

MAKING
MUSEUMS
MATTER

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From Being about Something to Being for Somebody

THE ONGOING TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM

At the end of World War II, the American museum—notwithstanding the ringing educational rhetoric with which it was originally established and occasionally maintained—had become engaged primarily in what my Washington colleague Barbara Franco once called the “salvage and warehouse business.”¹ It took as its basic tasks to gather, preserve, and study the record of human and natural history. Any further benefit, such as providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the collections and information thus accumulated, was simply a plus.

Fifty years later, caught up in the confluence of two powerful currents—one flowing throughout the worldwide museum community, the other specific to the United States—the American museum is being substantially reshaped. In place of an establishment-like institution focused primarily inward on the growth, care, and study of its collection, emerging instead is a more entrepreneurial institution that—if my vision of its ultimate form should prove correct—will have shifted its focus outward to concentrate

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on providing primarily educational services to the public and will measure its success in that effort by the overarching criterion of whether it is actually able to provide those services in a demonstrably effective way.

This prognostication makes no distinction between museums and museumlike institutions in terms of their funding sources, scale, or discipline. It applies equally to a large statewide historical society, a campus-based natural history museum, and a small, private art gallery. So-called private museums require particular mention. Even the most ostensibly private of American museums—through the combined effects of its own tax exemption and the charitable-contribution deductions claimed by its donors—receives a substantial measure of public support. Given the nature of that support, such private museums are inevitably expected not only to provide a level of public service comparable to that required of so-called public institutions but also to maintain similar standards of accountability and transparency.

Among workers in the field, the response to this ongoing change in the museum's focus has been mixed. Some—a minority, certainly—view it with distress. They argue that the museum—if not at the height of its salvage and warehouse days, then not long thereafter—was already a mature, fully evolved, and inherently good organization in no compelling need of further change. Particularly troublesome, in their view, would be to tamper with the centrality of the collection—even to entertain the notion that the collection might no longer serve as the museum's *raison d'être* but merely as one of its resources.

A far larger number of museum workers are sympathetic to the museum's evolution from a collection-based organization to a more educationally focused one, but they nevertheless tend to retreat from making institutional effectiveness so exclusive a test of institutional failure or success. Characterizing the museum as analogous in some measure to the university, they argue that the museum's traditional activities of preservation (which may include collecting), interpretation (which may include exhibiting), and scholarly inquiry (above all) are not merely instrumental steps toward an ultimately external outcome but should also be valued in their own right, as ends as well as means. From that moderate position, many still share the vision of an emerging new museum model—a transformed and redirected institution that can, through its public-service orientation, use its very special competencies in dealing with objects to improve the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities.

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Vague as those purposes may at first appear, so multifarious are the potential outcomes of which this emerging museum is capable that to use terms any more specific than “quality of life” or “communal well-being” would be unnecessarily exclusive.

Finally, at the other extreme are those museum workers who question whether the museum truly is an inherently good organization (or whether it has any inherent qualities at all) and whether the traditional activities of preservation, interpretation, and scholarship have any value in a museum context, apart from their capacity to contribute to an outcome external to the museum itself. Rejecting any analogy with a university, they argue that museum work might better be understood instead as a value-neutral technology and the museum itself as neither more nor less than a highly adaptable instrument that can be employed for a wide range of purposes.

What follows will consider the American museum from this last point of view, examining the currents that now press against it as well as suggesting several possibly unanticipated consequences that may well follow in the wake of those currents. It is based on the twin premises that, first, those pressures now reshaping the museum will continue unabated for the foreseeable future, and second, that in yielding to those pressures nothing innate or vital to the museum will be lost or even compromised. As Adele Z. Silver of the Cleveland Museum of Art wisely observed, “Museums are inventions of men, not inevitable, eternal, ideal, nor divine. They exist for the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use those things.”²

THE MUSEUM AS PUBLIC SERVICE

In a reflection on the recent history of museums, written for the fiftieth anniversary issue of the UNESCO magazine *Museum International*, Kenneth Hudson—perhaps the museum community’s most astute observer—wrote: “The most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half century . . . is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. It was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came to look, to wonder and to admire what was set

before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum’s prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors.”³

Among the several factors to which Hudson points in seeking to account for this change is the enormous increase during the postwar period in both the number and the magnitude of museums. By his count, at least three-quarters of the world’s active museums were established after 1945. In no way has the level of direct governmental assistance to these museums kept pace with that growth. In some countries it has remained stagnant; in others—the United States, for one—its vigorous growth in the 1960s and 1970s has been followed by actual decline. The result, almost worldwide, has been the same: to change the mix in the sources of support for museums, with a decrease in the proportion coming directly from governmental sources and a corresponding increase in the proportion that must be found elsewhere.

It seems clear, at the most elementary level, that the greater the degree to which a museum must rely for some portion of its support on “box office” income—not merely entrance fees but also the related funds to be derived from shop sales and other auxiliary activities—the greater will be its focus on making itself attractive to visitors. Likewise, the greater the extent to which a museum might seek corporate funding—particularly for its program activities—the more important will be that museum’s ability to assure prospective sponsors that its programs will attract a wide audience. Under such circumstances, it should hardly be surprising that museums are increasingly conscious of what might be of interest to the public. The consequence is that museums almost everywhere have, in essence, shifted from a “selling” mode to a “marketing” one. In the selling mode, their efforts were concentrated on convincing the public to “buy” their traditional offerings. In the marketing mode, their starting point instead is the public’s own needs and interests, and their efforts are concentrated on first trying to discover and then attempting to satisfy those public needs and interests.

