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Managing change: program options and alternative financing possibilities

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Each word in the published title for this lecture and in its further elaboration: adapting museum structures to new times – what a monetary museum is required to offer to 21st century society – leads one to expect that not only is doing museum business differently an expectation, it is in fact a necessity. Incorporating words in the title such as options, alternate, possibilities, adapting, new times, required, offer to ... does not imply consistency, a continuation, or indeed a maintaining of a status quo.

Such expectations of change, perhaps even constant change, are now an integral component of the corporate environment at all levels and in almost all sectors. However, should this mean that, of necessity, change mechanisms must automatically become part of the museum environment?

Perhaps we can turn the title of this presentation on its head and pose the question: what is it about the 21st century that anticipates that what a monetary museum – or any museum – is required to offer society also means that the museum's structures must be adapted?

Alice: Which way should I go?
Cat: That depends on where you are going.
Alice: I don't know where I am going!
Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you go!!

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass

To set the context for exploring this question, two components are necessary: an understanding of «society» in the 21st century and a statement of the current structures or model(s) for museums.

It is far beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed this conference, to define «society in the 21st century». However, it is possible to make certain assumptions based on what we know of the environment in which museums presently exist.

If what we now live in is defined as the information age, then we can be certain that ever-expanding technologies will reinforce this condition in the coming decades. Museums, once considered to be the repositories of the tangible evidence of cultures through their collections, are now becoming disseminators of information.

Let me ask you to ponder for a moment a question which may not sit comfortably on everyone's shoulders: what business are museums – all museums, not just monetary museums – in? Some of you may immediately reply – the collection and preservation of our collective history; others may say: education. I will argue – and likely will have to do so after this session – that the business of museums is information, knowledge-based, and grounded in the Collections, but nonetheless, information.

Not only is information the product which museums produce – through their exhibitions, publications and public programming – but it is also the product which the public at this end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century wants, and looks to museums to provide. It is on this point, the expectations, interests and indeed the demands of the museums' publics that significant shifts and growth are happening. Understanding, meeting, and indeed anticipating the needs of the public are the major challenges for museums today – and for the future.

To borrow the words of Stephen Weil: 'the audience is now centre stage.' No longer are the Collections the primary focus; their care and preservation no longer occupy 'centre stage.' This shift has occurred (and is continuing) for many reasons. First and foremost, the number and scale of museums world-wide has almost quadrupled over the past three decades. Public awareness has led to an expansion of audiences, now estimated in the hundreds of millions globally. In part because of the pressure this growth puts on now-inadequate facilities, initiatives based in national pride have led to the further construction or major expansion of national institutions. Major renovations such as the Prado and the Louvre are familiar to us all. At a different but equally important scale, many new museums have been developed under local initiatives and are tangible proof of each community's pride in its own heritage.

Museum visitors can now be counted in the many millions and come from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In many parts of the world, museums and their practices have not been a central part of collective cultural expression, even though the retention of tradition and heritage is very important to the same peoples. In many countries, museums are but one of the tools for the preservation and understanding of cultures, whether of a particular group in society or in a broader context. An excellent example of how various communities have recognised and put into place organisms which respond to their own distinct needs can be found in ICOM's *What Museums for Africa?* conference and the subsequent AFRICOM programme.

By the third day of this conference, several speakers have already addressed visitors' perceptions and services to the public, however I would like to add a few additional examples within the context of change.

In many ways, museums are becoming increasingly aware of their audiences' needs and interests. Repeatedly, responses to visitors' surveys indicate that people are looking for more information about exhibits, collections and, on a very practical level, where to find what in the museum. In fact, for many, security guards are the only museum staff they ever encounter. Furthermore, visitors want the information in an accessible format and clear, comprehensible language. But we are learning, and there are many positive examples of what works well. Art museums, often cited as the worst offenders, are now incorporating information panels and/or short video discussions with the artist, often in a discrete area where they can be viewed and read (or not) at the visitors' choice.

Coupled with the shift towards communicating more frequently and better, is a shift away from classical museum 'education' towards learning, in particular self-directed learning by the visitor. Museum education has relied on formal approaches such as lectures, classes and docent-directed tours as tools to disseminate the information which the museum feels visitors need to know about X exhibition or Y collection. Increasingly, museums large and small are recognising the value of the knowledge and experience that each visitor brings *a priori* to an exhibition. The challenge is to identify how visitor knowledge can be assimilated into the information which the exhibit itself presents. To assist with this challenge, a few museums are using focus groups, drawn from both the general population and from the typical profile of a museum visitor, to test developing concepts and approaches.¹⁰⁸ The use of 'animators', specifically trained and available to answer visitors' queries within the exhibit spaces (some even wearing a T-shirt saying 'Ask Me'), or the new approach to Information Assistants (formerly security guards) at the Glasgow Museums are examples of creative developments in this area.

