

Opening of the Bo Bartlett Center at Columbus State University is a big job for director David Houston

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By SANDRA OKAMOTO



David Houston, the director of the Bo Bartlett Center at Columbus State University, left, and artist Bo Bartlett are photographed in the large space inside the Corn Center for the Visual Arts that will house the Bartlett Center.

David Houston has a big job ahead of him. He was recently named the director of the Bo Bartlett Center at Columbus State University. The center takes up the entire upstairs of the Corn Center for the Visual Arts and is simply an open space right now. It currently has a cube that is humidity- and temperature-controlled, holding many of Bartlett's paintings, drawings, journals, sketchbooks and other mementos of his life.

Houston, 56, is used to this kind of job, though. He was the curator for the openings of the South Carolina State Museum in Columbia, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans and the Walmart-backed Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark.

Crystal Bridges, which opened in November 2011, is the largest American art museum to open since the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, Houston said.

That museum, even though it's in northern Arkansas, attracted more than half a million people the first year it opened. He was expecting 300,000, but he says the large number of visitors is a good problem for a museum to have.

In Columbus, the center is owned by CSU but will be privately funded. Houston has to raise money to keep the center open, he said.

Besides being the archive for Bartlett's works and journals, he's hoping it will be an archive for other artists. Both Bartlett, a Columbus native, and Houston are hoping that the center will become a place for artists to come and study.

Bartlett will hold his annual holistic art workshops, but he will not be the only artist to do that. This year's workshop, scheduled for next month, is sold out.

Architect Tom Kundig of Seattle, Wash., has been hired to design the more than 18,000-square-foot space. It will feature skylights for natural light and "floating" walls to mount exhibitions. By late spring, Houston hopes to have a calendar of events, including the grand opening. Unlike the Ogden and Crystal Bridges, which were built, he said "at least we have a building already."

He also said the building is in the right place -- on the Chattahoochee River, in downtown Columbus. Bartlett, 57, who has known Houston for about six years, feels that he's the right person for the job.

"He understands my work in the scope of American art," Bartlett said. "His creativity can take on a project of this scope. I could not have wished for anyone better." Houston said it's not usual to be able to work with a living artist in his prime like Bartlett, who is in the forefront of the new American realism art movement. "People seldom have a chance to meet an artist," Houston said. "This center will help humanize a person to let people see where he came from and how they evolved into the artist they are. It gives people a connection to the artwork."

He's hoping to pull regional and national resources to fund the center as well as make it a place for a "wide range of artists" to come. But he doesn't want it to become just another artists' colony. Houston wants the community, which already supports Bartlett, to be part of the center. "I want to make it available to students and the public," Houston said.

Bartlett joked that Houston will have to work with a smaller budget. Crystal Bridges is sponsored by Walmart and had an annual budget of about \$50 million. The artist, who has homes in Washington state, Maine and here, said he and his wife, artist Betsy Eby, will be spending more time in Columbus because of the center. They are also planning on setting up studio space in Columbus.