

Museum as Soup Kitchen



Elaine Heumann Gurian

Abstract In this paper, I suggest that museums have not explored their potential opportunities enough when dealing with their communities under stressful conditions. Each reader, however, should decide when what I am talking about is no longer appropriate for museums in general or your museum in particular. While some museums have moved more in the direction of serving their communities, I am struck by how little philosophical change has actually taken place in most museums after a year into this universal economic downturn. I argue that incorporating a broader palette of social services may make institutions more useful, but at some point these institutions might cease to be traditional museums. My question would be: "Should you care?" I do not suggest that all museums become full-service community centers, though some might explore that option. Perhaps the question might become: How do we expand our services so that we make museums' important physical assets of safe civic space and objects useful for tangible three-dimensional learning into more relevant programs that reach all levels of community, and are rated by many more as essential to their needs and their aspirations for their children?



Cultures, not objects, are our real concern. It is the cultural space around and between objects that gives them their meaning and makes it impossible for museums to avoid a social and political role. To ignore or deny this role, despite all the difficult problems it entails for us, would be to evade a fundamental public responsibility.

—Anderson (2000)

The Fundamental Question

Deciding to integrate direct social service into a museum's agenda has a long and uneven history. Some museums find working with the community to be their central mission;

Elaine Heumann Gurian (egurian@ix.netcom.com) is a senior museum consultant and a member of the Museum Group.

they introduce activities in accord with a perceived need, without much consideration about falling outside the usual definitional constraints on museums. Other museums believe that—while introducing social service into a museum’s program is a worthy ambition—it is better done by other organizations, and remains outside of their purview. Each museum-like institution defines its appropriate relationship to its local community in ways that distinguish it from similar organizations. The activities have ranged from housing the dispossessed during physical calamities, to occasionally arranging for free or reduced admission for a single day. These activities, and many in between, are generally publicized by the museum’s marketing department as instances of community responsiveness.

The question for us who work in and love museums is a definitional one.¹ Given the current world economic crisis and the needs of the people in our communities, at what point do we begin to ask ourselves, “Is what we are contemplating doing—even though it’s consistent with our own institutional definition of museums—enough?” Or—if your museum chooses a more activist position—when are you forced to ask yourself the opposite question: “Is what we are doing no longer the business of museums?”

I have struggled personally with these two questions for a long time, feeling that museums need to become more responsive to the least among us, and I have not cared too much about whether the activities for which I was lobbying fit the strictest of museum definitions. I wish the reader to consider programs others have adopted when responding to the current crisis. I would suggest that each reader should decide when what I am talking about is no longer appropriate for museums in general or your museum in particular.

Thanks to the extent of today’s economic crisis, exhorting museums to engage more directly in social service to their communities has gained more credibility than it has had at any time during my career. It has become clear to many of us that the familiar arguments on behalf of museums—that they enrich the quality of life and preserve our collective patrimony—have failed to engage funders adequately in the face of our economic plight. Fewer available resources have forced many museums to cut their budgets, lay off some staff, and furlough or reduce the hours of others, delaying and canceling exhibitions and programs, or contemplating selling objects from their collections. Some museums are even shutting their doors and going out of business.² But interestingly, very few are thinking about changing their mission and direction. A museum in trouble could—if it wished—think about this crisis as an opportunity and reconsider its direct relationship with its community. In fact, that is what I am suggesting.

Choosing

In 2001, I wrote a paper titled “Choosing Among the Options” (2002). I suggested that museums, taken as a whole, were not as homogeneous as people assumed. Each museum was free to choose from a range of intentions, and each intention led to

different emphases. The direction a museum decides to take is not, I suggested, based on the subject matter of its collections, but rather on the philosophy of the director, staff and board. This philosophy is sometimes, but not always, expressed in the museum's mission statement.

I argued that there are five different, though often overlapping, intentions: object-based; narrative; client-centered; community-focused; and national. Users could intuit the direction of the museum if they knew the answer to two fundamental questions: "Which does the museum value more—visitors or objects?" and "Is the museum primarily an instructor to or a collaborator with its audience?" Even though most museum personnel will answer that their museum values visitors and content equally, and that the museum is both a civic meeting place *and* a place of instruction, usually one or the other of these opposites predominates on a continuum.

If the museum's wish is to educate or instruct an audience, then the museum is probably more object- or narrative-based than it is community- or client-centered. The object-based museums are more guided by their "stuff," while the narrative museums are more interested in the story, but both are collections-driven. If, on the other hand, a museum wishes to be primarily responsive to those who use it, then the museum is probably either predominantly client-centered or community-focused. Client-centered museums tend to think of users as individuals, small social groups, or families, while community-focused museums address a larger group defined by location, economic level, or culture. If the museum puts its community's welfare first, then (not surprisingly) it is a community museum.

