

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS



LINDA CHOMIN

Author takes a critical look at DIA

When Jeffrey Abt moved to Detroit in 1989, he found that people in the immediate community and museum profession didn't have an understanding of the Detroit Institute of Arts and why Gov. John Engler's budget cuts in the early 1990s had such a big impact on the operating budget of the museum.

So, he decided to write a book. *A Museum on the Verge: A Socioeconomic History of the Detroit Institute of Arts 1882 to 2000* takes readers from the very beginning when the Detroit Museum of Art was a privately owned entity to the launch of a \$91 million building project scheduled for completion in December 2005. One of America's largest and oldest municipal art museums, the DIA nearly closed after funding cuts in the 1970s and 1990s. Abt wanted to know why such a valuable resource had a history of economic troubles.

"I had two audiences in mind — people who know something about the arts and museum and want to know more, and for scholars and graduate students in museum studies, museum professionals for whom I included footnotes, tables and graphs," said Abt, an associate professor of art at Wayne State University. "I wanted it to be comprehensive and serve as a case study for how a museum history would be done."

Abt admits *A Museum on the Verge* is a critical look at the DIA and its complex relations with private interests and government since its founding in the 1880s. In the decade that followed, the museum established a pattern of depending on government funding and thus remained vulnerable to budget cuts. By 1919, the museum became a city of Detroit agency and remains so today.

"Museum histories tend to be celebratory," said Abt. "They usually can't be circumspect because they're self-published. They're usually done on a birthday, so an absence of objectivity compromises the book."

Early on, Abt realized he would need help in undertaking the extensive project which would result in his book. He obtained a Wayne State University research grant to hire a graduate student who began working in the archives at the DIA and Burton Historical Collection. Sean Dey and Abt met once a week with the author asking questions, the graduate student coming back with answers.

"It came down to searching, evaluating, reconsidering, and discussing," said Abt. "Over time we began to paint a picture."

Written during the summer of 1999 and a winter sabbatical that followed, the book takes an in-depth look at the museum's financial struggles.

"I was struck by how often the museum was plunged into crisis from one period to another," said Abt. "The biggest revelations were the development in the 1920s before the Depression. The city was prosperous and a number of masterpieces in the collection were purchased by the city. From 1975 to 1985 there was tremendous growth and prosperity for the city and the museum as well."

"Now there's a new growing structure since the city of Detroit subcontracted the operations to the Founders Society. It's an important step to make the museum run more efficiently."

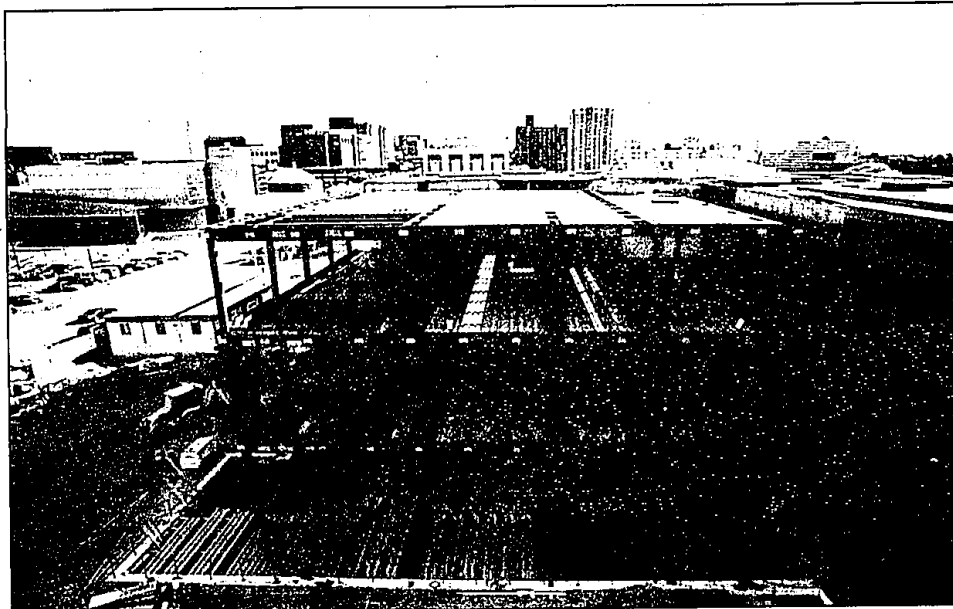
Abt was more optimistic about the financial future of the museum before the recession and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on America.

"All cultural institutions that depend on public or private funding need to be concerned. As far as the DIA it depends on raising \$351 million for the Capital Campaign begun in 1999. Individuals can support the museum by contributing generously to the Capital Campaign and by waiting for the regional and cultural tax to come up again on the ballot and to support it. It would mean funding for not only major institutions but community based programs as well."

