

Mill Town, Factory Town, Cultural Economic Engine: North Adams in Context

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We must examine social context to understand the community effects of a cultural organization. This is especially true for a newcomer to the neighborhood like MASS MoCA. Ethnographic and anecdotal evidence suggest that the most important signs of community development impact are at the neighborhood level. The social context of the community and the organization, and their relationship to one another, are what concerns us in this report. Drawing upon newspaper articles, local ethnographic sources, and Census and other town data we will provide a background on the development of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), how it came to exist, why it exists in North Adams, the cultural history of North Adams, and a brief economic history of North Adams.

The study of North Adams is a first step in developing a template by which we can study and compare neighborhood regeneration through the introduction of a new cultural arts organization. Through a series of reports we will present a variety of perspectives – historical, anthropological, economic, and sociological – to analyze and discuss the results of North Adams’ attempt to regenerate itself by collaborating with the development of a major new cultural arts organization, MASS MoCA. The tools we develop throughout this project are replicable yet flexible enough to allow for comparable studies in a variety of neighborhoods and communities.



Stephen Sheppard 2004

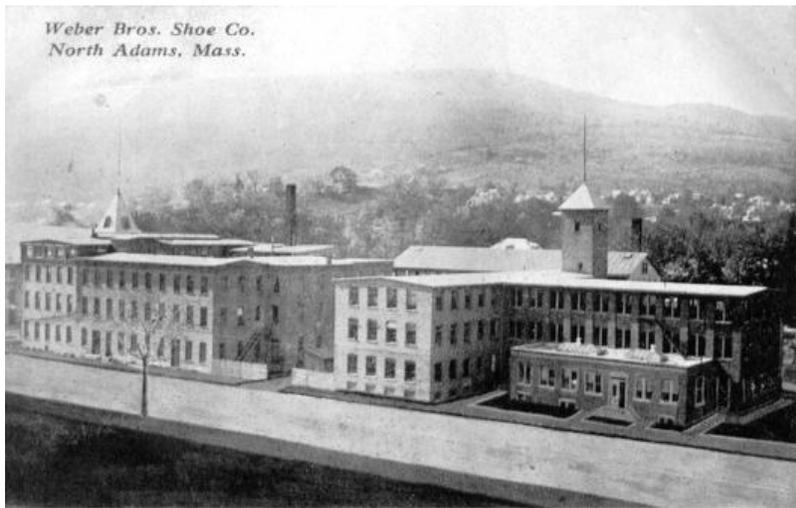
The geographic location of North Adams has shaped its history

We will see that North Adams, while economically and socially troubled in the 1980s, has a rich social history. This history is important to understand in assessing the prospects of economic revitalization of the town. We will also see why the choice of a contemporary art museum, while a seemingly improbable choice at the time for an ‘economic engine’, has in fact helped integrate the town of North Adams into the cultural tourism economy of Berkshire County.

The site where MASS MoCA is located spans more than two hundred years rich in local and regional history. Its 13 acres of grounds comprise nearly one-third of North Adams' downtown business district. The use of the site traces the trajectory of the economic development of New England, from print works factory to electronics factory to cultural arts producer.

Listed in the National Historic Register, the site's 26 buildings form an elaborate system of interlocking courtyards and passageways, bridges, viaducts, and elevated walkways. The red brick facades lend a distinct architectural ambiance to the complex. Throughout its history this site has been a place for innovation, using the most advanced knowledge and technology of the day.

Manufacturing began before the Revolutionary War on and around what is today the MASS MoCA site. Its location at the confluence of the two branches of the Hoosic River was ideal for the diverse, small-scale industries of Colonial times. By the late 1700s and early 1800s businesses at or near the site included: wholesale shoe manufacturers; a brick yard; a saw mill; cabinet-makers; hat manufacturers; machine shops for the construction of mill machines; marble works; wagon- and sleigh-makers; and an ironworks, which later forged armor plates for the Civil War ship, the Monitor. The big industries in North Adams during the mid-nineteenth century were shoes and textiles.



Shoes
were a
large
industry
in North
Adams

Postcard date unknown

“Manufacturing in North Adams not only determined the business make-up of the town, but also affected its demographics as a flood of immigrant workers of Irish, Italian, and French Canadian descent ... migrated to the city in search of work in the city's mills and factories.”¹ For a brief period Chinese immigrants worked at the shoe factory of C.T. Sampson, who brought them in expressly to break a strike in 1875 at his North Adams factory. Unable to bring their families to

¹ Wso.williams.edu/cmolvey/NAdams/

the U.S. the Chinese saved their money and returned to their homeland at the end of their three year contract.²

In 1860, the print works O. Arnold and Company established itself on a portion of the site where MASS MoCA is located today, and installed the latest equipment for printing cloth. Large government contracts to supply fabric for the Union Army ensured that the business prospered, and during the next four decades Arnold Print Works became the largest employer in North Adams. By the end of the 1890s, 25 of the 26 buildings in the present-day MASS MoCA complex had been constructed,³ and by 1905, Arnold Print Works employed some 3,200 people as one of the leading producers of printed textiles in the world.⁴

Tony Talarico, the son of a local tailor, was born in North Adams in 1914. Interviewed by Joe Manning in 1996, he discussed work at the Arnold Print Works:

I worked at the Arnold Print Works while my brother Gene went to Bryant College. I made \$14.00 a week. I was a laborer doing basically a woman's job,



In 1910
Arnold Print
Works
produced
75,000
yards of a
single
stylized
floral textile

Two-color print, Arnold Print Works 1898, reproduced by P&B Textiles

² Filson, Brent. 1985. "Calvin Sampson's Chinese experiment." *Yankee Magazine*. February, pp. 93-138. A summary of this and other local history writings can be found online at <http://wso.williams.edu:8000/~cmulvey/NAdams/summaries.html>. Apparently not all of the Chinese workers returned to China, however, since oral tradition describes the first Chinese arriving at Oliver Place (currently Ping on Alley) in Boston in 1875 from a shoe factory strike in North Adams. This is credited as being the beginning of Boston's Chinatown. <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~chira/chinatown/past/pingon.html>

³ It is ironic that one scholar of industrial architecture wrote of the Arnold Print Works that it began as a characteristic rectangular block with a monumental tower. "But then it grew and spread like an amoeba, extending its projections, wings, towers and chimneys into every corner and crevice of the triangular piece of land which it occupied between the two branches of the Hoosic River. Ultimately, it achieved a million square feet of floor space but did so at the expense of any semblance of architectural order...." W.H. Pierson, Jr. *Industrial Architecture in the Berkshires*, volumes I and II, Yale University Ph.D., 1949.

