Six Steps to Build Mass MoCA’s Success

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art
North Adams, MA

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Gilbane provided construction management at-risk services for renovation of the Robert W. Wilson Building (Building 6), as part of the third phase of the comprehensive, 25-year, master plan for the redevelopment of the mixed-use factory mill complex. Occupying nearly one-third of North Adams’ downtown business district, this phase culminates in the facility’s site circulation plan, which encourages visitors to explore the Museum through various paths.

The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) is ranked among the most visited institutions dedicated to new art in the United States. The Museum’s overall goal for the project was to increase their visitors’ stay from approximately two hours to fours hours through the development of additional exhibit and ancillary spaces.

Phase III involved the build-out of 135,000 SF of interior space within the three-story structure, including gallery space, performing arts facilities, a storage area and public circulation, as well as workshop and meeting spaces. A large component of the project included the coordination and sequencing of selective demolition, shoring and installation of extensive seismic structural steel. The team also oversaw ductwork and lighting upgrades and the installation of fire-stopping wall boards.

The Gilbane team worked closely with the designer and the owner to ensure that all associated activities were properly scheduled so as not to impact ongoing museum operations.

Additionally, the team focused heavily on local community involvement throughout the project. At its height, the on-site project team comprised more than 180 local tradesmen and women. The Gilbane team’s outreach and engagement efforts helped to achieve Mass MoCA’s goal of ensuring the project remained local.

The successful transformation of the project was contingent on five core elements. The Gilbane team focused on the below six steps to achieve a seamless, quality project result that met the client’s budget and schedule requirements.
SIX STEPS TO SUCCESS

1. PROVIDING A COMMUNITY SPACE
At the core of each museum project is the requirement for community engagement. Selecting a construction company that understands and appreciates the importance of the surrounding community is critical to a museum’s success. Community engagement during construction can be achieved through local hiring schemes, outreach activities and tours.

As a community space, Mass MoCA’s local residents were always considered during this project. Local participation of trades was promoted and encouraged to provide local employment opportunities throughout the construction period. Gilbane also supported the Museum’s efforts to promote the facility to local residents and worked to be as flexible as possible with the construction schedule to accommodate Museum tours, community days and local fundraising events. The Museum continues to host monthly and annual free day events for local residents to further encourage engagement and community interaction efforts.

2. IMAGINING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE
A unique and individual visitor experience is key to a valuable museum visit. It’s important for a museum space to be built with consideration for the future visitors’ experience and the flexibility for patrons to enjoy an experience that is unique to their individual art knowledge and preference.

As the Mass MoCA developed, the design team paid extensive attention to the experience of the museum’s future visitors and the project’s goal of increasing the average visiting duration from two hours to four hours. The purpose-built spaces were created in anticipation of the visitor’s holistic experience, with the lighting, pathways, environmental factors and exhibit spaces specifically designed to completely immerse a visitor in the displays. These designs provide a mix of both flexible and deliberate pathways to enable each visitor to create their own unique experience, while ensuring they were exposed to all of the art on display. Removing floors to create larger spaces brought a greater focus to the displays, providing breathing space for the exhibits and a surrounding environment that supported a visitor’s interpretation of the pieces. Maintaining the historic integrity of the space also ensured the perfect backdrop that enhanced the artwork and therefore the visitor experience, rather than competing with the displays.

3. MAINTAINING AN OPERATIONAL MUSEUM DURING CONSTRUCTION
Ensuring a safe, secure and clean site is critical on any project, but is especially critical for museums that need to remain operational during construction. In addition to planning for the physical changes to the site, a detailed construction work plan must be developed to ensure construction activities have zero interference with daily operations, control noise, dust and mitigate potential impacts to the surrounding community.

“The local knowledge of the Gilbane team, their in-depth museum experience and excellent collaboration with Bruner Cott Architects resulted in a beautiful revitalization of the building – they really brought our vision to life...

