



An Agenda for American Museums in the 21st Century

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About 15 years ago I wrote in the journal, *Museum News*,

The word ‘museum’ has lost its power to adequately define a coherent body of institutions that have similar missions, goals, and strategies. To define a major research driven natural history museum, a regional science and technology center, an encyclopedic art museum, and a local volunteer-run historical society as a ‘museum’ is like describing General Motors, Kmart, a regional bank, and a local convenience store as a ‘business’—it is accurate but not helpful.

As I look at that statement today I wonder why I thought that the word “museum” ever defined a body of coherent institutions.

From its beginnings, the great value of American museums has come from their diversity. It has always been a mix of collecting, inquiry and scholarship, entertainment, and education and I would like to take a few minutes to give you a flavor of some of these early museums. It is worth noting that Charles Willson Peale’s museum in Philadelphia, begun late in the 18th century was a commercial as well as educational undertaking. Educationally, Peale understood that “It is only the arrangement and management of a Repository of subjects of Natural History...that can constitute a utility. For if it should be immensely rich in number and value of articles, unless they are systematically arranged and the proper modes of seeing and using them attended to, the advantage of such a store will be of little account to the public.” At its apogee Peale’s museum had a collection of over 100,000 specimens including a mastodon named “mammoth” that was a popular Philadelphia attraction. As a businessman Peale was constantly juggling and balancing his serious collecting efforts and his entertainments in order to make his museum a financial success.

As Americans moved west to create what historian Daniel Boorstin has described as “Upstart” communities, museums, along with colleges and universities, opera houses, libraries, and theaters were often created before there were people to use them. They often provided the definition of community before there was any community.

A museum that epitomizes the entrepreneurial spirit of

these early “Upstart” museums was the Western Museum of Cincinnati, founded by Daniel Drake. In creating the museum, Drake was motivated by a blend of intellectual curiosity and civic boosterism. Drake’s ambitious plan was to create a museum of “natural and artificial curiosities embracing nearly the whole of the great circle of knowledge: and appealing to the naturalist, the antiquary, and the mechanician.” Drake established a partnership with the newly established Cincinnati College and started several archeological projects. To pay for it all he organized a stock company that permitted stockholders free admission to his museum. Others paid 25 cents. When Drake’s attempts to make the museum a financial success failed, it was sold to a new group of stockholders who turned the collection over to Joseph Dorfeuille, a French immigrant who already had accumulated a large natural history collection of his own. While interested in science, Dorfeuille was a pragmatist who observed that for the general public “the truths of natural science were not as attractive...as the occasional errors of nature in her productions.” Under his stewardship the museum created a colossal entertainment titled “The Infernal Regions.” A blend of automated wax figures (interestingly created by the young sculptor Hiram Powers), the exhibit became one of the most popular attractions in the American West. The traveler Francis Trollope described it as “a pandaemonium...in which he has congregated all the images of horror that his fertile fancy could devise To give the scheme some more effect, he makes it visible only through a grate of massive iron bars, among which are arranged wires connected to an electrical machine in a neighboring chamber; should any daring hand or foot obtrude itself within the bars, it receives a smart shock that often passes through many of the crowd, and the cause being unknown, the effect is extremely comic; terror, astonishment, curiosity, are all set in motion, and all contribute to make ‘Dorfeuille’s Hell’ one of the most amusing exhibitions imaginable.” Even with the success of such exhibitions, Dorfeuille’s museum eventually closed in 1867 due to financial difficulties.

While Peale, Drake, and Dorfeuille represent important apprenticeships in the establishment of the American museum movement, it was P.T. Barnum who brought together a winning combination of education and entertainment in his American Museum, founded in 1841 in New York City. On the surface, Barnum’s museum housed a somewhat bizarre and exotic collection of curiosities and a group of performers. Yet Barnum recognized in his visitors a deep curiosity, a need to know and understand things for themselves. In the words of cultural historian Neil Harris, “despite Barnum’s eclecticism there was

a certain unity to its exotic trappings, and approach to reality and to pleasure. The objects inside the museum, and Barnum's activities outside, focused attention on their own structures and operations, were empirically testable, and enabled—or at least invited—audiences and participants to learn how they worked. They appealed because they exposed their processes of action.”