⁴ In 1910 Arnold Print Works produced 75,000 yards of a single stylized floral textile. From the RISD Museum, A&L Tirocchi Dressmakers Project online at http://tirocchi.stg.brown.edu/essays/hay_fabric_20.html

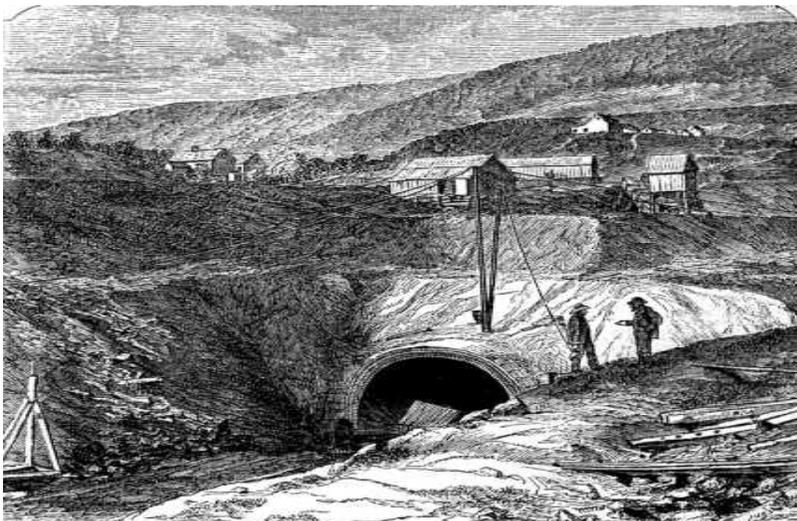
and I was working nights. That plant was running twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, during the Depression.⁵

Silvio Lamarre discusses his mother's and grandfather's life as new immigrants:

My mother was born in Cantazario, Italy. She came over with her sisters and brothers and her father. When they got here, they were poor, so they were put in the orphanage in Holyoke until their father could get enough money to take them out. Her father worked in the Arnold Print Works where MASS MoCA is now. He must have worked fifty or sixty hours a week.⁶

The 19th Century saw migration from New England to points further west, opening new markets for those who had access to them. Both sentiment and profit motivated western entrepreneurs to maintain commercial ties with New England, and the economic importance of such trade was clear to political leaders in Boston. A series of mountain ranges making up the western chain of the Appalachian system proved, however, to be an effective barrier to trade between New England and western markets.⁷

A solution to New England's economic isolation was the Hoosac Tunnel project, first planned in 1819 as a canal to connect Boston with Upstate New York. The canal project was shelved, but in



Critics called the Hoosac Tunnel the Great Bore

Scribner's December 1870

1851 work began on the northern railway line that would run from Fitchburg, Massachusetts through Greenfield and Deerfield to its terminus in Troy, New York. The route was considered

⁵ Joe Manning. 2001. Steeples: Sketches of North Adams. Florence, MA: Flatiron Press, p.27.

⁶ Ibid p. 99

⁷ The Hoosac range is a Western Massachusetts mountain range which is part of the Appalachian Mountains and an extension of the Vermont Green Mountains.

“remarkably feasible” except for the existence of the Hoosac Mountain in North Adams.⁸ After original attempts to bore through the mountain failed, the project languished for several years. In 1854 the Massachusetts legislature approved a \$2 million loan of credit to the Troy & Greenfield Railroad and work began again in earnest.

The Hoosac Tunnel project remained beset with financial difficulties, however. In 1862 all of the properties of the Troy & Greenfield Railroad Corporation were transferred to the state of Massachusetts. From 1863 to 1868 work on the tunnel was done under the direct supervision of the state. In December 1868 the Massachusetts legislature appropriated another \$5 million and hired brothers Walter and Francis Shanly of Canada to complete the tunnel.⁹ Critics of the project referred to it as The Great Bore.

Another major problem during completion of the tunnel was loss of life, often due to high profile accidents. In 1867 thirteen men working at the bottom of the shaft perished when a gasoline tank exploded near the engine that ran the central shaft air-pumps and water pumps. It is most likely they died of suffocation after the air-pumps stopped. Then the water-pumps stopped, and the central shaft quickly filled with water. Because new buildings had to be erected and new equipment brought in, it was a full year until the central shaft was emptied of water and the bodies recovered. A total of 195 lives would be lost on the Hoosac Tunnel project.¹⁰



Western Portal. <http://www.boudillion.com/hoosac/hoosac.htm>

It took
2 million
bricks to
build the
arch

The tunnel, completed in 1873, was 4.84 miles long, making it the longest tunnel in North America at the time. “The first train that came through caused rocks to fall from the ceiling of the tunnel. The tunnel could not be used until a brick arch was completed. Two million bricks were required for the project, at a cost of \$14,000,000. In 1876 the tunnel was pronounced

⁸ “The Hoosac Tunnel,” Scribner’s, December 1870. Available online at <http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/htstory1.Html>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The construction manpower of approximately 800 men was supplied almost entirely by Irishmen supplemented with some Cornish miners. The Cornish miners largely worked digging the central shaft. Daniel V. Boudillion and Andrew T. Bowers. 2002. “Hoosac Tunnel: Abode of the Damned?” Available online at <http://www.boudillion.com/hoosac/hoosac.htm>.

reasonably safe for travel.”¹¹ It took over 21 years to complete and cost over \$21 million. It remains the longest tunnel east of the Rocky Mountains.¹²

What a difference a century would make in terms of North Adams’ place in the United States and public opinion of it! One visitor writing in Scribner’s in 1870 refers to the stage ride over Hoosac Mountain as “the grand feature of the journey [from Boston to Troy]. It might be difficult to find anywhere in New England a public road which affords within an equal number of miles an equal variety and magnificence of scenery.”¹³ He goes on, “One of the fairest little valleys your eyes ever rested on lies at your feet; on your right, at the foot of its encircling hills, the outskirts of the village of North Adams are visible....”¹⁴

A New York Times author in 1995 would write the following about the same entry to North Adams: “To avoid the post-industrial decay that litters North Adams, which is next on Route 2 [the Mohawk Trail], reverse direction.”¹⁵

In 1873, however, the completion of the Hoosac Tunnel allowed Berkshire County to be connected economically with Boston to the east and Albany to the west. The Hoosac Tunnel project made North Adams central to economic commerce in New England. North Adams was a



Due to its important location at the western portal of the Hoosac Tunnel, North Adams was the largest city in Berkshire County in 1900

Postcard ca. 1910

¹¹ North Adams Historical Society. “History of North Adams.” Available online at <http://www.geocities.com/northadamshistory/>

¹² The Moffat Tunnel, a 6-mile tunnel through the Continental Divide in Colorado, was completed in 1928.

¹³ Ibid There exists a plan for such a road dated 1795 in the Massachusetts archive.