- Larry Smallwood, Deputy Director, MASS MoCA
Gilbane developed an on-site plan that ensured the safety of all Mass MoCA visitors, staff and the facility's collections throughout construction. Work areas were isolated from the operational spaces of the building and shutdowns were carefully coordinated with the owner. As available space for on-site deliveries was limited to a shared courtyard, the team communicated regularly with the owner through weekly meetings to coordinate and update team members on daily delivery schedules. The team's collaborative efforts resulted in an on-track project schedule, with no impact to daily operational activities.

**Controlled Access and Security Efforts**
Gilbane worked closely with all on-site staff to ensure that collection storage areas remained undisturbed throughout construction. All team members were conscious of the secure areas throughout the facility as part of their orientation process and were not permitted into operational and/or storage areas within the facility to ensure they did not disturb the museum's daily operations. Gilbane's efforts to control access and isolate construction allowed the Museum to maintain a revenue stream throughout the duration of the project.

### 4. PROTECTING THE HISTORIC DESIGN INTEGRITY
The renovation or expansion of a historic museum building should be treated with the same care as the artwork it will house. Critical planning and deliberate design helps to support the preservation of the building, retain historic integrity and ultimately, enhance future exhibits and visitor experiences.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the 16-acre Mass MoCA site includes a large complex of 19th-century factory buildings that needed to be preserved during construction. The team's top focus was to ensure the preservation of the facility's industrial elements and historic integrity through the extensive reuse of salvaged materials. In keeping with the community's early industrial building aesthetic, nearly 5,000 original bricks were removed, cleaned and reused during this phase, as well as more than 60,000 SF of the facility's maple flooring, which was revitalized and reused. A historic window well, which was filled-in by previous tenants, was also restored as a critical aesthetic component of the project.

### 5. CREATING PURPOSE-BUILT SPACES TO HOUSE ART
The spaces that houses artwork must be designed and built with future exhibits in mind. The rooms that exhibit art can either enhance or detract from the visitor experience, so it is critical to engage a builder that understands the importance of delivering a flexible and suitable space for the future artwork display.

Architect, Bruner/Cott was challenged with designing a space that both pays tribute to the history of the 100-year-old industrial facility, while also celebrating and accommodating the Museum's extensive contemporary art collection. The juxtaposition of old and new was a vital project component that needed critical attention in order to achieve the right balance.

Many areas within the Museum were designed around the exhibits and art displays. One area focuses specifically on ten works by James Turrell, while Jenny Holzer projections are exhibited in a specially-designed gallery. In order to create
specifically-designed spaces to house long-term installations by artists, James Turrell, Laurie Anderson, Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois, the Gilbane team worked closely with Bruner/Cott, the Museum staff and the artists who served as curators for their respective spaces in an effort to evoke their own distinct styles and ensure thoughtfully designed and coordinated exhibit spaces.

Bourgeois’ 15-ton sculpture, housed in the updated wing, required extensive coordination in order to safely move the large-scale work into the space. As it was determined that an exterior wall would need to be removed to facilitate the piece’s safe transportation, Gilbane coordinated with the Museum and specialty contractors to ensure that the wall removal and replacement process did not interfere with the facility’s ongoing operations or historic integrity. Through the team’s collaborative approach and careful planning, the sculpture was safely installed and the wall was successfully reconstructed without impacting visitor experiences.

6. PROTECTING THE ART
Sensitive museum artwork and artifacts require an investment in the environment in which they are housed. As it is crucial that this delicate atmosphere not be compromised by construction activities, it is necessary that a comprehensive strategy be developed to maintain the existing environmental factors during a project. As the Mass MoCA team were working adjacent to occupied galleries and collection storage areas, the implementation of environmental controls for noise, dust and vibration control were of the utmost importance. The team successfully avoided potential impacts to the operational facility through the isolation of construction areas and use of ample ventilation.

Part of the project scope involved lighting and climate control flexibility and coverage throughout the space. New HVAC and lighting systems were specially designed for the exhibit spaces, providing control mechanisms for individual areas, allowing the museum to increase or decrease lighting and temperature settings, dependent upon specific exhibit requirements.