

A photograph of William Thorsell, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt. He is standing in a gallery with traditional Chinese architecture, featuring ornate stone carvings and a large, curved wall behind him. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

# *Renaissance Man*

A museum-side chat with **William Thorsell**, who this summer steps down as director and CEO after a decade of ushering in an era of revitalization at the ROM

BY KELVIN BROWNE

William Thorsell in the renovated ROM Gallery of Chinese Architecture.

*I first met William Thorsell 18 years ago through mutual friends when he was editor of the Globe and Mail. Although I was a Globe columnist, I didn't work for him until I joined the ROM in 2004. Writing about people you know can be like traversing a mine field. Since William has never ceased to impress me with his eloquence, when I was asked to profile him, I thought it prudent to let him speak for himself.*



**Kelvin Browne:** The Michael Lee-Chin Crystal seems inevitable now, and Renaissance ROM has revitalized the Museum. But 10 years ago, few would have predicted it all would have materialized so successfully. What was your initial assessment of the ROM?

**William Thorsell:** When I came here in August 2000, it seemed to me that a very fine museum had been struggling for a time—but it was a fine museum to be sure. The quality of the underlying assets convinced me that we had a good chance to turn things around.

Some of the issues were physical—the facilities had the aura of faded glory. Public support of the operating budget had been cut and was in decline.

We all knew the ROM was a famous collections-based institution, with significant research and teaching responsibilities. However, many collections were displayed in distinctly dated galleries and others had no public representation at all. Little of our research was known to the public. To some extent, we had a valuable secret in full public view.

It seemed obvious to me that the aim of any redevelopment should be the effective presentation of all the Museum's collections for an educated audience. The ROM had no reason to lose faith in itself as a museum of first international rank.

As well, the ROM's impressive heritage buildings had been significantly compromised by renovations and varied uses. I believed that retrieval of the original architecture's beauty and function was essential to the Museum's revival. Despite its excellent location at Bloor Street and Queen's Park, the Museum presented a rather forbidding mien to the city. An iron fence ran the length of a narrow sidewalk along Bloor Street and at night a steel curtain came down over the main entrance. Very little about the ROM's envied location was used to bring life to the corner or welcome the city at large. The Museum didn't seem to realize where it was—at the centre of Canada's national city.

To me, the ROM's wonderful location suggested the potential for a far more active role in the contemporary city, to be expressed in due course by public programming and the Institute for Contemporary Culture.

**KB:** And obviously you saw more potential too.

**WT:** Yes indeed. All this presented an opportunity to address the ROM's need for extra space and public amenities. It was clear that a new and larger entrance should move up to busy Bloor Street. If we were going to build a significant new addition, we had an opportunity to do ambitious architecture at an enticing moment in the history of architecture itself.

This became the starting point for the public face of Renaissance ROM—a phrase I used to signify a transition from past to future. Considerable planning was already underway when I arrived at the ROM. And while I wanted to go in a different direction, the ROM was prepared to act on a large scale. ROM boards were hungry for a credible vision. Excellent staff were in place for planning and fundraising, although we clearly needed to restock our shrinking curatorial contingent.

**KB:** What were your first steps?

**WT:** We declared our aim to rebuild the classic ROM with contemporary tools. But we needed to reach beyond the ROM to make it work. We launched Renaissance ROM in early 2001 as a city-building project, rather than an institutional one alone. We announced an international competition for an architect to renovate our heritage wings and to build something wonderfully new on Bloor and Avenue Road.

This provocative public process was electric in its effect, tapping passionate desires to reverse the retreat of Toronto in the 1990s, and to participate in a new era of city-building. It also created the basis for government and philanthropic support of Renaissance ROM itself.

The selection of Daniel Libeskind in February 2002 after months of exhibitions, forums, public lectures and debate, was a dramatic moment in the life of the city. The ROM went from a valuable secret to a conspicuous actor in public life.

