

It's a jungle in here: Museums and their self-inflicted challenges

Robert R. Janes

Our world now confronts a constellation of issues that threaten our very existence. There is a burgeoning literature that offers dire warnings and solutions, but museums are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Are museums irrelevant as social institutions? Perhaps: I submit that most museums have largely ignored, on both moral and practical grounds, a broader commitment to the world in which we live. Instead, museums have allowed themselves to be held increasingly captive by traditional practices and their own internally driven agendas.

In making this sweeping assessment, I am, of course, generalizing. I accept this liability as the starting point for considering those practices, which — taken for granted and rarely critically examined — hinder the evolution of museums as more conscious, empathetic and self-critical organizations. Museum practitioners and academics seem preoccupied with method and process — getting better at what we already do well.

Learning means questioning

In our “knowledge economy,” it is widely held that learning is essential to intelligent and caring change, and learning requires asking uncomfortable questions. Avoiding these questions is characteristic of those with a vested interest in the status quo — an obvious explanation for the lack of self-critical and innovative leadership on the part of corporations, governments, universities and museums. How many of these organizations are actually leading the way to a sustainable future, once the advertisements and the election speeches are unmasked?

Museums cannot be replaced

I acknowledge Neil Postman, the iconoclastic academic, for noting that the purpose of all museums is to explore answers to the

fundamental question: “What does it mean to be a human being?”¹ At their best, museums present the richness, complexities and diversity of life, and keep reflection and dialogue alive for visitors. Governments are not equipped to do this, business is committed to homogenization and efficiency for profit, and most universities are still grappling with separation from their communities. Churches should not be dismissed as a possibility, but it is increasingly difficult to grasp how a commitment to contemporary monotheism will allow the tolerance and understanding that social cohesion and cooperation require.

This leaves museums with the obligation to probe our humanness and, in assuming this responsibility, museums are unique and valuable social institutions that have no suitable replacement: therein lies their great worth. My idealism ends here, however, as critical reflection, experimentation and innovation remain largely unrealized opportunities for most museums. With permanent exhibitions requiring years to complete, an obsessive fear of deaccessioning, and the lack of funding to nurture experimentation, it is difficult to be sanguine about a bright future replete with museum learners.

In exploring some of the internal challenges to progressive museum practice, I have no intention of judging the conduct or commitment of individual museum workers. I ask you to recognize that there is an underlying paradox at work here: the disconnection between individuals who work in museums and the way museums function as organizations. Individual staff members are often insightful and innovative, yet these qualities may never be translated into institutional reality. Indeed, it is critical to bear in mind the demanding requirements of museum work, including notoriously low salaries, high professional standards, governing authorities who lack relevant expertise — not to mention fickle funding agencies that foster mission drift through their insistence upon short-term project funding. Museums are highly complex organizations, with multiple professional allegiances under one roof, competing values and interests, and a range of diverse activities that would give pause to the most seasoned executive. Much of this unnecessary complexity is a result of the automatic pilot that keeps museums moving along in familiar tracks, which thus constrains learning and change. We remain, as it were, in a field of sacred cows.



Ceremonialist Pete Standing Alone paints the face of museum ethnologist Gerald Conaty, in preparation for a chieftainship ceremony in 2003 honouring Conaty's contributions to the well-being of the Kainai Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Alberta. Photo: R. R. Janes.

The fallacy of authoritative neutrality

Museums must answer the essential question: *why* do they do what they do?

One explanation for the failure to ask *why* lies in an uncritical commitment to what I call “the fallacy of authoritative neutrality” — the widely held belief that we must protect our neutrality, lest we fall prey to bias, trendiness or special interest groups. Authoritative neutrality has taken on new meaning over the past decade, as museums rely increasingly on foundation and private funding, and business people occupy more seats at the board table. Perhaps the pervasive, albeit discreet, argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate a private sector sponsor, real or potential.

The simple truth, apparently unrecognized by the proponents of authoritative neutrality, is that corporations *are* special interest groups, marked by a rigid tribalism grounded in marketplace ideology: a set of ideas, beliefs, values and passions that justify and mask a specific set of interests.²

Moving beyond authoritative neutrality requires judgement and risk-taking, and the potential for either enhancing the collective good, or abusing it, lies dormant in every opportunity. In a 2003 CMA survey of 2,400 Canadians, 60% believed that “museums can play a more significant role in Canadian society,” although this role was not defined. For those respondents who visited museums most often, this view rose to 82%.³ Further, Fiona Cameron’s recent research in Australia notes that “bringing important, challenging and controversial points of view [forward] in a democratic, free-thinking society was seen as a key role for museums by many.”⁴

Granted, presenting controversial viewpoints is not the same as committing to a particular perspective, but it is a giant step along the continuum of social responsibility. There is an even greater need to transform the museum’s public service persona, currently defined by ancillary education and often ersatz entertainment, to one of a locally embedded problem-solver, in tune with the challenges and aspirations of communities.

