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MUSEUMS, CORPORATISM AND THE CIVIL

SOCIETY*

Introduction

True growth is the ability of a society to transfer increasing amounts of attention and energy from the material side of life to the nonmaterial side, and thereby to advance its culture, capacity for compassion, sense of community, and strength of democracy.

(Arnold J. Toynbee 1947: 198)

In 1990, the late Stephen Weil published an article in *Museum News* (Anderson 2004: 74–79) wherein he referred to “an emerging new paradigm” in the museum field that defined the essential functions of museums as preservation, study, and communication. Weil credits the Dutch museologist Peter Van Mensch with this three-function paradigm and then devotes the bulk of his 1990 article to seeking a sharper definition of what the third part – to communicate – actually means. Weil sums up his search for a fuller articulation of the range and consequences of museum communication in the following eloquent passage (2004: 79). It is quoted in full, since it serves as both the point of departure and the underlying reason for this chapter:

We need to be able to define the purposes for which a museum deals with its public in far finer and more precise ways than we thus far have. Acknowledging how greatly the answers might differ from one museum to another, or even at different times within the history of any single museum, we must be able to say just what a museum would like the outcome of its public program to be. Should this outcome impact a visitor’s life in some significant way? If so, in what dimensions, when, how greatly, and how often? Do we believe that this outcome can come about wholly from our own exertions, or do we conceive of the visitor as a collaborator in this effort? Is the impact of the museum limited to its visitors or does its role – as an authority, as an arbiter – extend into the community generally? If so, in what ways, how far, and toward what ends?

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit these salient questions 17 years later, in an effort to determine if we are any closer to understanding the range and consequences of the third part of the paradigm – that of communicating – which also includes, in the spirit of Stephen Weil, a museum’s relevance, accessibility,

and value to its community. In so doing, I wish to broaden the discussion beyond the conventional context of arts and culture within which museums are normally examined, and to consider museums from a different perspective – as agents of the civil society. In an effort to underscore the importance of shifting one’s perspective from arts and culture to a broader social one, it is necessary to consider some worrisome trends currently besetting museums and galleries of all sizes and shapes.

The rise of museum corporatism

The questions posed by Weil in 1990 are more relevant than ever, as contemporary museums and galleries search for meaning at a time when many of them worldwide are struggling to maintain their stability in the face of the complex challenges of the nonprofit world. These challenges range from declining attendance to finding the appropriate balance between earned revenues and public funding, and none of them is easily overcome. Many of these challenges are economic, and are grounded in a belief that continuous economic growth is essential to our well-being, and that the consumption of everything is an appropriate means to achieve unlimited growth. Indeed, capitalism has become inescapable. As philosopher Mark Kingwell notes, “every moment of waking and sleeping life is shot through with commitment to the goods and services of the global economy” (2000: 184). One result of this prevailing worldview in North America is the rise of museum corporatism, characterized by the primacy of economic interests in institutional decision making.

It comes as no surprise that museums are not immune to the imperatives of the economists and the marketplace, and that there is a growing preoccupation with money as the measure of worth (Kimmelman 2005; Levit and Levy 2006; Perl 2006; Grattan 2006: 10–11). This sentiment is now fully installed in the boardrooms of many cultural institutions. *The Toronto Star* reported (Hume 2000) that “the gap between the haves and the have-nots of the museum world will be greater than ever.” The director of a prominent American art museum is quoted as saying, “If you want to stay competitive in the cultural arena, you can only do it by investing large sums. That means you have to spend 200 to 300 million [dollars] just to keep up with the next guy.” Many museums now see no other way but to consume their way to survival or prosperity, failing to recognize that this is an outdated and increasingly vulnerable perspective, as the following discussion illustrates.

In pursuit of prosperity, many museums have made the choice to increase their popularity and revenues through high-profile exhibitions, and architectural sensationalism, or architectural conceit, depending upon one's perspective (Grattan 2006: 10–11; Hume 2005). This strategy is so consuming of staff and money that there is often little left of either to pursue other activities. Yet various museums are succeeding at this, especially the larger ones, although the long-term sustainability of this approach to business planning is not yet known (Hudson 2006: 38–41).

In a recent research paper prepared for the Getty Leadership Institute, Adrian Ellis concludes that this approach is not sustainable (2002). The problem with the expansion plan, or the galvanizing building initiative, as the context to raise funds, refinance, and move forward, is cogently summarized by Ellis (2002: 21):

[T]his strategy . . . is a form of pyramid selling or Ponzi scheme. Eventually, after the noise has died down and the new building is completed, the logic of the weakening balance sheet kicks in again. Unless the scheme was so successful that it has generated a whole new set of contributed funding opportunities, then the systemic under-financing reappears, and in a heightened form, given the larger facility and the more ambitious programming on which the facility is premised. The museum stands faced, again, with the three options of crisis appeal, more populist programming, or obfuscatory expansion.

