



# Lunch With WWT

*Roundup Editor, Jane Lemke, recently sat down with Kathleen Bartels, Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) at the Anvil Centre in New Westminster. Refreshingly approachable, Bartels was full of excitement about her organization's new building and its expanding role in BC's cultural scene.*

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## **1. What piqued your interest in the field and what steps did you take to get you to where you are at the helm of the Vancouver Art Gallery?**

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In many ways, it feels like I have been around art my entire life. My uncle was a well-known artist – a sculptor – and, head of the visual arts department at Washington University in St. Louis. As a young child, I remember being in awe of this man and used to hang out in his studio for hours on end, and would listen in as his students and fellow artists would gather to talk with him and share ideas. I think it was precisely in those early moments when I realized I could grow up and be involved in this exciting world. As a young adult in university, I enrolled in art history and attained my BA in photography. During that time, I worked as a student intern in what is now a very respected small museum, the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago. After undergrad, I worked in the commercial gallery sector in Chicago and gained valuable experience in everything from hanging shows to working with artists and planning events. Following this, I spent several years travelling throughout Oceania and Asia eventually landing at the University of Hawaii where I studied art history with a

focus on the Pacific Island art from Micronesian to Melanesian. My first professional position in the museum was at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA). It was at MOCA that I had the breadth and depth of experiences that taught me so much about art museums; the importance of fundraising and how to work with a board and volunteers; and that artists must be at the core everything you do. I worked at MOCA for 14 years, working my way up the ladder to being the Assistant Director, and was extremely excited to be recruited to come to Vancouver to serve as the Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

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## **2. You've been the Director of the VAG since 2001 and your 14 years of leadership has been a period of unprecedented growth in terms of the budget, the collection and visitor engagement. What's your secret?**

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I think it's about building strong relationships, being positive, welcoming and collaborating. And, being ambitious and never saying "we can't." So many people say to me, "Oh you aren't like most museum directors I know. I thought you'd be more reserved and serious." At the Vancouver Art Gallery, we try to make our exhibitions accessible to all our visitors by making connections through our programs so that there is something meaningful for everyone. It's really about making it a place where people want to visit because it's exciting, engaging and always unexpected. The Gallery is a place that

people can come to meet others, to hang out and to be inspired by great art. That's what I think museums should be like.

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## Tell us about the design philosophy for the new Vancouver Art Gallery and how it was conceived to suit BC's unique needs?

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Following an in-depth peer review and interview process, the Gallery was unanimous in its decision to select Herzog & de Meuron. This was based on their proven ability to create innovative museum buildings that place prominence on artists and institutional mission, as well as the vision they presented for a new Gallery. We wanted an architect with a design aesthetic that we felt could be transformational for Vancouver and British Columbia. And, for the past year, we have been engaged in an intense, collaborative, and exciting conceptual design and master planning process with their team

led by Senior Partner Christine Binswanger. This process has involved our board, staff, many artists, colleagues and key stakeholders. The team from Herzog & de Meuron has spent extensive time in Vancouver and has also travelled throughout the province. They've been to Haida Gwaii, the Okanagan and to the Gulf Islands, for example. They really wanted to have a sense of what British Columbia means as a place and as a culture.

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## How does the Vancouver Art Gallery collaborate and engage with artistic and educational community groups and how does this play a role in fostering a more community-led institution?

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I am very proud of how the Gallery collaborates and works with artists and our colleagues in the arts and culture sector, but of course we could always



**Above:** Vancouver Art Gallery's conceptual design as seen from across Queen Elizabeth Plaza.  
Photo credit: Herzog & de Meuron



**Top Right:** Vancouver Art Gallery's Conceptual Design in the Gallery Courtyard.  
Photo credit: Herzog & de Meuron



**Right:** Vancouver Art Gallery's Conceptual Design. View from West Georgia Street at night.  
Photo credit: Herzog & de Meuron



do more. On an ongoing basis, we work with artists and designers through our ambitious exhibition program. As a large institution, this is an important part of our responsibility to our community. In our regular programs such as FUSE and Family FUSE Weekend we work with many artists and performing arts groups, and in programs such as our Teen Art Group (TAG), we have the opportunity to collaborate institutions such as Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

We also work with organizations beyond our city, with examples including our provincial touring program; Across the Province that has enabled the Gallery to share our impressive collection of more than 11,500 works to communities across British Columbia. This program, which provides Gallery-organized exhibitions with no fees, partners with many important organizations including the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Kamloops Art Gallery, Two Rivers Gallery, among others. We also

collaborate with countless institutions across the country and internationally through our exhibition touring program, and in our new building, we'll be doing even more as we'll have more space. The opportunities are endless.

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### What advice would you give someone trying to get into this field?

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First, get a great education and do as many things as you possibly can within the field. Museum professionals often work in many different areas throughout their career, and this includes working in the commercial art sector, education, retail, museum services, fundraising and curatorial, among others. Don't get stuck on a job title as you might not get your dream job right away but you will be getting significant hands-on experience along the way.



*Kathleen Bartels presents the keynote at the BCMA 2015 Conference. Photo credit: Jane Lemke*