

# Museum Quality

## A New Museum and Recharged College Bring Creative Energy to North Adams, Mass.

MARY GRANT

Nestled in the valley between the Berkshire hills and the Taconic range, North Adams, Massachusetts, in many ways is typical of old New England mill towns working hard to create a new identity in the global economy. When Sprague Electric left town in 1985, the city of 16,000 reeled from the loss of 4,000 blue-collar jobs. Today, North Adams is reinventing itself as a center for arts, culture and the “creative economy.” Moreover, the city is doing so by building upon existing assets. The vacant Sprague physical plant, good public schools, strong leadership, an excellent state college, the local workforce and a spectacular geography offer fertile ground for entrepreneurship.

The former Sprague site itself has been transformed into the world-class Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MassMoCA), which has served as a major catalyst in this new economy since opening five years ago. North Adams and surrounding communities have experienced an infusion of artists, writers, filmmakers and others who bring new ideas, new energy, a degree of wealth and a willingness to take risks. This spirit, evidenced in yet another successful transformation of former mill space into live/work artist housing, was largely inspired by the creative vision of Eric Rudd, an artist, sculptor and founding director of the Contemporary Artists Center. Now, the city is poised to give new life to the old Mohawk Theater, a priority for local politicians. This increasingly creative and entrepreneurial economy, driven in part by the array of arts and cultural institutions across Berkshire County, will demand skills and educational levels that are different, but not wholly separate, from those that provided a foundation for success in earlier times.

The New England Council has noted that “a strong arts and cultural sector is vital to the future of New England’s economic growth and competitiveness.” The council found that the cultural sector represented nearly 4 percent of New England jobs and generated \$6.6 billion in tourism revenue in 2000. In addition, the sector has been growing faster than any other part of the econ-

omy, particularly in Western Massachusetts, where the economic base has shifted away from one dominated by large manufacturing companies and their well-paying jobs. As in so many “company towns,” successive generations of families enjoyed access to reliable, well-paying jobs where advancement and new opportunities could be realized through seniority and training on the factory floor. No longer. In place of the manufacturing economy, however, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) is providing new hope and innovation.

As the old electric supply plant has been reinvented as MassMoCA, the old Normal School has evolved into a modern state college offering a wide range of academic degree programs in the arts, sciences, humanities and business. Among these programs is MCLA’s Fine and Performing Arts Program, specializing in arts management, the visual arts, music and theatre.

Recently, MassMoCA and MCLA have collaborated on projects and programs including student performances and partnerships with K-12. Leaders from MassMoCA and MCLA, who serve as important stakeholders in the Regional Competitiveness Council, the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce and the recent Northern Tier initiative are proposing initiatives involving public and private colleges from Boston to the Berkshires to prepare students to compete in this new economy.

The local impact of MassMoCA, meanwhile, is beyond theoretical. MassMoCA operations and non-local visitors have injected approximately \$14 million into the local economy per year since the museum opened. Additionally, the museum constantly is renewing exhibits and renovating more space, thereby providing design and construction jobs to local workers. MassMoCA Executive Director Joe Thompson has been entrepreneurial in luring law firms, restaurants and other businesses to the former Sprague site. Dozens of professionals and paraprofessionals now commute daily to the old factory. Across River Street, the famed Porches Inn offers a unique lodging experience for travelers to the museum, MCLA and other destinations in the area. In addition to Porches, the local Holiday Inn enjoys capacity bookings many nights of the year. Downtown North Adams now hosts upscale restaurants.



Williamstown, Mass.—North Adams’s neighbor to the west—is home to Williams College, the Clark Art Institute and the Williams College Museum of Art. With the Williamstown Film Festival, the Williamstown Theatre Festival, fall foliage season, ski season and the area’s bountiful recreation opportunities, this north-western corner of Massachusetts is now busy most of the time. Between Williams College and MCLA, events such as commencements, speaker series, concerts, theatrical productions and Division III athletic events bring many thousands of visitors, including alumni, to the area every year. By itself, MCLA generates nearly \$90 million for the local economy. Overwhelmingly, driving this vibrant local economy is the powerful and efficient three-cylinder engine of arts, culture and education.

Businesses and local economies compete in a global, creative arena. Those who work in this new economy must be able to think critically and adapt to changing situations and emerging technologies. Creativity—the ability to conceptualize, analyze and then respond rapidly to new situations, problems and opportunities—is paramount among the professional skills required to compete successfully in the new economy. As creative economy expert Richard Florida has

written: “Creativity involves the ability to synthesize, and requires self assurance and the ability to take risks. It is not the province of a few select geniuses ... it is a capacity inherent in varying degrees in virtually all people.”

Unleashing and channeling this creativity has been at the heart of North Adams’s success.

Advances in science and technology, entrepreneurial solutions to business and social problems, works of art that both inspire and provoke discussion and strong forward thinking communities are all connected by a common thread of creativity. These connections are at times tenuous and, as Florida notes, “creativity requires support—sustaining it requires attention to and investment in the economic and social forms that feed creative impulses.” The collaboration between MassMoCA and MCLA is an example of a creative work in progress, and the synergy developing between the local community and its cultural and educational institutions is still taking root. Nevertheless, these partnerships offer great promise for promoting and sustaining the reinvention of Berkshire County. Stay tuned.

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