Museums and the end of materialism

Robert R. Janes

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the planet earth and global civilization now confront a constellation of issues that threatens the very existence of both. These issues range from climate change to the inevitability of depleted fossil fuels, not to mention the bewildering array of local concerns pertaining to the health and well-being of myriad communities throughout the world. There is nothing new about these challenges and there is a burgeoning literature which offers dire warnings and solutions for their resolution.1 Surprisingly, museums are rarely, if ever, mentioned or discussed, causing one to conclude that the irrelevance of museums as social institutions is a matter of record.

I submit 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.

In making this sweeping assessment, I am, of course, generalizing, and I accept this liability as the starting point for reconsidering the underlying purpose, meaning and value of museums. These questions are rarely, if ever, truthfully examined in the museum literature or thoughtfully discussed at museum conferences. On the contrary, museum practitioners and academics are seemingly preoccupied with method and process – getting better and better at what they are already doing well.

Nonetheless, there are some essential questions worth considering, such as – if museums did not exist, would we reinvent them and what would they look like? Further, if the museum were to be reinvented, what would be the public’s role in the reinvented institution? It has been noted that “the great challenge to our time is to harness research, invention and professional practice to deliberately embraced human values.” The fateful questions, according to scientist William Lowrance, are “how the specialists will interact with citizens, and whether the performance can be imbued with wisdom, courage and vision.”2 None of these questions have been articulated
by the majority of museums, much less addressed by them, despite there being no more important questions than these for both museums and society at large.

I have not set out to support or disclaim a particular theory, as the meaning of social engagement for museums is not only deep, varied and untested but it is also too unwieldy to be subsumed under a particular intellectual model. This potential variability is akin to the concept of the biosphere, where the diversity of life is the key to ecological health. So should it be with museums, where individual and organizational approaches to social relevance can be as diverse as the communities which spawned the museums themselves. Although my approach lacks a theoretical stance, I have drawn on various theoretical perspectives as both stimuli and counterpoints to my own thinking, including modernism, postmodernism, positivism and materialism. While theory plays an important role in any well-reasoned proposition, my bias is toward practicality.

If this chapter can be said to reflect any particular aspect of modern thought, it would be in the realm of the civil society, or the so-called public sphere. Simply put, the civil society is that part of society lying between the private sphere of the family and the official sphere of the state, and refers to the array of voluntary and civic associations, such as trade unions, religious organizations, cultural and educational bodies, that are to be found in modern, liberal societies. Museums belong in this sphere, yet have received little or no attention as fundamental agents in advancing the collective good, other than in the realms of education and entertainment. Although I have no theory to espouse, other than an abiding interest in social capital and the civil society, I also intend to debunk the imposition of free market ideology on the museum sector. I will do so by interpreting a collection of empirical observations and data based on my professional experience, the literature and my belief that it is incumbent upon us to question ourselves about where the future is leading – all in an effort to demonstrate that museums have far greater value than is currently being realized.

The turning point

Museums have inadvertently arrived at a metaphorical watershed where it is now imperative to ask broader questions about why museums do what they do, to confront a variety of admittedly unruly issues, and to forge some new choices. After decades of museum self-help manuals and collections of papers on museum studies, it is not enough for museums to do their work better – they have to ask once again what their real work should be. This metaphorical watershed is not unlike Peter Drucker’s concept of a “divide.” In his words, “Within a few short decades society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world.” Drucker noted that we are currently living through the transformation to a post-capitalist society, with knowledge being the real and controlling resource, not capital, land or labour.

In reassessing the purpose of museums, I have no intention of judging the conduct or commitment of individual museum workers. I ask the reader to recognize that there is an underlying paradox at work here, and resist the urge to dismiss many of these observations as judgemental. The inherent paradox is the widespread
disconnection between individuals who work in a museum and the manner in which the museum functions as an organization. Individual staff members can be insightful and innovative, yet these qualities may never be translated into institutional reality. With this in mind, my purpose is not to challenge the commitment of any museum worker, especially in light of the multifarious and often contradictory requirements of museum work. These challenges include notoriously low salaries, high professional standards and governing authorities who lack relevant expertise, not to mention fickle funding agencies that encourage mission drift through their insistence upon short-term, project funding.

