Are museums irrelevant?

Museums are rarely acknowledged in the global discussion of climate change, environmental degradation, the inevitability of depleted fossil fuels and the myriad local issues concerning the well-being of particular communities – suggesting the irrelevance of museums as social institutions. At the same time, there is a growing preoccupation among museums with the marketplace. Museums, unwittingly or not, are embracing the values of relentless consumption that underlie the planetary difficulties of today.

*Museums in a Troubled World* argues that much more can be expected of museums as publicly supported and knowledge-based institutions. The weight of tradition and a lack of imagination are significant factors in museum inertia and these obstacles are also addressed. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, combining anthropology, ethnography, museum studies and management theory, this book goes beyond conventional museum thinking.

Robert R. Janes explores the meaning and role of museums as key intellectual and civic resources in a time of profound social and environmental change. This volume is a constructive examination of what is wrong with contemporary museums, written from an insider’s perspective that is grounded in both hope and pragmatism. The book’s conclusions are optimistic and constructive, and highlight the unique contributions that museums can make as social institutions, embedded in their communities, and owned by no one.

Robert R. Janes is the Editor-in-Chief of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley and is the former President and CEO of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada. He is also a museum consultant. His books include *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*, *Museum Management and Marketing*, *Museums and the Paradox of Change*, *Archaeological Ethnography Among Mackenzie Basin Dene*, Canada, and *Preserving Diversity: Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives on Cultural Change in the Western Canadian Subarctic.*
Museum Meanings

Series Editors
Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Flora Kaplan

The museum has been constructed as a symbol of Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society’s basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museums can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In postcolonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

*Museum Meanings* analyses and explores the relationship between museums and their publics. ‘Museums’ are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. ‘Relationships with the public’ is also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its public shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationship of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

Also in the series:

- **Heritage and Identity**
  *Engagement and Demission in the Contemporary World*
  Edited by Marta Anico and Elsa Peralta

- **Museums and Community**
  *Ideas, issues and challenges*
  Elizabeth Crooke

- **Museums and Education**
  *Purpose, pedagogy, performance*
  Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

- **Rethinking Evolution in the Museum**
  *Envisioning African origins*
  Monique Scott

- **Recoding the Museum**
  *Digital heritage and the technologies of change*
  Ross Parry

- **Museum Texts**
  *Communication frameworks*
  Louise Ravelli

- **Reshaping Museum Space**
  *Architecture, design, exhibitions*
  Edited by Suzanne MacLeod

- **Museums, Society, Inequality**
  Edited by Richard Sandell

- **Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture**
  Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

- **Re-imagining the Museum**
  *Beyond the mausoleum*
  Andrea Witcomb

- **Museum, Media, Message**
  Edited by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

- **Colonialism and the Object**
  *Empire, material culture and the museum*
  Edited by Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn

- **Learning in the Museum**
  George Hein

- **Liberating Culture**
  *Cross-cultural perspectives on museums, curation and heritage preservation*
  Christina F. Kreps

- **Pasts Beyond Memory**
  *Evolution, museums, colonialism*
  Tony Bennett
Museums in a Troubled World

Renewal, irrelevance or collapse?

Robert R. Janes
For Peter, Erica, Geoff and Kiran – the hope of things to come
And can we also realize in time that, in many ways, we are ironically but unwittingly poisoning ourselves and the biosphere, psychically and physically, out of our endless and magnificent but unexamined precocity, out of our fear and our greediness, and the cleverness of our minds and our industry and our institutions, cleverness that turns dangerous when we become attached, entrenched, absorbed, delighted with parts but uninterested in wholes and larger wholes?

Jon Kabat-Zinn\textsuperscript{1}
Contents

List of figures ix
Acknowledgements xi
Foreword xiii

ELAINE HEUMANN GURIAN

Prologue 1

Time immemorial 1
The Willow Lakers 3
The curator 5
The exhibit technician 8
The Chief Executive Officer 9
The future 12

1 Museums and irrelevance 13

Troubling questions 13
Sobering assumptions 15
Uncertainty, elitism and myopia 19

2 A troubled world 26

The absence of stewardship 26
A troubled world 28
Our lethal footprint 32
A virtual impression 34
Killing our relatives – close and distant 42
Enter museums 44
Homogenizing the ethnosphere 46
Diagnosing the assault on stewardship 53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It’s a jungle in here: Museums and their self-inflicted challenges</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The three agendas</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The fallacy of authoritative neutrality</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The lone museum director</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management myopia</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The consequences of hierarchy: Learning from hunters</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum exhibitions: Ploughing old ground</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collections: Museums as consumption</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Debunking the marketplace</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporatism has arrived</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Back to the beginning</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A clash of values</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The anatomy of failure</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courting the corporatists: A cautionary tale</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business literacy</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods aren’t values</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Searching for resilience</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilient innovators</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why resilience?</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilient values</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assuming responsibility</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The mindful museum</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum chatter</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking orthogonally</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum mindfulness</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museums for a troubled world</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Museums: Stewards or spectators?</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A brief retrospective</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The consequences of ignoring the present</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renewal – denial is not an alternative</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In praise of museums</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

1 Aerial view of migrating barren-ground caribou in the Thelon Game Sanctuary, Northwest Territories, Canada, 1971.  2
2 The Willow Lake hunting camp in the Northwest Territories, Canada, 1975.  4
3 Hiker at the Great Divide in the Rocky Mountains, Alberta, Canada, 2007.  27
4 A Canadian Museum of Nature botanist shares his knowledge of arctic plants with a participant in the 2008 ‘Students on Ice’ Arctic Expedition.  36
5 The Michael Lee-Chin Crystal at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada, 2008.  38
6 Rendering of the wind turbine installation at the Western Development Museum, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, 2008.  41
7 Willow Lake women attend a feast at the Willow Lake hunting camp, Northwest Territories, Canada, 1974.  47
8 Home of the headman of the nomadic Manaseer tribe, near the ancient city of Meroe, Sudan, Africa, 1971.  49
9 Blacksmith and his wares at the Kabushiya market, Sudan, Africa, 1971.  52
10 Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada.  72
11 Willow Lake hunters, Paul Baton and Maurice Mendo, butchering a woodland caribou, Northwest Territories, Canada, 1974.  74
12 Jose Kusugak and the author en route by snowmobile to a museum meeting with Inuit elders in Canada’s Central Arctic, 1986.  96
13 The Royal Ontario Museum’s paleontological excavations at the Burgess Shale, Yoho National Park, British Columbia, Canada, 1999.  100
14 The Praise Dancers perform at a Cultural Connections event – a partnership between the Field Museum and over twenty Chicago-area ethnic museums and cultural centres.  126
15 Couple enjoying the calm view of the lake at the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens.  128
16 Barbara Kruger, an American feminist artist, incorporated reports
of violent acts against women from Scottish newspapers into an installation at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, where visitors were immersed in her signature large graphic statements. 133

17 Women making a patchwork quilt at La Maison de Calico, the Quilting Economuseum in Pointe-Claire, Quebec, Canada. 136

18 The Rethinking Disability Representation Project included the ‘Life Beyond the Label’ exhibition at the Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service. 140

19 Ceremonialist Pete Standing Alone paints the face of museum ethnologist, Gerald Conaty, who exemplifies heightened consciousness of his professional responsibilities. 152

20 Children – the hope of things to come. 185
Acknowledgements

Lengthy book acknowledgements have been criticized recently, but such criticism is uncalled for when one has spent over thirty years in any kind of work, whether it is museums or plumbing, and then writes a book. Those thirty-plus years encapsulate countless interactions, musings and learnings, and it is careless to pretend that one’s thoughts and perspective somehow spring full-blown at the moment of writing. Because they don’t, I have a number of people to thank for their ongoing expertise and support. Research, reflection and writing are ultimately a collective enterprise and I must mention some of the key participants.

For acuity, collegiality and perseverance beyond the call of duty, I wish to thank Richard Sandell for reviewing the manuscript; his comments and support were instrumental in the completion of this book. I am also grateful to Joy Davis for reviewing the manuscript, as her generous support, her thoughtful comments and editorial scrutiny were invaluable. In addition, James M. Bradburne generously reviewed the draft and provided cogent comments and an international perspective. Writing is a solitary task and Sandell, Davis and Bradburne kept me motivated. I am indebted to the celebrated museologist, Elaine Heumann Gurian, for writing the foreword. Her accumulated knowledge and experience are rivalled only by her generosity in sharing them.

Others reviewed various chapters and provided useful comments and welcome encouragement, including Adrian Ellis, Suzanne Keene, Kathleen McLean, Michael Robinson and Douglas Worts. There are also a number of individuals who provided interviews and guidance, as well as published and unpublished work, including Joanne DiCosimo, Maurice Davies, Elaine Heumann Gurian, Peter Janes, David Klatt, Emlyn Koster, Ruth Lane, Diane Mar-Nicolle, Sylvie Morel, Bernice Murphy, Gabrielle Nammour, Will Phillips, Beatriz Plaza, Marjorie Schwarzer, Charles Stanish, Frank Vanclay and Alaka Wali. I want to thank Rob Ferguson, in particular, for keeping me abreast of relevant literature.

Other colleagues and friends continue to provide ongoing support and encouragement, as well as reviewing various drafts of papers and presentations that have led to this book. I thank Alexandra Badzak, Mary Case, Christine Castle, Gerry Conaty, Michele Corbeil, Ford Bell, Jim Cullen, Clare-Estelle Daitch, Naomi Grattan, Des Griffin, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Erica Janes, Joan Kanigan-Fairen, Doug Leonard,
Acknowledgements

Michael Lundholm, Suzanne MacLeod, Kitty Raymond, Barbara Soren and Ronald Wright. I thank them for their consideration and interest. There are two other individuals who are no longer with us – Michael Ames and Stephen Weil – whom I wish to acknowledge for their ongoing, albeit silent, legacy. I also want to thank the Editorial Board of Museum Management and Curatorship, as well as the many authors and referees, for their research, writing and commitment to the journal. All of them are a continuous source of stimulation and insight.

I was able to present and test many of the ideas in this book in various public presentations, and I want to thank the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, the British Columbia Museums Association, the ‘Tribute to Stephen Weil’ hosted by the Cultural Management Program at the University of Victoria (Canada), the University of Leicester, and the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation/American Association of Museums for generously inviting me to address their organizations. I also thank the Canadian Academy of Independent Scholars and Simon Fraser University for providing financial assistance in the preparation of this book through the Beatrice Gross Independent Scholar Award.

I want to thank those who assisted me with fact-checking and references, including Marc-Andre Anderson, John McAvity, Terry Cheney, Michelle Eligott, Elizabeth Ellis, Chantal Fortier, Graham Kappel and Alexander Pappas. Numerous individuals also generously provided images on behalf of their projects and institutions. Although I was not able to use all of these images, I am grateful for the willing assistance of Adam Blackshaw, Christie DuBois, Maurice Davies, Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones, David Klatt, Ruth Lane, Elizabeth McCrea, Gabrielle Nammour, Mark O’Neill, Madeleine Tudor, Frank Vanclay, Alaka Wali and Douglas Worts. Ron Marsh prepared the digital images for publication, and I thank him for his impeccable work.

My editor at Routledge, Matthew Gibbons, has been involved with this book since the beginning and I sincerely thank him for his unwavering support and guidance. I also acknowledge Lalle Pursglove, who has provided skilful assistance at every turn. I wish to thank Matthew Brown for his expert copyediting and proofreading, as well for managing the many production details. Last, I thank my wife, Priscilla, who has contributed to every aspect of this book while remaining even-tempered, gracious and insightful.
Robert Janes has a fertile mind and an omnivorous delight in learning. He has written and edited books on social responsibility and change in museums. He is an editor of an important museum journal. And it is evident in his past work and in this book that he is brave and has an evident, visible, moral core. He has spent a lifetime championing museums as important institutions, not only because of their collections but also because of their possibilities within the social fabric of society. Bob Janes fervently wants museums to make a difference in every community and in individuals’ lives.