"The DIA is still relying on 15 percent of operating funds from the state and the state's cutting its budget but

Please see CHOMIN, B5

Celebrating A NEW ERA!



Going up: A 35,000 square foot addition to the Detroit Institute of Arts' is scheduled for completion in March.

Decade makes a difference at DIA

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER
lchomin@oe.homecomm.net

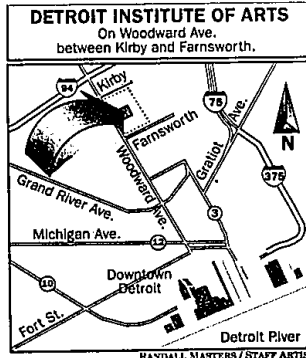
A decade after some of the darkest days in Detroit Institute of Arts history, Maurice Parrish reveals all the idea of celebrating the dawn of a new era at the museum.

Parrish joined the DIA staff in 1989 and vividly remembers when the lights literally went out in half of the galleries after Gov. John Engler cut the state's budget two years later. Limited viewing hours accompanied a 40 percent reduction in staffing. Special exhibitions programs were practically eliminated, blockbuster exhibitions such as Van Gogh's *Face to Face* in 2000 out of the question.

At the dawn of 2002, a \$91 million building project, backed by a \$331 million capital campaign (begun in 1999), represent the changing environment at the DIA. The museum broke ground on a 35,000 square foot expansion of the South Wing on April 30, a month after completion of renovations on the Conservation Lab, the first phase of the Master Plan Project. The DIA's last major structural changes took place in the late 1960s when the North and South Wings were added to the original Paul Cret building.

The South Wing expansion will create more gallery space by 2005 but the museum's not waiting until then to realize its dream of attracting a larger portion of the public. As of October, it extended hours from 27 to 37 a week and welcomes visitors to experience the collection as well as Friday night programming. Listen to jazz music, draw in the galleries or tour the museum with a docent. Volunteers, including docents, helped turn the museum around in the early 1990s, serving as the eyes and ears in the galleries as they greeted visitors.

"To see it now compared to then it's energizing when you consider all of the hard work that's been done by staff and members of the board and Founders Society to get us to this time," said Parrish, DIA executive vice president.



Detroit Institute of Arts

Where: 5200 Woodward Avenue, Detroit
When: Expanded hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday, until 9 p.m. Friday, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday
Admission: \$4, \$1 children, free for Founders Society members. Call (313) 833-7900 or visit the Web site at www.dia.org

"They're doing roofing work this week on the 35,000 square foot South Wing addition. It will be fully enclosed very soon. The space will be initially used to store collections while work on other parts of the building proceeds. Major work in the Cret building includes the replacement of all win-

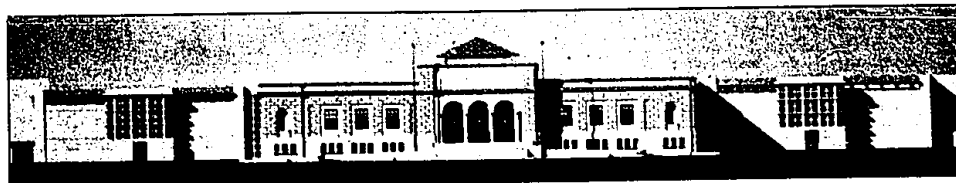
dows and mechanical systems. Built in 1928, we are upgrading it to current museum standards. So far we're on schedule and on budget. We've only lost a few days because of weather. It's important that a project this complex be started on time and off to a good start. We expect to be completed by December 2005."

From Woodward Avenue, the museum looks like it has for 74 years but behind the calm exterior heavy construction equipment lays the groundwork for a future vision. To keep visitors updated on the progress of the expanded South Wing, which will house the Walter Gibbs Learning Center, 8,000 square feet for special exhibitions and additional gallery space for the 65,000 objects in the collections, the DIA is adding signage at the Woodward and Farnsworth entrances. The signs also list upcoming events and exhibitions, and promote Fridays at the DIA. In October, the museum extended programming from 6-9 p.m. every Friday after its First Friday nights proved so successful.

"After budget cuts in 1991, even after we picked ourselves up and dusted ourselves off, we were still operating at reduced hours," said Annmarie Erickson, vice president of communications and marketing. "We looked at the operating budget in January 2001 and knew we wanted to expand hours. We asked when people wanted us to be open. Three years ago we started extending hours by instituting First Fridays. Now we're open an hour earlier every morning to accommodate school groups and have noticed a tremendous increase in visitors."

"It's been very successful. In October an additional 3,273 attended. For November's five Fridays the numbers came close to doubling with 6,179, and in December on Noel Night alone, 4,771 came through the galleries. The other two Fridays there were 1,522. That's 10,000 additional people since we extended the hours every Fri-

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Vision of the future: This rendering shows the arts museum as it will appear when completed in December 2005.