It can be argued that a significant change in how museums plan and develop their public activities was largely due to the block-buster exhibitions in the 1970s. True, there had been many, major exhibitions which drew large audiences prior to the 1970s but the block-busters' emphasis (some may say over-emphasis) on marketing and attracting non-museum goers to an «event» characterised these high profile exhibits and brought museums into a new realm. For, while most block-busters have been based on sound research and include significant material, the focus of these events has been to substantially raise the profile of the sponsoring museum and to attract significant revenue. In introducing museums into the highly competitive world of entertainment and high profile sponsorship, block-busters targeted much greater numbers, including audiences who are not typically composed of returning visitors.¹⁰⁹ This often resulted in a one-time-only revenue stream.

Beyond block-busters, in the future, increased competition for the visitors' attention (and euros or dollars) is a fact, not from other museums, as we often suspect, but from the broadly-based entertainment sector. Studies now show that people will consider what they will do at a given time (Saturday afternoon), and those 'offerings' which succeed have been demonstrated as those which combine learning, some form of meal, and shopping. The Question is not: what museums shall we go to, but what combination of events interests us. Because of this change in behaviour patterns, museums must also now pay attention to who their partners are. 'Packaging' of the museum visit has become the new buzz word.

What about the growth of virtual museums, where people surf the Internet to learn about collections and never set foot in the museum? When added to fluctuations in tourism numbers, a typically strong source of museum visitors, will these two realities result in falling attendance at a time when museums increasingly depend on their admission and museum boutique revenues? Museums must not give up on these potential audiences but rather find ways to interest and capture them.

At this point in this presentation, I would like to make a few points specific to monetary museums for as you have no doubt observed, my comments to date have been about museums in general. The truth of the matter is that prior to coming here, I had no specific knowledge about monetary museums (other than as a casual visitor), nor has it been easy to find such information. If monetary museums are facing a challenge, it may indeed be that their profile is somewhat low, and that they are only well known to specialists in numismatics and collectors. Is this the desirable environment for money museums?

Which leads me to my second component of defining a framework for the 21st century: the traditional model of the museum.

Since their inception, museums, in particular specialist museums such as monetary or numismatic museums, have been recognized as a single, authoritative voice on a given topic. Their frame of reference has been articulated through extensive research and scholarship, based on each museum's collection and its interpretation and presentation.

Such museums were typically fully-funded, frequently from a single source such as the state, or other levels of government, governmental agencies or perhaps private corporations, foundations or even individuals. Public interest and involvement was not a factor, neither for the funders nor for the museum's curators.

Recently, a new term has entered the language. 'Economic liberalisation' is a phrase used to describe a government's gradual transferring of responsibility for the funding of services for the public, services such as

museums, from the public tax base to the private sector. This shift in emphasis has brought about very significant changes in the role and responsibilities of a number of museum staff not the least of which the director. From someone whose principal concern is the calibre of the Collections and research on them, the emphasis is now on spending considerable time raising funds to enable the museum's on-going operations, and courting sponsors of its activities. While these changes may be considered a primarily North American phenomenon, there is much to indicate that it is becoming more and more prevalent in many other countries.

Traditionally, museums have not sought out candidates for senior positions who have identifiable management training and/or skills and experience, despite the complexity of the tasks which they will have to accomplish. In most museums, advanced academic training in a particular discipline was, and is still, believed to be all that is needed to equip people for senior management positions. This is particularly true in the traditional model of the museum where even positions identified as managerial, carried a very high level of direct responsibility for content. The classical career path was to move through progressively senior curatorial positions and, if and when interested, eventually become director. Only a very few museums have followed the model of the performing arts with its dual leadership of an Administrative Director/Manager and an Artistic Director.

Nonetheless, the need for expertise and experience in management is increasing rapidly as the line blurs between museums as custodial institutions and museums as businesses.

At the curatorial level, the expectations of curators are that they will have ample opportunity and time to conduct in-depth research on topics which are of professional interest to them, with the eventual target of developing an exhibition or other form of public presentation based on this research. It is the curator who initiates based on his/her understanding of the discipline and attendant opportunities for original scholarship.