¹⁴ Ibid. Frederick J. Wood, writing in 1917 after the road had been turned into a state highway, expresses a similar sentiment when he states that the route “has now become one of the most popular and beautiful roads of the country.” Frederick J. Wood, “The Turnpikes of New England,” 1917. Available online at <http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/httpk2nd.html>

¹⁵ E.F. Graff. May 7, 1995. “Byways of Western Massachusetts.” New York Times, pp. A1-A2. It would take until the opening of MASS MoCA for the tide of national public opinion to turn again. On September 14, 1999 The New York Post would call North Adams an attractive community of steep hills and church steeples. Eleanor Berman. “This town has Mass. Appeal.”

railway terminal for six important railway lines.¹⁶ The importance of its new location at a major transportation hub cannot be overstated. The following, written about the town of Mechanicville, New York, could have easily been written about North Adams:

The rail connections not only created hundreds of jobs locally for craftsmen and laborers in the transportation industry. Equally, or more importantly, they made possible the expansion of other local industries – brick making, paper making, and textiles – which now had outlets to major markets in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Canada.... The community had become integrated into a vast production network, the heart of which was the railroad industry.¹⁷

North Adams grew from a town with 1,100 inhabitants in 1830 to the largest city in the Berkshires in 1900 with a population of 24,200.¹⁸

In its industrial prime North Adams was considered by many of its residents to be a jewel in Western Massachusetts. The commercial center of town was a bustling district with beautiful shops and hotels. Tony Talarico’s memories of the scene are quite vivid:

North Adams was a great vaudeville town. We had beautiful vaudeville shows at the Paramount Theater....



Richmond Hotel, North Adams, MA 1910

The
Human
Fly would
climb up
the side of
the
Richmond
Hotel

We had a person come to town called the Human Fly. He would climb up the side of the Richmond Hotel. That was a beautiful building. It had the Richmond Theater, which had three balconies. I was told by a play critic that the theater was one of the best theaters east of the Mississippi.¹⁹

¹⁶ North Adams Historical Society. Op. cit.

¹⁷ Dr. Paul Loatman, Jr., city historian of the town of Mechanicville. “We’ve been working on the Railroad.” Available online at <http://www.mechanicville.com/history/articles/Railroad%20I.htm>. Mechanicville is located 13 miles north of Troy, New York.

¹⁸ The Town Meeting form of government having become too difficult, North Adams adopted a city form of government in 1895 with an elected mayor. North Adams Historical Society and www.Berkshireplanning.org

¹⁹ Joe Manning, op. cit. p.35.

North Adams was about to change from a textile town to one of capacitors and electrical components. Despite decades of success, falling cloth prices and the lingering effects of the great Depression forced Arnold Print Works to close its Marshall Street operation in 1942, consolidating to smaller facilities in neighboring Adams, Massachusetts. Later that year, the Sprague Electric Company bought the site.

Robert C. Sprague founded Sprague Electric in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1926. He was born in New York City, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1921, and served in the Navy in the 1920s. While serving in the Navy, he invented tone control for radio. He received graduate degrees from the Naval Academy and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served as president of Sprague Electric until 1953 and as chairman and chief executive until his retirement in 1971.²⁰

While largely leaving the building exteriors as they were, Sprague made extensive modifications to the interiors to convert the former textile mill into an electronics plant. Sprague Electric would become one of many electronics firms to move into old textile mills across New England. Eastern Air Devices moved into a mill in Dover, New Hampshire that previously had been used by Pacific Mills and later by Esmond Mills. Western Electric Co., Northeastern Engineering, Inc., and Clarostat Manufacturing Co. are additional firms that had relocated to New England textile mills.²¹



Capacitors, date unknown

Sprague would employ over 4,000 of North Adams' 18,000 residents

²⁰ The New York Times, October 1, 1991. The Boston Globe, September 28, 1991. Robert C. Sprague, Obituary. Sprague died in his Williamstown home at the age of 91. He was a founding director of the Williamstown Theatre Foundation, and in 1991 received the Ephraim Williams Award from Williams College as the non-alumnus who had done the most for the college. His concern for the local community seems to extend back to at least 1953 when he was offered the job of Undersecretary of the Air Force, but turned it down because Senators insisted that top Defense Department nominees get rid of holdings in firms that did business with the Government. Sprague said he decided to retain his holdings in the family-owned firm for “fear that stock control might pass to out-of-town investors with possible ill effects on the community...” Wall Street Journal, February 11, 1953.

²¹ Wall Street Journal, April 7, 1954. “Electronics Firms Move into Old Textile Mills, Absorb Idle Workers.”

According to a 1954 article in the Wall Street Journal, the physical plant was not the only aspect of the textile mills being recycled. “Go into the electronics mills and you will find that nearly half the predominantly female help at some time worked in a textile plant.”²²

The significance of Sprague Electric in North Adams is clear. By 1966 Sprague employed 4,137 workers in a community of 18,000, existing almost as a city within a city. As one worker remembered it, “I met [my husband] at Sprague’s....I enjoyed it. I met a lot of friends at Sprague.... All my brothers and sisters worked there.”²³

Sprague Electric also gained a national importance that should not be overlooked. Between 1953 and 1975 Sprague Electric built or developed plants in at least the following areas: North Carolina (1953); Plymouth, NH (1961); Worcester, MA (1965); Galashiels, Scotland; Rneydt, Germany; Taiwan; Tours, France; Renaix, Belgium; South Carolina; Puerto Rico; Clinton, TN (1973); Concord, NH; Sanford, Maine.²⁴

Sprague physicists, chemists, electrical engineers, and skilled technicians were called upon by the U.S. government during World War II to design and manufacture crucial components of some of its most advanced high-tech weapons systems, including firing capacitors for atomic bombs.²⁵ Outfitted with state of the art equipment, Sprague was a major research and development center, conducting studies on the nature of electricity and semi-conducting materials.



New
England
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electronics
mill

Cocheco Print Works, 1842-1919, Thom Hindle Collection

²² Wall Street Journal, April 7, 1954. “Electronics Firms Move into Old Textile Mills, Absorb Idle Workers.”

²³ Interview with Rita Fortini Pedrin, Oct. 3, 1996, Steeples, Jo Manning, p. 44.

²⁴ Wall Street Journal, various dates.

²⁵ Sharon Zukin. 1995. *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, p.86. Also M.J. Andersen. 2/19/2000. “North Adams museum takes root.” *Providence Journal-Bulletin* (Rhode Island).

In 1960 Sprague received a \$1.2 million contract for solid tantalum, electrolytic capacitors for use in the inertial guidance and flight control equipment of the Air Force's Minuteman intercontinental ballistics missile.²⁶ Sprague's products were used in the launch systems for Gemini moon missions. By 1963 Sprague Electric was the nation's largest manufacturer of fixed electrical condensers and precision resistors.²⁷

One of the most striking aspects of interviews with North Adams residents is that the community as they experienced it was totally dependent on the existence of Sprague Electric (as it was before that on Arnold Print Works).

