

May 3rd, 2012

New Wing at Boston's Gardner Museum Opens

by Jeanne Schinto

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Boston, Massachusetts

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Photos courtesy Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

"Woe is me! Why am I not Morgan or Frick?"

—Isabella Stewart Gardner, in a letter to her collaborator, mentor, advisor, and agent Bernard Berenson, August 26, 1907.

Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner was neither J.P. Morgan nor Henry Frick, it is true, but she was something better: her own person. Henry James said she was "not a woman" but "a locomotive-with a Pullman car attached."

As such, Gardner created in Boston in 1903 a unique building to house her collection of old masters, works of art in other styles and from other periods, and herself. It opened to the public during her lifetime. When she died in 1924, the place—a three-story stucco palace, modeled after the 15th-century Palazzo Barbaro on Venice's Grand Canal—became wholly a public museum meant, in her words, "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever."

Forever is a long time, however, and in recent years the building, like the Yeatsian center, wasn't holding. Administrators' offices were squeezed. Educational programs were conducted in the basement. Musical concerts, one important legacy of her patronage, were taking place in a gallery meant for displaying tapestries. The gallery had charm galore, but musicians all knew it wasn't a great venue to play in.

Something had to be done.

Now that something—a new wing, complete with administrative offices, classrooms, and a dedicated concert/performance hall, along with a new gallery space, "living room," greenhouse, visiting artist residences, new and expanded restaurant space, and gift shop—has opened with a ribbon cutting on January 19.

Barbara Hostetter, president of the museum's board of trustees, told a group of previewing reporters that planning for the project began more than a dozen years ago. Identifying the museum leaders' main challenge as finding a way to serve their visitors while at the same time preserving an increasingly fragile world-class collection in a historic building, Hostetter said the answer required "magic." But the institution was at "a critical juncture...it could not survive at its current level of use." Magic had to be performed.

Anne Hawley, the museum's director, said the project found "the perfect partner" in Renzo Piano, who received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1998. "In fact, when someone asked him what he would do if he met Isabella Stewart Gardner in paradise, he said, 'Well, I would tango with her,' and I'm sure he would."

Perhaps he was thinking of El Jaleo by John Singer Sargent, which used to be one of the first things museum visitors saw. Often called simply "the Spanish picture," the wall-size oil on canvas hangs near what used to be the

museum's entrance in a Spanish grotto-like setting designed exactly to suit the painting's subject—a gypsy flamenco dancer dressed in a tidal wave of silvery ruffles.

That old entrance is relatively dark. Director of operations James Labeck characterized it as "a mousehole." But then, as you encounter the soaring indoor courtyard and sculpture garden flooded with light, and breathe in its flowering greenery, there is, as Labeck put it, "a little bit of an explosion."

To those who know and love the old Gardner, here's a warning: the new entrance is nothing like that. It's a minimalist 21st-century entrance made of glass.

The same words describe the new wing—some 70,000 square feet of transparency, through which one can see an adjacent parkway, the cityscape beyond it, and the palazzo next door.

"The palace is always there—you can't forget it even for an hour, no matter what you do," Piano told the press. "This [new wing] is an homage to the fact that that is where everything started." The palace is "always the object of desire."

The architects of that grande dame were Willard T. Sears and Edward Nichols, but Gardner was their acknowledged micromanager. There's a well-known photo of her on a ladder orchestrating things. "From Willard Sears's diary, it's clear that she was running the show," Labeck said with a laugh. No one, not even Boston's building inspectors, told her what to do. She didn't bother with a permit, and when Labeck and others tried to find plans she may have filed with the city, they came up empty-handed.

Like many of the world's gifted collectors, she operated like an artist, following her muse. That's one reason why the old building is a work of art. It's also why envisioning a new wing was so daunting. As Hawley said, "How could anything stand next to [it] and honor it and be a companion with it without also aspiring to that kind of being? I think that Renzo has given us another work of art."

Lest fans of the old Gardner needlessly worry, be assured that nothing in the palazzo has been moved, at least not yet. In an architect's statement distributed to the press, Piano intimated that some of those works may be moved into the new gallery temporarily at times. "This is the place where we can take artworks from the palace, a piece of art at a time, and we put it there. Like observing something in your hand—something a bit more carefully, and three or four or six months later that piece of art goes back to sleep in the palace." But for now you'll find Titian's *Europa*, the Virgin and Child pictures by Raphael, the Botticelli, the sculpture, furniture, rare books, and illuminated manuscripts right where you always have.

As Hawley correctly defined the Piano structure, it is, for the most part, where the "thinking" part of the museum will now be performed, while the palazzo, "which had been put to uses for which it was unequipped, could be returned to its original function as an undiluted source of pleasure in art."

