



TRANSFORMERS
From left: Wilco bassist and Tourists partner John Stirratt, North Adams Mayor Richard Alcombright, Mass MoCA founding director Joseph Thompson, architect Karla Rothstein, Tourists partner Ben Svenson, architect Sal Perry and chef Courtney Burns.

THE SHIFT

A SEASON OF CHANGE

This summer, North Adams welcomes a series of cutting-edge projects, further transforming the Berkshires into a cultural hub.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA HELY-HUTCHINSON

IT TOOK IMAGINATION for Wilco bassist John Stirratt to picture a great art and design hotel in the run-down motor court he encountered in 2014. He was on a real estate scouting trip to North Adams, Massachusetts, where his band has hosted a music and arts festival since 2010. “There were doors ajar—it was basically a squat at that point,” recalls Stirratt, then hunting with his future partners for a home for his first hospitality project. Though the rooms were in bad shape, the bones of the buildings were strong, and the woodland, dropping down to the Hoosic River, was remarkably idyllic.

This summer, that old Redwood Motel, built in 1962, will be reborn as Tourists—a reference to the signs that hung outside roadside accommodations in the Berkshires in the mid-20th century—a hip, 55-acre clubhouse with 48 spare, modern rooms; outdoor showers and hammocks on balconies overlooking the

river; a restaurant from San Francisco chef Courtney Burns of the recently shuttered Bar Tartine; and a series of massive outdoor sound sculptures from the New Orleans Airlift collective.

When it opens, it will be the first destination hotel in this once-great manufacturing town. But visionary ideas have been percolating in North Adams since the mid-’80s, when plans emerged to renovate a 28-building industrial campus, the former Sprague Electric capacitor plant—at one time the city’s biggest employer—into a showcase for cutting-edge art. The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (or Mass MoCA), which opened there in 1999 after a long gestation, has helped transform the city. “We saw the [plant] closing, the desperation in the community,” says North Adams Mayor Richard Alcombright. “And we all admit one thing, resoundingly: Where the hell would we be if it were not for Mass MoCA?”

A slew of projects, starting to roll in this summer with the mayor’s support, promises a leap forward, further changing North Adams into a destination for art and performance, accommodation and food. It may be a turning point for a city that’s dealing with population depletion, high unemployment and addiction rates and empty storefronts that starkly contrast with the well-heeled Williamstown, home to Williams College, right next door.

A key driver for the new optimism in North Adams is Mass MoCA’s expansion, including a building that will double the museum’s gallery footprint to nearly 250,000 square feet and fill three stories (each one an acre) with some of the biggest names in American contemporary art. The additional space opened in May with a six-decade survey of James Turrell’s work; a collection of massive marble sculptures from Louise Bourgeois (one of which weighs 15 tons and has never before left her studio); and sections devoted to Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation’s Captiva Island art residency in Florida.

The long-term projects in the building represent a big shift for a museum best known for its temporary exhibits—one or two big shows a year. “For artists, often space and time are the hardest things to get, maybe even harder than money,” says Mass MoCA’s founding director, Joseph Thompson. “We don’t have a lot of money, but we do have space *and* time.”

Most of the artists in the addition—Sprague’s Building 6—have strong personal ties to Mass MoCA >



ART TALK
From far left: A view of Mass MoCA; the exterior of Greylock Works.



MASS APPEAL
A James Turrell installation in Mass MoCA. Right: Inside Greylock Works, a former cotton mill that is being renovated by Sal Perry and Karla Rothstein.



REST STOP
Above: A guest room at Tourists, which will begin welcoming friends and family this summer.

and its director. “Jim Turrell had been coming here for years talking about doing a large, really significant retrospective of his work,” says Thompson. And Laurie Anderson, the polymath performer and visual artist, has been workshopping pieces on-site almost since the museum opened. “I work in the cracks between film, sculpture, painting, stories and records,” she says. “I talked to Joe, and he really understood that in a way that most people don’t—he’s kind of an adventurer out there in Western Massachusetts doing what he wants.”