Hudson argues—correctly, I think—that something more profound than mere box-office appeal is involved in this change of focus. He suggests that the museum’s growing preoccupation with its audience also may be attributable to the tremendous increase of professionalism within the museum community during the postwar years. The impact of that development—and, as a principal consequence, the equally tremendous growth in the scale, influence, and variety of professional associations—should not be

underestimated. The policy positions taken by those professional associations—and the insistent repetition of those policies over time—have played a compelling part in shaping the mind-set and expectations of new practitioners in the field and the larger public as well. As the sociologists Walter W. Powell and Rebecca Friedlkin point out in their analysis of the sources of change in public-service organizations, beyond such changes in focus as may be attributable to changes in the sources of an organization's support—for museums, the box-office factor—institutional change may frequently represent “a response to shifts in the ideology, professional standards, and cultural norms of the field or sector in which an organization is situated.”³⁴

That would appear to be the case for the museum. A broad range of national and local professional organizations have influenced the ideological reshaping of the American museum. Earliest among these was the AAM, founded in 1906 as something of a parallel to the United Kingdom's Museums Association, which dates back to 1889. Narrower in focus but also with considerable impact have been the more recently established Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) and the Association of Youth Museums (AYM). Of perhaps lesser consequence for the American museum—but of enormous influence elsewhere—has been the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Descended from the International Museums Office founded under the auspices of the League of Nations in 1927, ICOM was established in 1946 as a UNESCO-affiliated nongovernmental organization, headquartered in Paris.

The publications and program activities of these associations amply document the degree to which they have changed their emphasis over the past several decades, from collections and preservation to public service. Within the AAM, that shift can be attributed directly to the growing influence that museum educators have exercised over the association's public-policy positions. That influence can be traced on an ascending curve, beginning in June 1973 when a group of prominent museum educators threatened to secede from the organization. In June 1976, as a gesture of conciliation, a change in the AAM's constitution granted a committee of educators together with other disciplinary groups a role in the association's governance. With the publication of *Museums for a New Century* in 1984, education was declared to be a “primary” purpose of museums.⁵ This upward curve reached its zenith in May 1991, when the association's governing board adopted the educator-prepared position paper *Excellence and Equity* as an official statement of the association's policy.⁶ Woven throughout *Excellence*

and *Equity* are the linked propositions that a commitment to public service is “central to every museum's activities” and that “education—in the broadest sense of that word—[is] at the heart of their public service role.”⁷

A similar shift of focus can be traced in the AAM's program of institutional accreditation, first proposed in 1968 and put into operation in 1971. In its earliest phase, accreditation was primarily concerned with how an institution cared for its collection and maintained its facilities. With the passage of time, the scope of accreditation has steadily broadened to consider not only the institutional care of collections but also, as importantly, the programmatic use of those collections. Consider the contrast between the types of concern expressed in the AAM's first accreditation handbook of 1970 and in its most recent one, published in 1997. In the 1970 publication, among the positive traits that might support a museum's accreditation were avoidance of “crude or amateurish” exhibits, evidence that exhibit cases were dust- and vermin-proof, and a demonstration that the exhibits themselves were “selected to serve [some] purpose and not just [as] ‘visible storage.’”⁸ Regarding special exhibitions, it suggested that the better practice was to offer exhibitions that appealed to the interest of the general public and not simply to that of an “antiquarian or dilettante” audience. In the AAM's 1997 publication, the emphasis shifted entirely. Suggested areas of inquiry include whether the “museum effectively involves its audiences in developing public programs and exhibitions,” whether it “effectively identifies and knows the characteristics of its existing and potential audiences,” and whether it “effectively evaluates its programs and exhibitions” in terms of their audience impact.⁹

Contrasting quotations from two other AAM publications may suggest how far the rhetoric—if not yet all of the operational practices—of the museum community has evolved during this period. Consider the 1968 *Belmont Report*—a mostly forgotten document that was once thought (wrongly, in the event) to offer an irrefutable argument for the increased federal funding of American museums. Those who produced the report were certainly aware that “education” would prove the most likely heading under which increased funding could be justified, but they seemed reluctant to relinquish entirely the old-fashioned satisfaction (“pleasure and delight”) that museum collections were traditionally thought to provide.¹⁰ “Art museums,” they explained, “aim to provide the aesthetic and emotional pleasure which great works of art offer. This is a primary purpose of an art museum. It is assumed that a majority of the people who come regularly to art museums come to

be delighted, not to be taught, or preached at, or "improved" except by the works of art themselves. An art museum, especially, is—or ought to be—a place where one goes to get refreshed."¹¹ Never adequately explained in the *Belmont Report* was why so much refreshment (particularly in the case of the art museum, where that refreshment was disproportionately consumed by the more affluent members of society) should properly be provided at public rather than private expense.

The escalation in rhetoric is suggestive. Over three decades, what the museum might be envisioned as offering to the public has grown from mere refreshment (the museum as carbonated beverage) to education (the museum as a site for informal learning) to nothing short of communal empowerment (the museum as an instrument for social change). Describing the growth of museums in rural Brazilian communities seeking to discover their roots and preserve a unique history, Maria de Lourdes Horta wrote in a 1997 AAM publication:

A museum without walls and without objects, a true virtual museum, is being born in some of those communities, which look in wonder to their own process of self-discovery and self-recognition. . . . For the moment, in my country, [museums] are being used in a new way, as tools for self-expression, self-recognition, and representation; as spaces of power negotiation among social forces; and as strategies for empowering people so that they are more able to decide their own destiny.¹²

ICOM, like the AAM, has put increasing emphasis on the public-service role of museums. Going still further, it has advanced toward a view—similar to that from Brazil—that museums can play a powerful role in bringing about social change. To some extent, that conviction has grown almost in tandem with the number of developing countries included within its membership base. Given that change in its membership, as well as its ongoing relationship with UNESCO, ICOM's emphasis on social activism must be understood as more than simply a passing phase. It permeates virtually every aspect of ICOM, beginning even with its membership requirements. In contrast to the AAM, which continues to take the more traditional approach of defining museums primarily in terms of their activities—to present essentially educational programs that use and interpret objects for the public—ICOM's statutes were amended in 1974 to redefine "eligible" museums as those that have among their characteristics the purpose of serving (in an earlier iteration) "the community" or (in ICOM's current definition) "society and . . . its development."¹³