An ecological metaphor for museums

An ecological metaphor is useful here in pondering the role of museums in contemporary society, as ecology is about the relationships between organisms and their environments – including dependent, independent and interdependent relationships. Museums have predicated their survival on being both dependent and independent, as exemplified by commonplace comments such as “give us the money; we know what to do.” In the process of overlooking the meaning of interdependence, museums have contributed greatly to their own marginalization. It is time to forge an ecology of museums that recognizes that a broad web of societal relationships is the bedrock of successful adaptation in a complex, and increasingly severe, world. The lack of interdependent relationships among most museums is an increasing liability, and being valued for ancillary educational offerings and often ersatz entertainment is no longer sufficient to ensure sustainability.

It is also no longer sensible to ignore the web of these relationships by claiming some sort of benighted status for museums as innocent beneficiaries. Can we not expect more deliberate reflection from museums about their societal role – as organizations that pride themselves on their historical acuity and their objective frame of reference? This means that the museum enterprise has an inordinate amount of rethinking to do, as the era of museum privilege begins to decline. By privilege I mean that paradoxical mixture of societal respect and indifference which has allowed museums to stand sedately on the sidelines in the service of their own self-interest. The decline in privilege is inevitable for the unprecedented reason that various social, economic and environmental issues have now transformed into a critical mass that can no longer be ignored by government, corporatists and citizens. In comparison, no such urgency attaches to the purpose and goals of the vast majority of museums, despite the fact that the status quo for museums is arguably even more brittle and beleaguered than it is for society at large.

The tyranny of the marketplace

One of the most significant challenges to heightened consciousness among museums is the rise of marketplace ideology and museum corporatism, whose uncritical acceptance by museum practitioners has created a Frankensteinian phenomenon that is unravelling or enfeebling a host of otherwise competent museums. There is no
doubt that museums and galleries worldwide are struggling to maintain their stability in response to the complex challenges facing the non-profit world. These challenges range from declining attendance for many, and over-attendance for some, to finding the appropriate balance between public funding and earned revenues. Many of these challenges are inescapably economic, and originate in the belief that unlimited economic growth and unconstrained consumption are essential to our well-being. Indeed, capitalism and the lure of the marketplace have become inescapable for all of us. The dominant ideology of capitalism and the decline of public funding for museums have combined to produce a harmful offspring – a preoccupation with the marketplace and commerce, characterized by the primacy of economic interests in institutional decision-making.

**Corporatism**

The other face of marketplace ideology is corporatism – based on “our adoration of self-interest and our denial of public good,” to quote the Canadian essayist, John Ralston Saul. He notes that corporatism also results in individual passivity, conformity and silence, because the corporatist system depends upon the citizen’s desire for inner comfort. Instead, Ralston Saul argues that our individual and collective responsibilities in a democracy hinge upon participation and the psychic discomfort which inevitably accompanies active engagement in the public sphere. In his view, “the acceptance of psychic discomfort is the acceptance of consciousness.”

Contrary to “active engagement in the public sphere,” many museums see no other way but to consume their way to survival or prosperity, failing to recognize that this is increasing their vulnerability as social institutions. This trend, in combination with the free-market worship of the consumer’s supreme power, has made things very difficult for museums. This is all the more reason why museum boards and staff must seriously ponder a critically important distinction. That is, while we can acknowledge that the market is the key element in economics and in wealth creation, we are not bound to accept a free-market society where everything is to be achieved through the pursuit of private interest. Corporations are second only to governments in their influence on public policy and have clearly demonstrated time and again that the common good can be an inexhaustible arena for private gain. It is obvious that the marketplace is incapable of addressing the collective good, while museums are potentially key agents in doing so. It is essential that museums become more conscious of the market forces they are embracing, in an effort to avoid the consequences described below.

