Ken and Sheila Tingley interviewed Dr. Robert R. Janes for Museums Alberta at his home in Canmore, Alberta on 12 May, 2001. While the interview was conducted three years ago, the issues discussed still resonate in museums today.

Dr. Janes spearheaded the organizational change at Glenbow, which has become of wide interest within the museums community and he has spoken and written widely of that experience. *Museums and the Paradox of Change: A Case Study In Urgent Adaptation*, the title of his book dealing with the experience at the Glenbow and lessons learned from that experience, is now sold out in the second edition.

The title *The Paradox of Change* suggests that while change is thrust on museums, it is either resisted or- embraced by the museum and the community it serves. But there is a paradox. There’s always a trade-off.

Dr. Janes agreed, and noted that the title had been suggested by Charles Handy’s *The Age of Paradox*, a work which was “inspirational to me when we were undergoing all this transformation at Glenbow. Museums are supposed to keep everything forever and not change, and that’s why people, a lot of people, love museums. But at the same time, if we don’t change and adapt we’re not going to prosper as organizations. There still are museums where [time] does stand still and sometimes you have to create that effect in the exhibits, but I think as a
community of people, an organization, we can’t stand still.

Question: in the report’s subtitle there is a reference to “Urgent Adaptation.” Why do you think it’s so urgent today?

Dr. Janes: Well, I suppose probably one of the biggest drivers is just the economic impairment, dwindling public money. That was the main impetus for us to get things going. But also, I think there was a sense among staff that things did need to change; things could be improved. The organization had become rigid. But for us the urgency came about from the fact that shortly after I took the job at Glenbow, I discovered there was no funding arrangement with the province. It was coincidental to my arrival as the president of Glenbow. At least I hope it was coincidental. It was indeed urgent that we get something in place.

Question: Throughout your book you define the role of what you call “Cultural Executives.” Cultural Executives are different from other kinds of executives. What is it that sets them apart?

Dr. Janes: I suppose the very nature of the words, in many ways, because other kinds of executives usually don’t have a modifier on them. Basically, executives deal with profit making enterprises. Cultural Executives deal with cultural organizations, and they are not necessarily in place to make money to create a profit. I suppose that Cultural Executives have a commitment to, a more enduring set of values than a business executive necessarily would have.

Question: Speaking of paradox, there are very high expectations of museums by the public,
and very low public support through corporate support or government support. That seems to be one of the major binds. The public goes to museums, but not as many as most of us would like. But, when they go there, they have very high expectations of what to expect. That takes money to meet these expectations. Could you just reflect on that a little bit? And if there are high expectation, why is there a diminishing importance attached to it by the government, in particular.

Dr. Janes: This is really a profound question. I think it is a bit of a conundrum too. I guess to begin with, in a broader perspective, it turns out that corporations only give about 1% of their annual budgets to charitable or non-profit causes. So, there is a certain myth about the level of corporate support. Actually, in fact, the people who pay most for the sort of work we do are individual citizens, in combination with governments. But, I think that if we have to be cold-hearted about it, the visitor experience in many museums has been lacking in quality and in meaning, And because that’s the case, we don’t have the constituency out there to put the pressure on politicians to make sure that we are on the radar screen. I think there are more general reasons too, as well. And one would be, I think, perhaps, the newness of the country, the newness of Alberta, the newness of Canada. Apparently in France, when the top ministries sit down, you have people like defense and health. But, culture is there too. And perhaps they’ve had a much greater time depth to develop this value, and perspective on culture, preservation and expression. . . . I think another thing is that we have a tendency to elect mostly business people and lawyers to our governments. So that a lot of the agenda has to do with money and legalistic things, because we have lawyers and businessmen in those positions. So, it certainly is understandable. We should be electing more people who are from the culture business.
Question: In your book you write: “When I arrived as the new director in 1989, attracted by Glenbow’s multidisciplinary composition and substantial reputation, it was clear that major changes were in the offing. Although Glenbow is remarkably self-sufficient for a Canadian museum, it required a major contribution annually from the provincial government in fulfillment of their legal obligation to maintain and exhibit our collections. An agreement to this funding came to an end, coincidental with my arrival, and there was nothing to ensure ongoing provincial support. Because of diminishing funding from these and other sources, we eliminated 19.5 positions in 1990, mostly through attrition in the summer of 1992. The provincial payment to Glenbow had declined at that point to 26% since 1998–1999.”

When this happened, it was a shock right through the province and right through the country. Glenbow does have a special place in Albertans’ hearts, I think. When it made it into the news, people suddenly were aware that there were problems. Was there a bit of a vacuum to some extent, as there had been no director just before you came?

Dr. Janes: It was probably closer to a two-year drift, because there was a person in an acting position. But typical of acting positions, people don’t want to make big decisions. But, I think the layoff of those people was a sign that the institution was in serious decline. But decline doesn’t just happen overnight. Glenbow was spending more money than it was generating, and I guess the people in charge at that time hadn’t put all that together and done some projections. When you’re forced to cut staff to answer a problem, I think that’s a good indication that an organization is in decline. And that precipitated a process, a very deliberate process of change.

Question: What happens when there is no executive director during a process of transition
for a sustained period of time?

Dr. Janes: Well, I think it is very harmful to the organization, because there isn’t a person who is guiding the holistic picture on a daily basis, and who is accountable for that.

Question: There is a natural inclination, as you mention later in your book, to resist any fundamental changes in any bureaucratic structure or organization. Does that kind of a long transition make it harder? Do people tend to go into their own areas and develop their own ways of doing things that become even harder to change later, do you think?

The thing about change is, you can’t just talk about change and expect it to happen, I mean that change is a process that has to be well designed and then implemented and then nurtured all the way through, because change is difficult for every single person.