Many of the museums that have adopted the corporatist growth model have also come to resemble corporate entities, with revenues and attendance being the predominant measures of worth. Many of their boards are increasingly indistinguishable from their corporate counterparts, with too many directors being chosen for their business experience, corporate loyalty, or ostensible influence in fundraising. Although such qualifications are obviously important, the danger lies in the growing tendency for these boards to self-select on the basis of these criteria, to the exclusion of other attributes such as cultural diversity and community connectedness.

Beyond corporatism

All of this is puzzling, considering the critical thinking that should accompany the self-proclaimed role of museums as knowledge-based institutions. The belief in limitless growth should be a cause for serious concern among those many museums that have staked their future on attendance figures, architectural vanity, and culture as entertainment. Ironically, and despite all of these initiatives, research indicates that the museum sector is struggling to maintain its audiences,

and that the visitor base is stagnant or declining. These trends will be discussed later in this chapter; it is sufficient to note at this point that the challenge for governing authorities, museum management, and staff is to understand that the reigning economic growth model is an ideology, and that it has profound implications for museums. The application of strict economic criteria to museum management is misleading when, for instance, one considers that sound collection management is based on a long-term business plan, not the quarterly results common to business. In contrast, the average lifespan of a multinational corporation (Fortune 500 or its equivalent) is between 40 and 50 years (de Geus 1997: vii, 1–2). Adopting the marketplace model, where growth and money are the primary measures of worth for a museum, is no less ideological than hosting a meeting of World Trade Organization culture jammers (social activists who oppose commercialism by identifying the contrasts between corporate image and the realities of the corporation).

Criticism of the reigning economic model could be considered gratuitous, however, from the perspective of the boards and executives who are responsible for the fiscal health of public museums in the face of declining or stagnant government funding, apathetic audiences, and strident labor unions. Many museum directors are vociferous in pointing out that they would not be pursuing a marketplace agenda if they were not forced to by financial circumstances. Considering the very real fiscal pressures confronting museums, the remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring the possibilities of an alternative approach to the marketplace model for achieving accountability and long-term sustainability. There is good reason to believe that the spread of marketplace ideology is not only enfeebling otherwise competent organizations in the name of so-called fiscal responsibility, but it is also serving to divert museums from realizing their unique strengths and opportunities as social institutions in the civil society.

Civil society

The concept of civil society is by no means new. Its definition is attributed to the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, best known for his Idealist philosophical system in which dialectical logic sees contradictions as fruitful collisions of ideas from which a higher truth may be reached by way of synthesis (Bullock and Trombley 1999: 126, 222, 387). Simply put, “civil society” is the sphere of society lying between the private sphere of the family

and the official sphere of the state, and refers to the array of voluntary and civic associations, such as trade unions, religious organizations, cultural and educational bodies, that are to be found in modern, liberal societies. In Hegel's words, "individuals can attain their ends only in so far as they themselves determine their knowing, willing, and acting in a universal way and make themselves links in this chain of social connexions [sic]" (1952: 65).

The Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics notes that "civil society" refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values.¹ In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family, and market, although in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family, and market are often complex, blurred, and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors, and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy, and power.

Of particular importance in considering museums as agents of civil society is the concept of social capital, since it is civil society organizations that generate the networks, norms, trust and shared values – the "social capital" – that is transferred into the social sphere and not only helps to hold society together, but is also instrumental in facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and the interests within it. Social capital is born of long-term associations that are not explicitly self-interested or coerced, and it typically diminishes if it is not regularly renewed or replaced (Bullock and Trombley 1999: 798). In short, the civil society enables individuals to participate in a variety of ways in the life of society without direction by the state.

Museums and civil society

In a country like Canada, where most professional museums are owned and operated by some level of government, the role of museums in civil society remains undiscovered and unexplored (Janes 1997: 232, 254–258). Whether a museum is government owned or not (the latter being more characteristic of U.S. museums), the concept of civil society provides a valuable context in which to clarify some persistent complexities that cause much hand-wringing in the search for a clearer understanding of the meaning and value of museums. This is particularly important for museums at this time, since the concept of civil society serves to explain how an increasingly economic view of museums can be both limiting and destructive, and can undermine the unique contributions that

museums are capable of making.