Janes can visualize the ideal museum as clearly as he can see the food on his plate, and he wonders why we can’t also see it. Having worked so hard to point out museums’ possibilities, he is baffled and disappointed by those of us who control museums but fail to change them in the ways he so fervently wishes. He cannot conceive that there are some within the profession who like museums just the way they are. He believes that these colleagues are either misguided or that they lack tools to remake their museums and improve them along the lines of his vision:

I will argue that the majority of museums, as social institutions, have largely eschewed on both moral and practical grounds a broader commitment to the world in which they operate. Instead, they have allowed themselves to be held increasingly captive by the economic imperatives of the marketplace and their own internally-driven agendas. Whether or not they have done this unwittingly or knowingly is immaterial, as the consequences are the same. It is time for museums to examine their core assumptions. (p. 13)

Bob Janes would argue that he is essentially an optimist though he appears both sad and frustrated. This book serves as a summation of a lifetime of work, thinking, writing and speaking. He hopes it will guide us on the road to fundamental museum reformulation. I must say that I share his frustration. Museums can be stubborn institutions to those who wish for them to change.

This book is an exhortation to us – museum trustees, students and practitioners – to create museums that will make a difference to society in this perilous new century.
He thinks we, with all good but misguided intentions, have persisted with outdated models and have become inadvertently stuck,

seemingly in a collective inability or unwillingness to generate and sustain a critical mass of purpose and will. Thought and action are largely uncoupled in the museum world – a primary cause of the drift into irrelevance. (p. 173)

The author thinks we have been deceived by the capitalistic world of for-profit management and have charted our success by using the wrong measures:

Marketplace ideology, capitalist values and corporate self-interest are clearly not the way forward, having conclusively demonstrated their financial fragility and moral bankruptcy. (p. 184)

Janes wrote this book before today’s world-wide financial calamity and yet is prescient about the need to turn away from ‘the belief that unlimited economic growth and unconstrained consumption are essential to our well-being’ (p. 94).

He is even more forward-looking when he poses a new use for our collections which he refers to as ‘cumulative knowledge and wisdom’:

The need to revisit this cumulative knowledge and wisdom may come sooner than expected, as the destruction of the biosphere renders industrial technology increasingly malevolent. This record of material diversity may have a value not unlike biodiversity, as we seek adaptive solutions in an increasingly brittle world. Collections will be the key to examining the relevance of this material diversity in contemporary times, and will distinguish museums as the only social institutions with this perspective and the necessary resources. In this respect, museums are as valuable as seed banks. (p. 179)

He wants us to re-examine our fundamentals – what museums are for – and to invent new methods and more humane ways of being with each other. He hopes we will measure success by yardsticks of kindness, relevance, community cohesion and other more psychological markers of good health. He provides many examples of how we can shape an uncertain future and is sure we will figure it out.

The book incorporates models, examples and readings that are in part spiritual, utopian, and harkens back to the ‘hippy’ days when activists hoped that the world would become kinder. For example, as an admirer of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Janes wants us to be more ‘mindful’ which he explains as ‘moment-to-moment awareness ... cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily ignore,’ and wants us to guard against ‘chaotic cascades’ of endless electronic distractions and interruptions, and practise the creation of ideas that are orthogonal, or at right angles to conventional reality.

museum’ and ‘Stewards or spectators?’. He hopes that if he can more clearly describe problems, we will feel impelled to work together to remake museums into more useful organizations as he so fervently wishes. And he offers us some fix-it ideas so that we might get started on the way.

While Bob Janes can clearly see the new improved museum in his mind’s eye, how to transform our present institutions into these more relevant ones is slightly murkier. He can sense, but not quite fully describe, the next steps. So he gives us many ideas, side readings, excursions into other disciplines, and examples that he hopes will provide some guidance as we figure out our way.

I found the experience of reading this book very like beginning to read philosophy in college: intrigued, but always a little befuddled – almost, but not quite, grasping the point. Nevertheless I see ways that I could apply the ideas, as imperfectly as I understand them, to my own professional life. I find it interesting and useful to meander into the places that Bob has found interesting and try to parse the connections that he so plainly sees. Each of the possible course corrections he offers is unexpected, interesting and worth contemplating. Janes thinks about ecologically sustainable lives, study circles, strategic thinking, new models of shared leadership and sensitive ways of working with community.

Along with the willpower required to reduce consumption is the greater need to transform the museum’s public service persona, defined by education and entertainment, to one of a locally-embedded problem-solver, in tune with the challenges and aspirations of the community. (p. 173)

He wants consultation and organic clusters within our organizational structures, and strategies for quick and nimble responses. He summarizes his aspirations as follows:

All museums have the responsibility and the opportunity to become synthesizers, and foster an understanding of the interconnectedness of the problems we face, both environmental and social. A mindful museum can empower and honour all people in the search for a sustainable and just world – by creating a mission that focuses on the interconnectedness of our world and its challenges, and promotes the integration of disparate perspectives. (p. 166)

This is not a ‘how-to’ book. Janes leaves it to us, our passion, and our individual and collective circumstances to create the improvements that fit within our unique community needs.

Robert Janes uses himself as a barometer. This makes for vivid and engaging reading and, as the authentic self-reflection of a fervent practitioner, the book is valuable. The author is someone who is really, really smart, humane and wants us all to succeed. As a reader, you feel that you know him even if you don’t. This book is multi-layered, and challenging to absorb in one reading. Chapters have their own internal trajectories. Every paragraph could be turned into a chapter and each of these would be interesting in its own right. Bob Janes reads both far afield and close to home.
The titles listed in the notes for this book are in themselves an excellent guide for personal self-study.

This is an intriguing book so stocked full of ideas and good quotes that I find I have to read and then reread each paragraph and think about it before going on. This is not a book to take on the airplane and glide through on the way to a conference. This is a book so filled with ideas that one wants reassurance that Bob Janes will show up tomorrow morning at early breakfast so you can start a discussion that will range all over the universe (hopefully while you also tramp through hill and dale) and end with exhaustion at bedtime. At the end of each paragraph I want to say, ‘But, Bob, what about … and, Bob, I don’t agree these are linked ideas but they’re important and could lead to a very different conclusion … and, Bob, have you read … and, Bob, …’ And so it goes. (And I know Bob personally, so the possibility of having that conversation is not farfetched.)

But for you, dear reader, if you do not know him yet, I suggest you get a highlighter and armed with his email address begin to read while sitting at your computer madly writing questions and rebuttals to him. In today’s technological age it is possible to set up such a real dialogue with the author. Alternatively, the best use of this book may be as a book club project, tackling just one chapter at a time. This should not be a superficial bag-lunch discussion but an agenda item for a serious meeting – the senior management weekly meeting, for example.

The chapter chosen for discussion would be the one most related to your museum’s current situation. My expectation is that your colleagues will protest the very idea of shared study, arguing that they have ‘real work’ needing to be done. After reading the assigned chapter, they will become so agitated, so angry at the author, so dismissive or embracing of the ideas embedded in the chapter, that the ensuing conversation will be heated – and sufficiently provocative to unlock a real plan of action that will move the institution ahead in unexpected ways. The results will vary from the book’s prescriptions but will fit the needs of the institution, just as Bob hoped they would.

I believe this book will serve as an irritant that causes change – change that has not happened using smoother and more tranquil methods. I predict that joint reading will give rise to new ways of doing things that will prove productive for the institution.

The real usefulness of this book is that, as Janes suggests, we are so comfortable in our shared, but narrow, set of self-referential information that we cannot get out of our collective rut without provocation from thinkers outside our small groups. If used in this way, the book will allow your colleagues to gather insights, marshal refutational arguments and not having Bob Janes around – take each other on in ways that will expand the possibilities of productive change far beyond that imagined by the group before. When this happens, the author’s exhortations will bear the fruits he has hoped for and render the book a success.

3 November 2008
It’s a jungle in here: Museums and their self-inflicted challenges

The three agendas

In reflecting on the low profile of mainstream museums in issues of natural and cultural stewardship, it won’t do to attribute this passivity to the much-vaunted view that museums must remain protective of their authority and respect by remaining aloof from activities that entail competing views and values. As discussed earlier, this in itself is a commitment to the status quo and its deprivations, including the presumption of unlimited economic growth and the tacit support of the governments and corporations who are committed to this ideology. Nor is it sufficient to use the inertia of museum tradition as a rationalization, for such practices are not immutable, as the examples of progressive practice in the previous chapter testify. There are simply too many museums submerged in a miasma of sacred cows, unquestioned assumptions, groupthink and habitual behaviours.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify and discuss some of the more potent of these habits, all of which museums have wittingly or unwittingly imposed upon themselves, and all of which can be overcome by awareness and will. I contend that these challenges have hindered many museums from moving beyond the temple to embrace a deeper consciousness and a broader outlook. There is good reason to believe that these internal hindrances, in combination with the spread of marketplace ideology, are not only enfeebling otherwise competent museums but are also serving to divert museums from realizing their unique strengths and opportunities as stewards, not spectators.

Museums are highly complex organizations – housing multiple professional allegiances, competing values and interests, and a range of diverse activities that would give pause to the most seasoned executive. In distilling this complexity, I am indebted to museum and business consultant, Will Phillips, and his concept of the ‘Three Agendas.’ This concept is useful for distinguishing between the complex activities that characterize museums as organizations, and in identifying various internal issues which confront museums. The first agenda focuses on the work and content of the museum, including the mission, exhibitions and programs, collections, conservation, marketing, audience development and so forth. This is where boards of directors and staff normally focus, as well as the vast majority of professional conference programs.
The second agenda is about how things are organized – the people and resources required to do the work, including strategic plans, organizational structure, delegation, staffing, training, systems for communication, methods for resource allocation, coordination and control, reward and recognition systems and so on. In short, the second agenda is the all-pervasive culture of the organization, and the automatic pilot that keeps the museum moving along in its old and familiar track, even when changes are being made in the first agenda. Phillips notes that only 1 to 2 percent of typical industry conferences focus on the second agenda.2

Although there are no statistics available for museum conferences, 32 years of attending conferences has also convinced me that the time and energy devoted to the second agenda are negligible. These topics are largely the private purview of museums, and suffer from neglect and disregard. One doesn’t learn much about innovative organizational designs or how to improve internal communication at museum conferences. Whether or not a museum’s organizational culture is healthy or dysfunctional is generally not the subject of public discussion or analysis – it is mostly the stuff of innuendo, rumour and staff conversations at all levels of the organization. A willingness to be vulnerable is a prerequisite to the exploration of the second agenda, and vulnerability, like innovation, does not come easily to any kind of organization.

The third agenda is concerned with change, and with a focus on the mental and emotional constructs in individuals that set the stage for how they interact within the organization.3 This agenda is about individual development, learning and transformation, all of which museums must address if they are to answer the crucial question of ‘why’ they do what they do. Phillips notes that many businesses and museums are ‘stalled out’ because of unresolved third agenda issues. There is no doubt that these issues are daunting, unacknowledged or intractable for many museums, which explains why they are not the subject of professional discussions and public forums. The idea of the third agenda is essential to the purpose of this book, as the change required by museums has much to do with third agenda issues – rethinking the role and responsibilities of museums and museum workers at a time of unprecedented global challenges.

It is obvious why the museum community’s attention is on the first and second agendas, recognizing both their importance and the difficulties inherent in transforming individuals and organizations. I mentioned earlier the widespread disconnection between an individual’s values and perspective, and the actual behaviour of the organization. The third agenda is the watershed or minefield, where individuals and organizations can come together for mutual growth and transformation, or not. Although this book is ultimately a journey into the third agenda, many of the obstacles along the way originate in the first two agendas. They are numerous and formidable, and must be addressed if the capacity for museum renewal is to be realized.

Before launching into this discussion, I should note that the larger the museum, the greater the potential to suffer from the self-inflicted challenges catalogued in this chapter. This doesn’t mean that small museums have mastered the three agendas, as they can be as bogged down with these complexities as large museums. I hope that
the reader from a small museum resists the temptation to dismiss these challenges as belonging to bigness, as smaller museums are no less immune to the tyranny of tradition. While one size does not fit all, I must, of necessity, generalize about museums as organizations in the following discussion. Generally speaking, small museums have more effective internal communication simply because they are smaller, and can be more nimble and flexible as a result. This does not mean, however, that these advantages are necessarily seized upon.

The fallacy of authoritative neutrality

With so many museums joining the perpetual round of entertainment, with borrowed exhibitions and impressive restaurants, one must ask what is hindering a more expansive understanding of their role in society. One explanation lies in an uncritical commitment to what I have labelled ‘the fallacy of authoritative neutrality.’ This is the widely held belief among boards and museum staff that museums must protect their neutrality, lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness and special interest groups. Authoritative neutrality has taken on new meaning over the past decade, as museums have increased their reliance on corporate, foundation and private funding, and business people occupy more seats at the board table. Perhaps the pervasive, albeit discreet, argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate a private sector sponsor, real or potential.