The outlier here is the fifth category—national museums—because their intention is usually not controlled by the staff, but rather imposed from the outside by stakeholders—often elected officials—who feel they speak for and represent the nation.

I have found that these are inexact definitions. All museums are hybrids of some kind. However, it is useful to see where the emphasis is placed. I might propose an inexact diagnostic test: If a museum's written mission statement is based on the five primary definitional activities of three decades ago—to collect, preserve, interpret, educate, and research—then it's probably either object- or narrative-based and quite traditional in how it defines its permissible activities.

Quizzing yourself about the predominate direction your museum intends to take might help you determine your next programmatic step.

In 2001, when describing community-centered museums, I wrote:

Community museums look the least like museums and are often named cultural or community centers. They are often a mixed-use space of affiliated organizations and functions, with a blend of meeting spaces, gathering spaces, teaching spaces and stages along with offices and food service. They mix social service, day-care, performance and community events with exhibitions. The target audience is often these who live in the neighborhood, who do not traditionally use museums, and whose group collectively is under stress or in great transition.



Children experience art activity at Boston Children's Museum's Camp on the Channel, an urban summer camp focused on introducing Boston kids to downtown and the waterfront. And Teen Ambassadors participate in Arts on the Arcade summer programming at Boston City Hall Plaza. Photos courtesy of Boston Children's Museum.



There have been community-centered museums in many countries and over many decades.

Because of the higher social status typically accorded to object-based museums, community-based museums have often been fragile. They tend to evolve toward more traditional institutions in order to achieve greater recognition and funding. Many times, they have failed for lack of consistent funding . . . If community-centered museums were accorded some primacy in the museum pantheon perhaps they would be less likely to become diffuse, discarded, or unrecognizable.

If other museum sectors intend to take on these important social roles, they would do well to study the close community relations, long-standing commitment of staff, and targeted programming that community museums have practiced and that their missions entail. Building community is difficult, nuanced, and must be sustained over time. It is not for everyone (Gurian 2002).

Given our current global situation, I have begun to refocus on the importance and opportunity offered by community-centered museums in leading us all. I have tried to ascertain how far (and no further) museums should be going in responding to this crisis.

Now that the economic downturn is more than a year old and showing signs of turning around, I am struck by how little philosophical change has actually taken place in museums. It seems that most institutions have tightened their belts and held their breath, rather than thinking of this as a new, more fundamental, opportunity. I am not surprised, but saddened. I have been eagerly awaiting signs that our most conservative museums have become more responsive and timely as an indication of a change in their philosophy. What I have found is that most museums—aside from responding to certain high-profile events³—have made it clear that nothing much has changed.

Because I value the opportunity that community stress offers, I suggest that now might be a good time to highlight how small, under-funded, community-embedded museums and cultural centers might be considered as an important class of their own, worth emulating, and truly useful in today's climate. These little places that have always wished to imitate their larger and better-funded, object-rich cousins might finally gain the spotlight.

What I am proposing is not "business as usual"—museums cloaked in the name of social good, justifying their pent-up need—but rather transforming currently less-than-useful local institutions into dynamic and community-focused "clubhouses" for building social cohesion, and incorporating social services usually delivered elsewhere, such as job retraining, educational enhancements, and public discourse—in addition to their classic role of collections care, interpretation, and exhibitions.

I am suggesting that some museums recalibrate in order to adopt a mission of more social services than ever before. I understand that some museums would find this change more difficult to contemplate than others would. I know that the classical, large, omnibus, object-based museums would have the hardest time in becoming more



A visitor investigates a relief sculpture from the Ancient World as part of the Touch Tours program in association with the Maryland State Library for the Blind. The Walters also partners with Baltimore City Community College's Refugee Youth Project to foster empowerment, build social skills, and provide access to art for recently re-settled K-12 refugees. *Photos on this page are courtesy of the Walters Art Museum.*



community-centered, while the small institutions located in neighborhoods might find it the most rewarding.

There are many who believe that preservation of material objects and reflection upon them is the primary, legitimate work of museums, and that what I am postulating—contemporaneous social action—is wrong-headed. In that case, encouraging the object-centered museum to become more welcoming in its approach, more diversified in collecting, more broadly representative in its labels, and more interested in dialogue in programming, might be a good next step and sufficient progress. I feel very ambivalent about that being enough, but am resigned to the slow movement of museums.

