Building on a Legacy
“... for the education and enjoyment of the public forever.”

— Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1924

I am often asked, “why a new building for the Gardner?” When Isabella Gardner opened her doors to the public on New Year’s Night 1903, she presented a new context for art in America by creating a museum where visitors experienced music, the beauty of gardens, and historic and contemporary art, all in the highly personal setting of her courtyard palace. Her museum was a work of art in its totality as well as a “salon” that fostered the notable artists, scholars, and musicians of her day.

Today, her palace and collection remain as she conceived them, and her passion for patronage lives on in the museum’s artist-in-residency program and vibrant public programs in the performing arts, horticulture, and the visual arts. With this important new building project, we, the administration and Board of Trustees, knew that we were traversing bold and challenging territory by proposing an extension of the historic museum building. We did not enter into this process lightly. Intense long-range planning and a clear commitment to preservation formed the foundation of our ambitions.

The museum today faces challenges that Isabella Gardner could not have imagined. The museum that she founded a century ago with 2,000 annual visitors now welcomes close to 200,000 visitors each year. The historic Tapestry Room, one of the nation’s preeminent galleries for viewing tapestries, now hosts the museum’s acclaimed concert series with audiences of 10,000 a season. While increasing the number of visitors upholds Isabella Gardner’s mandate that her museum remain “for the education and enjoyment of the public forever,” this demand has resulted in additional, unsustainable pressure on the historic building and collection.

To alleviate these pressures and ensure the museum’s future, we made the bold and important choice of extending the Gardner Museum with a new Renzo Piano building, itself to be a work of art and a worthy addition to Isabella Gardner’s extraordinary collection. Incorporating Renzo Piano’s signature talent for clarity and beautiful proportions, integrating old and new building fabric, and masterful handling of light, along with his uncompromising attention to detail, the new building will be a celebrated cultural and architectural landmark for Boston, the Fenway Cultural District, and the region.

The reorganization of our physical spaces will ensure that visitors in the future will be more deeply engaged in the creative life of the Gardner Museum and better able to connect with Isabella Gardner’s legacy through inspiring encounters with art, music and horticulture. New spaces will include an acoustically sublime hall for music, and scholarly and artistic programs; a naturally illuminated gallery for historic and contemporary art exhibitions; inspiring classroom space that will fire the imagination of children and adults alike; and new conservation labs that will better support Isabella Gardner’s celebrated collection. In the palace, historic gallery spaces will be returned closer to Isabella Gardner’s original compositions, including the Tapestry Room. The new wing will also feature improved services and highly visible greenhouses and gardens to provide a beautiful and inspiring experience for visitors.

With her museum, Isabella Stewart Gardner choreographed an experience to captivate the mind, elevate the senses, and awaken the spirit of all who visited. We build on this legacy today.

Building on a Legacy

Anne Hawley
Norma Jean Calderwood Director

Anders Zorn, Mrs. Gardner in Venice, 1894
“The Gardner Museum is one of the city’s greatest treasures. This project, with one of the world’s greatest architects, will give the Gardner the space it needs... so it can serve visitors from both near and far.”

— Thomas M. Menino, Mayor, City of Boston

When an institution is housed in an older building that is itself a distinguished work of architecture, there’s a special burden on the owner to maintain that level of excellence. The Gardner has stepped up to the plate on this issue by commissioning a building from Renzo Piano, acknowledged as one of the leading world architects of our time, a winner of the Pritzker Prize and the designer of such outstanding art museums as the De Menil in Houston and the Beyeler Foundation in Basel.

Piano’s design has been developed in collaboration with the museum staff and trustees. It’s unobtrusive in scale, so as not to compete with the palace. But it’s also ambitious. It seeks to be, itself, a work of art worthy of taking its place in the Gardner’s famous collection.

The Piano addition will decant from the palace many of the activities that have gathered there over the years during which the Gardner has been morphing from a private museum into a 21st-century civic institution. These activities have overcrowded the palace and, in many cases, have caused deterioration. Removing them will permit the palace to be restored closer to Mrs. Gardner’s intentions. There will also be basic new visitor amenities, starting with an adequate entry lobby.

Architecturally, the new building doesn’t try to floor you with some flabbergasting new shape, as do other recent museums. It’s simple, understandable, and logical. Nothing about it feels heavy or heavy-handed. Instead it is crisp, light, and transparent, reminiscent of nautical design, and thus a deliberate foil to the closed “plain brown wrapper” of the palace. A ground floor, wrapped in clear glass, welcomes you when you’re looking in from outside, and when you’re inside it opens up views of the palace across a newly landscaped garden. Upper levels are clad in patinated copper.

Piano has been careful to preserve the Gardner’s most frequently cited virtue, namely the famous explosion of space, light, and color you experience as you emerge into the courtyard. You’ll now come at the courtyard from a different angle, but the experience will be at least as dramatic as in the past.