The simple truth, apparently unrecognized by the proponents of authoritative neutrality, is that corporations and the business community are themselves special interest groups, marked by a rigid tribalism grounded in marketplace ideology. And make no mistake that this is an ideology – a set of ideas, beliefs, values and passions that justify and mask a specific set of interests. There is no doubt that moving beyond authoritative neutrality requires judgement and risk-taking, and the potential for both enhancing the collective good, or abusing it, lie dormant in every opportunity. The following little-known examples from the museum world are salutary case studies of both extremes.

Museum eugenics

The Hall of Human Biology and Evolution at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City is the next iteration of the Hall of the Age of Man (closed in 1984), first mounted by Henry Fairfield Osborn, the museum’s Director of Vertebrate Paleontology and its President from 1908 to 1933. Osborn was the child of one of the most prestigious families in the city, and felt called upon to provide moral and intellectual leadership in confronting the problems of a rapidly industrializing society due to massive immigration and the mixing of racial and ethnic groups. He feared that the human species was becoming diluted and weakened, and the subtle message in the Hall of the Age of Man was the need to preserve natural and racial purity.
Osborn also chose to preside over the Second International Eugenics Congress in 1921, which coincided with the opening of the Hall of the Age of Man. Equally harmfully, the Congress was financed by J. Pierpont Morgan, the American banker and financier, who also served as president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A series of temporary exhibits, one floor below the Hall of the Age of Man, promoted the value of eugenics – breeding superior people and preventing those deemed inferior from reproducing – the essence of Nazism and ethnic cleansing. In short, the AMNH had become the site of a ‘powerful constellation of economic and political interests … bent on exercising social control, with the aim of preserving the priceless gene pool that supposedly had made America great.’ Osborn’s work is a clear case of advocacy run amok, but the potential for wrong-doing persists, albeit with far greater subtlety in contemporary museums. Are museums, with their commitment to authoritative neutrality, being sufficiently self-reflective and appropriately critical about the real interests at play in their exhibitions, programs and governance, and who they actually represent? Museum scholar Kevin Coffee has asked this question and concluded that no museum can ‘effect broad accessibility if it does not intend to confront, at least episodically, the social forces that underlie or overlay its existence.’

MoMA and the Nazis

In the fall of 1940, an exhibition proposal entitled ‘For Us, the Living’ (codenamed ‘Exhibition X’ in the museum files) was submitted to the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) Executive Committee in New York. Conceived in response to the Nazi occupation of Paris in June of that year, the proposal was developed by the Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, MoMA’s Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the historian and critic, Lewis Mumford, and the Director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Leslie Cheek. It is doubtful that a more blue ribbon museum team has ever been assembled, and I can do no better than to quote directly from their proposal:

The magnitude of America’s task in confronting the immediate threat of world domination by Hitler and Stalin has expanded the task of the show itself. What began as a mere exhibition has become a dramatic initiation into the spirit and purpose of American life.

This exhibit was to use every means available, including pictures, ‘written legends’, three-dimensional figures, the human voice and music, as well as a new building. The building was required to house this unprecedented initiative, erected on MoMA’s garden plot. The proponents of ‘For Us, the Living’ also noted that this show is ‘our American reply to the many grandiose, if empty, exhibitions that Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin have put on during the last decade,’ and that ‘millions of people will take part in it; millions will be influenced by it.’ MoMA’s Executive Committee voted to cancel the proposed exhibition, citing the US$750,000 budget and expressing doubts about its effectiveness. Ironically, the AMNH succeeded, while MoMA failed, and even with the passage of time, the relevance of MoMA’s proposed exhibition
is defensible, irrespective of the timidity of the governing authority. Both of these examples attest to the risks inherent in taking a position.

A critical museum executive speaks up:

‘We can’t possibly take a stand, or advocate for a particular position, perspective or issue. The world is too complicated, and truth and opinions come and go in this postmodern world of ours. We might get caught with our pants down – unprepared to deal with the complexities. Besides, it’s too risky; we might risk alienating a donor, sponsor or supporter. Taking on an issue is none of our business – our museum has to be seen to be fair and impartial.’

And I say:

‘That sort of thinking is akin to the slippery slope argument, so ubiquitous in museums. Museum boards and staff who subscribe to this way of thinking maintain that they cannot move a centimetre from their position without sliding into oblivion, or worse. Unfortunately, the slippery slope argument is not useful, simply because the abuse of something does not bar its use. Experience, intelligence and prudence all require that one assess each situation, compare the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action, and then choose the one that best fits the purpose and circumstances. If that prescription for moving beyond one’s institutional neutrality is too commonsensical, there may be a greater stimulus in what the museum-going public is currently thinking. For example, the results of a 2003 survey of 2,400 Canadians indicate that 60 percent of the respondents believe that ‘museums can play a more significant role in Canadian society,’ although this role was not defined. For those respondents who visited museums most often, this view rose to 82 percent.’

Fiona Cameron’s recent museological research in Australia confirms this expectation, and she notes that ‘bringing important, challenging and controversial points of view in a democratic, free-thinking society was seen as a key role for museums by many.’ Granted, presenting controversial points of view is not the same as committing to a particular perspective, but it is a giant step along the continuum of social responsibility. Similar sentiments are also emerging from the United States. Twenty-nine percent of respondents to a summative visitor study of the American Museum of Natural History’s 1992 exhibition entitled ‘Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast’ said that it ‘was superficial, and that it should go deeper into the issues, touch on more topics or take a stronger stand.’ And this was in 1992! Needless to say, the museum was surprised by the responses. If museums can be thought of as mirrors of social belief, then it is reasonable to assume that they have an obligation to give back what their communities put in front of them. Are museum staff listening, reading and reflecting, or are they on autopilot, unaware that those they serve are considering a new destination?
The lone museum director

There are basically two organizational traditions in the Western world. The first of these is the hierarchical tradition which places one person in charge as the lone chief at the top of the organizational chart. With few exceptions, all of our institutions, including government, corporations, churches, universities and museums, see no other way than to hold one person responsible. There is another organizational tradition, rarely identified or discussed, which originated in Roman times, known as primus inter pares. In this leadership tradition, the principal leader is the primus inter pares, or the first among equals. The primus is the leader, but not the chief or the boss, and must prove and test his or her leadership among a group of peers. Radical, indeed, especially for inherently conservative organizations like museums that have embraced the hierarchical model with great enthusiasm. I have written about this elsewhere, but feel compelled to reintroduce the Roman model again as an alternative, with the belief that the lone museum director is an increasing liability in these complex times. I have chosen to use the outmoded title of museum director in this discussion, as opposed to the fashionable title of chief executive officer, simply to draw attention to the unnecessary imposition of business terminology on museums.

A flawed model

There are so many flaws in the lone director model that it is difficult to know where to start. The difficulties are present from the beginning, when the director leaves and the search begins for a replacement. Although succession and transition planning are still uncommon in the museum world, they have been recognized as a duty by at least one museum director. In this instance, the incumbent gave sufficient notice of his departure to plan for an orderly transition, including a two week overlap with the new director in order to provide an ‘open, reflective and candid’ briefing – ranging from donor issues to staff talents to organizational history. In the absence of a transition plan, there is commonly a disruption of varying severity when the incumbent leaves, irrespective of whether there happens to be an internal replacement for the interim. Interestingly, research indicates that the appointment of internal candidates as interim museum directors significantly alters the social ecology of the museum.

In the absence of succession and transition plans, most museums inevitably enter a period of organizational drift, as a result of the incumbent leaving on short notice either because he or she was dismissed, or because there was no adequate notice period required in the employment contract. A minimum of six months allows for an intelligent transition, and far outweighs the disadvantage of the lame duck syndrome. In any event, the museum goes on hold, with the acting director in a custodial mode, postponing the substantive decisions for the new director. And everyone else waits with great anticipation for the mythical leader – sometimes idealized as ‘the 18-year-old who has fought in both world wars.’
Impaired judgement

Once on the job, the remaining flaws of the lone museum director model emerge, and persist with a vengeance. Cut off from the grapevine of internal rumour and intelligence, the lone director is soon isolated – a person with subordinates, not colleagues. The pyramidal structure erodes information links and destroys channels of honest reaction and feedback.21 Perhaps this is why there is so much unthinking and unnecessary change when a new director arrives, as this isolation seems to create a certain all-knowing quality in the new director, cut off as he or she is from genuine and critical interaction with peers. I should note here that the museum CEO in the Prologue is only partly fictional.

The result is impaired judgement, and there are too many examples where the new director pays little or no heed to the evolution and qualities of the museum as he finds it, and begins changing the museum in accordance with what he or she knows to be true, or has experienced elsewhere, however limited or inappropriate that may be. This is particularly common when a museum director comes from a considerably smaller museum, or has no museum experience at all. In the primus inter pares model, any attempt at arbitrary change would have to be fully scrutinized by one’s senior peers, which would do much to prevent the squandering of resources and morale resulting from the omniscient, but disadvantaged, lone director.

Loneliness

The human dimension of this inordinate amount of authority is, of course, loneliness for the director. The loneliness of the museum director and the business CEO has achieved a level of hackneyed empathy among incumbents, causing one to wonder why something hasn’t been done about it. In fact, some remedial attempts are under way, most notably the directors’ roundtables, as well as self-organized meetings of museum directors such as Museums Anonymous in Canada. The Museum Directors’ Roundtables in the United States, founded and facilitated by the Qm2 museum consulting company, consist of small groups of museum directors who meet together every four months to help one another solve problems and improve their museums.22 Informal discussions with other directors help clarify issues and transform concerns into practical action. An experienced facilitator chairs the sessions to produce the maximum benefit for each participant. As an early participant in one of these Qm2 Roundtables I can attest to their unique value, but they are no substitute for the primus model, as roundtables occur outside of the workplace. The sustained interaction required to move beyond the lone director model must occur within the museum, among senior colleagues.
Overburdened

It is also apparent that the lone director is hopelessly overburdened. Depending upon one’s appetite for long hours and prodigious work, these demands destroy, debilitate, or severely discourage lone directors on an ongoing basis. More to the point, these excessive workloads replace or erode the lone director’s creativity at a time when the leader’s growth, awareness, communication and sensitivity are critical to the institution. This diminishment of time and creativity, as more and more work converges on the lone director, results in a number of conventional, yet decidedly dysfunctional practices. I am thinking of how often the lone director must resort to briefings from staff, like the typical politician, and have others write his or her correspondence and reports. As these positions are currently structured, there is little choice, but surely this must diminish thought and creativity.

As the Editor-in-chief of Museum Management and Curatorship (MMC), an international, peer-reviewed journal, I see the woeful lack of practitioner contributions every day. I attribute this absence directly to the overburdened lone director, not to mention the overburdened museum staff. For example, the past 14 issues of MMC (volumes 20 to 23 – March 2005 through June 2008) contained a total of 62 full-length, peer-reviewed articles. A total of 14 of these articles were authored by museum practitioners – individuals who actually work in museums. That is only 22.6 percent of the articles, with all the others being written by academic museologists, consultants and students. Recognizing the amount of experience and knowledge residing in the world’s lone directors, their absence in the museum literature is nothing less than alarming. What’s more, this absence of practitioners contributes to the isolation of both academics and practitioners, as academic research and writing are far less likely to make their way into actual practice, and the academics, in turn, are deprived of the practitioner’s knowledge, wisdom and experience.

The loser is the museum community itself, where the need for new knowledge, method and theory is essential to critical reflection, growth and renewal. My attempts to encourage practitioner contributions are mostly met with polite rejections, tinged with genuine incredulity. It is hardly necessary to even pose the question these days, as I approach the harried lone director. The answer emerges almost telepathically – ‘How in the world do you think that I possibly have time to read and write?’ Acknowledging the tyranny of the hierarchical leadership model, I understand perfectly. Is it time for museum leaders to pay attention to other leadership models and unburden themselves?

Contrast all the flaws of the lone director model – isolation, omniscience, loneliness and overwork – with the inherent advantages of the primus inter pares model. To begin with, the primus model embodies a collective approach to work and learning that all museums require continuously in order to integrate the work of a variety of specialists. This leadership model exemplifies this multifunctional approach in a highly visible way, while at the same time offering unprecedented opportunities for executives to test their ability to rise above the particular interests of their own work unit. The primus model, based as it is on collective and shared executive authority, is a prerequisite to moving beyond territoriality in the interests of the organization.
It is also an arena for collective inquiry into complex issues, which in turn builds depth in the leadership of the museum. And in the process, leaders are built and nurtured, who then constitute the intellectual and practical capital that any competent museum must have in the twenty-first century.