Among the clearest articulations of ICOM's evolving position was a resolution adopted by the membership in 1971 at its ninth general conference. Rejecting as "questionable" what it called the "traditional concept of the museum," with its emphasis "merely" on the possession of objects of cultural and natural heritage, the conference urged museums to undertake a complete reassessment of the needs of their publics, so that the museums could "more firmly establish their educational and cultural role in the service of mankind." Rather than prescribing any monolithic approach to this task, individual museums were urged to develop programs that addressed the "particular social environment[s] in which they operated."¹⁴

At an April 1998 meeting in San José, Costa Rica, "the first summit of the museums of the Americas," organized by the AAM in collaboration with some of ICOM's national and other committees, the proposition that museums might play a useful role in social development was taken a step further. In a three-tiered finding that amounted to a syllogism, the 150 delegates representing 33 Western countries took the position that the museum was not merely a potential or desirable instrument for sustainable social advancement but, in effect, an essential one. The logic of that position went as follows: "First, sustainable development is a process for improving the quality of life in the present and the future, promoting a balance between environment, economic growth, equity and cultural diversity, and requires the participation and empowerment of all individuals; second, culture is the basis of sustainable development; and third (and, in effect, ergo), museums are essential in the protection and diffusion of our cultural and natural heritage."¹⁵

This emphasis on social service is the first of the two currents that are pushing the American museum out of the salvage, warehouse, and soda-pop business and toward a new line of work. It is powered both by economic necessity—the box-office factor—and by the museum field's changing ideology as transmitted not only through such major professional associations as the AAM, ASTC, AYM, and ICOM but through countless smaller ones as well. It is coupled with the reality that for many of the more recently founded museums in newly populous parts of this country, it will never be possible—because of scarcity-driven market prices, international treaties and export/import controls, or endangered species and similar legislation—to amass the in-depth and universal collections that were built many years ago by the longer-established institutions. For those older museums, public service may nevertheless be their more viable future. For younger

ones, without important collections or any great prospect of ever acquiring them, public service may be their only future.

EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF NONPROFITS

The second current pushing against American museums is a local one. Its source is in the not-for-profit or "third" sector of this country's economy, the organizational domain to which the largest segment of those museums belongs and by which all of them are profoundly influenced. Comprising more than a million organizations—museums accounting for less than 1 percent—and generally estimated to include about 7 percent of the nation's wealth, jobs, and economic activity, the third sector itself is in the midst of profound change as to how it evaluates its constituent organizations as worthy of funding. Increasingly, the principal emphasis of such evaluations is being put on organizational performance—on the results that an organization can actually achieve.

The genesis of this change may be found in the long-simmering sense that the managers of governmental agencies as well as third-sector organizations—both lacking the reality checks of a competitive marketplace as well as the operational discipline required to demonstrate consistent profitability—have rarely been required to apply their resources with the same effectiveness and efficiency that would be demanded of them in a for-profit context.¹⁶ In the case of federal government agencies, Congress's desire to ensure greater effectiveness culminated in the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which was passed with strong bipartisan support in 1993 and which became fully effective in 2000. GPRA requires every federal agency to establish—preferably in objective and measurable terms—specific performance goals for each of its programs and to report annually to Congress on its success in meeting those goals. For the third sector, where nothing so draconian as GPRA has yet to be proposed, this new emphasis on organizational performance nevertheless constitutes a sharp break with past practice.

Two events can be singled out as having accelerated this growing emphasis on performance. One was the "social-enterprise" model of third-sector organizations developed by Professor J. Gregory Dees at Harvard Business School during the early 1990s.¹⁷ The other was the United Way of America's development and advocacy of outcome-based evaluation as the

appropriate means of evaluating the effectiveness of the health and human-service agencies to which it provides funds.¹⁸

The impact of Dees's social-enterprise model can best be understood by considering some of the ways that third-sector organizations have previously been viewed. As recently as the end of World War II—a time when museums were still in their establishment stage and when survival (as contrasted with accomplishment) was widely accepted as a perfectly reasonable indicator of institutional success—the three adjectives most commonly used to describe such organizations were "philanthropic," "benevolent," and "charitable." Remarkably, none of these referred either to what those organizations actually did or to what impact they might hope or expect to make on some target audience. Their reference instead was to the high-minded motives of the individuals responsible for their establishment and support: philanthropic (from the Greek for a "lover of humankind"), benevolent (from the Latin for "somebody wishing to do well"), and charitable (from the Latin also: *caritas*, or "with loving care"). In the years since, those adjectives have largely been replaced by the terms "nonprofit" and "not-for-profit," notwithstanding the repeated criticism that the third sector is far too large and its work far too important to define it so negatively in terms of what it is not, instead of positively in terms of what it is.¹⁹

What is particularly striking about Dees's social-enterprise model is its way of cutting through earlier methods of evaluating these third-sector institutions and concentrating instead on "organizational outcomes," "impacts," or "results." In the long run, says Dees, it is those outcomes that matter—not goodwill, not an accumulation of resources, not good process, and not even highly acclaimed programs, but actual outcomes, impacts, and results. In essence, those are the organization's bottom line. Thus envisioned, the social enterprise can be seen as at least partially parallel to the commercial enterprise—similar in having achievement of a bottom line as its ultimate operational objective, yet wholly different because of the way that bottom line is defined. The commercial enterprise pursues a quantifiable economic outcome; the social enterprise pursues a social outcome that may or may not be quantifiable but that, in any event, must certainly be ascertainable.

