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Profiles - The Rubin Museum of Art

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photo: David De Armas



Profiles

The Rubin Museum of Art

For over two centuries, New York City's arts and culture have been enhanced by visionary founders of museums designed to house collections the founders themselves treasured. That tradition continues with the installation of a remarkable collection in the equally remarkable transformation of a former clothing store. The Rooftops Project's Payal Thakkar and Professor James Hagy visit with **Patrick Sears**, Executive Director of **The Rubin Museum of Art** in New York City.

Along West 17th Street in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, a series of former commercial buildings serve as the home of The Rubin Museum of Art, which encompasses over 3,000 objects of art from the Himalayas (and neighboring regions) dating from more than 1,500 years ago to contemporary works. Even a casual, first-time visitor to the Museum can easily appreciate what an excellent example it is of adapting pre-existing property conditions to become a superlative base for collections, preservation, and programming.

The role that physical space plays in the Rubin Museum of Art is embedded in its single-sentence mission statement, which calls its Museum "a dynamic environment that stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia." The background statement on the Museum's main web page also demonstrates consciousness of the central supportive role of real estate in its objectives, recognizing the Rubin as "a space to contemplate ideas that extend across history and span human cultures."

To explore the evolution of both the Museum and its home in Chelsea, we visited with Patrick Sears, Executive Director at the Rubin. He has almost four decades of experience in the management and operation of art museums, with a specialization in museum architecture, design, and operations. His experience includes more than 20 years with the Smithsonian Institution, at its Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. He has been

involved in new museum buildings, renovations, or new installations in the United Kingdom, Japan, and Nepal, as well as in the United States.

Patrick was still at the Smithsonian when, one day some 11 years ago, he received a call from one of the founders of The Rubin Museum, describing the somewhat daring vision for a new, privately founded museum for Himalayan art in New York City.

Leaving a preeminent organization like the Smithsonian for a newly planned, specialty museum that was not yet open would be a major career decision for anyone of Patrick's professional stature. Founder Don Rubin understood this and made a convincing appeal. Patrick recalls the several months of dialogue that led to his move.

"The Smithsonian is a great institution; some would argue that it's the greatest institution in the world," Patrick reflects. "But it's huge. I think there are between 7,000 and 8,000 staff, 68 different departments, and 22 museums and research institutes. There is a Smithsonian footprint in something like 14 countries. It's a big, deep, complicated place that is both part of the federal government and not part of it, a hybrid institution because of its government and non-government charter.

"Don Rubin said, 'I would like for you to come and join us. I can't offer you the Smithsonian, but I can offer you something they cannot: no bureaucracy!' Don's brilliant because he's incredibly insightful and emotionally driven about people. There is something he sensed about me from our conversations; he figured out what could make me say yes, and, sure enough, within three weeks, I agreed to join a fledgling staff. We had great fun and I am still having fun."

The Museum's founding team had enjoyed considerable flexibility in the site-selection process. "The board really wanted the Museum to be in Manhattan," Patrick explains. "But where in Manhattan was not terribly important. In fact, they'd looked around all over town, at maybe 20 or 30 sites. They looked at building something, but since they thought the budget would be relatively small they thought it would be more effective to renovate. This [the Museum's





Photo: Evi Abeler

home today] was the first building they had seen that they felt would satisfy the needs of the institutional vision as it was at that point.”

The Museum occupies a series of buildings along West 17th Street that are a legacy from before their acquisition by the Rubin. One building houses the Museum’s café, Museum shop, and, at the lower level, theater/auditorium space. The “Gallery Tower” contains the primary gallery spaces for the Museum, all connected by a curved, seven-story monumental staircase preserved from an earlier renovation that created the department store.

At the point of Patrick’s arrival, from an organizational perspective, the Rubin had a small board of trustees and an even smaller staff, both still engaged together in determining the precise focus for what would emerge. The building had been acquired some five or six years earlier, the construction had commenced, but what would become today’s Rubin Museum had not yet become fully formed.

“One of our founders is very fond of the dialectic approach,” Patrick observes. “So he would put people together, ostensibly to advise, but they would in effect debate. It felt more comfortable to them to try to get advice from as many different people as possible.”

This fluidity resulted in Patrick having the opportunity to participate in the design process, even though physical work on the building had started. “A lot of it was technical in nature: lighting systems, security systems.” While a security consultant had suggested that the Museum’s security cameras be highly visible as an added deterrent, for example, Patrick regarded them as hideous and opted for a more aesthetic approach. And while the mechanical systems were originally to be oil-fired, the Museum decided on a dual-fired approach. “We have to have the ability to switch back and forth among energy sources, whether that is oil, gas, or electricity. Economically it’s the right thing to do for the long run.