With this depth, the departure of the *primus* does not occasion the trauma and the handwringing that stem from the departure of the lone director, simply because the leadership is not stalled while waiting for the arrival of the new director. They know what they are doing because they are already fully engaged on behalf of the whole museum, not just their own bailiwick. This promise of relative calm is in itself an organizational sigh of relief, especially for the governing authority. Finally, I contend that the *primus* model would, in fact, mitigate the workload for each member, because the *primus* is not expected to handle things alone – there is no concentration of power to stunt a person’s growth, as happens with the lone director. In summary, I turn to the words of Robert Greenleaf, the most articulate advocate of the *primus* model, who noted:

> Finally, the prevalence of the lone chief places a burden on the whole society because ... It nourishes the notion among able people that one must be the boss to be effective. And it sanctions, in a conspicuous way, a pernicious and petty status striving that corrupts everyone.\(^\text{25}\)

Having started and finished my museum career as a museum director, I concur. With 24 years as a director in both flat and hierarchical museums, including one experimental attempt at the *primus* model, there is no doubt that effective leadership is less the property of a person than the property of a group. Put another way, the ‘real strength of a leader is the ability to elicit the strength of the group.’\(^\text{26}\)

A dubious deputy director speaks up:

> ‘We already have an executive team. We meet regularly and work out what we have to do. We don’t need such a far out approach to leadership – it would never get anywhere with our board – they have to have someone to blame if things go wrong. You can’t blame a group. Besides, if we did it, we would all have to have similar salaries and benefits, because we would all be sharing in the responsibility of running the whole museum, not just our divisions. Our lone director is making $125,000 right now anyway, and she won’t take lightly the democratization of her salary. Things would be looking up for me, on the other hand, as I am making $100,000 as deputy director. I am also worried that, even with the *primus* model, my colleagues would continue to jockey for power and influence, which they are always doing when they meet privately with the director. How do you deal with that?’

And I say:

> ‘Thanks for your candour, but the *primus* model is not as radical as you might assume – its low profile is characteristic of its very nature. No one knows who is
in charge of Switzerland, because there are seven people on the Chief Executive who run the country and serve for limited terms. How many people accuse the Swiss of bad management? Jockeying for power and influence is an executive pastime, and it’s well known that tensions and conflicts which originate at the executive level (and most of them do) find expression throughout the organization – it’s only a matter of time. The rapidity with which these conflicts spread is directly related to the severity of the disagreements among senior people, and their willingness or unwillingness to deal openly with these difficulties.

The *primus* model also provides the context to nurture collective action, in a more deliberate and demanding manner than the traditional management team – afflicted as it is by the underlying one-on-one meetings with the lone director and the attendant psycho-politics of complex and cross-functional turf wars. I agree that we always have to contend with colleagues who do not want to look bad, who like to lay blame and cannot stand disagreement. So, I have a proposition for you. You and your management team should prepare a proposal for your board, wherein you request that they delegate the management of your museum to your group, based on the *primus inter pares* model. You divide up the work according to your abilities, and ask for an annual payment, from which you will each draw your salaries, based on mutual agreement about what each of you is to be paid. That should help even out some of the growing salary disparities plaguing your museum. The *primus* will report to the board on behalf of the group and, other than that, the senior managers will be running the show – as a group.’

To sum up this rather lengthy look at the tired museum leadership model and what can be done to improve it – ‘none of us are perfect by ourselves.’

**Management myopia**

Much has been written about the differences and similarities between leadership and management, and it is not necessary to review this work for the task at hand, other than to note that they are best described as two sides of the same coin. Management is about coping with complexity, while leadership is about coping with change. The challenge is to combine them, and use each to balance the other. The management myopia which plagues museums, and underlies their inability or unwillingness to embrace socially relevant missions beyond education and entertainment, is essentially a lack of foresight – a seeming inability to anticipate future events that have little or nothing to do with current activities and commitments. This shortsightedness is not restricted to museums, however, as the following observation by psychologist and former CEO, Richard Farson, indicates:

The difficulty for all of us is that our absorption with what we do well may blind us to what will enable us to do even better. The particular challenge for managers is to remain mindful that organizations can set themselves up for
It's a jungle in here

trouble when they rely solely on the things they are already doing well and fail to see what they really need to do.\textsuperscript{29}

Confronting this myopia is particularly important, because it erodes the museum’s untapped potential ‘to envision how the community’s ongoing and/or emerging needs in all their dimensions – physical, psychological, economic and social – might be served by the museum’s particular competencies,’ to quote the late Stephen Weil.\textsuperscript{30} Management myopia has been identified in the business world, and is amenable to both analysis and remediation, once one is aware of its underlying principles or beliefs. It is useful to reiterate these principles here, as they are rarely, if ever, questioned or challenged – either in the private sector or within museums.

**Myopic principles**

There are four principles or beliefs which give rise to management myopia, and all of them are alive and well in the museum world. I am indebted to Ralph Stacey, the management specialist, for his insightful analysis of these complexities.\textsuperscript{31} The first principle underlying museum myopia is that the museum should have a visionary director who determines the future destination of the museum and guides it to that point (recall the earlier discussion on the lone director). The assumption is that the lone director, along with the less celebrated management team, are in control of their museum and its journey. The second belief is that the museum must have a common and unified culture, sharing a single vision and committed to the same rules. The third belief, once the sole concern of business and now the preoccupation of countless museums, is the focus on the balance sheet and the financial bottom line. This is the direct outcome of the belief in continuous economic growth as essential to societal well-being, resulting in the ever-increasing primacy of economic interests in institutional decision-making. The fourth root cause of management myopia is the belief that the museum should determine what it is good at, give people what they want and adapt to the market environment.\textsuperscript{32}

All of these principles or beliefs are familiar and sensible in terms of our individual and organizational experiences, but they are based on an erroneous and, ultimately, dangerous assumption – that the internal and external worlds are stable and marked by regularity, predictability and adaptation. In short, ‘we’re in control; we know where we’re going, and we don’t want any surprises.’ Implicit in these perspectives is the assumption that the future is knowable, and that it is possible to know enough about what is going to happen.\textsuperscript{33} The result, as noted earlier, is museums getting better and better at doing more of the same. This may be the foundation for current success, but the earlier overview of socio-environmental issues demonstrates that the natural and cultural worlds are not in stable equilibrium. In fact, we are bombarded daily with the instability of it all, ranging from the rising price of oil to the continued loss of biodiversity, not to mention the increasingly evident consequences of climate change. It borders on hubris for any museum to assume that it is business as usual when both the biosphere and ethnosphere are on such perilous trajectories. Stable management
is, of course, essential for all healthy museums, but this is not the issue. The issue is one of heightened consciousness, and the need for museums to create new mental maps, new mindsets, new perspectives and new ways of working that will allow them to meet the challenges of our troubled world, with empathy and commitment to the communities they serve. Doing away with the hollowness of authoritative neutrality and the lone director model are an excellent beginning, in combination with replacing the four myopic principles with a new sense of how people can work more effectively in museums. There are various practical and achievable antidotes to management myopia that do not require wholesale changes in organizational dynamics and outlook, however, as outlined below.

Research and development

There is an obvious need for risk capital in museums, just as there is in the private sector, where it is called venture capital. Venture capital is money provided by outside investors to high-potential companies, in the interests of preparing a company to issue its common stock to the public for the first time. The museum’s need and the entrepreneur’s need correspond in an important way – the need for money to finance the necessary research and development to bring an idea or product to fruition. In the business world, companies and entrepreneurs must raise sufficient capital to see them through research, product development and marketing, until there is a return on investment.

In contrast, museums are expected, and required, to develop new programs and services on a balanced budget, as they have no risk capital with which to experiment and try new things. The notable exception to this is the current spate of vanity architecture projects, where deficit spending is apparently assumed. Instead, what seems to matter in these building projects, according to author, James Kunstler, is ‘that the city was blessed with a fashionable object created by a celebrity shaman. Alas, nothing is more subject to losing value by going out of date than something that is valued solely for being up-to-date.’

The risk capital that museums require would not be spent on new buildings and vanity renovations; nor would it be a stabilization fund, which is intended to introduce stability and discipline into organizations that are on the edge of collapse. The purpose of the research and development fund proposed here is to finance the challenging of traditional practices in order to create new possibilities, designed to enhance relevance, value and meaningful renewal. As mentioned repeatedly, museums are not known for innovation, and such funding would provide both a stimulus and the means to move beyond this impasse. A public/private funding partnership would be a sensible approach to establishing a research and development fund, ideally as an endowment – the income from which would be distributed to multi-year projects based on merit. The funding could be made available in a variety of ways, including grants and loans, with or without interest charges. It is essential that the funding be multi-year to allow sufficient planning and follow-through.
The current preference of many governments and foundations for one-off project funding is creating no end of stress for a host of museums and other non-profits, including the debilitating phenomenon known as mission drift. As organizations scramble to obtain operating money through short-term project grants, they begin to forget why they exist in the first place. Assembling and administering a museum venture fund would be a valuable role for a collective of museum associations to assume, and potentially much more effective than the popular strategy of lobbying government for museum funding. Accountability would be essential, but so would a wide tolerance for mistakes and failures, as these are unavoidable in any attempt to develop new mental maps and new ways of working.

**Research and development possibilities**

The research and development possibilities for stimulating innovation are only limited by the imagination of the museum community, and they could include:

1. **An Annual Think Leak** – This would be an annual forum of museum ‘insiders’ intended to share the successes and failures of the research and development program with the museum community at large. The purpose here is collective learning and it should be thought of as a think ‘leak’, rather than a think tank, as the emphasis would be on evaluating and disseminating new ideas, approaches and improvements to current practice, as well as those that failed.

2. **Creativity Forums** – These forums would involve recognized museum thinkers and experts, as well as non-museum innovators, in a think-tank context. It appears that museum conferences are becoming increasingly diluted, partly because of the need to appeal to a broad and diverse membership. The result is a dearth of new and creative ideas for practitioners, and regular creative forums that engage the very best minds in pursuit of better museums would be a great boon to the profession. In short, there is no such thing as too many ideas. These forums should also include citizens who have a particular interest in mobilizing the unique qualities of museums to address community issues.

3. **Local and Regional Heritage Federations** – These could be pilot projects to explore the value of creating federations of like-minded museums, for the purpose of developing shared strategic visions, including the sharing of organizational costs and revenues. In a time of increasingly scarce resources, many museums continue to dissipate their fragile budgets by publishing separate periodicals, developing their own information systems, purchasing materials and supplies in low volumes, and so forth. Although such collaboration runs counter to conventional practice, the research and development fund could provide an opportunity to explore the potential advantages of less insularity.
Reaching out

Collaboration must also include non-museum organizations, since broadly-based coalitions of unrelated but like-minded partners can be very powerful. There is little doubt that both governments and citizens pay serious attention to cross-sectoral approaches, and museums are sadly out of date when it comes to this level of collaboration. There are numerous examples of museums partnering with university faculties, for example, but this is only the beginning. Where are the collaborations and partnerships with environmental organizations, health care providers, community development agencies and humanitarian organizations? Although the world is full of vibrant and intelligent non-governmental organizations espousing values and concerns compatible with those of museums, collaboration with museums is virtually non-existent.

Although difficult for museums to acknowledge, there is untold expertise, experience and commitment residing outside of museums, all of which are essential for forging new mental maps. The understanding and scope of what constitutes collaboration in the museum world require deliberate experimentation and enormous expansion, and the venture funds would permit this. Surprisingly few museums have considered the organizational design options inherent in mergers, alliances and joint ventures, according to a recent article on intelligent organizational design. Collaboration and consolidation are obvious strategies for enhanced sustainability, and doing so requires careful design and a disciplined process of decision-making containing a number of distinct steps.

A thoughtful middle manager speaks up:

‘I don’t see how we could possibly do away with the four causes of management myopia. First of all, it would mean rethinking the role of our all-powerful director who, for example, allows no one else to attend board meetings. In fact, we don’t see him much, as he is the only one here with an international travel budget. Not only that, but we’ve done a lot of work around here to make everyone think alike, and that would have been for nothing. We’ve spent a great deal of time developing a uniform set of procedures, practices and policies to protect our organization from making mistakes. Personally, I was opposed to this, as these sorts of regulations are designed with the least competent person in mind, and end up forcing everyone to perform at the lowest level of competence.