Dr. Janes: I think that’s probably true. People become even more isolated, fragmented and devoted to their particular task, rather than to the organization as a whole. The thing about change is, you can’t just talk about it and expect it to happen. I mean that change is a process that has to be well designed, and then implemented and nurtured all the way through, because change is difficult for every single person. The tendency for most people is to take the easy way out, and change isn’t easy.

Question: You’ve read widely in corporate literature dealing with organizational change. How does the museum compare to that? Is it much harder to do?

Dr. Janes: I don’t think it’s any harder, or easier, because it involves human beings in complex
organizational settings. What almost drove me to write the book, was an increasing annoyance with the literature from the private sector, where changing these large organizations was somehow presented as easy. “I did this, I wrote the book, there’s a happy ending.” My own direct experience, and everybody else’s who I was close to on our staff, was it’s hard for a museum. It’s an ongoing process. Henry Mintzberg, Canada’s maverick management professor, is actually saying now that probably the best model for management is nursing. Nursing implies long-term care and nurturing, and not interventionist cures. Change doesn’t happen overnight. I remember talking to some wise people during our process, and they would say, “take a deep breath because it’s going to be seven to ten years before you see the fruits of this kind of investment in change.” The corporate literature seems to have all these easy solutions, and I don’t know whether they do that to write and market books, or what it is. But I found it to be quite false.

Question: I’d like to quote a few things, brief excerpts from your book, and get you to comment on it a little bit. In the Preface you say: “There is abundant evidence to indicate that organizational change and adaptation occur with great difficulty in museums. The most compelling testimony to this is the death threat I received during the most painful of our organizational initiatives – the reduction of 25% of our staff. There could be no starker reminder of the impact of these events on individual human beings than such a threat. Nor is there a more cogent reminder of the responsibilities we have, as museum executives, for the decisions we make and the actions we take to ensure the survival and prosperity of our institutions.” I’m sure this happens in other corporate organizations, but I’m not sure how often it happens in a museums community.

Dr. Janes: You mean the death threat? I don’t know that either?
Question: The death threat and the depth of feeling. Is there a sense of entitlement among some people that are long-term workers in museums, because they are committed to what they consider a higher calling, do you think?

Dr. Janes: I think so. And as you, and we all know, people don’t do it for the money, and most people are very well educated, and there’s a love and commitment to the work itself. And I think a lot of that attitude, that view, that value, is very valuable, and that’s what organizations need, that kind of commitment. It comes with a sense of entitlement, however, that I really should be left alone to be able to get on with what I think is important. And there are advantages and disadvantages to this perspective.

Question: “There are universal characteristics of organizational life and fulfillment, which are just as relevant to the Royal Ontario Museum as they are to Bombardier.” “Universal characteristics”, could you reflect on what you meant by that?

Dr. Janes: I mean everybody is entitled to the opportunity to do quality work. You know, they’re entitled to have some sort of control over the work they do and their destiny within the workplace. They should have some sort of opportunity to express their own aspirations and their own ideals in their work. It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re an aircraft mechanic or a conservator in a museum, everybody should have an opportunity to do this.

Question: Speaking of the Royal Ontario Museum, it’s undergoing changes too. Do you know if there’s been any direct spin off from the Glenbow experiment; that people have decided they would try to implement some of the ideas?
Dr. Janes: That’s a very good question. I don’t know specifically. I think one of the problems is that museums have such a tendency to behave in an insular fashion, and there isn’t a lot of sharing. That’s another reason why in 1992, another museum director and I co-founded the Canadian Museum Directors Group. And this doesn’t purport to be representative of anything except the ten or twelve museum directors of various institutions – art galleries, museums, natural history museums – who are the members. We all agreed that we needed to interact much more consistently, in order to share our failures and our experiences with respect to the organizational changes that we were undergoing. The Royal Ontario Museum participated in that group, and we did share a lot of information in a frank and candid way. And I am sure that on a staff level, there is information, rumor and advice going on across the country all the time. But, in the end, I think every institution has to invent its own solution. Each institution is unique, and there is no cookie cutter that’s going to work.

Question: Each museum grows organically out of its own past, and it has its own identity. But, someone just drew to my attention recently, some interesting literature on the implication and the importance of models. And one of the problems with failure has been the lack of good models; models that actually have succeeded. Because, as you know, there are all these horrible cases of the residential schools and everything, and everyone is studying them. But why not study some positive ones? It seems to me that maybe more networking among the museums would be good, outside of provincial boundaries, so that you can find these models.

Dr. Janes: That’s a very important point, because you always have to pay attention to other peoples’ experiences, especially the positive ones, because you can learn from them. And it’s
back to something you said earlier too, that each museum grows organically out of its own history. I think one of the biggest failings of change processes is that the powers-that-be, board or executive staff, deny that history. You can’t do that. It’s part of that institution and it has to be respected. There may be negative aspects to it, but you have to build on what has come before, because it’s just as legitimate as what you want to do in the future.

Question: Is it crossing that line, when you use the museum as a format for big blockbuster shows that deal with something that’s completely foreign? How does that work? For example, some museums will start bringing in blockbuster shows, as opposed to developing their own program – let’s say about Native peoples, Native arts or Alberta painters. It’s much easier to bring in a pre-packaged one. Is that crossing the line and turning your back on your own institution?