**Complex portfolios**

The inappropriateness of unthinking adherence to the marketplace lies in the complexity of museums as institutions because every museum, in the language of the marketplace, is a mixed portfolio. Some museum work is clearly subject to market forces, such as restaurants, shops and product development, while other activities such as collections care, scientific research and community engagement are not. The latter bear no relation to the market economy and, in fact, require a safe distance from the marketplace and corporatist influence.
Market ideology and corporatism have failed to demonstrate any real ability to deal with the complexities of a competent museum and are, instead, homogenizing the complex portfolio with a stultifying adherence to financial considerations. The tyranny of quantitative measures, such as attendance numbers and shop revenues, is a clear indication of this reality. The failed relationship between museums and the marketplace goes beyond the clash of nonprofit and for-profit values, however, and includes several other embarrassing and injurious consequences. These afflictions include short-term thinking, money as the measure of worth, conspicuous consumption and business tribalism, each of which is discussed below.

The short-lived corporation

Recognizing that short-term thinking is the foundation of marketplace ideology, it is appropriate to note that the average life expectancy of multinational corporations is between 40 and 50 years, a discovery that provoked such alarm that an inquiry was undertaken to determine why. The author of this work, Arie DeGeus, a senior planner at Royal Dutch Shell, concluded that the exclusive focus on the production of goods and services has doomed the vast majority of companies to rapid extinction. Most importantly for this discussion, DeGeus concludes that

The twin policies of managing for profit and maximizing shareholder value, at the expense of all other goals, are vestigial management traditions. They no longer reflect the imperatives of the world we live in today. They are suboptimal, even destructive – not just to the rest of society, but to the companies that adopt them.

Yet, these twin policies continue to grow in status and influence, and have now entered the museum boardroom in the guise of quantitative measures, earned revenues, excess consumption, hollow imitation and “the customer is always right” mantra.

Money as the measure of worth

Underlying the pervasive power of short-term thinking is the new orthodoxy of money as the measure of worth, and herein lies another significant clash in values. As difficult as it is to concede, the marketplace now provides much of our ostensible happiness and sense of worth, and museums are not immune. This has not gone unnoticed in museums, and there is concern about the advent of money as the measure of worth. Veteran museum executive Tom Freudenheim writes that “The money worm has burrowed into museum foundations in the last five decades, weakening structures already challenged by power politics, relevancy issues, and contemporary anxieties.” He further notes that “the idea of a museum ... as a money-making machine is frighteningly pervasive.”

Similar anxieties are also emerging from the United Kingdom (UK), where the Museums Association (MA) notes that more and more museums are adopting the short-term, money focus characteristic of business. The MA’s landmark report questions the sustainability of museums that occupy energy-hungry buildings, have
expanding collections, and continually destroy old exhibitions with little reuse or recycling, while also promoting international tourism that involves energy-consuming travel.\textsuperscript{12}

The so-called “Bilbao Effect”

The global museum community is currently enamoured with the “If you build it, he will come” syndrome, and this infatuation is heralded by the “Bilbao Effect.” The “Bilbao Effect” refers to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (GMB), the architectural monument designed by Frank Gehry and rumoured to be the transformative agent in revitalizing the depressed industrial economy of the Basque region of Spain. In short, for urban planners, politicians, museum directors and trustees, the “Bilbao Effect” means “the transformation of a city by a new museum or cultural facility into a vibrant and attractive place for residents, visitors and inward investment.”\textsuperscript{13} Alas, the “Bilbao Effect” might well be an illusion, now that the boosterism is being replaced by evaluation and reflection.