‘When it comes to the bottom line, that’s the name of the game here, and it comes directly from the board and the director. I’m hoping that someday we can get the board membership back into balance, and replace some of the corporate and business people with a more accurate reflection of our diverse community, including some different cultural groups, some community organizations, and youth. I also believe that there are limits to revenues and growth, and the board and managers need to think a lot more strategically about what constitutes long-term sustainability – it’s not just money – it’s about being valued by your community.'
‘As for giving people want they want, we never really ask them what they want. We got into blockbusters to increase revenues and pay off our renovation, and that’s about all we do now. Personally, I think it’s destroying our brand, as most people only visit when we have a borrowed show – they don’t seem to care much about our collection, our knowledge and the unique qualities of our staff. We’re on a treadmill now, doing more of the same, and adapting to the market doesn’t leave us much time to do anything else.’

And I say:

‘Amen.’

The consequences of hierarchy: Learning from hunters

I have a sustained interest in how people are organized to do their work, a topic that has received remarkably little attention in the museum literature. Although it is a subject of intense and daily discussion for many museum workers, seasoned with much angst and frustration, museum administrators are apparently content with the hierarchical organization imported from elsewhere. There are two experiences in my museum career, however, that regularly remind me that the internal organization of a museum is ill-served by corporate or military convention, and instead requires, imagination, creativity and care.

As a brand new, ‘20-something’ museum director, hired right out of graduate school with no museum experience, I had no choice but to assemble the best group of museum workers I could find, or resign immediately. My new job came with an immediate and compelling focus – build the museum from scratch for a public opening by HRH the Prince of Wales, already confirmed with the Royal Family for three years after my start date. It was to be a professional facility with full environmental controls, in a region where winter temperatures drop to minus 50° Celsius. There was no comparable facility in northern Canada to consult for guidance.

I assembled a core team of five, including a curator, a designer, a technician and an administrative assistant and, together, we solidified our purpose, divided up the tasks, and worked both individually and as a group, as required. We opened the building on time and on budget – fully staffed and programmed. It was long before the tidal wave of teamwork hype, now a management industry in its own right, and none of us had any formal knowledge or training in team dynamics and interpersonal communication. We were self-organized, with each of us having particular kinds of knowledge and skills. We also had an explicit understanding of our collective purpose, and knew, above all, that we had to be respectful of time and money. This early approach to our work served the museum well, as it grew to a staff of 28 in the years to come and became a relatively ‘flat’ organization – with one or two levels of reporting relationships.
Hierarchy in action

I returned to southern Canada 14 years later to assume the directorship of one of Canada’s ten largest museums, complete with 160 staff, an art gallery, the largest non-government archives in Canada and a public research library. Imagine my surprise, on my second day of work, when I was politely admonished by an assistant director for speaking directly to a department head, as I sought information to assist me in my orientation. The Glenbow Museum had 18 departments and four divisions in those days, and the organizational map was byzantine for the uninitiated.39 I told my colleague that I was in search of some particular information and I had gone directly to the source. He patiently noted that that department head reported to him, and that information flows in prescribed directions at Glenbow. In the future, he suggested, it would be best to speak to the vice-presidents and avoid any confusion.

I knew, at that moment, that the future would require some redefinition, as the brittleness of strict reporting lines is an inevitable liability. I later installed a management principle, as part of our strategic planning, which stated that any person, in any part and at any level of the museum, is encouraged to go directly to any other person in the museum for information or assistance needed to perform his or her job. This, however, was not enough, and the next three years would see a dramatic alteration,
wherein Glenbow’s 18 departments and four divisions were collapsed into six multidisciplinary work units, each headed by a director. This transformation produced anxiety and trauma, along with change and results, and has been documented in excruciating detail elsewhere.40

**Hunters**

In keeping with the museological interest in understanding the origin of things, it is useful to note that, of the two million or so years that our species has been on earth, over 99 percent of this time has been lived as hunter-gatherers. It is only in the last 10,000 years that we have domesticated plants and animals and harnessed energy sources other than the human body. In short, ‘the hunting way of life has been the most successful and persistent adaptation that man has ever achieved.’41 As anthropologists Richard Lee and Irven Devore note, if we fail to survive our current socio-environmental challenges, ‘interplanetary archaeologists of the future will classify our planet as one in which a very long and stable period of small-scale hunting and gathering was followed by an apparently instantaneous efflorescence of technology and society leading rapidly to extinction.’42 I have not yet read a more succinct and sober foretelling of the consequences of our current dilemma – leave it to anthropologists to elegantly objectify our collective peril.

Because our hunting adaptation has strongly affected both our biological and cultural evolution, including our social, psychological and behavioral characteristics as human beings, it is a mystery why we don’t pay more attention to the organizational dynamics of this way of life, irrespective of the fact that there are few, if any, traditional hunting cultures still intact. The hunting way of life is, in fact, the progenitor of self-organization and flexible work design. This is the legacy of the Willow Lakers in the Prologue and the precursor to every effort to work in teams, and it is time that this hard-won wisdom and practice be recognized for its relevance and value. Leaders and managers, including the management consulting industry, are only dimly aware, if at all, of this ancient legacy. It seems that management consultants, in particular, behave as if everything is new and it is their invention. Their lack of familiarity with indigenous hunting traditions is regrettable in light of the vigorous body of anthropological knowledge devoted to this subject.

**Self-organization**

The stereotypical band is egalitarian, mobile, adaptive and responsive to individual and collective needs, and leaders emerge according to the skills required for the task at hand.43 The link between the lives of hunting bands and the idea of self-organization in museums lies in the fact that much of the work in museums is done in small groups. It is in the small group that ‘most habits become shared, modified, rejected, etc; and it is here that the individual adjusts not only to small groups but to larger
groups as well.44 We do not have to reinvent the fundamentals of small group culture for organizational life – we just have to pay attention to our origins as hunters.

Self-organization is a ready alternative for those museums seeking solutions to the self-imposed rigidity inherent in hierarchical organization. Senior managers will have to lighten up, however, as seeking to maintain control over this particular work design is abundantly stressful and ultimately self-defeating. It is preferable to get comfortable with the observation that ‘if you know about everything that is going on in your museum, there isn’t enough going on.’ I’ve used these words many times and they help to bolster managerial self-respect, as the fruits of self-organized work begin to roll out. But what is the potential fit between an organizational model that is millennia old and the contemporary museum?
Having spent close to 35 years in and around museums in a variety of capacities, I cannot recall the number of times I have been approached by concerned museum workers about their lack of control over their work, the indecisiveness or insensitivity of their supervisors, the consequences of undefined expectations, inadequate communication – the list goes on. Granted, there are always multiple sides to these conflicts, but there is definitely a pattern here, and it has to do with the systemic obstacles to freedom and creativity that are inherent in hierarchical organizations of any size or description. This is especially onerous in museums, which have a large number of highly trained and highly motivated individuals who are committed to the work itself. Museums are not alone, however, in producing disgruntled employees. Despite all the efforts of organizations and management consultants to understand employees and to manage them more effectively, many employees remain stressed, poorly managed and generally dissatisfied. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stress, anxiety and depression will become the leading causes of disability in the workplace over the next 20 years.45

Hierarchical structures are prime contributors to this unhappiness, and it is in the best interests of museum executives to pause and consider if there might be a better way to organize work, if for no other reason than to head off the WHO’s predictions. Most leaders and executives know, based on their own substantive experiences, that both authority and responsibility for one’s work are essential for effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction. Shouldn’t this realization be returned in kind to the staff? For those museum workers who do not wish to assume authority and responsibility for their work, and insist upon being told what to do, the sun is setting. Waiting around to be told what to do is incompatible with the need to develop proactive, socially responsible missions. Besides, this kind of passivity squanders the potential freedom inherent in all museums – perhaps a manufacturing assembly line would be a better choice for those who are more comfortable with compliance and passivity.

Collective intelligence

Promoting the growth, development and self-respect of museum workers requires abandoning, or at least minimizing, hierarchical structures, and many small museums have known this all along. Hierarchy can be replaced with self-organization, a group phenomenon that occurs spontaneously when members of a group produce coherent behaviour in the absence of formal hierarchy within the group, or authority imposed from outside it.46 Decisions are made at the most local level in the organization where they can be made well, and this requires that managers respect and nurture the so-called informal leaders – those individuals who exercise influence and authority by virtue of their competence and commitment, and not because of any formal position in the hierarchy. Informal leaders exist at all levels in all museums, and are essential ingredients in effective self-organization by fostering interaction and interdependence.

This description of a self-organized work unit is strikingly similar to the task group of the Willow Lakers, described in the Prologue. The task group comes together for
a specific purpose (fishing, for example), is of limited duration and stresses individual autonomy, egalitarianism, decision-making by consensus and limitations on the exercise of power. An informal leader may not even be required in a task group, if the outcome is clear and the necessary skills are present in the group. In summary, there are ancient lessons to be learned that can inform and inspire the organization of contemporary museum work, as well as guide it into the future.

Individuals, in organizations, may choose to learn new things rather than persisting with the familiar. To make the transition to a more conscious and engaged museum will require substantive internal changes that both allow and nurture the autonomy required to continually develop ideas, experiment and evaluate. Hierarchical structures are simply too restrictive to allow the unfettered interplay of the ‘what, how and why.’ The key point is for management to focus on results, rather than insist upon any particular process or means for achieving the results. David Bohm, the physicist, writes that human beings have an innate capacity for collective intelligence, based on dialogue.47 Dialogue does not require that people agree with one another, but rather allows people to participate in a pool of shared meaning that can lead to aligned action. Simply put, hierarchical structures get in the way of collective thinking, as staff attempt to navigate across and between organizational boundaries, be they departments, divisions or the manager’s office. Organizational structures can be replaced with multifunctional work groups, while individual tasks co-occur. They have to, as there is no substitute for the individual work that underlies group work.

**Autonomy works**

Of particular importance to museums is the use of multidisciplinary, multifunctional and cross-departmental teams which may include educators, marketers and security staff, as well as curatorial and exhibition staff. In some instances, these teams also include individuals from outside the museum, who are given both the authority and responsibility for decision-making, in partnership with museum staff.48 It is increasingly recognized that multifunctional teams are essential in cross-fertilizing the rich storehouse of knowledge, skills and experience inherent in museums, not only to develop programs, exhibitions and services but also to enhance the general level of creativity and innovation by bringing in non-museum perspectives from the community. This will be absolutely essential as museums reach out to their communities in search of solutions to both local and global issues. Giving up top-down authority and control is not easy, but an organizational design that permits autonomy at the working level is now a prerequisite for an engaged museum.

This need not be as disturbing as it sounds – something I learned when I first became aware of the Glenbow Museum School, several months after it had been conceived and designed. The first of its kind in Canada, it is based on one-week visits by school classes with custom programs designed by the teacher and involving up to 20 or more museum staff during the one-week sessions.49 The museum school had been developed before I knew anything about it, yet I could only feel grateful to have staff with such initiative and confidence. When asked by a colleague why I didn’t know
about the school from the beginning, I could only say, ‘If I knew about everything that is going on in this museum, there isn't enough going on.’ Zen master Suzuki Roshi has another way of expressing this approach to work design: 'to control your cow, give it a bigger pasture.'

A seasoned curator speaks up:

I’ve got several big concerns about self-organized groups, because they are based primarily on the idea of teamwork, and that has a bad name around here. It starts with the fact that everyone on the team thinks that they know how to do your job. There’s a lot of second guessing and interference in my view. I also don’t like the fact that the vice-president has control over our group’s budget and has to authorize all of the expenditures. We need to be able to get on with the work. I also can’t spend all my time in meetings – if I can’t get my individual work done, there won’t be any contribution to the group. I don’t think that working in groups, and self-organizing is genetic – it’s more like learned behaviour. The individual is everything in our society, and that is how we have been socialized and educated. Working together, in close quarters, is not as easy as you might think. And we also have individuals who just won’t cooperate or produce and there is nothing we can do. But, you know, when the team is working well and the project is getting done, there’s absolutely no better way to pool the creativity and energy around here – there aren’t any organizational barriers to decision-making and getting things done.