Dr. Janes: I guess it depends on the extent to which you do adopt the blockbuster approach. You do see this becoming quite popular across North America. Boards see it as a way of generating money, and there’s no doubt that a good blockbuster show can do that. Some boards even see it as a kind of a panacea to enhance popularity or fix current operating problems. But, as you pointed out, they’re a mixed blessing. I think that the key is balance. Yes, indeed, your audience does deserve to see a show from Egypt. They want to see something exotic, that you might not be able to produce from your own resources. At the same time, your core mission is your collection. And I think there have to be ways to do both; to have blockbusters and develop your own theme. Balance! It’s a simple-minded principle, but it’s important. I was talking to the recently retired CEO of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Bill Barkley. You know, they’ve put themselves on the map in the last five years with their blockbuster shows. They are now a destination for US tourists. Their Leonardo DaVinci show, I don’t know whether you
saw it?

Question: I did.

Dr. Janes: I think they netted over a million dollars on that show, and they’ve had several other equally successful shows. What’s interesting is that they’re seeing about a 4% steady decline in their attendance, despite these blockbuster shows that may draw 300,000 people. The reason is that people aren’t coming to the RBCM unless they have a blockbuster. Bill Barkley said, “these blockbusters are actually destroying our well established brand at the RBCM.” Their solution now is one of balance. Rather than putting so much effort into bringing in a big show, they’re going to put a serious amount of money into refurbishing their own permanent collection galleries and create a blockbuster feeling for those.

Question: One of the memories I have is having to go in at a certain time, buying tickets, lining up, crowds, pushing.

Dr. Janes: Totally controlled.

Question: It wasn’t my idea of a museum experience, as I’ve grown to think of it.

Dr. Janes: Yes, that remains mysterious to me, too, because, you’re right, every blockbuster experience I’ve had has been physically unpleasant. And the only way that I’ve gotten through them is that I’m tall, and I can see over the heads of most people. But, people don’t seem to mind. There’s more than just the content of the exhibit going on here. It’s being somewhere, and there’s this celebrity dimension to it that seems to draw people.
Question: Now, another quotation from your book. “Who would be interested in a book about organizational change in a museum, and who would buy it? What can museums offer to the corporate world of complex organizations, where the salary and stock options of many senior managers exceed the total annual budgets of most Canadian museums?”
That’s an interesting question, and you’re one of the few people who can answer it because you’ve written a book like that. Do you find that there is any kind of feedback coming from having the book out there for a while?

Dr. Janes: Yes, there has been. In fact, one of the positive reviews was done by the Sloan Management Institute in the United States, which publishes one of the most prestigious management journals in North America. They said that that book was equally as applicable to “profits”, as it was to non-profits. The other thing I hear from people I know in the private sector is just take the word “museums” out, and we could probably sell ten times as many copies. As soon as someone sees the word museums in the title, they say, how could that possibly be relevant?”

Question: That’s really funny and it’s sad. But, it’s really a monumental problem. I don’t know how you could possibly get beyond that, because it’s almost so ingrained. It’s like Richard Hofstader’s book on anti-intellectualism in America. It’s part of that whole thing – people who go to museums are strange.

Dr. Janes: It’s true, and even to the point now where a lot of new organizations that are really museums are not using the word museum. They call themselves heritage centers, cultural centers or whatever, in an effort to overcome the stereotype.
Question: Although if you put “virtual” in there, it’s okay. . . .

Dr. Janes: Yes and they’re doing very well these days with all that new federal money.

Question: Now another quotation from your book. “For those among us who bemoan the abandonment of museum truths’ in the face of very real economic and social imperatives, this book has nothing to offer. I see no value in gratuitously polarizing the complex matter of museum adaptation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, by setting up tradition in opposition to contemporary realities. There is room for both.” That again seems to me to be something that’s very central to the whole problem. Perhaps it comes through in some of my comments about blockbusters and so forth. But I really do feel the traditional way is still the better way, in so far as having the museum represent the place it’s located in, and the history of that place.

Dr. Janes: That’s an important responsibility, but I don’t think it necessarily has to end there. I think what I was trying to get at is that a lot of our effectiveness is reduced because of dualistic thinking and fragmented thinking; reductionism, really, which we have inherited from the scientific method. Things can be compartmentalized, and you don’t see the whole, and we put things in oppostiton to each other all the time. It’s either this or it’s that. Well, where’s the middle ground? Where’s the both/and rather than the either/or? De-accessioning is a classic example. It is the sacred cow in our work, which says that you keep everything forever. But, it’s not practical. And, there are ways to constructively de-accession that are going to enhance the institution, and the institution’s relationship with its public. De-accessioning is good housekeeping and it’s good collection management.
... a lot of new organizations that are really museums are not using the word museum. They call them heritage centers, cultural centers or whatever, in an effort to overcome the stereotype.

Question: Your book “does not question why museums exist or whether they should be replaced by something else.” “My main interest,” you write, “is how museums are organized to do their work, and whether or not improvements can be made.” Also, “these concerns should not be dismissed as mere process.” I know that when reviews go on in museums, there is an inclination to think, “Oh no, another meeting, and we’re going to have to go down...”

Dr. Janes: Another plan! (laughter)

Question: Another plan, and they roll their eyes. So, I think I know what you’re talking about as being dismissed as mere process. It’s taking away time from the real job. I’m going to continue because I like this quotation. “... dismissed as mere process, for the manner is which a museum does its work will either permit or preclude the democratization of curatorial authority, inclusive thinking and the persistent questioning of the status quo. These issues should be the preoccupation of all competent museums, and museums will only thrive to the extent that traditional museum practices are continually questioned, improved or done away with. Mediocre research, disciplinary allegiances which restrict creativity and excessive professional standards – all of these are rooted in process. Until we have learned to unlock the knowledge and energy which are obscured by these and many other archaic habits, museums will remain true to their stereotype.” When we’re talking about excessive professional standards that may seem paradoxical themselves, because
how can you be excessive? There are some museums that see themselves as academic. Is there a place for that kind of museum too?

