

FORUM

Choosing among the Options: An Opinion about Museum Definitions

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There is a serious crisis of institutional identity and a crisis of concept.
... The truth is, we do not know any more what a museum institution is.”
(Sola 1992, 102 & 106)

INTRODUCTION³

Throughout my more than three decades in the museum business, people have debated the definition of museums. I have been among them, arguing that the boundaries of museums are expanding and that expansion can be seen as a positive development. Much of my writing has been about the importance of museums in the building and rebuilding of community. I steadfastly believe that museums can foster societal cohesion and civility. Taking museums' community-building role seriously is not easy and requires multi-faceted and consistent commitment.

Yet, even if we agree that museums have an overarching public responsibility, they are not and should not be programmatically uniform. Museums should choose among the many possible emphases and carefully define their vision so that their stated mission and direction are accurately articulated and achievable. That accomplished, staff will know what direction to go in, and the public will know from the outset what they might experience.

Here, I propose five different museum types, or categories. These are: object-centered, narrative, client-centered, community and national. It occurred to me that each

type, or category, of museums was formed from legitimate but different directions, by different pressures and each has contributed different areas of excellence to the museum field. But museums always borrow ideas from each other, and the result has been that through borrowing all museums are now a mixture of some or all of these types, and almost no museum is wholly one kind or another. But parsing museums into this taxonomy of archetypes offers a filter for viewing institutional intentions, allowing for future possibilities and celebrating the gifts that each type of museum has brought.

I write partly because rhetoric most appropriate to one noble mission is sometimes grafted inelegantly and even inappropriately onto a museum with another purpose. Frankly, this can lead to a facile expression that is often unexamined and, at its worst, might be termed expedient and even cynical. I am hopeful that if we use a new taxonomy of terms—a sorting language—then maybe we can measure, respect and celebrate each museum for what it actually is.

If museums' missions were examined with more precision, one outcome would be an acknowledgment of what we always knew—that museums are, should be, and always were, positioned along on a broad continuum.⁴ To state the obvious, “no museum can do what the whole range of museums can do any more than one college can cover the whole breadth of college possibilities...”⁵

Let us maintain our overarching commitment to public service, but let us declare the search for definitional homogenization over. Let us make it safe for museums to narrow their direction, to specialize. At the same time, let us celebrate museums that truly aim to be broad in their approach and can do so successfully. Then, collectively, let us hold each museum accountable to put its money where its oratory is.

MISSION STATEMENTS

It has become *de rigueur* for museums to write mission statements, to hold visioning workshops, and to produce annual goal-setting documents. The mission statement is

commonly broader than the annual plan. However, many plans tend to be somewhat formulaic and emphasize the museum's role in a wide palate of activities including education, social impact, scholarship, and community outreach. There are exemplary museums that aspire to and then fulfill these goals. But for others, these aspirations, while good, are often unfilled. In many cases, goals are not thoroughly thought out; the stated objectives take on a wish list aspect rather than a rigorously focused plan.

Writing an annual plan is obviously not enough. Museums must follow-through to remain creditable. Their objectives, to be actualized, must be reflected in the operating budget. With new objectives there must be a corresponding reordering (or expansion) of priorities, and above all, a re-allocation of funds. In a zero-sum budget process, that requires taking funds from some to give to others. It is a painful process.

Adding categories to one's mission without a clearly operationalized and realistically budgeted commitment to them is disingenuous. While not suggesting that museums are willfully distorting their intentions, it often appears that some commonly used terms are not fully understood. Outreach, underserved, accessibility, forum, civil society, inclusion, interactivity, and learning are used frequently and enthusiastically—but not precisely. There are certain museums that, in fact, fulfill these all-encompassing objectives and are, by their example, world leaders. They are few but great. It is the others that I wish to caution. Expansive rhetoric, if empty when used, gives museums bad reputations with targeted and then forgotten constituencies.

