The man who expanded the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, USA, and oversaw construction of its acclaimed Monitor Center has died.

John B Hightower, 80, died on 6th July 2013.

Hightower directed three maritime museums, transformed a sleepy state arts commission into a national powerhouse and was at one time was the youngest head of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

He remained active in the public arts and culture world after his retirement from the Mariners' Museum, serving as director of the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center during the final troubled months before it opened in 2008, and also as a board

John Hightower came to Hampton Roads in 1993 to become president and CEO of the Mariners' Museum after serving as director of planning and development for the arts at the University of Virginia, where he had been for four years. Under his leadership, the museum grew to include the Defending the Seas gallery, the \$1.4 million Small Craft Center and the jewel in the group, the \$30 million Monitor Center, opened in 2007.

"He was wonderful to work with," said Marge Shelton, assistant to the president of the Mariners' Museum. Shelton worked for Hightower from 1998-2006. "He had a very good sense of humor. We laughed almost every day."

Anna Holloway, the Monitor Center curator and the vice president of collections and programs at the museum, said Hightower believed in the museum's ability to expand, to care for and display artifacts from the Civil War ironclad *Monitor* when, in the late 1990s, the Navy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration sped up recovery efforts.

Holloway said the museum had been named the repository for *Monitor* artifacts in 1987, but most of the recovered items could be measured in "ounces and pounds" before the ramped-up recovery, initiated because the *Monitor* was deteriorating more rapidly than scientists had predicted.

"NOAA gave the museum the opportunity to opt out because we were going from ounces to tons," she said. "John said, 'We will take whatever you bring us.' We now have 210 tons of *Monitor* artifacts."

Shelton said Hightower had a gift for developing exhibits that showcased maritime history. The high point was the "*Titanic*: Fortune and Fate" show in 1998, which brought more than 200,000 visitors to the museum. But his great love was the museum's trove of fine arts and scholarly holdings. "He expanded the scholarly section," she said.

Holloway said Hightower gave her the curatorship with the instructions: "I want you to do this because you're not a Civil War historian. I want somebody who is a maritime historian, but not so focused on the area." Her job was to "design it for the poor people the civil war fanatics are dragging with them", she added. "The irony is, now I am a Civil War historian."

At the time of Hightower's retirement from the museum in 2006, W.M. Jordan, president and CEO, and museum board chairman John Lawson said his accomplishments were "absolutely unprecedented."

Hightower, a 1955 Yale University graduate, came to the Mariners' Museum with experience running maritime museums. He had directed the Norwalk Maritime Center in Connecticut and the South Street seaport Museum in New York. He led the \$30 million drive to build the 90,000 square foot Norwalk center, which included an aquarium, maritime hall and IMAX theater. At the South Street Seaport Museum, he expanded exhibits, helped build it into a nationally known ship-restoration program and pushed a \$345 million development deal between the state, city and private sector.

In 1970 he was named director of the New York Museum of Modern Art. From 1964 until he joined New York's MOMA, he was executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts. Under his leadership the council added a film program, a poets and writers program, a museum aid program and a festival program. He also added children's theater to the council's touring program. During his tenure, the council's funding grew from about \$2 million to more than \$20 million.

But both Shelton and Holloway note Hightower's talents reached beyond his leadership, his arts and culture interests and his ability to build partnerships and turn ideas into reality. Shelton said he was a gifted writer, and Holloway noted his interest in poetry, particularly haiku. Hightower also loved cats and fine wine, Holloway said.

"Every now and then I would get an envelope with a single whisker from one of his cats and a haiku," she said.

Lawson, who received news of Hightower's death while on vacation, said "John was a Renaissance man. He was a creative personality and had a command of the English language like nobody I've ever met. He was one of the people you feel fortunate to have cross your life."

Holloway said Hightower left a strong legacy. "He turned a sleepy yet wonderful museum into a world-class place," she said.

John Hightower is survived by his wife, Marty, and his children.

By Cathy Grimes, Newport News Daily Press, with contribution by Mark St. John Erickson