And I say:

I understand and appreciate everything you’re saying. Teams are not, in fact, the best way to approach every task, as there’s still a lot of museum work that is routine and predictable and that requires individual effort, like accounting, collections management and public inquiries. There is also solitary work, like research and writing. You have to use your judgement, based on the desired outcome, to determine when you need a self-organized group. Each member of the group also needs to be respectful of everyone else’s knowledge and experience. Just because a curator isn’t in charge of the group doesn’t mean that everyone else can be the curator. Each group consists of people with particular expertise and they have to be respected and used appropriately. That doesn’t prevent open dialogue and examination, however, because that is a distinct advantage of a cohesive group.

As far as the money goes, if you don’t have control over the budget, then you don’t have authority and responsibility, which means that it is impossible to be accountable. It doesn’t work that way, and the sooner the senior managers understand the need for budgetary control at the working level, the better. It won’t be easy, however, as self-organized work groups are difficult for upper management because power and authority are dispersed. The senior managers also have to appreciate that group work isn’t genetic, as you noted, and funds have to be available for ongoing training in project management, interpersonal
communication, conflict resolution and so forth. Probably one of the biggest criticisms of group work is the amount of time taken up in meetings. Personally, I wouldn’t even attend a meeting without an agenda and defined outcomes presented in advance of the meeting. As for those individuals who are incapable or unwilling to work in a group, they will eventually be passed over. That will be their loss, for the potential to unlock individual talents and contributions in self-organized groups is enormous.

Museum exhibitions: Ploughing old ground

None of the previous challenges – claiming neutrality, the omniscient director, short-sighted management and unsuitable hierarchy – is the focus of concerted analysis or much discussion in the museum community or in the museum literature. Thus, my criticisms of these challenges may be buffered by a certain amount of disinterest on the part of the reader. Not so with the next topic of discussion – museum exhibitions – the mainstay and one of the defining features of all museums. All museum workers are involved in this enterprise in one way or another and all museums struggle daily with producing exhibitions and marketing them. This means that there are a lot of experts out there, from curators to designers to marketers, which makes it all the more surprising that museums continue to use methods, techniques and mental models that have remained unchanged for centuries. It is for this reason that exhibitions are included on my list of intractable habits that require rethinking and reinvention. I first expressed my concern about the future of museum exhibitions over a decade ago, and my unease has not abated. The current approach to exhibitions is yet another internal obstacle to achieving relevance and meaning for many museums.

More and more of the same

These concerns have been reinforced and heightened in an excellent article by exhibit planner, designer and developer, Kathleen McLean. McLean read the entire first volume of Curator: The Museum Journal (published in 1958) and compared the ‘musings, expectations, and best practices of today with those voiced by our colleagues 50 years ago.’ This diachronic approach alone is a treat; the results of her inquiry are even more instructive. McLean’s observations are many and rich, but what sticks in my mind is her comment that ‘I detected a disconcerting similarity between much of what was written those many years ago and what is still being debated today.’ McLean worries that museums haven’t evolved much over the past 50 years. She then goes on to describe her visits to three mainstream museums and galleries, in preparation for a conference presentation, and concludes that museum exhibitions might be an obsolete medium, ‘out on a dying evolutionary limb’ and unadapted to the rapidly changing environment.

She attributes the obsolescence of the museum exhibit to various factors, including a lack of imagination about what exhibitions could be in our complex world, as
It’s a jungle in here

well as the traditional ways in which exhibitions are developed – requiring huge
amounts of time, people and money. Nonetheless, the museum community is gener-
ally accepting of all these limitations and continues to produce more and more of
the same, often at tremendous cost. An important Canadian museum with modest
means, for example, recently opened a permanent exhibit at a cost of CA$12 million
– an undertaking whose expense is rivalled only by the outmoded thinking that led
to its development. Big and expensive exhibits are what museum people like to do,
and this is not an isolated example. Nor will be the benign neglect of this exhibi-
tion – no renewal, refreshing or replacement for decades – as staff deal with scarce
resources and the imperative of driving admissions to appease the marketplace.

Both the lack of imagination and the complex production requirements are key
factors in what McLean calls the ‘stultifying sameness’ in museum exhibitions, and
there are several other causes which also merit attention. The first of these can
be attributed to a tacit presumption on the part of museum workers – that linear
constructions of glass and wood, incorporating massive amounts of two-dimensional
text in conjunction with objects that can be only visually examined, is the most effec-
tive means of providing meaning and value to visitors. The museum exhibition, as
traditionally conceived and currently presented, is essentially a book, without any
of the advantages of book technology, such as portability and ease of way-finding.
These exhibitions convey the notion that knowledge and information are timeless,
and that is simply disingenuous. Moreover, these exhibitions are the most time-
labour- and capital-intensive work that museums do, and are stubbornly resistant to
renovation and upgrading without large amounts of money. Upgrading is seldom,
if ever, built into the budget at the outset, with the consequence that these exhibits
remain in place from 15 years to a half century, despite the fact that they are clearly
dated, shabby, tired and often shockingly irrelevant.

Is it any wonder that visitors react appropriately, noting that ‘they saw the exhibits
when they visited with a grade 6 field trip.’ This is not to imply that there is no place
for exhibitions with longevity, as many museums have concepts and information
that they wish to convey to all visitors by way of orientation, and durable exhibits
are the means to do so. Nor do I wish to imply that only temporary exhibits are
appropriate. My concern is that the linear inertia that characterizes most, if not all,
of these exhibitions is losing its appeal for many museum visitors, particularly youth.
Recall McLean’s discouraged comments on her museum visits, which are all the more
disturbing, assuming that she is unusually empathetic as a museum worker herself.

A litany of ills

Why don’t museums spend more time considering what actually happens in people’s
private and social lives? Meaning, value and pleasure come from a variety of sources
in our lives, including conversations and discussions grounded in memory and expe-
rience; the presence of material objects that are valued for their meaning; a variety
of multimedia devices ranging from televisions to portable multimedia players (the
iPod, for example) and, in many cases, an eclectic collection of printed materials
including books, magazines, newspapers and so forth. We use all of these things, alone or in combination, intermittently or constantly, depending upon our changing needs and interests. Do museum exhibitions come close to providing this real-life menu of thinking, doing and aspiring? The answer is sometimes, thanks in part to the advent of the ‘discovery centre’ as part of some museum exhibitions. These are dedicated spaces, within or adjoining exhibitions, which provide a comfortable setting and resources, ranging from staff to printed materials to objects that can be handled. The focus in these activity areas is most often the family, and the space and its contents are designed to enhance visitor interaction. Nonetheless, the ‘discovery centre’ is mostly an afterthought, intended to overcome the inertia of traditional exhibitions. It should be obvious by now that all exhibitions should be designed as ‘discovery centres’ in their own right, from the outset.

The typical exhibition is also plagued by another major omission – the lack of authorship or attribution. It is de rigueur to acknowledge sponsors and donors, but rarely does the exhibit make explicit who conceived of the exhibit, who did the research and writing, and why. I don’t know what purpose this anonymity serves – is it modesty, adherence to unthinking convention, or the subtle maintenance of assumed authority? Very few books are written anonymously; why should museums persist in this omission? The implication in maintaining this anonymity is that there is one perspective or interpretation, and the museum owns it. As we all know, nothing could be farther from the truth. Although exhibition team members are increasingly being identified, this should be a universal and ethical requirement, along with some explanation of the etiology and motivation for the exhibit. The late Stephen Weil, with his typical clarity, summed up the need to sign exhibitions by noting that,

In the end, an exhibition is not made by the institution but by the curator or a group of curators who ought to be able to say what they think. The public should know they are dealing with human beings who have opinions … signing exhibits gives the museum the ability to go much further and … make statements that might be troublesome coming from an institution.55

**Distinctiveness, comfort and usefulness**

It is also obvious that the typical museum exhibition does little to contribute to a museum’s unique identity. Recall McLean’s observation on the ‘stultifying sameness’ in many of the exhibitions being created today – irrespective of the expensive furniture, media and graphics. At a time when so many different businesses, organizations and issues are clamouring for people’s attention, Rob Ferguson, a maverick marketing consultant, has some straightforward advice:

What do you have to be bold about? If you know something no one else knows, say it! In this noisy, cluttered, over-communicated society, people take pride in associating with people, places, and organizations that stand out and have the appearance of being unique. That, in a nutshell, is knowledge marketing:
it’s about packaging your leadership in a way that makes a clear, unequivocal statement that your organization has unique knowledge. It’s about being recognized for your high ideas, about carving out a brand for your organization as a thought leader.  

Ferguson is a great admirer of the National Geographic Society (NGS), for various reasons that seem to have escaped the attention of museums. While the NGS’s mission is ‘the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge’ (undoubtedly a yawner for most people), it also happens to be a billion dollar business that is ‘pathologically adaptable’ in Ferguson’s words, and devoted to accomplishing its mission in every possible way. The NGS has moved from photographs, to documentary films, to television, to the internet, while staying true to its reputation and ability to ‘use fresh, compelling content to infect ordinary, intelligent people with a sense of wonder about the world.’ Although the NGS now has a vast range of knowledge products, they have maintained their original identity.

The forward-thinking NGS provides a useful contrast to the museum community’s fixation on the time-honoured exhibition as its flagship knowledge product. If distinctiveness is the goal, and sameness is the result, it appears that some rethinking is required. Objects and collections are not enough; nor are exhibitions and programs that fail to deal with the many issues our society confronts – from global warming to species loss; from war to global epidemic disease. McLean asks if museum exhibits will ever deal with these contemporary issues in a manner that will be ‘enlightening, comforting and useful to museum visitors?’ Ferguson asks ‘if you want people to believe in the capacity of your organization to deliver on its mission, where is the proof of your distinctiveness?’ And I ask, where is the reflection required to challenge the tyranny of tradition and complacency embedded in contemporary museum exhibitions?

**Asking the right questions**

Rethinking the traditional approaches to museum exhibitions requires dialogue, critical thinking and new ideas, and happily, this conversation has started. The Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM) hosted its inaugural ‘Symposium on Creating Exhibits’ in April of 2008 and the conference program was heartening. Although much of it was devoted to sessions that can be found at museum conferences anywhere – technology, labels, exhibit teams and contracts – there were several sessions which demonstrate that critical thought is alive and well at this particular meeting. The first noteworthy session was entitled ‘Why Do an Exhibit at All?’, with an iconoclastic preface which stated that ‘some of the most expensive projects of the past decade have amazingly turned incredibly interesting events, unique collections and stories into completely unenlightened and boring experiences.’ Another session, ‘Cabinets and Curiosity’, asked where the cabinets of curiosities went and wondered if current exhibitions are just too overdone – ‘Overly curated, educated, designed, evaluated, and marketed?’ The organizers worried that technology and interpretation
are not enhancing the experience. A third session, ‘Have Our Audiences Left Us Behind?’ asked, ‘Does the exhibit experience as it is now defined need to reinvent itself to meet the changing experiential expectations of our audiences?’

These are wonderfully important questions and ones that the entire museum community should be asking daily. Perhaps this kind of questioning could lead to some genuine experimentation where, for example, the exhibitions could be designed as a series of family rooms or living rooms; modules or activity areas (call them what you wish), each devoted to the theme or topic the museum wishes to explore. The visitor would be free to engage in the variety of behaviours noted earlier, be it conversing, reading, observing, sitting quietly, using media devices, and so on. The contents of these activity areas could change as required, without excessively expensive demolition and renovation. I am not thinking of a uniform approach, but rather creating the opportunity for visitors to assume much more responsibility for discovering the meaning in their own experiences. As the MAAM sessions indicated, money has nothing to do with the quality of the experience and, may in fact, be a liability. Nor is money doing anything to counter the steady decline, perhaps unravelling, of the value of traditional museum exhibitions. Whether it is corporatism in the museum boardroom, or an honest effort ‘to keep up with the Joneses’, the resulting imitation and excess are only making obvious the need to replace traditional practices.

The active agora

Museums might consider departing from their preoccupation with exhibitions and replace them, or augment them at least, with a dialogue centre. I don’t know where this idea originated (it may be a Canadian invention), but the model I have in mind is the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, part of Simon Fraser University. The Wosk Centre describes itself as ‘an intellectual home and an advocate for dialogue.’ At the Centre, practitioners, researchers and students of dialogue probe the nature of dialogue—that process of interaction whereby open-minded discussion leads to mutual understanding and positive action—and they nurture it in practice. The Centre has ergonomic seating for 154 participants and is arranged in concentric rings for maximum interactivity, with each desk equipped with technology to enhance dialogue.