Yet I believe that there are other options for institutions that are situated in the midst of a community in stress and even in extremis.⁴ I understand that incorporating a broader palate of social services may make institutions more useful, but at some point these institutions might cease to be traditional museums. My question would be: “Do you care?”

In the past, subject-matter expertise has shaped the limits of allowable museum uses. Generally, museum content experts have delivered information in whatever form they wished, as if visiting the museum, its programs and exhibitions, provided sufficient social benefit to justify their existence and access to funding. The presumption that museums, by what they traditionally do, are of obvious social value has not proven sufficiently convincing for broad government funding. As many governments try to craft economic and infrastructure stimulus packages, museums are being mainly left out, or are being put into some stimulus packages through unexpected funding loopholes by more ingenious funders.⁵ I argue that museums and their kin are seen by government funders as “nice to have” but not “essential” when it comes to meeting the challenge of immediate social need for which the stimulus package was created.

There are great museums in all parts of the world. But some might say that there are an even larger number of underused and often uninteresting small museum-like facilities that could—and perhaps should—be transformed into new instruments of useful community service or—dare I risk saying this—be closed. And that would only happen if we, as museum workers, chose to purposely reposition some of our institutions so that they intentionally delivered the services needed in real time. To be fair, there are some wonderful community museums and culture centers that are already doing useful work and have been for a long time. Yet their fame has not created a groundswell for emulation. I do not know why that is.

The definition of “need” varies with the level of community stress. Each level of difficulty calls for a diverse range of programmatic responses. At a primary level, there are social scientists who assert that well functioning and responsive community assets such as museums are essential in rebuilding or maintaining public trust and safety (Oldenburg 1989). Local governments believe in funding certain important group-gathering assets. These usually include public parks and recreation areas available for use during clement weather, and libraries and schools available during inclement times. In many of these same towns, museums are either under-funded or not included in the budget, because, I assume, they are not considered to be as



The National Museum of African American History and Culture works within communities, helping people learn about their objects and conserve them at home. Here, Smithsonian Institution staff members help evaluate items brought to the “Save Our African American Treasures” event on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. *Photos by Michael Barnes, courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.*



important or as engaging as civic amenities in the manner of parks, libraries, or schools.

Consider what a difference rehabilitated local museums would make if they provided attractive and useful “free indoor public parks” for days when outdoor use is not an option. In this economic crisis, the attendance at venues seen as educational and recreational is going up—especially in cases where free entrance is provided. Libraries in the United States, for example, are seeing burgeoning use.⁶ The Tallahassee Museum’s program “We’re In It Together!”—which offers free admission to those out of work and reduced admission to those working at the university or the government—has contributed to a 20-percent increase in projected attendance since its implementation.⁷ The Tallahassee Museum initially thought to end the program in September 2009, but its success has prompted an extension through February 28, 2010. Director Russell Daws explained in an email: “Our decision to extend is three-fold: 1) Too many people in our community are still being negatively impacted by the economy; 2) the program has been well received and used by people in need; and 3) it has proven to be a good business decision by increasing the volume of visitors even though the average revenue per visitor has decreased.”

Museums have two important civic assets shared by some—but not many—other institutions. They have specialized spaces constructed to allow strangers to safely congregate, and they present specially designed three-dimensional evidence that visitors find worth contemplating. They can:

- Value inner-directed learning and curiosity for its own sake, and are not proscriptive, like schools that have exams and externalized curriculum.
- Encourage multi-generational and social group exploration.
- Create neutral “third spaces” that allow strangers to see and pass each other with safety.
- Encourage and present fair and civil debate in physical form about difficult questions that allow visitors to reconsider their positions or re-examine their long-held beliefs.
- Provide surroundings that are beautiful and contemplative, relaxing and aesthetic, and not available elsewhere.
- Help stimulate both community cohesiveness and cross community understanding by purposefully promoting, retaining, and resurrecting community traditions.

At their most basic, museums have:

- Clean buildings with toilets, heat, and running water.
- Sufficient surveillance to offer personal safety upon entering.
- Gathering spaces large enough for groups of related and unrelated people to congregate.



Liberty Science Center immerses students in real-life events by providing video conferencing of cardiac bypass surgery, neurological surgery, kidney transplants, and (lately) minimally invasive robotic surgery. Here, students in Inverness, Scotland participate in Johnson and Johnson's Bridge to Employment Program by watching *Live from...*—a real-time operation taking place in a New Jersey hospital. Ethics, teamwork, technology, and other social issues are foregrounded. *Photos courtesy of Liberty Science Center.*



- Sufficient building maintenance and seating to keep people covered or warm as necessary, even though capital maintenance has been deferred for decades.
- Objects (if they have them) that are interesting, at least to some.
- Immersive environments that provide three-dimensional evidence, and experiences that allow for multi-sensory learning.