While Sprague Electric offered a steady job for many townspeople, it was not always a pleasant job ("They never paid that well, but it was steady work").²⁸ Michael Gamari, born in 1944, shares his childhood memories of his father's job at Sprague:

I understand that Sprague wasn't the warmest of companies in terms of their pay, in terms of their attitude toward people. My dad never spoke glowingly of the company like people spoke of General Electric in Pittsfield. I can't tell you how many times my dad said to me that he should have gone to GE.²⁹



Unknown

The work
was
steady, if
not always
pleasant

Yet Joanne Mancuso Saltamarini offers a competing opinion of life at Sprague:

I worked at Sprague's maybe ten years. It was great in those days. They would let you make your own hours. I used to work five to ten in the evening, and then take care of my family. I worked in the office and did typing. I loved it.³⁰

²⁶ Wall Street Journal, July 27, 1960.

²⁷ Wall Street Journal, August 12, 1963.

²⁸ Joe Manning, op cit., p. 225.

²⁹ Joe Manning, op. cit. p. 94.

³⁰ Joe Manning, op. cit. p. 118.

By 1966 Sprague Electric had moved from a strictly family owned business to one traded as public stock. 1967 and 1968 saw losses and a “major realignment of senior management.”³¹ There were losses again in 1969. In 1970 there was a 10-week strike at the North Adams plant that some locals blame for the ultimate demise of the company.³² The strike was settled in May of 1970 but by then Sprague had lost close to 50% of its U.S. capacitor market share.³³ In September the company felt the need to cut the pay of salaried employees by 7% to 12%.³⁴ In November 2,300 employees were laid off.³⁵

Sprague was not alone in its woes. At this same time William C. Hittinger, vice president and general manager of RCA Corp.’s solid-state division, stated that the semiconductor components industry “is suffering through the most trying time since its inception.”³⁶

In March of 1976 Cabot Corporation agreed to acquire Sprague for stock, making Sprague a wholly owned subsidiary of Cabot. By December of 1976 General Cable bought 93% of the common stock outstanding of Sprague Electric. Penn Central acquired Sprague in 1981 and moved corporate headquarters to Lexington, Massachusetts in 1984. In 1985 operations in the Marshall Street complex, North Adams, were closed.



IUE Campaign Button

The International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) represented striking workers at Sprague in 1970

³¹ Wall Street Journal, April 3, 1967, October 7, 1968, November 6, 1968.

³² The Boston Globe also attributes the closing of Sprague to the 1970s strike. “A strike at major employer Sprague Electric in the early 1970s eventually led to the plant closing and decades of economic malaise.” “North Adams school prepare for a fight.” The Boston Globe, 9/22/2003.

³³ While only 15% of total production was affected by the strike, competitors were able to persuade Sprague’s customers to buy elsewhere. Revitalizing U.S. Electronics. John Sprague. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann. 1993. pp. 112-113.

³⁴ Wall Street Journal, May 13, 1970; September 2, 1970.

³⁵ Wall Street Journal, November 10, 1970.

³⁶ Wall Street Journal, November 20, 1970.

In 1968, at the same time that Sprague Electric began to see regular losses, the government began its urban renewal program in North Adams. Older North Adams residents point to urban renewal as the beginning of the decline of North Adams. Perhaps this is due to the very visual nature of the removal of buildings. The construction work destroyed most of the downtown commercial and residential buildings and failed to provide the promised renewal. Whatever the mechanism, urban renewal broke the spirit of North Adams. Older residents see urban renewal as the literal destruction of their community. Venice Partenope states:

North Adams didn't change until they started tearing it down. It was the government's idea to tear it down. They paid for the urban renewal. People were upset. Most of the merchants went out of business. Some of the buildings should have stayed there, they were so beautiful. We used to go down there and watch them tear it down. They gave us the idea that it was going to be built up again, and that it was going to be wonderful.³⁷

Lou Siciliano's comments mirror these other memories:

It was sickening to watch them tear down the buildings when they had the urban renewal. The whole south side of Main Street went kaput. There was three hotels: the Richmond, the Wellington, and the Sterling. There was very little blasting. It was all wrecking ball. It went on day after day, summer and winter. It took a couple of years, then everything was gone. People just stood out there and watched.... You'd feel it inside. It was tearing something apart.³⁸



A generation would grow up with the wrecking ball as a central image of their town

North Adams Transcript c. 1971-1973

³⁷ Joe Manning, op cit., p. 18.

³⁸ Joe Manning, op cit., p.56.

Tony Talarico remembers the North Adams National Bank:

“They had one of the most beautiful lobbies at the First National Bank. They tore that down, too. They used marble in that hotel, and I have a little piece of it at home.”³⁹

The economic impacts of this construction were disastrous. Instead of bringing urban revitalization, the majority of the businesses left town never to return. Benjamin Apkin, a local lawyer, points directly to the urban renewal as the beginning of the economic unraveling of North Adams:

The economic depression here was starting then. Most of the businesses didn't start up again, and most of the merchants just left town. They didn't fight the urban renewal. It was a foregone conclusion. Many of these merchants probably felt that the day of reckoning was about to come...

Most of the owners were living in town. They were able to compete with some of the bigger firms like Sears Roebuck and Penny's, because their overhead was low. It wasn't mortgaged, so all they had to do was maintain the building. They had no way to compete once their store was taken away. In order for them to continue the business, they would have had to lease a brand new building at a much higher cost. So most of the owners left town.⁴⁰



The marbled luxury of the National Bank represented better days in North Adams

Undated postcard

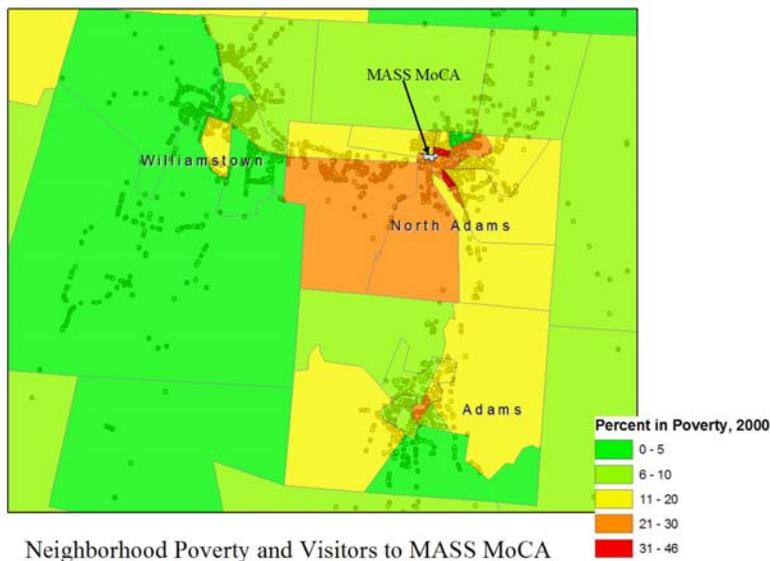
³⁹ Joe Manning, op cit., p. 35.

