

# The Boston Globe

## At 25, Mass MoCA has secured its place in contemporary art. But has it lifted up North Adams?

Priorities have shifted for today's cultural institutions, says Kristy Edmunds, only the second director in the museum's history. It's about helping the community, helping artists.

BY MALCOLM GAY — JULY 30, 2024



VISITORS TO MASS MoCA WALKED THROUGH "COSMIC LATTE," AN INSTALLATION BY ARTIST SPENCER FINCH. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

**NORTH ADAMS** — When the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art commissioned Bob Faust to create an artwork for its 25th anniversary, the artist channeled a familiar language to describe the sprawling museum: Statistics.

The resulting mural, "MASS MOCA BY THE NUMB3R5," is awash in eye-popping figures: 300,000 square feet of gallery space, 15,000 square feet of indoor performing space, 24 acres, 27 miles of HVAC.

People have relied on outsized numbers to describe Mass MoCA ever since it first opened in 1999 in the old Sprague Electric Co. factory complex with a two-fold promise: It would bring world-class contemporary art to the Berkshires while also leading an economic revival in this faded factory town.

Mass MoCA has delivered on its artistic promise. It now ranks among the largest contemporary art museums in the country. Innovative long-term loans ensure works by art-world heavyweights fill its galleries. Lively music festivals draw tens

of thousands of visitors each year, while its cavernous halls enable contemporary artists to create exhibitions at a scale seldom realized in the United States. One 2017 study put its annual lift to Berkshire County at just more than \$50 million.

But the numbers tell a less convincing story when it comes to the museum's economic impact on the people of North Adams. The median annual household income here — according to the latest estimates around \$49,525, or roughly half the statewide figure — has grown by about \$2,300 when adjusted for inflation over the past quarter

century. Though it's impossible to say where the city would be without Mass MoCA, the median household income has grown statewide by roughly \$10,000 during that time, nearly four and a half times greater than in North Adams.

Meanwhile, a brutal round of pandemic-era layoffs exposed a critical over-reliance on ticket sales and other earned revenue in the museum's operating model. A recently formed union went on a weeks-long strike after wage negotiations broke down in March, and the museum faces infrastructure issues on its campus of 19th-century buildings.

Now, after 25 years of odds-defying expansion, Mass MoCA is at a crossroads. The campus still has numerous buildings that could be developed. But instead of expanding the museum's footprint, director Kristy Edmunds is seeking to usher in a new era of sustainability, stabilizing Mass MoCA's finances, making its campus more environmentally friendly, and delivering more fully on its economic promise to the city — all while maintaining the museum's freewheeling spirit.

"It wasn't about, 'Boy, we need more space to develop,'" said Edmunds, who became only the second director in Mass MoCA's history when she arrived in 2021. "My role now is to build it out."

Seated in one of the museum's immense galleries, she added that the pandemic, with its seismic effects on the cultural and economic landscape, fundamentally transformed the equation for arts organizations.

"The kinds of questions that are asked of cultural institutions now are not so much grow or die, and what are your holdings," said Edmunds, who recently unveiled a strategic plan for the museum. "It's like, what are you meaningfully doing for a community? What are you meaningfully doing for the artists of this country?"

Seeking answers to those questions has taken her far afield of the art world. She sometimes sounds less like a museum director and more like an urban planner, confronting the legacy of industrial decline in this northwest corner of the state.

During an impromptu tour of the museum's campus last month, Edmunds stopped briefly at "C.A.V.U.," a 2021 light installation by artist James Turrell. One of Edmunds's first orders of business was to raise money to endow the artwork, which is housed in a repurposed water tank the size of a modest home.

