

History in the making

Boston has an astounding wealth of history, culture and character to share with the world. Even as we face a recession, our region must continue to protect and invest in its cultural assets. This sector, far from being a luxury, attracts tourists and an engaged, talented workforce. Both help sustain the region's economic vitality. Yet unlike the financial sector, museums cannot expect a government bailout. Bold new thinking and a look to the lessons of history are in order.

At this week's History & Innovation Awards, supporters of the Boston Museum announced a merger with the highly regarded Boston History and Innovation Collaborative. The merger heeds the advice of the mayor, the Boston Foundation and others who have pleaded with nonprofits to pool their talents and resources. This new history museum and urban marketplace planned for the Rose Kennedy Greenway will benefit from the Collaborative's extensive research capabilities and vital relationships. The Collaborative will help plan exhibits and programs.

More such mergers, alliances and joint ventures are planned. The museum is forging a collaboration with The Sports Museum to provide a visible and additional platform for its rich collection, currently housed at TD Banknorth Garden. It promises space for Theatre Espresso, a troupe that produces original historical plays. It has engaged potential partners such as Plimoth Plantation and the Boston Irish Heritage Trail in early conversations about possible future collaborations. Educational programs, in partnership with Facing History and Ourselves and Massachusetts 2020

are already under way.

Still, setting aside mission-worthiness for a moment, is it foolhardy to think that a new museum in Boston, even one created by strong partnerships, will survive?

The next few years look lean. But rather than fold in the face of scarce funding, the Boston Museum will expand audiences, bringing new patrons to the downtown historic sites and magnificent new parks. Consult-Econ Inc., an economic research and management consulting firm based in Boston, has concluded that the project is financially feasible and that "the available markets for the Boston Museum are large. ... Boston has not had

many new visitor attractions in the last 25 years, and this project will add to the excitement of Boston as a destination for regional residents, tourists, and convention planners."

The Boston History & Innovation Collaborative's own research reminds us that the Museum of Fine Arts was

funded and built during a challenging time. The aftermath of Boston's Great Fire of 1872 created a need to build downtown. The economic Panic of 1873 decreased wealth, just as today's crisis has. Yet the MFA was built and opened in 1876 — a lesson from our cultural past that may, if we pay heed, guide us in building a better future.

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LINDA WHITLOCK is former Nicholas President & CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston and a member of the board of directors of the Boston Museum.

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