For Barnum, the curiosity, the excitement, and knowledge embodied in his American Museum were to be shared with visitors in an active way. Even in his exhibitions that bordered on hoaxes, Barnum actively engaged the issue of authenticity; what is real and what is not. He realized that his audience took instinctive pleasure in uncovering process and that education, if doled out in acceptable doses, was a major American preoccupation that had some box office appeal. In fact Barnum wrote an English friend in 1845, “I trust that ere long, the richest men in America will be we museum chaps.”

While Barnum was not very prescient in his prediction about the wages of museum directors, he was a genuine pioneer in understanding the needs of audiences to have an “experience” in a museum setting and that such experiences played upon the public's natural curiosity. Barnum insisted that the museum visitor be actively challenged, his hokum in many cases being specifically designed to invite skepticism, discussion, and debate.

I mention these early museums to make the point that many of the issues of commercialism, the use of new and exotic technologies in exhibitions to create a memorable experience, the blend of entertainment and education, and the balance between audience needs and museum purpose are not a new phenomenon. While the recipe for these early museums was somewhat different, the ingredients have generally remained remarkably similar to those in use today.

In addition to their diversity, the other continuing characteristic of the American museum movement has been its attempt to be responsive to changing social needs. At the same time the great 19th century American art and natural history museums were aggressively assembling their collections at a level of plunder that would not be accepted today, they continued a strong commitment to public education and uplift, as long as it stayed within clear boundaries of social control. If we look closer to the present we can see this characteristic still at work. The acknowledgement of a more diverse and pluralistic society in recent years has created a plethora of unmet contemporary social needs and museums have often been among the first responders. Major initiatives for encouraging and strengthening minority museums, for promoting a greater level of civic engagement by museums, and bringing museums closer to communities have been sponsored by the American Association of Museums and

other groups. A simple measure of the continuing strength and diversity of the museum movement was provided by a study commissioned in 1979 by the newly formed Institute of Museum Services that showed that approximately half the museums in America had been brought into existence since 1960.

Looking at the state of the American museum movement from the perspective of today I think we can say that museums matter in a way that they have not in any earlier period. To an extent unimaginable even a generation ago, they are considered important and influential institutions that both shape and reflect the public agenda. The print and electronic media regularly review museum exhibitions, the comings and goings of museum directors are now considered newsworthy, and museum scandals are front-page stories. New museum building projects remain, like sports stadiums, benchmarks of civic pride and ambition.

I would like to now shift focus to the main topic of my remarks, which is to suggest some elements of an agenda for museums in the next century. Before doing so I would like to mention several things that set the stage for this agenda.

The first is a reality check on museum usage. Today's museums have done a very good job at believing their own press releases. We hear again and again how museum visitation exceeds that of professional sports; we are proud of ourselves at how we are reaching new and diverse audiences. Yet pretty much all the audience research confirms what we have always known instinctively: that a relatively small number of people of above average education and cultural confidence are avid museum goers and that their visits add up fast. I say this not to say it should always be, but that the missionary wing of the museum movement has a very hard time acknowledging that it is possible to live a full and rich life without ever visiting a museum.

The second is recognition that many of the careful distinctions that we make within the museum field regarding our unique and special professional roles in society are non-issues for those outside our movement. It is hard to argue that we are so special in a world in which Las Vegas casinos have major art collections and mount special exhibitions for the public; where the Hard Rock Cafe chain has an aggressive collecting program that has resulted in a world-class collection of historical materials relating to rock and roll that is curated and conserved by a well-trained professional staff; and where a full-blown but failed non-profit aquarium in Denver was purchased for pennies on the dollar by a foodservice chain to serve as an entertaining and educational backdrop to its signature restaurant. For the public the distinctions between non-profit and for-profit, education and entertainment have become largely irrelevant. The tax status and high purpose of who they get

their museum-like experience from is less important than the perceived value for their expenditure of time and money

Yet that said, I think as we look to the future of museums, the possibilities for the future of the museum remain exciting. I think we are on the edge of an era in which museums and their natural partners, libraries, have the potential to greatly strengthen their ability to truly become the new “public utilities of a knowledge society.”

In order to accomplish this I think American museums must address three major challenges:

- The challenge of distinctiveness
- The challenge of connectedness
- The challenge of trustworthiness

The Challenge of Distinctiveness

If we look at the most influential museums in contemporary America, their success is less a result of the intrinsic quality of their collections than it is the distinctiveness of their mission, clearly articulated and executed strategies based on that mission, and an imaginative staff to execute museum strategies. This was driven home to me in a very practical way when I became President of what was then Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in 1981. The verdict of my peers was already in when I arrived. As one very distinguished colleague told me when he called my first day in the office, “Harold, you have just committed professional suicide.” To be sure the museum was not what anyone coming from a traditional museum background would find comforting. Its mission was to keep going although there was no shared sense of what direction to go. What saved us were the collaborative efforts of some wonderful people, and over time we were able to begin to find some common threads that led to a sense of mission that provided a platform for the creation of something educationally very powerful out of the strong yet somewhat strange legacy we inherited. As a result of that experience I have become a bit of a fanatic on the subject of mission but do not feel my fanaticism has been wrongly placed.