In a recent article by Beatriz Plaza, an economist in the Faculty of Economics at the University of the Basque Country (Bilbao, Spain), we learn that the “Bilbao Effect” is not the magical solution so fervently hoped for by those in search of painless museum renewal. Contrary to the ardent believers who credit the GMB with transformative powers, Plaza writes that the GMB was part of a much larger economic redevelopment strategy which included a new subway line, new drainage and water systems, an airport, residential and business complexes, a seaport and industrial and technology parks. In Plaza’s words, “The icing on the cake was the construction of the GMB and additional cultural investments, such as a concert hall and a centre for young artists to promote art and cultural tourism as a means of diversifying the economy and reducing unemployment.”\textsuperscript{14} Plaza’s quantitative and qualitative analysis is in blunt contrast to the simplistic coronation of the “Bilbao Effect” – much heralded by directors, trustees, governments and consultants, as well as the celebrity architects themselves, as the solution to irrelevant museums, urban blight and economic renewal.\textsuperscript{15}

There is no doubt that bold and creative buildings attract visitors and can provide meaningful visitor experiences, but these inducements are increasingly suspect and maladaptive, in a world beset by a host of social and environmental pressures – ranging from global warming to endemic poverty. The superficial truisms of the marketplace have proven to be not only inadequate as solutions, but also the source of many of our present difficulties.

Business tribalism

In addition to short-term thinking, money as the measure of worth, and culture as consumption, there is another feature of the marketplace that imbues it with considerable control and influence – the culture of business. This culture underpins the clash of values discussed earlier and is a dominant factor in blinding museums to a sense of their own worth and well-being. The origin of much of this difficulty lies in the tribal nature of business. By tribal, I mean a particular reference group in which individuals identify with each other through common language, ritual and legend.\textsuperscript{16}
This tribalism sets values that orient the behaviour of individuals around common interests. Clearly, the culture of business and business literacy contribute much that is essential to our collective well-being, but that is not my concern here.

Business tribalism has several faces, including the celebrity worship of business leaders; in-group thinking that excludes non-business people; immature corporate governance which has created a litany of scandals, and narcissistic notions of personal worth as measured by obscenely high salaries and bonuses. Although museums have mostly avoided governance scandals and overpaid executives, many have nonetheless come to resemble corporate entities, with revenues and attendance being the predominant measures of worth. Many museum boards are increasingly indistinguishable from their corporate counterparts, with too many directors being chosen for their business, legal or accounting experience.

The market values and tribalistic traits discussed above are ideological, and remain alarmingly unexamined by the museum community. The trouble with ideology, according to writer and philosopher, Robert Grudin, is that it “enables us to pass judgments on a variety of issues while lacking adequate information or analytic skill or commitment to discovering the truth.”

Museums cannot consciously evolve without analyzing their assumptions, no matter how deep and well protected these beliefs may be. Organizational self-knowledge requires that the ideology that governs purpose and values, both individually and organizationally, be made explicit. It is imperative that museums embark on this journey of self-knowledge, not only to make practical sense of a beleaguered world, but also to define a meaningful contribution to an increasingly troubled world.

Methods aren’t values

The distinction between methods and values recalls the characteristics of long-lived companies, which were also identified by DeGeus in his landmark study. These characteristics include sensitivity to the environment, organizational cohesion and identity, tolerance and decentralization, and conservative financing. None of these defining factors have anything to do with commercial dogma or business literacy – they are values. It would seem that in the pressure cooker called the marketplace there is little or no time for values, even though values are the essential and enduring beliefs that articulate how an organization will conduct itself. Instead, values are replaced by imperatives – more visitors, more earned revenues, more collections, etc. I suggest that DeGeus’ characteristics of long-lived companies could also serve as qualitative performance measures for museums.

In addition, classical economic theory and commercial dogma do not allow for the needs of future generations, because marketplace decisions are based on the relative abundance or scarcity of things as they affect us, now. Jeremy Rifkin, the economist and social critic, wrote: “No one speaks for future generations at the marketplace, and for this reason, everyone who comes after us starts off much poorer than we did in terms of nature’s remaining endowment.” The marketplace notion that “the present is all there is” is antithetical to the very nature of museums, whose existence is predicated on the stewardship of posterity. A respectful sense of the future is required in museum planning and strategy, aided and abetted by business literacy, but not beholden to the values of the marketplace.
Museum renewal for a new age

