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BMA unveils an ambitious 20-year plan for expansion

Main entrance would reopen; gallery, storage areas to grow

By Edward Gunts
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The [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) would add more than 100,000 square feet of space over the next 20 years under a comprehensive expansion plan that would increase gallery and storage areas, reopen the historic main entrance and cover the open-air Schaefer Court with a glass roof.

The plan calls for the museum to reinstall its collections and expand its library, gift shop, restaurant, auditorium and study facilities. It would gain 50 parking spaces in an underground garage that the [Johns Hopkins University](#) plans to build next door, and create a new north entrance to link the museum and the university.

"It's a thrilling plan," said BMA board Chairwoman Suzanne Cohen. "We have a lot to think about, a lot to tackle."

The museum is contemplating its first capital fund-raising campaign since the 1980s, and this fall trustees will begin reviewing strategies for phasing in construction, said museum Director Doreen Bolger.

The board hopes to raise sufficient funds from public and private sources to finish at least part of the expansion in time for its 100th anniversary in 2014, Cohen said.

The proposed expansion would be the first new construction at the 76-year-old building since its West Wing for Contemporary Art opened in 1994 and would transform every corner of the museum. It marks the first long-term vision for growth by the museum since Bolger replaced Arnold Lehman in 1998.

As designed by Ayers Saint Gross of Baltimore and endorsed in principle by the museum board last month, the plan calls for adding up to 112,600 square feet of space to the existing 200,000 square feet at 10 Art Museum Drive -- including 5,000 square feet for gallery space and 5,000 square feet for educational activities.

The museum has no firm cost estimates for the project, to be carried out in phases. But if construction were to cost an average of \$300 per square foot (a conservative estimate), the price tag could top \$30 million.

The plan steers new construction to the north and west sides of the existing building, on land owned by either the city or Johns Hopkins. That's a departure from Lehman-era studies that explored ways for the city-owned museum to expand southward into [Wyman Park](#) Dell -- an idea parks advocates fiercely opposed.

"The [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) is one of the greatest civic spaces in Baltimore," Bolger said Tuesday at the museum's annual meeting, where the plan was presented. "This master plan will help us enhance the museum's visibility as a cultural asset for the region and make it a must-see destination."

The changes will make it easier for visitors to see the collection because the building will be opened up and taken back in many ways to the original design by neoclassical architect John Russell Pope -- starting with reopening of the historic Merrick Entrance.

"This is going to provide a visitor experience that will be unlike any other building in Baltimore," said architect Adam Gross, who worked with Sandra Vicchio and John Harden.

The changes "will allow you to experience the collection in a more profound way because you won't be worrying about how to get around. You will be able to focus on the art, rather than finding the elevator."

The master plan was designed to allow the museum to change in increments, as money becomes available, Gross added. Whereas some architects say form follows function, he said, in this case, "form follows funding."

Founded in 1914 in Mount Vernon, the museum was re-established on Art Museum Drive in 1929 and has expanded nine times as its collection has grown, including additions to the east and west sides of the Pope building and a 3-acre sculpture garden.

The new master plan represents the first comprehensive planning exercise for the museum since Pope's in the 1920s. The genesis for the new plan was a desire by museum directors to reopen the historic entrance, closed since the east wing's Zamoiski Entrance opened in 1982.

Bolger said that when she became director in 1998, BMA members asked her to make two changes -- put the Cone Collection's Henri Matisse paintings back in their original frames, and "reopen the front door."

Bolger responded to the first request in 1999, placing 42 Matisse's back in the gilded wood frames that donor Etta Cone ordered for them. Now the master planning effort is addressing the second request. "I think people really remember that experience" of walking up the main steps to the front entrance, Bolger said. "The sense of arrival and anticipation. ... We need to recapture that."

Once the architects started looking at ways to improve the museum, the scope of recommendations grew. The new master plan refers back to Pope's original plan by integrating spaces throughout the building and creating both a strong north-south axis and a strong east-west axis on the main level.

Highlights include:

- Moving all exhibit galleries off the ground level and using that space to expand the gift shop, restaurant and offices.
- Adding elevators and stairs leading to the Fox and Schaefer courts and a circular stair in the lobby leading to the special exhibition galleries.
- Increasing space for temporary exhibits.
- Creating a new entrance on the north side of the building, facing Hopkins' Homewood campus and lining up with the reopened front entrance.
- Adding a backstage area to the museum's auditorium to expand the range of performances and presentations.
- Converting the existing library to a gallery, as the space was originally used, and building a new library on the north side of the museum.
- Creating a new third level to provide space for conservation and special collections.

Now is a good time to plan for the museum's expansion, Gross said, because the upper Charles Street corridor is experiencing a burst of investment and activity, from new construction on the Hopkins campus to housing and commercial development in [Charles Village](#). Initial community reaction to the plan has been overwhelmingly positive.

"I think it's a phenomenal plan, if they can pull it off," said Sandra Sparks, a longtime [Charles Village](#) resident and community activist. "It's comprehensive. It acknowledges the importance of [Wyman Park](#)."

"I love the idea of opening up the back of the museum to Johns Hopkins," said architect Jamie Snead. "The alliance with the university can create a synergy that will benefit both institutions."

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