Since I left Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in 1996, my wife Susan and I have worked with literally dozens of museums. For us the best indicator of success for these museums was their ability to create and execute a statement of mission that clearly articulated what the museum does, what was the outcome of doing it, and most importantly, what was the value added of the outcome to the audiences it served. In business terms, it addresses the simple question of “what is the value proposition?”

It is essential that as American museums move forward, individual museums are able to clearly define for themselves, and for those they purport to serve, their reason

for being. To say that the museum mission is to collect, preserve, and interpret a collection no longer will suffice since those activities are no longer seen by many as an intrinsic social good.

I should briefly insert here that I think the special missions of college and university museums need some attention. It has been my experience that too often the college and university museum is seen as a public relations tool to attract students, patch up town and gown tensions, and provide community service. All of these things are important and good. At the same time, being part of an already existing and privileged community devoted to critical inquiry and teaching offers opportunities for intellectual and aesthetic programming that few museums outside the academy can risk. The college and university museum has the potential and built in permission to become an intellectual and aesthetic provocateur that can raise issues, do exhibitions, and sponsor activities that could make it a focus and center of campus intellectual life. It seems to me to be a shame that in communities with such an incredible intellectual resource, college and university museums too often remain on the periphery of campus intellectual life.

The Challenge of Connectedness

Closely related to institutional distinctiveness is connectedness. Again the distinctiveness of the museum’s mission helps it to know to whom it should be talking, to whom it should be listening, and what are the limits of the museum to respond. While there has been a great deal of talk about the need for museums to more directly engage communities, there has been little acknowledgement that this is easier said than done, given that contemporary communities are so fluid, transitory, and different from the more traditional community model that is held out as the ideal. We have moved from communities of need to communities of choice, where people define themselves by their personal choices rather than their needs. For museums these communities of choice signal a movement from a culture of “outreach” where museums create programs and activities and then reach out with them to potential audiences, to a culture of “inreach” where individual users reach in to those organizations that they see as giving personal value to them.

There is a great future for those museums that try to make themselves communities of choice. Certainly the museum cannot and should not try to provide all the things that people need and desire in their lives. However, with some imaginative thinking on the part of museums they could do a lot more to becoming the center of powerful “learning communities.” The key to doing this is to create institutional strategies, consistent with mission, that connect museum programs to people’s basic personal

needs. I will suggest just a few such strategies.

Help Improve Knowledge: This is the most obvious strategy; an acknowledgement that people come to museums for increased knowledge. It is important that the museum both acknowledge its own expertise and authority and at the same time the competencies the user brings to the museum. It means answering the questions in the mind of the visitor, not the museum staff.

Find the Shared Stories: In connecting with audiences, one of the most powerful tools we have is storytelling. It remains the most elementary and effective form of memorable explanation and communication. An unhelpful legacy of the quasi-academic culture of museums has been a preference for analysis over narrative, theme over story. Museums need to return to storytelling as an important way of communicating and cultivating community; shared stories are the essence of any community.

Foster Dialogue: Dialogue is a focused conversation in a setting of trust. Dialogue is important because it allows people to experience the security of what they know and yet be willing to listen to an alternative version of it. It is a way of introducing ambiguity, uncertainty, and even threatening ideas in a setting of trust. Here there are real possibilities of acknowledging the content expertise of museum staff and the living expertise of the museum audience in a give and take process. It offers all an opportunity to acknowledge the possibility that things might have been different.

Provide Validation: A positive and affirming process, validation is the experience of finding an outside source of authority that gives value and meaning to one's life. This is especially important when one's personal or collective experience is left out as in the case of minority or other marginalized groups whose experiences are not part of "mainstream" museum interpretation.

Help People Mourn: This may seem a strange kind of cultural process and experience to build on in a museum setting, but it is an important one. Formally and informally, collectively and individually, saying goodbye to something that is irretrievably lost is an essential part of any community. I suggest that our museums need to help people mourn those things that are irretrievably lost by time and circumstance.