“Wisely, they wanted the renovation [of the building] to be responsive to the fairly tight architectural brief. But the project wasn’t led by a central idea; it was led by lots of different ideas. In addition, Don Rubin is known as a generous but thrifty guy. He doesn’t believe in spending money when you don’t have to, and he believes you get more from an organization if you under-resource it.” The budget for the renovation project, which began at a few million dollars, eventually grew as the vision for the organization and the space emerged. The final budget was under \$25 million for acquisition of the

property and under \$30 million for the renovation which created the space you see when you visit today.

“It was multiple buildings strung together because most of the space was originally occupied by Barney’s, the department store. Part of the building had been renovated in the late 1980s, so the supposition was that it was in relatively good condition. It seemed large enough; there was enough square footage and room for expansion. It was purchased in a bankruptcy auction. Our thrifty founder supposed he could pick this up at a reasonable price and, sure enough, he did.”

The result of renovations to the existing buildings is to create modern, functional galleries that are intimate, welcoming, and harmonious with the best features of the original architecture. The relatively small footprint of each gallery space on each floor also makes it easy for visitors to find their way around. On the day of our visit, one-half of one floor was partitioned off for the installation of an upcoming exhibit. Yet the combination of engaging art and the pleasing shape and materials of the monumental stairs themselves were such that we passed the closed gallery without any recollection of it a few minutes later when we went to retrace our steps. Patrick agrees.

“Yes, you can always see the stairs, and that’s a great thing for this orientation. It’s not necessarily the best thing for installing an exhibition around a big open donut [the monumental stairwell]. The staircases were really the reason that the organization bought the building. They fell in love with the staircases, and they liked the scale of the space, too. It was almost residential in its scale; it felt comfortable to be in, and appropriate to the scale of much of the art. While this place is very large, it’s very human. Each floor creates flow issues that sometimes make it more challenging to offer visitors a linear experience where their knowledge is cumulative. On the other hand, visitors don’t necessarily behave that way anyway. They like to graze. So, even in a series of spaces where you can roam through an exhibition, the assumption that people will get the experience that you intend is not necessarily the case. It forces us to look from the visitor’s point of view and be a little more flexible about structuring the narrative aspects of our exhibitions.”

The physical constraints of the existing building and the property footprint come with some inherent limitations, nonetheless. “We have almost no back-of-house space,” Patrick explains. “About 60-70 percent of our space is public space. In a more typical [arts] organization like ours, a much smaller percentage would be public space.”



Photo: Evi Abeler



The consequence is that, like many museums in challenging real estate markets like Manhattan, the Rubin requires offsite rented storage space. That has dual disadvantages—not only the economic costs of rental but the distance and limited accessibility of collections for the museum’s curators, conservation and collections management staff, and visiting researchers.

“We had to lease enough [storage] space that it was really usable long-term, as art collection moves are costly and difficult,” Patrick notes. “It’s inefficient, because our folks are generally here [at the Museum in Manhattan], and they have to trek across the East River to Queens.” Other external factors, practical and regulatory, also affect space needs. Lending artwork for exhibitions at other institutions is a significant example.

“We have packing space; we do a lot of international loans both outgoing and incoming. TSA [the federal Transportation Safety Administration] has made it challenging, because they require that international shipments be inspected in their own facilities or in facilities that are approved by them. So there is a level of security that is more complicated and more space intensive. This adds significantly more to the budget.”

The Museum also houses some of its administrative offices and educational and meeting space in another building nearby to the east on the same block of West 17th Street. Despite the location not being immediately contiguous to the main Museum, Patrick has found the arrangement to be functional.

“It doesn’t seem to affect our engagement with students or whomever is going there. We typically use that space in connection with a Museum visit. When it’s freezing cold or raining, it’s uncomfortable to do that walk, but New Yorkers are used to that in a way. It’s not the same kind of problem as if we were in Dallas or Austin. Being in a large and concentrated urban center helps, I think.

“It is inconvenient for the staff, because we have to transition many times a day. And it’s not a great thing for communication because you don’t see anyone standing in line for the restroom or for coffee. But many institutions face the same series of problems; there are people who spend their entire career and they have never met anyone from a neighboring museum. It always takes an effort. I would rather have the space, even if not contiguous, than not.”