⁴⁰ Joe Manning, op. cit. p. 112

Sprague, GE, and the remnants of the textile industry all abandoned the workers of North Adams at once. Around the same time that Sprague closed its operations on Marshall Street, General Electric in nearby Pittsfield also closed its large-power transformer plant. The loss of these two major employers took away 3,600 manufacturing jobs. At about the same time, 2,000 more jobs were lost as the last remnants of the textile industry disappeared.

The economic decline of North Adams had been occurring for some time however. North Adams had lost population in every decade since its peak in 1900.⁴¹ In 1900 North Adams was the largest town in the Berkshires with a population of 24,200. By 2000 it was the smallest city in Massachusetts with a population of 14,681. In both 1990 and 2000 median household income in North Adams was \$10,000 per year lower than that of Berkshire County as a whole.

Figure 1 shows the percent of households with income below the poverty line in 2000 for each neighborhood block-group in the region covering North Adams and the nearby communities of Williamstown and Adams.⁴² North Adams can be seen to be the poorest community in the region. It is a community with significant poverty, as well as other social problems associated with post-industrial decline. For example, North Adams schools have tended to perform worse than those in many other communities, achieving results in statewide tests of educational attainment that are regularly below the state average.



North Adams is the poorest community in the area

Figure 1

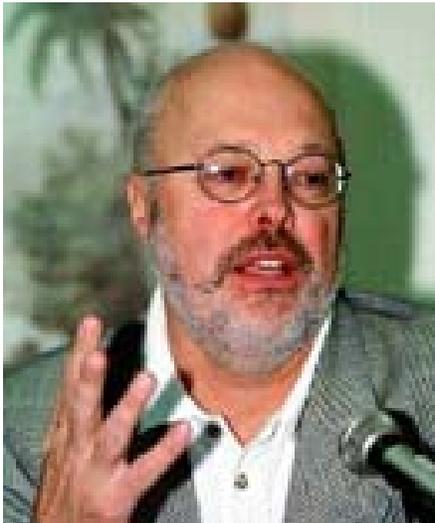
⁴¹ Census population numbers for North Adams are as follows: 1900 24,200; 1950 21,567; 1960 19,905; 1970 19,195; 1980 18,063; 1990 16,798; 2000 14,677, representing a steady and constant decline in population throughout the 20th Century.

⁴² In addition, the small circles in Figure 1 represent the residential addresses of local visitors to MASS MoCA from 1999 to 2002. It is interesting to note that MASS MoCA draws visitors from most local neighborhoods, even those with high rates of poverty.

MASS MoCA was conceived with two goals in mind: to bring economic expansion to North Adams and the best of contemporary art to the public.⁴³ The plan for MASS MoCA originated with Thomas Krens, the director of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) from 1981 to 1988.⁴⁴ He had just left an art fair in Cologne where some young dealers rented an abandoned factory next to the official exhibition to display enormous works of contemporary art.⁴⁵ Krens realized that while WCMA did not have the capacity to show large works of art (even with the new addition in progress), there were millions of square feet of factory space in North Adams.

Krens met with the Mayor of North Adams, John Barrett III about a mill in town. Mayor Barrett was originally skeptical of the idea of using an empty mill for a museum, but once convinced it could work, he was on board whole-heartedly. His interest was in the healthy future of the town of North Adams. “I could see from Day Three that MASS MoCA could transform the community,” he said.⁴⁶

With significantly lower income and high poverty rates, and having suffered significant population loss and general economic decline, North Adams was a demanding context for an arts institution to succeed as a contributor to the city’s well-being. Yet within a year after the departure of Sprague, the formation of such a plan was underway.



Thomas Krens, undated

Thomas Krens wanted space to expand Williams College’s collection of contemporary art

⁴³ Kris Worrell. “MASS MoCA milestone.” May 21, 2000. The Times Union (Albany, NY). Deborah Weisgall. March 15, 1989. “The Guggenheim in Massachusetts?” The New York Times. Christine Temin. “Massive MoCA; Scale and adventurous curating are among the new museum’s attractions.” May 28, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁴⁴ Krens dates the birth of his idea to November 14, 1986 at 7:30 p.m. Carol Vogel. 5/27/1999. “A new arts center opens against all odds.” The New York Times.

⁴⁵ Patti Hartigan. 8/11/1996. “North Adams’ mill of dreams; If they build a museum, will art lovers come?” The Boston Globe.

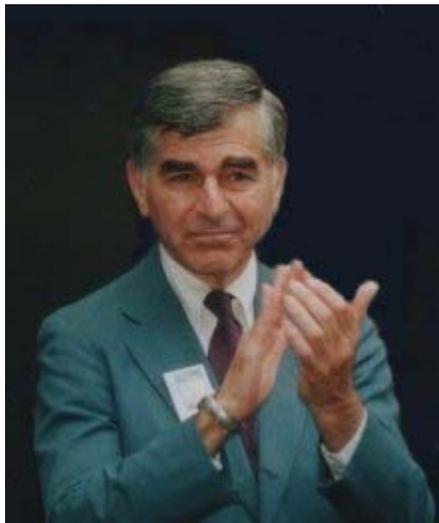
⁴⁶ Carol Vogel. “A new arts center opens against all odds.” May 27, 1999. The New York Times.

At this time in the mid-1980s, the unemployment rate in North Adams ran from 25 to 30 percent, the highest in Massachusetts. North Adams had been lambasted as the city with the most teenage pregnancies per capita in the nation and the highest reported rates of child sexual abuse and physical abuse of children in the state. Its high school dropout rates were more than five times the state average.⁴⁷

The local newspaper kept a front-page box score on plant closings. A developer suggested that the best use for North Adams would be to flood it to make lakefront property for houses in neighboring Williamstown.⁴⁸

Then Sprague Electric abandoned its gigantic mill complex. By May of 1987 Krens and Mayor Barrett had put together the beginnings of a tentative plan with Governor Michael Dukakis, the Penn Central Corporation (which held the facility at that time), and Count Giuseppe Panza, an Italian industrialist with an important collection of American contemporary art.⁴⁹ The museum also owes much to Williams College, five miles to the west in Williamstown, which gave crucial initial backing to the museum.⁵⁰

In March 1988 the state legislature, with the backing of Governor Dukakis, approved a bond issue allocating \$35 million to MASS MoCA.⁵¹ Joseph Thompson, an exhibit coordinator and designer for the WCMA, joined the project and would become the museum's first (and current) director.



Michael Dukakis, undated

Governor
Michael
Dukakis
was an
enthusiastic
supporter of
MASS
MoCA

⁴⁷ “Not a pretty picture; City hopes museum proposal can spark dismal economy.” The Boston Globe. March 2, 1992.

⁴⁸ Presumably this was not a serious suggestion but rather a reflection of the low opinion of North Adams at the time. John Kifner. “Museum brings town back to life.” May 30, 2000. The New York Times.