The warning signs of our collective vulnerability continue to accumulate. These include population stress arising from differences in population growth rates between rich and poor societies; energy stress from the increasing scarcity of conventional oil; environmental stress from worsening damage to our land, water and forests; and economic stress due to instabilities in the global economic system (including the widening gap between the rich and the poor), as well as climate stress.21

All of these complexities can be distilled into a rather simple model of what could transpire as these events unfold. Jeremy Rifkin notes that “our modern economy is a three-tiered system, with agriculture as the base, the industrial sector superimposed on top of it, and the service sector, in turn, perched on top of the industrial sector.”22 Each sector is totally dependent on more and more non-renewable energy – fossil fuels. Rifkin posits that, as the availability of this energy diminishes, the public and private service areas will be the first to suffer, because services are “the least essential aspect of our survival.” In short, an economy with limited energy sources will be one of necessities, not luxuries or inessentials, and will be centred on those things required to maintain life. Where do tourism, edutainment, museum shops, permanent collections and blockbusters fit in this looming adaptive model?

Museums are a public service, and the extent to which they will weather the above scenario is difficult to predict. In addition to 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. In a world of pressing local and national issues, it is commonsensical to expect that public funding will eventually go to environmental, social and economic priorities. Those museums that remain committed to consumption, edutainment and ancillary education will no longer be sustainable in this context. Many are not sustainable now.

Decline is not inevitable

What alternatives do museums have as the combined tyranny of traditional practices and the marketplace conspire to undo them? Renewal – rethinking, replacing and rejuvenating – is the only alternative, despite the hackneyed use of this concept. There is much lip service paid to this ageless and vital concept in organizations, but very little actual renewal. This is because authentic renewal is a tough and burdensome process, not a silver bullet. In effect, all people, organizations and societies start slowly, grow, prosper and decline.23 Organizational decline, however, is not inevitable if museum boards and staff are willing to challenge assumptions and conventional practices, because this kind of thinking is the precursor to renewal. Renewal is also profoundly paradoxical, because it requires change at a time when “all the messages coming through to the individual or the institution are that everything is fine.”24 The fact that most museums think that everything is fine is the most salient reason for widespread renewal. As uncertain as the future is, there are at least six ways of framing museum renewal in this declining age of materialism.
Museums are free to choose and act

Museums, unencumbered with the public policy responsibilities of government and the destructive bottom lines of corporations, are agenda-free at the moment – with the exception of their tacit commitment to mainstream consumer society. The time has come for a particular “museum agenda,” predicated on greater awareness of the world and the social responsibility that accompanies this awareness. Museums are some of the most free and creative work environments in the world, and there are few organizations which offer more opportunities for thinking, choosing and acting in ways that can blend personal satisfaction and growth with organizational goals.

For those boards and executives who claim a lack of autonomy with which to chart a course of greater awareness and social responsibility, there is no doubt that addressing the litany of social and environmental issues will require both courage and a leap of faith. Not surprisingly, society is not even cognizant of the museum’s unique potential, much less demanding its fulfilment. This is ideal, for it permits museums to engage in deliberate renewal of their own design, but the time to do so grows short. Marketplace ideology, capitalist values and corporate self-interest are clearly not the way forward, having conclusively demonstrated their financial fragility and moral bankruptcy with the global meltdown of capital markets in 2008–2009.

Museums are seed banks

The technological present persists in disavowing much of the scientific, traditional and local knowledge that chronicles our species, and modernity has led to the loss of knowledge of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia. Museums are the repositories of the evidence of our adaptive failures and successes, not to mention the chroniclers of our creativity and pathos. In this sense, museums are akin to the biological seed banks that store seeds as a source for planting, in case seed reserves elsewhere are destroyed.

If seed banks are gene banks, then museums are tool, technology and art banks – curating the most distinctive trait of our species – the ability to make tools and things of beauty. And to this priceless legacy we must add the trove of natural history specimens housed in the world’s museums. Richard Fortey, a prescient paleontologist at London’s Natural History Museum, has suggested that “Museums might now be considered the conscience of the world.” He notes that their permanent collections “will be the only way to understand and monitor what we’re doing to the world.”