An economic view of democratic society sees only individuals and government (Dahrendorf 1990: 24–32). This perspective, grounded in marketplace ideology, creates the space for autonomous activity, but then corrupts civil society by turning everything into commodities. This is best summed up by the eminent sociologist Sir Ralf Dahrendorf (1990: 26):

If we allow an economic view of society to prevail, then the institutions that provide a buffer between the state and the individual will be left unprotected, leading to their disruption. In the end, universities will be places not of teaching and research, but appendixes of economic growth; the arts will be mediums not of human expression and enjoyment but of commerce, entertainment, or advertising.

Dahrendorf's observations of 17 years ago were prescient; the future has arrived. The pressures to buy, sell, and entertain are front and center. Whether the offerings consist of plastic replicas of Egyptian funerary objects or the mummified remains of our Neolithic ancestors, many museums have joined the perpetual round of entertainments, complete with the inevitable sameness inherent in contemporary consumerism. The short-term necessity of seeing people only as audiences is understandable, but it is only short-term and it is only bottom-line driven.

Museums, as constructions of civil society, are a necessary counterbalance to the rhetoric of the free market. As such, museums have a much more enduring role to play in society by clearly demonstrating that no one group or ideology possesses the sole truth about how society should develop. A competent museum is testimony to the fact that a healthy society is a multitude of competing interests, aspirations, plans, and proposals that cannot be ignored in favor of the rubric of economic utility. Recognizing this creative chaos is the only guarantee of an open society (Dahrendorf 1990: 24). Museums are the obvious caretakers and promoters of these complexities.

The concept of social capital is also relevant here, particularly as defined by Robert D. Putnam in his well-known study of the decline of civil society in the United States (2000). He identified two types of social capital – bonding and bridging – with “bonding social capital” referring to social networks between homogeneous groups of people (similar age, race, religion, and so on). “Bridging social capital” consists of social networks among heterogeneous groups who are dissimilar and diverse. Both of these types of social capital are essential to the civil society, with the bridging variant being critically important in multi-ethnic societies if they are to achieve some degree of stability and cohesion.

Putnam, in the article that led to the book cited above, also suggests the need for further research, including an inquiry into what types of organizations most effectively embody or generate social capital, including reciprocity and the broadening of social identities (1995: 65–78). Museums, although notably absent from the roster of civil society organizations, are already engaged in the creation of both kinds of social capital, as the following examples demonstrate.

Museums as creators of social capital

This discussion of museums as creators of social capital begins with collections, which are simultaneously the most celebrated and the most enigmatic dimension of what defines a museum. Although there is pronounced agreement among museum workers that collections are the *sine qua non* of their institutional identities, the use of museum collections is generally constrained by the weight of tradition and a decided lack of imagination. More often than not, the mere presence of collections is seen to be sufficient reason to maintain the status quo, which means continued collecting and storage with little or no effort to ask honest questions about their purpose, much less identifying creative ways of using them. As Keene quotes in her valuable book on the meaning and use of museum collections, “museums are organisms that ingest but do not excrete” (2005: 1–11).

Nonetheless, collections management has undergone a gradual change in museums over the past decade, most notably with a shift from preservation to access (Hayward 2001: 145–156). No longer is the task of preserving objects and records for posterity considered to be an appropriate end in itself. A redefinition of collections management is underway, with a new emphasis on public interest and audience needs (Keene 2005). If collections can be used to assist in redefining the role of museums as generators of social capital, as the following examples illustrate, this might well serve to disarm the traditionalists in both the marketplace and the museum – thereby introducing the possibility that many of the other resources found in a competent museum could be similarly employed.

Collections and social capital

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Glenbow Museum in Calgary (Canada) and Mookaakin Society is one of the first of its kind in Canada. The MOU was signed in 1998 to promote and preserve the Kainai Nation's spiritual doctrines and observances that have existed since time immemorial, including the unique language and history of the Kainai (Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Society and the Glenbow-Alberta Institute 1998: 1).² This agreement allows both parties to cooperatively address matters relating to the Kainai and other Blackfoot collections, which are housed in the Glenbow Museum. There are 17 clauses in this agreement that define, in practical terms, the mutual obligations and requirements. For example, the Glenbow Museum is obligated to develop a process to allow the Kainai access to spiritually sacred materials, cultural objects, and data, including full disclosure of the Kainai museum collections at the Glenbow. The Glenbow will also support the repatriation of Kainai sacred objects that are housed in museums outside of Canada, by participating in discussions with the International Council of Museums and other professional agencies.

The Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) in Victoria, British Columbia (Canada) has been a leader in nurturing meaningful relationships with First Nations for decades. In the 1970s, the RBCM had a program of loaning ceremonial regalia (masks, robes, rattles, and so on) from the permanent collection for family and community events. The Aboriginal Material Operating Policy (AMOP) is the latest expression of this relationship, and commits the museum to the "involvement of Aboriginal peoples in the interpretation of their cultures as represented in exhibits, education programs, and public programming developed by the museum" (Royal British Columbia Museum 2003: 1). This policy also commits the museum to continuous dialogue with Aboriginal communities in British Columbia with respect to collections, repatriation policies, and cooperative management efforts.

The Glasgow Museum Resource Centre (GMRC) [Scotland] is a publicly accessible museum storage facility that houses around 180,000 objects, and was designed from the outset to enable people to access their collections.³ The key issue in the planning was the balance between accessibility and security, and it was decided that supervised tours provided the most affordable balance. The GMRC could not afford to invest the necessary money in glass-fronted shelving, so most of the objects are on open shelves or have grilles. This approach provides a genuine sense of intimate contact with the object.

The GMRC building is in an industrial area in a run-down part of Glasgow,

chosen deliberately to help contribute to the revitalization of the area, and also because there is good access by public transport. The key concepts that underlie the current and future work of the GMRC are those of participation and active engagement (Glasgow Museum Resource Centre 2002: 2). The purpose is to create and promote opportunities for the public to actively engage with the heritage that the Glasgow Museums hold on their behalf. Overall, the GMRC believes that museums can be a catalyst for change in people's lives, and can contribute greatly to the quality of life for all residents and visitors by supporting the concept that every citizen has the right to both access and excellence in our diverse culture (Glasgow Museum Resource Centre 2002: 66).

The concept of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), located in Wellington, was developed through an extensive national consultative process (Te Papa 2005). Te Papa's conceptual framework incorporates several key dimensions, including unified collections, the narratives of culture and place, the idea of forum, bicultural partnerships between the dominant society and Indigenous peoples, and a multidisciplinary approach to delivering museum services for diverse audiences. Te Papa's conceptual framework recognizes three priority concerns: the earth on which we live, those who belong to the land by right of first discovery, and those who belong to the land by right of treaty.

These three concerns underlie Te Papa's mission, which is to serve as a forum for New Zealand "to present, explore and preserve the heritage of its cultures and the knowledge of the natural environment in order to better understand and treasure the past, enrich the present and meet the challenges of the future" (Te Papa 2005). Te Papa has embraced this mission with commitment and creativity, as exemplified by "A Guide to Guardians of Iwi Treasures," a document that outlines essential considerations in developing sustainable working relationships with Indigenous peoples (Te Papa 2001: 1–8). Te Papa's approach is based on the recognition that museums must increasingly accept that *iwi* (Indigenous tribes) must be involved in the interpretation, exhibition, and care of their artifacts, and that this involvement can only be achieved through strong and effective partnerships.

The other aspect of Te Papa's work which is of particular value is the museum's commitment to certain core concepts underlying the partnerships. These concepts are, in fact, spiritual in nature and are concerned with *tikanga*, or the correct way of doing things. The correct way of doing things is associated with *tapu* and *mana*. Everything has inherent *tapu* (power and influence of the gods) because everything was created by Matua (Supreme God). *Mana* has

various meanings, including the power of the gods, the power of the ancestors, the power of the land, and the power of the individual. *Tikanga* is both custom and protocol, and it is instructive to note how Te Papa, a mainstream cultural institution, is integrating spiritual values and beliefs into what are normally seen as the secular activities of a museum. The Te Papa commitment to this is expansive and demonstrates the possibilities of rethinking conventional practices in museums – thereby enhancing intercultural understanding and social cohesion.

Art, healing, and social capital

In addition to these examples of generating social capital through the innovative use of collections, there are important initiatives in forging trust, networks, and shared values that have nothing to do with collections *per se*. One such initiative is the McMullen Art Gallery at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton, Canada, a small gallery whose irrelevance had it destined for closure. This purpose-built gallery is located within the hospital and was founded with the belief that “art should be where there is hurt and healing” (Pointe 2005: 114). Yet, by 1999, only 4% of the 10,000 annual visitors were hospital patients, and only 15% were hospital staff.

All that has changed, as a result of self-critical analysis and the recognition of the gallery’s potential as a creator of social capital. The gallery now employs visual artists, poets, writers, musicians, and a dancer, who work directly with patients and their families in the creative process. Patients paint the windows of their rooms, make murals on hospital walls, and create “The Poets’ Walk,” an installation of patients’ writing. After his wife’s death in the hospital, a man wrote a note to one of the gallery’s poets (Pointe 2005: 120):

I want to thank you for your great kindness to my Sofia during her long and horrible ordeal. . . . Your visits meant much to her. The words you have written give me solace, and were enormously appreciated by both Sofia and me. Thank-you, they are now treasured mementoes of a difficult end. . . .

