A Bubble Bursting With Ideas

By Judith H. Dobrzynski

New York

The National Mall in Wash-
ington has seen all sorts of
enterprises over the years,
but who would build a trans-
continental, inflatable, peer-
protruding from the doughnut-
shaped Hirshhorn Museum and
Scultpure Garden, with a bit like a giant jelly bean colored robin's
egg blue? And why?

That would be Richard Koskela, the Hirshhorn's volatile
director, who when announcing the 14-foot tall bubble last December, uncharacteris-
tically said little about its purpose other than that it would host four
week-long international events, every spring and fall, about con-
temporary art and culture.

Over breakfast here last week, he began for the first time to fill in important details. Invok-
ing the need for society to take its cues from "the cross-

vandalized," he spoke of plans to con-
verse forums in the bubble-
which is being designed by
Diller Scofidio + Renfro-that will insert art into the dialogue of
national and world affairs. For
the inaugural "Open Studio," in
the fall of 2012, the focus will be on "new
applications of cultural dialogue and
diplomacy that will help
in partnership with the Council on
Foreign Relations. Later that
month, "Open Studio" will ex-
ploring how technology is driv-
ing culture. The following May
will feature a week on "art and de-
struction," and later in the year,
"Advanced Study in Princeton.

Luminaries in the visual arts and
other specialists will help
organize the meetings include
conductor Daniel Barenboim,
movie director Kathryn Bigelow,
and Brazilian President Luiz
Inacio Lula da Silva (because, Mr.
Koskela says, he has spoken out
corresponding to internationally
on nuclear issues in South Korea).

The Hirshhorn Museum's
director wants to alter
the course of cultural
policy in this country.

The curated, invitation-only
events will include school-
children, college students, pro-
fessors and leaders of industry.
But the public will be able to watch a "streaming" of the pro-
ceedings in the Hirshhorn's lobby,
which is being turned into an
interactive "classroom of the
future," and on the Mall. Online
audiences, also invited from var-
ious constituencies, will widen
participation and enhance the
project's function as a public
research forum. Thus, Mr.
Koskela says, "this building be-
comes a cultural think tank."

Mr. Koskela needs $5 mil-
lion-including an $15 million endowment-to hatch his grand
idea, which in its bare bones
description last winter was a little
narcissistic. But the project may soon
score some credibility: Bloomberg LP will provide more than $1 million over two years as a naming gift,
though it will not be official until the
Regents of the Smithsonian
Institution, of which the Hir-
shorn is part, approve it at their
meeting this fall. (The inflatable
dweller's actual name is also
problematic: "Bloomberg Bubble"
is probably not going to work,
given the connotations of "bub-
ble" to the financial world.

Mr. Koskela has also raised $1.5 million from the Pearson
Foundation, News21, the
MacArthur Foundation and a
few individuals for the lobby classroom, which will function
year-round. He's hoping the
decision of these funders will help
them attract the rest.
But what has all this got to do
with visual art?

It will all take place in parallel
with exhibitions, conserva-
tion and research at the Hir-
shorn, but Mr. Koskela's main
line of defense centers on every
museum's educational mission.
"This is not entertainment," he
says. "This is not a conference.
It is an educational exchange."
He believes that museums today
"have to curate the public
spaces and educational pro-
grams as well as exhibitions."

It also has a lot to do with his
ambitions as director. With its
free admission and location on
the heavily trafficked Mall, the
Hirshhorn easily draws visitors
to its exhibitions and its collec-
tion of about 12,000 works of
modern art, mostly given by its
founder, financier Joseph H.
Hirshhorn. But while the collec-
tion has strengths—depth in
work by artists like Willem de Kooning—it also has mediocri-
ties: "a work in progress" is Mr.
Koskela's preferred description.
He plans to address the weak-
nesses by acquiring, contempo-
rary works avidly, especially in
film, video and new media—an
effort that will take time.

The Hirshhorn's profile has
even been high in the art world,
though, and Mr. Koskela is
impatient. When he was
named to his job in February 2009, at age 67 he set out to en-
hance the Hirshhorn's low pro-
file in the art world. His previ-
ous jobs as director of the
Museum of Contemporary Art
in Los Angeles and later as presi-
dent of the Art Center College
of Design in Pasadena, Calif., gave
him lofty platforms, allowing
him to forge friendships with people like Frank Gehry and
Nobel laureate David Balti-
more—so he may be clearly en-
palmed.

Mr. Koskela's plans for the bubble, which combine splashy
architecture with elements of both the exclusive and influen-
tial World Economic Forum in
Davos, Switzerland, and TED (Technology, Entertainment,
Design) conferences around the
world, achieve both professional
and personal goals.
"I took the job because of this," he says. "If we can develop an
educational program that's
national and global in outlook,
we can have an impact on cul-
tural policy in the U.S."

The bubble and its events will
also, he says, inspire new "art-
based programming and publica-
tions, both at the Hirshhorn and
with our collaborating institu-
tions." Many of the events in the bubble will be published
at the museum, which may precede, be concurrent with or follow the
bubbles, but need not be. There
will be an exhibition called "Art and
Destuction" beginning in 2012,
opening before that forum and
continuing past it.

There will be plenty of poten-
tial subjects, because each forum will have four or five projec-
tive illustrating its theme. Already, there are plans for the ever-
creasing, climate change, to
explore the impact of the West-
ern European Divan Orchestra,
conceived in 1998 by Ms. Barenboim and the late Edward Said, which
brings together young musicians
from the Middle East to play and reflect on the Partition and Arab
problem. The World Digital
Library, through which the Li-
brary of Congress, the library of
Alexandria, in Egypt, and dozens of other libraries world-wide are
making primary source materials
available to the public, is a
interest in multilingual format, is
another agenda item.

Mr. Koskela shows no signs of being daunted by the specific
challenges that building this cross-border cultural awareness could lead to:
new ideas, new relationships, new understandings. "This is real-world research," he
explains.

The Hirshhorn's location in
the nation's capital is critical to Mr.
Koskela's concept. "I would not
put this in Los Angeles or Chi-

ca," he says. But Washington is
not only the "capital of democ-

racy," home to the Education
Department and other federal
agencies that deal with the issues
the Hirshhorn will explore, but
also has a "deep foreign presence" in embas-
sies and international agencies.

The bubble project also fits
easily within the four areas
Smithsonian Secretary Wayne
Clough has outlined as his orga-
nizational principles: exploring the
cultural crossroads of world
nations and the American
experience.

Mr. Koskela hopes that his
vision will go beyond Washing-
ton, inspiring other museums
that are struggling to draw and
engage their current and future
audiences. "Museum education has been very predict-
ably an afterthought," he says,
but life-long learning that links dif-
ferent constituencies with the
arts in a new way. It's a "bold leap forward," he says.

Ms. Dobrzynski writes about the
arts for the Journal and
other publications and blogs at
www.artsjournal.com/realcultur-
ists.