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The lone museum director

There are basically two organizational traditions in the Western world.⁵ The first — and predominant model — is the hierarchical tradition in which one person is the lone chief at the top. There is another tradition, rarely discussed and dating from Roman times, known as *primus inter pares*. Here, the principal leader is the first among equals, but not the chief or the boss; the leader must prove and test his or her leadership among a peer group. Radical, indeed, especially for inherently conservative organizations like museums that have embraced the hierarchical model with great enthusiasm. There are so many flaws in the lone director model that it is difficult to dissect. The difficulties are present from the moment a museum must fill the role. In the typical absence of succession and transition plans, most museums inevitably enter a period of organizational drift. The museum goes on hold, with the acting director in a custodial mode postponing all substantive decisions for the new director.

Once on the job, further flaws of the lone director model emerge. Cut off from the grapevine of internal intelligence, the lone director is soon isolated — a person with subordinates, not colleagues. The pyramidal structure erodes information links and destroys channels of honest reaction and feedback.⁶ Perhaps this is why there is so much unthinking and unnecessary change when a new director arrives: this isolation creates a certain all-knowing quality in the director, cut off as he or she is from genuine and critical interaction with peers. Behold the omniscient — but disadvantaged — lone director.

This model leads to impaired judgement, and there are too many examples of new directors paying little heed to the museum as they find it, but rather beginning by changing the museum in accordance with their own experience, however limited or inappropriate. This is particularly common when a director comes from a smaller museum, or has no museum experience at all. In the *primus inter pares* model, any attempt at arbitrary change would have to be fully scrutinized by the director’s senior peers, which would do much to prevent squandering resources and morale.

Last, the long hours and excessive workload demanded of the lone director erodes creativity at a time when the leader’s growth, awareness, communication and sensitivity are critical.⁷ This loss often results in conventional, yet decidedly dysfunctional, practices. Consider how often the lone director must resort to briefings from staff, as a typical politician does, and must have others write their correspondence and reports. As these positions are currently structured, there is little choice, but surely this must diminish thought and creativity.

Management myopia

Much has been written of the differences and similarities between leadership and management; they are best described as two sides of the same coin. Management is about coping with complexity, while leadership is about coping with change. The challenge is to use each to balance the other.⁸ The management myopia which plagues museums, and underlies our powerlessness to embrace socially relevant missions beyond education and entertainment, is essentially a lack of foresight — a seeming inability to anticipate future events that have little or nothing to do with current activities and commitments. Confronting this myopia is particularly important, because it erodes the untapped potential of museums “to envision how the community’s ongoing and/or emerging needs in all their dimensions — physical, psychological, economic and social — might be served by the museum’s particular competencies,” to quote the late Stephen Weil.⁹

There are four principles which give rise to management myopia, and all of them are alive and well in museums. I am indebted to

Ralph Stacey, the management specialist, for his insightful analysis of these complexities.¹⁰ The first is that the museum should have a visionary to guide it to a splendid future — recall the lone director. The assumption is that the director, along with the less-celebrated management team, is in control of the museum and its journey. Second, the museum must have a common and unified culture, in which all staff share a single vision governed by the same rules. The third is the focus on the financial bottom line, which is directly linked to the belief in continuous economic growth as essential to societal



Rendering of the wind turbine installation at Saskatoon's Western Development Museum.
Photo: B. Newman, 2008.

well-being, resulting in the ever-increasing primacy of economic interests in institutional decision-making. The fourth root cause of management myopia is the belief that a museum should determine what it is good at, give people what they want and adapt to the market environment.¹¹

These four beliefs are familiar to us, but they are based on an erroneous and, ultimately, dangerous assumption that the world is stable and marked by regularity, predictability and adaptation; that it is possible to know enough about the future.¹² The result, as noted, is that we get better at doing more of the same. This may support current success, but the current litany of socio-environmental issues demonstrates that the natural and cultural worlds are not in stable equilibrium. We are bombarded daily with

the instability of it all, from the rising price of oil to the continued loss of biodiversity, not to mention the increasingly evident consequences of global warming.

It borders on hubris for any of us to assume that it is business-as-usual when the biosphere is on such a perilous trajectory. Stable management is, of course, essential for all healthy museums, but this is not the issue. The issue is one of heightened consciousness, and the need for museums to create new mental maps, new mindsets, new perspectives and new ways of working that will allow us to meet the challenges of our troubled world, with empathy and commitment to the communities museums serve. Doing away with the hollowness of authoritative neutrality, the lone director model and myopic management serve as an excellent beginning — in combination with a complete rethinking of exhibitions.

Museum exhibitions: Ploughing old ground

While none of the previous challenges receive much attention, it is not so with the mainstay and defining feature of all museums: exhibitions. All museum workers are involved in exhibitions in some way, and all museums struggle daily with producing and marketing them. Thus there are a lot of experts out there, from curators to designers to marketers, which makes it all the more surprising that museums continue to use methods, techniques and mental models that remain unchanged. It is for this reason that exhibitions are included on my list of intractable habits that require rethinking and reinvention.

