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## Marking the spot

From Seattle to Saadiyat Island, Gail and Barry Lord have overseen the creation of more museums than most of us visit in a lifetime. As founders of a hugely influential consulting firm, the Toronto couple have shaped 1,700 institutions, including some of the world's most beloved cultural centres. Their work has not only given them an unmatched vantage on the state of the modern museum, it has given Carol Kino, it has given them remarkable power to define it

Lords, continued on 4 →



04

Friday, February 12, 2010 www.thenational.ae

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1,700

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Number of projects that the Lords estimate they have completed, in 46 different countries, in the last three decades



A computer rendering of the King Abdulaziz Center for Knowledge and Culture, under construction in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Courtesy of Saudi Aramco



A computer rendering of the Maritime Museum, under construction in the Saadiyat Island cultural district. Courtesy of TDIC



The School of the International Center of Photography in New York. Copyright Matthew Monteith, courtesy of the International Center of Photography

# Curating the world

Put a finger on a globe and you'll touch one of their projects. Carol Kino reports from the Lords' museum-planning empire

→ Lords, continued from 1

One day last autumn, the museum consultants Gail and Barry Lord stood in the middle of their Toronto headquarters as their 35-person local staff buzzed around them. It was a rare occasion: the first time in months that they had been in the office on the same day.

As the founders of Lord Cultural Resources (LRC), arguably the world's largest and most extensive museum consulting firm, the couple spend most of their year travelling separately, keeping tabs on the dozens of projects that their company has underway at any one time.

Barry had recently returned from Jaipur, where he is masterminding the effort to transform a sleepy 19th-century town hall into a 21st-century heritage museum, complete with interactive and multimedia displays – some of the first in India. Gail was on a layover between trips across Canada, part of her work developing content for Winnipeg's forthcoming Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the first national museum of its sort in the world.

Between Europe, North America, Asia and the Gulf, the Lords currently have nine offices, some of which are run by partners. They also post individual employees on-site when they are involved in a mammoth, multi-year project, like the King Abdulaziz Center for Knowledge and Culture, a huge development that is being built by Saudi Aramco in Dhahran; Lord Cultural Resources is working with them on every aspect of the entire project, from project management to staffing to programming.

But the increasingly global reach of their business has not diminished their personal involvement. "People think we go to visit our offices, like Queen Elizabeth goes around and visits her people," said Gail. "But I would never visit New York just to visit the office. I go to visit projects."

The Lords had spent the morning hashing over ideas with their staff and various clients, and now they were bickering affectionately over a large world map. It was studded with pins, each of which signified one or more of their ventures.

Cities with only one LRC project – like Riga, Latvia, where the company recently created the master plan for a Tate Modern-esque contemporary art museum – got a black pin. Red pins marked cities with two or more: like London, where the Lords have consulted for the Design Museum, the Victoria & Albert, the National Gallery, Tate Modern and Tate Britain, among others; or Abu Dhabi, where they helped develop the Military Museum and the Saadiyat Island cultural district, for which they crafted master plans for the Sheikh Zayed National Museum and the Maritime Museum, as well as an early concept plan for the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

That week, the Lords had been awarded the contract for a new textile museum in Jordan, and Barry – the only person in the office al-

lowed to move the pins – was itching to make it official, and giving Gail a hard time.

"Well, announce it," he nagged his wife, "so I can put a pin in the map!"

"You can only change it to red," Gail warned him. "It's not going to be a new pin. We already have a pin in Jordan, because we've already done a project there."

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Nothing better represents the Lords' global reach: twirl a globe and point your finger at random, and you're likely to hit a country where they've worked.

Since founding the business in 1981, they have completed "more than 1,700 projects in 45 countries on six continents", as they are fond of saying.

But their work is not distinguished merely by its quantity: it also provides a dramatic illustration of how museums themselves have changed and proliferated, especially over the last several decades. Since the 1950s, they have metamorphosed from fusty repositories into social centres; their numbers have mushroomed; and, prompted by the growth of cultural tourism, they have spread around the world, as cities and countries look to new museums and cultural institutions as "emblems of development". And the Lords, widely regarded as the first consultants to focus exclusively on museum and cultural planning, have been at the forefront of most of the major trends in the field, doing the kind of work – often behind the scenes – that defines a museum's identity and shapes how it comes to life.