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. The record of material diversity contained in museums 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.
Museums are diversity personified

The meaning of the word “museum” enjoys explicit name recognition everywhere, irrespective of language, and museums populate the world. There are 22,500 museums in Canada, the USA and the UK alone, and the World Bank estimates there are about 40,000 museums worldwide, although this strikes me as an underestimate. Museums come in all shapes and sizes, with collections and mandates as diverse as human existence. It’s as if there is a global museum franchise, only it is self-organized, has no corporate head office, no board of directors, no global marketing expenses, and is trusted and respected. Is this not the dream of every marketplace ideologue?

This informal network exists by virtue of the apparently universal need for museums, and museums are a significant antidote to the globalized homogenization that is the by-product of hyper-capitalism. This homogenization is overpowering much of what was once unique and diverse in the natural and cultural worlds. With a global presence grounded in specific communities and cultures, yet united in purpose and tradition, the vast network of museums has untold potential for nurturing the diversity that underlies the integrity of the biosphere. The challenge will be for museums to collectively acknowledge that they are capable of defining the limits of homogeneity, and then embarking upon this task. Resistance and independence of thought will be essential to this renewal.

Museums are the keepers of locality

No one would dispute the fact that most of the world’s museums are expressions of locality and community, and the world is full of museums because they are spawned by individual communities. The ubiquity of museums and the familiarity they enjoy are the building blocks of renewal, especially as the need increases to seek ingenuity and solutions on a smaller scale – in communities.

Wendell Berry writes that “the real work of planet-saving will be small, humble and humbling” and that problem solving will require individuals, families and communities. The UK’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport consultation paper, Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life, noted that, while globalization brings new opportunities for travel, cultural diversity and access to information, it also disperses communities and erodes traditions. This creates a greater need for community roots and values, and enhances the role of museums “by virtue of their unique ability to connect the local to the global and … place personal beliefs within more general and universal truths, and historical settings.”

Museums are the bridge between the two cultures

The persistent fissure between the humanities and science, both symbolic and pragmatic, is an increasingly destructive tension in Western societies. It was brought to the attention of the world in two famous essays by C.P. Snow entitled The Two Cultures: And a Second Look, wherein Snow described the dangerous split between the humanities and the scientific community. Snow argued in 1959 that Western society had become seriously fragmented, with scientists and non-scientists failing to
communicate and working at cross-purposes, with no place where the two cultures could meet. Canada’s public intellectual, John Ralston Saul, also condemns the cult of expertise and specialization, and writes that “Such intellectual splintering explains some of academia’s passivity before the crisis of the society they ought to be defending.”

Intellectual splintering also underlies museum passivity when, in fact, museums are one of the few knowledge-based institutions equipped to bridge the divide between the two cultures that continues to fragment our world-view. Although museums have borrowed the disciplinary boundaries of the academy, they are not bound to them for purposes of institutional identity and advancement. The very nature of any human, natural history, science or art museum demands interdisciplinarity and holistic thinking, because they embrace multiple subjects and points of view, all of which are intimately interconnected.

Herein lies another opportunity for renewal – the possibility of museums becoming the meeting place for the two cultures. In the process, museums might well create a “third culture,” along with other mindful individuals and organizations, by parting company with academic convention and offering a less splintered understanding of human presence in the biosphere. Museums are not only particularly suited for this renewal – the troubled world and its citizens are crying out for this leadership.

Museums bear witness

Wendell Berry writes, “One thing worth defending, I suggest, is the imperative to imagine the lives of beings who are not ourselves and are not like ourselves: animals, plants, gods, spirits, people of other countries and other races, people of the other sex, places – and enemies.” I am indebted to Marjorie Schwarzer, Chair of Museum Studies at John F. Kennedy University, for cementing the connection between Berry’s aspirations and the relevance of museums. I can do no better than quote Schwarzer, who wrote:

If not for the museological impulse, there would be NO memorials, NO resources and NO caretakers of the remnants of the kinds of history that our society’s more evil impulses seek to destroy ... I’m saying all of this because I do raise this question: despite all of the missed opportunities perpetuated by poor and unethical museum practice, would the world be a better place without museums?