A SHORT HISTORY OF MUSEUMS⁶

Even in their beginnings, museums existed in different forms, intended for disparate purposes and diverse audiences. It might be an over-simplification to say that art and history museums were meant to awe, and ascribe power to the founder/s. These were primarily institutions of western objects. Natural history museums and other descendants of “cabinets of curiosity” were meant to display the world of the exotic to the uninitiated. Interestingly (and horrifically) many natural historians, collecting exotic flora and fauna,

included any non-white, non-European peoples and their products, reinforcing the notion that Western domination over “primitive non-rational” people was a good thing. Science and technology museums were designed to make us all believe in progress as a continuous progression—“Tomorrow will be better than today!” They were also intended to make laborers working in difficult conditions feel proud that they were part of an improving world. Even after the age of enlightenment, collections of Christian religious objects were displayed with an intention to inspire reverence; spiritual objects of non-Christian people were intended to arouse curiosity. At the dawn of the twentieth century, children’s museums were founded to improve education for children (ages 8-12) who, as the theory went, were not miniature adults, and had unique needs for different and more tactile stimuli to learn.

Collectively, these museums used objects to promote good taste and other cannons of acceptable behavior among visitors, and to assure their place amongst the “decent citizens.” In this respect, museums were overtly institutions of social education. The museum workers (often from the upper classes) were allied with the museum founders and board members as purveyors of good and upright thought.

This chronology brings museums to the mid-twentieth century, when pervasive changes begin. These changes often came in the form of a struggle, and this has antecedents in the first part of the twentieth century, when a mostly tacit philosophical alliance formed between the political left (most especially academics), activist minority cultural groups (including indigenous peoples), and museum educators. Often separately, but with common purpose, they began to agitate for structures that respected and gave more direct voice to the visitor, to the descendants of the displayed and to the contemporary history and artistic achievements of the marginalized. This shift, most of it very civilized, was an outgrowth of the less tranquil “power to the people” political movement of the time.

DEFINITIONS OF MUSEUMS

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one of the consequences of this revolution is the thrilling but complex balance of sharing power. In the past, there were fewer stakeholders, fewer competing claims and desired outcomes. Now there are many vocal constituencies: staff, board, volunteers, patrons, governments, producers of the material, and the public. While their advocacy has broadened the museum's mission, it has also resulted in some lack of mission clarity. Now museum leadership must deftly steer through the competing claims.⁸

The words used by museum associations to describe museums reflect the partial success of this revolution.⁹ In the most orthodox definition, Museums Associations, United Kingdom (MA) writes that a museum, "collects, documents, preserves, exhibits, and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit."

The Canadian Museum Association adds words specifying the charter of organization, excluding for-profit museums, and expanding types of allowable collections (including arboreta, zoos, and botanical gardens) and making room for science centers and galleries to be considered museums even though they have no collections or their primary objects are reproductions or "purpose-built" samples. Canada also includes words about visitor motivation to allow "enjoyment" to accompany "instruction"¹⁰.

Museums Australia formally adopted a new museum definition at the Annual General Meeting of Museums Australia on 22 March 2002. In the Museums Australia definition, a "museum" is an institution with the following characteristics:

A museum helps people understand the world by using objects and ideas to interpret the past and present and explore the future. A museum preserves and researches collections, and makes objects and information accessible in actual and virtual environments. Museums are established in the public interest as permanent, not-for-

profit organisations that contribute long-term value to communities.

Museums Australia recognizes that museums of science, history, and art may be designated by many other names (including gallery and Keeping Place). In addition, the following may qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition:

natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature that acquire, conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment;

institutions holding collections of and displaying specimens of plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, herbaria, aquaria and vivaria;

science centres;

cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity);

such other institutions as the Council considers as having some or all of the characteristics of a museum.”

Museums Australia adds further civic direction to its mandate with the following passage taken from its statement of values:

Museums Australia: Believes museums and galleries occupy a vital place in the community. Is committed to indigenous peoples' control and management of their cultural materials. Recognizes the diversity of cultures in

our society. Advances access to and the care of Australia's cultural and natural heritage. And is a forum for ideas.

The Pacific Island Museum Association (PIMA) has included in the ambit of its mission the more social service oriented and multi-disciplinary “cultural centers.” Even more interesting, their purpose now includes the proactive function of “nurturing” in addition to preserving. It is a clear example of intending to include living culture rather than focusing on “dead” evidence of the past.