Many of their projects have used museums to anchor civic redevelopment, like the Lowry, which opened in Salford, in north-west England, in 2000. The city's original idea was to rescue the local docklands – then one of Britain's worst slums – by building a relatively generic performing arts centre. Gail proposed personalising the development by anchoring it with around a museum dedicated to the work of LS Lowry, a popular British painter and an early 20th-century Salford success story, who had been largely disregarded by the art establishment. The results proved so successful that London's Imperial War Museum was inspired to open a second branch nearby. "It's about finding what's deep in the culture will make a place really click," Gail said.

Other Lord ventures have served as a rallying point for a new national or civic identity. In the early 1990s, about 25 years after Singapore became a republic, Barry masterminded the overhaul of all its museums – a patchwork of 19th-century institutions dating from the island's days as a British colony – and set up a new national system from scratch. (So far, the company has completed nine museums and cultural centres there, as well as a state-of-the-art storage and conservation facility.) A few years later, the Lords worked on the



A map in the Lord Cultural Resources office with pins indicating the locations of the firm's projects. Photo by Yvonne Berg for The National

redevelopment of the Saudi Arabian National Museum in Riyadh, and the transformation of the nearby Darat al Malik Abd al Aziz palace complex into a cultural centre. More recently, they have joined the planning team for the West Kowloon Cultural District, to be built on landfill in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour.

The Lords have also been active in the development of "idea museums" – institutions whose brief is not to celebrate a particular collection but to tell a story, like the Canadian Museum of Human Rights or the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco.

They have also had a hand in shaping many of the experiences that contemporary museum-goers take for granted. Consider the Tate Modern, which has always been noteworthy for its user-friendliness: its galleries are liberally garnished with fairly informal explanatory text; they are also interspersed with casual coffee bars and hangout zones, where you can sit and chat or read catalogues, and stay all day. That is partly the result of several studies that the Lords undertook for the Tate while the new museum was in formation. And in 2000, after Tate Modern had opened, the Lords undertook a new study to help the original Tate, now rebranded Tate Britain, with the consequent drop-off in visitors. "It was about why people visit, in a really deep and philosophical way," recalled Peter Wilson, who at the time directed the Tate's special projects. "Why would you go to a museum, what would you

get out of it?"

In fact, it was a report Gail wrote on museum entrances that helped Nicholas Serota, the museum's director, convince his trustees that it made sense to commission contemporary projects for its massive Turbine Hall. "Gail pointed out to us that with people having to do this big journey once they got into the building, it was key that they encounter art early on," Wilson said. "Nick would have done it anyway, but it just helped him to push forward with this very ambitious idea, which might have been regarded by our trustees as a bit of a luxury. That's the kind of thing that Lord does – help people support hunches with a more rigorous approach to things." (Wilson is now overseeing the expansion of the Royal Shakespeare Company's home base at Stratford-upon-Avon, and sometimes consults for the Lords.)

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Of course, there are now many other companies around the world that do similar work for museums. But LRC was among the earliest in the game and, even today, it seems to be the only company that can handle every aspect of creating or recreating cultural institutions, just about anywhere on earth.

Consider what goes into making or expanding a museum. First, whether it's a start-up or an expansion, someone has to come up with the right idea and flesh it out; that's conceptual planning. Then there's the feasibility study: figuring out how much

the project will cost to build, operate, and accomplish. Both are often included in a master plan, which frequently involves market analysis, and lays out the project's needs in terms of facilities, programming, and staffing. Next come facilities and functional planning – determining the scale, shape and arrangement of the space required: how close should administration be to conservation, how far should the galleries be from storage (or the cafe); what relative humidity and light levels are required for different areas; where to situate security access. If you want a given amount of gallery space, how much additional space should be reserved for other public spaces, like the lobby, the gift shop and the toilets, as well as back-of-house operations, like offices, storage, and conservation?

The Lords do all these things and more, including exhibition planning and design, programming, education, training and recruitment. And then there is strategic planning, which can be done at any stage in a museum's life: working with governance (usually the board) and senior staff to figure out where they want to go next. "It's about forming a consensus so the institution is all facing the same way," said Barry. "When you do get everyone lined up in the same direction, fund-raising comes along. All sorts of things get solved."

The Lords also have a somewhat unique perspective because of their global reach. "They have clients in so many countries now," said Chris-

topher Phillips, a curator at the International Center of Photography in New York. "They have really got the big picture about where museums are going globally better than almost anyone." (In 2005, when the ICP began contemplating an expansion, the Lords worked with them for nearly a year on strategic planning.) Phillips also described them as "less a corporate enterprise than a global mom and pop shop".