Many of the works on display have an immersive quality. Anderson’s section will open with two virtual reality pieces and a glassed-in recording studio housing her audio archive. Turrell’s walk-in spaces—installed for the long term—will also take time to navigate (visitors will have to wear shoe covers in one cove; in another, their eyes will need to adjust to the dark). Holzer, meanwhile, is projecting her poetic truisms onto the museum facade during the building’s opening month, and her text-engraved benches are placed throughout the grounds. “She views the entire campus as her canvas,” says Thompson.

The first rooms at Tourists will welcome friends and family in late June, when the museum’s summer season is in full swing and in time for Solid Sound, Wilco’s biannual festival held on the museum grounds, with public reservations following in the fall. “Basically, we’re here for Mass MoCA,” says Boston real estate developer Ben Svenson, one of eight partners, including Stirratt, in the hotel project. It will also offer a new base for the many bands and fans arriving for Solid Sound. “There hasn’t really been a good late-night component to the festival,” says Stirratt, who hopes the hotel complex will

fill that void. Bands will perform impromptu there throughout the festival.

Starting with the acquisition of an 18-room motel, the vision for Tourists has expanded to encompass 27 connected parcels, including a 19th-century farmhouse and a sprawling industrial mill. A phased rollout for the rest of the project will develop over the next couple of years, based on a master plan from Lake Flato, the Texas architects behind Austin’s Bunkhouse hotels.

Cortney Burns, who is a partner as well, will offer informal dining for hotel guests beginning this summer. She aims to one day have multiple restaurants spread across the property. Her first, yet-to-be-named spot, offering casual all-day dining, will open in 2018 at the motel site and feature “live-fire cooking,” she says, and ingredients sourced from local farmers.

The chef is best known as one half of a professional duo, with her partner in cooking and life, Nick Balla (he’s running their latest San Francisco restaurant, Motze, while she sets up their first East Coast outpost). Their creations tap a multicultural palette referencing Japan, Eastern Europe and the Middle East among other locales and rely heavily on a house-made larder of fermented, preserved and pickled products. “We want to create a seasonless kitchen,” she says, “not because we want to have tomatoes all the time, but to be able to utilize concentrated flavors throughout the year, to layer things in.”

Tourists will be a closely watched test case for other hospitality projects currently proposed for North Adams. Just up the road, New York architects Karla Rothstein and Sal Perry have been transforming another old industrial building—the 240,000-square-foot former Greylock cotton mill—into a magnet for

visitors. The couple, who bought the building two years ago, have big plans for Greylock Works (or their “majestic industrial cathedral,” as Perry calls it). An event space on the first floor will host its first wedding in August, with custom furniture they’ve fashioned from old Douglas fir floorboards and beams from the original building. They hope to lure artisanal food entrepreneurs to its loftlike spaces along with a hotel, condos, bars and restaurants. “Karla and I are very long-range investors,” says Perry.

And there’s much more in the pipeline for North Adams. Though clearly ambitious, the ventures under construction this summer are a fraction of the city’s proposed master plan, a grand scheme to build a “cultural corridor” that’s currently outlined in blueprints and feasibility studies, featuring at least four new museums along with a distillery and “art hotel,” both designed by Jean Nouvel. It’s all the brainchild of Thomas Krens, who hatched the original idea for Mass MoCA before moving to New York in 1988 to run the Guggenheim for almost 20 years.

Krens, who has a home in neighboring Williamstown, would not discuss details of his official return to the Berkshires, but they’re easy to discover by talking to local power players. His Extreme Model Railroad and Contemporary Architecture Museum, a quirky 34,000-square-foot institution featuring model trains zipping by landmark buildings by architects such as Frank Gehry, is most likely to break ground first, followed by the Global Contemporary Art Museum, a motorcycle museum and a museum of time. If even a portion of the plan gets off the ground, it may be as significant for the area as Mass MoCA’s opening 18 years ago. “We’re one attraction away,” says Mayor Alcombright, “from being a weeklong place to be.” ●