



WHOSE ART IS IT ANYWAY?

by Omar Mouallem
illustrations by Eric Diotte

Paul Moulton knew the optics of his proposition were not good. When the interim executive director of the Edmonton Arts Council entered City Hall on December 1, 2015, it had been three years since his predecessor, John Mahon, sat at that exact table, asking for \$1.1 million in bailout and operational funds to rescue the Art Gallery of Alberta from three consecutive deficits. Mahon returned in 2013 for another million to carry the AGA for the next three years. He got the money, but on the promise that the gallery and arts council, which has managed the gallery's municipal grants since 2011, would conjure a more sustainable plan.

Now Moulton had it in hand: a 62-page, five-year strategy that would quadruple attendance by instantly making every Albertan a member, yet generate surpluses unseen in its 91-year history. Written with one of the world's most respected arts consultants, EmcArts of New York, the thinking was that the gallery could drive dollars with volume. Many more people inside meant significantly more spending at the gift shop, bills slipped into the donation box and corporate sponsors clamouring for attention.

It was a bold idea, but there was one problem: It would require yet another handout.

This would be not emergency funding. Moulton was clear on that. He was quick to remind Council that the AGA had posted modest profits since the last money injection. This, he explained, was bridge funding — “a go-forward” — to carry out its vision ►

at a cost of just \$250,000 a year, or .017 per cent of the city's budget. But Moulton also knew it felt like déjà vu to some of these councillors, and his bleak tone certainly didn't help. "If we don't do this now," he forewarned, "the downward spiral is going to be hard to recover from." By then, the AGA's books showed it was about to miss nearly every revenue target it had set for 2015. Without this, said Moulton, there could be cuts to service, hours and programming. It was no longer apparent whether he was offering them an opportunity or a ransom letter.

Mayor Don Iveson said it was "worth the shot," but Mike Nickel, amongst others, was not having it. "I find it difficult to accept that the AGA can't raise \$250,000 a year," said the Ward 11 councillor, who bragged about raising more money for smaller charities on his own. "I find it nothing short of shocking." He added, "I would suggest your fundraising team has a problem and not the City of Edmonton has a problem."

The motion went to vote and, with former councillor Amarjeet Sohi already gone to Parliament, the vote was a 6–6 tie. A loss.

Perhaps with Sohi's seat filled, the AGA could have become the largest free art gallery in Canada, but perhaps not; the Alberta economy required some unusual belt-tightening at the last budget and even the most progressive politicians weren't as generous. What is remarkable, however, is just how fiscally granular the hour-long debate was and yet how little consideration was paid to the more important question: Is access to a public art gallery also a public right? Is the AGA, or the Royal Alberta Museum for that matter, akin to our public library or K-Days?

Both used to be free, in the 1970s and early '80s. Back then, the former Edmonton Art Gallery went

on a spending spree, quintupling its collection of mostly Western Canadian works, much of which were free for viewing. The gallery, of course, had modest aspirations compared to its descendent, imagined as a world-class building where Degas, Warhol and Karsh would come to Albertans, and not the other way around for a change. The high hopes seemed justified after its 2010 reincarnation. Almost 75,000 people paid to enter the AGA in its first year, but, five years later, only 23,200 had purchased tickets for its notably downscaled exhibitions. That's yet a third fewer as in 2014. With LRT construction in Churchill Square about to displace the summer festivals that bring the gallery spontaneous drop-ins, attendance is expected to dwindle further.

"It's like a marriage," says AGA executive director Catherine Crowston. "You've been in it for five years. You still love each other, but you don't go out quite as much. So how do you get the spark back?" Might free admission be the answer, or would those fireworks just as soon fizzle out again? We may soon know because the AGA is not ready to give up on its bold plan.

BACK TO Nickel's points at the budget debates for a minute. Whether his shock was genuine or political posturing, he raised a valid question: Why couldn't the AGA find the quarter million in the pockets of our philanthropic community?

Evidently, it probably could. If there was any upside to the negative press about the AGA's future, warranted or not, the business community stepped up and helped it set an all-time record for corporate support. It raised nearly \$200,000 more than the year before, in the midst of Alberta's economic turmoil, no less.

The AGA has already rolled out parts of its new business plan,

including reallocating morning hours to evenings with hopes of reaching weekday workers, expanding education programs to hook younger art-lovers and showcasing more indigenous art. Free memberships, however, are on the back burner until there's stable funding. That could come in 2019, when a 10-year contract with Compass Group Canada, which leases the AGA's public spaces, is up for renewal.