But what she wanted to point out during the outdoor tour was the nearby system of flood chutes



KRISTY EDMUNDS, DIRECTOR OF MASS MoCA, SEEKS TO USHER IN A NEW ERA OF SUSTAINABILITY AT THE MUSEUM. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

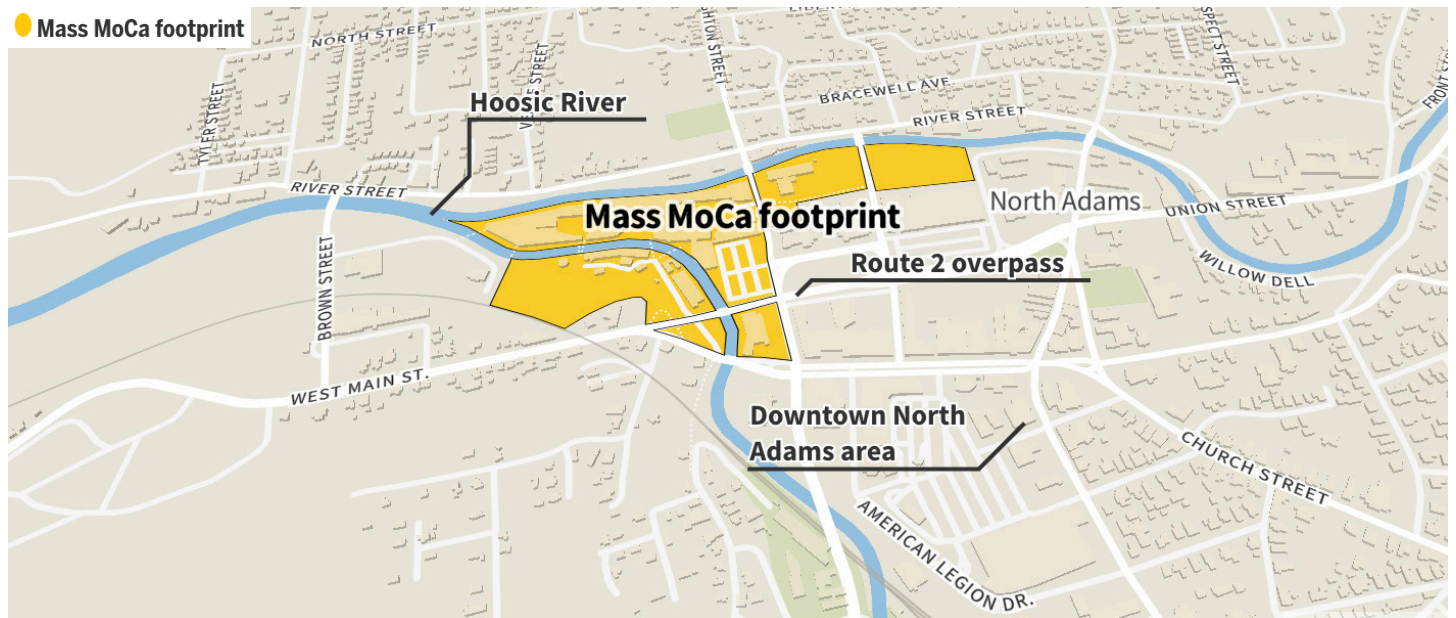


MASS MoCA IN NORTH ADAMS. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

# A map of MASS MoCA in North Adams

Here's what the museum's footprint in the city looks like today.

## ● Mass MoCa footprint



RYAN HUDDLE/GLOBE STAFF

that divert the Hoosic River — which once powered production here — around Mass MoCA's campus. They are failing. Edmunds has been working with the US Army Corps of Engineers and community groups on a feasibility study to address the concrete channel in hopes of safeguarding the city and museum against flooding, while also making the river more accessible to visitors.

“Look at it: Segmented concrete ... two of them have fallen over,” she said, pointing at a pair 75-year-old cement slabs. She described it as a quality of life issue. “There is nowhere in the North Adams community that this river is accessible to its inhabitants.”

Edmunds is also planning a comprehensive landscape redesign, part of a future capital campaign she hopes will not only mitigate some of site's industrial legacy, but also increase the endowment and finance much-needed facilities upgrades.

Meanwhile, Mass MoCA is working with community groups to design and develop a bike trail that links North Adams and neighboring Williamstown. It's also working with the city to address the Route 2 overpass, a relic of the urban renewal era that separates Mass MoCA from downtown North Adams and hinders museum visitors from patronizing nearby businesses.

