tacoma, streetscaping projects, a new convention center; huge urban investment. And that has been very important because it has helped shift the perception from ‘the aroma of Tacoma’ [a reference to Tacoma’s heritage in the paper pulp industry], a dirty downtown, to a cultural destination. Name other major cities where you have three world-class museums—art museum, history museum, glass museum—within walking distance, literally a block apart. You would end up in New York, or Washington.”

The area is attracting new cultural neighbors. “Now we are on the cusp of going from the tri-museum to the ‘six-pack.’ The maritime museum, in an old dock and a warehouse along the waterfront, is fabulous. The children’s museum is moving into an old historic building next door and renovating the first floor. And now there is a brand-new facility, the LeMay, that you see rising up next to the Tacoma dome.” This is LeMay—America’s Car Museum®, which just opened in June, 2012.

Stephanie sums up the district from the visitor’s perspective. “Four institutions are brand-new facilities, two are in renovated spaces. Think about what that configuration looks like and what that means in terms of downtown real estate. It’s remarkable. They really are within walking distance, or a simple ride on the free light rail that connects all of you. It is a huge investment, and it has changed what it means for a family to come to Tacoma. ‘Let’s go to the car museum in the morning, the history museum in the afternoon; the art museum in the morning, the glass museum in the afternoon. Children’s museum, maritime museum.’ You could put signs up or you could put something in the ground that says: ‘Fifty paces to Museum of Glass, 500 paces to the LeMay Museum, 50 paces to the art museum, 50 paces to the children’s museum.’ Those are the possibilities. That is the future.”

The neighborhood also features the innovative and frankly spectacular Chihuly Bridge of Glass, a 500-foot-long bridge spanning Interstate 705 to connect Pacific Avenue to the Museum of Glass and the cultural district. Much more than a mere pedestrian passage, the overpass features a dramatic ceiling, called Seaform Pavilion, that towers over visitors and is composed of 2,364 colorful pieces of illuminated Chihuly glass. The Bridge also includes an installation case with 109 Chihuly glass sculptures, including some of the largest blown glass works of any artist. In addition to its artistic beauty, its unexpected location above freeway and train traffic will challenge forever your conception of glass as a fragile medium.

The city has been key in acquiring and transferring land for development and, in the case of the LeMay Museum, parking. Stephanie views the contribution of real estate as beneficial to the neighborhood’s institutions. “Of course some days you’d like cash, but real estate is worth a lot for us.”

The exterior streetscape continues to evolve as the setting for this cluster of art and cultural institutions. In 2009, TAM embarked on a project to redesign the museum’s plaza and perimeter, embracing a leadership role in the future of the neighborhood.

Transforming the Urban Environment

Why do Stephanie and the TAM Board of Trustees feel so passionately about redefining the museum’s surroundings? “We have tried, as all of these institutions, to be catalysts for our neighborhoods,” Stephanie replies. And Steve Barger, chair of the museum’s Plaza Redesign Task Force, expresses TAM’s role as that of “the community’s living room.”

TAM feels passionately about the project, despite what Stephanie and the Board know are challenging times. “We have a $17 million campaign, and of course it is never a good time to raise money, especially in a down economy. But it is the time to raise the money.”

DEFINING THE CULTURAL DISTRICT

Stephanie came to TAM in 2005, shortly after the new facility opened. She had previously been Assistant Director at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where she was active in community partnerships and outreach, having also served with the prestigious Cleveland Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, and the Guggenheim. She holds a Master of Arts from New York University, a Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University, and a Certificate of Nonprofit Management from Case Western Reserve University.

At the time, Judith Nilan, Vice President of the TAM Board of Trustees, noted that “We found who we were looking for. . . . Stephanie not only has the credentials and the passion for community involvement that defines Tacoma Art Museum, but she has the energy and drive to lead this organization through its next phase.”

STEFANIE SEBICH

Not-for-Profit as Urban Neighbor: Tacoma Art Museum
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“My board has said that one of the great challenges for the museum is that the outside experience doesn’t express what is on the inside,” Stephanie explains. “We have an accessible, warm, beautiful art space, easy to navigate; restrooms, store, museum café, all very easy to move around in. And we have a brand personality of being gracious, and approachable, and dynamic.

“And yet on the outside we have a cold, cement, unwelcoming plaza. We need a more welcoming exterior. We don’t have much green space, we have hardscape on the front triangle. We don’t have much visibility from the street. And we have an accessibility issue. You come in from the front along Pacific Avenue. The building is not facing the street, it is at an angle to the street and disappears with the stainless steel and the glass.”

Stephanie reaches for a blank sheet of paper and begins boldly sketching out for me her vision for the neighborhood’s continuing transformation. She also sees the potential to draw new visitors by improving pedestrian flow along Pacific Avenue.

“Pacific Avenue is really broken into regions and into zones. We are sitting in the museum and university zone, and yet we are on the edge of that. So there is this great moment where the Link, the free light rail, stops. You go up to the university, you go to the history museum, across the Bridge of Glass, and to the Museum of Glass. You look left down Pacific Avenue and you say, ‘Hmm, why should I go that way?’ I don’t see anything. I don’t see any greenery. I don’t see any art or sculpture, and I certainly don’t see the Tacoma Art Museum because again we are set back and at an angle.