⁴⁹ “Big art museum planned for rural Massachusetts.” The New York Times. May 3, 1987.

⁵⁰ John Kifner. “Museum brings town back to life.” May 30, 2000. The New York Times.

⁵¹ Douglas C. McGill. March 15, 1988. “Art museum bond issue approved in Massachusetts.” The New York Times.

Just as the project was getting off the ground, Thomas Krens was named director of the Guggenheim museum in New York City.⁵²

When Krens became director of the Guggenheim in 1988, it seemed that MASS MoCA might become one of a series of Guggenheim branches he planned for around the world. The potential connection with the Guggenheim complicated plans immensely. On the one hand, the Massachusetts legislature required a sponsor for the new museum,⁵³ and Krens had originally agreed to have the Guggenheim manage MASS MoCA. The Guggenheim could also lend a significant number of works to MASS MoCA for exhibition.⁵⁴

Two things happened, however, that turned the Guggenheim connection into a liability. One is that Krens began to distance himself from the project, and the Guggenheim became a supporter in name only.⁵⁵ The other is that both the New York and Boston presses were highly critical of the idea of a Guggenheim ‘branch’ in North Adams – the New York press because it would diminish the cultural offerings of New York⁵⁶, and the Boston press because they interpreted it as using Massachusetts tax dollars to ‘warehouse’ largely unwanted art of the Guggenheim.⁵⁷



The Guggenheim Museum, NYC, undated

The possible connection with the Guggenheim had advantages and disadvantages

⁵² “The Guggenheim’s man.” January 17, 1988. The New York Times.

⁵³ John Kifner. “Museum brings town back to life.” May 30, 2000. The New York Times.

⁵⁴ Deborah Weisgall. “The Guggenheim in Massachusetts?” March 5, 1989. The New York Times. Michael Kimmelman. “What on earth is the Guggenheim up to?” October 14, 1990. The New York Times. Grace Glueck. “Is a dream museum dead or progressing? Officials disagree.” December 19, 1990. The New York Times.

⁵⁵ Patti Hartigan. “North Adams’ mill of dreams; If the build a museum, will art lovers come?” August 11, 1996. The Boston Globe. Christine Temin. “Hard hats and Talking Heads: A MASS MoCA progress report.” June 15, 1997. The Boston Globe.

⁵⁶ Michael Kimmelman. “What on earth is the Guggenheim up to?” October 14, 1990.

⁵⁷ Grace Glueck. “Thinking big at the Guggenheim.” May 29, 1988. The New York Times. Christine Temin. “Mega-museum for the Berkshires inches closer to reality.” September 24, 1989. The Boston Globe. Christine Temin.

“Funding MASS MoCA: Is Guggenheim involved?” October 27, 1990. The Boston Globe. Grace Glueck.

“Massachusetts says new art museum must help pay costs.” September 4, 1991. The New York Times.

As a result, the project started off with ardent backing, but enthusiasm waned. After the 1987 stock market crash and during the 1990-1992 recession, the project's political backing collapsed along with the Massachusetts economy.⁵⁸ Governor Weld, who replaced Dukakis, froze funds for the project in 1991.⁵⁹ It appeared as if the project would collapse. "Weld didn't quite pull the plug," Thompson recalled later, "but he began issuing challenges, like 'Show us that the project has private support. Show us a program.'"⁶⁰

By the early '90s, Thompson found himself the director of a museum project that did not have land, buildings, art or money.⁶¹ At one point even Mayor Barrett said "I'm all MOCA'd out."⁶²

The town loved the idea, the press hated it. The response of residents of North Adams was positive. "I like the idea that the building will be used instead of just sitting around," was the comment of one resident who worked in a mill in town. "I think it's fantastic," said a carpenter.⁶³



Joseph Thompson, MASS MoCA director, 2003

Joseph
Thompson
stuck with
MASS MoCA
even when it
had no land,
buildings, art,
or money

Venice Partenope's vision of the future of North Adams, stated in 1996 when MASS MoCA was still in the planning stages, captures the hopeful attitude of residents who had lived through the Sprague years and the depressed years that followed:

⁵⁸ Bill Van Sicle. "Modern art center revived." April 25, 1995. Providence Journal-Bulletin (Rhode Island).

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Kolbert. "Delaying a dream for an art museum." August 6, 1991. The New York Times. Jennifer Dunning. "A sleeping arts giant reawakens." August 29, 1995. The New York Times.

⁶⁰ Christina Tree. "MASS MoCA – it grows on you." June 20, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁶¹ M.J. Andersen. "North Adams museum takes root." February 19, 2000. Providence Journal-Bulletin (Rhode Island). Around this time Ann Marie Rousseau, a photographic artist, discovered the abandoned Sprague building and spent two years photographing its abandoned and water damaged interior, often placing a single nude figure in the shot. See www.amrousseau.com/lalatrtext.html

⁶² John Kifner. "Museum brings town back to life." May 30, 2000. The New York Times.

⁶³ "Big art museum planned for rural Massachusetts." New York Times. May 3, 1987. See also "World's largest contemporary art museum may find an unlikely home." Christian Science Monitor. February 11, 1988.

Let me tell you something about MASS MoCA. The entire area will change.... It will benefit North Adams, Adams, Pittsfield, Troy, and Albany. MASS MoCA is going to benefit the entire area.⁶⁴

The response of the press, particularly in New York and Boston, was scathing.⁶⁵ The New York Times wrote that the museum's main use would be as a storage facility.⁶⁶ It argued that the Guggenheim was Krens' power base, and the museum in North Adams his means to expand that base.⁶⁷

The Boston Globe was even harsher. It called the project preposterous, and completely devoid of artistic and economic logic.⁶⁸ It argued that MASS MoCA would become Guggenheim North, but with the taxpayers of Massachusetts paying for it.⁶⁹

In October of 1990 The Boston Globe wrote that MASS MoCA "is like one of those hard-shelled ants that occasionally creep into your house during the summer: You can crush it under your shoe, you can spray it with Raid, you can drown it in the toilet – but it just won't die."⁷⁰



Carpenter ants

The Boston
Globe
compared
the MASS
MoCA plan to
ants you just
can't kill

⁶⁴ Interview with Venice C. Partenope. Ibid. p. 19.

⁶⁵ Sharon Zukin, a New York City sociologist, wrote two papers in the mid-1990s that seem unfoundedly negative about the plan for MASS MoCA. Her presentation is heavily influenced by the interpretation that MASS MoCA would be a branch of the Guggenheim. It also overlooks the fact that Krens originally conceptualized MASS MoCA as part of a developing relationship between Williams College and North Adams. Sharon Zukin. 1995. *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 79-107. Sharon Zukin. 1997. "Cultural strategies of economic development and the hegemony of vision," pp. 223-243 in *The Urbanization of Injustice*, edited by Andy Merrifield and Erik Swyngedouw. New York University Press.