Dr. Janes: Oh, I think there is, and I think some museums fit that description and are invaluable in playing that role. I look at the Smithsonian, which is often considered rather old-fashioned and stuck in the mud. But, at the same time, there are units within that 18-member corporation, called the Smithsonian, which create original and new knowledge, and it’s irreplaceable. But, I also think that a lot of the so-called research that goes on in museums these days is journeyman’s research. I mean that it doesn’t constitute original contributions to knowledge. At the same time, museums are still knowledge-based organizations, and that’s important.

Question: Well, quite often research is done either in-house or by consultants who are brought in on a tight deadline to do something for a specific display, timed to a date. And, I can speak from experience on that. The 50th anniversary of the end of the war or something, and you’re under the gun to get something together.

Dr. Janes: Yeah, because they should have planned it a year or two years ago. But at the same time, the upside of bringing in people like you is that you bring in a different perspective and a different set of intellectual skills. I really recommend that. Museums, as can all organizations, can get atrophied with the same people doing the same work all the time.

Question: Now, I had a really interesting quotation from your book concerning the meeting of Canadian Museum Directors in 1993, which conjures up a sharp image. “Canada’s major museums are standing on the edge of a cliff, holding hands and peering over the edge. Glenbow is part of the group, but just put on a parachute and jumped. Everybody else is still
standing at the edge, both terrified and elated at the act, and the possibilities.” That’s in 1993. Are fewer people prepared to jump now, do you think?

Dr. Janes: Indeed, and a little context for that quote is in order. That was the Canadian Museum Directors Group that I referred to earlier. What I had done is take our entire blueprint for change, in confidence, to that group, and distilled and summarized it for them to get their feedback. The plan we had to reduce our staff by 25%, to develop a commercial wing, and to engage in de-accessioning – these were all things I discussed with them to see how they would react.

Question: And the response seems to be quite positive?

Dr. Janes: Well, I got a lot of grief about de-accessioning. Not from the public, but from professional colleagues. They thought . . . and these are people I continue to respect, that we were going too far in doing that sort of thing.

Question: You keep coming back to that. Maybe we could discuss that now. I suppose the people that were in opposition were advocating that there was a pact that had been signed, in many cases, with the dead. . . .

Dr. Janes: Fiduciary trust.

Question: Fiduciary trust, and you also have a moral obligation to the people who had brought in their quilt or their object from the family, a rifle their father had used, perhaps. And the feeling was that it was going to be there for good. Then it turns out that there are
500 of these rifles, and all with more or less the same provenance. So, do you really need all these rifles? If you sold them to another collector, which is another issue in de-accessioning, then what? Are you then turning your back on that moral responsibility? I think even more than the fiduciary responsibility, it’s the moral dimension that people get worked up about.

Dr. Janes: Well, Glenbow’s case had two distinct qualities to it, that don’t generally apply. At least one doesn’t apply to most other museums. That is, the bulk of the high value material that we de-accessioned was donated by the Harvie family, so we didn’t have the problem of having to deal with individual donors who may have passed away or whatever. We could deal with the Harvie family directly. The issue that arose after we secured their permission was whether that de-accessioned objects should be given to other Alberta museums, or other museums in the country. We said no, as we knew this was high value material and it was not a fire sale. We sent out 93 letters, offering the right of first refusal to institutions across the country. We received a very small response, and those people who did respond said “just give us the material.” But, we had a strategy here, which was to sell the high value material and create an endowment, which would generate income to pay for the care of the core collection. In the end, the de-accessioning endowment amounted to about 6 million dollars, and now it’s throwing off about 300 thousand dollar in income to pay for the upkeep of the core collection. It pays for the conservation and maintenance of the collections, and it was a very pragmatic, business-type solution.

Question: Do you think it’ll ever be resolved? I mean this is one of these paradoxes where it depends on how deeply you’re involved in the work itself. In a sense, it’s easier for people outside the museum itself to take a pure attitude towards it.
Dr. Janes: I think when you really start to look at it, there’s a lot of de-accessioning going on, and museums just don’t talk about it. We happened to agree to commit to an entirely visible public process with our de-accessioning. But, again, I think there’s a lot of de-accessioning going on. We just don’t hear about it.

Question: I’m wondering if you could just talk a little bit about the role of performance monitoring within the museum, and the kind of reaction there might have been to that and how it’s gone subsequently.

Dr. Janes: It was difficult to do, and we decided to make it part of our strategic plan. When we found out that there was no funding agreement with the province, we decided we needed to do a strategic plan in order to justify our request for multi-year funding. We didn’t want one-year funding, because it’s impossible to do any kind of intelligent planning. So we needed a strategic plan. In designing that strategic plan, there were glimmers out there that performance evaluation was going to become important. We embraced the idea, because performance evaluation is a way of being able to tell your supporters this is what we said we were going to do, and this is what we did. So again, it was a deliberate strategy. But, introducing it to the staff, was quite difficult, because the reaction always was, “you can’t measure what I do, because everything I do is qualitative.” But, I think in the end, you can have a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. The big danger was that once people embraced the idea, they wanted to measure everything, and you end up spending all your time measuring everything. You have to be really disciplined about the number of measures you use, because it takes a lot of time to collect the data.

Question: Did people agree on the criteria for the evaluation? If they’re involved in the
process does it make them feel a lot better?

Many people in museums are highly intelligent, with a unique body of knowledge, and are content to pursue that body of knowledge whether or not it is relevant or meaningful to the visitor.

Dr. Janes: I think that people have to be involved in those things in order to be able to commit to them. It was painful. And it was painful designing a system where everybody had to report, because people are very busy. But yes, in the end it worked. We were all worried that if we didn’t develop our own performance measures, somebody else was going to impose them upon us. So, it was better we do it ourselves. And it was a really very good way of monitoring our progress towards the goals we set.