The Pacific Island Museum Association (PIMA) brings together museums and cultural centres in Pacific Islands to develop their capacity to identify, research, manage, interpret, and nurture cultural and natural heritage.

POSTULATIONS ON MUSEUM CATEGORIES

Here I want to launch the notion of a permissible narrowing of expectations. I use terms gleaned from here and there suggesting that while museums are on a “grid composed of intersecting ‘continuums’”¹¹, each museum has certain emphasis, and these emphases form clusters or categories. I have found that in describing these categories and giving them names, I can more easily differentiate between certain options and associate one set of program expectations with one set of terms.

While these definitions are inexact creations that do not hold together under any sustained scrutiny, they are, I hope, useful for the discussion of choice. There are no pure museums within each of these categories nor will I argue that purity is the issue—only emphasis and clarity of direction.

I propose five different categories of museums—the object-centered museum, the narrative museum, the client-centered museum, the community-focused museum, and the national museum. I suggest that—while some museums really do wish and succeed in

being all five types at the same time—most do not. Further, while some combinations are natural fits, some may not be.

Each of these five museum sectors has many examples one could cite. Each sector has also had opportunities, criticisms, and tensions. Each has experimented with certain solutions. It is these experiments that, while sometimes causing controversy, have brought new invigoration to the field.

The object-centered museum

Firstly, there are the object-focused institutions. Object-centered institutions are the “treasure-based” museums that concentrate on the material they own or borrow. The objects are the source of research, scholarship, and the basis for their public exhibition programs. It is the extant collections that inform subsequent acquisitions.

Since the 1960s, it has been object-centered museums that have been under the greatest pressure to diversify their approach and it has been these institutions that have undergone the most change. Commentary, in the past, had often centered about these institutions’ lack of responsiveness to wider and more uninformed audience. Object-centered museums have not always been audience friendly. Decades of critique and pressure have led to many forms of interpretative materials that can be understood by the uninitiated. Object-centered museums now routinely include glossaries, introductions, overviews, films, multimedia kiosks, and extensive labels within their exhibitions.

Lack of conceptualization has been another critique of object-centered museums that often displayed objects with no indication how the object fit within its surrounding, how it was used, and its meaning. But the object-centered museums are now much livelier. Many have re-installed their collections in a more understandable format and have made use of exhibition techniques piloted by other kinds of museums. For example, many art museums have created reading alcoves and hands-on locations, techniques that originated at children’s museums.

It may be the time, however, to say that some of these “object-focused” museums might proudly remain what they wish to be: displayers of objects for their own sake, unabashedly and without apology. Without meaning to offer a “hidey-hole” to museums too lazy to invigorate their displays, it may be time to allow stunning objects to take their place as just that. And if that is the intention of the museum, then the institution should say so and we will all understand.¹²

The consequences of such a decision would be that some few institutions might remain the province of the initiated, and repositories of many treasures viewed just for their beauty or their mystery. These institutions would remain “temples of the contemplative.” The Frick, the Gardner, and let us hope the Pitt Rivers, will resist change; or when changing will remember to let us wander down the isles bathed in the riches of the things on view. Such object-driven museums will proclaim proudly that their focus is on installations of “stuff.” That, I hope, is what the new installation of British material at the Victoria and Albert Museum is intended to signal¹³.

The questions that would lead new experimentation at such museums include: Are there interpretative models that can help the beginner by augmenting but not interfering with contemplation? Does contemplation need to be a silent and anti-social activity or is there a mix of furniture and activities (such as more seating, desks for writing, conversation pits) that will encourage social and joint contemplation without interfering with others. Can visitors have access to information that will allow those, that wish it, to learn more without visually disturbing others? And as always, in the area of scholarship, what is the interesting juxtaposition of objects that will bring new unexpected surprise to the visitor.

Given the pressure on object-centered art museums to expand their collection base to include objects made by artists of equal quality but from different cultural aesthetics, the issue of object selection and purchase will need to be taken on within the context of the maker more forthrightly than before. Who is choosing the objects? What constitutes

aesthetics from the maker's standpoint? How will the viewer's understand these choices?

