

THE DEAL

BUSINESS ON SUNDAY



CHARLA DINES/TORONTO STAR

Gail and Barry Lord, co-founders of Toronto-based LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management, at Cherry Beach, near the future site of the Humanitas museum.

MUSEUM MAESTROS

Selling culture is big business, globally — as two Canadian entrepreneurs know only too well, having virtually invented the industry 25 years ago.

The map of the world in the boardroom of LORD Cultural Resources Planning & Management on Davenport Road in Toronto shows 1,300 projects in 32 countries in which the firm has been involved.

Gail Dexter Lord, president, and Barry Lord, vice president, are a compelling pair, and surprisingly modest (Canadian to their roots, I guess) given their list of current contracts — from the Louvre in Paris to the World Trade Centre redevelopment in New York, the Bilbao Guggenheim, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg, Constitution Hill (former prisons) in South Africa, the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, the National Discovery Museum of Thailand, the Motown Center in Detroit, and on and on.

They run the largest firm of its kind in the world, with 45 employees and offices in Paris, Berlin, Hong Kong, London, New York, San Francisco and Washington.

At home, they're working on the master plan for Humanitas, a \$20 million museum that will anchor Toronto's long-delayed waterfront revitalization and tell the story of the city to its citizens and to the world. And the Canadian Music Hall of Fame. And the African Canadian Heritage Network. They helped the notoriously troubled McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg come up with a new vision, and they're working with Canada's native peoples to create the National Gallery of Aboriginal Art in Vancouver.

What is culture, after all, but storytelling — reflecting human activity and creativity in engaging forms? We crave meaning and purpose to illuminate our lives.

This is the Lords' territory, one Gail Dexter started mining straight out of U of T with a history degree, working as an art critic at the *Star* in the mid-1960s, where she attracted the attention of a young arts intellectual, Barry Lord.

"Gail Dexter was known as a leading feminist," Barry says. "The first time I met her I had an

argument with her about Clement Greenberg. I quickly realized she was right and I observed how staunchly she stuck to her position."

When he heard she'd left the *Star*, he arranged to interview her. Telling the story, laughing and joking, the pair step out of their yellow Thunderbird convertible to have their portrait taken on the waterfront on a breezy June day.

"I prepared some provocative questions designed to get a feminist going," Barry says. They had a big fight that they both found exciting — and here they are today, on top of the world.

In fact, they live on top of their shop, in a loft. Their two children are grown and gone, allowing the senior Lords to flit around the globe unimpeded. In a few weeks, they leave for their chalet in Bordeaux, on France's Atlantic coast, from where they will work on their project at the Louvre and Gail will deliver a speech in Turin.

"I've always been a popularizer of arts and culture," says Gail, describing their professional origins. "Barry knew museums from the inside out, while I knew them from the outside in."

At McMaster and Harvard grad, Barry Lord worked for Canada's national museums system in Ottawa during much of the 1970s. It was a golden era, he says, thanks to "Trudeau, Belletier and Marchand who came to Ottawa (from Quebec) inspired by a vision of democratization and decentralization in cultural policy."

Lord wrote *Toward a People's Art: The History of Painting in Canada*, and from 1977 to 1981 worked for the Museum Assistance Program, setting up specialized museum programs across the country.

"Smaller exhibition centres were opened in places like Thunder Bay and Rimouski. Money was put into the big museums to develop exhibitions that would be sent across the country and around the world."

"The cultural expertise developed by Canada was fantastic," Barry says. "It was a very effective operation, and it was killed by the Mulroney Conservatives."

Out of Barry's Ottawa experi-

ence came the Lords' first book, *Planning Our Museums*, with contributions from other experts, published by the government in 1983. The book was the first of its kind in the world and it paved the way for an enduring series of three subsequent manuals devoted to museum planning, management and exhibitions, which established the Lords' expertise internationally.

There are 40,000 museums in the world with new institutions being conceived in all corners of the globe, providing a steady market for the Lords' talents. (They have to compete for most jobs; most projects are tied in to public institutions.)

For instance: In the early 1990s, Salford, an industrial suburb of Manchester, England, sought to develop a cultural centre to improve its rundown image; when its efforts to get funding for an opera house were rebuffed, the community turned to LORD for help.

Gail Lord took on the project; typically Gail and Barry handle different jobs. She helped the citizens of Salford to refocus. She discovered a large collection of paintings by L.S. Lowry, a native son, in a shabby city gallery. Most of his paintings were in the basement — but Lowry, she learned, was the third most asked-for artist at the Tate in London. His populist paintings of mines and mills — working-class subject matter — were much loved by the English public, though dismissed by art critics.

Gail suggested the Lowry collection be made the centrepiece of the Salford arts centre. "You have a fantastic cultural resource here," she said. The people worried. "Is he good enough? Is he worth it?"

At home, they're working on a museum to revitalize Toronto's waterfront

LORD's six-year planning process produced spectacular results. Located on the historic Manchester ship canal, the \$284 million Lowry, as the arts centre is known, is the jewel of an area now transformed by new business and residential development. In 2001, it was named the U.K.'s Building of the Year for the Millennium Year 2000.

The City of Toronto's cultural director, Rita Davies, says the Lords' strength is that "they don't take a cookie-cutter approach. Gail is extraordinarily well informed about cultural policy, strategy and the links between economics and tourism development."

But staying alive in the cultural sector is not all glory.

"There have been lean years, we've been affected by economic cycles and our clients are constrained by budget limitations," Gail says.

Yet business has never been better. The firm is expanding in joint ventures with local partners in Paris and Berlin, "an exciting new way for us to grow," Gail says.

It is a peak moment for them to be working at the Louvre — on a new Islamic Gallery that opens in 2010 — and as part of the World Trade Centre team in planning the subterranean museum to commemorate the events of 9/11 in New York.

Last week, Barry was in a different city every day, answering his cellphone in Vancouver, where he was in meetings for the National Gallery of Aboriginal Art. The next day he was in Nashville for the Museum of African American Music, Art and Culture, which requires him to think about the history of gospel and jazz.

"It's fun," he says, "and it comes out of the Canadian experience. Because Canada is the way it is, with two official languages and tremendous cultural diversity, you learn sensitivity to different groups and you learn what we've got in common — Aboriginal artists in Canada, African American musicians in Nashville..."

Gail's last word is practical. "Let us know when the story appears so we can show it to our bank manager."