Museums, bioregionalism, and social capital

The last example that demonstrates the key role that museums can play as agents

of civil society involves neither collections nor visitors, but rather the watershed of one of North America's most important and heavily used rivers (Dallet 2006).⁴ In 2001–2002, a variety of non-profit organizations from seven American states that share the Colorado River came together to organize and present *Moving Waters: The Colorado River and the West*. The purpose of the project was to generate a regional consciousness of the river, and to focus on the importance of the river to all its users in non-economic terms. This consortium of humanities councils, museums, libraries, and community councils wanted a public conversation about the river, including its historical, philosophical, and cultural dimensions. Traveling exhibitions, radio documentaries, public meetings, and the voices of scholars, poets, activists, scientists, and First Nations were all used to forge a bioregional consciousness that transcended the insular concerns of local jurisdictions and individuals. Cogent questions were posed for public discussion, such as “does a river have rights?” and “can you own flowing water?”

There is perhaps no better example of the value of civil society collaboration among museums and related organizations than the Colorado River Project, especially with its multidisciplinary focus on complex human issues within an elaborate ecosystem. Even if they were to express an interest in forging such a dialogue, it is highly unlikely that government, with its rigid bureaucracy and policy agenda, and business, with its profit agenda, would be capable of addressing these issues. Museums have unlimited potential to be an integral part of similar processes in a variety of societal sectors that are striving to nurture trust, cooperation, and deeper understanding.

Are museums communicating?

It is now time to return to the questions posed by Weil (2004: 79) in the introduction of this chapter, and to consider whether or not museums are moving in the direction he so ardently desired as a scholar-practitioner. Particularly:

should this outcome impact a visitor's life in some significant way? If so, in what dimensions, when, how greatly, and how often? Do we believe that this outcome can come about wholly from our own exertions, or do we conceive of the visitor as a collaborator in this effort? Is the impact of the museum limited to its visitors or does its role – as an authority, as an arbiter – extend into the community generally? If so, in what ways, how far, and toward what ends?

There is now some cause for optimism in considering these questions, as

illustrated by the foregoing examples of thoughtful collections management, meaningful visitor engagement, and multidisciplinary inquiry encompassing both culture and nature. Viewed from a broader perspective, however, the prognosis for museums is unsettling, as a number of disturbing trends continue to unfold. Despite all of the marketplace initiatives such as blockbuster exhibitions, architectural renewal, and culture as entertainment, research indicates that the museum sector is struggling to maintain its audiences, and that the visitor base in developed countries is stagnant, declining, or increasing disproportionately less than the number of new and renovated museums (Burton and Scott 2003: 56–57; Cheney 2002; Hill Strategies Research Inc. 2003). Statistics Canada (2004) reported in 2002 that the average attendance at Canadian museums remained the same as in 1999.

In addition, despite the significant progress that individual museums have made in broadening their audiences, there has been little or no diversification in the traditional visitor profile, which is still marked by high income and a high level of education (Cheney 2002; Martin 2002). There is also recent research that suggests that earned revenues are not infinitely expandable. In a study of museums and commercialization, Toepler and Kirchberg concluded that the business-like activities of museums “do not appear to generate net revenues that will allow museums to become more self-sustainable in fundamental ways” (2002: 19). Their data also suggest that museum merchandising in general has already reached the limits of future growth. While the funds generated from commercial sources have increased over time, as a general pattern, the share of total museum income accounted for by commercial revenue has not increased (Toepler and Dewees 2005: 143). All of these trends are further complicated by the failure of the museum community, at least in Canada, to ponder what constitutes an appropriate balance between public funding, private funding, and earned revenues for public museums.

At the same time, there are also societal forces at work which have consequences for museums. In a report on the impact of Canada’s new funding regime, the Canadian Council on Social Development notes that nonprofit and voluntary organizations are constantly juggling their missions to suit the funding agenda, in response to a demand for greater accountability (Scott 2003). This demand is coming from governments, foundations, and private funders, and many of them want museums and galleries to demonstrate their value to their communities, to be more inclusive, and to help build stronger communities. In addition, the results of a 2003 survey of 2,400 Canadians indicate that 60% of the respondents believe that “museums can play a more significant role in

Canadian society,” although this role was not defined (Canadian Museums Association 2003). For those respondents who visited museums most often, this view rose to 82%.