The narrative museum

Object-centered museums of old told "stories" primarily to the extent that their available collections might relate. The pressure to tell stories regardless of available material gave rise to "narrative museums," of which the Jewish Museum Berlin and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are important recent examples. The narrative museum bases its primary focus on the explication of a story, recognizing that objects have important but limited use. In these museums, objects serve primarily as evidence. Narrative museums specialize in contextualization.

Narrative museums include those institutions created by cultural groups who wish to tell their story to themselves and to outsiders and find that they do not have or cannot find the collections that suffice. This is especially true in museums that present information about formerly subjugated or repressed peoples.¹⁴

These institutions are interested in making the non-visible visible and are comfortable with including emotions, (pathos, humor, and dramatic tension) if they fit the story¹⁵. Narrative installations are less like academic exercises than physical interpretations of novellas or plays, though there is no inherent reason the scholarship should be less than impeccable.

Narrative museums focus on telling a story using any interpretative means possible and have been the most willing to use all exhibition strategies (whether found in commercial, attraction or museum settings.) They have had little difficulty with including objects, reproductions, technology, and anything else, as long as it is in the service of moving the narrative along. They have been eager to embrace technology in as many forms as possible.

While social history museums are foremost among the narrative museums, narratives can also be found in natural history museums to impart the notion of geologic or biological evolution through time, whether or not they have access to the most telling physical specimens. Historic houses, open-air museums, and art museums, like the Picasso Museum, can be narrative museums when they wish to tell a visual biography. To support the story, the collecting policy of narrative museums often focuses on examples or classes of things rather than, or in addition to, unique items.

In all such cases, the storyteller has a viewpoint, and much has been written about the lack of objectivity in these presentations. While it is generally understood that no exhibition is “objective”, narrative museums’ curatorial bias can be seen more forthrightly and less apologetically than in any other museums.

New exhibition techniques should come in the future from narrative museums as they experiment further with non-material evidence. Sound, smell, live performance, and interpretation have all been demonstrated to enhance parts of stories, yet each of these avenues of presentation is still in its infancy.

Often, especially in large encyclopedic museums, there are some object-based galleries and some that are primarily narrative. This has sometimes confused the critics and the audience¹⁷. If the distinctions of this paper have any use, it may be to allow directors to declare which strategy they are using so that their critics may then follow suit by utilizing differentiated criteria appropriate for each kind.

Client-centered museum

The “client-centered”¹⁸ museums, most especially children’s museums and some science centers, have audience as their priority rather than content. They often have no collections at all. The museum’s main focus is on ways of promoting learning among their targeted visitors (i.e. children and families) (Borun 1995). The staffs of these institutions view themselves primarily as educators and are interested in child-rearing

norms and learning theory, and continue to seek out and embed this theory in improved approaches to their programs and exhibitions.

The principal visitors to these museums include novice learners of all ages. Exhibitions and programs are structured to reduce any apprehension to learning. Since client-centered museums are focused on the audience, their concern includes the non-achiever, the non-literate, and the handicapped.

Client-centered museums piloted many approaches that have subsequently been adopted by other museums. Their great strengths are in creating hands-on environments, placing visitor services personnel on the floor, and establishing special pre-school environments. These museums also piloted hands-on discovery boxes, label copy experimentation meant to turn adults into willing learners, and resource centers embedded within exhibitions.

“Client-centered” museums are the biggest creators of “purpose built” environments that allow participation to enhance understanding. Creators of these exhibitions borrow freely from strategies used in educational and playground toys, public attractions and industrial design. They have been accused of being playgrounds and not museums and as the level of activity gets more vigorous, critics have posited that no learning is going on at all. These institutions are often labeled “Disneyesque.” They are noisy rather than contemplative, and seem chaotic rather than predictable and orderly. Since the early 1970s when these interactive museums became accepted into the pantheon of accredited museums, it has become even harder for museum associations to create acceptable inclusive definitions of museums.

A strength of these client-centered museums is “free-choice learning.”²⁰ Rather than working with school groups as groups, these museums often allow individual exploration. And they are interested in enhancing socializing behavior between individuals. These museums often intentionally provide psychologically supportive environments to parents, caregivers, and their children.