“I guess I do sound like an urban planner, but it feels to me like Mass MoCA is interdependent with the success and capacity of the city,” said Edmunds, who's funding some of the preliminary work on these projects with a \$1 million grant from

the Barr Foundation. “We have to build a durable, interconnected future.”

For most of its history, Mass MoCA ran like a start-up. Working on a shoestring budget, founding director Joseph C. Thompson and his staff hustled to sell donors — and the Commonwealth — on the museum's improbable vision of a world-class museum in the Berkshires.

Starting with \$35 million in state funds, alongside private donations, the museum opened its first buildings in 1999, a 200,000-square-foot renovation that instantly put Mass MoCA on the map. The museum continued to grow at an astonishing pace, securing another \$25 million from the state to open the Robert W. Wilson Building in 2017, a giant leap that added more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space in a building that's more than twice the size of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art.

To make it all work, Mass MoCA ran lean, with a small staff, low wages, long hours, and no real permanent collection. It cut corners where it could, leaning into the old buildings' industrial vibe to keep costs down and diversifying revenues by leasing office and retail space to a variety of businesses.

Still, the museum had little in the way of cash reserves and scant margin for error.

“I could write a book on how not to build a museum,” said Thompson, now a curator-at-large for The Momentary, a contemporary and performing arts extension of Crystal Bridges Museum of American

Art in Bentonville, Ark. “The first chapter would be: Never start a museum with no cash, no line of credit, and no endowment, which is what we did.”

But the art delivered, and despite an early court battle with Swiss artist Christoph Büchel over the display of a disputed work, Mass MoCA built a reputation for welcoming artists to dream big, creating colossal installations in and around its “campus of museums.” Critically, the museum also began hosting a series of well-attended performances and outdoor music festivals, including Wilco's Solid Sound, FreshGrass, and Bang on a Can.

The real innovation came in 2008, when Mass MoCA brokered a pathbreaking long-term loan agreement to display 105 large-scale wall drawings by conceptual artist Sol LeWitt. The museum went on to replicate the model, brokering long-term deals to display works by Turrell, Louise Bourgeois, Anselm Kiefer, and Jenny Holzer, among others.

The loans, some of which span decades, had a sweeping effect on Mass MoCA, delivering the equivalent of a permanent collection while also transforming it into a site of cultural pilgrimage.

“People come from all over the world,” said Jock Reynolds, former director of the Yale University Art Gallery who was instrumental in the Lewitt loan. “There are some very important installations there.”

Despite these successes, some locals say the museum could have done more for North Adams, whose economy flatlined after Sprague Electric shut down in the mid-1980s.



THE HOOSIC RIVER AT MASS MoCA. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF

Ralph Brill, a longtime resident who owns a nearby art gallery, said Mass MoCA's commercial leasing operation undercut the downtown rental market.

"They stole the most available professionals," said Brill. "I can't say that it was a strategy of Joe Thompson and his real estate people to upset the balance of Main Street, but it happened."

He added that museum visitors rarely venture beyond the Mass MoCA complex to dine or shop, though the museum erected a map of the city and installed artworks downtown to lure museumgoers farther afield.

"They made the campus an exciting jewel within a desert," he said. "You've got to help the rest of the city benefit by your presence and the fact that you're bringing in 100,000 people a year. That they never quite addressed."

Thompson allowed that North Adams's economic recovery has taken "longer than I'd ever dreamed it would."

"Main St. of North Adams is not nearly as vibrant as I'd hoped that it would be," he said. He added, however, that the city is in "far better shape today than it was," pointing out that Mass MoCA has attracted several new businesses, including The Porches Inn just north of the museum.

Another is Tourists Welcome, a boutique hotel that opened in 2018.

"We would not be here but for Mass MoCA," said Ben Svenson, a developer and museum trustee who cofounded the hotel on Route 2. "What I see today is a museum that is really helping the city."

Similarly, a 2017 Williams College study (the most recent such report available) called Mass MoCA a "cornerstone" of the Berkshire County economy. It found that the museum and museum-related activities added \$51 million to the local economy each year and was responsible for some 586 jobs.