While the museum has been open ten years, the space doesn’t reflect the passage of time, wear or tear. Unlike many properties open to public visitors, you don’t think “Gee, it would be nice if they painted the bathroom every thirty years.” We looked closely and thought it was spectacular, far beyond many peer institutions. Patrick is pleased at the observation.

“We put a premium on how well the space is maintained. I would love us to do even more, because I am obsessive about these things I guess. Because we are an art museum, I believe people pay attention to everything they see in the building. Whether that’s the restroom, or the bookshop, or the galleries, it’s all part of a single visual experience and I don’t want that experience to be jarring. I was just in the restrooms in the cafeteria area and was talking to our operations manager about them today. A lot of this is more attitude than money. So I’m glad it is noticed.”

There are many things to admire about the contributions that both the space and the staff make to the visitor experience. On a prior visit, we observed a gallery security guard carefully removing a discarded, used facial tissue that had inadvertently been left by a visitor. It was a gesture of an “ownership” mentality almost certainly beyond what most museum guards would view as their job descriptions. On the day of our meeting with Patrick, guards could be seen on the one hand unobtrusively allowing the visitors space, while on the other hand volunteering to press the elevator button for us as we approached to move between floors. That experience seems evident visit to visit, achieved even though the staffing is provided by an outside company on hire by the Rubin and has been consistent through a recent vendor change. It is a tone set from the top by Patrick and his team.

“The [security staff’s] job is not just to be mindful of the collection, but to help people feel that they’ve had the kind of time that they want to have here. You know, some kids want to be lively and the guard really engages them. They’ve developed a good skill set in knowing what audiences want and need and can try to respond to that in a reasonably good way. I am delighted to hear you say that you’ve had a good experience; if people are enjoying themselves, we believe that they will be more respectful of the objects.”

The constructive engagement between Museum personnel and security staff can influence exhibition design in beneficial ways, too. “We actually listen to our guards a lot,” Patrick notes. “They see the visitors more regularly and



Photo: Michael Seto



more consistently than anybody on the [Museum] staff. We have guides on staff as well, and they also offer a lot of feedback.”

We mentioned to Patrick a pet peeve of ours about the frequent seemingly minute font sizes chosen for didactic plaques in cultural museums and the conundrum it poses for visitors who want to read the information while also being respectful of the collections by not getting too close. Patrick appreciated the example. The Rubin strives to avoid this pitfall, too.

“We try to be responsive to those types of suggestions. We don’t want to create the potential for conflict between a visitor and a guard, especially for something as simple as making the type larger. I think it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. You get what you give, and if you’re authoritarian and dictatorial, you’re probably going to get that back and it’s not necessarily going to give you great feedback with your constituency or your social media contact group.”

We asked Patrick his view about the volume and utility of visitor feedback, from his experiences both at the Rubin and at the Smithsonian.

“We don’t really receive that many suggestions, because feedback is self-selected. It falls into two groups. The middle group is one you don’t hear from. You hear from the people who are very pleased, who had such a wonderful time and they’d really like to thank that guard. We get comments where a visitor will compliment someone else, say a tour guide. And we occasionally get comments at the other extreme. Don’t believe your own press and don’t believe self-selected comments, because that person who had the mean comment may have had a bad day and it had nothing to do with us, and maybe the tour guide suggested providing feedback. When people make a suggestion to us that seems well-reasoned, we tend to take action. We collate the comments and send them to the departments that can effect change.”

Similarly, the Rubin Museum exhibits objects for their artistic and cultural merits; it does not aim to provide space for meditation. But the origins of many of its works were for religious use and, if members of the public visit with the objective of reacting to the collection in a spiritual way, their intentions are welcomed.

“There is a Ganesha [a sculpture of the well-recognized Hindu deity that is represented with the head of an elephant] over there, and people put money and offerings [in front of it]. We don’t try to stop that. Up in the shrine room, which looks like a shrine in a wealthy Tibetan home, its purpose is not to provide a context for meditation, but there is the sense of what all of these things would look like and how they would be used in context. If someone wants to sit in the space and reflect on their religion or their beliefs, that’s fine although it’s not part of our mission. As a public institution we don’t advocate. A true Buddhist wouldn’t proselytize, or get converts to Buddhism. We think of ourselves as having an educational mission. Learning about the culture and the religion that gives rise to the art is a part.”

Another small design element that is visitor-friendly, but too seldom in place at other institutions, is the ability to access the restrooms before entering the museum or starting your tour. You can also visit the Museum café and spend an afternoon there without visiting the galleries or paying admission. The café offers not only a respite when visiting the galleries, but is a popular meeting point with an excellent selection of Himalayan cuisine including vegetarian and vegan items. On Friday evenings, guests can also enjoy Himalayan-inspired small plate tapas, wine, beer, and cocktails. The Rubin offers this as a popular destination event that draws additional audiences into the Museum.

