

Museum of Design Atlanta makes game-changing debut in Midtown

New space across from High adds to Midtown arts district

by Scott Henry

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Form has finally followed function for the [Museum of Design Atlanta](#).

Long trapped in a netherspace halfway between a hallway and a broom closet somewhere in a Peachtree Center office tower, MoDA has quietly won the real-estate lottery. It will soon open its doors in a spectacular new space in a remodeled building on Peachtree Street directly across from the High Museum.

The move, which will be consummated Sun., March 20, with the opening of *Passione Italiana*, an exhibition of Italian motorcycle design, is roughly equivalent to going straight from open-mic night at

the local coffee shop to playing Carnegie Hall. The game-changing potential of the relocation is not lost on MoDA's principals.

"This is what we've always talked about when we've dreamed about a location for the museum," says Bruce McEvoy, MoDA's board chairman, who helped score the new space. "The foot traffic alone will be a great thing for us. It was such a hurdle to get people into Peachtree Center."

Apart from the highly visible location and the proximity to the High, there's the exhibit space itself — all 6,500 square feet of it. With their clean, industrial lines and versatile concrete floors, the two main galleries could just as easily house a minimalist clothing boutique or modern furniture store. The front desk area can double as a reception space and the back gallery has a vaulted ceiling with windows stretching up two stories. There's now a built-in A/V system with ceiling-mounted digital projectors; track lighting that switches on in the blink of a motion detector; and banks of security cameras.

While these amenities might be standard equipment at an amply endowed museum, they're a head-spinning novelty for MoDA, as Brenda Galina, the museum's director of three years, can confirm.

"It wasn't really a museum before," she says. "It was a lobby and an office. And, since we didn't have climate or lighting control, we couldn't show textiles or other delicate materials."

In fairness, the museum wasn't exactly trapped in its previous space, which had been donated in the mid-'90s by the owners of downtown's Marquis II Tower. But the out-of-the-way — and partially upstairs — location virtually ensured that the museum's only visitors were design freaks and conventioners who couldn't afford a rental car.

By the early aughts, the museum, then operating under the catch-all name of Atlanta International Museum of Art and Design, also was struggling with a too-broad mission. In 2003, after receiving a series of life-saving local grants, the group rebranded and refocused itself as a design museum, launching a critically lauded run of exhibits on subjects such as Bauhaus virtuoso Marcel Breuer, Japanese architecture and ladies handbag design.

Critically lauded, perhaps, but modestly viewed. That, however, should soon change.

"I took this job with the idea of taking the museum to the next level," Galina says, "but I never thought we'd end up right across the street from the High."

As the way these things usually happen, MoDA's good fortune came about through connections. Board Chairman McEvoy is an architect with Perkins + Will, a national commercial design firm that recently overhauled the unremarkable former Invesco headquarters at 1315 Peachtree St. into a modern, street-friendly, LEED Platinum home for its Atlanta offices, complete with rooftop trellis.

McEvoy approached the firm's CEO, Phil Harrison — also a MoDA board member — with the idea of inviting MoDA to set up shop on the ground floor. The building's second floor is occupied by a public library, a holdover from an existing long-term lease agreement. The architecture firm expanded the back of the building onto what had been an unsightly parking lot, losing valuable parking spaces for the sake of enhanced curb appeal and more gallery space. The firm even designed and built out MoDA's interior, which includes stylish offices overlooking 15th Street. The overhaul cost an estimated \$1.5 million.

For the museum, the move was a no-brainer, with one caveat: Rent would be discounted and deferred, but it would no longer be free — no small consideration for a nonprofit with only two full-time staffers and an annual budget of about \$800,000.

Galina, for one, is too busy preparing the new space for its inaugural show to sweat the issue of rent just yet.

"Eventually, we'll have to pay Perkins + Will back, but the trade-off is a landlord who is eager to make everything perfect for us," she says.

Galina also acknowledges that the Midtown venue is certain to attract more grants, gifts and corporate sponsorships, as well as higher-profile exhibitions. In the old space, the Italian motorcycle show — which features 11 rare and high-end bikes from Alabama's Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum — would have been crowded into corners and split across two floors. Now, the bikes can be shown to full effect to sizable crowds. And the street-level visibility will allow the show to snare passers-by, not simply museum members or readers of arts listings.

Arguably, it's also a great time to be showcasing design, considering that such prominent manufacturers and retailers as Apple and Target have helped elevate great design to the forefront of public consciousness, making aesthetic appeal as important a consumer consideration as price and durability.

Although MoDA hasn't struck up any collaborations with the High just yet, McEvoy anticipates a trickle-down effect from having thousands of arts patrons a stone's throw from the design museum's doorstep.

"We're very excited to have MoDA as across-the-street neighbors," says Joe Bankoff, president of the Woodruff Arts Center, of which the High is a component. "We're very impressed with the building and it adds to Midtown's status as Atlanta's art center. It's terrific synergy."

Speaking of synergy, the Savannah College of Art and Design, Midtown's other arts behemoth just around the bend of Peachtree Street, would also seem to hold rich possibilities for future collaboration with MoDA.

But for now, Galina is focused on lining up the museum's next few exhibits, which are typically planned a year or so out. Next up is *WaterDream*, a survey of the history of bathroom design, followed by a retrospective of a quarter-century of international AIDS posters. Then, she's considering a collection of costumes meticulously made of paper by Dutch artist Isabelle de Borchgrave, or perhaps an exhibition of architectural models by white-hot octogenarian Frank Gehry.

Those shows would cost plenty, but Galina is cautiously hopeful that MoDA's move will result in a boost to the museum's fortunes.

She notes: "It really is all about location, location, location."