But the benefit to North Adams proper has been less obvious: Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate that, despite fluctuations, the unemployment rate today is about what it was in 1999, a quarter-century span that saw the city's population decline by roughly 15 percent.

"North Adams is assuredly better for having the museum than not," said Rod Motamedi, assistant director of economic and public policy research at UMass Amherst's Donahue Institute. "But has it fundamentally changed the trajectory of the town? That's unclear."

John Sprague Jr., whose grandfather founded Sprague Electric, said it's unlikely that any one

institution can return North Adams to its "glory days," when the manufacturer employed some 4,000 people, or an estimated one in five residents.

"It's almost impossible to replace Sprague Electric, because Sprague itself was really overemployed in North Adams compared to what was really sustainable in the long run," said Sprague. Mass MoCA "just doesn't require the number of jobs that Sprague Electric did."

Morgan Everett, Mass MoCA's head of public initiatives and real estate, said the museum is working on a range of economic development projects, such as a pilot project for affordable artist housing and shifting its leasing operations to attract more creative-sector tenants.

"We're going to double down," he said. "The manufacturing economy took 150 years to develop here, so to see what's been accomplished over 25 years is pretty stunning. So imagine what's going to happen over the next 25 years."

Mass MoCA's finances have also remained precarious for most of its existence. Returns on its modest endowment historically covered less than 10 percent of its budget. Board philanthropy was robust, but the museum relied on ticket sales, rentals, and other forms of earned revenue for more than half of its income.

Then came the pandemic, when state-mandated shutdowns wiped out this essential revenue stream. The museum soon laid off nearly 75 percent of staff, a drastic measure that placed its economic vulnerability in stark relief.

“We were reliant on today’s earned income to pay tomorrow’s bills,” said Thompson. “There’s simply no way to sustain that model.”

Edmunds seeks to change that. She’s secured more than \$8 million in new multiyear funding from individuals and foundations, increasing the museum’s operating budget to around \$20 million — up from around \$13.5 million in fiscal year 2019.

“We like to be a little bit hungry, but we don’t want to be unreliable,” she said. “You don’t want to just solve every problem with a hot glue gun and a rubber band and some baling wire because you know how.”

Edmunds, who previously ran the Center for the Art of Performance at the University of California, Los Angeles, said much of the new funding has come from her philanthropic connections in the performing arts world.

“I was like, ‘Y’all want to have some impact? Come on over,’” said Edmunds, who’s working to give artists more time and resources to realize their projects. She’s also seeking to increase the museum’s endowment, which at around \$30 million is a fraction of the roughly \$460 million held by the neighboring Clark Art Institute. “Endowment money is hard to raise, but it is a proven numeric fact that nearby institutions have endowments that could fund a small nation.”

Mass MoCA now employs around 185 people. About half of them live in North Adams, and a portion of the museum’s expanded operating budget has gone toward increased salaries following the strike.

Edmunds bore the brunt of the labor unrest, but observers said the long-simmering wage issue took centerstage after the layoffs.

“She had to deal with the fact that the staff was very underpaid and unhappy, and Joe had never responded to that,” said Reynolds.

“Don’t get me wrong, Joe Thompson did an absolute miracle figuring all the different ways to develop that real estate,” he continued. “But it was incredibly ambitious and very transactional with

certain major donors, and a lot of the things that are necessary to creating a real healthy culture in the place didn’t get fulfilled.”

Edmunds said she was legally constrained from discussing certain aspects of the strike, which concluded with a contract that raised the museum’s base salary from \$16.25 to \$18 per hour.

“I was never against the higher wages,” said Edmunds, who’s also created an emergency fund for employees facing unexpected hardship. “The question was how large and how fast in order to not trigger layoffs.”

As she rounded out the evening tour, Edmunds gestured toward the city’s downtown, adding that the museum, though separated by the Route 2 overpass, makes up about a third of the business district.

“This is like a rotary,” she said. “The city grew around a factory. The factory halted, and a museum took it on.”



“MASS MOCA BY THE NUMB3R5,” A MURAL BY BOB FAUST, IS ON DISPLAY AT THE MUSEUM. DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/GLOBE STAFF