⁶⁶ "Thinking big at the Guggenheim." *The New York Times*. May 29, 1988.

⁶⁷ "A megamuseum in a mill town; The Guggenheim in Massachusetts?" *The New York Times*. March 5, 1989.

⁶⁸ Alex beam. "Endive economics." October 5, 1988. *The Boston Globe*. John Kifner. "Museum brings town back to life." May 30, 2000. *The New York Times*.

⁶⁹ "Mega-museum for the Berkshires inches closer to reality." *The Boston Globe*. September 24, 1989.

⁷⁰ "Arrgggh! It's alive!" *The Boston Globe*, October 22, 1990.

MASS MoCA would indeed have died were it not for the tenacity of Mayor Barrett and MASS MoCA's Director, Joseph Thompson, who worked without salary for extended periods of time, inspired board members and other community members to remain committed, and was flexible enough to adapt the vision for MASS MoCA when its initial concept lost momentum.

MASS MoCA was refashioned as an interdisciplinary arts center joining a Berkshire County collaboration of arts organizations.⁷¹

The MASS MoCA plan came back to life in 1993, when Sam Miller, then director of Jacob's Pillow, announced that several organizations would collaborate with MASS MoCA to make it an interdisciplinary center.⁷² His proposal to add performance and technology to the mix grabbed the attention of the arts community.⁷³ Joe Thompson refashioned the project to include the performing arts, and laid plans to offer some of the complex's vast space to businesses.⁷⁴

Under the new plan, MASS MoCA would become a place where dance, music, theater, history, education and technology as well as the visual arts would intersect, with the public witnessing not only the end product, but the process.⁷⁵



Collaborating
with Jacob's
Pillow and
other
Berkshire
County arts
organizations
was a
successful
plan

Collage, www.Jacobspillow.org

That new vision, along with continued fundraising success and a growing admiration by Governor Weld and his administration for the determination and creativity of MASS MoCA's backers, led to the Governor's decision to finally approve the disbursement of state construction

⁷¹ William Grimes. "Massachusetts museum idea adjusted." December 3, 1993. The New York Times.

⁷² Gina Gold. "MASS MoCA takes groundbreaking step forward." October 1, 1995. The Times Union (Albany, NY). Jennifer Dunning. "A sleeping arts giant reawakens." August 29, 1995. The New York Times.

⁷³ Gina Gold. "MASS MoCA takes groundbreaking step forward." October 1, 1995. The Times Union (Albany, NY).

⁷⁴ M.J. Andersen. "North Adams museum takes root." February 19, 2000. Providence Journal-Bulletin (Rhode Island).

⁷⁵ Christine Temin. "MASS MoCA revamped for all arts." December 3, 1993. The Boston Globe.

funds. Construction began in 1995 and MASS MoCA opened to the public on May 30, 1999,⁷⁶ the largest center for contemporary arts in the United States.⁷⁷ As of 2006, combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 construction expenditures have amounted to some \$35 million in state funds, \$5.8 million in federal funds, and over \$15 million in private funds. Since opening, the museum has operated on a budget of approximately \$5 million per year, 98% of which comes from private philanthropy and earned revenues.⁷⁸

Jacob's Pillow isn't MoCA's only partner. It now has close ties with other area arts institutions, particularly with the Clark Art Institute and the Williams College Museum of Art, both in neighboring Williamstown. As *The Boston Globe* wrote, "the three museums together create a world-quality art axis."⁷⁹

"MASS MoCA is a case study for urbanologists and politicians seeking to revive failing cities."⁸⁰ MASS MoCA opened to positive national (and international) reviews.⁸¹ Even the skeptics were won over by what the American Institute of Architects' Honor Award referred to as "a compelling, haunting overlap of adaptive reuse and neighborhood vitalization."⁸²



Bridge of Sighs, Venice

The Boston
Globe
compared
parts of MASS
MoCA's
building with
the Bridge of
Sighs

⁷⁶ Timothy Cahill. "Massive undertaking; Huge new contemporary museum MASS MoCA opens today in a former factory complex in North Adams." May 30, 1999. *The Times Union* (Albany, NY).

⁷⁷ Kris Worrell. "MASS MoCA milestone: The large arts center in North Adams is thriving as its first birthday approaches." May 21, 2000. *The Times Union* (Albany, NY).

⁷⁸ Mike Reardon. "Art meets industry." *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA).

⁷⁹ Christine Temin. "Massive MoCA; Scale and adventurous curating are among the new museum's attractions." May 28, 1999. *The Boston Globe*. Maureen Dezell. "MASS MoCA is chasing away a small town's blues." August 20, 2000. *The Boston Globe*.

⁸⁰ Brian C. Mooney. "A 'joke' becomes a showpiece." August 18, 1999. *The Boston Globe*.

⁸¹ Mike Reardon. "Art meets industry." April 15, 2000. *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA).

⁸² Kris Worrell. "MASS MoCA milestone." May 21, 2000. *The Times Union* (Albany, NY).

[N]o matter how striking the art, the star of the show is the old factory itself....⁸³

The conversion of the old Sprague Electric Co. complex (previously a textile mill) is brilliant.⁸⁴

[T]he enclosed elevated walkways connecting MASS MoCA buildings suggest Venice's Bridge of Sighs.⁸⁵

[It] looks like a museum that the Shakers might have built [A] home so plainly beautiful it barely needs art.⁸⁶

MASS MoCA's cultural contribution, both to Berkshire County and to the cultural world, was also noted.

The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art is a must-see.⁸⁷

The state's extraordinary investment ... is the wonder of Western Massachusetts.⁸⁸

[MASS MoCA] adds in surprising ways to the already rich mix of culture and natural beauty in a corner of this state....⁸⁹



The New York Times called North Adams a nascent Soho in the Berkshires

Soho

⁸³ David Hugh Smith. "Culture factory." August 10, 1999. Christian Science Monitor (Boston).

⁸⁴ Brian C. Mooney. "A 'joke' becomes a showpiece." August 18, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁸⁵ Christine Temin. "Massive MoCA; Scale and adventurous curating are among the new museum's attractions." May 28, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁸⁶ Roberta Smith. "Art center has room for the big and the new." June 2, 1999. The New York Times.

⁸⁷ Christina Tree. "MASS MoCA – it grows on you." June 20, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁸⁸ Brian C. Mooney. "A 'joke' becomes a showpiece." August 18, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁸⁹ Christina Tree. "MASS MoCA – it grows on you." June 20, 1999. The Boston Globe.