Dees points to a second important difference between the commercial enterprise and the social enterprise. He calls this the "social method." Whereas the commercial enterprise must rely on "explicit economic exchange relationships, contracts, and arm's-length bargains" to obtain resources and to distribute its product, the social enterprise operates in a dif-

ferent environment. At the input end, it may rely on the voluntary contribution of funds, goods, and/or labor; at the output end, it typically provides its services to the public without charge or at a price below the cost of producing those services. Those differences aside, in the social-enterprise model—just as in the commercial-enterprise one—the ability to achieve an intended bottom line is what distinguishes organizational success from failure.

For the American museum, this is a fresh challenge. To the extent that it has ever accepted that its performance might be legitimately subject to overall and possibly comparative evaluation, its worst-case scenario was that such an evaluation would—like the AAM's accreditation program—be wholly internal. What constitutes a good museum? At one time, it might have been defined in terms of the loyalty and generosity of its benefactors. Later, "good" might have referred to the magnitude of its resources and the excellence of its staff: a fine collection, a highly regarded and well-credentialed group of curators, an appropriately large endowment, and a substantial building. Among government-related museums, a good museum might be one that adhered to the best practices and highest professional standards in the field, one that did things "by the book." Or—as was the case during the heyday of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, with their emphasis on program funding—it might be a museum at which exhibitions and other programs were considered exemplary by knowledgeable colleagues who worked in peer organizations. What seems so extraordinary, at least in retrospect, is that not one of those approaches took into the slightest account the museum's external impact, on either its visitors or its community.

Curiously, a rigorous bottom-line evaluation, with its primary weight on just such considerations, would not really eliminate any of those other, inner-directed approaches. It would simply incorporate and supersede them. For a museum to achieve a consistently solid bottom-line result, it would still need the ongoing support of generous donors and a spectrum of tangible and intangible resources. It would still need to establish and adhere to sound working practices and to produce high-quality programming. In the social-enterprise model, all the factors are necessary but not—in themselves or in combination—sufficient. The museum that aspires to be successful must still manage to combine these elements with whatever else may be necessary to render the specific public service that it has identified (for itself and for its supporters) as its own particular bottom line.

And what, for museums, might such a bottom line be? Here, I think, the museum community can find useful guidance in the evaluation model that the United Way of America formally adopted in June 1995. Before, the United Way had centered its evaluation process around the programs of its applicant health and human-service agencies. In 1995 it determined that it would henceforth concentrate instead on the results of those programs—on the identifiable outcomes or impacts that those agencies were able to achieve through those programs.

The key concept in the United Way's newly adopted approach is *difference*. To qualify for funding, the United Way's applicant agencies are called upon to demonstrate their ability to make positive differences—differences in knowledge or attitude or values—in the quality of individual or communal lives.

There are, I think, few people working in the museum field today who doubt for a moment that museums can meet such a standard. Museums quintessentially have the potency to change what people may know or think or feel, to affect what attitudes they may adopt or display, to influence what values they form. As Harold Skramstad, president emeritus of Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, asked in 1996 at the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary symposium in Washington, D.C., unless museums can and do play a role relative to the real problems of real people's lives, then what is their point?

The answer is, with the considerable funding that they receive directly and indirectly from public sources, American museums must embrace such a role. As I have written elsewhere,

If our museums are *not* being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people's lives, on what [other] basis might we possibly ask for public support? Not, certainly, on the grounds that we need museums in order that museum professionals might have an opportunity to develop their skills and advance their careers, or so that those of us who enjoy museum work will have a place in which to do it. Not certainly on the grounds that they provide elegant venues for openings, receptions and other glamorous social events. Nor is it likely that we could successfully argue that museums . . . deserve to be supported simply as an established tradition, as a kind of ongoing habit, long after any good reasons to do so have ceased to be relevant or have long been forgotten.²⁰

With the ongoing spread of outcome-based evaluation, however, two cautions seem in order. First, museums need to observe a certain modesty as

they identify their bottom lines, lest they overstate what they can actually accomplish. Grand proclamations, such as those made at the first summit of the museums of America, may be important in highlighting the museum field's overall capability to contribute meaningfully toward social development. The individual museum that declares "denting the universe" to be its bottom line may be setting itself up for failure unless and until it can produce a perceptibly dented universe to demonstrate its accomplishment. Museum workers need to remind themselves more forcefully than they generally do that museums can wonderfully enhance and enrich individual lives, even change them, and make communities better places in which to live. But only rarely—and even then, more often than not in synergy with other institutions—do they truly dent the universe.

Second, museums must ensure that the need to assess the effectiveness of their public programs does not distort or dumb down the contents of those programs to the point of including only what may have a verifiable or demonstrable outcome and excluding everything else. The problem is parallel to that faced by the nation's school systems with respect to nationally standardized tests. For all its promise, outcome-based evaluation—like any system—requires a wise and moderate application. Taken to an extreme, it can damage the very institutions that it was designed to benefit.

As part of the worldwide museum community, the American museum is under pressure to make public service its principal concern. Because the museum is also part of the American not-for-profit sector, the nature of the public service it will be expected to provide can be defined in more specific terms: demonstrably effective programs that make a positive difference in the quality of individual and communal lives. Recast in marketing terms, the demand is that the American museum provide some verifiable added value to the lives of those it serves in exchange for their continued support. Recast in blunter terms, the museum is being told that, to earn its keep, it must be something more important than just an orderly warehouse or popular soda fountain.

RIPE FOR CHANGE:

EXHIBITING THE LIVING CULTURE

Traditional wisdom holds that an organization can never change just one thing. So finely balanced are most organizations that change to any one ele-

ment will ultimately require compensating and sometimes wholly unanticipated changes to many others. As the focus of the worldwide museum community continues to shift, from the care and study of collections to the delivery of a public service, I want to examine at least two other aspects of American museums that may be considered ripe for compensating changes. One is the way that they are divided along disciplinary lines by the types of collections they hold—most typically art, history, and science. The other is the way they are staffed and how museum workers are trained. In both respects, the overwhelming majority of American museums and museum-training programs continue to operate as if World War II had only just ended and as if collections were still at the center of the museum's concerns.