Be a Place and Time for Celebration: Conversely, it is through celebration rituals that most of us, collectively and individually, reinforce and strengthen what is most important in our lives. Visits to museums affirm that education is an important value and that history, art, and science are important enterprises that continue to change and evolve.

Many in the museum world see a "celebratory" role as

uncritical, unscholarly, and unreflective. However the concept of "celebration" needs to be seen in a more broadly defined way: as a way of focusing on and paying attention to those things that are truly important in our lives.

Finally,

Inspire: This is, in my opinion, the highest level of aspiration for a museum. Any museum that can inspire people can claim a grand achievement. The real things that are a museum's stock in trade: the people, stories, and objects of art, history and science—are the great raw materials of inspiration.

To create a community of choice in an individual museum is no small challenge. And to create the kinds of exhibitions and programs that try to connect and sustain a shared sense of community is not easy—and requires some skills that are in short supply in most museums.

It also requires a sense of urgency and timeliness that is lacking in most museums. I remain baffled when I look at the exhibition agenda of many museums that claim a public agenda and see very few topics that could be characterized as timely. Journalistic exhibitions that could be competently mounted in a matter of weeks or months need find a larger place in a museum's program vocabulary. There are few topics in contemporary life that could not benefit through engagement by museum exhibitions.

Finally, museums attempting to create communities of choice need to understand just how important the sense of place is in building a shared community. Communities are grounded in both physical space—and increasingly in virtual space. The great observer of cultural landscapes, J.B. Jackson, writes in his essay, "A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time," that successful places

... are embedded in the everyday world around us and easily accessible, but at the same time are distinct from that world. A visit... is a small but significant event. We are refreshed and elated each time we are there. I cannot really define such localities any more precisely. The experience varies in intensity; it can be private and solitary, or convivial and social. The place can be a natural setting or a crowded street or even a public occasion. What moves us is our change of mood, the brief but vivid event. And what automatically ensues... is a sense of fellowship with those who share the experience, and the instinctive desire to return, to establish a custom of repeated ritual. (p. 158)

I think the same characteristics also apply to virtual spaces. I remain amazed that at this late date more museums have not adopted the simplest forms of chat rooms and other types of virtual communities that could act to strengthen

a sense of shared interests and relationships among those affiliated with individual museums.

The Challenge of Trustworthiness

In the world of tomorrow the relative trustworthiness of institutions will increasingly mark the difference between those that are successful and those that are not. The issue of trustworthiness is, for museums, closely tied up with the issue of authority. Traditionally museums have sought their authority through the authenticity of their collections and the expertise of their staff. In an era when museum audiences, staff, and patrons shared the same transcendent values and saw them as an intrinsic good, they could be transmitted through their collections and exhibitions without fear of controversy or contradiction. Museums provided a strategy for organizing and colonizing the natural and human world. Their exhibitions provided a way for museum goers to discover, explore, and “consume” other people’s heritage in a culturally comfortable setting

In recent years the rules of the game have changed. As American museums became more visible and their audiences more diverse, the shared understanding that earlier underlay museum assumptions about the scope and focus of their collections and the subject matter and approach of their exhibitions and programs, began to erode. As a result, museums are no longer seen as places of unquestioned authority and trustworthiness.

A landmark example of this was the controversy during the 1980s over traditional museum stewardship and display of objects considered sacred by various Native American groups. While the intellectual and ethical debate turned on two very different cultural views of the value of tangible Native American objects, the controversy also uncovered the fact that the museums that had held these objects for many years had in many cases done a poor job of caring for them.

Museum exhibitions have also become battlegrounds for larger historical, scientific, and aesthetic debates. Exhibitions mounted by such varied institutions as the Museum of the City of New York, Library of Congress, the Brooklyn Museum, Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of New Mexico have become platforms for strident advocacy representing a variety of points of view. This was new stuff for most museums. They are having a hard time learning to listen to groups and individuals who do not accept their authority yet understand the importance of challenging an influential shaper of values and opinion. The most visible example of this remains the National Air and Space Museum’s planned exhibition on strategic bombing during WWII in the 1990s. The result of the controversy pitted the museum’s curators and director against a variety of outraged veterans and other interested groups, several

of which were politically savvy and quite ruthless. The result was the exhibition was cancelled before it opened. More recently, however, there have been numerous examples where controversial topics have been successfully addressed by museums. We are learning.