“And then we have some missing teeth along Pacific Avenue in some unbuilt land. Also, we sit physically next to a sunken parking area, a shared parking lot, which is a federal courthouse, which is a high security location. We sit across five lanes of traffic, which unfortunately all open up right in front of the museum. We sit next to the derelict railway track. And we sit across from a dead plaza—Tollefson Plaza. It is a very safe plaza, but there are no people on it. Again we have taken it upon ourselves to program that, within reason since it is not our land.” Stephanie sees further opportunity, perhaps creating all-weather covered walkways that would connect the convention center and adjoining Hotel Murano to the museum district.

Many other museums would be envious of the easy accessibility enjoyed by TAM. Public transportation is right out front, and there is accessible, convenient, barrier-free parking adjoining the museum near the waterfront. And while on a visit some years earlier, I had found Tacoma’s streets somewhat of a maze and difficult to navigate, the city has obviously made a very effective effort to install understandable signage that now works well.

While Stephanie agrees, the current approach to the building from the parking lot doesn’t satisfy her aesthetic taste as a proud museum director. “We have most of our visitors coming by car, and coming up in what I jokingly call the world’s slowest elevator, and missing that experience of coming in [through the main entrance to the museum]. We are going to spend $3.5 million on our plaza and then we are going to build a ramp that takes you up from the parking area. And we are going to have little art moments along the way.

“The City of Tacoma is doing a $10 million streetscaping project. It goes from 7th to 17th Street, because the streets are terrible. The sidewalks are terrible. We need some public amenities, better lighting, chairs, all that good stuff.” The area also has significant challenges associated with storm water control and soil erosion, something that the museum district residents, from the cultural institutions to the federal courts and Union Station, share as a common concern and focus.

Stephanie also has her eye on the potential for the now unused rail corridor. “We sit next to the historic railway track, which is this incredible linkage from up through the university right past the art museum, past Pacific Avenue, the grand boulevard, down to the waterfront. That is untouched land that has been in only single-purpose use—the railway—and that too is now being discussed as a potential rails to trails, public sculpture, all kinds of possibilities. We sit next to it, the university sits next to it, and the children’s museum and United Way sit next to it, as its closest neighbors. Ideally, this would be a great connector.

“And what has been our strategy? To have our architects have a finger in each of these projects, so it is an integrated design and we have the best possible communication.” TAM suggested Olson Kundig, TAM’s architect for the plaza redesign, to assist the city, for example, with some preliminary design plans at the beginning of planning for the public aspects of the project. Olson Kundig has also worked on design with the Hotel Murano and has collaborated in the Prairie Line Trail project, which is receiving funding from the region and the state.

**Cityscape as Art Gallery**

TAM is excited about the prospect of bringing more outdoor public art to the area. The museum district has a great start, set by the example of the Bridge of Glass, as well as outdoor installations that are part of the existing TAM and Museum of Glass collections. Now, in the new phase of redesigning the areas around the museum, the Tacoma Art Museum is collaborating with the City of Tacoma to select and install public art along the Prairie Line Trail, which is located immediately next to the museum. The cornerstone for this project is a $200,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant.

Stephanie Stebich describes what TAM hopes to achieve. “Again we are trying to collaborate, develop a harmonious design for the neighborhood, bringing private dollars—our money will be primarily private, although of course we will seek government funds—we already have a commitment from a major foundation in the community. And we also want to keep our finger in the art selection process, especially in the neighborhood around the art museum, selecting public art befitting what we see in ourselves as a community—a new Tacoma and a mighty Tacoma.”

Stephanie would like to emphasize art from the Northwest, expansively defined to include Alaska as well as the continental northwestern U.S. She would like to work with an artist who would be open to thinking about environmental issues.
ART, SPORT, AND ICE

The museum has also initiated outdoor programming as a contribution to the life of the area and as a way to build curiosity about the museum. This past winter, the museum engaged an outside organization, international skating events company incerinkevents.com, to stage a temporary, portable ice-skating rink in Tollefson Plaza, right in front of the museum complex. It opened the day after Thanksgiving for a run that extended a week past the planned closing date of January 2.

"Important for us, it was an art-themed ice-skating rink," Stephanie notes. "We asked, ‘How do we make it an art experience? How do we make it really beautiful? How do we have a Northwest element to it?’ Again, things to make downtown vibrant. That is another one of our missions here. We take seriously our name, Tacoma Art Museum. It is not individual, private philanthropy. It has the name of the city. We try to be a catalyst and we try to be very civic-minded.”

The skating event had the effect of drawing new visitors right to the front door of TAM over the holidays. TAM imagined people coming into the museum to warm up, perhaps even to use the restroom, all opportunities for the public to have a glimpse of the welcoming environment and artistic treasures awaiting them inside the museum. “We have art in the lobby. There is a place to sit down. There is the café and the store. And there are spaces where we can show films, and have talks and hold events. They may not be in the galleries per se, but they are getting a flavor for it.”