Berry and Schwarzer are talking about bearing witness – an unsung role for museums but one that is unmistakably present. One need only consider the work of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience as a powerful reminder of the need to remember past struggles for justice and to address their contemporary legacies. The scope for bearing witness has expanded exponentially in recent times, however, and now includes an increasingly damaged biosphere, as well as the seemingly infinite catalogue of human rights conflicts and issues. Are not museums founded on “imagining the lives of beings who are not ourselves”? All museums specialize in assembling evidence based on knowledge, experience and belief, and in making things known – the meaning of bearing witness.
In search of resilience

Resilience means “the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,” and suggests a frame of mind that is not bound by deadening routine, habit, or traditional practices. Resilient systems are supple, agile and adaptable, and resilience is enhanced by “loosening some of the couplings inside our economies and societies,” in the words of Homer-Dixon. For museums, this means a serious appraisal of the current growth model based on building expansions, expensive exhibitions, growing collections and increased operating costs – coupled with the relentless imperative of visitor consumption in order to augment the earned revenues that are required to support the increased costs. This vicious cycle is unsustainable as discussed earlier, and decoupling may be the only solution.

The strength which ensues from a mix of sound business practices and social responsibility is qualitatively no different than the strength which emerges from species diversity in an ecosystem. For a museum to judge its performance on attendance and/or collection growth is analogically identical to monoculture food production, where only one crop is grown. This is not resilient; it’s a high-risk strategy because that one crop may fail – just like blockbuster exhibitions commonly do. Yet, everyday we see museum boards, executives, troops of consultants and architects decreasing resilience by promoting more growth, bigger buildings and increased costs. This is brittleness, not resilience.

Our collective well-being requires enhanced resilience, and that all organizations (private, public, nonprofit and for-profit) contribute concepts, ideas, plans and alternatives for a better and more stable world, not to mention assistance in coping with the fears, constraints and issues that already exist. A surge of innovation, creativity and experimentation is urgently needed, and to assume that the majority of museums may somehow sit this one out is the embodiment of self-deception. The “long emergency” is now well underway, and will require no less than the shift from our “high-entropy culture” (the purpose of which was to create material abundance and satisfy every human desire) to a “low-entropy world” that minimizes energy flow.

In our high-entropy culture, we have celebrated material progress, efficiency and specialization, and joined this with an unalloyed hubris that places our species at the centre of the universe. Fossil fuels have allowed this spectacular florescence of technological growth, but these days are numbered. In contrast, the inevitable low-entropy world will recognize that excessive materialism and consumption are maladaptive and constitute an unacceptable assault on the biosphere. What role will museums play in expanding this awareness?

Assuming responsibility

Are museums up to this task? How many have actually contemplated their role and responsibilities as the world moves from energy consumption to energy frugality? Nearly three decades ago, Jeremy Rifkin made an observation that could serve as a touchstone for the strategic future of museums. He wrote:

After a long, futile search to find out where we belong in the total scheme of things, the Entropy Law reveals to us a simple truth: that every single act
that occurs in the world has been affected by everything that has come before it, just as it, in turn, will have an effect on everything that comes after. Thus, we are each a continuum, embodying in our presence everything that has preceded us, and representing in our own becoming all of the possibilities for everything that is to follow.\textsuperscript{40}

Is this not the eloquent mission statement of a competent museum? As self-professed keepers of the continuum and “all those acts that preceded us,” can museums not be the harbingers of an adaptive future? The high energy paradigm, currently the foundation of our existence, must be dismantled deliberately and quickly, taking into account its social ramifications and indecipherable complexities. Are museums to wait for passive bureaucracies and faltering politicians, at all levels, to point the way? If museums are reluctant to assume these responsibilities in the absence of any authority to do so, then they must ask themselves from what source they think their authority will come.\textsuperscript{41} Because museums will never be in control of society or their communities, waiting around for the authority to act responsibly is both heedless and fraught with risk.

