

Sean O'Harrow's Exit Interview: Figge Executive Director Accepts University of Iowa Museum Position

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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In Sean O'Harrow's telling, the Figge Art Museum is gaining an ally as much as it's losing an executive director.

It was announced last week that O'Harrow has accepted the directorship of the University of Iowa Museum of Art (UIMA), at which he'll start on November 15. A national search for O'Harrow's replacement is expected to take at least four months.

"It is my faith in this region that is keeping me here," O'Harrow said in an interview Friday. "I think there's a lot that eastern Iowa can achieve. There are a lot of great museums and great cultural offerings which I think need to be better promoted, to a certain extent organized, maybe coordinated."

And he said that after three years as executive director, he's leaving the Figge in good shape. "It's a very stable institution right now, and it's offering some very high-quality programs," O'Harrow said. "And if I can help the UIMA, I think that would be a very powerful pairing ... It was important for me to offer my services."

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O'Harrow has already proved that he believes in partnerships, especially between the University of Iowa and the Figge. As he put it in an understated way: "It is obvious to a lot of people that the University of Iowa's art is in this building."

After the flood of 2008 in Iowa City -- which forced the University of Iowa to remove the artwork from its museum -- O'Harrow offered the Figge for storage of its 12,000 works of art. That facilitated the 2009 Figge exhibit *A Legacy for Iowa*, which included many of the UIMA's most-famous works -- including Jackson Pollock's seminal *Mural*

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As the next UIMA director, O'Harrow will be charged with building a new art museum to replace the flooded one. O'Harrow in that process will have an impact on the Figge, as the UIMA size and structure will determine whether the Figge's housing of University of Iowa art is a short- or longer-term arrangement.

But given his record at the Figge, it's a good bet that O'Harrow will continue to strengthen the relationship between the two museums.

"We've been discussing things with the University of Iowa since 2008," O'Harrow said. "And so I've had discussions with them about all sorts of ways we can help and combine efforts and save money" Later in our interview, he summarized: "I'm offended at duplication and redundancy and overspending in certain areas."

Interrelated Accomplishments

O'Harrow said he wasn't looking for a new job when the University of Iowa search committee approached him.

"As a museum director, you get phone calls all the time," he said. "I wasn't tempted at all."

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O'Harrow was vague about why he was tempted this time, but he gives the impression that he's the type of person who needs new challenges. (The University of Iowa job will reportedly pay O'Harrow \$190,000 a year. He admits he'll be getting a pay boost but said it will likely be eaten up by a higher cost of living. He declined to say how much he makes at the Figge.)

O'Harrow didn't accomplish all his articulated goals at the Figge -- especially building the museum's endowment -- and he said that he would have liked more time at the museum: "Perhaps if this came a little later, it would have made a little more sense, but the timing is what it is."

Overall, though, he talks like somebody satisfied with what he checked off his to-do list. When I asked him to list five accomplishments that define his tenure, he offered them with barely a pause. Critically, they're interrelated, all working toward the long-term health of the institution.

O'Harrow listed the accomplishments in no particular order, he stressed.

- "The art in the building is a much higher order," he said. The permanent galleries have been reorganized so that visitors enter in the 20th Century and explore in a more organized fashion.

- "We've built some pretty important partnerships," he said, citing those with both the University of Iowa and Western Illinois University, some of whose works will be on display soon. The Figge also hosted the first public exhibit of works from the Deere & Company corporate collection. "It covers areas that we've never completely covered, like South America and eastern Europe and Japan," O'Harrow said of Deere. "That relationship can develop further as well."

- O'Harrow said he's helped raise the local, national, and international profile of the museum, through its assistance with the University of Iowa flood recovery and the Deere collection. He also cited a 2008 exhibit that represented the U.S. premiere of tapestries by Henry Moore. Museum board member and U.S. Bank Regional President Ken Koupal said O'Harrow helped "put the Figge on the map."

