

# Mass MoCA & the Hoosac Tunnel

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*Any engineer knows that the key to the universe is discovering the cause for an effect (and vice versa). To what lengths do we go to discern them?*

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BRIAN BRENNER

**M**ass MoCA is not an espresso drink, but an elaborate museum in North Adams, Massachusetts. The museum displays works of modern art and "installations." To a rational engineer such as myself, a lot of the artwork is hard to appreciate. The material can be confusing and unapproachable. When I visited, there was a display of something about risk and the cosmos of the universe. You threw some weird dice at a sort-of craps table, and then received a playing card with a symbol that you were supposed to find elsewhere in the exhibit. My card had a "Joker" with a symbol representing eternity, or the loss of lunch, or something like that. There were many paintings on the wall. I think they were paintings. They had blobs of color arranged (or flung) in random patterns.

Next to this exhibit was a vast space filled with crumpled white paper. New sheets of

paper would gently float down from the ceiling at timed intervals. While this was happening, eerie voices cried out from feathered hanging speakers, which rose and fell from the high ceiling. Children ran around in this space. It was like an untidy bedroom, only this one was much much bigger and it had a lot more stuff on the floor.

At the risk of seeming gauche, I admit that I didn't understand the point of most of the exhibits. The only one I did get showed video clips of a taxi wandering around North Adams. The taxi had a board on top that had been programmed with space-appropriate messages automatically matched to a GIS. For example, if the taxi drove by MacDonalds, the message might be something like "Eat healthier food." Now this was a clever exhibit, and it even had a computer database and engineering things. But overall, most of the exhibits struck me as peculiar. Probably at the top of the strangeness list was an exhibit I can't even describe completely. Suffice to say that it displayed a male mannequin wearing a gold foil suit that had a dynamic feature.

## Modern Irony

I may not understand modern art, but I do like irony, and I thought that Mass MoCA was plenty ironic. The museum occupies a beautifully restored old factory complex. The complex features a campus of nineteenth-century

brick buildings, redone in industrial chic for the museum. Along with the strange museum is a strange restaurant and a strange store. The idea, apparently, is to develop a center of avant-garde strangeness. There's also a lawyer's office in one of the buildings – that's not strange per se, but the lawyers probably like being associated with the edginess of the complex.

Mass MoCA creators succeeded admirably in establishing the museum after battling years of adversity. The museum complex has recently become very popular and a destination attraction, no easy thing in the fiercely competitive Berkshires with such stellar cultural attractions as Tanglewood and the beautiful Williamstown art museums. The facility has become a catalyst for the redevelopment of the whole city, which, along with Pittsfield, had been a poor stepchild to the rest of the classy county. Mass MoCA is a roaring success and has helped put North Adams back on the map. The downtown was thriving when I visited, with a mix of eclectic and practical stores on the busy, attractive Main Street. There was even a real mocha bistro, something unimaginable in the dowdy, hardscrabble little city of the past.

The irony comes into play when you think about the previous uses of the factory complex. Back in the nineteenth century when the factory was a factory, workers made widgets of some sort. I'm not sure exactly what they made, but it was clearly something tangible, corporeal and useful. In the days of competitive American manufacturing, understanding what you did with your time and its resulting product was bit different than today at Mass MoCA. Workers trudged off to the mill in a pre-post-North Adams factory setting — we're talking *Flintstones* here.

## The World Gets Smaller & Larger

The frontier at the edge of the wilderness was much closer for those workers two centuries ago. Not far from the mills are the portals of the Hoosac Tunnel. The tunnel's west portal

opens in North Adams, about four miles from the museum. The Hoosac Tunnel is a great civil engineering achievement. In its day, it was the longest rock tunnel in the world, extending 4.75 miles below the Hoosac mountain range. The tunnel opened a clear railway route to the west. It required twenty years to build, and featured the first use of nitroglycerin. The tunnel was built at a time when the connection between things and what you did to get them was much more direct and understood than it is today, at least in our privileged Commonwealth. Freight traffic still uses the tunnel, but its importance has been eclipsed by the roar of semis barreling down the Mass Turnpike to the south and braving the hairpin turn on Route 2.

In today's factories in North Adams, the frippery of Mass MoCA revitalizes and drives the economy forward. The infrastructure comes back to life, and the area is reborn. But I wonder if this is a real rebirth. The art installations at Mass MoCA, while maybe entertaining if you are wise enough to understand them, don't really build or accomplish anything. I know that's a silly argument — there is a place for pure abstract (and in this case, completely disconnected) thought in the scheme of creation. But still, my son is also good at making a mess on the floor, and does little to drive the economy of our household, not to mention trying to revitalize a city's economy. Maybe I'm too much the engineer, looking for more direct cause and effect. Maybe I should accept the fact that food just arrives at the supermarket and not wonder about how it gets there, and what I'm doing to earn the right to eat it. But in North Adams there are ghosts in the factory walls and in the musty darkness of the old tunnel, and they must be looking on and wondering as well.

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