**KB:** What happened after Libeskind was chosen?

**WT:** Within a month of Libeskind's selection, the Ontario government announced \$30-million in support of the project, the federal government matched that in May, and the ROM Governors approved a major capital fundraising campaign that we then announced would be chaired by the Hon. Hilary Weston. Soon thereafter, Michael Lee-Chin made his historic commitment of \$30-million to the project. The wind was fully in our sails.

**KB:** But it was hardly easy sailing after that. What were the most difficult moments during the building project for you?

**WT:** It was mostly fascinating, but there were some compelling moments. The most difficult challenge related to the engineering of unprecedented shapes and volumes in the context of the Canadian climate and our capital budget. That chewed up time and added to costs.

Photo: (opposite page) George Whiteside; grooming, Gregory Craveline.

Right: Inspecting progress in the James and Louise Temerty Galleries of the Age of Dinosaurs.

Above right: Looking at a model of the Lee-Chin Crystal with Campaign chair the Hon. Hilary Weston.





Left: Signing the last beam with architect Daniel Libeskind.

There were shortages in raw materials, especially steel, which was doubling in price because of demand from China. And then came inevitable missteps here and there in managing logistics. But the remarkable thing was how resilient the project team was in meeting these challenges: As Daniel Libeskind insisted, we had no *problems*, we had *puzzles* that should be interesting to solve. Not easy—interesting.

However, as costs rose, our capacity to raise funds grew as well, and we completed the first phase of heritage renovations on time in December 2005. Two years later—and one year late—the Governor General opened the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal on a warm June evening in front of 40,000 people. Just five years after choosing the architect, we had one of the most innovative and striking buildings in North America.

Ultimately, the renovations and building of new spaces and galleries were an excellent adventure, about which most of the participants have grown properly nostalgic.

**KB:** A decade later, what have you learned?

**WT:** I've learned our audience has high expectations for knowledge and intellectual stimulation—smartening up is much more important to them than dumbing down.

I've learned that the ROM possesses the mandates and materials to tell thousands of compelling stories about the natural world and human cultures. Doing this effectively will require a whole new array of instruments, many of them digital. With so many more collections now on permanent display, enriching the narratives around them remains a high priority, and will require inventive minds. There should be 50 ways to tour the ROM in 15 languages.

We are just starting to build our program of public forums, debates, and symposia, unafraid of controversy as a means to intellectual growth and social change. I have learned that the public is all too ready for this.

The risks of change are generally visible—the risks of not changing generally unseen. Playing things safe can be the most dangerous choice in the world.

Most important, I have learned that cynicism is unjustified in the presence of virtue and potential. A focus on the good things arising from our legacy and the better things in our grasp can unleash enormous commitment from a surprising variety of sources—including government. That is something I'm very grateful to have learned.

**KB:** If you had to sum up your accomplishments, or the results of your leadership, you'd say...?

**WT:** We have a strong community of support around the ROM under a new generation of leadership. The value of that to the Museum is fundamental.

We have fine new facilities, strategic additions to curatorial staff, a fresh emphasis on original exhibitions, research, and contemporary culture, new initiatives in education, and a responsive public. We have record attendance and revenues on a more solid operating base, and are reaching out to new communities across Ontario.

I believe the ROM has recaptured its self-confidence, intellectual authority, and capacity to engage varied interests in a global context. That is an outcome I cherish.

**KB:** What are your aspirations for the ROM after you leave?

**WT:** I hope the Museum retains a high sense of ambition about its potential within the city, province, and beyond. Consolidation is a continuing process. As long-time ROM supporter Liza Samuel often said, "Just keep going." I take away a sense of amazement that we won the mandate we did, and that we realized so much in a short time with such pleasure in the doing. The ROM is almost a century old but is young again, and can act with vigour and daring to reshape its purpose in public life.

**KB:** Parting words?

**WT:** À bientôt. And good luck—an important factor in any context. o



Left: At one of the many gala openings with Kateryna Yushchenko, Former First Lady of the Ukraine, and former Board of Governors Chairman Jim Temerty.



Left: Communicating with the community and media was a key part of Renaissance ROM.