It is difficult to ignore the growing disconnection between the market-driven search for meaning and relevance – as increasingly promulgated by boards of directors and museum executives – and the desires of governments, foundations, donors, and citizens that museums demonstrate their societal value and play a more significant role. Stephen Weil obviously sought the latter alternative in his relentless pursuit of museum relevance, but in the meantime the economic model of museum competence has now become commonplace. Irrespective of their demonstrated ability to generate social capital and be socially responsible, the value of museums is now measured in terms of consumption, including visitation, retail sales, food purchases, gallery rentals, and so forth (Keene 2005: 159). While these services clearly provide essential operating revenues, the current preoccupation with them obscures the fact that they are the means to the end, not the end in themselves. By confusing these fundamentally different realities, museums are forsaking the opportunity to creatively rethink their purpose, and are instead embracing an increasingly fragile and unsustainable economic model based on fickle consumerism and showmanship. To attempt to improve the current situation by adopting the same marketplace ideology that has reduced the level of public support for museums so dramatically over the past two decades could be ignored as wishful thinking, or perhaps solipsism, if the implications were not so apparent.

Accommodating corporatism

Broadly speaking, there are now at least two distinct trends, or perhaps worldviews, unfolding as museums continue to define their futures: one committed to the status quo and economic utility; the other in pursuit of a new and different accountability grounded more in societal interests and aspirations. These are not dialectical forces competing for supremacy, however, since neither has demonstrated any long-term survival power. As noted earlier, the long-term effectiveness of the “build it and they will come” perspective remains to be seen. There is also only a modicum of evidence that demonstrates the potential for financial sustainability inherent in adopting a socially responsible mission (Koster and Baumann 2005; Koster 2006; Pointe 2005). Nonetheless, with the growing popularity of museum corporatism, it is useful to consider what can be

done to diminish its most negative aspects and hasten the development of museums as agents of civil society.

Reforming the marketplace

The first possibility is to strive to perfect the marketplace, not abolish it (Heath and Potter 2004: 334–335). In short, the current marketplace is flawed, hypocritical, and far from ideal, and there needs to be more government, not less, to redefine equitable rules on behalf of citizens and communities. In the ideal market, there would be no monopolies, no barriers to entry in any industry, and competition would be based entirely on the price and quality of the goods being sold. In addition, there would be no advertising – a growing necessity in light of the 700 to 3,000 advertisements the average person must face every day (Heath and Potter 2004: 206).

In the ideal market there would be no windfall profits and, most importantly, all businesses and corporations would have to factor in the full social and environmental costs of their actions in every decision made. Reforming the market is not a short-term answer to the choices confronting museums, however, especially considering the growing intimacy between corporate interests and national governments in economically developed countries. This is readily apparent in the arena of globalization, where problems that were once resolved by national governments re-emerge in an international context, where the rule of law is absent (Heath and Potter 2004: 335). Reforming the market in the foreseeable future is unrealistic – the vested interests weigh far too heavily and there is no apparent leadership to pursue this agenda.

Creating more autonomous museums

As noted earlier, the majority of the large public museums in Canada are government owned and operated, as is the case in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Western Europe, as well as with national museums everywhere. With government ownership, the status of the museum as a civil society organization is both ambiguous and variable, and depends upon the degree of government control. There are various government museums that enjoy a great deal of autonomy in their governance and operations, and thus are positioned to act more or less independently in the civil society space between the individual and government. There are also many government museums that are tightly

controlled by legislation and cultural officials, the latter dutifully impeding organizational autonomy in the name of policy and procedure, while also conveying this timidity to museum boards and staff.

One of the more debilitating examples of this restricted autonomy is the appointment of the governing boards for Canada's national museums, although this situation appears to be improving with the federal government paying increasing attention to the recommendations of board-nominating committees.⁵ These board appointments are political patronage and rarely include anyone who has any substantive knowledge of museum practice. This is by no means a reflection on those appointed, but rather demonstrates the workings of an archaic, self-serving political system that is oblivious to the complexities of nonprofit governance and management. The solution is obvious for those museums in this predicament: eliminate the dependent relationship by redesigning the legal relationship to achieve more organizational autonomy.

At least one museum has opted for this alternative (Janes 1997: 249–252), although doing so is admittedly fraught with risks, including the potential withdrawal or reduction of government financial support, as well as the pervasive and unnerving anxiety that accompanies a radical departure from the status quo. The conventional argument states that tight controls are essential to ensure a high level of accountability for the tax dollars spent on government museums. In fact, this is a disingenuous rationalization, as it is a matter of record that government museums are no more accountable than any other type of museum. The opposite is more likely to be true, as revealed by the research of Griffin and Abraham (1999: 45–92). In contrasting the prevalence of effective management practices across 30 government and non-government museums and science centers in four countries, they note that of the 10 worst organizations, 8 are government. Whether it is reforming the marketplace, or achieving more autonomy for government museums, neither appears to be achievable at this time, or practical enough to accomplish what needs to be done.