In other words, museums have physical attributes that could (and in some places have) served people well during periods of crisis. Museums physically rival libraries, churches, and schools as useful public gathering spaces that are regarded by the public as aesthetic, trustworthy, and neutral. (They may also be considered irrelevant and/or off-putting. Some of these advantages are dependent on free access, and that may be an essential ingredient for broader use by those who feel alienated.)

If interested in expanding community use, these museums might offer, in addition to free or very low cost fees, tailored hours and those programs listed above:

- Useful food service at affordable prices.
- Sites for traditional community rituals, including those considered spiritual.
- Offering other, often unrelated, organizations, including social services, the opportunity to use the institution to present their own service.
- Assisting in alternative but demonstrably useful educational programs like low-cost and no-cost after-school and day-care programming, remedial tutoring, and job retraining.
- Access to materials that are in short supply and too costly to own individually—such as computers and the Internet, heat and airconditioning.

In other words, local museums could be seen by the neighborhood as busy and active hubs in which a former reliance on exhibitions and programs has been augmented by many other offerings. What is being proposed exists in some places. These institutions are more often known as community centers and are generally without collections and have only rudimentary exhibition halls. In the United States, the contrast is between museums and community-based libraries. Libraries are more likely to offer social services⁸ and to have full service exhibition halls and are seen as free and essential public amenities.

Transformation into Community Centers

The concept of using museums as community centers is not new. The idea has faddishly come and gone and come again during the previous five decades in many countries, often depending on what political party and philosophy was in power. But I submit that

the museum sector has mostly not embraced these “community service” museums as “true” museum siblings.

In Ireland and England, institutions known as community centers have long been a part of the political social agenda and unofficially part of the radical community. What is striking, however, is that these community centers—even though they often house exhibition halls—are not considered museums. And the institutions that are labeled museums often remain outside the social agenda.

Despite all this, some under-funded but dedicated community museums with visionary directors have continued to operate as useful tiny gems. There are singular models—but few of excellence—operating today in many countries. Yet even as they become individually well known, there does not appear to be any industry-wide impetus for replication.

Intellectual Agenda

Unlike community centers, museums have intellectual characteristics, and are, at their core, “about something.” They have a mission, a point of view, three-dimensional evidence, and an instructional mandate.

Perhaps—rather than thinking of these organizations as full service community centers—the question might become: How do we expand our services so that we make these museum assets into relevant programs that reach all levels of community, and are rated by many more as essential to their needs and their aspirations for their children?

Enhancing the aspects of safe space, and reflecting our surrounding cultures more broadly in our programs and collections, is a good start. Here are some others that are beginning to get traction in some locations.

- Sharing content development with a broader coalition of authors who represent expertise and amateur interests.
- Using all the tools associated with social networking to encourage the development of new and unexpected connectedness.
- Creating internal structures that allow for timely response to local issues in both programs and exhibitions.
- Expanding the definition of collections to include material enhanced by local collections, family-held photos, and so on.
- Changing the definition of collection ownership to allow for material to be “on loan” and returnable for occasional use.
- Creating a policy of excellence that considers unrecognized local talent to be part of the mix.
- Using technology for the collection of local and relevant stories (following the example of National Public Radio’s Story Corps).

- Changing the way we consider access to collections, so that we can work with local teachers to rearrange exhibitions and allow classes and amateurs direct access to collections. These possibilities can be achieved by having staff available or by installing study storage with access to computerized information.
- Teaching appropriate research skills by presenting museum collections to primary and secondary school students as collaborative school-and-museum assignments.
- Creating shared authority pipelines through multiple technological and non-technology-based social networking systems, so that community expertise can be better harnessed.

Museums need to welcome more, share more, and control less. They need to share their space with others—broadening their offerings beyond that which they can provide themselves. And they need to share their collections, their programming, and their content—encouraging others outside the museum staff or invited guests to create, refute, add, and rebut the content associated with the evidence the museum has collected.

Ultimately, museums that identify themselves as primarily cultural repositories of objects will also have to integrate intangible heritage into their collecting sphere, blurring the distinction between action, ceremony, performance, and objects. The notion of ownership will need to be enlarged. Then more of what the museum owns will be considered to be part of the collections and available for use.

Museums—in becoming an essential community asset—will in the end need to put their users first. The safe spaces in question will become more inclusive by intellectually sharing responsibility for information with others.

