

The Future of Museums

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These ideas about the future of museums and the role of museum studies are presented in three categories:

- Community, a new civic culture
- Technology, challenges and opportunities
- Working Together, styles and goals of collaboration

COMMUNITY

Museums are no longer the exclusive enclaves of the elite and privileged. They have become centers of learning where doors to new experiences are opened to all. They have become our reinvented town squares where people of like minds and interests meet, share and engage. With visionary leadership museums can be at the core of a new civic culture where the distinctions between public and private (space and missions) become blurred.

By establishing a sense of purpose and place, museums can help reclaim the communities which we long for from recent memory. A time when people lived, worked, shopped, worshipped and went to school together within a shared community. Today most people accomplish these everyday tasks with different groups of non connected people at places scattered around a region. Our lives have become segmented. We seek for a feeling of belonging that is not being fulfilled by much of contemporary culture. We do not wish to be anonymous and apart. Rather, we want to feel connected with people with whom we share an affinity. It is a "civic intimacy" that is lacking in our lives, a tangible perception of belonging that is central to our most basic needs.

Museums are the type of public institutions that can help build communities. They are cultural hubs that attract people by expressing the issues and ideas valued by particular groups. They are demographic filters that bring people together in real space and time with those who are of like or curious minds. An art, science and children's museum are likely to attract people with different interests, needs and enthusiasms. Each of these museums has the opportunity to create unique communities.

These communities will be especially valued by their members because they provide encounters in the flesh not mere "virtual" encounters of cyber-space. The "virtual" world of high technology will propel people out of their homes in search of reality (real things), intimacy (real connections) and experiences of three dimensions that excite all their senses. Museums can fulfill these needs especially for tangible connections.

They must be ready to quench the thirst for information, ideas and community for which our new virtual world makes us hungry. Each significant piece of knowledge technology has increased our desire for more learning. They have all have sparked our curiosity and our primal need to know more.

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Each visitor to a museum is a irreplaceable participant in a process of story telling. The stories we choose to tell and how we tell them is a responsibility we must never forget. Each person brings something unique from his / her own experience to a museum. Who could guess that Picasso's love of African art would transform a bicycle seat into a bulls head? Each of us reinvents what we see into new worlds and new connections. Museums now play a vital role in this process.

Museums can create environments for teaching, contemplation, learning and experiencing the world first hand in ways that will make lifetime memories. It is in "memory building" that museums open ourselves to new connections and create legacies for future generations.

Museums continually recreate the ways that they connect to their communities. Retailing, licensing and sleep overs for children have made new profit centers while opening doors to new members. Cruises, resorts and summer camps are becoming the next step in community outreach.

Museums are increasingly sensitive to the needs of parents with children, teens, singles and the elderly. They are reshaping themselves to accommodate these groups. Spaces for socializing , resting and homework clubs are becoming more common sights in museums.

Creating accessibility and a feeling of ownership to all people regardless of class, race, gender, age and ethnicity will challenge museums to become relevant. Museums must develop opportunities for the uninitiated to become familiar with new experiences and values that such institutions offer.

Museums need to contextualise and interpret exhibits and collections in ways that friendly and understandable. Creating environments for learning that are generous, nurturing and inclusive rather than demanding and circumspect.

TECHNOLOGY

Never before in history have so many people had so much information available to them in their homes. We can be sure this was being said after the invention of movable type and again when phonographs, radios, telephones and televisions arrived. Museums faced these challenges and survived and flourished. Today, the internet, digital entertainment, interactive games and computers compete for our time and attention.

The challenge of museums is to make the trip away from home unique. The public will want to know if the museum offers something better than the technologies at home. To experience the feeling of community is one reason people will leave their homes. To enjoy the performing arts, or walk through a well designed building or neighborhood will bring folks out of their electronic cottages. Somethings can only truly be experienced in three dimensions. To come face to face with the genuine article can only be done in person.

I've often thought that when cultural events are reviewed in the newspaper a row of footprints would be more telling than stars. What we really want to know is if it worth leaving the house to go to the event.

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Technology is also a vehicle that can humanize and personalize a visitor's experience. Imagine data base technology delivered in a device the size of a PDA (personal desk accessory) that would ask you a few questions and customize a tour of a museum for each person. It could prompt a visitor and say "If you enjoyed this. You might enjoy such and such". It can also give the museum professional rare glimpses into real and measurable patterns and preferences by measuring the time and tracking the path of each visitor.

Museums can also enter our homes and lure us out with virtual exhibits delivered via the internet. They will want to see the real thing and will come to museums. Nothing can replace the experience of scale or the subtlety of pigment laid on by the hand of a master than real life encounters.

WORKING TOGETHER

As a designer and creative director I have had the opportunity to work with many talented people. It has been my personal style to collaborate rather than impose my singular point of view.

Over the years I have seen two distinct styles of working. The first I call an "architectural" model. This is where the designer (architect) specifies to all the people and trades working on a project, all the details and expectations of a job. The ideas in this method flow from the top down. The second style of working I call a "theatrical" model, a more collaborative approach. Here the designer is in the role of a writer / director. The intent and specifications are communicated in great detail but in this model there is value added. Each trade and artist is encouraged to contribute additional interpretation, just as the actors and designers do in a theatrical production. Here the ideas flow back and forth. The director acts as a guide and final arbiter. I believe the architectural model is safer and on a good day can deliver 98% of what was intended. The theatrical model, although riskier, can deliver 120% of what was first intended.

Preparing people to manage the opportunities and challenges that they will face as museum professionals is essential. Creating and sustaining an environment where students will learn to understand the issues and literature in their field of interest and be able to produce original and meaningful work in his or her own voice is the challenge of educators. Working in a museum environment is a highly collaborative experience. Methods of engagement and strategies for effective communication are essential parts of the preparation needed for future museum professionals.

CONCLUSION

To a large extent we fashion the future by how we imagine it. Dreams can come true. It is my hope that the next generation will have more access to the tools and the power needed to make their own dreams come true. That giving people the tools to effect positive change in valued institutions will create a legacy of caring values can and will make a difference in small and large ways that we cannot begin to imagine.