With regard to the division of museums by discipline, let me start with an anecdote. During a visit to British Columbia in 1997, I learned of an exhibition mounted earlier that year by the Nanaimo District Museum on Vancouver Island, *Gone to the Dogs*. The exhibition not only traced the history of dogs in the community back to their pre-European roots but also took into account the various ways in which dogs—"as companions and coworkers"—continued to relate to the community today: from tracking predators for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to acting as Seeing Eyes for the visually handicapped to serving as pets. In a Doggy Hall of Fame, local residents were invited to post photographs of favorite dogs as well as brief, typed statements as to why they thought them special. A free film series—*Dog Day Afternoons*—presented feature films about dogs. Supplementary programs addressed local dog-related businesses such as pet grooming and veterinary services and highlighted the work of the SPCA.²¹ By all accounts, the exhibition was an enormous success. It brought many first-time visitors to the museum, its popularity required the museum to transfer the exhibition to another local venue and extend the closing date, and, above all, it appeared to have left behind the palpable sense of a public enriched by its recognition of a common bond. In the end, the exhibition proved not to have been so much about dogs as it was about the shared concerns and interconnectedness of a community.

Almost as striking as the novelty of that exhibition, however, was the recognition of how few communities in the United States might ever hope to see a similar exhibition in their own local museums, notwithstanding the ease with which it might be replicated. The mission of the Nanaimo District Museum was defined by geography, not by discipline: It was established to serve the city of Nanaimo and its surrounding district. In seeking to il-

illuminate that region's cultural heritage and link that heritage to its present-day development, no restrictions limited the range of materials that the museum could employ to illustrate such links. In the United States, most museums are confined to specific disciplines. In the 1989 *National Museum Survey*—the most recent broad-based statistical information available—only 8.6 percent of American museums classified themselves as general museums not tied to a particular discipline.²² If children's museums, generally multidisciplinary, are counted as well, the total is still barely above 15 percent.

For the remaining 85 percent of American museums, to present an exhibition such as *Come to the Dogs* would generally be considered as beyond their disciplinary boundaries. When collections were at the center of a museum's focus, that disciplinary exclusivity might have made sense. From a managerial perspective, at least, it limited the number of such narrowly trained specialists as discipline-specific curators and conservators who had to be kept on staff. With the refocus of the museum on its public-service function, strong arguments can be advanced for releasing the museum from this disciplinary straitjacket—most particularly in communities that have only a single museum or, at best, two. Why should those museums not try to broaden their disciplinary scope? Staffing problems could readily be dealt with through collaboration with local colleges, universities, and research institutions, by outsourcing, or through the use of consultants. In the words that James Smithson used to describe his expectations of the institution that was to bear his name—that it be for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge”—the public-service-oriented museum might well conclude that, rather than pursue both goals with equal vigor, it would make better sense to emphasize “diffusion,” where the museum's unique competencies lie, and to leave the “increase” to possibly more competent academic institutions, with which it could closely collaborate.²³

Easing the disciplinary boundaries of museums would not be as radical a step as it might first appear. A separation into disciplines was never inherent to the museum as an institutional form, even in its origin in those sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities. Such a separation was a later development. The Tradescant collection—the founding collection for the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford—comfortably combined natural-history specimens and what its first catalog of 1656 called “Artificials”—objects that ranged from works of art, weapons, and coins to ethnographic materials and Egyptian and Roman antiquities.²⁴ Many continental European *wunderkammern* were similar. In the United States, the first

museums—such as the one Charles Willson Peale opened in Philadelphia in 1786—held equally eclectic collections. Peale's museum included not only portraits of American Revolutionary War heroes but also fossils, shells, models of machinery, and wax figures of Native North Americans.²⁵ Throughout the twentieth century, the case for multidisciplinary museums was advanced by museum practitioners as diverse in their views as John Cotton Dana in the first quarter of the century and by the proponents of the ecomuseum in more recent years.²⁶

Contemporary museum practice provides ample room to envision museums organized along other than disciplinary lines. One immediate example is the children's museum. In her 1992 survey of children's museums across the United States, Joanne Cleaver credits Michael Spock and his staff—who revived the Boston Children's Museum, starting in 1961—with having pioneered the idea that “the museum was for somebody rather than about something.”²⁷ An alternative institutional form—a museum that is about something but nevertheless is nondisciplinary—is the community or neighborhood museum. One well-established type is the *heimat* (“home-land”) museum, an institution that began to appear throughout Germany during the latter part of the nineteenth century and, after some twists and turns, still survives today.²⁸

Although *heimat* museums were intended originally to document rural life and popular culture, particularly in their preindustrialized forms, the potential role of these museums in education and community development was recognized by the turn of the century. Under the Nazi regime, it was only a short step from education to propaganda. The *heimat* museums were employed to disseminate a pseudoscientific message of Aryan superiority and to preach a nationalist gospel of blood and soil. Notwithstanding that dark episode, there is something remarkably prescient of current museological thinking in these 1936 observations by a German curator writing about a *heimat*-like museum in Cologne: “The *heimatmuseum* must not be a kingdom of the dead, a cemetery. It is made for the living; it is to the living that it must belong, and they must feel at ease there. . . . [T]he museum must help them to see the present in the mirror of the past, and the past in the mirror of the present . . . and, if it fails in that task, it becomes no more than a lifeless collection of objects.”²⁹

In the contrasting attitudes that German museum workers take toward its postwar continuation, the *heimat* museum can be seen as providing a litmus test by which to separate those who still believe in the primacy of col-

lections from those who now see the museum primarily in terms of public service. Some German colleagues dismiss the contemporary *heimat* museum as beyond the boundaries of the field because, in addition to holding objects, it also serves as an active cultural and social center. For exactly that same reason, other German colleagues consider it to be an especially valuable and viable kind of museum. Outside of Germany, the *heimat* concept has taken on a life of its own. With its emphasis on everyday life and ordinary objects, for example, the Museum of London—which opened in 1976 and which Kenneth Hudson has acknowledged to be “one of the finest city-biography museums in the world”—might simply be seen as the *heimat* museum writ large.³⁰

