

'Cultural Corridor' Proposed for Northern Berkshires

By Randy Kennedy

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Thomas Krens, who once directed the Guggenheim Museum in New York and its overseas satellites, on Saturday joined with the former Massachusetts governors William Weld and Michael Dukakis to announce an ambitious plan to establish a “cultural corridor” between North Adams and Williamstown, Mass.

The project, intended to draw more visitors to the northern Berkshires and to help the economy of North Adams in particular, would include a new contemporary art museum, the renovation of a 1938 movie palace and the building of what Mr. Krens calls a museum for “extreme model railroading and contemporary architecture,” all in or near North Adams. The plan was announced at a news conference in North Adams.



A rendering of a museum of “extreme model railroading and contemporary architecture.” Gluckman Tang Architects

The plan is being formulated a year after the opening of the final stage of an expansion of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown that has drawn tens of thousands of new visitors, and as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, known as Mass MoCA, has embarked on its own expansion, to more than double its gallery space.

In an interview, Mr. Krens, one of the forces behind the development of Mass MoCA beginning in the late 1980s, said that the museum had helped heal the economic wounds of North Adams, a faded mill town, but that it had not “quite been the economic driver that it could be.” (It draws more than 150,000 visitors a year.)

And so Mr. Krens, who has been at work on art-related projects in China and has largely disappeared from the American art world since stepping down from the Guggenheim in 2008, said he began thinking about other new institutions that could solidify the northern Berkshires as a tourist destination. Mr. Krens has experience in museums as economic catalysts: He oversaw the development of the Guggenheim Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, a star attraction in northern Spain.



The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, which occupies buildings that used to house an electronic plant and a textile factory, established North Adams as a cultural destination. Stewart Cairns for The New York Times

The new contemporary art museum, which would be designed by the architect Richard Gluckman and is proposed for the grounds of the Harriman-West Airport near North Adams, would be funded by a group of international art collectors who would use it to show pieces from their collections. “They’re looking for solutions in between their houses and a full-blown art museum,” said Mr. Krens, who declined to name the collectors, saying the project remains a work in progress.

The model-railroading and architecture museum would be built in Western Gateway Heritage State Park, an old rail yard. The museum, which Mr. Krens first considered developing in China, would feature one of the world’s largest working systems of O scale model trains, with perhaps 100 in operation at one time and a control room that “would look like something from NASA,” he said. He added that he believed such a museum could draw hundreds of thousands of visitors a year.

The overall project has an estimate of \$25 million to \$30 million, and fund-raising and public approval is only now beginning, Mr. Krens said. “All this stuff is still early-stage stuff,” he said. But he added: “Sometimes the more unlikely and preposterous the proposal is, the more interesting it becomes. This is us taking the sheet off the experimental car.”

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