

Expanding a Vision

A Chat About the Museum's Planned Expansion

Leslie-Lohman Museum Board of Directors President Jonathan David Katz and Museum Director Hunter O'Hanian

Jonathan David Katz (JDK): So let's tell people what we've planned.

Hunter O'Hanian (HOH): It's really pretty simple. We are going to expand the Museum into the former retail space next to our existing location at 26 Wooster Street. We will be taking over all of the ground floor space north to Grand Street.

JDK: How did this come about?

HOH: Well, as you know, last autumn, we started looking at the possibility of expanding the Museum and even moving to another location. We looked at a few other buildings in the downtown area. There was one building on the Bowery we looked at which was over 30,000 square feet.

JDK: Yes, It would have made a magnificent queer museum. It was such a beautiful building, but it was, we all realized, too much space too fast. It became clear that at 3,800 square feet presently, we needed to think about an interim step before we moved to a larger location. We learned that the space next door was going to be

available this year and we started planning to see if it made sense. We moved into our existing space in 2006. Expanding next door is something we had talked about for a while.

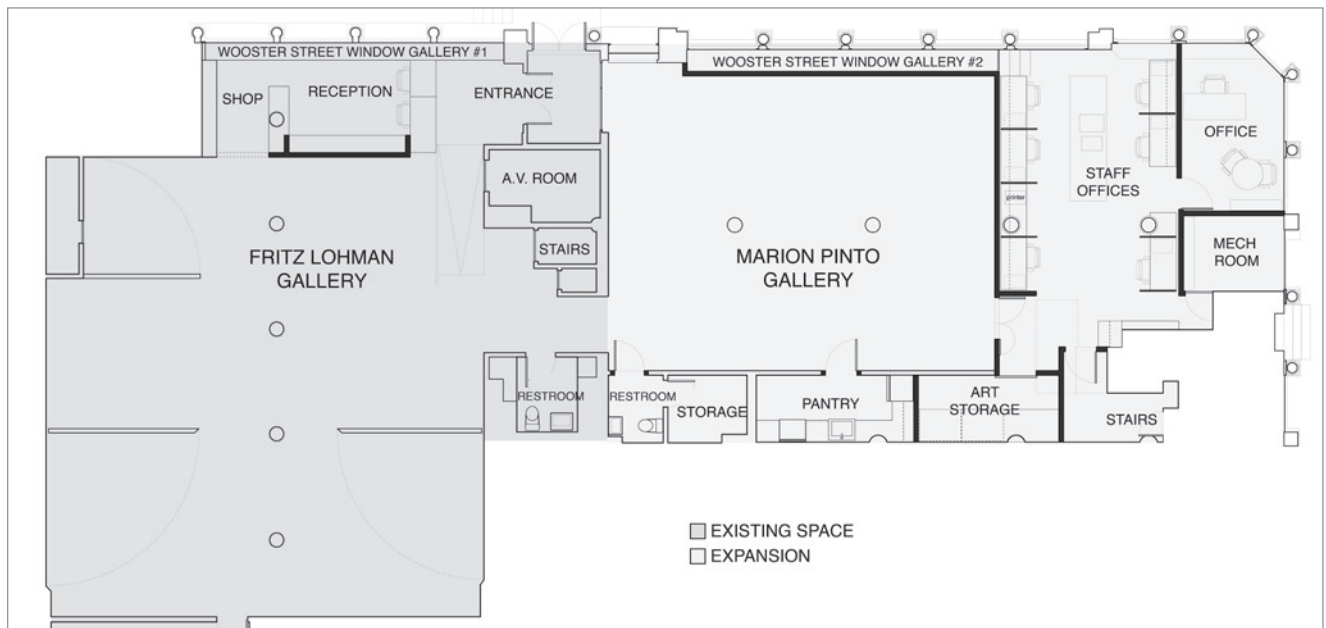
HOH: It seemed it was a natural move for us. It will allow us to expand in a gradual, controlled fashion while at the same time make many facility-related improvements. This move will give us many important gains. And a lot of this came out of the strategic planning process we began last summer.

JDK: That was a helpful process, and we now have a three-year strategic plan that identifies our goals and values and sets out a clear plan going forward. There is a lot of work to do, but it all seems doable. This has been a good process so far. These things can be tricky, but we've worked hard to incorporate everyone. The Board set up a board/staff committee to help support the project and assist in the planning and design. So the entire staff will be involved in the planning. Let's take a look at the plans.

HOH: Well, when we started looking at the possibility of expanding into the space, we developed a program design schematic. We wanted to see what options the additional space would give us. We have been fortunate to secure the services of Steven Keith, a New York architectural firm with the experience and credentials to help us with the expansion. They have been great so far, as has Museum member Curtis Estes, who assisted us with creating the initial design schematics.

JDK: The most important thing is that the expansion will allow us to add an additional gallery, roughly the same size as our existing exhibition space, to continue our programming dedicated to preserving and exhibiting work that speaks to the entire queer community.

HOH: While at the same time we are available to anyone interested in visiting a professional museum in New York. Our vision is clear: We will continue building a destination museum with a dedicated LGBTQ focus on par with other small, excellent museums in New York, like the



Floor plan showing the existing gallery space and the expansion.

Studio Museum of Harlem, El Museo del Barrio, the Rubin, or the Jewish Museum.

JDK: Agreed. When we are done with this expansion, we will have doubled our size.

HOH: This is an important step for two reasons. First, with two major galleries, we can be open 365 days a year. Now, we are closed between 10 and 14 days for the de-installation and installation of exhibitions. With two galleries, we will always be open to the public. It will mean a lot to our visitors. Nothing is more heartbreaking than seeing two women from Amsterdam at the front door, with only three days in New York, who want to visit the Leslie-Lohman Museum, and we are closed for installation.

JDK: Exactly, I've seen this happen way too often.

HOH: The second major programmatic change is that we are committed to displaying work from the Museum's collection at all time in one of the two galleries. This is very important as it gives us opportunities to show much of the work in our collection that has not been exhibited.

JDK: The other major change is that we are going to offer the staff a more professional working environment that will allow them to do their jobs without a whole host of interruptions.

HOH: Yes, and we will have better places for meetings and conversations, which will allow for greater productivity.

JDK: The visitor will see more changes as well, as there will be a dedicated visitor greeting area and also a real book/gift shop. We will continue the Wooster Street Windows Gallery, which we will expand significantly—it'll be the greater street presence so many of us have wanted.

HOH: Another great benefit will be the ability to expand our collections area and improve our storage of objects borrowed from other institutions and individuals for exhibition. As you know, we have been borrowing more work recently from institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. With those loans come requirements regarding storage; this will allow us to better meet those requirements.



Exterior view of the space into which Leslie-Lohman Museum will expand, north to Grand St.

JDK: These expansions will also help us as we move forward in developing an educational program. We already have the most robust queer arts speaker and tour program in New York, but this expansion will allow us to expand those efforts even more.

HOH: As a museum, we are primarily an educational institution. Everything we do in this area is important.

JDK: So what's the time frame? What are the needs?

HOH: We have secured the space, devised a plan, identified the funding, and are now

moving forward. I am hopeful that if all goes according to plan we can be open in the newly renovated space by the end of 2015 or beginning of 2016. But we need to increase our membership base to help cover costs. We're hoping members can talk to their friends about joining. We're a free museum, so membership is one of our few sources of income.

JDK: It's an ambitious plan—no question—but it's totally doable. This expansion is the next step in the Museum's amazingly fast growth. We only became a museum four years ago, and we're already doubling in size! ■