My dream is that the museum will become a clubhouse for all who need it, and the community will be strengthened by it. The terms “clubhouse,” “forum,” “town square,” and “meeting ground” have been used frequently in contemporary press releases by many institutions that have not fully embraced what these terms mean and what alteration must be undertaken in their program mix. If we could regard these terms seriously, we will have used this stressful time of diminished resources as an opportunity to transform museums into something recognized by all as essential for our collective wellbeing.

Acknowledgment

This paper was written for the Irish Museums Association Annual Conference, February 28, 2009, and revised for the Florida Association of Museums Conference, September 23, 2009. It has been expanded for this article.

Notes

1. The word “museum” will be used throughout this paper as a synonym for a class of institutions that include museums and those without “museum” in their titles,

such as art galleries, nature and science centers, historic houses, and outdoor venues like preserves, zoos, and botanic gardens, which have buildings suitable for public programming.

2. For example, on August 19, 2009, David Donald, writing in a Florida online newspaper, published a story, "County considers shuttering historical museum." He reported that the county commissioners are considering closing the Lake County Historical Museum. The closing would save the county an estimated \$80,000 a year. After giving some quotes from the museum's director/curator about the museum's importance—arguments familiar to all of us—the article quotes county manager Cindy Hall as saying: "The Tourist Development Council has said spending tourist tax dollars to operate the museum is not an appropriate use because it doesn't put heads in beds." The blog following the story includes comments primarily supporting the museum, but a few supporting the closure. See <http://www.dailycommercial.com/localnews/story/081909museum>, accessed Sept. 29, 2009.
3. The related issues of timeliness and relevance seem to have been recently embraced by more museums. For example, some museums have responded to the death of Michael Jackson and Eunice Kennedy Shriver by installing memorial exhibits within a few days of the event. Furthermore, there are museums responding to generic community issues like aging. And others acquiring material that relates to immediate past history. In August 2009, the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida received the 20-foot lifeboat used during the events surrounding the hijacking of the *MV Maersk Alabama*. In April 2009, the *Maersk Alabama* was hijacked in a series of events involving piracy. See press release at <http://www.navysealmuseum.com/news.7.31.09.php>, accessed Sept. 29, 2009.
4. The National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA) has presented programs and worked with many museums to deal with issues related to the aging population. See <http://www.alznyc.org/events/moma.asp>, accessed Sept. 27, 2009. The Museum of Modern Art in New York launched a program, "Meet me at the MoMA," in 2006, which is now being emulated nationwide. For example, five Wisconsin art museums received funds in August 2009 for a new initiative entitled Museum-Based Partnerships for Older Adults with Alzheimer's Disease, modeled after the MoMA program. See "Racine Art Museum receives grant for Alzheimer's and Aging program," accessed Sept. 29, 2009 at http://www.journaltimes.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/religion/article_c4583ef8-9423-11de-afc1-001cc4c002e0.html.
5. The *Pensacola News Journal* reported in August 2009 that the University of Florida's cash strapped Maritime Museum project had the opportunity to apply for stimulus funds through the intervention of a for-profit development group. The park board approved pursuing the funds two days later. See the article by Jamie Page, "Stimulus funds may speed park museum," and another article by Page, "Maritime park board OKs pursuing stimulus money." Both articles were published on Aug. 20, 2009 and accessed on Sept. 29, 2009 at <http://search.pnj.com/sp?aff=1100&skin=100&keywords=maritime+museum&x=0&y=0>.

6. Jakob Rodgers, writing in the *Greeley [Colorado] Tribune*, reports on a 13-percent increase in public computer usage in the High Plains Library District. The reference librarian, a 25-year employee at the Lincoln Park Library branch, attributes the increase to questions about computers and online job applications. See "Faces of the recession: At library, job literacy growing," accessed Sept. 29, 2009 at <http://www.greeleytribune.com/article/20090927/NEWS/909279991/1002/NONE&parentprofile=1001>.
7. See <http://tallahasseeemuseum.org/index.php?page=together>.
8. For example, in its online August 5, 2009 "Museums" category, the *Palm Beach Post* lists the following: "Three Women and Their Art" at the Delray Beach Public Library, featuring local artists Phyllis Emmett, Dr. Myra Levick and Roberta Melman "and their vivid watercolors and oil paintings featuring seascapes, landscapes and portraits." Accessed Sept. 29, 2009 at <http://www.pbpulse.com/arts-and-culture/art-museums/2009/08/05/learn-loxahatchee-river-story-at-lighthouse-museum/>.

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