Community-centered museums

The fourth category of museums is “community-centered.” Similar to client-centered museums in that they are also interested in service, they differ in emphasis. Their primary concern, no matter what the subject matter, is the well-being of their community rather than concentrating on the interactions taking place in each individual social unit (i.e. a family, a group of friends, a school class, etc.) “They generally arise from a community’s desire for self-expression, rather than being created by or aimed at an elite group” (Tirrul-Jones 1995).

The editorial of an ICOM News issue devoted to community museums put it this way. “In many cases, community museums are the only way that local traditions—crafts, religious rites, language—survive”(Hogan 1995). These institutions, to underscore PIMA’s vision of cultural nurturing, often teach traditions such as drumming or native language as part of their offerings, host community events, feasts and celebrations, as well as provide information and assistance on issues specific to the community, such as health education and conflict resolution.

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

There have been community-centered museums in many countries and over many decades. Tribal museums of indigenous peoples often concentrate on the societal needs of their people as their primary agenda. Eco-museums are a kind of community-centered museum started to preserve in living history fashion, the work, crafts, or information

known only to the elders of the community. Controlled by the community themselves, they hope to create a new economic reality by turning this knowledge into a tourist attraction. Community-centered museums often make their objects available for ceremonial use and study as a matter of course.

Because of the higher social status typically accorded to object-based museums, community-based museums have often been fragile. They tend to evolve toward more traditional institutions in order to achieve greater recognition and funding. Many times, they have failed for lack of consistent funding. The community museum movement in the United States in late 1960s included the creation of the Anacostia Museum by the Smithsonian Institution, with “Rats” being its most famous exhibition. Much was written about Anacostia; today it looks undifferentiated from other small museums. If community-centered museums were accorded some primacy in the museum pantheon perhaps they would be less likely to become diffuse, discarded or unrecognizable.

Ironically, the history of museum finance reveals the insistence of funders that object-centered and narrative-based museums become more community focused—while these same funders have often ignored those small handcrafted community centers that were already the leaders in this field. A contemporary resolve that museums function as “meeting ground,” “forums,” and “town squares”²³ coincides with the mission of community-centered institutions. If other museum sectors intend to take on these important social roles, they would do well to study the close community relations, long-standing commitment of staff, and targeted programming that community museums have practiced and that their missions entail. Building community is difficult, nuanced, and must be sustained over time. It is not for everyone.

National (and government) museums

Museums created by a “nation” are themselves a distinct category. Powerful actors—government officials, politicians, and pressure groups—outside the scope of the museum profession often wish to be involved in content and exhibition strategies. If you work in

a national museum, you may have to begin with “national” as your primary mission. The most heated museum-related press coverage is often associated with national museums and their presentation of “nationhood.” The controversy surrounding the Smithsonian’s exhibition on the Enola Gay is an example.

Governments, large and small, build museums to celebrate their achievements. In government-sponsored museums cultural policy comes into play. Totalitarian governments often attempt to control their public image by dictating the content of museum exhibitions and programs. But in democratic societies, museums are one of the visible arenas within which the rightness of belief is debated freely, but publicly.

Exhibition designers working within government museums must consider carefully the balance between celebratory stories and social criticism, the percentage of space given to minority and indigenous groups, the difficulty in displaying the avant guard, and must carefully walk the boundaries between pornography and free speech.

Governments, national and local, have also been proponents of tourism as an economic driver for financial growth. National capitals, sometimes thought of as cultural backwaters, have become must-see tourist destinations when new government museums have been built. This is true of Washington, DC; Ottawa, Canada; Wellington, New Zealand; and Canberra, Australia. Indeed, a successful array of national museums in national capitals changes the tourism pattern of a country, enhances the flow of money to the capital city and incites jealousy from the other cities’ museums. This is why, government-sponsored museums have given architects opportunities to create prestigious buildings, and governments have invested large sums of public funding into new institutions.

Part of the reason that the tourist patterns change is that the citizen visitor’s motivation for seeing these museums leans more to patriotic pilgrimage than ordinary museum-going. People visit who otherwise would never go to a museum in their hometown. The iconic nature of the national museum becomes its most important aspect.

SUBJECT MATTER CHOICE

The museum categories outlined above are not based on subject matter. A museum can fit into any, some, or many of these emphases regardless of content.