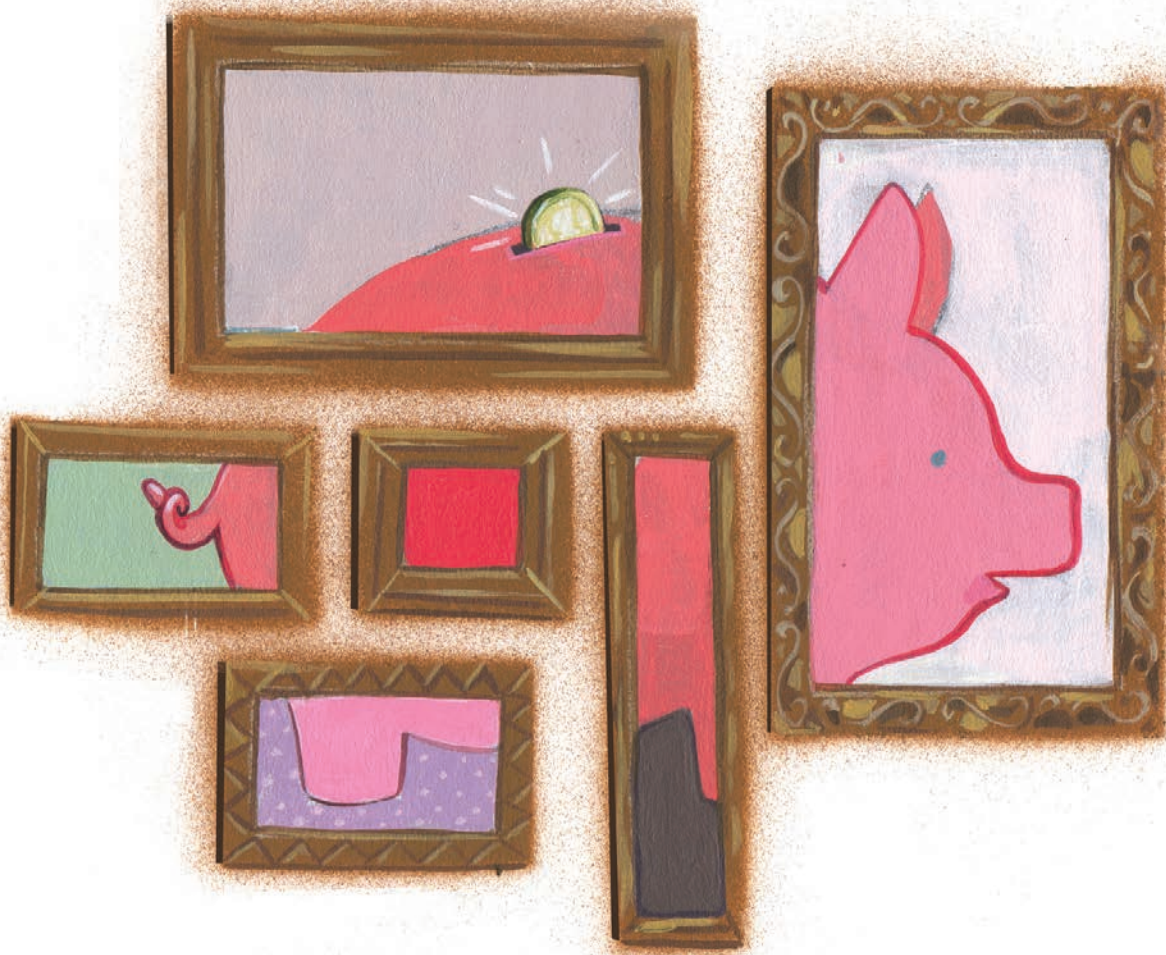
Think of all the weddings and

**"YOU'VE BEEN
IN IT FOR FIVE
YEARS. YOU
STILL LOVE
EACH OTHER,
BUT YOU DON'T
GO OUT QUITE
AS MUCH.
SO HOW DO
YOU GET THE
SPARK BACK?"**

—CATHERINE CROWSTON

corporate parties passing through the AGA's atrium at \$2,200 per day, and think of all the wine poured. It would seem like lucrative business for the gallery, but the lion's share of that revenue goes to Compass Group Canada, which, as leaseholder of its event spaces, as well as the restaurant Zinc, virtually calls the shots after exhibition hours.

