



THE PLAIN DEALER

Beacon for art lovers

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Beacon, N.Y.- Twenty years ago, the main street of this former factory town on the Hudson River was "burned out and boarded up," in the words of longtime Mayor Clara Lou Gould.

Now, seemingly overnight, Beacon has become one of the hottest destinations in the world of contemporary art. Thousands of visitors are driving north from New York City or riding commuter trains to see Dia: Beacon, the newest big art museum in the country.

Housed in a renovated factory that used to print cartons for Nabisco, the museum is filled with a matchless collection of works by leading contemporary artists.

The ensuing influx of tourists has made Dia: Beacon the latest example of how the arts can change the image of a blighted city and boost the local economy.

"It's really wonderful to see all these people in black clothes walking from the train station to Dia along the river," said Ned Foss, a developer from Delmar, N.Y., outside Albany, who is building an eco-friendly riverfront hotel nearby to cater to overnight visitors drawn by Dia and other developments.

The Beacon story is particularly apt for Cleveland, which has plenty of vacant or underused industrial buildings, and which dreams of revving up the arts as an engine of revitalization.

Since Dia: Beacon opened in May, more than 65,000 people have visited it to see large-scale works by artists who came of age in the 1960s and '70s, including Andy Warhol, Richard Serra, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Michael Heizer, Richard Chamberlain, Walter De Maria and Dan Flavin.

On a monthly basis, the flow of visitors nearly equals Beacon's population of 14,000. No economic-impact studies have been done since the museum opened. But Anne Davis, director of the Bureau of Economic Research at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, estimated that Dia will stimulate at least several million dollars a year in direct spending.

The ripple is already apparent. Galleries and restaurants are blooming downtown, six hotels are under construction nearby, and property values in southern Dutchess County, 60 miles north of Manhattan, are going up, up, up.

Dia can't take sole credit for the good news. A \$3.5 billion IBM manufacturing plant in East Fishkill created 1,000 jobs when it opened last year and spurred development, including most of the hotels, said Ronald Coan, director of the Dutchess County Economic Development Corp.

The county also boasts other cultural and historic attractions, including the home of Franklin D. Roosevelt in Hyde Park and the new Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, an architecturally spectacular building designed by Frank Gehry.

Until now, however, much of the new development in Dutchess County has occurred outside Beacon, which had a reputation as a poverty-racked haven for drug dealers and gangs.

Now, instead of worrying about blight, Mayor Gould frets about how wealthy newcomers might displace longtime residents.

"People are saying, 'Are we going to be able to afford to stay here?' " Gould says.

Beacon's experience echoes that of Bilbao, Spain, where the city capped an urban renaissance in 1997 with its curvaceous, titanium-clad branch of the Guggenheim Museum, designed by Gehry.

The difference is that instead of hiring a star architect to create a new landmark, Dia chose to reuse an existing building.

A factory transformed

Designed by Nabisco's in-house architect, Louis Wirshing, and built in 1929, the Nabisco plant was an ideal candidate for remodeling as a contemporary art museum. It had a tough, industrial aesthetic that echoed the work in Dia's collection. It had huge skylights that washed the interior with natural light. And it was big.

The building encompasses nearly 300,000 square feet of interior space, of which roughly 240,000 square feet is devoted to art. That's almost twice the amount of exhibit space the Cleveland Museum of Art would have after completing its proposed \$225 million renovation and expansion.

And here's the kicker: The Beacon project cost roughly \$50 million.

For a Clevelander, there's much here to contemplate. Cleveland is packed with old factory buildings like the Nabisco plant, any one of which could become a new art museum.

But the big lesson from Beacon is that artistic excellence means everything. Even before renovating the Nabisco plant, Dia owned a sizable, high-quality collection with enormous historical significance.

The institution was founded in 1974 by German art dealer Heiner Friedrich and Philippa de Menil, heir to a Texas oil fortune, to support artists who wanted to work on a grand scale and to control or design the spaces or landscapes in which those works were shown.