Let me illustrate this with five art museums and note their different primary direction. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is mainly object-based. Zoom (the German children's art museum) is client-centered. The Picasso Museum in Paris is a narrative museum. The National Gallery of Canada is a national museum, and the art gallery in Soweto, South Africa is a community museum. They are all art museums. And while these definitions are inexact of necessity, a person working in each of these would make choices based on different criteria when presented with similar works of art and would, I suspect, write quite different labels for display.

The mission statement, if precise, allows staff to know what basic direction they are to take. And when the primary directions are understood, the next choices about audience, topic, and exhibition strategies can be intelligently tackled.

For museum leaders, then, the first aspect of strategic planning is to decide which of these categories on a continuum of possible mixes and tendencies the museum is to be, (object-based, narrative, client-centered, community-focused, and/or national.) Then, work through the possible combinations that would be most effective and compatible in meeting other specific objectives.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT AUDIENCE

Because museums are often discussed as an undifferentiated whole, the non-museum going public may not know what they're missing. If we were more fine-grained in our self-descriptions, certain segments of the public might make different choices and start to come.

Hood (1983) looked at people's motivations in choosing leisure-time activities. Grouping her subjects into frequent, occasional, or not-at-all users of museums, Hood found that people who visited museums only occasionally, or never, looked primarily for the following attributes when choosing to participate in an activity: "being with people, participating actively, and feeling comfortable and at ease in their surroundings." They visited museums infrequently or not at all because they believed that their primary recreation criteria would not be fulfilled by museums. However one can think of some kinds of museums—especially highly interactive children's and science museums—where the desired criteria would have been satisfied. Clearly, differentiating museum types one from another might also change the demographics of their users and might encourage the occasional and non-user to choose to participate in certain museum activities.

FUNDING AND RHETORIC

A dilemma for museums lies in the fact that much of the targeted funding available in the grant-making marketplace is temporary. If a grant-funded project or program is not firmly embedded in the museum's mission as a first or second priority, it will disappear when the funding expires, exposing the lack of commitment to the activity and its audience regardless of the promotional language used previously.

In many private museums, admission fees the general public provide the largest single source of income. The requirement to pay for entry, however, skews the composition of the audience. Demographic studies show that museum visitors tend to be middle- or upper-income and highly educated. They are trained to go to museums and can afford them. Thus attendance fees are incompatible with the target audiences of some of the museum categories described above and are a hindrance to all museums where the audience might be more diverse if admission was free. This result can be seen in the free national museums whose audience diversity is slightly broader than in private or civic fee-required museums. It will be interesting to see the evolution of audience

demographics in the UK, (both in overall numbers and demographics,) where admission charges in the major museums have just been dropped.

External funding, using the United States as an example, generally comes from four sources—government grants, charitable foundations, sponsorship by corporations (from their marketing budgets), and gifts from (mostly wealthy) individuals. Foundations are generally interested in social service, education, and the improvement of civil society.

Government grant funding, while varying by party in power, usually supports expanding educational opportunities. Funders from the commercial sector (corporate marketing executives for example) are often interested in exposure, expanded name recognition, and association with worthwhile institutions and prestige. The rich individual is often interested in enhancing personal prestige.

In effect, all dollars are not equal; they certainly are not all fungible. Funders are interested in different audience segments, the government and charitable foundations are often interested in organized groups including schools, and social service groups and clubs, while the corporation is interested in the volitional audience who are consumers.

So the institutional mission tends to load the funding dice. Or, vice versa, the availability of money may tend to load the mission. As museums continue to go after all available possible sources of funding, they perpetuate the current situation, with missions that are all things to all people. Let us hope for a future in which museums are more inventive about educating their funding sources to understand their mission, rather than twisting the mission to match assumptions of the funders.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT ARE THE CATEGORIES

To summarize, over the last fifty years, museums have been busy reviewing and enlarging their definitions of purpose and mission to include social benefit, commitments to diverse cultures and publics, learning and education, and even the fostering of cultural

activity. Museums have too often expanded their vocabulary but not necessarily matched that with action. It may be time for museum people to adhere to tighter definitions, so that their choice of words would have more predictable consequences and associated expectations.