The AGA only gets a small commission of restaurant, catering and beverage sales, and, more importantly, venue bookings. So



while it slashes its exhibitions budget, Compass posted record sales last year, which added up to a quarter million for the AGA (still, somehow below target). That's not bad, but compare it to the Winspear, which operates its own facilities, and netted almost \$500,000 on concessions alone. "I know it's a lot of work, but I would never give that money up to an outside contractor," says Moulton, who was the concert hall's facility director when it opened in 1997. Of course, the Winspear was designed as an events space, so it's logistically well equipped to handle the events management load.

Might the funds be hiding inside the \$88 million gallery all along? "There's no question that if we ran [hospitality], our revenue would be better," says Pedro Carriel, the AGA's director of finance, "but the question

is, how much of that revenue would make it to the bottom line?" He adds, "It makes more sense for us to outsource those operations because it's not our expertise."

The challenges with Compass go beyond potentially lost revenue. Zinc's upscale and ultra-modern restaurant does little for the gallery's exposure, says former EAC director John Mahon. "Zinc is a restaurant that art galleries all over the continent have, but it's too expensive and too slow." He says it would be better off with a more casual place that fed people to the AGA.

Compass's control over its public spaces has also limited the AGA from doing the very thing it has set out to do — engage more citizens with art. Take, for instance, last year's Nuit Blanche, the biggest public art night this city's ever seen. Last September

26, 50,000 people came to experience the downtown core redone as a giant exhibition, until 4 a.m. While City Hall, the Winspear and Citadel threw open their doors to free exhibits, the AGA constructed an artful and elaborate bouncy castle outside, but inside was closed for a wedding. "I heard from a lot of people who wanted to show it off to their friends, but they couldn't get past security," says Moulton.

This is the main reason the AGA is closed most evenings: it's in high demand for Compass bookings. Even during its popular "Refinery" parties, the gallery only profits on ticket sales and a commission of beverages sales. (Carriel declined to say how much, citing proprietary reasons.) The contract even requires the AGA to book its own boardrooms through the Toronto-headquartered ►

hospitality giant — for free, yes, but on very rare occasions it must pay Compass for lost revenues if it wants to kick someone out.

Compass, which had a similar deal with the Royal Ontario Museum, until walking away from the contract amidst renegotiations in 2013, did not respond to *Avenue* after repeated interview requests.

AGA board chair Darcy Trufyn, however, says it would be wrong to blame Compass for any of the AGA's struggles. He admits that the gallery could be more successful if it managed its own facilities. "But

**"YOU MIGHT
WANT THAT
FERRARI, BUT
YOU HAVE TO
DRIVE WHAT
YOU CAN
AFFORD."**

—DARCY TRUFYN

that's not where our future is. Our future is bigger and bolder than trying to squeeze a few more dollars out of a catering contract." It's about evolving into something that's relevant to every Albertan, not just the art-literate elite.

MUSEUMS HAVE struggled with mass appeal since the late enlightenment, both in their physical spaces and their artistic offerings. In their original formations, explains Crowston, museums were collections of works from aristocracy, and when they began to travel through Europe and the United States, it was through buildings of imposing architecture. "Many museums have been trying to address how they could become more accessible and engaged for decades," she says. Half of Canucks can't name a single visual artist — dead or alive — from their own country, according to a Mainstreet Research poll, and only 16 per cent could name three or more.

As the AGA's fifth executive director in 15 years, Crowston has had the difficult task of guiding a gallery that's lacked succession planning, all while it adopts a new mandate, settles into a new home and tries to widen its appeal. But unlike her predecessors, Crowston, who was hired for the position in 2012, has nearly two decades of institutional knowledge as the gallery's chief curator.

Along with the former Edmonton Art Gallery's infamous internal condensation — buckets on the floor and walls so dewy that major museums flat-out refused to lend it collections — she remembers "From Sea to Shining Sea." This was a staid show that consumed a third of exhibition space for over 20 years, unchanged. "It was an old exhibition model," she says of the permanent exhibition. "The promise of the new building was we'd have a facility in

which we could bring international works of art to this city."

But many Edmontonians as of late are wondering where these so-called "blockbusters" have gone. "We have to live within our means," says Trufyn. The Edgar Degas figures show that the AGA premiered with, for instance, cost more than last year's entire \$650,000 exhibition budget and didn't necessarily pay off. Since then, attendance and memberships have dropped by half. "You might want that Ferrari, but you have to drive what you can afford," says Trufyn.

