

“I've got the perfect job for you.”

By Caroline Daniel

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Caroline Daniel finds out why David Gordon has swapped the London arts scene for a museum he'd barely heard of.

David Gordon is distracted. The sober image conveyed by his dark grey suit can't mask the boyish excitement as his eye eagerly follows a bullet-shaped train carriage, being slowly lowered on to tracks outside the Milwaukee Art Museum. The deep orange hues of the 1947 train are a shock against the crisp, white lines of the building. Bringing the observation car from the Olympian Hiawatha train to the museum was his idea, a marketing gimmick and apt flourish to promote the museum's exhibition on industrial designer Brooks Stevens. "You can't have an exhibition of him without bringing the train," says the director and chief executive of the museum. His decision, however, also put the show \$75,000 (£45,000) over budget. Fortunately, or unfortunately, for Gordon, that sum is pocket change compared with the museum's \$25m deficit which he was appointed to address last July.

Gordon, 60, has been here before. A key reason behind his recruitment was his financial prowess, honed as chief executive of the Economist magazine and ITN, the UK's main commercial television news organisation, and more recently as secretary at London's Royal Academy for six years where he transformed its finances.

His office reflects those impeccably British roots: on his bookshelf is a toy London cab and double-decker bus. He speaks with the pithy authority of one used to being part of the establishment. So why after a career in London, take his first overseas post in Milwaukee, a city better known for its beer and bratwurst than artistic bohemia?

After resigning from the Royal Academy he considered a consultancy to advise cities on links with museums, but a headhunter dangled the chance to put his thoughts into practice. "She said 'David, I've got the perfect job for you: Milwaukee'. Milwaukee? I said 'What!' I knew vaguely it was a midwestern city and she said, 'well don't you know they've just built this Calatrava building'. I hadn't heard about it and she said, 'look at the website'. So I went and saw this astonishing building and I thought, 'worst case is I get an expenses-paid trip to see it.' "

Seeing the extension, completed in May 2001 by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, was an "apparition," he says. "I walked inside the hall and it was completely and utterly shock and awe. I thought the community that could pull together the resources to put up a building like that has got something special."

But the addition came at a price: the initial budget of \$20m ballooned to \$122m, of which \$98m has been raised. Its creation formed part of the trend by museums to spend huge sums on trophy architecture, such as the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain and the Denver Art Museum by Daniel Libeskind, rather than on enhancing collections.

The building looms like a powerful white bird, with great ribs of white concrete, overshadowed by hydraulically powered steel wings that rise slowly up out of the building, with a 217ft span. Inside, the white marble floors gleam with the reflected light from the uninterrupted view of Lake Michigan.

While the architecture has been admired, Gordon faces the challenge of reducing the debt - "the concept of the leveraged museum is not a good one," he drily observes - putting the museum on the world stage, and holding exhibitions which can silence those who doubt the art can live up to the architecture. The fact that even as a member of London's vibrant art scene, he was unaware of the museum

is a sign of the task ahead. "The Guggenheim handled the publicity of the Bilbao brilliantly. I remember being taken there in my first week at the Royal Academy when it was still a building site. I don't think the PR for this building and opening was international enough," he says.

He doesn't want to rely just on the building. "It has forced us to raise our standards about the exhibitions we do and how we present our collection." The art is typical of a city museum: an eclectic, though occasionally weak, nod at different historical periods, from an Egyptian mummy and Greek pottery through to a fine Cornelia Parker installation. There is also a strong German Expressionist collection, the Mrs Harry Lynde Bradley Collection of 20th century art, and modern pieces such as "The Janitor" by Duane Hanson, slouching eerily against a wall. Two nuns walking by it giggle, and comment on how lifelike it is.

Although Gordon says change will be "organic", he has made swifter changes, such as opening the doors seven days a week, targeting the internal cultural tourism market, using more freelance curators - such as Glenn Adamson, who has put together the Stevens show – and cutting the number of exhibitions in the new wing from two to one, to host bigger shows.

At the Royal Academy, Gordon ran up against the conservatism of some academicians by hosting the 1997 Sensation show of young British artists and was accused of being a "suit", prostituting the institution's aesthetic sensibilities to its financing needs. "The problem with the RA, which persists, is that you've got a governing body which is composed wholly of artists and they have a president with ill-defined powers and RA has expanded hugely beyond its constitution since 1768, so there are other quasi-governing bodies. Therefore the governance is incredibly complicated. It had a lot to do with why I left. I got completely and utterly fed up with battles with the president who was inadequate for the job and remains so to this day."

He faces conservatism too in Milwaukee. Dennis Oppenheim, the New York

artist, won a \$220,000 commission for the new airport car park and proposed a giant translucent blue shirt. "A rightwing talk-show host got on the bandwagon and said it was making fun of the blue-collar past," he says. The contract has been rescinded and remains bogged in local politics. Faced with that episode, how would Gordon feel about proposing, say, a Chapman Brothers exhibition, the London duo who were part of the Sensation show and whose work includes childish mannequins with faces replaced by adult genitals. "It wouldn't be honest to say I wouldn't worry about it. It's not London and New York. The midwest is more staid, more conservative. There is a very strong Catholic influence in Milwaukee. It is a more shockable community. Now what does one do? Does one say fine - this gives me more opportunity to do the shocking or does it mean one takes into account the local likes and dislikes?"

He has annoyed locals by saying he will only have shows by Wisconsin artists if they are nationally important. He hopes to bring over more European artists and is planning the museums' first video art show in September next year. As Gordon admits: "I'm a big fish in a small pond. It's terrific. I am quite enjoying it."

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