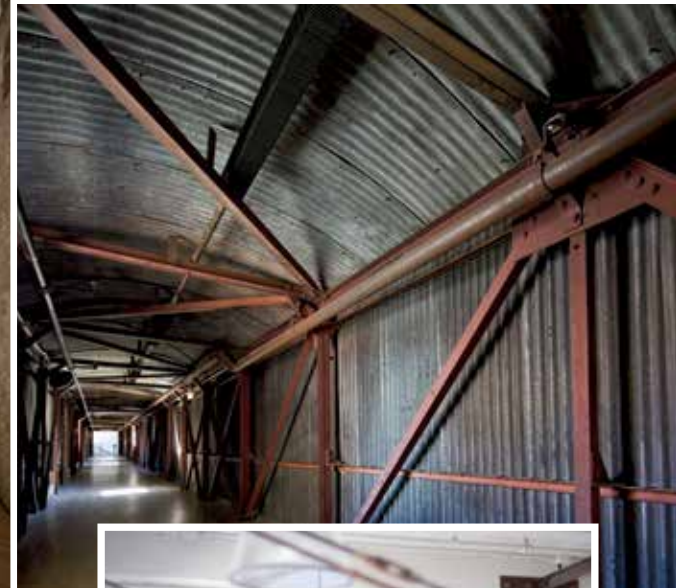
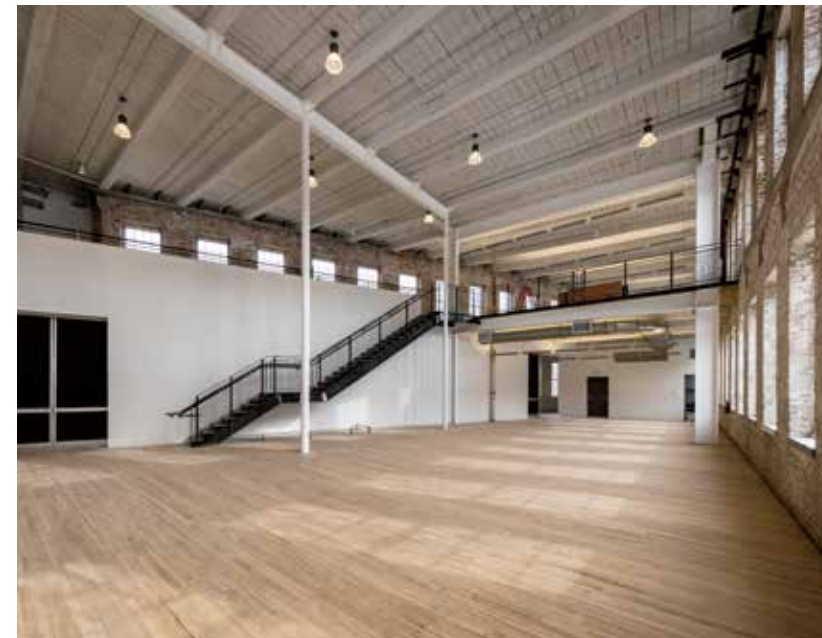