With regard to neighborhood museums, perhaps the best-known model in the United States is the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, opened by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967. As an institutional type, the neighborhood museum was described by the late John R. Kinard, Anacostia's founding director: “[It] encompasses the life of the people of the neighborhood—people who are vitally concerned about who they are, where they came from, what they have accomplished, their values and their most pressing needs. Through the various media of its exhibits the museum reflects the priorities already determined by neighborhood people and other community agencies and is, thereby, able to present the issues that demand attention.”³¹ Just as few American museums might have had the flexibility to mount the Nainimo Museum's *Gone to the Dogs*, few might have had the inclination to undertake so bold and neighborhood-specific an exhibition as *The Rat: Man's Invited Affliction*, an early Anacostia project generated by local children and the concern they expressed about the problem of rat infestation in their neighborhood.

Kinard later wrote that it was the *Rat* exhibition that convinced him and his staff that the museum could no longer afford to deal only with life in the past. Its exhibitions, he said, “must have relevance to present-day problems that affect the quality of life here and now.”³² That conviction notwithstanding, the museum's focus on its immediate neighborhood was eventually to change. Scarcely more than a decade after the founding of the museum, Anacostia's board of trustees adopted a new mission statement pursuant to which it was to offer a more generalized but still multidisciplinary program dealing with African American history, art, and culture.³³ In essence, it was now to be a community rather than a neighborhood museum, with the understanding that the community it served was to be a na-

tional one. In 1987, two years before Kinard's death, the Anacostia Museum officially dropped the description “neighborhood” from its name and moved from its first site in a converted movie theater to a new, purpose-built facility in a nearby park. In recent years, with additional space at its disposal, its name was changed again to the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture.

Neighborhood museums—following the original Anacostia model—have generally been considered in connection with the economically depressed inner city or similar locations, but there appears to be no reason why their use should be so limited. One example of the wider application of the neighborhood museum concept—particularly in its concentration on contemporary issues that affect its constituents—is the remarkable metamorphosis that has occurred at the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York. It was founded as a salvage and warehouse museum almost by default; Margaret Woodbury Strong, its patroness, left it more than three hundred thousand objects after her death in 1969, nearly twenty-seven thousand of them dolls. Several decades into its life and after extensive and even painful consultation with its community, the museum decided to change its original focus and become instead a museum that had special appeal to local families.

From its previous emphasis on life in the Northeast before 1940—a concentration well supported by Mrs. Strong's collection—it has turned instead to what its director calls “history that informs civic discourse about contemporary issues.”³⁴ Since 1992 the topics examined by its exhibition program have included the cold war, AIDS, bereavement, racism, drug abuse, and health care. It has entered into joint ventures with the Children's Television Workshop for an exhibition built around *Sesame Street* and with the Rochester public library system to integrate a branch library into the museum.

Some observers argue that museums can only achieve this organizational breadth by sacrificing the depth with which they were previously able to address a narrower range of subjects. Others—my Smithsonian colleague Robert D. Sullivan, for one—respond that, whether or not museums are or ever were the most appropriate places for learning in depth, an emerging electronic information environment is rapidly reshaping how information is distributed, and breadth-based learning, typified by the Internet's capacity to provide infinitely branched linkages, will be its hallmark. “In the same way,” Sullivan says, “that the printed word as a medium of diffusion encouraged linear, sequential, and vertical ways of thinking, the Internet

encourages non-linear, non-sequential, horizontal ways of thinking and connecting knowledge. The instantaneous horizontal connectivity of the Internet collapses time and space and evaporates and/or challenges all efforts by information and knowledge rich institutions to remain isolated, fragmented, walled chambers."³⁵

For the "knowledge-rich" American museum to abandon its old scavenger-warehouse business would seem fully synchronous with such a change. All the same, many in the American museum community—and not merely the moderates of whom I spoke earlier—would be reluctant to see museums lose their capacity to deal with knowledge in depth as well as breadth.

NEW SKILLS FOR MUSEUM MANAGEMENT

The second unintended consequence of the American museum's shift in focus away from the care and study of its collections involves the way museums are staffed and how museum workers are trained. Here we enter uncharted territory, but one thing seems clear: Tomorrow's museums cannot be operated with yesterday's skills. Although museums will still require the expertise of the discipline-centered specialists who today hold many of their senior positions, the successful operation of public-service museums will require that those specialists at least share these positions with museum workers of a different orientation and expertise—museum workers who will bring to their institutions a new combination of skills and attitudes.

Along these lines, Leslie Bedford—for many years with the Boston Children's Museum and more recently associated with the Museum Leadership Education Program at the Bank Street School in New York—has proposed the establishment of a training institute that would prepare museum workers for careers in public programming.³⁶ In her view, a thoroughly trained public programmer would be a "creative generalist" who combines different specialties now scattered both inside and outside the museum. These would include an ability to work directly with community members to assess how the museum might appropriately meet their needs; practical knowledge of how to establish productive collaborations with other community organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit; understanding of how best to use all the myriad means—exhibitions, lectures, films, concerts, programs of formal education—through which the museum may in-

teract with the community; and knowledge of how to make appropriate use of audience research and various forms of program evaluation.

Going beyond Bedford's proposal, this last skill ought to be in the curriculum of museum-training programs at every level. Its neglect—particularly in management training—may be caused in part by the tangency of such programs with graduate schools of business. In the for-profit sphere, where at least short-term success or failure can be determined from financial and other periodic reports, evaluation simply does not perform the same critical function of measuring effectiveness and distinguishing success from failure that it does among governmental agencies and not-for-profit organizations.