Question: Neil Postman defines museums as basically answering a question, “What does it mean to be a human being?”

Dr. Janes: The museum should provide answers to that question.

Question: You describe that as a fairly elegant statement. But, from something so profoundly philosophical, moving it into the realm of actually getting several hundred people realizing this. . . . If you take that definition to all the people on the staff, how are they going to react to it?

Dr. Janes: Well, I think that’s the $64,000 observation, because that has been at the heart of the change in museums, at least in North America, for the last ten years. And that means waking up
to the external world and deciding how responsive we are going to be to the public. For so long, I think visitors were almost an irritation to a lot of museum people. Many people in museums are highly intelligent, with a unique body of knowledge, and are content to pursue that body of knowledge whether or not it is relevant or meaningful to the visitor. I think the whole change process is the museum saying “hey, there are people out there that we can serve, there are people out there that we can provide personal meaning to, inspiration to.” And you see museums are engaged on all different levels of doing that now. There still are museums out there that don’t care much about their visitor. There are also others that maybe have gone over the deep end in terms of audience experience, by simply giving the people what they want. I think that’s one of your concerns about blockbusters. The truth is probably somewhere in between. But, it really means connecting with your community.

Question: I’ve noticed that you get some wonderful exhibitions that are devoted to Native history. You could just observe, from the people coming through, there is a high percentage of Native people coming to that. But, then the next one is dealing with the role of the Chinese in Alberta history and a high percentage of Chinese-Albertan people come. But it’s not a return clientele; no museum can cater to all those communities. So making those decisions on what kind of human being to describe is so hard. And that’s where it almost comes down to an advocacy role of one of the curators it seems.

Dr. Janes: The starting point would be, of course, your collections. You’re not starting from scratch, right? If you take a place like Glenbow, it has some of the best High Plains ethnological collections in the world. So, with the strength of that collection, it only stands to reason that we should just keep getting better and better at sharing that material. And the culmination now is the new Blackfoot Gallery. It’s unprecedented, as it was created by
Blackfoot in conjunction with Glenbow staff, who served facilitators and resource people. The story is the story as seen by Blackfoot people, and that’s what I mean about being a mirror of community. The Blackfoot are the people who should be telling the story, using the resources and strength of Glenbow’s staff and collections.

Question: And speaking of the Internet. Every institution now is getting a home page of varying effectiveness. Where does that fit into the whole long-term picture of museums as you see it?

Dr. Janes: In a practical sense, just having information out about who you are, where you are, how you get there and how much it costs is just good advertising. But, I also think that e-commerce and the Internet are in an incipient stage of development. I think a lot of e-commerce businesses failed, right, and it hasn’t met peoples’ expectations in museums, we’re not going to get anywhere just trying to create the museum on the Internet. If you do it as a 3D exhibit on the Internet, why don’t you just go see the exhibit? And, I’m not sure how many people out there are going to want to scroll through thousands of digitized images. That’s why I’m really interested in this virtual museum development in Canada, and the fact that the federal government is bankrolling it. I’m hoping that out of this we can create some unique approaches to Internet communication based on museum work, and not just try to reproduce what we already do in museums. I’ve seen the power of the Internet though, at Glenbow, with respect to the library and archives. They’re doing so many research transactions now, as well as knowledge building and commerce over that system. Our Librarians and Archivist told me repeatedly how gratified international researchers were that they could get all this material electronically, and didn’t have to come to Glenbow. I don’t mind the fact that they don’t have to come to Glenbow, as long as they can use that material. And the Internet’s allowing this.
Another example of the power of this is the Archives Network of Alberta, which Glenbow pioneered. This has allowed much smaller archival institutions to connect with a bigger network.

Question: When you were hit with the real crunch in 1992, you were looking at deficit spending. You couldn’t do that because that’s right in your constitution.

Dr. Janes: The board has never permitted it, and Glenbow has never had a deficit.

Question: Lobbying, which is also so important. And, this is another thing, all the little museums when they sit down to decide what they’re going to do, they say, well, we’ll get the big corporate sponsor. And most of the corporations have people hired to deal with those requests. And, usually it’s “no” that is the answer that comes.

Dr. Janes: And increasingly it’s because the corporation asks, “What are you going to do for me?” The philanthropy has gone right out of corporate spending. They see it as marketing opportunities. I’ve run into that in other volunteer work that I do, where since a company doesn’t have a presence in the town where you want to raise money, they’re not going to give you any, right, it’s you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.

Question: This day and age does sort of make the robber barons look quite philanthropic.

Dr. Janes: It’s true, and we don’t have that tradition in Canada, yet. I guess because we’ve been so reliant on government for so long. But, I’ve been doing work in the United States recently, and the level of generosity and the level of personal responsibility that so many individuals feel
down there for supporting the arts and museum are quite extraordinary. It never ceases to amaze me. Granted, there are a lot more people and a lot more money, but there is also a well-developed sense of responsibility. And I, quite frankly, don’t see it a lot around here. It’s “the usual suspects” in a place like Calgary, and I think that most of those people, being as generous as they are, are suffering from donor fatigue. They’re the ones that are always hit up.

Question: The other option was waiting for more public money. And you mentioned provincial and federal governments are bankrupt. Well, they’re not now. Maybe it’s extreme to say they’re rolling in money. But, Alberta is doing quite well. They’re still not making a huge move to step in and fill the gap.