A dialogue centre is also part of the Science Museum in London, and is a stylish, purpose-built venue designed for experimental dialogue and ‘blending the best from science, art, performance and multimedia to provoke discussion and real engagement with the key issues of the day.’ Activities at the Dana Centre include stand-up comics debunking science myths, updates on radical research, and handling sessions of rarely seen objects from the Science Museum’s collection, as well as debates on modern science. State-of-the-art digital facilities link the Dana Centre with anyone who has online connectivity, including mobile phones.

Although much has been written, and much said, about the role of the museum as a forum, or the more fashionable museum as agora, little has been done to consciously
nurture the visitor’s active participation apart from the passive consumption of museum services – exhibits, shops and restaurants. A dialogue centre is a tangible focus for visitor interaction, and could even be used to explore the future of museum exhibits from the visitors’ perspectives. This is an opportunity for the rhetoric about museums as ‘forums of public discussion and safe havens for dialogue’ to actually assume tangible expression. It is highly unlikely that public space in museums, no matter how monumental it is (and there is more and more of this space every year), will ever produce much more than admiration and fatigue. Visitor interaction, as idealized in the forum/agora aspiration, is not going to happen with people standing around as passive observers. Museums are one of the few public institutions that can assume leadership in nurturing active visitor involvement, and dialogue centres are a means to this end. Dialogue centres are a commitment to the future and one which all museums should seriously consider in their renovation or building plans.

**Excruciatingly current**

Unlike many of the socio-environmental issues chronicled earlier, the rethinking and reinvention of museum exhibitions is within the grasp of all museums. Time is of the essence, as the current approach has outlived the curve of its effectiveness and is now in decline. Fortunately, there is a small pocket of progressive practitioners who are committed to averting further decline, and they are actively experimenting with new thinking, research and approaches. Kathleen McLean, whose work was mentioned earlier, is among these outliers, and her reasons for doing so are an apt summary of the pressures the entire museum community should now be feeling. In response to an interview about how technology may change the museum, McLean cites a report prepared by the Irvine Foundation concerned with critical issues facing the arts in California.64

This report indicates that visitors will expect museums to be increasingly technologically literate; they will expect that their experiences will be customized to meet their own particular needs and interests, and that museums will have to be ‘excruciatingly current.’ Being ‘excruciatingly current’ has never been an imperative in museums – it still isn’t – and the vocabulary may not even be recognizable. And yet, ‘excruciating currency’ is only one of the ingredients required in the makeover of exhibitions – the museum community’s most visible and expensive activity. Ignoring this makeover is an invitation to irrelevance which many museums seem ready to accept.

**Collections: Museums as consumption**

Alone, and on a fine July day in Canada’s western subarctic, I had a salutary encounter with an object. While doing an archaeological survey of a cluster of abandoned cabins deep in the boreal forest, I noticed a small piston rod from an outboard motor, entangled in bearberry on the edge of an overgrown trail. This was a most unusual piston rod, for not only was it broken, the shaft had been repaired – bound with green moose hide to a ‘shrink-wrapped’ hardness, and then tightly bound in a coiled...
casing of brass snare wire. The care invested in this repair was obvious; its precision and symmetry a pleasure. The mute meaning of this transformed object was a bold contradiction to my own experience and world-view. Paradoxically, in mainstream society, where technology is so revered that it compels religious adherence, a cracked piston rod is akin to a fatal coronary. Repair requires a specialist, and in the absence of this technical skill the part and the whole have no further value. The hunters who made this repair had no access to service centres and paid mechanics; nor were they privileged to simply buy a new rod or motor.

This was the remote boreal forest, distant as light years from the centres of consumption that define our mainstream lives. Life and death in the boreal forest have always hinged on the appropriate tools, and being able to care for them. Someone had made this repair attuned to this imperative, but it was impossible to tell if the repair had worked and if the injured part had once again served its purpose. It doesn’t matter. What matters is the timeless evolution of disparate values, skills and aspirations, bound together forever in an object no bigger than the palm of my hand. This is why we have museums, why people visit them, and why people work in them, but are museum collections contributing to this wonder and mystery – the numinous experience?

A growth industry

I have no intention of dismissing museum collections as irrelevant in contemporary society. After all, collections are the acknowledged raison d’être of all museums and what distinguishes them as unique social institutions. I also accept that many people just really love ‘things.’ Yet, because I believe that ‘our engagement with objects is to understand wider things,’ various attitudes and assumptions that underpin museum collections require some scrutiny. McLean’s earlier observations about the intractable nature of museum exhibitions bring to mind collections, as they, too, are an obstinate arena in which critical thinking seems perpetually stalled. Change is fugitive and innovation is rare – perhaps because ‘museums are organisms that ingest but do not excrete.’

The focus on ingestion has made collections an unbridled area of growth for museums, as the numbers testify. In the United States, Schwarzer notes that the nation’s museums house some 750 million specimens, objects, artifacts and works of art. It is estimated that the rate of collection growth in the US is 1 to 5 percent per year, which translates into millions of additional objects annually. While Keene reports that there are 200 million objects in United Kingdom museums, there are no data on museum collections in Canada, according to the Canadian Museums Association (CMA). The lack of statistical information for Canada is puzzling, considering that the deterioration of collections is a major plank in the Canadian Museum Association’s national lobby campaign for additional museum funding. It would be beneficial to know the metrics of the crisis.

The absolute number of stored objects in the US and the UK and the steady expansion of collections make it difficult to accept that there has been a paradigmatic shift from
collection-driven institutions to visitor-centred museums – a piece of conventional wisdom celebrated among museum practitioners and supported by the museum literature, as noted earlier. My own experience as a director and a consultant is at odds with this purported shift, where thoughts of serious deaccessioning remain largely heretical and scarce resources are lavished upon objects that will never see the light of day. Schwarzer reports that less than 5 percent of US collections can be exhibited at any one time. Collections may no longer be seen to be a museum’s primary occupation, but they remain a ready rationalization for maintaining the status quo.

**The flagship of arrogance**

In light of the continuous growth of collections, perhaps the most important question is whether museum collections are fulfilling their purpose? My consideration of this question will be brief, and I urge the reader to consult the excellent work of Suzanne Keene, who continues her thoughtful and in-depth inquiry into the use of museum collections. It can certainly be argued that collections are fulfilling their purpose, and there is some impressive supporting evidence. For example, museum collections provided the comparative specimens which confirmed that the egg shells of peregrine falcons were thinning due to the introduction of the pesticide DDT, which was moving these birds close to extinction in the 1960s. The problem was rectified with the banning of DDT, thanks to the undeniable testimony of the museum specimens. This is a dramatic example, however, and one that is not easily duplicated in countless collection storerooms. My interest lies not with the sensational, but with the unquestioned assumptions and vulnerabilities inherent in acquisitiveness.

Self-interest is a delicate matter at the best of times, and when it involves museum collections it can create a swamp of political machinations, including real and potential embarrassment for the museum community at large. I am thinking of the current flagship of museum arrogance known as the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. This manifesto is the antithesis of the Buffon Declaration discussed in the last chapter, and can only be described as an ethnocentric and colonial relic. Signed by such luminaries as the Louvre, the Rijksmuseum and the British Museum, the Universal Museum Declaration refuses to consider repatriation claims on the grounds that ‘universal museums’, with their encyclopaedic collections, are best positioned to act on behalf of the world. By claiming to know what is in the world’s best interests, the prestigious signatories have violated a cardinal tenet of anthropology, which is to avoid deciding what is in other people’s best interests. Who is advising these omniscient directors in such an undertaking, and what is responsible for their lack of intellectual rigour? The extent to which this Declaration is harming public perceptions of the museum community is unknown, and I am surprised when many of my colleagues admit to knowing nothing about it – perhaps another expression of museum insularity. The Declaration is of considerable concern in both North America and Europe, however, where various signatories are confronted with repatriation claims.

The implications of the Universal Museum Declaration for the Parthenon sculptures have not gone unnoticed by museologists and academics, however, and the
Declaration’s flawed logic was recently the subject of a philosophical analysis in the journal Museum Management and Curatorship, with revealing results.75 Interestingly, several of the signatories to the Declaration declined to participate in this professional discussion for reasons known only to them. One of the contributors, Anthony Snodgrass, Chair of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, distilled the controversy into three cogent factors.76 The first of these is the knowledge or ignorance of the case, and Snodgrass argues that the more you know about the historical details, the more likely you are to support returning the sculptures to Athens. The second factor has to do with the role of ideology in this debate, and the fact that ideology is seldom moved by reason or logic – witness the Declaration’s violation of the anthropological tenet mentioned earlier. Last, and most interesting, Snodgrass singles out the self-esteem of the British Museum, noting that ‘the British Museum is really too grand to bandy words with other institutions.’ In support of this observation, Snodgrass writes that the British Museum celebrated its 205th anniversary in 2003 with a program entitled ‘Enlightening the British.’77 I can’t help but think that the British Museum deserves a backhanded compliment for this degree of panache in the twenty-first century, no matter how misguided it is. How many museums would even contemplate such a pronouncement?

**Formidable challenges**

The exercise of self-interest and collections is not always as visible as the Universal Museum Declaration, as noted by art museum director, Maxwell Anderson. He writes:

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the good governance of art museums has to do with the participation of volunteer leadership in the art market. The very individuals who are charged with disinterested oversight of museums are often accomplished collectors, whose influence may be greater than is publicly acknowledged.78

He goes on to suggest that safeguards must be put in place to ensure that the decisions about what to collect and what to exhibit are made by scholars for the public benefit – not for the collector’s benefit. Anderson is diplomatic in his warning, and does not indicate if actual events in his career gave rise to his concerns. Nonetheless, there are numerous examples of perceived conflicts of interest between private collectors and public institutions, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.79

The dangers that Anderson refers to are not restricted to the art world, however, as the looting of archaeological and ethnological collections is a matter of record, and some of the most prestigious museums have participated.80 Rarely discussed, the opaque world of museum collecting is a Pandora’s Box whose dimensions remain boundless, even now. The meaning is clear, as is the vulnerability – museum collections are not immune from the contamination of self-interest, whether dressed up as
civic duty or curatorial authority. Assuming intellectual and moral superiority, as in the *Universal Museum Declaration*, is an unfortunate ruse and only proves that the emperor is without clothes in an alarming number of museums.

There is another dimension of museum collections that receives scant attention from practitioners, although it lies at the very heart of the collecting enterprise. In short, it is essentially impossible for museums to keep pace with the changing meaning of objects. Simon Knell calls this an ‘interpretive tension’ between the values enshrined in the collection and the requirements of modern society. This tension arises from the fact that any collection is a product of its time, and embodies those particular social aspirations and values. Society is forever in process, however, and these aspirations and values change over time. The complex nature of the curatorial process, including the procedures, the time, the energy and the resources required, creates an internal inertia which few, if any, museums can overcome. This makes it mostly impossible for museum collections to reflect the dynamic nature of the society they purport to represent.

Nonetheless, an unknown number of cultural history museums do have contemporary collecting programs, perhaps the most systematic and impressive being Samdok. Samdok is a voluntary association of about 80 Swedish museums of cultural history devoted to contemporary studies and collecting. Founded in 1977, the members cooperate in working groups known as pools. Each pool collaborates to define the content and direction of their work and, at the conclusion of each project, a new piece is added to the Samdok collection of contemporary studies. Samdok is clearly a forward-looking and creative approach to the daunting challenge of contemporary collecting which, inexplicably, has not been embraced by the museum community at large. Perhaps the degree of cooperation required is simply too daunting for the individualistic character of new world museums.

As mentioned earlier, however, the lone institution is simply too bound by the inertia of curatorial and institutional requirements to keep up with the materiality of a society in process. It is perhaps unrealistic to assume that this is even achievable, which causes one to think that most museums are destined to be time capsules only – forever failing to embrace the continuum of time’s arrow they are intended to serve. The role of time capsule is a laudable one, but only if it is recognized for what it is, consciously articulated and acted upon. Instead, we have museums promoting the very latest of everything – exhibits, technology and stuff in the shop, while essentially ignoring the temporality of their collections. At the same time, the collections are continuously touted as the core of the mission. Is this a lack of self-awareness, an unavoidable paradox, tacit hypocrisy, or an excuse to sustain the comfortable introversion at the expense of community engagement? Irrespective of the cause of this disjunction, it is another vulnerability that is apparently below the consciousness threshold of most contemporary museums.
Exit the experts

Along with the threats of self-interest and inertia, museum collections are also suffering from a decline in collections-based expertise. Museum workers say repeatedly that the value and the magic reside in the knowledge about the object, not the object itself. Yet, there is persistent talk of ‘the death of the curator,’ and they remain a target for staff reductions. Simon Knell writes that collections and their authenticity ‘critically depend upon the rigour of disciplinary expertise, something in Britain we have rather forgotten. It is expertise – with all the risks of bias – which breathes life into the corpse-like object, by shaping the labels in drawers, exhibits and heads.’