Why spend time defining categories of museums? First, people tend to lump museums together as a single generic entity. Pollsters and evaluators, in particular, do this. But in reality, museums are quite different, one from another, and the policies adhered to by one kind of museum may not work for another kind of institution and its audience. Delineating the different emphases among museums would be a useful marketing strategy, allowing people with different motivations to knowledgeably choose different venues.

Additionally, respect for each of these categories requires that the criteria for success and value must be judged within, rather than across, categories. If we begin to look at museums within their own terms, then small community museums, for example, will be judged for how well they meet the needs of the people within their community rather than how they compete in size and audience with larger institutions. Finally the “small” will be seen as a specification of potential excellence rather than a short-term inconvenience. New museum alliances and kinships might arise where none were before.

Within each sub-set, tension and opportunities make the most progressive museums produce new and interesting solutions and thereby stand out as leaders in their field. Experimentation within each category will continue. Cross-fertilization between categories hopefully will also, because the museum field worldwide is still small, and most museum professionals know each other (and/or have visited each other’s museums). Success in one place will be incorporated elsewhere and interesting ideas will still move from one place to another. We will continue to blur the boundaries.

The danger inherent in this approach is that the proposal to differentiate missions one from another, and to value them all, could sustain complacency within museums

reluctant to change citing the timeless unchanging object-based nature of their mission, for example. But some museums have resisted change throughout the current revolution anyway.

What I hope will emerge will be more clearly focused and useful organizations, an acceptance of differences with sharpened criteria for success, a more precise use of language, less exaggerated claims, and more certainty of direction.

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³ Moore (1997) was an especially helpful book during the writing of this piece.

⁴ Weil writes, “We have too often chosen to ignore the very rich ways in which museums differ and to focus instead on their thin margin of overlap” (1990, p. xiv).

⁵ Weil, Steven, personal e-mail Jan 23, 2002.

⁶ See Alexander (1979) for an interesting view of the history of museums through the 1970’s.

⁸ Steven Weil said, “At Harvard they use fancier terms: the interplay of operational practicality, political feasibility and substantive merit” (personal e-mail, Jan 2002).

⁹ For a review of the history of the changing definition of museums within the American Association of Museums see Gurian (1999).

¹⁰ The Canadian Museums Associations defines museum as:

"A non-profit, permanent establishment, exempt from federal and provincial income taxes, open to the public at regular hours, and administered in the public interest, for the purpose of collecting and preserving, studying, interpreting, assembling and exhibiting to the public for its instruction and enjoyment, objects and specimens of educational and cultural value, including artistic, scientific (whether animate or inanimate), historical and technological material."

¹¹ Hindmarch, Jennie Harré, Te Papa, personal e-mail, February 2002.

¹² Gopnick (2001) wrote "Hence the growth of wall texts: They provide an experience that everyone feels comfortable with -- reading a hundred words of simple explanation -- as a replacement for a properly artistic one that many people find quite tough. But if visual art means anything at all, we have to imagine that its purely visual component can be eloquent all by itself, without the help of words -- that long looking will unlock more of the secrets of an art museum's holdings than hours in the library."

¹³ See reviews such as Ricketts (2001).

¹⁴ The Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel, opened with only reproductions and tableaus in order to tell the complete story of the Jewish Diaspora because many important objects just did not exist.

¹⁵ Jeshajahu (Shaike) Weinberg, the founding director of both the Museum of the Diaspora and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was quoted as saying he wanted to make "hot" museums.¹⁶ The Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel, opened with only reproductions and tableaus in order to tell the complete story of the Jewish Diaspora because many important objects just did not exist.

¹⁷ New York Times criticism of the opening exhibition of the National Museum of the American Indian.

¹⁸ Michael Spock, then director of the Children's Museum, Boston, coined this phrase when speaking about the history of children's museums in the late 60's.

²⁰ Falk, John, director of the Institute for Learning Innovation favors this term to describe the learning behavior in most museums. The website uses the expression multiple times, i.e., “Established in 1986, the Institute for Learning Innovation is a non-profit organization committed to understanding, facilitating, and communicating about free-choice learning. “

²³ The Association of Children's Museums (ACM) “vision is to bring children and families together in a new kind of "town square" where play inspires lifelong learning” (ACM 2001).