“Yes, it’s an accident of the building [design], but it was an intentional tool. We wanted people to feel that this is a neighborhood place, too. They can come in and don’t necessarily have to pay to see an exhibition that maybe they have seen before. The building enabled us to do this, and it seemed like the right thing to do. The problem is, like any of these institutions, you have people coming in that want to use the restroom and they leave it a total mess. So there are penalties associated with that kind of institutional generosity as well. But, it’s not something we are likely to change; it works for us. We have twice as many free visits as we do people who go to the gallery or to programs; the number is almost exactly double.”

One objective indication of the value achieved by the board in selecting this property at auction can be drawn from the sale last year of a small part of the property. The sale involved a building at the corner of Seventh Avenue and West 17th Street, on a 5,000-square-foot lot that had not yet been renovated and adapted by the Rubin. It was being used for temporary non-art storage, and also still contained bits of history, such as the occasional discarded mannequins, from the retail store that had previously occupied the site. When we first visited with Patrick at a time before the sale, this space seemed pleasantly reminiscent of the set from an episode of the British sitcom “Are You Being Served?”

“We realized that at least on a 20-year horizon it probably wasn’t going to be practical for us to renovate that building without substantially increasing our operating costs. And by the time it might become feasible years from now, we felt we would probably need a purpose-built building anyway.”

So the Museum hired a real estate broker, eventually achieving a price substantially higher than the team had hoped. While the property comprised only about one-sixth of the total site, the disposition gained the institution a market price more than double what was paid for the entire property when the Rubin won it at auction. While the original acquisition was mission-driven and for the Museum’s programmatic use, it proved a sound investment, too.

Patrick sees additional benefits both for the Museum and the neighborhood in the outcome of the sale and the successful buyer that emerged. “Out of many offers, not only was [the eventual buyer] the highest offer, but it was the only bidder among all of them that was going to renovate the building rather than tear the building down. So not only did the trustees do the right thing by maximizing the income, but it is better for us because it is going



Photo: David De Amas



to reduce seismic implications [during any redevelopment of the property]. It also preserves the relatively low-rise nature, so that helped the neighborhood and especially those people who are against building ever-higher.”

While some art museums may find themselves operating residential housing as an element of supporting educational programs for students—the Art Institute of Chicago and Atlanta’s Woodruff Arts Center come immediately to mind—the residential component of the Rubin Museum complex is, instead, historical happenstance. One of the quirks of the property was the inherited collection of residential apartments (and tenants) in the upper floors of several of the buildings comprising the site. They are subject to New York City rent control and rent stabilization programs, so any adaptation or renovation of the spaces for the Museum’s programmatic use has been deferred into the future. The Museum employs a management company for the residential units and so avoids these responsibilities falling directly to the Museum staff.

The buildings are well over 100 years old in origin, with parts of the plumbing to the residential units dating back almost that far, too. All the more reason to keep a constant eye on the property. Naturally, the Museum has staff present 24 hours a day as a matter of Museum security and to monitor conditions for the well-being and preservation of the collection.

Like many cultural institutions in New York City, the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy posed challenges. “We had no power. Our massive emergency generator ran out of fuel; it had been a long time since New York had such a sustained power outage. We had to haul additional fuel to the roof because

the elevators weren’t working. It became enormously complicated. The one thing that we had in our favor was that the outside temperature and humidity were close to perfect for art preservation, so we had no climate control issues. We basically secured the whole building and, as it was closed, it gradually acclimated to the exterior state, which was near-perfect—70 degrees. If it were in the middle of the winter or the summer, we could have had more problems.”

In preparatory conversations with us on previous visits, Patrick mentioned to us repeatedly his belief, formed over his extensive career with institutions and projects both in the United States and overseas, that a senior Museum executive should aspire not to build and then saddle his successors with an unsustainable physical monument. He and the Rubin can take pride in envisioning, designing, and, as importantly, operating, a cultural jewel that seems perfectly sized and suited to its exceptional collection and audience.



Payal Thakkar is a candidate for a Juris Doctorate degree at New York Law School in 2016. During her law school career, she has been actively involved in the Impact Center for Public Interest Law, and she also has an interest in real estate. Prior to law school, Payal received a Master’s of Science in Higher Education from the University of Pennsylvania.



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