Critical to understand here is the changing standard of not-for-profit accountability. As effectiveness becomes more firmly established throughout the third sector as the overarching criterion of institutional success, accountability will eventually boil down to a single, hard-nosed question: Is this institution demonstrably using the resources entrusted to it to achieve what it said it intended to achieve when it requested and was given those resources? Peter Swords, of the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York, has referred to this enhanced standard as "positive accountability": being able to show that the resources entrusted to an institution were in demonstrable fact used to accomplish its intended purpose.³⁷ This positive standard is in contradistinction to what he calls "negative accountability": being able to show that no financial improprieties have occurred and that all of an institution's funds can properly be accounted for. An organization without the capacity to monitor its outcomes regularly and credibly—unable, that is, to render a positive account of its activities—may no longer be fundable. Nor will meeting such a requirement simply be a matter of appropriate staffing; it will also be a matter of budget. Monitoring program impacts is costly, but it will be no more a dispensable frill tomorrow than filing tax returns or tending to workplace safety are today.

The work that needs to be done is daunting. In many instances it may start with something so basic as getting a museum's leadership to articulate what it hopes or expects its institution to accomplish. That so many museums continue to be so unfocused about their purpose—avoiding any reference to outcomes at all and/or mistakenly defining them in terms of organizationally controllable outputs—is only the beginning of the problem. Compounding it are, first, the extraordinarily wide range of potential museum

outcomes—educational, experiential, recreational, and social—and, second, the difficulty in ascertaining the achievement of those outcomes, a difficulty far greater than in ascertaining the frequently quantifiable results that can be achieved by health and human-service agencies.

Museums may sometimes provide anecdotally recoverable and even life-transforming “Oh Wow!” experiences.³⁸ More often, though, the impact of museums on their communities—on their visitors and nonvisitors alike—is subtle, indirect, cumulative, and intertwined with the impact of such other sources of formal and informal educational experiences as schools, religious bodies, and social and affinity groups. Museum management must not only become educated as to how the museum’s impact can be captured and described; they must also educate those to whom they are accountable as to what may or may not be possible in rendering their accounts. In no way do these complexities make evaluation any less essential. On the contrary: Because the value that the museum can add to a community’s well-being may not be nearly so self-evident as that provided by an emergency room or a children’s shelter, credible evaluation will be all the more critical to the museum’s survival.

At the level of institutional leadership, the most important new skill will be the ability 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. The museum has tremendous technical facility in assembling, displaying, and interpreting objects, and a well-interpreted display of those objects may have enormous power to affect what and how people think or know or feel. What then can the museum contribute? Can it be a successful advocate for environmentally sound public policies? In what ways might it help the community to achieve or maintain social stability? Or energize and release the imaginative power of its individual citizens? Can it serve as a site for strengthening family and/or other personal ties? Can it trigger people’s desire for further education or training, inspire them toward proficiency in the creative arts or the sciences?

For the newly reshaped American museum to achieve its public-service objectives, even those new skills may not be sufficient. Needed as well may be some attitudinal changes—two in particular. First, museum workers must learn to relax their expectations as to why the public visits their institutions and what it may take away from those visits. Exhibition curators

may sometimes imagine a far greater congruence than is really the case between the intensity with which they have prepared an exhibition and the interest that the public may take in the educational content of that exhibition. The public is not a monolith. People come to museums for many different reasons and take many different things out of that experience.

In *Speak to My Heart*, an exhibition opened by the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture in 1998, a label text described the community role of the contemporary African American church as “a safe place to be . . . a haven from the stressful workaday world, a place for personal growth and community nurture, and an outlet for the development and use of natural talents.” How pertinent might such a description be to the museum? Is the museum only important as a place in which to receive the authorized curatorial word, or might it have other legitimate uses as well?³⁹ That so many different visitors may choose to use the museum in so many different ways should not matter. That it is so open textured as a destination, so adaptable to various public uses should not—at least in the emerging and visitor-centered museum—be regarded as a defect. Rather, it should be understood as one of its greater glories.

The other attitude in need of change involves the museum’s relationship to the community. The emerging public-service-oriented museum must see itself not as a cause but as an instrument. Much of the cost of maintaining that instrument is paid by the community: by direct support, by the community’s forbearance from collecting real estate, water, sewer, and other local taxes, and by the considerable portion of every private tax-deductible contribution that constitutes an indirect public subsidy from the community. For that reason alone, the community is legitimately entitled to have some choice—not the only choice, but some choice—in determining how that instrument is to be used.

In the emerging museum, responsiveness to the community—not in discriminate, certainly, but consistent with the museum’s public-service obligations and with the professional standards of its field—must be understood not as a surrender but as a fulfillment. The opportunity for museums to be of profound service, to use their competencies in collecting, preserving, studying, and interpreting objects to enrich the quality of individual lives and to enhance their community’s well-being, must certainly outdazzle any satisfactions that the old salvage, warehouse, or soda-pop business could ever have possibly offered.

NOTES

1. Notwithstanding that museums throughout all of the Americas might appropriately be so designated, the phrases "American museum" and "American museums" are used here to refer solely to museums in the United States. Barbara Franco is director of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Her observation was made in conversation with the author, June 1998.
2. Barbara Y. Newsom and Adele Z. Silver, eds., *The Art Museum as Educator: A Collection of Studies as Guides to Practice and Policy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 13.
3. Kenneth Hudson, "The Museum Refuses to Stand Still," *Museum International* 197 (1998): 43.
4. Walter W. Powell and Rebecca Friedkin, "Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 181.
5. American Association of Museums (AAM), *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1984).
6. AAM, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1992).
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. AAM, *Museum Accreditation: A Report to the Profession* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1970).
9. AAM, *A Higher Standard: The Museum Accreditation Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1997).
10. AAM, *America's Museums: The Belmont Report* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1968).
11. *Ibid.*, 2.
12. From a presentation made during the Smithsonian Institution's 150th anniversary symposium, Washington, D.C., September 5-7, 1996. The full text appears in *Museums for the New Millennium: A Symposium for the Museum Community* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution, and AAM, 1997); the quoted passage is found on pp. 107-108.
13. ICOM Statutes, sec. 2, art. 3.
14. ICOM News 71 (September 1971): 47.
15. Taken from the May 1998 interim report to the AAM board of directors and the ICOM executive committee on the summit meeting of the museums of the Americas, "Museums and Sustainable Communities," San José, Costa Rica, April 15-18, 1998.
16. See, for example, Judge Richard A. Posner's observation in *United Cancer Council v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, 165 F3d 1173 (7th Cir 1999): "Charitable organizations are plagued by incentive problems. Nobody owns the rights to the profits and therefore no one has the spur to efficient performance that the lure of profits creates."

