The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/2a30XkN

SundayReview | OPINION

How the Rich Are Hurting the Museums They Fund

By BEN DAVIS JULY 22, 2016

THE recent announcement of a wrenching round of layoffs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has sent a shiver through the museum world. Yet as recently as March, the Met seemed to be on a roll, when it opened a flashy contemporary art annex, the Met Breuer.

Indeed, if you've thought at all about the fate of art museums in the 21st century, it is probably as a rare example of good news in difficult times. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has just opened a $305 million addition, creating what is described as the largest modern and contemporary art museum in the country. Last year, two high-profile museums opened in New York (the new $422 million Whitney building downtown) and in Los Angeles (the $140 million Broad).

The turmoil at the Met should be our cue to ask if all this "good news" is really the story of cultural triumph that it is made out to be. According to the Association of Art Museum Directors, for every $8 visitors spend at museums in North America, museums spend $55. So running a museum isn't a great business, despite the crowds.

According to The Art Newspaper, close to $5 billion from 2007 to 2014 was spent in the United States on new expansions, more than the other 37 countries the newspaper examined put together. The United States is also, the publication notes, unique in the degree to which it funds culture through private philanthropy, rather than public money.

For museum executives, the dirty secret of expansions has been that they are often motivated by the need to have some exciting new thing to rally board members and interest potential patrons. These institutions depend heavily on rich people to fund them. Those rich people like to pay for flashy new buildings; no one wants to donate to boring old museum upkeep.

New institutions like the Broad, financed by the billionaire Eli and his wife, Edythe Broad, and other "ego-seums" illustrate that the people with the money are increasingly interested in founding their own institutions. Consequently, traditional museums have to be ever more aggressive with new projects just to win their imaginations, and their dollars.

Consider the Met. What's really behind the Breuer expansion beyond carrying the Met's classical strengths into contemporary art? About 99 percent of all collectors "are collectors of contemporary art," the former Met director Philippe de Montebello told The New Yorker. "The Met is not, as an act of volition, going to cut itself off from the supporters of the future."

The new initiative was said to add $17 million a year to the big museum's budget. The current job cuts and restructuring are motivated by the threat of a $10 million shortfall. It is evidently still easier to raise money for fancy new things than to maintain what is already here.

So, have museums been growing? Yes. But on a sustainable basis? No.

A 2012 report from the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago looked at more than 700 cultural building projects undertaken from 1994 to 2008. It concluded, "There was significant overinvestment in bricks and mortar during the building boom — especially when coupled with the number of organizations we studied that experienced financial difficulties after completing a building project."

Institutions that already had to beg for funding were drawn into building more expensive facilities, but had no better way to fill the funding gap when a crisis hit.

At the same time, the spectacular growth of the most visible institutions may distract from how art institutions are faring as a whole. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, between 2002 and 2012, average adult attendance at art museums and galleries declined, by as much as 30 percent.

Large, cosmopolitan institutions have resources to compete for attention in a way that the bulk of smaller institutions, more dependent on local communities and cultures, simply can't.

As Andy Horowitz argued in a recent essay for The Atlantic, leveling the playing field between big and small organizations was one of the historic, modest achievements of the N.E.A. Yet while the 1 percent have accumulated staggering wealth, even modest government outlays for culture have been cut. Adjusted for inflation, public arts funding is 15 percent lower today than it was 20 years ago.

"When grant funding is slashed, the organizations that suffer most are the smaller groups, which have lower levels of visibility among other donors," notes a recent report, "Diversity in the Arts," by the DeVos Institute of Arts Management. "This means that arts organizations of color — along with rural, avant-garde and service organizations — suffer disproportionately."

So there's a case for a significant increase in public art funding that's more than just a sentimental call for a cause favored by the well-to-do. In fact, it's based on correcting for the biases of the rich.

That makes it all the more important to see that, whatever its glories, the great American museum boom mirrors all the irrational extremes of the age of inequality.

Correction: July 25, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the size of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art after its expansion. It is now the largest modern and contemporary art museum in the country, not the largest art museum.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 24, 2016, on page SR9 of the New York edition with the