Dr. Janes: There are so many interesting things happening, though, in Alberta. That is a historical statement that you just quoted, because Glenbow just received 1.1 million from the province for the Blackfoot gallery. And, I heard the Tyrrell just got 4 million. With the birthday coming in 2005, maybe we’re going to turn on the taps, and museums should be the beneficiaries I would think. But you’re right, in the grand scheme of things; it’s still a tiny amount of money. When I was working at the Glenbow, we determined that the province was spending less that one half of one percent of its entire budget on arts, culture, sport and recreation. I don’t know if that’s improved.

Question: And one other way you can judge this, I think, is where culture stands in the government hierarchy. I mean, when I started working as a consultant, there was Alberta Culture. Then it kept getting rolled into Multiculturalism, and now it gets rolled over into the Community Development portfolio. That seems to me to be indicative of how the government actually views it.
Dr. Janes: Yes, it’s a junior ministry in many ways. And that goes back to some of our earlier conversation about lawyers, politicians, and businessmen. They lack a sense of time depth. But, it’s also because, as I mentioned earlier, we need to do a better job at creating that constituency – people that are committed to us.

Question: “Death by installment” was a phrase used by Alan Gottlieb when he was with the Canada Council, to describe the undiscriminating, annual exercise of stripping away staff and budgets. And, that’s something that was forced on Glenbow at a certain point.

Dr. Janes: Yes it caught me off guard as the new president – that first set of layoffs. There was no choice. But after that, we decided that we weren’t going to do this 10% a year, 4% the next year, and so on. That’s why we developed this wholesale transformational process – to get it over with.

Question: Right, because otherwise there’s that sword hanging; somebody’s going next year.

Dr. Janes: Exactly! And the amount of anxiety that creates and the down time that creates are huge. When we were hit off guard the first time with those layoffs, we realized that things were changing. So, we did a bunch of financial projections. We determined that by 1997, I think it was, that if we had continued at the current rate of expenditure, Glenbow would be completely and totally bankrupt. We got a glimpse of the future, and that’s when we set about with this strategy-making process. And that wasn’t crisis management, because we had a year and a half to do that. This way we were able to involve our entire staff in developing solutions and
actually generating strategies. I don’t know how many hundreds of ideas we got. Through a whole process of consultation, workshops and meetings with staff, we consolidated these into six strategies. I think it’s important to mention that the solutions didn’t sort of emerge full born. There was a lot of work.

Question: Now public service was another strategy – “museums may not survive in any useful form if they do not become more commercial and popular,” observes Michael Ames. The main purpose of this strategy is to identify new and creative ways of serving the public.

Dr. Janes: That’s the audience experience. How do we impart more meaning and value to the people that come here?

Question: What were some of the initiatives made by Glenbow along those lines in the nineties?

Dr. Janes: I think some of the more successful moves were, for example, introducing live actors into our exhibits. So that when we did an exhibit on Toulousse Lautrec, we “hired” Lautrec, and he came dressed in period costume with a French accent and interacted with the visitors. Another one would be the discovery center that we created at Glenbow, which is a hands-on interactive space where people are free to learn on their own – independently, dependently, or interdependently. The museum school would be another example.

Question: Do you think it’s important having the building itself a focus for other groups? Like the Historical Society of Alberta.
Dr. Janes: Yeah, I think that having all those different people in there, using it and being together, really creates a synergy. And the networking is very important. Public service is an ongoing requirement. You’ve got to keep thinking and working all the time. And that’s also part of this blockbuster thing. How many should you do? How often? People love them, and this last blockbuster at Glenbow, the Egypt show, has been an immense success, in terms of the number of paid visitors.

This way we were able to involve our entire staff in developing solutions and actually generating strategies. I don’t know how many hundreds of ideas we got.

Question: Business processes and cost reductions – the purpose of this work is to continuously examine how Glenbow can simplify its work in order to reduce operating costs and red tape. That’s just something that any corporation does, I guess, pretty well.

Dr. Janes: And any organization should do it. Especially the older and larger you get. You develop all these habits that may not be at all rational. For example, we went around and mapped various activities. One example was getting an artifact out of the building on a loan. When the staff mapped it, there was something like 38 separate steps. As soon as people start to break down the work and look at it they said “how come it went to her and then it comes back to me and then back to her and then over to him again?” By doing that, we cut down the number of steps on that particular work process by two-thirds, saving an immense amount of time and money. So you always have to pay attention to that. But, that’s not something you’re going to necessarily do, unless you deliberately decide to do it.

Question: Non-commercial partnerships. . . . Do you actually go out and try to get more
people attracted to the institution, to come in to the museum? Cultural groups, historical groups, collectors.

Dr. Janes: I guess the answer to that would be yes and no. Archives Network of Alberta, for example, is an example of a non-commercial partnership, and that’s something that we deliberately put together out of the archives. We provided the server and the technical support and convinced people to do this. In other cases, the Children’s Museum of Calgary came to us, and we worked with them on a bunch of collaborative projects. It just depends.

Question: New forms of organization, designing a more flexible organizational structure. Now, that’s a big part of the your book. You do have a foldout of the previous hierarchical organizational chart. And there’s also an indication of the “shamrock organizational model”, which was used in an effort to replace the old structure. How successful did the shamrock model prove to be in bringing everyone more into contact with everyone else in the organization?

Dr. Janes: That’s a good question. In fact, I was thinking if a third edition of this book was considered to be appropriate, that someone should go to Glenbow and analyze that question. How is it working now? I’ve been away now for 15 months [in 2001], and I know that the organization that I left has already changed again. That’s very important, because the ideal structure is a function of what’s going on – purpose. So fluidity is very important. I also think that some of our original attempts were ill designed, but improvements have been made. And, I think improvements have been made, because what we’re seeing more and more, if you create a free work environment, self-organization begins. And that’s coherent behavior produced by human beings in the absence of an authority. And when you have people like museum workers,
many of whom are highly intelligent and motivated, they don’t need anybody telling them what to do or how to do it. The key is all agreeing on what needs to be done and then doing it. In answer to your question, I think it’s working to the extent that Glenbow, for it’s size, is a highly productive organization and there’s still innovation going on there. I think these are two good signs of that organizational change. But, it’s an organic thing and it’s a dynamic it’ll continue to change.