Science museums have also been the scenes of demonstrations and disruptive activities by various groups opposed to evolution. For the most part these museums have taken the offensive in defending both their scientific perspective on evolution and the scientific method as an overwhelmingly recognized form of inquiry.

A new debate regarding the authority and trustworthiness of museums is just now emerging with the creation of major new museums that privilege the perspectives of groups that have been excluded from more traditional museum narratives. The most important of these has been the National Museum of the American Indian which opened in 2004. Its location and architecture clearly symbolize the change from the museum as a colonizing force to the museum as a legitimizing force. The large and dramatic architecture of the building and its location on the National Mall is a clear sign to all that American Indians and their heritage are indeed important and will not be denied. The exhibitions have proved more controversial. Most were conceived and organized by Native American historians and anthropologists in close collaboration with various tribal informants. To some the exhibitions are a successful attempt to de-privilege traditional academic constructs of Indian life and culture; for others they represent multicultural platitudes. The American Indian Museum is by no means the first autobiographical museum but it is by far the largest and most influential to date. Its ability to develop a reputation of legitimacy and trust among an audience beyond Indians is yet to be seen but will set a precedent for other major national museums such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture planned for the Mall, and a planned national museum of Hispanic culture.

The growing number of presidential museums, especially those dealing with living presidents, poses many of the same issues. The subject of the museum picks the planners of museum content and the exhibition designer, pretty much answering the question in advance as to whether the museum will provide a serious assessment of the particular presidency or attempt to secure a positive historical legacy.

Presidential museums and advocacy museums clearly fit under the tent of American museums. However, if they become seen as instruments of propaganda rather than a trustworthy source of information and insight they will cast a shadow on the trustworthiness of other museums.

Another equally interesting example of the conceptual change of the museum from a colonizing force to a

legitimizing force is the recent creation of corporate museums that use the positive culture capital of the word “museum” to strengthen their brand identity. German automakers Mercedes, BMW, and Volkswagen have all built expensive museums, each housed in distinctive and cutting edge works of architecture designed to give experiential reinforcement of the values of quality and precision. Japan Airlines has just created an internal museum to teach safety to its employees as well as strengthen a culture of safety awareness. Hong Kong has recently opened a museum devoted to helping people tell the difference between fake and authentic goods produced in China. There is an interesting irony here in that while many groups, especially those in the U.S., seeking to create museums, debate endlessly whether or not the term conveys an image of stuffiness, more market savvy branders and educators openly embrace the word “museum” as a sign of authenticity, authority, and trustworthiness.

We will see more of this in the future. The authors James Gilmore and Joseph Pine, whose book *The Experience Economy*, was a thoughtful acknowledgment of the importance of providing engaging, personal, and memorable experiences as a key to business success have just published a new book titled *Authenticity*. Its purpose is to help businesses position their goods and services as authentic, arguing, “If your customers don’t view your offerings as authentic you’ll be branded inauthentic—fake! —and risk losing sales.” Gilmore and Pine suggest three major characteristics of authenticity: sense of place, strong point of view, and a sense of larger purpose. They then go on to outline ways that a brand identity stressing authenticity can be created for any business.

The Experience Economy laid out a blueprint as to how a business could create engaging, exciting, value-giving, and memorable experiences that should be our museums’ stock in trade. Business got it yet most museums did not. In *Authenticity* the authors provide a strong argument for the branding value of authenticity as another key to business success. Again, if there is any brand identity that museums should own it is authenticity. For me it is more than a little strange that we should need to relearn from the brand managers of businesses the most basic things about our own enterprise.

In the future the authority that a museum claims will not be a function of the quality and authenticity of its collections nor its specialized content expertise. It will be secured by having a clear and distinctive mission that is well executed and relentless connectedness with its audiences in an atmosphere of mutual trust. Museums can no longer continue to take refuge in their claims of higher purpose and nonprofit status. Like any organization, they must demonstrate their value and renew the bonds of trust with their users and supporters every day. In the final analysis it is quite simple. People listen to, affiliate with, and support

people and organizations they trust.

The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in one of her best-known poems,

Upon this age, that never speaks its mind,
This furtive age, this age endowed with power
To wake the moon with footsteps, fit an oar
Into the rowlocks of the wind, and find
What swims before his prow, what swirls behind—
Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric . . .

Museums, I think, can be looms that can help us all weave the wonders of the world into a continuing array of distinctive, authentic, and trustworthy fabrics that can teach us, bring us together, inspire us, and give us pleasure and delight through their warmth.