The exhibit developer Kathleen McLean has reinforced and heightened these concerns.¹³ McLean read the entire first volume of *Curator: The Museum Journal* (published in 1958) and compared the "musings, expectations, and best practices of today with those voiced by our colleagues 50 years ago." This diachronic approach is compelling and her observations are many and rich, but what sticks in my mind is her comment: "I detected a disconcerting similarity between much of what was written those many years ago and what is still being debated today."¹⁴

She attributes the obsolescence of the museum exhibit to various factors, including a lack of imagination about what exhibitions could be, as well as the traditional ways in which they are developed — requiring huge amounts of time, people and money. Nonetheless, the museum community generally accepts these limitations and continues to produce more of the same, usually at tremendous cost.

Although lack of imagination and the complex production requirements are key factors in what McLean calls the "stultifying sameness" of museum exhibitions, there are other considerations that also merit attention.¹⁵ The first of these is the tacit presumption that linear constructions of glass and wood, incorporating massive amounts of text paired with objects, is the most effective means of providing meaning and value to visitors. The museum exhibition, as traditionally conceived and currently presented, is essentially a book — without any of the advantages of book technology, such as portability and ease of way-finding. Many exhibitions also imply that knowledge and information are timeless — this is simply disingenuous. Moreover, exhibitions are the most capital-intensive work (including time and labour) that museums do, and are stubbornly resistant to renovation and upgrading without large amounts of money. Upgrading is rarely built into the budget at the outset, thus it is common for exhibits to remain in place for 15 to 50 years, while becoming dated, shabby and often shockingly irrelevant.

Exhibitions are also typically plagued by another major omission — the lack of authorship or attribution. It is mandatory to acknowledge sponsors and donors, but rarely does the exhibition credit who did the creative work, the research and writing, or why. I don't know what purpose this anonymity serves — is it modesty, adherence to unthinking convention, or the subtle maintenance of assumed authority? Very few books are written anonymously; why should museums persist in this omission? Maintaining this anonymity implies that there is one perspective or interpretation, and that the museum owns it. As we all know, nothing could be farther from the truth.

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Conclusions

To conclude this discussion of our self-inflicted challenges, it is essential that we recognize both the charm, and the curse of expertise.¹⁶ We can become so complacent about what we think we know that we ignore cues and options. And, given that intransigence usually accompanies expertise, we must realize that effective thinking and planning are as much about deciding what not to do as they are about developing new initiatives. The inability or unwillingness to refuse dated work, outmoded practices and rigid habits of mind is the Achilles heel of the museum world — continually blocking the coalescence of limited resources around risk-taking, experimentation and strategic priorities. Until we fully embrace the need to question, reflect and innovate, much of the emotion, imagination, intuition and reflection — the best qualities of the people who work in museums and the arts — will remain largely blocked, diffused or erased by the constant reshuffling of conventional practices. This is unfortunate, considering that these qualities are the mainstays of an engaged and responsible museum, and are also the antidotes to the current preoccupation with the marketplace and quantitative measures.

Unsurprisingly, society at large is not even cognizant of the unique potential of museums, much less demanding its fulfillment. This allows us to engage in a deliberate renewal of our own design, but the time to do so grows short. Marketplace ideol-



The Praise Dancers perform at a Cultural Connections event — a partnership between The Field Museum and over 20 Chicago-area ethnic museums and cultural centres. This program provides a unique opportunity to explore important questions, such as why there is cultural diversity, what is culture and what makes cultural diversity important. Photo: S. Sommers, ECCo, The Field Museum, C2007_246.

ogy and corporatism are clearly not the way forward, having conclusively demonstrated their shocking fragility and moral bankruptcy. Resistance and independence of thought are essential to renewal, as is the quality of hope. Having spent nearly 35 years in and around museums as a director, consultant, author, editor, board member and volunteer, museums have always been important to me because they are organizations whose “purpose is their meaning” — to borrow a phrase from Charles Handy, the British social philosopher.¹⁷ The meaning and purpose of museums are now in need of urgent redefinition, as are the deeply embedded assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that define much of museum practice. Will museums continue to believe that tradition and status exempt them from increasing irrelevance, or will they seize the opportunity to assume responsibility as gifted and privileged social

organizations, and rethink their time-honoured assumptions? Judging by the state of the troubled world and the urgent need for community organizations of the highest order, museums are positioned to realize their societal potential in a manner that truly reflects their inherent worth. **M**

*This article is abridged from chapter 3 of Robert R. Janes’ new book **Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse** (Routledge, 2009). Janes is the Editor-in-Chief of **Museum Management and Curatorship** (www.informaworld.com/rmmc), a Fellow of the Canadian Museums Association and the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley (www.biosphereinstitute.org). He lives in Canmore, Alberta. Contact him at: r.pjanes@telus.net*

Notes

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