THE EXHIBITIONISTS

They advised the Bilbao, worked on the Louvre and are helping transform Abu Dhabi into the cultural jewel of the Middle East. No wonder Gail and Barry Lord are the go-to couple for anyone looking to cash in on the global museum boom

By Joanna Pachner **Photographs** Dominic Nahr

One of the Lords' latest projects is the expansion of Istanbul's Sadberk Hanim Museum

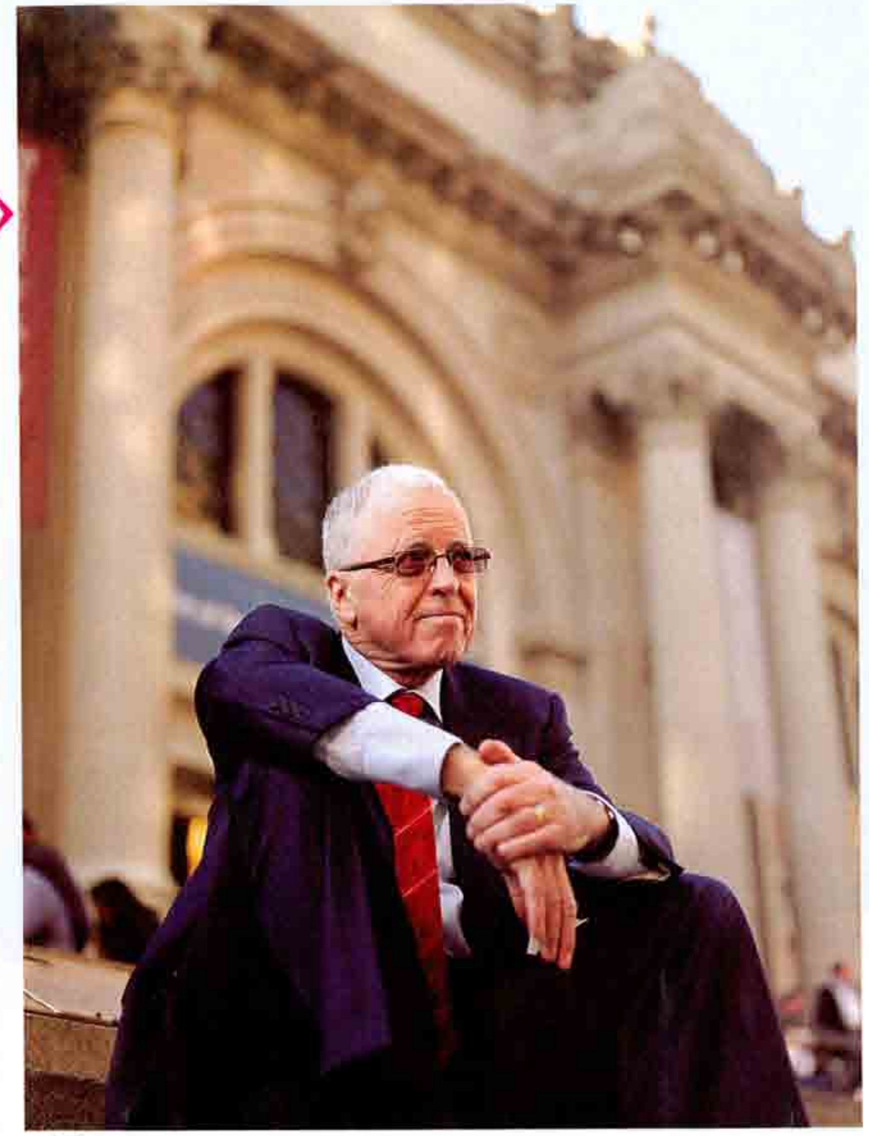
Guggenheim Bilbao, the "starchitect" museum that transformed a derelict Spanish port into a money-spinning tourist hot spot, is now an urban-planning legend. But before there was Guggenheim Bilbao, there was the Lowry. It's a story Gail Lord, president of Toronto's Lord Cultural Resources Inc., loves to tell because it drives home both the economic healing power of culture and the international clout of her firm. Back in the mid-1980s, Salford Quays, a shuttered shipyard near Manchester, England, was the poorest place in all of Western Europe. Luckily, its impoverishment made it eligible for buckets of development money from the European Union. Local planners envisioned a Sydney-style opera house as the central feature of a redeveloped neighbourhood. "Can you imagine anything more ridiculous than an opera house in the poorest, poorest..." Lord shakes her head in astonishment.