MASS MoCA augments the region's tradition-bound cultural fare in a hipper, kid-friendly, year-round venue.⁹⁰

North Adams is in renaissance, a nascent Soho in the Berkshires.⁹¹

'Triumph' seems not too strong a word to describe what [Thompson has] achieved here.⁹²

"Cool" is a term that could be applied to MASS MoCA as a whole.⁹³

I have seen the future, and it's MASS MoCA.⁹⁴

Perhaps the most telling comment on MASS MoCA's reception in the art world is Thomas Krens' statement almost a year after MoCA's opening: "This is part of the Guggenheim," he stated to a writer from *The New Yorker*, "but I'm not branding it as a Guggenheim museum."⁹⁵

This is still North Adams. Several journalists noted that even with the existence of MASS MoCA, bringing tourist dollars to North Adams remained a challenge. *The Boston Globe* noted, "this is still North Adams, off the beaten tourist track."⁹⁶ One journalist prosaically noted



Mayor John Barrett III was behind the project "from Day Three"

Tom Herde, *Boston Globe* 2004

⁹⁰ Brian C. Mooney. "A 'joke' becomes a showpiece." August 18, 1999. *The Boston Globe*.

⁹¹ John Kifner. "Museum brings town back to life." May 30, 2000. *The New York Times*.

⁹² Christine Temin. "Massive MoCA; Scale and adventurous curating are among the new museum's attractions." May 28, 1999. *The Boston Globe*.

⁹³ Mike Reardon. "Art meets industry." April 15, 2000. *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA).

⁹⁴ *The Wall Street Journal*. Quoted in "MASS MoCA milestone." Kris Worrell. May 21, 2000. *The Times Union* (Albany, NY).

⁹⁵ Martin Filler. "The museum game." April 17, 2000. *The New Yorker*.

⁹⁶ "Berkshire renaissance." July 18, 1999. *The Boston Globe*.

that there are “more than a few people who still think of northern Berkshire County as post-industrial road kill.”⁹⁷ Mayor Barrett had been confident that if they built it, visitors would come. He acknowledges, however, that now “the challenge is to entice them to stay a while and spend money.”⁹⁸

Mayor Barrett has also noted, however, that “we’re still the same city with the same people.”⁹⁹ The town has not suffered the gentrification and displacement so often seen in cases of urban revitalization. Housing values have increased, but remain affordable. Artists have been attracted to town through two major mill conversion projects providing artist live/work space. The town has welcomed an exciting assortment of young knowledge-based businesses, most of them concentrated on the museum campus. The increasing linkages with neighboring towns have lessened the hard socio-economic divide that once contributed to the sense of isolation and dysfunction pervading North Adams in its pre-MASS MoCA period.

MASS MoCA is revitalizing North Adams. The purpose of this paper has been to put MASS MoCA’s role in revitalizing North Adams into cultural and historical context. North Adams is a town with a rich and interesting past. At the turn of the 20th Century, it was the most significant town in Berkshire County. Signs of this past are still visible today in its steepled churches and Victorian housing stock.



Stephen Sheppard 2004

MASS
MoCA has
made North
Adams a
more
desirable
place to live

We address the economic and social impacts of MASS MoCA on North Adams in a series of additional papers. We will note here, however, two direct impacts of MASS MoCA on its community.¹⁰⁰ First, to quote Bruce Seaman, an economist working on the arts:

⁹⁷ Peter J. Howe. “Silicon village grows; Internest firms inject hope for brighter days in North Adams area.” December 26, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁹⁸ Brian C. Mooney. “A ‘joke’ becomes a showpiece.” August 18, 1999. The Boston Globe.

⁹⁹ Brian C. Mooney. “A ‘joke’ becomes a showpiece.” August 18, 1999. The Boston Globe.

¹⁰⁰ Today MASS MoCA enjoys 120,000 visitors per year. Currently MASS MoCA receives approximately 100,000 visitors per year to its galleries and an additional 20,000 visitors per year to performing arts and film programs. It

Improvements in a city's "social infrastructure" such as parks, playgrounds, pleasant walking areas, recreational facilities, educational opportunities, and cultural variety are kinds of investments that would enhance the urban environment in a generally beneficial way. To the extent that these things lift human spirits and generate local pride, they may have more directly measurable benefits such as higher productivity and reduced crime and social tension....

[T]he comfort of knowing that when out-of-town guests arrive, there are places of interest to take them [can be a source of local pride].¹⁰¹

We have seen the improvement in town pride that results from increased social infrastructure. As the arts complex has burgeoned, the town has been transformed. It suddenly has a completely different view of itself. Community pride has been restored.¹⁰² "We've finally shed the image that we're a dirty old mill town," says Barrett.¹⁰³

"The thing I've really noticed on the streets of North Adams has been a change in the mindset from somewhat defeatist to fairly optimistic that we may really be looking at the beginnings of a new economy," said Bob Barton, executive director of the Northern Berkshire United Way.¹⁰⁴

North Adams residents have lived the experience that Joe Manning notes in his introduction to *Steeple*: "I have experienced the excitement of watching a nearly forgotten factory town struggle toward rebirth, spurred on by the creative arts."¹⁰⁵



www.massmoca.org

**MASS MoCA
is a catalyst for
community
improvement**

The second effect that MASS MoCA has had on its community is that it is slowly transforming residents, providing them with the human and social capital needed to participate in the Berkshire tourism and knowledge economy.

has over 2,000 members. It operates on a budget of \$4.5 million, with a staff of 52 employees and 20 interns and other seasonal staff.

¹⁰¹ Bruce A. Seaman. 1997. "Arts impact studies: A fashionable excess," pp. 43-75 in *Economic Impact of the Arts: A Sourcebook*. Washington, D.C.: National Conference of State Legislatures.

¹⁰² Brian C. Mooney. "A 'joke' becomes a showpiece." August 18, 1999. *The Boston Globe*.

¹⁰³ David Hugh Smith. "Culture factory." August 10, 1999. *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston).

¹⁰⁴ "Web gives old towns new life." December 27, 1999. *Providence Journal-Bulletin* (Rhode Island).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 7.

Security guard James Daunais, who worked at Guido's Fresh Market in Great Barrington before becoming a security guard, said he has learned about the art by talking with the visitors. "I see people come dressed no better than the locals, but they know the artists personally," Daunais said.¹⁰⁶

Kathy Smigel, another museum security guard and North Adams native understands the difficulty for local residents who have not been exposed to contemporary art. "I never knew about any of this because I wasn't really into art," she said. "But now I'm educating myself."¹⁰⁷

As new economic and educational opportunities continue to emerge in North Adams; as long-time residents continue to build relationships with new residents and museum visitors; and as local educators and arts administrators increasingly emphasize the role of culture and technology in preparing the children of North Adams for a changing economy, MASS MoCA is well positioned to remain more than a catalyst for interdisciplinary art forms. It has shown that it can be a catalyst for ongoing community improvement.

¹⁰⁶ Tatsha Robertson. "High art gives lift." July 28, 1999. The Boston Globe.

¹⁰⁷ Tatsha Robertson. "High art gives lift." July 28, 1999. The Boston Globe.