

Galerie



Interior view of Wexler Gallery's new space in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

Philadelphia's Wexler Gallery Expands Footprint with Soaring Fishtown Location

Occupying a former pretzel factory, the 11,000-square-foot space opens with works by Edward McHugh, Andreea Avram Rusu, Feyza Kemahlioglu, and Eric Slayton

BY [STEPHEN WALLIS](#)
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Wexler Gallery's new location transforms a former pretzel factory.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

Stepping into [Wexler Gallery](#)'s new home in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood, what's striking is the scale—and the light. Occupying a former pretzel factory built in 1910, the 11,000-square-foot gallery features a dramatic, 35-foot-high central atrium topped by large skylights cut out of the timber ceiling.

“We can now show really large work from the ground up or from the ceiling down,” says Lewis Wexler, who along with his wife, Sherri Apter Wexler, opened the gallery in 2000 in Philadelphia's Old City. Over the years their eclectic program has evolved from a

focus on studio glass, ceramics, and furniture—with a mix of fine art—to showcasing more diverse, edgier, and more expansive work that often blurs distinctions between craft, design, and art.



Interior view of Wexler Gallery's new space in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON



My Heart Runs (2023) by Edward McHugh on view at Wexler Gallery's new space in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood.
PHOTO: STEPHEN WALLIS

The inaugural exhibition, a spirited selection of works by gallery artists and designers, features a 16-by-10-foot abstract painting by Edward McHugh, a towering expanse of atmospheric grays that is the biggest work he's ever made. Galerie Creative Mind [Andreea Avram Rusu](#) contributed an extra-large version of her Bontanica glass chandelier in tropical hues, while Feyza Kemahlioglu created one of her longest illuminated pendants featuring jewel-like glass orbs and carved-meerschaum elements. Then there's the cement console by Eric Slayton, an exquisitely textured, 1,200-pound monolith that had to be brought in on a forklift and would have been relegated to the

basement at Wexler’s previous location.

“We feel like the space has risen up to the quality of our artists,” says Sherri Apter Wexler. She points to one of the gallery’s newer stars, furniture-designer Jomo Tariku, who will have a solo show at Wexler late next year or in early 2025. Tariku, whose contemporary interpretations of traditional African forms appeared in the movie *Wakanda Forever* and have recently been acquired by multiple museums, says his plan is to “juxtapose an object that influenced my design right next to it and tell the story of each object.”



Works by Jomo Tariku and Andreea Avram Rusu on view at the new Wexler Gallery in Fishtown.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

The gallery’s flexible spaces serve equally well for showing smaller-scale works, notes Lewis Wexler, adding, “or even one large object, which at some point I would love to do in the center of the space.” He says they also plan to host performances and are exploring a collaboration between ceramist Malcolm Mobutu Smith and the Roxey Ballet Company that would involve dancers interacting with Smith’s sculptural vessels

that draw from hip-hop and jazz.

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SHERRI APTER WEXLER

When the Wexlers decided it was time to move their flagship (the gallery also has a space at the New York Design Center), the couple zeroed in on Fishtown. Over the past several years, the working-class area has been transformed by redevelopment into Philadelphia’s hippest neighborhood, celebrated for its restaurants, bars, shops, and, increasingly, an expanding art scene.



Works by (from left) Malcolm Mobutu Smith, Jomo Tariku, Trish Demasi, Patrick Weder, Henry Bermudez, and Feyza Kemahlioglu on view in Wexler Gallery's new Fishtown space.

PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

“People call this the Brooklyn of Philadelphia,” says Lewis Wexler, who met his wife when they were both working at Christie’s in New York in the 1990s. “We saw it as up

and coming, a little edgy still, and that appealed to us.”

The onetime pretzel factory, located on the main artery of Frankford Avenue and sporting a distinctive brown-brick crenelated façade, checked a lot of boxes for the couple. But it needed a massive overhaul. A classic automobile collector had been using the street-level space as a garage to tinker with his cars, while “on the second floor there was a guy who was living there kind of illegally,” says Lewis Wexler. Meanwhile, the entire rear of the building was dilapidated, with extensive water damage, perhaps from a fire. “When we were cleaning up, there were mummified bats and rats back there,” he says. “I was like, what are we getting ourselves into?”



“1811 Inaugural Exhibition” installation at Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

To carry out the nearly two years of renovations, the couple worked with the Philadelphia firm DIGSAU, which also designed the nearby Clay Studio building, completed last year. Here, brick walls were cleaned up but left unfinished, beams and ductwork were left exposed, adding to its industrial feel. Where possible, existing timber

beams and joists were preserved, and those that had to be replaced were salvaged and the wood repurposed for the open staircase's treads, which were crafted by the Challenge Project, an organization based in Delaware that “works with people in underserved communities, some who have just left prison, and teaches them a trade,” explains Lewis Wexler.



Second floor office and flex space in Wexler Gallery's new Philadelphia location.
PHOTO: HALKIN MASON

The Wexlers hope the gallery will become an anchor that helps attract other arts destinations, joining galleries such as Corridor and several others in the nearby Crane Arts building, as well as the Clay Studio and the just-opened Ray Philly, a residential development with ground-floor artists' studios backed by collector Dasha Zhukova. Also, an industrial building on Frankford is in the early stages of a renovation to become the future home of the West Collection, a vast trove of contemporary art assembled by SEI chairman Alfred West Jr. and his daughter, Paige.

For now, Lewis Wexler is okay with being a bit off the beaten path. “We’re still kind of like being an if-you-know-you-know gallery,” he says. “I like the fact that we fly under the radar a little.”