With her rapid-fire speaking style, infectious ebullience and cat's-eye glasses, Lord has the air of a chic hostess-socialite, and as she spins her tale, the energy level in the company's sleek, light-filled boardroom spikes noticeably. She was brought in to salvage Salford's rejected funding bid, and as she ventured out into the community, she discovered that the town had the world's largest collection of art by L.S. Lowry, the early-20th-century artist who is one of the most beloved painters in England. With her usual brio, Lord persuaded the planners to regroup around an art gallery, then oversaw the concept, facility and engineering plans, and had the collection moved into the flashy new building. Helped partly by a letter-writing campaign by Lowry fans, the gallery received £85 million from three government agencies, becoming the U.K.'s best-funded millennium project. Lord visited the site late last year and found it surrounded by hotels, high-end condos and—she gasps in mock horror—a sprawling Lowry Outlet Mall. The neighbourhood, she notes, will soon be home to the BBC's new "Media City" offices.

The Lowry is the kind of financial and critical success that has made Lord and her husband, Barry, the go-to couple for anyone looking to cash in on the global museum boom. Over the past 25 years, their company has had a hand in most significant building or expansion projects in the field. They advised the Bilbao to focus on its Spanish heritage; they crafted the concept and designed the facilities for the planned September 11 Memorial & Museum on the site of the former World Trade Center. They've run architectural competitions, drafted operating and program plans or conducted visitor research for the Louvre, the Tate Modern and the Smithsonian. In Canada, the Lords put most of the flesh on the bones of the Asper family's dream for the Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, among numerous other projects. But none of these comes close to the monster job they've taken on this year: the $30-billion transformation of an island off the coast of Abu Dhabi into the arts jewel of the Middle East. With four museums (including the first foreign branch of the Louvre and the latest Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim outpost), as well as art pavilions, a performing arts centre and dozens of hotels, Saadiyat Island is billed as the largest cultural project in history. Naturally, the Lords are all over it. "Museums are a tremendous growth industry," says Barry. "If there's value in what you're doing, you need a museum to prove that. Surveys show people who distrust church, schools and the media will respect the authority of the museum."

Driven by the desire to re-create the so-called Bilbao effect and attract the wealthy cultural tourist, every city, town and hamlet with something to commemorate is sprouting a museum. In the U.K., a new one has opened, on average, every two weeks for years now. North America, meanwhile, has seen an explosion in children's museums and specialized institutions celebrating everything from famous former residents (Timmins, Ontario, home of the Shania Twain Centre!) to novelty pursuits (Albuquerque International Balloon Museum: "It's more than you imagine"). "We're almost moving into a city-state competition among cities," says Gail Lord, "and that's the big motor" for museum-building.

With only about 40 staffers spread across nine offices from New York to Beijing, the Lords' company nevertheless consults on everything from managing collections to how many clerks should be hired to run the gift store. "We're always worrying about who takes out the garbage and where it goes," jokes Barry. In the process, they've helped guide a major shift in how museums operate. In a world of increasing global mobility and entertainment-media saturation, dusty artifacts behind imposing doors are no longer a viable proposition. Today, museums are part of the "themed attraction" business and must compete for customers with everything from concert halls to malls. And while museums remain heavily subsidized in most countries, increasingly, they have to support their activities with revenue earned from entrepreneurial ventures. The Lords used to prepare "feasibility studies" for new institutions; now these are simply called business plans.



