

# Hammer it Out

In the first of an ongoing series, Angella Nazarian—founder of the nonprofit organization Visionary Women—speaks with one extraordinary female, Ann Philbin, about the Hammer's transformation and the path that led her to L.A.

PORTRAIT BY JEREMY LIEBMAN

**Angella Nazarian: You joined the Hammer Museum as director in 1999. Now, it's exciting to see that the third-floor exhibition space—which has been an important project for you—has opened up. How has it changed the way that you're showing art?**

**Ann Philbin:** Well those galleries were basically designed for Old Master works. Edward Barnes was the original architect and his client, Armand Hammer, had no intention of showing contemporary art here. The galleries were designed to be picture galleries with crown moldings, etc. For years, I would try not to look at those elements. Our shows looked great, but I was always aware of the fact that the architecture was fighting the work on some level. I had been wanting to renovate them for years, but needed to find an opening in our schedule. We did the whole thing in four months. We raised the ceilings, put in new floors, completely redesigned the skylights and expanded the main galleries.

**Doesn't lighting make such a big difference?**

Such a big difference. Architect Michael Maltzan is so wonderful. We have worked with him for 17 years. This was a real feat pulled off by our architect and our contractors. One of the main motivations was that we needed an unfettered 10,000-square-foot exhibition space. Our partners are places like—MoMA, the Met, the Whitney and the Walker. We exchange exhibitions with them and they generally require a 10,000-square-foot space. So, we have both expanded the footprint and made it more modern.

**And speaking of that footprint, what I have seen you accomplish in that small space is astonishing. I read somewhere that the number of visitors is now 250,000 per year.**

Yes, a bit more than that now.

**So how was it that you were able to bring in so many visitors and do so much with your program when your hands were tied in terms of this physical space?**

Ultimately, what people come for is the content: the exhibitions and programs. I have been here 18 years and it took three to five years before things began to change. It was a real start-up. But then people started to notice that something special was going on. We focused on the artists community—what they needed, and what they were interested in seeing.

**You asked the artists?**

Sure. So many of my friends are artists so I was in that conversation

already. But I also knew what this community needed was a support structure that would allow emerging artists to have nonprofit exposure. Unlike New York, which has many nonprofits to show emerging artists, L.A. did not have that—maybe LACE and the Santa Monica Museum, but the opportunities were limited. So it was a niche that I knew we had to fill—to make a program for small, risk-taking projects for young artists—Hammer Projects. That's what attracted the artists to us. Once we got the interest and trust of that community the rest started to follow.

**One other thing I think is so special about the Hammer is that it is free to all. Does it change the demographics of visitors?**

Absolutely it has. It is not only a 25 percent larger audience, it is much more diverse. We were always free to students, but for some reason that audience has increased dramatically. We have become a real gathering place for young people.

**When did you know you wanted to work in the creative arts sector?**

When I was in college I used to drive on the weekends from New Hampshire down to New York to see avant-garde theater—the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, La Mama, etc. I remember one night I came out of the Performing Garage after seeing *Tooth of Crime*, with Spalding Gray. I told my friend, "I have decided that after I graduate I am going to move to New York. I want to live around creative people like this and I am going to figure out how to be in this world." And then ironically, 20 years later, I ended up on that street in that exact spot running the Drawing Center.

**That's incredible. Who was a mentor to you early on?**

A couple of people. In graduate school at NYU I interned at The New Museum and Artists Space, and the women who ran those spaces—Marcia Tucker and Linda Shearer—were mentors. But probably my biggest professional inspiration was watching Kathy Halbreich run the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. She was my hero in that she ran a large institution, but it was totally artist-centric. I admired that.

**Who is your inspiration now?**

Gloria Steinem. And dedicated, brave artists always inspire me.

**Do you have a motto or mantra?**

One of the mottos that I put out internally here, which everyone kind of knows, is my answer is always "yes" before it's "no." It's "yes" and "we'll figure it out."



Ann Philbin at her home in Beverly Hills.