Yet because much of this work is highly confidential, and often takes place long before the public even hears rumours of a project, the Lords are not exactly household names. "I guess that's the fate of consultants and planners," said Gail. Indeed, when a museum opens, credit usually goes to the director or the architect, not to those who laid the early groundwork and drew up the strategic and master plans. "A good deal of it is getting the board going in the right direction," said Barry, "and people don't necessarily want to identify the people who did that with them."

What the Lords are widely known for, however – at least within the museum world – is having advanced and codified the field of museum planning, to the point that it is now considered an actual discipline.

In 1983, they conceived, wrote, and edited the first publication on the subject, *Planning Our Museums*, which was published by the Canadian government. In 1989, they published *The Cost of Collecting*, the first study to analyse the actual price of a



TheNational

review

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Approximate number of projects underway at Lord Cultural Resources at any given time

Friday, February 12, 2010 www.thenational.ae

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Longwood Gardens, a huge garden complex near Philadelphia. The Lords were hired to draft the institution's new master plan. Courtesy of Longwood Gardens

museum acquisition: not just the initial purchase amount, but also the price for the work's storage and preservation over time. Since then, they have written five more books, each of which details different aspects of planning. Their work has been translated into French, Georgian, Chinese and Russian (and discussions are underway for an Arabic edition) – and has become a standard reference manual.

Now the Lords have decided to lay out the underlying ideas that motivate their work, in a book called *Artists, Patrons and the Public: Why Culture Changes*, which will be published in May. It will set out their grander theories, drawn from decades of experience, about culture – be it material, physical, socio-political, or aesthetic, as they define its four subcategories – and the role that museums play as engines for driving and expressing social change.

To explain, Barry reached back to the ideas of the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who coined the concept of “the global village” and the term “the medium is the message”. “What McLuhan had to say was that the content of the old medium becomes the content of the new,” Barry told me. “I think what we were able to do, coming out of McLuhan, is to say that museums themselves really have to be understood as part of the communications industry. Because they use objects in three-dimensional space we don’t think of them like that, but that’s essentially what they are. Even our original name, Lord Cultural Resources, Planning and Management, reflects that – the idea that what we’re dealing with is a cultural resource, and that’s parallel to a natural resource, subject to planning and management. And when you take a latent resource and make it into something which literally returns an interest, it becomes cultural capital.”

Or, as Gail put it, “We’re called upon to do a job which is to help create institutions, and to effect cultural change that is going to move societies in a certain direction.”

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Certainly, cultural change was in the air when the Lords met in Toronto in 1969. McLuhan was then in his heyday at the University of Toronto, and they were both cultural journalists, as well as political activists. Barry, who had previously been an actor, a museum curator and the editor of *artscanada*, was editing a journal called *The Five Cent Review*. Gail Dexter, a well-known feminist, was also something of a local prodigy: since her first year at the University of Toronto, she had been the art columnist for the *Toronto Star*, Canada’s largest-circulation newspaper.

When Gail left the *Star* after graduation, Barry decided it was time to profile her in print. He came to the interview armed with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and plenty of antifem-

inist barbs intended to provoke the best quotes from his subject. The interview swiftly devolved into a fiery sparring match, but it was love at first sight.

They married in 1972, by which time Barry was itching to get back into museums. “I missed the three-dimensional kick of the museum,” he said. “Seeing a space that other people are in, seeing people react ... the teaching and the writing doesn’t give you the same thing.”

After a few years running education services for the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, he went to work at the National Museums of Canada (NMC), which had been created in 1967 to oversee and promote Canadian heritage. There he ran a programme that funded scores of new museum buildings, expansions and projects, part of then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s bid to spread culture far and wide across the land. Many recall it as the golden era of Canadian museums.

Yet few of those projects ended well. “There were always problems,” Barry said. “Some museums were too big, some museums were too small, some museums were not appropriate by the time they were opened. So when I took charge of it, I said: ‘Let’s stop putting millions into these things on the basis of a handshake. Let’s insist on plans. And since the institutions don’t have money to do the planning, let’s give them money for planning grants.’” When it became clear that there was really no one around to do that planning, Barry undertook those duties himself. For several years, he travelled around Canada, doing everything from conceptual, strategic, and master planning to all the many areas the company is still active in today.

