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# One Eye on Art, the Other on Water

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

When Adam D. Weinberg was planning a new home in the West Village for the Whitney Museum of American Art, he did not expect to have to worry about waterproofing walls or finding a hydro-engineering firm that makes watertight hatches for the United States Navy.

But then Mr. Weinberg, the Whitney's director, also didn't expect Hurricane Sandy.

The storm hit the Whitney hard, just as construction had started on the museum's new home by the Hudson River, flooding the basement with 30 feet of water and ensuring that weather protections would become nearly as important as aesthetics.

Mr. Weinberg talked about these changes during a tour on Wednesday that offered a first glimpse of the building designed by Renzo Piano and expected to be completed in 2015. The new Whitney, Mr. Weinberg said, will be a temple of American art and a model of storm protection.

"It's the worst thing that ever happened to us and the best thing," Mr. Weinberg said. "We will now have a building in which we can be assured that the art will never be at risk."

Fortunately for the museum, work had not progressed very far before the 2012 storm, and the construction equipment was insured. Moreover, the Whitney had taken some precautions because its location, at the corner of Washington and Gansevoort Streets, was just a block from the river. While most museums keep their art-handling activities below grade, the Whitney put them on the fifth floor. "We always knew it was a vulnerability," Mr. Weinberg said.

Nevertheless Sandy did force significant adjustments. The water had risen a foot above the 500-year flood plain, Mr. Weinberg said, so the museum searched the world's leading hydro-engineering firms — including those in watery places like the Netherlands and Venice — for help. It settled on the German firm [WTM](#), which partnered with the [Franzius Institute](#) at Hanover University, which specializes in storm modeling.

"They did an analysis of water conditions, wave conditions," Mr. Weinberg said. "They came up with a plan for us to bolster and retrofit the lobby and basement to make sure we could withstand far beyond what happened in Sandy."

Now the building will have a temporary barrier system — an aluminum wall with steel footings that can quickly be assembled around the perimeter — and the Whitney will conduct

flood drills once or twice a year. The northern glass wall will be waterproofed. And both the loading dock and west entrance will have watertight doors, designed by [Walz & Krenzer](#), which made high-pressure doors for Chevron's "Big Foot" drill rig and a watertight hatch for the Canadian Coast Guard.

To pay for this, the museum has increased its capital goal by \$40 million, bringing the project's total expense to \$760 million, including endowment and other costs. Mr. Weinberg said 77 percent of the total had been raised. About half of the additional funds will pay for flood mitigation, Mr. Weinberg said; the other half will cover unexpected costs.

Mr. Weinberg detailed these developments as he walked through the site, riding the construction elevator to the top floor, which offers views of the Statue of Liberty. He was clearly most excited to show off the art-related aspects of the project taking form around him.

These include a fifth-floor temporary exhibition gallery, which will be perhaps the largest column-free exhibition space in the city and has floor-to-ceiling windows at the east and west ends.

"It's the first thing you can see coming down the street," Mr. Weinberg said. "So you'll know it's a building about art."

Four terraces will serve as outdoor galleries, doubling the museum's total exhibition space to 63,000 square feet, and will feature plantings. Piet Oudolf, the garden designer for the nearby [High Line](#), has been hired as a consultant.

The museum's ground level will be entirely open to the public, including a free gallery space, an outdoor cafe (which Mr. Piano refers to as "the piazza") and a Danny Meyer restaurant.

"People can get a taste of the museum" before deciding to buy a ticket, Mr. Weinberg said. "It feels like a community space."

When the Whitney moves, its landmark Marcel Breuer building on Madison used for at least eight years by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a place to display modern and contemporary art.



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Mr. Weinberg said the new Whitney pays homage to Breuer's brutalist design, namely its use of industrial materials like the concrete core that holds the building's mechanicals and the central staircase.

"It's rough, robust, but at the same time has an elegance to it," Mr. Weinberg said.

Unlike the heavy blockiness of the Breuer, which Mr. Weinberg described as "castle-like," the rest of the new Whitney aims to be more transparent, welcoming and connected to the

neighborhood. The galleries will be warmed by wooden floors made of recycled pine from old factory buildings. The central staircase will be walled in by glass, allowing visitors to look out to the river at every level.

And if another storm does come this way, the Hoppers and DeKoonings will be out of danger, Mr. Weinberg said, 60 feet above the lobby level.

“If the water comes up that high, I’m sure Manhattan is gone,” he said. “And we’ll have a lot more to worry about than art.”