TAM also offered joint tickets for ice-skating and a museum visit, to encourage people to combine the two activities in a day out. There were even opportunities for visitors to encounter Leroy, the Big Pup, a huge sculptural puppy created by Northwest artist Scott Fife, that has become an iconic mascot of sorts. Leroy donned skates and joined Santa in the rink. It brings a whole new meaning to the term “ice sculpture”!

SELECTING DESIGNERS

The selection of professionals for major real estate projects, from conceptual design to daily facilities management, is today often conducted through an extensive request for proposal process involving both written submissions and multiple rounds of personal interviews, sometimes involving travel across the country. Many service providers in the real estate world privately question the investment, not only in time and cost but whether the process is really helpful to differentiate the competing vendors to the decision makers. In awarding the plaza design, Stephanie Stebich and her project team used a very interesting and focused approach to avoid these potential drawbacks to the selection process.

RTP: You selected Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects, now Olson Kundig, to lead the plaza redesign. Olson Kundig had also been your architects of record in the construction of the Antoine Predock-designed museum building in 2003. How did you go about selecting Olson Kundig?

Stephanie: We issued our request for concept, not proposal or qualification, but concept. We are very particular about that, because we picked a European model. We judge people on their thinking. We wanted to test how people thought about our project. And we got 95 submissions.

RTP: I noted that your requested response was limited to three pages, which I know our audience will be interested in. Why this approach?

Stephanie: That was very purposeful. On our committee we had developers, we had architectural firms. We put the onus on us. I also think it is a great opportunity to bring more real estate expertise into the nonprofit arena. We all are facing real estate issues and facilities issues.

What do you need when people submit information? You need to know who they are. But you don’t need 20 pages of that. They should be able to summarize in one page who they are, what awards they won, what projects they worked on. Mostly we are interested in how they think. How they think in terms of a drawing and a design, and how they think in terms of a written program, written responses to what our issues are.

Also, we wanted to have an even playing field. We wanted to be able, maybe, to find a Maya Lin in the pile, too. We wanted to open it up to artists, actually. Because we would also be willing to pair winners, just as we paired Antoine Predock from the Southwest, as our lead design architect, with Olson Kundig, who is here in the Northwest and has done museums very well. That was a great pairing, because our climate is very special and yet Antoine Predock could see our climate in a different way, coming from the Southwest. So we were open to pairing and building teams. Certainly as we looked at the different groups, we had three-person offices, 200-person offices, artists submitting, all kinds of different solutions from different kinds of people.

We had these three pages that came in. We went from 24 to 12, and then we moved it down to six. Then we had them come in, and our only shortfall was that we should have been much stricter in telling them not to bring a model, not to bring a lot of stuff, we just want to talk to you. Because some people brought a model, and I was sorry for the time they put into that. We were conscious that we were not compensating people for their time; we didn’t want them to make models. We didn’t want the marketing piece, either. We wanted to know how you were going to solve our problems. And again, the group we picked, in the end, Olson Kundig, we liked because of their attitude toward the greater environment. Their concept talked about not only our space but adjacent spaces. They were thinking about the integrated, harmonious design that we were really after. And they have a history of working well with Northwest artists.

Then there were three left and we went to their offices. We wanted to see what their environment was like, what their team was really like, we wanted them to take us to their site so we could really see it and experience it. Then we boiled it down to two. Then we sat down, and thought obviously that we could work with either. And to the credit of our board, they said, “Stephanie, you pick. You are the one who has the best sense of the program.” That is the kind of board I have.

Have your own look at the request for concepts documents created by the Tacoma Art Museum for the plaza redesign competition, which can be found at www.tacomaartmuseum.org/Page.aspx?hid=4054.

LEADING IN LIGHT

The Tacoma Art Museum’s constant search for ways to improve its physical environment for staff and visitors has not been limited to its exterior surroundings. While the museum’s facilities are less than 10 years old, TAM staff have already reexamined and acted on the perception that the interior lighting could be not only more economical but of an improved quality for gallery viewers. Like other operators of
As our interview winds down, Stephanie demonstrates once more her appreciation and concern for the role of real estate in not-for-profit performance, the subject of course closest to our hearts at The Rooftops Project. She puts forward a question for our future work, one reflected in our conversations with other institutions around the country.

“Can I plant one more seed, too? There is a great challenge in the museum field in America at the moment, actually it is a worldwide issue. What do extremely wealthy people with major art collections do?

“They are doing what they have done historically. They are founding their own institutions. Because they are understanding, and rightly so, that the existing museums are full. And, as great collectors, they would like to have control over their collections. They are really concerned that their collections will not be on view all the time in the way that they would like.

“But now they are doing it in larger numbers. And what does that look like? It is becoming more problematic. Often it is a problem about the collection, but that can be resolved. It is often a real estate problem, too, in terms of what kind of commitments they have made to buildings and what location they have selected. There are real estate challenges for all of us.”

Note: The personal interview in this paper was edited for content and space. Quotations otherwise unattributed are taken from public print or Web-based communications of the Tacoma Art Museum and are used here with permission. The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Lisa Terry, Public Relations and Communications Manager of the Tacoma Art Museum, in the development of this article.