New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the few major institutions that has yet to hire the Lords

It's a Saturday in late June, and Barry Lord is getting ready to fly to his company's office in Paris, where he'll be reviewing plans for two new European museums. He'll also brief a staffer heading to work on a recovered mud-brick city in Saudi Arabia, then meet with a French architect bidding to design the national gallery in Singapore—which the Lords are overseeing (just about every cultural institution in that city-state has their fingerprints on it)—before finally meeting up with Gail at the couple's second home in Bordeaux. But first he needs to buy some razor blades. At a pharmacy in Toronto's ritzy Yorkville neighbourhood, where the pair lives in a condo tower next to the Four Seasons Hotel, Lord pulls out his wallet and starts rifling: euros, greenbacks, reals, pounds...oh, there, finally, some loonies.

To call the duo "jet-setters" is to understate—they're on the road more than half the year, usually on separate assignments (at $200 an hour plus expenses, "our rates are quite high and most clients don't need both of us," says Gail). At their Toronto

office, there's a giant map with pins marking the location of every Lord project. Barry, a onetime map collector, is the only one who gets to put in new pins. "It's one of my greatest pleasures," he says. "Most recently I put one in Istanbul, in Moscow and in Chongqing, China—on the same day." Today, the map sprouts thickets of pinheads—black (for single jobs) and red (for multiple clients)—in 36 countries, marking more than 1,500 projects they've tackled since leaving Ottawa to start their own consulting business.

Back in the 1970s, Barry, a former art curator and writer, spent five years with the federal Museum Assistance Program, rising to assistant director. Touring institutions around the country, he found lots of good collections and good architecture, but lousy museums. "They were just total planning disasters," he recalls over lunch at a pub steps away from the Royal Ontario Museum's much-ballyhooed Crystal addition. (The Lords didn't work on it and find it "flawed." During a visit on opening weekend, Barry noticed giant photographs on loan from Japan spangled in sunshine, which was pouring through the massive mullioned windows. "That level of light on a valuable photograph, just in sheer financial terms—it's madness!" he says.) The museums he visited on the job were often too large and expensive to operate, or clearly inadequate to the task even on the day they opened. "Or all kinds of atrocities were happening," he says, "such as you get off the freight elevator and find there isn't sufficient space to move anything off." He started to urge funders to first invest in planning, but realized almost no one actually knew how to plan a museum.

In 1981, when Brian Mulroney's Conservatives started gutting federal museum programs, the Lords decided to provide those services on their own. Their first project was a pioneer village near Hamilton; they lived on the premises in a log cabin with their two kids. Gail handled much of the start-up work, but it was Barry's background and connections that got them off the ground. Ottawa's national museum policy, set in place in 1972, provided funding and research that had made Canadian museum expertise world famous, and the Lords found they could spin that into ever higher-profile contracts. Barry is not humble about his professional stature, and as he sips neat whiskies and awaits his meal, 24-carat names spill from his lips: Daniel Libeskind, Thomas Krens (Guggenheim's legendary leader), Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates. He mentions, apropos of nothing, seeing his book on collections management prominently displayed on the Louvre director's bookshelf and quoted "in huge type" in a presentation by an Austrian museum honcho.