17. J. Gregory Dees's views can be found in two published Harvard Business School "notes": *Social Enterprise: Private Initiatives for the Common Good*, N9-395-116 (November 30, 1994) and *Structuring Social-Purpose Ventures: From Philanthropy to Commerce*, N9-396-343 (April 15, 1996).
18. For a basic description of the United Way's approach, see *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (Arlington, Va.: United Way of America, 1996).
19. Nancy R. Axlerod, former president of the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, suggested that these negative descriptions of third-sector organizations were no less inappropriate than that offered by the father who, on being asked the gender of his three children, responded that "two were boys and one was not."
20. Stephen E. Weil, keynote address to the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, Rochester, New York, November 13, 1997.
21. Information about *Gone to the Dogs* and about the Nanaimo District Museum generally was kindly supplied by Debra Bodner, the museum's director-curator.
22. All figures are from the data report for the 1989 *National Museum Survey* (Washington, D.C.: AAM, 1992).
23. In his 1826 will, through which the Smithsonian Institution was ultimately established, Smithsonian specifically mandated that it be "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men."
24. Arthur MacGregor, "The Cabinet of Curiosities in Seventeenth-Century Britain," in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1985), 147-158.
25. Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967), 242.
26. The writings of John Cotton Dana (1856-1929)—beyond question this country's most original thinker about museums—were out of print until the publication in 1999 of *The New Museum: Selected Writings of John Cotton Dana*, by the Newark Museum and the AAM. For an overview of his life, see Edward P. Alexander, "John Cotton Dana and the Newark Museum: The Museum of Community Service," in *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983). For a selected bibliography of Dana's museum-related writings, see *Newark Museum Quarterly* (spring/summer 1979): 58. For a description of the community movement, see Nancy J. Fuller, "The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project," in *Museums and Community: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullin Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 327-365.
27. Joanne Cleaver, *Doing Children's Museums* (Charlotte, Vt.: Williamson Publishing, 1992), 9.
28. For a brief history, see Andrea Hauenschild, "Heimatmuseum' and New Museology" (paper delivered at the Third International Workshop on New Museology, Tøten, Norway, September 14-19, 1986).

29. Quoted in Alfredo Cruz-Ramirez, "The Heimat Museum: A Perverted Forerunner," *Museum* 48 (1985): 242-244.
30. Kenneth Hudson, *The Good Museums Guide: The Best Museums and Art Galleries in the British Isles* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 102-103.
31. John R. Kinard and Esther Nighbert, "The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.," *Museum* 24, no. 2 (1972): 203.
32. *Ibid.*, 105.
33. Zora Martin-Felton and Gail S. Lowe, *A Different Drummer: John Kinard and the Anacostia Museum 1967-1989* (Washington, D.C.: Anacostia Museum, 1993), 37.
34. Scott G. Eberle and G. Rollie Adams, "Making Room for Big Bird," *History News* 51, no. 4 (autumn 1996): 23-26.
35. Robert D. Sullivan is the associate director for public programs at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The quoted language comes from "The Object in Question: Museums Caught in the Net" (unpublished essay presented at the annual meeting of the Visitor Studies Association, Washington, D.C., August 7, 1998).
36. Letter to the author, December 14, 1997.
37. Peter Swords discusses this in "Form 990 as a Tool for Nonprofit Accountability" (paper delivered at the "Governance of Nonprofit Organizations: Standards and Enforcement" conference, New York University School of Law, National Center on Philanthropy and the Law, October 30-31, 1997).
38. For a report of one such experience and an argument that such experiences should be given greater weight in visitor studies, see Anna M. Kindler, "Aesthetic Development and Learning in Art Museums: A Challenge to Enjoy," *Journal of Museum Education* 22, nos. 2 and 3 (1998): 12-15.
39. I am grateful to Camilla Boodie, a London-based museum consultant, for her suggestion that visitors may find a museum rewarding without necessarily accepting its authority. Conversation with the author, August 1998.

4

Fantasy Islands

Imagine two great and distant islands, as remote from one another (and from every place else) as Earth is from Mars or Venus. Imagine further that—in every respect save one—these two islands are uncannily alike. Each has all the necessary natural and human resources to support a stable and self-sufficient way of life. Each is self-contained to the point that none of its citizens has ever felt (or ever will feel) any necessity or even any great desire to reach out very far beyond its immediate shores. Until early in this century, these two islands even had virtually identical histories. The only difference between them lies in this: Some fifty years ago, the citizens of one of these islands—the one that we now call "Musalot"—began to establish a large and thriving variety of museums, exhibition centers, and related venues (hereinafter all called "museums") of almost every imaginable discipline and in a variety of scales. These museums have been maintained at a consistently high standard (and will continue indefinitely to be so).

In stark contrast to Musalot, not a single museum has ever been established on the other of these islands—the one that will always be known to us as "Naughtamuse"—nor will there ever be one. Because of an odd and

¹This was the third of three "warm-up exercises" that were published in *Museum News* (November-December 1996) under the collective title "To Help Think about Museums More Intensely."

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