Question: You mentioned that many people in museums are very well educated and quite intelligent and committed to their discipline. But many of them, it seems to me, tend to like to work alone, and imposing a team structure might get a little more difficult. Did you find that the shamrock model was a way of, by freeing things up, to get people into the team mode? And also allowing them to get back out and to work on their own?

Dr. Janes: That’s a good point about teams, because it’s a big temptation to see teamwork as a kind of panacea. You know, the solution to a happy work place. And you’re exactly right, our society is entirely individualistic, and that’s the way we were brought up. I guess kids in school now have to work collectively, but we never had to do it. I think that teams are absolutely essential to get certain kinds of projects done. But, there also has to be room for individual work. And there also has to be the freedom, for people to move in and out of teams, and Glenbow is getting much better at that now. We were quite naïve about peoples’ interest or ability to work collectively. So, it takes a lot of time to become a sophisticated team operation. And in some cases, teams simply aren’t appropriate. For example, we didn’t reorganize our accounting department into teams, because it doesn’t make sense. You have to be intelligent about the use of teams, as they are not a universal prescription. But, they’re also essential, when you’re doing an exhibit and you have to have different perspectives in order to have the best
product. The educators have to be on the team at the beginning; the marketing people have to be there. For so long, museum work was just assembly line work. You did your bid and handed it off and that was the end of it. You’re not going to get a creative outcome that way. There’s got to be that sort of co-activity at the very beginning, and throughout the process.

Question: There were several goals: create a more flexible organization to get work done faster and better; reduce administrative controls and enhance creativity; decentralize decision-making; decrease the negative effects of functional organizational boundaries, such as departments and divisions.

[On this last point], departments and divisions . . . get almost adversarial in some of the larger museum organizations, I think. And, that’s partly a function of the budgeting. Because if someone’s got so much, someone else assumes that they’re not getting the budget – that part of the budget that the other got, so . . . how do you overcome that one?

Dr. Janes: That’s why we took apart Glenbow’s structure. It had four silo-like divisions, and these consisted of 24 separate functional departments. We dismantled all those departments and combined those individuals into five multi-disciplinary work units, which I guess in some ways are like divisions. But, we made an effort to try to break down the disciplinary boundaries the staff really wanted to do this anyway. Where I made a huge mistake was that I underestimated the department heads’ sense of themselves. When their status was removed as department heads, there was a lot of harm done, as Department Head was a status which these people really valued. It was a sort of capstone on many of their careers and when we took it away, there were great difficulties. I think some of those difficulties still exist.
Question: So, what do you think would be a good way to address that problem? You do have to change the structure. Is there a way of changing the structure, and retaining the intrinsic status somehow of certain people?

Dr. Janes: I think there is. One way would be making sure they had team leader responsibilities. Another way is to develop a sort of parallel structure within the organization. A good example would be Gerry Conaty, who is the prime leader in a lot of our First Nations work. He was no longer a Department Head, but he became the Chairman of the First Nations Advisory Council, which is a job that I would normally do as President of the organization. But, he has the knowledge; he has the relationships, so this is a reward in recognition of his good efforts – making him the Chairman. I think there are lots of opportunities there. But to do that, you’ve got to be willing to share the power.

Question: And create an organizational structure that is easier to expand or contract.

Dr. Janes: That’s the shamrock idea. Going into the change, we had 76% of our budget allocated to salaries. After you paid all the bills, we had 24% left to do anything else. The shamrock allowed us more people going on flexible work arrangements – part-time and contract. And that’s a bit of the curse of the 21st century, because people don’t have the same status that they had before as permanent employees. And sometimes they don’t have the same benefits.

Question: Some people like and value that kind of flex time and some people don’t. And having the choice yourself, I guess, is the key issue. Whereas in a big organization, I guess, you don’t always have that choice.
Dr. Janes: I don’t know what it is. It’s the way of the world. Charles Handy wrote that only 50% of the people in North America and Western Europe who are capable of full time jobs in organizations, actually have those jobs. The other 50% of the jobs have disappeared, for whatever reason. I think it’s important that, when you do have people who are working in these flexible arrangements, that they be paid at a premium. This allows them to buy the kind of benefits that would normally accrue to a permanent position.

Question: Exactly, because I think people are afraid of losing some status. But, they’re also afraid of losing income and lifestyle.

. . . there are people who are working eighty or ninety hours a week – a lot of people, and others don’t have any work at all. There’s something wrong here.

Dr. Janes: And security too.

Question: And security. At the end of First World War, Bertrand Russell wrote a famous essay about bringing in a four-hour workday. Because productivity had gone up so incredibly during the war, you could probably continue by working four-hour days. And of course, this was considered outrageous. He was serious, of course, when he wrote the article. But, everyone thought this would be horrible, because people are committed to the eight-hour day, I think. Although it would be nice, the irony here was that people are working much more than eight hours a day. The weekends are gone, long hours of work, the evenings are gone. The Internet brings you into that. So, maybe that other 50% that is actually working is doing the work of the unemployed 50%. So, maybe it is time for some
flextime in the system. But, there is nothing built in there to guarantee you a lifestyle.

