

# THE MAKING OF MUSEUM OF GLASS

It began in August 1992 in the course of a conversation between two friends, Phil Phibbs, who had recently retired as president of the University of Puget Sound and artist [Dale Chihuly](#) who had grown up in a neighborhood near the campus and had attended the university. Dr. Phibbs suggested that Tacoma should have a glass museum. He reasoned that artists from the Pacific Northwest had played a major role in the Studio Glass movement as it developed around the world. In particular, Dale Chihuly had influenced the movement significantly, first through his personal artistry and then through the [Pilchuck Glass School](#), which he had founded in the early 1970s with Anne and John Hauberg.

A few weeks later, Phil Phibbs outlined his idea and the rationale for a glass museum to the Executive Council for a Greater Tacoma, a group of business and governmental leaders. He fully expected to be politely dismissed. Instead, he was invited to stay for the next presentation. It was a plan for the redevelopment of the Thea Foss Waterway, which at the time was an empty industrial wasteland along a narrow channel of water so polluted that it qualified as a federal Superfund clean-up site. The Chairman of the Council, George Russell, concluded that the idea of a glass museum coincided quite beautifully with the need for a dynamic anchor tenant on the restored waterway.

It was serendipitous that the ideas to build a glass museum and redevelop the Thea Foss Waterway coincided to become a civic undertaking. Now the Museum is part of a larger cultural district, but it was 10 years of visionary leadership, energy, and hard work that made the dreams of a revitalized waterway a reality.

By the mid-1990s, the vision for the Museum had become more focused. The site for the Museum along the Thea Foss Waterway was secured from the City of Tacoma. Although initially, the Museum focused exclusively on Dale Chihuly, the artist himself insisted that the Museum expand its mission to include works in glass by artists worldwide. This proved to be a practical shift as Tacoma met its goal of recognizing its native son with the spectacular *Chihuly Bridge of Glass*, and the Museum was able to broaden its appeal by honoring international artists. In the late 1990s, the mission was again refined to specify that the medium of glass would be presented within the context of contemporary art.

Jane and George Russell, co-chairs of the Museum's founding Board of Trustees, invited individuals, corporations, and foundations from around the world to join them in creating one of the most unique and beautiful institutions in the world.

As the century turned, the Museum passed major milestones. In September 1997, Canadian architect Arthur Erickson unveiled the Museum's design concept, which included an iconic, tilted cone. Josi Callan began as director in January 2000. Construction began in June 2000. The steel frame of the cone was completed in March 2001 and the *Chihuly Bridge of Glass* was underway by July of that year. Both the *Chihuly Bridge of Glass* and Museum of Glass opened to thousands of visitors and worldwide accolades on July 6, 2002.

Although some of the original ideas about the Museum changed over time, many of the initial elements remained constant. The concept of a large glass studio, where visitors could watch artists create art from molten glass, was an integral part of the original plan—and the Hot Shop Amphitheater, located inside the 90-foot tall steel cone, fulfills that description today. The Museum was envisioned as a center that would nurture artists, celebrate the dramatic new Studio Glass movement, and encourage creativity. This vision is realized through the exhibitions in the galleries, the art installations on the outdoor plazas, the hands-on art studio, and the Museum’s diverse educational programs, as well as the Hot Shop.

Today, the Museum’s stainless steel cone serves as a beacon to a stunning contemporary art museum as well as a symbol for the restoration of a waterway and the revitalization of a city.