Branding the civil society

Branding is a course of action with significant potential to nurture the role of museums within civil society and, paradoxically, it is also instrumental to the success of the marketplace. A brand is an engineered perception made up of the name of an organization, its products, services, and perceived attributes (Scott 2000: 36). The purpose of the branding is to create an identity that comes to be

associated with your brand and no other (Heath and Potter 2004: 210). There are three types of brands, including corporate brands, product brands, and values brands, with museums belonging in the category of values (Scott 2000: 36). A values brand, according to Scott, “has an enduring core purpose, which creates a long-term bond with those sectors of the market sharing the same values” (2000: 36). It is by no means apparent, however, that museums are aware of these distinctions, since museum branding and marketing strategies treat visitors and users as consumers and customers (Kotler and Kotler 2000: 273). Museums use the language of the marketplace in addressing their purported needs and aspirations.

With few exceptions, most museums do not brand values – they brand “stuff,” and the language used is all about customer service, efficiency, entertainment, value for money, and consumption (Janes and Conaty 2005). The uncritical use of these private sector techniques has not gone unnoticed. There is now a growing interest in moving beyond the language of the marketplace to create civic brands around ideas that are less tangible, and intended to both build emotional identification and take credit for the public value (read social capital) that nonprofit organizations create (Demos 2005: 4; Ferguson 2006; Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society 2004). Herein lies the most hopeful approach for nurturing a civil society identity for museums. There are several requirements for doing so, which are summarized below (Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society 2004: 1–10).

The brand is central to the values and mission of a museum and well-funded marketing departments cannot be given the task of defining the brand. It cannot be manufactured, but must be based on the answers to several key questions, including why does your museum exist, what changes are you trying to effect, what solutions will you generate, and what are your non-negotiable values (collaborative, inclusive, diverse, empowering)? These questions are hauntingly similar to those posed by Weil 17 years ago. One can only conclude that the forces of the marketplace have diverted most museums from experimenting with the answers.

For a start, marketers might ask if there are any deficiencies, issues, or interests in their community that their museum could help to address. Having answered these fundamental questions about why and what, the museum then is tasked to develop a constellation of activities that both create and maintain the brand, as exemplified by the activities of innovative museums discussed earlier in this chapter. In short, branding is a powerful technique for allowing museums

to move beyond the reigning model of economic utility and to create an alternative language to that of the private sector – a language more appropriate for museums as instruments of civil society.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided a critical overview of the growing dominance of marketplace thinking in museum affairs. Clearly, the extent and meaning of this phenomenon are highly variable, with the larger urban museums experiencing the most impact. It also bears repeating that nothing is to be gained by insisting that either business or the nonprofit sector holds the exclusive keys to the well-being of museums, irrespective of their size or governance structure. Museums are diversified portfolios, and some of their work (restaurants and product development, for example) is directly subjected to market forces (Janes 1999: 22). Other activities, such as intercultural collaboration and raising bioregional consciousness, have no obvious import for the market economy. It is important to note that a museum's mission can assume both the imperatives of the marketplace and the challenges of social responsibility. The essential requirement is the board and staff leadership to enable these disparate aims to coexist within the mission.

As a context for the paradoxical juxtaposition of market imperatives versus nonprofit values, it would be desirable for museum boards, executives, and funders to acknowledge a more realistic understanding of museum finances, as aptly summarized below (Ellis 2002: 1):

Museums are usually loss-making enterprises and red-ink businesses. We too easily forget that the implications of this fact permeate every aspect of the financial dynamic and culture of nonprofit organizations. There are many kinds of goods and services for which the market does not generate enough demand at a sufficiently high price to stimulate supply, given the marginal cost of producing those goods or services. Much of what we think of as the business of nonprofits fits this category, from lobbying for human rights . . . to providing live performances of symphonic music. . . . Left to the market, the costs of supply are either too high or the level of effective demand is too low for these activities to be priced in a way that is accessible to more than a very select band of consumers, if at all.