The new wing and the old are connected only by a juncture. Deciding what that link should look like was "the most discussed and debated" feature of the entire project, said Hostetter. Piano describes the glass corridor he came up with "an umbilical cord." Labeck, who showed me around with a small group of other reporters, said a metaphorical "conversation" needed to occur between the two buildings. Just as with a real conversation, the two parties shouldn't be too close or too far away from each other. "There had to be a comfortable distance."

The walkway is enveloped by newly planted trees, American hornbeams and lacebark pines. Architecturally it's impressive. Yet Labeck heard immediate complaints. One of my fellow reporters said, "I've been coming here since I was fifteen, and the most important aspect was being awestruck by the courtyard. To lose that is to lose the whole integrity of the museum." Labeck's reply was ready, delivered with a patient smile. "The public has come in at all angles. The old entrance has become the familiar one, but it wasn't always and not during Mrs. Gardner's lifetime."

Retracing our steps through the glass corridor, we revisited the new concert/performance space, where earlier we had heard the remarks by Hostetter, Hawley, and Piano. An almost literal cube, approximately 40' x 40' x 40', it suits the new wing's small, urban footprint with seating on three levels arranged on all four sides around a central performance area.

"This is a row house music hall," said Labeck. "There's not a lot of real estate here. We needed to stack every body."

While the new wing was built, badly needed renovations in the palazzo took place. The tapestry room, used for concerts since the 1970's, was restored and returned to its original purpose. There were also upgrades in the roofing, particularly in the courtyard, and in the lighting throughout. Still, I found it difficult for my eyes to adjust after the brightness of the new wing. If you go, allow ample time for your pupils to make the transition. And aging eyes will need even more time than youthful ones, according to experts.

Fans of the old Gardner may need transition time to adjust to everything. The palazzo was and continues to be an old-fashioned museum, whose main delight is that of viewing pictures and other works of art more or less silently. The new wing, with its emphasis on group experiences—the concert programs, plus two new lecture programs (one on the concept of masterpieces, the other on landscape architecture)—is "a bustling counterpart to the [palazzo's] sensual serenity," as Hawley put it. To expect otherwise is to be disappointed.

Museums are "about civic life," Piano rightly said. They always have been, but the Gardner's new wing is for the civic life of our time.

Taken together, the old and the new wings present more opportunities than ever before "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever." You could say, then, there is now a better than ever chance of the institution's achieving Isabella Stewart Gardner's original vision.

For more information, phone (617) 566-1401 or see the Web site (www.gardnermuseum.org).

Originally published in the May 2012 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. © 2012 Maine Antique Digest

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Exterior view of the lobby entrance. On right, the outdoor art installation *Ailanthus* by Stefano Arienti, up through January 21, 2013. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.



A view of the link connecting the palazzo and the new wing. Schinto photo.



Inside the link between the palazzo and the new wing. Schinto photo.



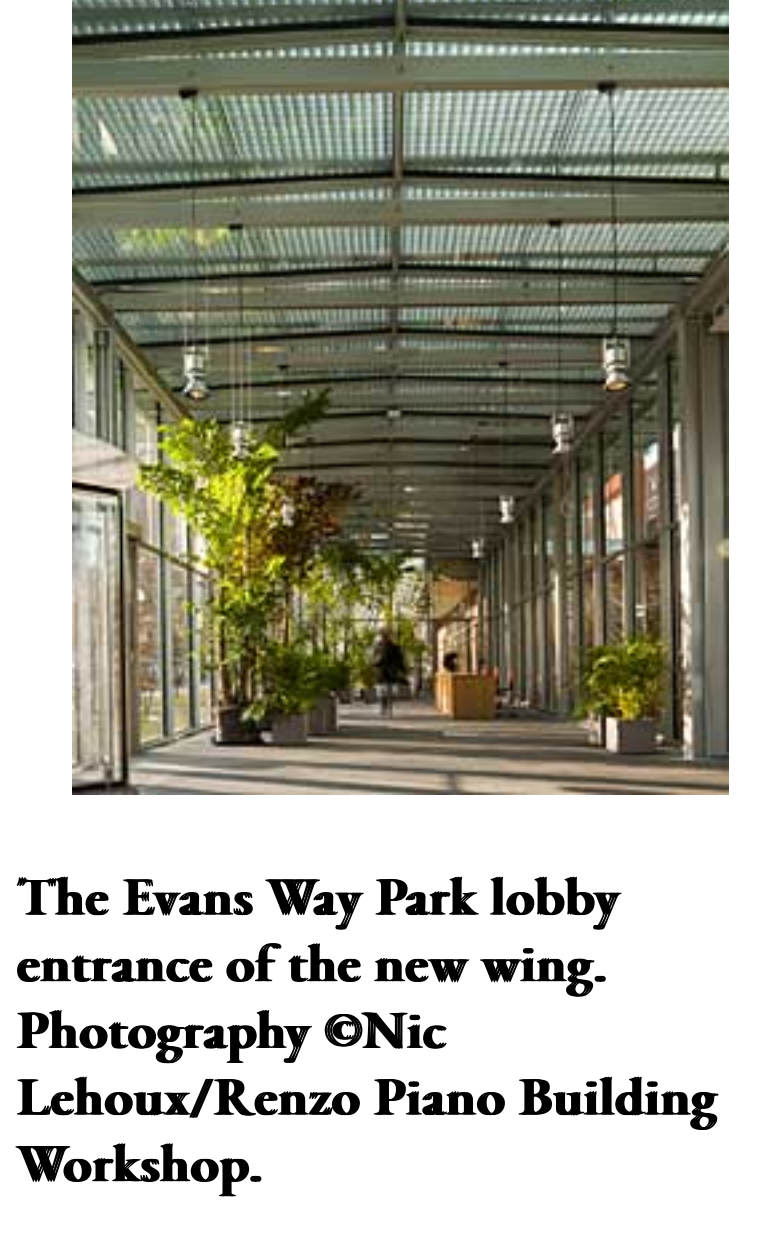
View of the palazzo's courtyard. Schinto photo.