Under the free model, according to its five-year budget forecast, shrinking admissions and programming revenues are offset by tripling donations and doubling sponsorship, compared to last year. The gift shop, Shop AGA, also triples last year's sales, based on the assumption that 15 to 20 per cent of all visitors spend at least \$10 there. In the meantime, however, tough financial adjustments are made every year to keep the books balanced.

As both chief curator and executive director, Crowston is an anomaly for the head of a large cultural institution, which usually divides those roles with very separate instincts — one to spend and one to conserve. Some would argue that this dual role lacks proper financial checks and balances, but the fact is that only under Crowston has the modern AGA posted surpluses, partly by reducing exhibition costs, amongst other things, like window washing. (When Randall Stout's airy architecture was selected, nobody would have guessed that it cost \$70,000 a year to squeeze.) As the building ages, the maintenance costs will only rise.

Still, Crowston says the conception that the AGA is in dire straights is false. "I think Paul [Moulton] wanted to get us the

money and he used the language he thought was effective.”

Moulton admits regret for the gloomy tone he brought to council last December. “She’s right and I was wrong,” he says. “It was desperation time and I think I overstated the case. They’re not in dire straits, they’re not falling apart.” Moulton says he just didn’t want council to let go of a vision that the two organizations had spent six months and many dollars building toward, a vision that could have ripple effects across Canada.

THE FEELING OF a missed opportunity is echoed by councillor Ben Henderson, who, needless to say, voted in favour of the bridge funding. He believes the AGA’s modest \$12 ticket is a bigger barrier than people think. It stops passersby from spontaneously enjoying the gallery, which maintains hours more in line with offices, better serving what few tourists Edmonton has instead of locals. “That ability to just walk in off the street during an afternoon is part of the joy of having a gallery,” he says. “If you pay your admission, you’ll only go when you have more time, and that never happens.”

The Edmonton Public Library also wondered if \$12 was a realistic barrier to entry when, in 2013, it gave every Edmontonian a free membership as a 100th anniversary present, for the first time in two decades. Lo and behold, active members (those who use the library at least once a year) rose by 60 per cent and program attendance jumped by half. But, admits EPL executive Tina Thomas, the philosophies of libraries and galleries vastly differ. The majority of libraries in Canada were already free, and it was mostly in Alberta where costs were common, as a result of Klein-era frugality. “A library is about access to information and knowledge for all. Galleries are talking about access to

art and creativity, and should that be a public right?”

If the Art Gallery of Alberta were free, it would not be without precedent. Many international galleries, like England’s Tate museums and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, operate on a “by donation” model, with an admission cost for special exhibitions. But these are also in highly trafficked cities that see more tourists in a week than Edmonton does in a year. Canadian galleries have adopted pay-to-see systems for decades. The only major galleries left with free admissions are in Saskatchewan — though maybe not for long. Saskatoon’s former Mendel Art Gallery will charge a fee when it reopens as the Remai Modern next year, and the MacKenzie Art Gallery, in Regina, is considering the same.

“Today we’re dedicated to it,” says Anthony Kiendl, the MacKenzie’s executive director, of free admissions. “We’re trying to be more of a community hub, almost like a library for visual arts. So being free lends itself well to a place that you’ll come several times a week. You can drop your kids off at the learning centre, get a coffee, take a workshop, get something from the gift shop. It’s something relevant to everyday life.” The gallery saw an impressive 74,000 in-house visitors last year — 30,000 more than the AGA, in a city one-fifth the size. But, warns Kiendl, there’s complacency amongst visitors. “It’s hard for people to see the cost of something without the price put in front of them.” With stagnant or shrinking government funding parallel to inflation, the Mackenzie posted a massive \$285,000 deficit last year. It’s now looking at ways to diversify its revenue, and that includes admission costs.

Still, whatever the trends, whatever the norms, both can



change, just as they did for Alberta’s libraries. After the EPL made free memberships part of its mission, at a cost of \$600,000 a year, which it found through fundraising, libraries across Alberta followed suit. “There is now a race to the finish line because nobody wants to be the last in Alberta to have a membership fee,” says Thomas. “If EPL had failed, if it didn’t work for us, the direction would have been the other way for all those other libraries. But because it was successful, everyone wants to do it now because they can point to us. The AGA has that opportunity and that risk, too.”

Although it doesn’t have a clear and set path, the AGA hopes to prototype a model in the near future, wherein only special exhibitions—the Warhols, the Degas—would have a set fee. “With any new initiative, there are risks and there are times when something doesn’t work,” says Crowston. But, she says, it’s a risk worth taking. 📍