



The new Asia Society building in Hong Kong, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.

Asia Society Expands, East and West

By ROBIN POGREBIN

Even as cultural organizations around the country contract because of the economic downturn, Asia Society is pushing against the tide with two new multimillion-dollar buildings, one of which opens in Hong Kong next week, the other in Houston this spring.

The buildings are part of a philosophical as well as physical expansion for the society, a nonprofit institution founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller III to educate the public about Asia and perhaps best known for the elegance of its headquarters and galleries on Park Avenue at 70th Street.

Long regarded as a New York institution with regional branches, Asia Society over the last few years has aimed to recast itself as an international organization, partly through the construction of the two major centers in cities where it previously had only offices.

The new buildings — each of which cost about

\$50 million — will catapult the annual operating costs of each location to \$4.5 million from about \$1 million, but Asia Society says it is confident about the investment.

“By the year 2050, more than 50 percent of the world’s gross domestic product will come from India and China,” Vishakha N. Desai, president of the society, said in a recent interview at her office. More than 60 percent of the population will live in Asia then, she said.

“We’re going from Pax Americana to possibly Pax Pacifica,” she added. “This is a century when America will be a very important player, but not the player. There is a different balance of power in the world.”

Because the world has changed, so has Asia Society’s mission. Where once the organization was focused on explaining Asia to Americans, now it emphasizes strengthening partnerships in areas like culture, business, public policy and education, not only between Asians and Americans but

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PAUL HESTER

Asia Society’s new center in Houston, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi, is to open in the spring.

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among Asians themselves.

“We have to think about how we relate to Asians as partners,” Ms. Desai said. “The fastest-growing trade is intra-Asia trade, yet there isn’t an Asian community. People don’t know each other well because for the last 250 years, everybody looked to the West.”

In May the organization announced its first appointments of chairmen on both sides of the Pacific: Henrietta Holsman Fore, a former chief of the United States Agency for International Development, who is based in Washington, and Ronnie C. Chan, a real estate developer in Hong Kong and China.

“This is that time when we should be increasing our footprint,” Ms. Fore said. “We are covering 51 countries in Asia. They are not one country. They are very different, interesting, growing countries. As a result there is a need for more scholarship, more visits, more business transactions, more tourists, more exchanges of artists, more connections between leaders.”

The Hong Kong project is in a 19th-century former factory that was used by the British military to produce and store explosives and munitions. The architects are Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, who designed the American Folk Art Museum’s former home on West 53rd Street in Manhattan and the new Barnes Foundation being built in Philadelphia.

The Houston center, in the city’s museum district, was designed by Yoshio Taniguchi, who was responsible for the renovation of the Museum of Modern

Art. The Korean artist Lee Ufan has been commissioned to produce a site-specific work to inaugurate the sculpture garden there.

“It makes sense that the Asia Society wants to find new ways — physically and virtually — of reaching audiences and donors,” said Adrian Ellis, a long-time arts consultant who recently served as executive director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. “Hong Kong and Houston are growth markets. If it were Detroit and Islamabad, that would be more surprising.”

Each center has art galleries, lecture halls, meeting spaces and offices. Both are opening with exhibitions that pay tribute to Asia Society’s founding with selections of traditional Asian art from its permanent collection. (The society started a contemporary collection in 2007.)

Ms. Desai said she realized that it would not be easy to support these new branches, given the state of philanthropic giving. Asia Society, which has a \$38 million annual operating budget, had a 25 percent drop in its endowment in 2009 and was forced to cut its staff by about 11 percent. The Hong Kong project is planning for deficits in its first few years.

In 2010 Asia Society also had to cope with the abrupt death of its high-profile chairman and cheerleader, Richard C. Holbrooke, the Obama administration’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But Ms. Desai said she was optimistic about the prospects for financial support. International corporations are interested in Asia Society’s work, she said. And she added that she hoped to increase the size of the board beyond 50 members, which will broaden the slate of committed inside donors.

Ms. Desai said she wanted to increase the proportion of Asian trustees on the board to 50 percent from 35 percent. Mr. Chan, one of the society’s chairmen, said he hoped to draw some trustees from places like Indonesia.

“To have both sides understand each other — Asia on the one hand and the United States on the other,” he said in a telephone interview from Hong Kong, “there is really the need for expertise from different countries.”

Some may question the need for an Asia Society in an increasingly globalized world. But the society’s executives say the institution has become more essential because it can serve as the link among various constituencies.

“The world is far more interconnected today,” Mr. Chan said. “Hence the need to understand each other is greater than ever before.”

Asia Society’s new programs include the Asia 21 Young Leaders Initiative, which brings together more than 150 Asians under 40 from the Asia-Pacific region. And the Women Leaders of New Asia program promotes a group of women from the public and private sectors.

When the society was first established, “people thought knowing about Asia was nice — ‘I’ll get to it when I can,’” Ms. Desai said. “Now it’s a necessity.”



Vishakha N. Desai