But now the dynamic has shifted, and may shift even more. Questions heard more often in curatorial programming meetings now are: what is the public interested in seeing? Can we identify what our net audience gain will be for such an exhibition? Is this a concept that will enable us to seek, and secure, a sponsor?

Previously, it was the museum which established the exhibition's premise. Now, particularly in instances when artefacts and the interpretation of cultural heritage are involved, the responsibility for determining form and content is increasingly to be shared with the originating group or culture. This has been and will continue to be very much the experience of curators working with aboriginal peoples the world over.

However, curators are primarily trained in academic research, not public interface. While some curators have the natural skills to successfully navigate such changes, others may not and furthermore, are not interested in this facet of museum work. The traditional management structure of museums is a strong, vertical hierarchy which was effective when museums were more narrowly defined and their revenues, even if limited, were more assured.

Key changes to which museums are already responding include extensive growth in their physical plants, rapidly expanding and diverse audiences with divergent needs, a move towards self-directed learning for visitors, competition from other sectors, and an emphasis on marketing and communicating the museum's 'message,' often with limited resources.

How effectively are such changes being managed and integrated by museums? Is the museum community a primarily reactive one that addresses pressures only when and if they occur, or are there museums which are involved in various degrees of proactive change? How are museums managing such profound changes, many of which they have little or no control over? Who is doing the managing?

The need to accumulate, comprehend and present multiple points of view, as well as manage complex businesses incorporating public/private partnerships, restaurants and boutiques, and the licensing of reproductions, requires experience in consultation with a wide range of people. In addition, the complexity of what the museum does means that, wherever possible, responsibility for decision-making should be devolved to the level responsible for implementing such decisions. Extensive consultation, both internally and externally, and the delegation of responsibility are management skills which are essential to the management of museums today.

Measurement of successful management, let alone the managing of change, is more difficult within the museum sector because the traditional measures common to the private sector, such as the profit generated, benefit to shareholders and return on investment, can only be applied in abstract ways. Museums typically measure their impact based on number of visitors, column inches in the critical press, or increases in donations (of significant material) to the Collections. Whether, through its activities, a museum had added substantially to the understanding and awareness of a collective history or art form is next to impossible to measure, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Yet, it is precisely a means of measuring success for which boards of directors (trustees, even advisory boards) are looking. Increasingly pressured by the need to raise ever more funds (often in competition with

other not-for-profits such as universities, hospitals and health care as government funding shrinks due to economic liberalisation), board members from the corporate sector have begun to apply some of the practices used in their business environments. This can lead, particularly in cases where senior staff are not perceived as strong managers, to increased involvement by boards in the day-to-day management of the museum. Many are the un-published examples of the complications this can cause.

Effective management of change must not result in the board becoming more involved in the on-going operations of the museum, but less. The board's attention must be focused on policy development, long-range planning and fiscal monitoring. In North America, a new model of governance has been developed by John Carver¹¹⁰ for not-for-profit institutions. A tool for substantial change in and of itself, the model has been adopted by a number of museums in both Canada and the United States. Interestingly, a recent study examining the effectiveness of the Carver and other governance models indicates that about half those adopting the Carver model have felt it to be effective.¹¹¹ Participants in the study remarked that the most positive benefit of working through a process of change in governance had been the process itself, which in turn has brought about unanticipated benefits and strengthened the organisation.

Good management alone will not produce a good museum, nor will it guarantee the effective implementation of change. Ultimately,

«Management is the capacity to handle multiple problems, neutralise various constituencies and, in a college or university [viz., museum], achieve a break-even budget. Leadership, on the other hand, is essentially a moral act, not – as in most management – an essentially protective act. It is the assertion of a vision, not simply the exercise of style; the moral courage to assert a vision of the institution and the intellectual energy to make that vision compelling»¹¹²

Museums are about vision, a collective vision. Recognizing the benefits and expanding awareness of how museums are demonstrating leadership, through the creative management of internal and external change, is the challenge for the next period to come.

ENDNOTES

¹⁰⁸ Influencing the Museum Visitor: Getty Consortium [proper title to come]

¹⁰⁹ *Mapping the Future: A Study of the Public Perceptions of Art Galleries in Ontario: Ontario Association of Art Galleries*; N.L. Hushion and Associates, The Angus Reid Group and Heath Associates, 1994.

¹¹⁰ Cite title of Carver book.

¹¹¹ Cite U. Victoria Study.

¹¹² Bart Giamatti, former President of Yale University and US Commissioner of Baseball.