Together, they shaped contemporary art history by commissioning epic creations, including De Maria's "Lightning Field," near Quemado, N.M., a square-mile grid of 400 steel poles that attract lightning during thunderstorms. They also collected more than 700 individual works of art and played a pivotal role in advancing the careers of Judd, Flavin, Chamberlain and other leading artists.

Dia's name derives from the Greek word meaning "through" or "between," which evokes the goal of Friedrich and de Menil to create a nonintrusive link between artists and their audience.

By the mid-1980s, Dia had overextended itself financially; Friedrich and de Menil left the organization. Dia stopped buying art, sold off some assets and devoted itself to temporary exhibits.

More recently, under director Michael Govan, Dia has resumed collecting. Govan also led the Beacon project as a way to put more of Dia's permanent collection on view.

The renovation of the old Nabisco building is as restrained and elegant as many of the artworks on view inside. It was designed by Robert Irwin, the California artist who laid out the garden at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and by Open Office, a New York architecture firm.

The designers subdivided the factory's vast shop floor into a series of large, white-walled galleries, each of which is devoted to displays by individual artists. The Dia philosophy is not to mix artists together to create art-historical narratives, but to let each stand alone.

Visitors enter the museum through a smallish, brick-enclosed vestibule added to the north side of the old factory. The lobby is dark and contained, in sharp contrast to the galleries beyond. There's a palpable sense of release when you enter the first two exhibit spaces, which seem to stretch forever into the distance. As big as they are, these galleries represent a mere fraction of the total square footage in the museum.

Seminal works

Installations include seminal works, such as Richard Serra's gigantic "Torqued Ellipses," a series of vasselike containers made of rusting steel, with sloping walls and curving interior spaces like narrow canyons in the Southwest. Also on view are luminous penciled grids on canvas by painter Agnes Martin; monumental sculptures by Flavin, made of store-bought fluorescent lights; and an in-depth display of works by the Surrealist-influenced sculptor Louise Bourgeois.

The exhibits at Dia have a strikingly contemporary look. But they also underscore deep continuities in American art. Surprisingly, they also have strong connections to the Hudson Valley, the birthplace of an important school of landscape painting in the 19th century.

One example is Heizer's "North, East, South, West," a series of 20-foot-deep geometric shapes hollowed out of the concrete floor of a large gallery and lined with weathered plates of steel. The installation, flanked by a glass barrier for safety, is an interior landscape that evokes a sense of smallness in the presence of something big and powerful. Those sensations are very close to the feelings about nature expressed in paintings by Hudson River painters Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Cole.

Works such as the Heizer, which is permanently installed at Dia: Beacon, make the museum unique in America and will likely add to its durability as a destination. It also shows a powerful commitment to the vision of an individual artist, a Dia trademark.

Cleveland, a conservative town that has never shown much enthusiasm for world-class contemporary art, could learn a lot from Beacon's example. The new museum fell into the city's lap by virtue of Dia's decision to locate there. But the city, county and state supported the development with \$2.8 million in public funding, which is spinning off other investments.

The state recently named Beacon as the future home of the \$132 million Rivers and Estuaries Center on the Hudson, an institute devoted to advanced environmental research. Along with Dia, the institute will be served by a riverfront hotel nearby, to be built by Foss, the developer, in collaboration with Scenic Hudson, a conservation and land trust organization.

Of course, the parallels only go so far. Cleveland can't easily draw tourists from a megalopolis like New York City, and Cleveland has been losing jobs, rather than gaining them from corporate expansions such as the IBM plant that has helped Dutchess County.

Then again, Cleveland has a rich legacy of philanthropy devoted to the arts, exemplified by the endowments of the Cleveland Orchestra and the Cleveland Museum of Art. It also boasts a river

and a lake and major educational institutions that could collaborate on a catalytic arts project.

In fact, the ideas behind the Beacon projects are strikingly similar to concepts that have been discussed by local planners for downtown Cleveland, University Circle and the Cuyahoga Valley. The difference is that Beacon is getting them done - and that contemporary art is at the heart of the city's rebirth.

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