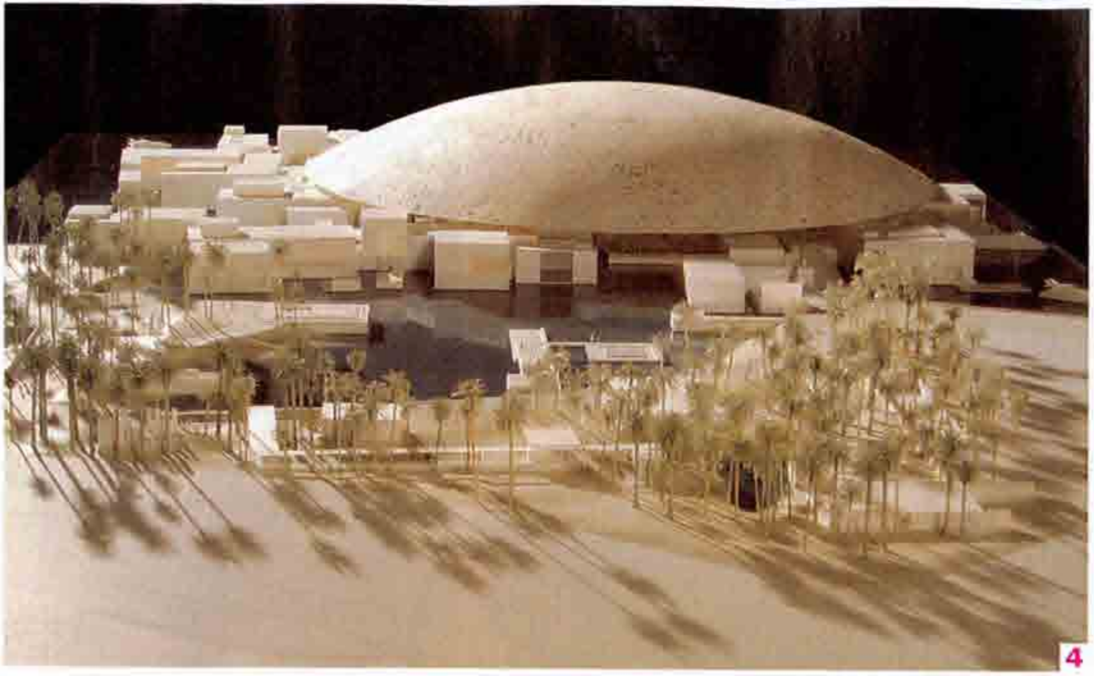
As their kids got older, Gail took on a more prominent role in the business. A former art critic who helped set up the photography department at Ryerson University, she's become the marketing, branding and visitor research expert. ("Barry knew museums from the inside out, while I knew them from the outside in," she once told a newspaper.) These specialties are now critical, as governments increasingly insist that cultural institutions respond to community (read: market) demands. "When we entered this field, it was unthinkable that any museum could function on less than 80% government subsidy," says Gail. "Today, it's going to be 50% to 60%. We now live in a society that believes in plural funding, and 'public-private partnership' is a philosophy that people feel is better for getting things done."

Since 1988, when Gail negotiated with Cadillac Fairview to provide the site for Toronto's Design Exchange in the former Stock Exchange building on Bay Street, the Lords' ventures have increasingly involved private enterprises. Take, for example, the new Zaryadye project next to the Kremlin and the Red Square in Moscow. Designed by Norman Foster, it's the brainchild of a private developer who is combining residences and retail space with concert

1 GUGGENHEIM BILBAO, SPAIN, 1997
The popularity of Frank Gehry's shimmering masterpiece spawned a race for trophy buildings to replicate the "Bilbao effect." Gail Lord helped draft the $125-million museum's new strategic plan in 2004, and she has advised on exhibitions and visitor outreach programs, which seem to be working: Attendance sits around one million a year, roughly on par with the Royal Ontario Museum.

2 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE, 2006
In 1990, the Lords prepared a master plan to redevelop Singapore's oldest museum, built in 1887. The plan eventually led to the creation of a national heritage board and three new museums (art, history and Asian civilization). The city-state's government has been eager to draw tourists via cultural venues, and the Lords have worked on six other projects there since 1990.

3 NATIONAL SEPTEMBER 11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM, NEW YORK, 2009
Part of the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site, the museum and memorial will be run by a $350-million non-profit foundation. The Lords collaborated on the concept and design for the gallery, housed beneath the footprints of the twin towers, and advised on the cultural elements of the larger site.



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4 LOUVRE ABU DHABI
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, 2012
The first foreign satellite of the French art jewel will cost up to $1.3 billion over 20 years just for the name and access to the Louvre's collections. That doesn't include the building (over $100 million) or the other venues that are part of the $30-billion Saadiyat Island redevelopment. Barry Lord consulted on "the desert Louvre," and also helped plan the national and maritime museums.

5 CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS,
WINNIPEG, 2010
From writing a three-volume master plan to choosing the architect, Gail Lord helped the late Izzy Asper flesh out his idea for a human-rights Mecca far from museum-packed Ottawa. The project is expected to cost $300 million.