In Canada, the concern over the erosion of expertise and research led to a national meeting to address the status and future of research within Canada’s museums. The overall conclusion was that ‘the combination of shifting and often urgent priorities, as well as reduced operating budgets, have had an adverse effect on some traditional core museum functions and professional staff, not the least of which are research, collections and curatorship.’ It was further noted that ‘After years of this debate among museum professionals in Canada, there is now a common consensus that the situation, specifically the capacity to do research and generate new knowledge, has seriously worsened.’ Here is yet another example of protracted museum discussions leading nowhere. Meanwhile, one of the legitimate justifications for amassing collections – knowledge generation – steadily erodes.

The most sacred cow

It is difficult to understand why these persistent paradoxes and vulnerabilities confronting collections have not prompted a more concerted inquiry into the very nature, extent and future of collecting. As mentioned earlier, the work of Suzanne Keene is a notable exception, as is the work of Nick Merriman, who articulates the need for intelligent deaccessioning or disposal, as it is called in the UK. Merriman’s research clearly demonstrates that, instead of treating all collections as having equal importance, the ascription of value must become a fundamental part of curatorship. Yet there is still no groundswell of professional interest, despite the world having changed significantly since the world powers made their imperial sweep and gave rise to museums as we know them now.

It’s as if the museum community is in an everlasting state of denial – continuing to collect with no heed to the consequences of elite self-interest, the inability to keep pace with the meaning of objects, disappearing expertise, and the enormous cost of keeping collections forever in accordance with rigorous professional standards. This is nothing short of nonsensical, and reflects the unrivalled status of collections as the museum’s most sacred cow. This metaphorical beast is the largest and strongest of all those in the museum stable, despite its purported meagre diet as of late, and it continues to assume an authority akin to the sacred cow of Hinduism.
The comparison ends here, however, as Hindus believe that the cow is representative of divine and natural beneficence and should therefore be protected and venerated. For museums, the sacred cow of collecting has become a liability, yet is too highly regarded to be open to criticism or curtailment. Or is it too highly regarded? The current state of museum denial does not actually allow any intelligent discussion. In fact, any talk of change is couched in terms of the ‘violation of fiduciary responsibility and the alienation of altruistic donors.’ Rhetoric aside, just as surely as there are limits to economic growth, the alarming growth of museum collections is no longer tenable. Where are museums to put all of these collections? Who is to pay for their care and maintenance? It is self-evident that museums must either be given the right to treat objects as their own (meaning control over their disposal), or be given appropriate public support to maintain them. Resolving this corrosive contradiction will require a frank and open conversation among the public, governments and museums themselves and, so far, there is nary a glimmer of interest in the museum community in initiating such a discussion. Museums, with few exceptions, remain passive supplicants to donors who are not even required to provide the means to maintain the donations they make (despite the tax advantages), as well as to governments who invoke the obligations of fiduciary responsibility and consistently fail to provide the funding to do so.

In short, museums are in need of a very large dose of self-determination, and this must start with removing collections from their unwarranted pedestal. To do otherwise is to continue jeopardizing the entire enterprise, not unlike the sailors of the British Royal Navy’s Franklin Expedition in search of the Northwest Passage. The two expedition ships were trapped in ice in the Canadian Arctic and abandoned in the spring of 1848, when the men set out in search of the mainland and rescue. They were pulling heavy sledges by hand, encumbered with the best of Victorian material culture – watches, spectacles, tools, books, tin boxes, canvas and silver cutlery. The entire expedition perished before reaching safety, succumbing to scurvy, starvation and exhaustion. Repeat – exhaustion. Museums, with their own heavy sledges and their mounting exhaustion, need not suffer a similar fate if there is sufficient collective will to challenge their own conventional wisdom.

**Grading collections**

Managing collections intelligently and pragmatically is neither mysterious nor rocket science, and there are a variety of real-life museum experiences that model the thinking required to avoid the pitfalls. In concluding this discussion of the self-inflicted challenges of museum collections, I want to briefly mention three approaches to realistic collections management that may or may not be familiar to the reader. I do so in an effort to leaven my jaundiced view of curatorial and institutional automatism, and to emphasize that there are proven methods, as well as opportunities, that can actually strengthen and sustain any museum with the will to act. The first of these is ‘grading the collection’, the logical precursor to deaccessioning – the dreaded ‘D’ word. The very word ‘deaccessioning’ casts its own spell in the museum world, and simply to
say the word provokes both trepidation and intransigence among the vast majority of museum workers, irrespective of rank or speciality. Grading can be seen as a comforting first step, however; an exercise in wielding judgement without any immediate consequences. Grading is about rationalizing the collection, and is intended to reduce costs in the long-term and enhance the potential for future growth of significant material. This, in turn, contributes to the overall value and effectiveness of the collection and the museum.

Any collection, contrary to conventional practice, must be ‘periodically reviewed and reshaped to serve better the museum’s purpose … pruning and upgrading are the hallmarks of a sound, dynamic and farsighted approach to collections management’.

When the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, graded its collection in 1998, four grades were developed which included the core collection (significant historical and aesthetic importance requiring full museum standards); the community collection (for use in non-museum environments, but not hands-on); the hands-on collection (for use by staff in hands-on programs), and the Grade 4 collection of poor quality or irrelevant objects destined for deaccessioning. Interestingly, the grading resulted in 53 percent of the permanent collection considered to be core, and 19 percent identified as Grade 4. With most museum workers assuming that their entire permanent collection must be core, these numbers are strikingly counterintuitive and underscore two key benefits of the grading process.

First, it allows the curatorial staff to study the collections in-depth, and to shape their future growth with this knowledge. Is this not the heart of the curatorial mission? Second, the outcome of a realistic assessment is guaranteed to increase the use of the collections by a wider cross-section of the public, be they other museums with less than perfect environmental standards, or long-term care facilities where objects have been used for therapeutic reminiscence. For those who argue that everything must be kept for posterity because we do not have the knowledge to assess future significance, two things must be said. Decisions about importance and value can be made intelligently and responsibly, using in-house, curatorial expertise in combination with external advisors, in order to ensure thoroughness and greater objectivity. More to the point, it must be reiterated that the vast majority of museum collections continue to grow with virtually no self-imposed limits, while simultaneously deteriorating. How does one deal with this blatant incongruity?

The ‘D’ word

As already anticipated, the second approach to constructive collection management, which follows logically from the grading process, is deaccessioning. In short, deaccessioning is the process of disposing, selling or trading objects from a museum collection. Irrespective of the consternation it provokes, there is a body of literature about deaccessioning, and I will not review this hard-won knowledge and experience here. I assume that my belief in its importance to intelligent museum management is abundantly clear by now. Nor will I attempt to distil the ‘do’s and ‘don’t’s of deaccessioning (and there are many), as these, too, are available in the chronicles of
others’ experiences. I simply want to relate some personal experiences in an effort to demythologize some of the purported deaccessioning demons that are invoked to prevent its use.

Despite the published theory and method, most deaccessioning continues to be done privately and quietly, ‘under the radar,’ so to speak. When the Glenbow Museum began its major deaccessioning in the early 1990s, only two examples of deaccessioning by Canadian museums had been published. This persistent lack of visibility further reinforces the stigma of deaccessioning, and fuels the episodic public suspicion which arises when deaccessioning does become public. A fully visible and transparent process is essential, and it will also demonstrate that pruning, as any good gardener knows, is essential to healthy growth. The same is true of museum collections, and deaccessioning must be seen for precisely what it is – sound collections management and a professional necessity. The only alternative lies in sufficient funding to keep everything forever, which is indefensible, irresponsible and unachievable.

Our experience with deaccessioning at the Glenbow Museum has taught me not to assume how the community at large will react – be it government, colleagues or the public. All of these reactions were unpredictable and, with the exception of the public reaction, reflected the dysfunctional thinking that underlies the resistance to deaccessioning. The most severe reaction came from provincial cultural officials who threatened us with a court injunction to prevent our deaccessioning. At the same time, the provincial government had drastically reduced our operating budget over the preceding years. These officials failed in the end and we persevered, intent upon becoming more responsible about our collection costs as part of an institutional plan to enhance our long-term sustainability. This government hypocrisy must be seen for what it is, as museums cannot continue to uphold an idealized and irrational notion of fiduciary trust as public funding stagnates or diminishes.

The reactions of our professional colleagues, including various professional organizations, were also a surprise and, in retrospect, underscored my naivety. I didn’t expect any accolades for our initiative from colleagues, but I also did not expect the polite, but firm, opposition. Again, I had assumed that the reasons for deaccessioning were crystal clear and in keeping with sound collections management. The professional reaction once again invoked the slippery slope – the type of thinking discussed earlier which states that museums cannot move a centimetre from their position without sliding into oblivion. In short, ‘If you start deaccessioning now, where will it end?’ Remember that the abuse of something does not bar its use, and we had no intention of using the proceeds from deaccessioning to pay staff salaries or repair the roof. Instead, we used the capital from the sale of objects to establish a collections endowment fund, the income from which is dedicated to the care of the collections.

If our museum colleagues were cautious, negative or condemning, the public reaction was refreshing. The press was fair and accurate in its reporting and the overall public sentiment was pragmatic and empathetic – as in, ‘if you don’t use the stuff and it does not serve your purpose, why do you spend money taking care of it?’ I had expected empathy from the government and our colleagues, not the public.
The public is continually held up as the bogeyman that will sink any museum that dares to be thoughtful about its bulging storerooms. In fact, the public appreciates intelligence and prudence, especially when they are used in a manner that befits the purpose and circumstances of a particular museum. It’s worth a try – as long as the deaccessioning process is well designed, well managed and transparent. As time marches on, what are the alternatives?

Sharing collections

If grading and deaccessioning are simply too radical to contemplate, there is a third approach to collections management that can help to relieve the burden and, more importantly, empower the institution and its community in the process. I am thinking of a very simple and innovative concept – sharing the collection and its stewardship. What follows is an example of an innovative approach to sharing collections which stands in stark contrast to the traditional museum practice of hoarding – nowhere better expressed than in the remarkably antiquated Universal Museum Declaration.

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’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.’ Their approach is important because it 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 their commitment to certain core concepts underlying their partnerships. These concepts are spiritual in nature, and are concerned with tikanga, or the correct way of doing things. These rules and customs are based on traditional and customary knowledge, as well as the Maori world-view, and a great deal of tikanga that relates to museums is associated with tapu and mana. If tapu can be seen as potential power, mana can be regarded as actual power and is also seen as emanating from the gods. 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. Here we have a remarkable example of integrating the artifactual and the ecological, as well as people and place – a radical departure from conventional museum practice. Anything is possible, truly.

In concluding this inquiry into the self-imposed challenges of collecting, we have now come full circle back to the troubled world. Have museums become microcosms of the unbridled consumption that is inexorably unravelling the biosphere? In their
celebration of materialism, have museums become the unwitting handmaidens to a value system that is at odds with our survival as a species? With unlimited collections growth and declining resources for collections care, coupled with an increasing emphasis on marketplace initiatives, are museums losing their way? At minimum, doesn’t the current trajectory require critical reflection and serious adjustment? At a time of unprecedented challenges, are museums modelling the kind of behaviour incumbent upon social institutions and required by succeeding generations? I think not. Is it time to ponder some of the paradoxes, perils and hypocrisy embedded in museum collections and address these issues forthrightly? Museums themselves must decide the future role of collections; it is their collective responsibility. Or are collections the unacknowledged means to sustain comfortable introversion while ignoring a broader engagement?

The answers to all of these questions will vary, depending upon the museum. We do know that various museums are becoming increasingly conscious, but there are so many museums, with so many redundant collections, demanding so many resources. For those museums that are content with the status quo, the material and psychic burden of collections may ultimately be their undoing as societal pressures magnify. I recall a recent bumper sticker, popular in Canada and the US, which reads, ‘The one who dies with the most toys wins.’ I have always associated that thinking with people who have lots of money but no brains – never with museums.