There are simply no better social institutions than museums to help define a sustainable future, grounded as they are in a diachronic view of humankind’s successes and failures. The current preoccupation of museums with growing collections and audiences, while confronted with the choice of outmoded tradition or renewal, heralds the metaphorical watershed discussed earlier. Museums have arrived at Peter Drucker’s “divide,” or that point in history “when society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions.”\textsuperscript{42} Are museums to be active participants as these events unfold, or victims of an indecipherable myopia?

\textbf{In praise of museums}

This chapter has sampled the growing complexity in biospheric affairs and the seeming reluctance of the museum community to muster the will and innovation to address the issues and challenges that relate directly to them. The fundamental question is – what social institutions exist to address these challenges, recognizing the growing ineffectiveness of government bureaucracies and the wreckage of the corporate profit agenda? Even universities are becoming the handmaidens of corporatists, with science in the interests of consumerism driving many university research budgets. Museums, it is argued, are one of the few social institutions with vast potential for proactive and effective community engagement.

This challenge is not about a new business model for museums, however. Instead, it requires going beyond business models to reappraise the museum mission itself. Business models are about processes and the means to the end, including collecting, preserving and exhibiting. The contemporary challenge for museums is ultimately about the ends. In fact, the endless preoccupation with business models has become tiresome and harmful. This preoccupation with the “how” is diverting museums from the real task at hand, which is to ask “why?” and become mindful of what is actually going on in the world around them, and then redefining their missions to reflect this new sensibility and purpose in appropriate ways.
Long live the museum

Paradoxically, museums have survived for thousands of years, unlike the bulk of corporate enterprises. In the process, museums have evolved from the elite collections of imperial dominance, to educational institutions for the public, and now to the museum as “mall.” The mall is the culmination of marketplace dominance, over-merchandised and devoted to consumption and entertainment. There is an important lesson in this historical trajectory, and it resides in the ability of museums to learn and adapt as circumstances require, however slowly. This ability is one of the characteristics of the long-lived companies discussed earlier, and can be described as organizations remaining “in harmony with the world around them” and reacting in a “timely fashion to the conditions of society around them.”

Now, and together with the rest of the developed world, museums have arrived at the dead end of materialism. This turning point for museums has evolved slowly, in the manner of the cabinet of curiosities becoming educational resources, but there is now much greater urgency to hasten renewal. Remarkably, museums have retained their core work of collecting, exhibiting and interpreting, irrespective of all of these historical iterations – a clear demonstration that core practices need not be relinquished as the environment changes. The sustainability that museums require cannot be achieved through education, entertainment and connoisseurship, but by sustained public benefit through the quality of the work they do, sustained community support through the commitment of the local community and an appropriate degree of financial commitment by the main financial stakeholders.

In conclusion, the world is in need of intellectual self-defence as an antidote to the mindless work of marketers, the self-interest of corporatists and money as the measure of worth. Museums, as public institutions, are morally and intellectually obliged to question, challenge or ignore the status quo and officialdom, whenever necessary. With the exception of museums, there are few, if any, social institutions with the trust and credibility to fulfill this role.

It is time to honour this trust and broaden the purpose of museums to encompass critical thinking, mindfulness and social responsibility. Human adaptation lies at the heart of the current global challenges and all museums can help. Judging by the state of the troubled world and the urgent need for community organizations of the highest order, museums are positioned to realize their societal potential in a manner that truly reflects their inherent worth.

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Notes


11 Ibid., p. 60.


33 Berry, Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community, p. 82–83.
34 M. Schwarzer, email (July 2008).
40 Rifkin, Entropy, p. 256.
43 A. Gopnik, ‘The mindful museum’, The Walrus, 4 June, 2007, p. 89. This article is adapted from the 2006 Holtby Lecture at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.