6 THE LOWRY, SALFORD QUAYS, ENGLAND, 2000
At Gail Lord's urging, plans for an opera house ceded to a more populist approach centred on the work of a beloved local painter. The revised strategy for the project, which garnered $160 million in British lottery funding, created a venue for everything from ballet to wedding parties. The Lowry and spin-off projects have created more than 10,000 jobs in the regenerated Manchester suburb.

halls and a museum; the Lords are advising on the concept and developing a facilities and operations plan. Or take the Toronto International Film Festival Group's new headquarters going up in downtown Toronto. The Festival Centre will be topped by a 37-storey condo building that will help cover its operating costs. On the ground floor, a planned 5,000-square-foot gallery will exhibit TIFF's collection of filmmaking memorabilia as well as screen movies, a hybrid use on which the planners needed guidance. "There aren't many buildings built for film galleries, and so there aren't a lot of models to follow," says Piers Handling, TIFF Group's director and CEO. So he has called in Gail Lord, hoping her experience with a variety of gallery formats and financial models will help define the project. Is the gallery a revenue-generating venture or a cost centre? What will it screen, and how will that affect the kind of corporations that might sponsor it? Should there be different levels of shows, including populist blockbusters for which TIFF can charge admission?

This type of entrepreneurial planning, starting at earliest conception, has become a necessity in the museum world, and that trend has led to a shift in how museums are managed. "Museums didn't used to be accountable," says Barry. "They received money from government; they spent it; no one inquired how it was spent. They didn't care about retail revenues, so their shops weren't very good, if they existed at all, and the food—you'd risk your life to eat in a museum." Today, institutions have to prove to their benefactors, public or private, that they're doing everything they can to support themselves. In most of the world, a third or more of museum operating funds must now come from "earned revenue," which covers everything from admissions and memberships to food and retail sales to space rentals. (In museums without collections to manage, such as science centres, earned revenues are expected to account for up to two-thirds.) In other words, a large institution like the ROM, with a $50-million-plus annual operating budget, needs to make $15 to $20 million by selling itself to the public.

This means that museum cafés now boast famous chefs and are often among the best places to eat in town. Sophisticated ticketing systems track who comes in and where they spend the most time. In its off-hours, the Singapore Zoo hosts overnight safaris, while the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles charges parents $43 to thrill their child with a sleepover next to dinosaur bones. Coming up with such ideas and ensuring that they're planned for in the building—and in the budget—is what the Lords and their staff get paid to do. Barry Lord bemoans museum boards that commit to a design before considering whether the lobby will be suitable for corporate events or weddings, how much the gift shop will earn per square foot, or even where chairs for functions will be stored. "Several years ago, the [facility] program for a major new museum in Europe amounted to six pages of verbiage that contained not a single number!" he writes in a paper titled "Is It Time to Call in an Architect? Perhaps Not Yet."

As important as earning revenue, however, is cost control. Staffing constitutes half the operating budget for many museums, notes Ted Silberberg, Lord's senior market and financial planner, making it crucial to combat the everyone-wants-an-assistant syndrome. Silberberg frequently recommends pooling resources to gain efficiencies: His business plan for the Cleveland Cultural Collaborative, which comprises three area venues, recommended sharing staff such as a volunteer co-ordinator. But such co-operative measures can extend to banding together when negotiating contracts for window-cleaning or office supplies, he says. Still, his recommendations are often ignored. Institutions "hire the big staff, then you hear of layoffs. Those get into the press, and the public doesn't want to visit any more."

Silberberg cautions, however, that museums and businesses have fundamentally different success curves. While new companies will typically lose money at the start before breaking into profitability, the opposite happens at museums: Their best year is their opening year, when media attention and curiosity drive attendance. The challenge is to keep people coming back. That's why museum management has to go in with "realistic expectations of success," says Silberberg. The budgets and projections need to be based on the lower attendance that tends to stabilize around year three, because those first two years are anomalies. "Museums are often able to secure funds for projects, and they want to make a great impression, so they spend all the money and don't have funds to reinvest," he says. Attendance plunges, and even getting King Tut or Claude Monet and his Impressionist friends to drop in for a month will not salvage a flawed strategic plan.

