

Great museums seem to matter for the locations on the shortlist for Amazon's HQ2

By [Sebastian Smee](#) April 20, 2018

Is it just by chance that almost all of the 20 cities and counties on the shortlist for Amazon's second headquarters can boast access to great art museums?

You can't help noticing the correlation. Of the 238 cities and counties that applied for consideration, plenty have the population (over a million), the pleasant environs and the basic infrastructure Amazon seeks. But if they don't also have an exceptional art museum — and preferably more than one — those cities didn't make the cut.

Amazon (whose founder and chief executive, Jeffrey P. Bezos, owns The Washington Post) says it expects to hire as many as 50,000 full-time employees over the next 10 to 15 years for its second headquarters, with an average annual total compensation exceeding \$100,000. (Average pay at Amazon's warehouses is a different story.)

How do art museums come into it?

Unemployment has been low for a while now. Demand for workers is high, supply tight. People qualified to expect high salaries tend to have the leisure time and surplus cash to pursue cultural aspirations. Companies trying to persuade them to move to where they are — and often to drag families with them — need to be conscious of those aspirations.

That's why, in the competition to secure the best and brightest, Amazon and other big companies care deeply about cultural offerings in the places they're located.

This isn't just my hypothesis. It's right there in Amazon's stated criteria. Yes, the company wants its second headquarters to be in a place where there is excellent higher education, low crime rates and cooperative local government. But it also wants, in the company's own words, "locations with the potential to attract and retain strong technical talent"; places where its "employees will enjoy living, recreational opportunities, educational opportunities, and an overall high quality of life."

Art museums — which these days are much more than just places to look at art — play an outsize role in satisfying all these factors. Their prestige and prominence make them prime tourist destinations. Their health and quality are also tied up with civic pride, with what makes a city desirable to live in.

Just ask the people of [Detroit](#). They almost lost whole chunks of their art museum's world-renowned collection when the city declared bankruptcy a few years ago. The collection, owned by the city, was considered an asset that could be sold off to pay the pensions of city employees. That nightmare scenario was averted, thankfully; the blow to civic pride would have been irreparable, its cascading consequences immeasurable.

People go to art museums for all sorts of reasons (666,168 of them went to the Detroit Institute of Arts last year): to attend parties, classes, lectures and concerts. Often just to get the little ones out of the house. They're places to drink in beauty and eros (sometimes even while drinking), which makes them ideal venues for hookups and dates. But they're also places where you can learn about cultures from around the world and debate politics in a context much wider and deeper than that offered by the daily news media.

The health of a city's cultural scene — and especially its art museums — directly affects its ability to attract ambitious businesses and the kinds of talented people who might want to work for them. That's part of why almost every big city in the United States wants either to have great art museums or to revamp the museums it has. Tens of billions of dollars have been raised and spent on new museum buildings in the past decade alone. For better or for worse, the sums dwarf those given in support of other art forms.

How, then, in terms of their art museums, do the cities on the shortlist actually compare?

The list, as many have noted, skews east, especially the East Coast. But cities in California, Texas, Illinois, Ohio, western Pennsylvania, Colorado, Indiana, Tennessee and Ontario are all in with a good chance.



A man walks through the Art Gallery of Ontario, designed by architect Frank Gehry. (Mark Blinch/Reuters)

Toronto is the only city on the shortlist outside the United States. Its pitch, as you might expect, made a big deal of Canada's universal health insurance. But its major art museums — the Art Gallery of Ontario, with its Frank Gehry addition and its terrific European holdings (including Rubens's "Massacre of the Innocents") and the Royal Ontario Museum — are nothing to sneeze at.

Dallas is surely one of the strongest art cities. The brawny Dallas Museum of Art, with one of the best and broadest collections in the country, is right next to the exquisite Renzo Piano-designed Nasher Sculpture Center, while nearby Fort Worth has an art precinct to die for: the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, and the Kimbell Art Museum, which has one of the world's choicest collections of art housed in Louis Kahn's most beautiful building.

The pickings in **Austin** and **Nashville** might be slimmer, but Austin's Blanton Museum of Art, with its new Ellsworth Kelly chapel, "Austin," perched right outside, and Nashville's Parthenon and its Frist Center for the Visual Arts are all jewels. (And what both cities lack in art, I've heard they kind of make up for in music.)

