



▲ "We need to break down the stereotype that museums are places of elitism and exclusion," says Julián Zugazagoitia.

Kansas City Chief

In his first two years as director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Julián Zugazagoitia has brought in a slew of new funding, exhibitions, and wacky public projects that have boosted attendance **BY GAIL GREGG**

Julián Zugazagoitia may characterize his early tenure as director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art as "a lot of listening," but he also appears to have been in constant motion during his first two years in Kansas City.

Since his arrival at the museum in the fall of 2010, the former director of El Museo del Barrio in New York has brought attendance up 13 percent to 410,000 annual visitors. He's helped land a significant grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to finance development of a strategic plan. He's pulled together "pop-up shows" such as Rodin bronzes borrowed from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, which he scattered throughout the museum. He's created partnerships both inside the community (with local arts organizations) and outside (through initiatives with other

museums). "Julián hit the ground running—and he hasn't stopped running since his arrival," says David Hughes, cofounder of Charlotte Street Foundation, an arts-advocacy group based in Kansas City.

Zugazagoitia took the helm at the Nelson-Atkins (replacing Marc Wilson, who was director for the previous 28 years) after a decade in which the museum's "energies were directed inward to build the expansion," Zugazagoitia says. That expansion was the 165,000-square-foot Bloch Building, designed by architect Stephen Holl, which opened to critical acclaim in 2007 and allowed the museum to supplement its renowned Chinese and European galleries with space for contemporary and African art, photography, special exhibitions, and the Isamu Noguchi sculpture court. The completion of the

Bloch Building, Zugazagoitia explains, means the museum "can focus on heightened programming."

Born in Mexico City in 1964 to a mathematician father and an actress mother, Zugazagoitia received art-history degrees from the École du Louvre and the Sorbonne in Paris. In addition to his former directorship of El Museo, he has worked as the executive assistant to director Thomas Krens of the Guggenheim Museum, served as cultural attaché to the Permanent Mexican Delegation to UNESCO in Paris, consulted on European undertakings for the Getty Conservation Institute, and curated for the 2002 São Paulo Biennale in Brazil.

The well-traveled director, who speaks six languages, says he has been welcomed warmly in Kansas City, and he has worked hard to return that welcome. He and his wife, Tasha, bought a house on the Kansas side of town—a street named State Line literally divides Kansas from Missouri—and enrolled their two children in a local grade school. He has made a point to be out and about, attending art openings, dinner parties, and concerts. "This is the most outgoing person," says Morton Sosland, a longtime museum supporter whose family donated money for Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Shuttlecocks* (1994), sculptures of giant badminton birdies that enliven the museum's 22-acre lawn.

In fact, the Nelson-Atkins's welcome to Zugazagoitia was so warm that it came with a \$5 million special-initiatives fund, "in eager anticipation of what Julián could do for the place," as Sosland puts it. Named after trustee Donald J. Hall, of the Hallmark family, the fund was designed to give the new director flexibility to seize opportunities outside the usual budget.

Zugazagoitia remembers seeing the imposing Beaux-Arts lobby of the original 1933 Nelson-Atkins building for the first time and thinking, "My former museum could fit in here. I could program this lobby." And indeed he has. Hoping to make the museum more inviting to Kansas City's large Mexican community, he tapped the