Saadiyat means "happiness" in Arabic, but the island that bears the name is unlikely to elate anyone's soul. Located half a kilometre off downtown Abu Dhabi, it's currently little more than a big dig, with bulldozers dotting the landscape. Sewers and other basic infrastructure are going into the ground, and a bridge link is under construction. Though the first museum isn't slated to open until 2012, architectural drawings point to a fantasy island of culture and luxury, which, the emirate hopes, will help it to diversify its oil-dependent economy. To date, the Lords have created master plans for the Maritime Museum and the Sheik Zayed National Museum (named after the man who united the emirates), which will commemorate Abu Dhabi's growth from a small fishing village to the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Barry has also worked on other parts of the development, including the concept for the Louvre Abu Dhabi, necessitating at least half a dozen trips to the Middle East over the past year.

The Louvre deal has shown the kind of valuations that big cultural brands can command—a notion that Thomas Krens, the long-time director of the Guggenheim Foundation, introduced to the cultural sector. Most traditional museums have vast collections, only about one-10th of which are typically on display. What's more, managing those collections can eat up two-thirds of the operating costs. Krens realized that this liability could be turned into a revenue-generating asset by establishing branches—an idea initially greeted with horror in the museum world. But the financial logic was seductive, and other big-name institutions soon spawned satellites: the Museum of Modern Art, the Hermitage and now the most famous one of all. The Louvre deal set a new benchmark for a cultural brand-licensing price: It's reportedly costing the UAE $1.3 billion to use the Louvre's name and gain access to its collection, versus the mere $18 million that the Guggenheim got from the Basque government to use the museum's name and gain access to its collection. "Still, that's not a lot to pay for 214 years of growth of this brand," says Barry. "It's something that the Tate has to look at, and the Met, even the ROM."

If they do, they'll certainly find an eager market. The developed world's shift away from industrial economies is feeding a global rivalry for trophy cultural assets, explains Gail Lord. Cities saddled with abandoned factories and brownfields are more than happy to see them transformed into thriving cultural districts, filled with galleries and condo towers. At the same time, baby boomers—well educated, moneyed and with decades of retirement living to fill—are propelling a new type of tourism that seeks out urban cultural experiences rather than mindless fun on the beach. Cultural tourists not only spend more cash but stick around longer, and thus have a bigger impact on local economies.

This drift toward brand-driven marketing and economic-development imperatives is changing what people have come to expect from a museum. The result is that the once-stark difference between, say, the august ROM and Canada's Wonderland theme park is now more of a sliding scale. "There is this marriage happening between commercial attractions and museums, where museums are using entertainment to educate their audiences," says John Robinett, director of cultural attractions practice for Economic Research Associates, a Los Angeles-based consulting firm that competes with Lord Cultural Resources. He points to the Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois, which is full of interactive and imaging exhibits that wouldn't be out of place at Disney's Epcot Center or even in a local arcade. The museum has been panned by historians and curators, but audiences are flocking to it. Many new museums are tapping into pop-culture themes, especially ones aimed at families. Where the distinction really blurs is with for-profit museums such as the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., run by the Malrite Co., a private business with roots in broadcasting.

Barry Lord sees no problem with this populist shift. "The temptation to Disneyfication is there, but the nature of the institution brings you back." After all, Canada's Wonderland doesn't do academic research, nor does it have a mandate that limits how much it can charge at the door—factors that will always curb how commercial a publicly funded museum can become. That said, "high entertainment value for visitors who do not have a high index of post-secondary education is not to be sneered at," he says. There's no better proof than the Lowry. The planners' snooty expectations of what a cultural institution should be almost torpedoed the project. When Gail Lord recommended digging out Lowry's drawings from the rundown local museum, they asked her, skeptically, whether she thought Lowry was good enough. The Lords' unique programming, from a cheerful "Meet Mr. Lowry" orientation to a children's gallery, helped turn the museum into one of the U.K.'s most popular family attractions—even motivating the venerable Imperial War Museum to set up its second home across the canal.

"The entire area has been transformed," says Barry. "This is cultural tourism at work."