Northern Virginia and **Montgomery County** are not known for their art museums, but both are so close to the artistic splendors of the nation's capital that it makes little difference. The same goes for **Newark**, which has the very respectable Newark Museum but is also blessed by its proximity to Manhattan.

If **Columbus** isn't on every art lover's list, it should be. The Wexner Center for the Arts has one of the most dynamic contemporary programs in the country, and the Columbus Museum of Art, which opened a new building in 2015, has a dynamic program and diverse collection that includes cubist works by Picasso and Juan Gris, and superb paintings by Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt and Marsden Hartley. From Columbus, too, you can drive in almost any direction and, in under three hours, arrive at some of the finest museums in the country (Cleveland, Toledo, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati).



The Carnegie Museum of Art's Hall of Architecture. (Tom Little)

Pittsburgh? It has the renowned Carnegie Museum of Art, which hosts the Carnegie International, the world's second-oldest recurring exhibition of contemporary art (it started a year after the Venice Biennale). Entering its 57th edition this year, it has brought an extraordinary number of modern and contemporary works into the collection, which boasts great things by Manet, Monet, Renoir, Degas, Bonnard, Van Gogh, O'Keeffe and de Kooning, not to mention Lynda Benglis, John Currin and Nicole Eisenman. Pittsburgh also, of course, has the popular Andy Warhol Museum, home to the largest single Warhol collection in the world.

Indianapolis combines a great collection, known for its holdings of African, Asian and contemporary art, with a beautiful campus at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, now called Newfields.

Atlanta has the High Museum of Art, which mounts dazzling shows with high prestige loans every year. It has a collection rich in American paintings and sculptures, as well as African art, contemporary art and European masterpieces by Giovanni Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio and many of the impressionists. The city also has a lively Museum of Contemporary Art.

Denver has a 125-year-old museum with a Daniel Libeskind-designed expansion that is recognized around the world. Its deep collection includes one of the strongest collections of Native American, Western American and pre-Columbian art anywhere, and a great impressionist collection that was boosted in 2014 by the Hamilton bequest, bringing in a swag of works by Van Gogh, Pissarro, Morisot, Monet and Manet.

Raleigh has not only the recently renovated North Carolina Museum of Art, with its sculpture park and outdoor amphitheater and impressively wide-ranging collections (which include great Renaissance holdings from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, northern European paintings and a gallery for Judaic art), but a small jewel, Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art, in nearby Durham.

Miami, meanwhile, has its annual art fair, Art Basel Miami, a magnet for art lovers all over the Americas. The fair has helped stimulate a thriving museum culture that includes a newly renovated museum for contemporary art (the Bass) and the Perez Art Museum Miami, housed in a building designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Herzog & de Meuron.

In the end, of course, there's no doubt that **New York City** has the nation's best art museums. Along with the Met, the third-most-visited art museum in the world (after the Louvre and the National Museum of China), it has the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim, plus gems such as the Frick Collection, the Neue Galerie and the New Museum. Nothing to argue with there.

But **Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, Washington** and **Philadelphia** also have the kind of historically great museums with deep, often encyclopedic collections that, over time, create whole ecosystems of art around them. Apart from their big, prestige museums (the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Getty, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the National Gallery), these cities also boast private house museums (think the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Phillips Collection and the Barnes Foundation), contemporary museums (La. MoCA, MCA Chicago, ICA Philadelphia, ICA Boston), private collector museums (the Broad), government-sponsored museums (the Smithsonian Institution museums in Washington) and world-famous college museums (Harvard Art Museums).

Am I saying the decision about where Amazon's second headquarters will be based all comes down to art? Of course not.

Is this Amazon decision even that important? Same answer.

But art museums galvanize cities and the people who live in them like few other phenomena. They don't just inspire loyalty (almost 80 percent of LACMA's approximately 1.3 million annual visitors are members.) They also draw in outsiders: [Crystal Bridges](#) Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., drew in 622,287 visitors in 2016, which is almost 100,000 more than the entire population of the metropolitan area it is in (Fayetteville-Springfield-Rogers).

Nobody likes reducing art to economics, but here's the thing. If you're a city that wants to attract smart people hoping to work for successful businesses and big corporations, it seems pretty clear: Invest in your art museums.