

EVERSON SHOULD GO BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

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In the past few months a fierce debate has raged in the bankrupt city of Detroit about the future of its famed Detroit Institute of Arts.

Because the city owns the museum's collection, pensioners and bondholders who face economic ruin argue that the paintings and other art objects should be sold to satisfy some of the city's massive debt.

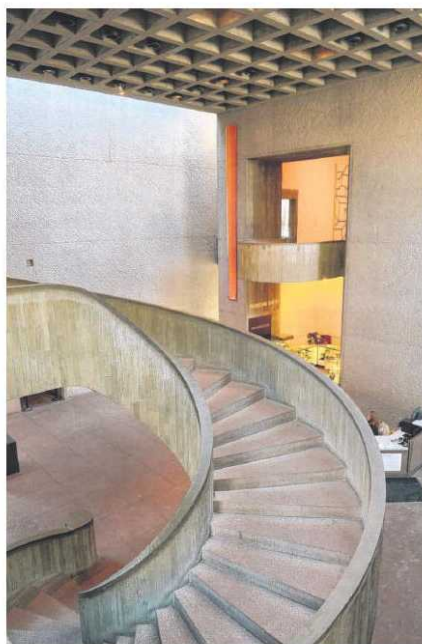
This would put works by Matisse, Van Gogh, Bruegel, Degas and others on the market, and it would gut the museum.

Opponents of the sale argue this is no way to help "save" the city. Losing its art museum would cost Detroit its cultural soul. It would be destroying what's most valuable about a city in order to save it.

In response to this possible cultural catastrophe, local foundations, corporations and donors have put together a fund that could reach \$800 million to buy the museum and its contents from the city. This money would then be turned over to the creditors.

I had this story in mind when the Everson Museum of Art announced in January that it was so strapped for cash it was canceling two traveling exhibitions for which ads had appeared on its website and docents were being trained. Both exhibitions would have brought more people

SOLVE MONEY WOES BY FINDING
COLLABORATIVE WAYS TO GIVE
THE COMMUNITY MORE, NOT LESS



Inside the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse.
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downtown, encouraged donors and maintained the energy ignited by the museum's former director, Steve Kern, who opposed the decision to cancel.

The Everson is not the Detroit Institute of Arts, but one could argue it plays a similar role in the revival of downtown Syracuse and in the cultural life of Central New York.

By canceling the exhibitions the museum's board created serious problems for itself. It will now be seen as an unreliable partner for other touring exhibitions. It disappointed its audience, which was eagerly awaiting these shows. The situation is reminiscent of the floundering Syracuse Symphony that canceled the visit of cellist Yo-Yo Ma just before it went under in 2011, deeply disappointing many SSO supporters.

The Everson board faces at least two major challenges as it deliberates what to do next.

First, it has little money to work with. In 2012 the museum reported only \$1.3 million in membership fees, donations and government grants, about the same total it raised in 2008. Its loss for the year was \$460,000, after losing \$310,000 in 2011. It realizes little income from a small endowment. Why donors, local foundations and the county are not more generous in supporting the museum is worth a separate discussion, but this is the reality. All our cultural organizations face this.

Second, the museum's perma-

EVERSON, PAGE E-4

Everson should offer more, not less

EVERSON, FROM PAGE E-1

nent collection is very small: only 11,000 objects. The best parts are ceramics and porcelains, which are not as popular with audiences as paintings and sculptures. It can't mount many shows drawn from its own holdings, as larger museums can.

However, there are some potentially attractive options to address both the programming problem and the revenue problem.

The museum could partner more often with other institutions to mount exhibitions. The Onondaga Historical Association has 800 paintings and prints, and not much of its own gallery space. This includes a large collection of 19th century portraits. Exhibiting those portraits and telling the stories of the sitters could yield some engaging shows.

The museum could explore a closer connection with Syracuse University to access its large art collection. SU has neither the gallery space nor the parking to mount many public exhibitions on the campus, so why not offer the Everson as a downtown location?

The museum could also display more work from our many esteemed local artists, such as Carrie Mae Weems, Darryl Hughto and Susan Roth. In 2011 the museum offered a successful exhibition of pottery by Syracuse's David MacDonald, who has an international reputation.

One way or another, the Everson must constantly display new work to get people into the habit of making frequent visits.

On the revenue front, the OHA has demonstrated that it's possible, with some imagination, to increase "earned income," as opposed to donations or grants. For example, the OHA's Gregg Tripoli obtained the original candy recipes of Syracuse's Mary Elizabeth Evans, a very successful chocolatier from the early 20th century. Some of her candies are now being made and sold at Lune Chocolat in Manlius, with some of the proceeds going to the OHA.

The OHA also has a huge collection of logos and ads from long-vanished local brewers. Tripoli is working with retailer Fishs Eddy in New York City to sell

pilsner glasses, beer trays and other items with the old Congress Beer logo (from Haberle Congress Brewing on Butternut). Again, proceeds are split.

Perhaps the Everson could team up with jewelry designers and ceramicists to mine its own great collection for retailing options.

The smartest arts administrator in the U.S., Michael Kaiser, has written in "The Art of the Turnaround" that no arts organization can cut its way to prosperity. New York City Opera slashed its season in response to budget woes and is now defunct. Programming is always the key for an arts organization, which is why canceling the exhibitions was so damaging. Programming brings in the audience. From these audiences come new members, donors and perhaps even more corporate and government support.

If the Everson is not a beacon in the city's cultural life, Syracuse will have a hard time selling itself as anything other than a city with a big mall and a basketball team, just as Detroit would not be Detroit without the Institute of Arts.