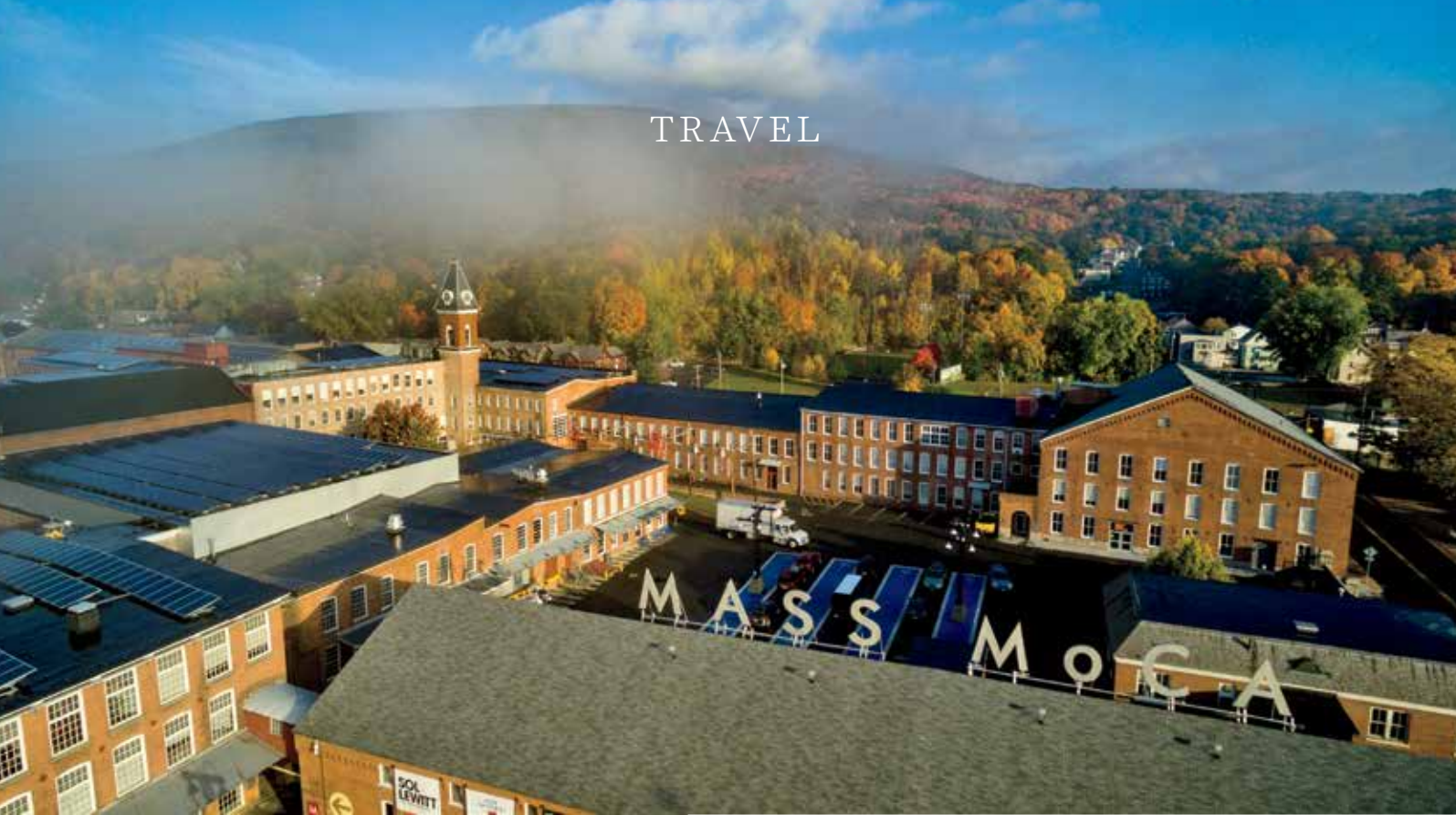