The cause for alarm lies in the growing imbalance in the metaphorical museum portfolio discussed above, with museums opting for the “bigger is better” mentality so ingrained in consumer society and so familiar to the increasing number of business people assuming governance roles on museum boards. The

solution lies not in becoming more like businesses, but in differentiating the value of museums based on their unique resources and attributes (Falk and Sheppard 2006). Departing from the status quo of marketplace imperatives opens the door to more creative definitions of museums as social institutions in the civil society – institutions whose complexity and potential stem from a uniquely high level of passion and commitment. Rather than being overwhelmed by the dictates of unrelenting capitalism, and the uncertain future it is creating, museums must exploit their uniqueness, resist homogenization, and test alternative means of achieving meaning and sustainability.

The risk in not doing so lies in the domination of marketplace thinking – a phenomenon in the museum world that has diverse origins, including the economic necessity of balancing government budgets, the uncritical adoption of business methods by museum practitioners, and the tribalistic thinking that characterizes both business and its leaders. This tribalism refers to the strong in-group loyalty of the business community, as well as the exaltation of business leaders above those in other sectors of society. This perspective is best exemplified by a prominent Canadian business leader who referred to nonprofit management as an oxymoron. Righting this imbalance is a significant challenge, especially for museum leaders – recognizing the seduction of large capital spending and the ensuing public profile, as well as the rewards of keeping the peace between a “marketplace” board and management. It should be noted that the museum world also suffers from its own kind of tribalistic and group thinking, which limits experimentation and innovation.

One key to meeting this challenge was intuitively known to Stephen Weil, although he never identified it by name in his many publications. This is the concept of orthogonal thinking, which recognizes that the “conventional, consensus reality we call the human condition is itself inexorably and strongly conditioned in the Pavlovian sense” (Kabat-Zinn 2005: 347–352). Adopting an orthogonal perspective requires that conventional reality be seen from a different perspective, more spacious than that of individual and organizational self-interest, and more admitting of creativity, compassion, and wisdom. It is a matter of what one is willing to see or not see, and to what extent one is able to ignore perceptions and remain habitually inattentive to what is really going on. Weil was always committed to promoting awareness among museum people about their responsibilities to society; he warned against being inward looking.

Isn't this “orthogonal perspective” also Weil's habit of mind, and what he wished for when he spoke and wrote about museums? If individuals can change

their consciousness, Kabat-Zinn argues, institutions can too, by moving beyond conditioned thinking and conventional reality, and by considering new possibilities, insights, and actions (2005: 353). Such thinking is what animates civil society, and is grounded in questions about what constitutes caring for the greater good, what this might entail, and then doing what needs to be done.

This level of organizational reflection and consciousness fits neatly within the concept of the post-museum, as defined by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000). She argues that it is time to move beyond the idea of the museum as a locus of authority conveyed primarily through buildings and exhibitions, and adopt a new model: the post-museum. The post-museum is fundamentally different from the traditional museum and is intended to embrace a variety of societal perspectives and values, with the traditional museum perspective being only one voice among many. Perhaps most importantly, the post-museum involves intangible heritage. Along with the emotions of visitors, the post-museum is directly linked to the concerns and ambitions of communities (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 152). The congruence between the post-museum and the role of museums in civil society is obvious and, hopefully, liberating for those who might require a theoretical construct for the thoughtful renewal of museums. At the very least, Hooper-Greenhill presents a cogent and convincing pathway for all museums that are committed to learning and growth.

Stephen Weil was crystal clear about this fundamental point: there is no “essence of museum” that must be preserved at all costs. Museums exist in, of, by, and for society and are obligated to continually ponder their work in an effort to be worthwhile and make a difference. What is essential in this process is the need to keep reflection and dialogue alive, and avoid complacency and the tyranny of outmoded tradition. Equally important is the need to remain vigilant and thoughtful in the face of the enormous pressures to conform to the prevailing imperatives of the marketplace. The essential task of all sound leadership and management is to ensure both individual and organizational consciousness. It is only through heightened self-awareness, both organizationally and individually, that museums will be able to fulfill the lofty triad of preservation, truth, and access described by Stephen Weil (2004: 75), and assume their role as key institutions in the civil society.

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Notes

- 1 For the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, see http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm.
- 2 The Kainai (or Blood) Reserve is the largest among the Blackfoot Confederacy and is located west and south of the city of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. The term “Blackfoot” is commonly used to refer to the four nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy: the Kainai (or Blood), Siksika (Blackfoot; Northern Blackfoot), Apatohsippiikani (Piikuni, Peigan), and Ammskaapiikani (Piegan, Blackfeet).
- 3 Mark O’Neill, Glasgow Museums, personal communication, March 30, 2005.
- 4 “Moving Waters: The Colorado River and the West.” Available online: <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2001/septemberoctober/feature/watershed>.
- 5 Joanne DiCosimo, Canadian Museum of Nature – personal communication, June 12, 1997.

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