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Cultural institutions record \$1.3B in construction in 5 years

By Ryan Hutchins



Whitney Museum of American Art's new project in the meatpacking district. (Jim Henderson)

New York City's cultural institutions—from zoos to museums to theaters—spent a combined \$1.3 billion on construction projects over the last five years, according to a [new report](#) by the New York Building Congress.

The report finds those organizations added 700,000 square feet of new space across the five boroughs, on top of investments in improving and restoring existing facilities. The bulk of the work came from museums and historic houses.

“What’s encouraging is that the cultural sector is demonstrating such vitality,” Richard T. Anderson, president of the Building Congress, said Wednesday. “But it’s not surprising because the city of New York is doing well. And when the city’s economy does well, then the city’s cultural institutions do well. And the real kicker is we are attracting more and more visitors from around the world.”

Construction starts in that sector reached \$208 million in 2014, rising from \$142 million in 2013, according to the report, which is based on construction data from Dodge Data & Analytics. The best year of the five was 2011, when projects worth a combined \$491 million got underway,

driven in large part by the Whitney Museum of American Art's new museum project. Starts totaled \$218 million in 2010 and \$215 million in 2012.

About 80 percent of the projects over the last half decade were undertaken by private institutions, though many of those benefited from government contributions, largely from the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. More than half the projects were in Manhattan and 30 percent were in Brooklyn. The museums and historic houses accounted for \$585 million of the construction, with other notable projects including the Queens Museum of Art expansion in 2011, the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum upgrade in 2010 and a plaza renovation at Museum of Art in 2012.

The report says there is a lack of investment in the city's library system, which had \$52 million in total construction starts but boasts 200 branches.

The outlook remains positive for cultural construction, despite the strengthening dollar and continued economic stagnation in Europe—both possible impediments to robust tourism. The report sites more than \$1 billion in upcoming projects: The \$500 million renovation of Avery Fisher Hall, the \$325 million addition to the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Public Library's \$300 million renovation. Both the Frick Collection and the Museum of Modern Art are planning 40,000 square feet gallery expansions, the report said.

Anderson said he did not see any immediate obstacles to a continued construction boom. He said there appears to be a bit of a race between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

"They're trying to out build each other," he said. "I think any cultural institution of New York that doesn't have a strong capital program isn't doing their job."