The Gardner isn’t a loner. It’s one member of an extended family of cultural entities in the Fenway neighborhood of Boston. That membership is part of its strength. Taken as a whole, the Fenway institutions form a cultural cluster with few if any peers in the United States. It’s a green cluster: the institutions gather near the Back Bay Fens as art-maven guests might surround a green table.

Opposite what will be the Gardner’s new front door is Evans Way Park, already renovated with new trees, plantings, pathways, and benches. Nearby is the Museum of Fine Arts, which has now reopened its Fenway entrance, from which you can stand at the top of the stairs and look across the Fens to the lights of that more populist cultural institution, the Red Sox. A push is on for renovation of the neglected parkland.

All the arts, from Titian to a well-turned double play, are present in the Fenway. Besides the Gardner and the MFA, there’s a wealth of visual art at the Museum School, Mass College of Art, and other centers. There’s theater at the Huntington. There’s music at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, New England Conservatory, Boston Conservatory, and Berklee College of Music — and of course at the Gardner. There’s history at the Mass Historical Society. There are students everywhere, starting with Northeastern and its handsome new west campus. Architecture is studied there and at Wentworth, and soon may be an option at Mass Art. Many of these institutions — at least half, by my count — are actively at work on some kind of plan for physical improvements to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The new Gardner will not be an isolated entity, as it was both socially and geographically when it was founded by Isabella Stewart Gardner, but will be a part of a meta-cultural green world where nearly all the institutions — like the Gardner — are now reaching out to connect with the broader and more diverse audiences of our own time.

Building a Cultural Landmark for Boston

Robert Campbell
Architecture Critic
The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum faces urgent challenges to preserve the historic building (known as “the palace”) and its collection. The museum that welcomed 2,000 visitors a year during Isabella Stewart Gardner’s lifetime now hosts nearly 200,000 visitors, with 10,000 people attending concerts in the Tapestry Room a year. The demand for access and programming has outgrown the museum’s historic building.

In 2004, after an extensive strategic planning process, the Trustees determined that the future of the Gardner as a cultural and civic leader and its work in arts and education depend on building a new wing. Following the development of a master plan for the site, a bold and important choice was made — to build a functional space that is also a work of art. For this, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano was the ideal choice for the project.

The new wing is designed to meet the following objectives:

• To preserve the historic museum and collection;
• To increase space for programming in the Gardner’s five cornerstones — historic and contemporary art, music, landscape, and education — and enhance visitor amenities;
• To build a new cultural landmark for Boston.

The new building is designed to complement the historic museum building in scale and spirit. The project will be approximately 70,000 square feet and will feature a new entrance off Evans Way Park and the Emerald Necklace park system.

The Project

Program Space and Visitor Amenities

The new wing will include:

• A 300-seat performance hall
• A special exhibition gallery
• Two artist-in-residence apartments
• Education studios
• A visitors’ ‘Living Room’
• Café, shop, and admission facilities

Palace Preservation

An integral part of the project is the preservation of the historic building and collection. This will include:

• Reinstallation of several galleries to their original configurations, including the Tapestry Room;
• New conservation labs and art handling facilities, as well as archival storage;
• The removal of visitor services and administration to the new building to reduce wear and tear and ensure the long-term preservation of the historic building.

Endowment

Additional endowment funds will provide financial support for existing programs and the operation of the new building in order to secure the museum’s long-term fiscal stability.

The Campaign for the Gardner

The new wing, palace preservation, and endowment objectives will be supported by a $180 million comprehensive capital campaign.
“In front of a strong historical legacy you are always confronted with finding the right balance between discipline and freedom, respect and courage. The new building will be the respectful nephew to a grand, great aunt.”

— Renzo Piano, Architect

Rendered from Evans Way Park

Architect Renzo Piano has designed the new wing to complement the palace in scale and spirit. The new entrance off Evans Way Park and the Emerald Necklace park system will lead to a welcoming lobby and orientation space surrounded by gardens. Piano’s use of glass and transparency will allow visitors to look out on the landscape with a clear view of their ultimate destination — the palace and its historic galleries.

An energy-efficient system of geothermal wells will support both the museum’s heating and cooling systems, and the goal of the new building to be LEED-certified. Other green aspects of the project include daylight harvesting and water-efficient landscaping.

Material palette: glass, copper, brick
“The building is fragmented into several pieces so that (it)... is not just one building, but smaller volumes that don’t ‘aggress’ the palace.”

— Renzo Piano, Architect

Site plan of the new wing and the historic palace

In deference to the historic building, Piano chose to set the new wing 50 feet away and to articulate it in five pavilions, four of which ‘float’ above a transparent, light-infused first floor.