TRAVEL



# Architecture as Art

The complex of nineteenth-century buildings that make up MASS MoCA are as much the museum's main attraction as its art installations

WRITTEN BY *David Masello*

Two kinds of architecture prevail in the Massachusetts Berkshires—the manmade and the natural. The skyline profile of the forested namesake mountains undulates for many miles, with the range culminating in North Adams at Mount Greylock, the state's highest peak. But there is an equally dramatic and nuanced architectural presence at the very center of the New England town. The twenty-eight redbrick buildings that make up the complex of MASS MoCA, the acronym for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, are so emblematic of America's past industrial might that they are listed on the National Historic Register.

What now functions as the nation's most cutting-edge venue for large-scale conceptual art, as well as musical, theatrical, and dance performances, is so dense and complex in its configuration that to wander the sixteen-



Opening page and opposite page, top to bottom: Noted for its dramatic interior expanses, MASS MoCA was once among New England's largest industrial complexes. Some of its recent exhibitions include Michael Oatman's *All Utopias Fail*, defined by a vintage Airstream trailer positioned atop an armature. Visitors enter the museum through a courtyard. This page, clockwise from top left: A galaxy of lights by James Spence; interior spaces are varied, with original brick walls, wooden beams, and steel frameworks.



Clockwise above right: Recent installations include; Nick Cave's elevated *Until*, reachable via ladders, set amid his other installation of 16,000 wind spinners in a football field-sized gallery; Anselm Kiefer's *Velimir Chlebnikov*; Louise Bourgeois's *Untitled* marble sculpture, and James Turrell's *Perfectly Clear*.



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In addition to Sol LeWitt's long-running *A Wall Drawing Retrospective* that is a popular feature of the museum, some of the late artist's three-dimensional sculptures have also been installed, including *Negative Pyramid* (1997).

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acre campus is to be immersed in a city within a city. An entire cityscape—or industrialscape—of bridges, tunnels, internal courtyards, streets, towers, waterways, power plants, elevated viaducts and walkways cohere into an architectural assemblage so compelling that the buildings themselves function as a kind of artwork.

All of the buildings on the site are now in use, with the exception of a triangular edifice that MASS MoCA director, James Thompson, says “sits like the prow of a ship at the confluence of the Hossic River”; it, too, is poised for its renovation into another 200,000 square feet of gallery space. From the exterior, the buildings, almost all of them from the 1890s, present themselves in a haunting rhythm of repeating redbrick facades, evenly cut with double-hung windows, while the interiors are often vast columned expanses that appear to continue into infinity. These spaces are able to house some of the largest artworks in existence. When any of us speak about Modern buildings, we often haughtily think that only spaces of our era could be of this scale, bathed with this much natural light. But these structures prove that America's nineteenth-century industrial spaces, when built well and thoughtfully for their workers, really are our nation's first modern buildings. Their builders understood ways to exploit masonry, steel, and wood to fashion vast, well-lit spaces imbued with architectural integrity.

Small-scale industries were already in place on this site in Colonial America. By 1905, Arnold Print Works was employing some 3,200 people in the manufacture of printed textiles, but when that business closed, the complex was taken over by the Sprague Electrical Company, which flourished during World War II (employing more than 4,100 employees when the population of North Adams was 18,000); the company continued to produce products for the Gemini moon missions. But when Sprague Electrical suddenly—and rather heartlessly—closed its operations overnight in 1985, North Adams had been struck by a

metaphorical lighting bolt. The city's very identity as an industrial locus was short-circuited.

Within just a year, though, under the vision of Thomas Krens, director of the nearby Williams College Museum of Art, the complex began to morph into a space for contemporary artworks. By 1992, a master architectural plan was in place, conceived by some of the most illustrious architects in the profession, including Simeon Bruner, Frank Gehry, Robert Venturi, and David Childs. By 1999, the first four buildings of MASS MoCA opened to the public. To date, some half million square feet of space has been renovated.

Although portions of the museum are dedicated to semi-permanent installations, including acres of Sol LeWitt's murals, Michael Oatman's *All Utopias Fell*, which uses a repurposed Airstream trailer set atop a steel armature, and an entire building of works by Anselm Kiefer, including his 82-foot concrete wave, MASS MoCA is known for hosting revolving works. Among the most compelling recent installations include sculptures by the late Louise Bourgeois (one of which weighs in at sixteen tons), nine James Turrell light installations, and James Spence's *Cosmic Latte*, a virtual galaxy of suspended white-light LED fixtures whose form references the Milky Way.

Just beyond the “city” of MASS MoCA lies the actual city of North Adams, a place that continues to revive, albeit slowly and episodically. Its evocative downtown streets are lined with century-old-plus commercial buildings, some of whose massive limestone blocks gleam in the sunlight, along with numerous churches, their spires seemingly competing in height with the neighboring Berkshires peaks. Elsewhere, old residential neighborhoods are defined by wooden Victorian houses, many of which appear to sag beneath their long histories. But visible from most of the downtown and from hilltop neighborhoods is the museum complex itself, a place that always looks to the future. Art is now the city's enduring and inspiring product. ■

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