The fantastic facade of the Congress Theater dominates a sleepy stretch of Milwaukee Avenue between Logan Square and Bucktown. This National Landmark – now shuttered after years of mismanagement – still commands attention as Chicago’s most intact legacy to the Roaring Twenties, a time when more than 30 communities revolved around the dynamism of this “palace theater block.”

Now, almost a century later, the Theater’s aging grandeur begs the question: “What if?” This proposal reimagines the connection between spaces with interventions that weave and overlap function to connect the four discreet buildings that occupy the block. Alleys become public establishments, extending activity through underutilized zones. The lobby serves as a community hub, pushing beyond its assigned purpose as a theater gateway. A contemporary bridge floats almost invisibly above the restored gilt and glass vestibule, linking two disconnected wings of an independent hotel.

By capturing “found” opportunities in space and time, the Congress Theater reestablishes itself not only as a vibrant community anchor but also as a destination, drawing Chicago’s visitors into neighborhoods far beyond the Loop.
MASS MoCA
BRUNER/COTT & ASSOCIATES
NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS

MASS MoCA inhabits a series of textile printing buildings constructed ad hoc throughout the second half of the 19th century. The buildings’ origin as an arts hub emerged in the late 1980s when the Williams College Museum of Art needed space to house large exhibitions while, simultaneously, the City of North Adams sought an economically viable solution for their now vacant manufacturing facility.

The design, centered on the credo of non-interference, exploits the infrastructural and material legacies offered by the abandoned factories. The repurposing of a series of bridges, walkways and courtyards between the buildings, once throwaway spaces, become interstitial connectors that serve to house art, host programs and orient visitors. An iterative process between building and building program allows for each use to oftentimes mold to the building’s found state with little modification.

At a larger scale, the integration of art into a neglected industrial town has reinvigorated the museum typology by leveraging found space while acting as a powerful economic catalyst for this region of the Berkshires.

Photo, top: Douglas Mason; bottom, Fred Charles.