Architect’s model of the new wing and the palace
The visible greenhouse will include a classroom and will play an integral part in continuing the horticultural legacy initiated by Isabella Gardner in the museum’s beloved Courtyard. Two artist-in-residence apartments and work spaces — integrated above the greenhouse by the sloped glass roof — will welcome artists from all disciplines and cultures who are invited to live at the museum and explore the collection in an immersive way.

“Visitors will be able to experience the museum ‘at work’ — observing gardeners in the greenhouse, hearing musicians rehearse, seeing children create art inspired by their surroundings.”

— Barbara W. Hostetter, President of the Board of Trustees
**Cross-section of the Performance Hall (above the café)**

The performance hall is a world-class 300-seat, flexible-use hall for concerts, lectures, and community gatherings. It has three balcony levels around a central stage with front row seats for all. It features a skylight to let in natural light and will feature sublime acoustics. This arrangement is intended to create a distinct visual and acoustical experience in which participants feel a sense of community and belonging. (The performance hall will be named Calderwood Hall in recognition of a grant from The Calderwood Charitable Foundation.)

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**Special Exhibition Gallery**

The special exhibition gallery, at 2,000 square feet, is three times the size of the current space (above), and will support historical, scholarly, and contemporary exhibitions, and the artist-in-residence program. It will include an ante-gallery for light-sensitive objects, a north-facing glass wall overlooking the historic building, a skylight with micro-louvers for manipulating natural light, and a movable translucent ceiling for varying spatial conditions and specific exhibition needs.

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*“The idea of this performance hall is like a wood harmonic chamber…. As soon as you get in that space, it’s about music, but it’s something magical as well.”*  
— Renzo Piano, Architect
Preservation of the Historic Galleries

As part of the preservation of the historic museum building, the Tapestry Room will be restored to its original configuration, as seen in this photograph from the 1920s.

Lighting the Galleries

An initiative to upgrade lighting throughout the historic museum building was begun in 2004. This comprehensive project is designed to preserve the collection for generations to come with better management of potentially harmful light and to enhance the visitor experience with improved overall lighting. (Above, new period-style pendant fixtures and fiber optic lights have been installed in the Yellow Room.)

The transfer of visitor services and administrative offices to the new building will reduce wear and tear on the historic building and ensure its long-term preservation — a vital objective of the project.

The fourth floor of the new wing will feature new conservation labs. In addition, art handling facilities and on-site archival and collection storage will have purpose-built spaces in the lower level of the new building.

The third floor houses administrative offices and the second balcony level of the performance hall.

A member of the Gardner’s Conservation Department at work
“Renzo Piano’s distinguished architecture has captured admirers around the world for more than 30 years. His work is sculptural, beautiful, technically accomplished, and sustainable.”

— American Institute of Architects, 2008
The Five Cornerstones of Programming at the Gardner Museum

When Isabella Stewart Gardner opened her museum in 1903 she pioneered a new context for art in America. Her aim was to fire the imagination in a highly personal setting where visitors experienced music, performance, and contemporary art alongside the tranquility of gardens, and a magnificent collection of historic art.

Today the founder’s vibrant legacy thrives, not only in her evocative building and collection, but in the Gardner’s programs. The new wing will allow the museum to enhance and deepen these programs in the five cornerstones — the heart and soul of the Gardner’s mission.

Historic Art — Inspiring New Scholarship The museum’s collection includes more than 5,000 art objects spanning thirty centuries, including masterworks by Botticelli, Titian, Raphael, Degas, Rembrandt, and Sargent. It continually invites fresh ideas and inspires scholarship. Special exhibitions and publications encourage new thinking while sharing the collection with audiences around the world.

Contemporary Art — Discovering and Supporting New Talent The Gardner’s Artist-in-Residence program welcomes artists from all disciplines and cultures. Artists are invited to live at the museum for a month at a time and explore the collection in an immersive way. This often inspires new directions for their work including special exhibitions and projects at the museum. A leading arts funder described the program as “setting the gold standard.”

Music — Outstanding Artistry The Gardner is home to the oldest museum-based concert series in the country, featuring performances by chamber music ensembles, jazz collaborations, talented young musicians, contemporary composers, and instrumental and vocal soloists. Free podcasts are available on the museum’s website, providing these concerts to a worldwide audience.

Landscape — Visionary Spaces and Design The courtyard installations — at the very heart of the museum — change nine times a year and include signature displays of nasturtiums, orchids, and single-stem chrysanthemums. The Landscape Visions lectures draw new audiences eager to learn about horticulture history and traditions.

Education and Public Programs — Celebrating Creativity and Community Central to the museum’s mission, education guides every program initiative, revealing the Gardner as a source of inspiration and creativity, as well as a dynamic environment in which to experience a personal connection with art. The Gardner’s educators design a wide range of programs that enlighten adults, children, families, school groups, Boston’s academic and professional communities, and diverse area neighborhoods.