The palazzo is visible through the windows of the Special Exhibition Gallery. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.



Another view of the palazzo through the glass wall of the Special Exhibitions Gallery. Schinto photo.



The Evans Way Park lobby entrance of the new wing. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

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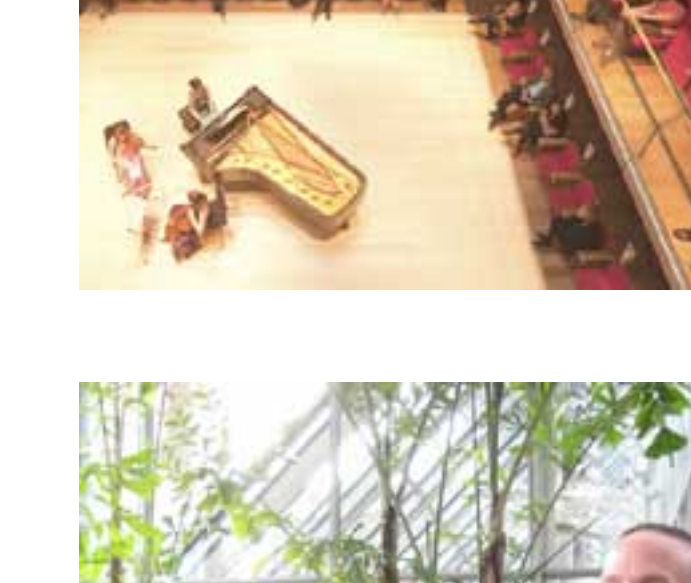
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Originally published in the May 2012 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. © 2012 Maine Antique Digest

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An overhead view of Calderwood Hall. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.



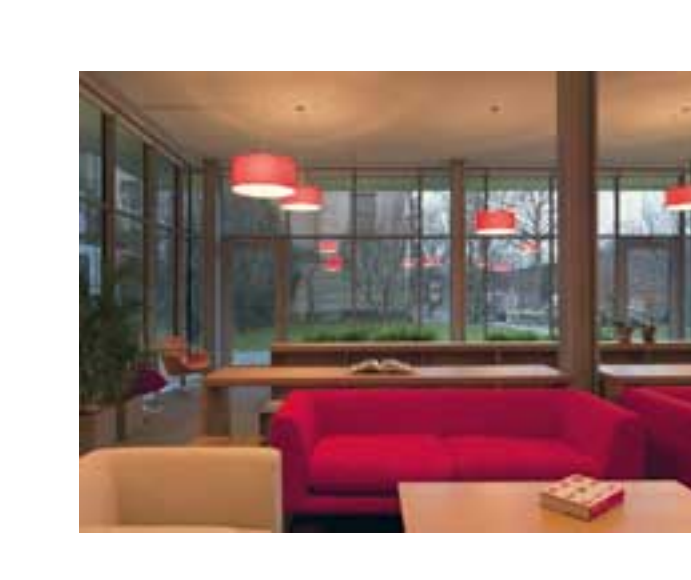
The new wing's director of operations, James Labeck, in the lobby entrance with journalists. The woman was covering the opening for a German newspaper; the man, Marc Kristal, was writing for the New York-based magazine *Wallpaper*. Behind them, the museum's new greenhouse.



Musicians practicing in Calderwood Hall. Schinto photo.



The new Living Room visitor orientation space. Once again, the palazzo is visible through the windows. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.



Evening exterior view of the Special Exhibition Gallery in the new wing. The Living Room visitor orientation space sits below. Photography ©Nic Lehoux/Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

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