Dr. Janes: No, I agree completely. There really needs to be some profound thinking about this, because it’s all unbalanced. As you’re implying, there are people who are working eighty or ninety hours a week – a lot of people, and others don’t have any work at all. There’s something wrong here. We’re in the middle of some kind of transition, and it doesn’t seem that we’re that sensitive to it in North America. But in Germany, for example, at Volkswagen, they’ve gone to a four-day week. Everybody agreed to take 20% less salary, but only work four-days a week. People are apparently delighted with it. They have another life. They have their paid life and then another life.

I just look at our children. We have a 23-year-old and a 21-year-old. The 21 year old is still in University. Even our daughter, and her friends, they’re working like you and I do in some ways. They have a little bit of work here in that area, and then they do some there. For you and I, as consultants, it’s a conscious choice. But, it seems in their generation that’s the way it is. This notion of a permanent job, even if they wanted one, doesn’t seem to be there.

Question: I’d like you to think on the period from 1995 and what has transpired since the first edition of your book came out, in terms of implementing some of the ideas.

Dr. Janes: I’m still involved in museum work, but in a much different way now. I’m no longer with an organization, and I have been thinking and writing about some areas that really aren’t covered in my book. One area would be the whole notion of museums and social responsibility. What responsibilities do museums, as social institutions, have for advocacy? This seems to be mostly unresolved in museums, with most museums saying, “we can’t get involved with that. We have to remain neutral.” But, natural history museums are being pressured by
environmental organizations to take a stand on the deterioration of the environment. What are museums going to do about that kind of thing? My impression is that a lot of museums don’t want to deal with this question. But, it’s a fundamental question, and you have to deal with it deliberately and knowingly.

Question: And you immediately run into a conundrum in that many big corporate sponsors are implicated. Let’s say Syncrude for example, and the Provincial Museum. Well, by taking corporate sponsorships, do you compromise your stand-free status in society by doing that? And does it maybe, while museums are under no obligation, to set its programmes because of corporate sponsorship, does it “cast a chill” because you don’t know when you’re going to be going back to the well for more from that corporate sponsor?

Dr. Janes: I think that even two years ago I would have dismissed comments like those as being too conservative. But the more you see what’s going on in the globalization movement and what corporations are actually doing, the more we have to be thoughtful about who do we want to line up with in the corporate world. I also think another area that merits more work is the whole notion of leadership and succession planning, because we have not done a good job with succession planning in our profession. The odd director has nurtured people in a deliberate sense, but for the most part we hope that everything will work out when we leave our senior jobs. Right now, there’s a real shortage of directors in this country and in the United States. And there’s no sort of program or approach in place to deal with.

Question: That’s what I think of as the “pyramid syndrome,” and it’s got nothing to do with the Egypt exhibition at the Glenbow. But it’s the sense of ownership that founders of museums have. They build it up, and when they die or when they move on they want to be
mummified in their pyramid and, I shouldn’t say this, but you know, have all of their staff slaughtered and their favorite horse put in with them.

Dr. Janes: And it’s over.

Question: It’s sealed. You know, that’s of course extreme. I’m just being facetious. But I mean, it’s the founder’s syndrome. People identify a museum with an individual, and it seems like that’s almost inevitable, you’re going to have that. Then when the founder dies you make the first transition.

Dr. Janes: There’s actually a life cycle of an organization based exactly what you’re describing. But the institution has to begin reaching out before the founder dies, or you get into a fairly delicate situation. When it’s been so insular, there is no community base for it.

I think though, that there are some mechanisms. One would be the Canadian Museum Directors Group that we started in 1992, because now it has a life of its own. It’s an opportunity for directors to get together two or three times a year. There’s a formal agenda where you share information, solutions, and problems in a candid way, based on collegial trust. I think that we have to start developing those round table discussions for museum people at all levels. Mid-sized museums and small museums need the opportunity to learn outside of their institutions based on candid and collegial interaction. And thereby avoid the founder’s syndrome.

Learning is often much more effective when it’s done face to face, with seven people sitting around a table, than it is reading a journal article.

Question: And then, the next stage is to have them sort of filtered down through the
museum communities that you go back to? I imagine most of these directors are of flagship institutions, bigger institutions and so on. But, then there’s all these middle range museums . . .

Dr. Janes: Exactly and that’s where the need is. Because that’s where the mid-sized museum can be developing leaders for the bigger institutions, and then the smaller institutions for the medium sized. I know that organizations like the CMA have talked about this for a long time, but there has yet to be any kind of systematic approach to this. I think that’s a real lack and it’s going to hurt us, because people are retiring now, in spades.

Question: Would it be fair if I asked you what you would do the same, what you would do differently in hindsight?

Dr. Janes: I should mention one major development that occurred during that period [at the Glenbow], and that was our independence from the provincial government. That was something we hadn’t anticipated when we started the whole change process. We decided to cut all our ties with the provincial government, and now Glenbow is the most independent non-profit, museum in the country. That’s been a real advantage, because we’re no longer hampered by unnecessary reporting requirements. We also developed a fee for service contract with the province, which specifies the amount of money they need to pay Glenbow to take care of Alberta’s collections on behalf of the people of Alberta

Question: Was that a hard thing to negotiate with the province?

Dr. Janes: Actually, it was surprisingly easy, because we did have the political will to do it. Key
people thought this would be an interesting experiment, and, so far, it’s worked. Glenbow is still there. . . .

Question: And long may it be.

Dr. Janes: I hope so. I guess in that sense all these change efforts have been successful. But, the environment changes every month, every year, and adjustments will have to be made and new directions sought. I know that Glenbow now has a major physical renovation program that they will be putting forward for funding at some point in the future. Again, to enhance the audience experience.

Question: Well, I think I’ll just conclude by thanking you very much for consenting to do this. I appreciate it.

Dr. Janes: You’re quite welcome.