- "We've done very well in integrating the mission of the museum into the larger development plan of the Quad Cities," O'Harrow said. This was done, in part, by convincing economic-development leaders in the Quad Cities that arts and culture are essential to attracting visitors and residents to an area. "You can't build an institution like this and walk away from it," he said. "It exists for a reason that is greater than just showing art." Specifically, he said, the Figge is "an essential part of RiverVision. ... It [the five-year-old Figge building] has become iconic. It is probably the most famous building in the Quad Cities now, perhaps."

- "I'm proud to have steered this institution through the recession which has totally battered and in some cases destroyed other art museums in the country," O'Harrow said. "We have not

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only remained stable but walked out in as good a [financial] shape if not better than when it started. We now offer significantly more." He said the Figge trimmed its operational budget to make ends meet but has had a balanced budget each year. "We managed to weather the recession smelling like roses," he said. "Every one of my colleague institutions has suffered."

Making a Stronger Case

That's undoubtedly a significant accomplishment, but it's also important to note that O'Harrow fell short of his goals related to the Figge's reserves and endowment. This is particularly crucial because O'Harrow has from the outset cast an endowment as a way for the Figge to offer more to the community without having to charge for it. Included in this was the goal of free admission.

"With a \$50-million endowment, the institution would be able to do things for the community that it wouldn't have to worry about paying for," he [told me in early 2008](#) . "I would see an endowment of between \$20 [million] and \$50 million as a way of buying freedom for the institution to serve the community."

He also said: "We have to get the endowment to \$20 million in the next three years."

[In an interview in early 2009](#) , he reiterated the importance of a \$20-million endowment, and said that was still feasible by 2011.

But as he prepares to leave, the endowment and reserves stand at roughly the same \$5 million that they were when he started.

O'Harrow joked that the Figge was fortunate not to have had a large endowment, given what the recession did to investments.

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But he added that the recession made significant fundraising impossible, and that the museum needed to lay operational and mission groundwork prior to a capital campaign.

"When I started the job, I thought that raising money would be the most important aspect of the position," he explained. "And it was and still is. But what occurred to me fairly quickly was that the institution needed to be accepted in the community better, the mission had to be better integrated in the needs of the Quad Cities ... , and the role that it played in the development of the Quad Cities had to be better defined. ... I realized that in order to raise ... sufficient amounts of money, I would need to sort those things out first."

Plus: "We needed to wait for this [recession] to subside Wealthy people had lost so much of their wealth that really no one was in any position to give significantly."

He said that in 2008, the plan was to start a quiet fundraising campaign that year. Now, he said, the Figge is again preparing for that "silent" phase.

"The case is much stronger now than it was then," he said. "Before, it was a museum that wasn't firing on all cylinders. The ask would have been, 'Look what this *could* become.'" Now the Figge can point to what it

is

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Koupal said O'Harrow has been successful at making the Figge "an art museum for the whole community and the whole region."

O'Harrow said that the Figge has had to create a "new model which is not necessarily seen in other cities. ... The model that we're pursuing is entirely new. ... It wasn't like I was going to be able to learn from other places how to do it." He described the model as "using partnerships to not only broaden your capability but strengthen your offerings, deepen your offerings."

He agreed with the assertion that the Figge's collection by itself isn't enough to sustain the museum: "In the sense that the collection perhaps was less appropriate for what the institution

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needs to do in the community. That's because the collection is very old."

Beyond expanding the collection through partnerships and collaborations, the Figge has also become more education-oriented, O'Harrow said. That includes changing the way the museum approaches schools. In the past, he said, the Davenport Museum of Art and the Figge "were sending out people teaching art. [Now] we're sending out people teaching other subjects using art. Art is not an end; it's a means to an end."

For example, a visiting instructor might teach about the Holocaust (or social studies or science) through art. This is necessary, he said, because schools today prioritize core subjects, often at the expense of secondary areas such as art. "Teaching art in a school system that doesn't value art as much is not a great program," O'Harrow said. "But teaching subjects that they do value using art is to me what art is all about. It's a way of communicating with people."

And that reflects his philosophy on the role of the Figge overall: "It isn't an art museum and it isn't art for art's sake, or an art museum's sake. It is an art museum as a way of developing our community, a way of educating our community, ... a way of communicating ideas. When people see culture in that way, they appreciate it."