In 1981, he and Gail decided to start an international consultancy, in part to broaden their world view. “We initially thought that these problems were uniquely Canadian,” Barry said. “Clearly, Americans and British and French must know the answers. If we were going to help people at all, we needed to help them with the rest of this knowledge.”

In 1983, they put down what they had learnt so far in *Planning Our Museums*, a manual published by the NMC. To their surprise, hefty orders began coming in from museums and conservation groups as far afield as Australia and Rome.

“We were astounded to find that there was clearly a serious market,” said Barry. “So then we thought, ‘Gee, it isn’t just a Canadian problem. It’s a worldwide thing.’”

The itch to go global intensified.

In 1986, Gail was in London, doing some research for a design museum in Toronto, when she visited the head of the British Museums Association (MA), the world’s oldest professional museum organisation. To her astonishment, she recalled, “he said: ‘Are you the Gail Lord?’ He knew us from our book!” Unbeknown to them, it was being used in



The Lords met in Toronto in 1969 when Barry went to interview Gail for an article. They were married three years later. Photo by Yvonne Berg for The National

the museum studies department at Leicester University.

At the time, with Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, Britain’s national museums were being pushed to become more entrepreneurial by raising their own funds and competing with each other – essentially the opposite of Trudeau’s programme of nationalised diversity in Canada. As Mark Taylor, who directs the MA now, recalled, “the director, looking for income generation, decided it might be a good idea to do consultancy.” He suggested that the Lords open a London office and go into business with them.

Gail, flummoxed, ran to a payphone and called Barry. “What should we do?” she recalled asking him. He responded, “Just say Yes.”

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Soon both the Lords, who by then had two children, were flying back and forth between Canada, the US and London. Her Majesty’s Stationery Office soon began publishing their books, starting with *The Cost of Collecting* in 1988 and *The Manual of Museum Planning* in 1991, an updated and internationalised version of their original handbook. (Their books are now published by Altamira Press, a commercial publishing house in the US.) They were also in an ideal position to take on projects spawned by Britain’s Heritage Lottery Fund, whose numbers grew as the millennium neared.

The Lords even moved to Britain for 18 months in 1989, when they

**We’re called upon to do a job which is to help create institutions, and to effect cultural change that is going to move societies in a certain direction**

Gail Dexter Lord

were hired to pull off a huge multimedia exposition for Glasgow, which was then undergoing extensive urban renewal in preparation for its year as a European of Capital of Culture in 1990. One day, while walking through Glasgow’s City Hall, Barry ran into a delegation from Singapore. As Barry recalled it, they told him: “We know that Glasgow has been transformed. It used to be an industrial slum, and now it is a cultural centre. We want to find out how they did it so we can do that in Singapore.” At that point, Singapore had been an independent republic for 25 years, and its government, having solved many of its infrastructure problems, was ready to proceed with the cultural side of things. As Gail put it, “they decided to construct their own story about themselves through new national institutions.” Soon Singapore was a client, too, and the Lords opened a third office there in the early 1990s.

From there, the Lords followed cultural change around the world, first expanding into Hong Kong, where they worked on strategic plans for that city’s Heritage Museum just before the British relinquished it to China. Next came the People’s Republic of China which, now, nearly 20 years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, was ready for its own cultural development: the Lords helped the Liaoning Provincial Museum in Shenyang with conservation issues. Not long after, they got their first job in South Africa, soon after the end of apartheid: redevelop-

ing Constitution Hill, a prison that had once jailed both Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, into a heritage site.

“They approached us,” said Gail, “as somebody there had read our book.” So did the government of Saudi Arabia, when it recruited them in the mid-1990s to work on a new national museum. Most recently, they have expanded into the emerging markets of India, Eastern Europe and Russia, where they are currently working on master plans for the forthcoming expansion of the Pushkin Museum.

While some consultants flourish quite well with repeat business and referrals, the Lords believe in doggedly hunting down and competing for new projects. “We really believe that it’s extremely important to compete because that’s how you stay smart,” said Gail. “And we really, really believe in being out there, being part of the world, part of the growth of new institutions.”

So far, the flow of work seems unlikely to stop, as museums continue to “grow like Topsy”, as Barry put it, prompted by political shifts and economic growth. Although the locus of development may change, “the field is just inherently vital, inherently dynamic,” he said. “There is a tremendous built-in demand for what museums have to offer, which is meaning.”

Carol Kino is a contributing editor at Art & Auction and a frequent contributor to The New York Times.