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# Museum News



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*This issue suggests ways to meet the "challenges confronting museums." Cover photo by Sabina Parks.*

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# Museums in Collaboration

□ Museums are caught in the cross fire between the growing demands of the people they serve and the shrinking financial resources available to meet these demands. And the problem is getting worse: The more that money problems limit the ability to respond, the less relevant museums seem when compared with other important institutions the public is asked to support. Unless we find a solution, unless we develop new ways of fulfilling the needs of the public while keeping costs in check, it is unlikely that we will succeed in reversing this downward spiral and in deserving a higher place on the list of society's priorities.

What does this crisis demand of us? What is our response to be? I would like to skip over the causes of our crisis and focus immediately

*Michael Spock is Director, The Children's Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.*

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## MICHAEL SPOCK

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on some possible solutions, emphasizing a proposal for some new forms of regional cooperation among museums.

The first step we must take is to admit to ourselves, to our colleagues and to our public that the crisis exists. We have an unfortunate way of convincing ourselves that our problems are unique to our own particular institutions, that our difficulties stem from an inability to manage our own affairs. In our embarrassment we try to cover up or minimize the seriousness of the problem. In reality, however, these pressures are common to us all. It is time to recognize that fact and speak out. For with the crisis confronted we may have some chance of marshalling the resources necessary to overcome it.

Next, it seems clear that most museums are spread too thin. From

a combination of past history and inertia, public pressures and a certain degree of opportunism we all find ourselves involved in many programs that are only marginally relevant to our central goals. Every museum should undertake an intensive study of the nature and needs of its particular audience, whether they be scholars, college students, teachers, bird watchers, history buffs or the "general public." Knowledge of the characteristics of each group—the services they desire and the support they can offer—is essential if we are to develop activities specifically suited to them. Then we can eliminate those functions better handled by other institutions or at least find some ways of coordinating overlapping efforts. By limiting the scope of our audience and the range of our activities, we can concentrate on those elements that are unique to our own museums that

set us apart from other cultural, educational and communications services offered in our communities.

We must be willing to speak frankly with the public and to withstand the initial blast of misunderstanding that could result from the attempt to explain precisely what we can and *cannot* do. No museum can minister to everyone, but we can develop exhibits and programs, rearrange hours, change location and alter our collections to match the needs of a more specifically defined audience and a more carefully designed role for each museum.

We should take a hard look at those items of our budget where considerable savings might be effected, notably, buildings, collections and administration: Do our present structures match our program requirements? Are we willing to make imaginative use of our existing facilities? Should we move to some other location or operate out of more economical, but less prestigious quarters?

In regard to collections, are we aggressive about securing those items that directly relate to our purpose and are we firm in refusing those that are not relevant? The parts of our collections not essential to our programs could be sold, traded or loaned to more appropriate institutions.

Modern business practices should also be introduced to improve the actual day-to-day operation of museums. Cost benefit analysis, for example, could be employed to measure program effectiveness against costs, to indicate ways of providing better service within the limits of present facilities and funds and to have a better sense of where the money is going and who might be asked to help support specific services.

Finally, museums must be more aggressive in their public fund raising; in charging fees and admissions that come close to meeting the actual cost of a service offered; in demanding city, state and Fed-

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**"Museums are caught in the crossfire between the growing demands of the people they serve and the shrinking financial resources available."**

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eral funds for such efforts as school and neighborhood programs that cannot be supported by user fees; in not standing by helplessly wringing our hands when money is no longer available from the old familiar foundation and private sources.

Sharing our problems and sharpening our services, facilities, administration and fund raising all may help, and certainly cannot hurt. But there is another intriguing solution to the problem of multiplying demands and rising costs that I would like to propose. The pooling of certain basic services and facilities by a number of museums within a workable area, be it a neighborhood, a metropolitan area or even an entire state, is worth examining closely. Regional collaboration could be achieved along several lines:

1) A regional business office to take advantage of machine bookkeeping and payroll, quantity purchasing, group insurance and retirement plans, low-cost reproduction services, centrally run housekeeping and security services, bulk mailing and pooled lists, as well as a peak load secretarial service.

2) A regional production shop to provide quality printing, photography, taxidermy, model-making, painting and cabinet-making services; equipment for special exhibits including lighting fixtures, temporary exhibit cases and panels and

other materials used only from time to time; and perhaps even a staff of artists, designers and technicians to assist small museums that lack such expertise on their own staffs.

3) A regional educational reference center to serve teachers and the general public by maintaining, publishing and distributing a catalogue (cross-indexed by topic and location) of all courses, school programs, exhibits, natural and historic sites, circulating materials (including books, pamphlets, films, kits and artifacts) and people with subject matter competence available in the area. Group visit and circulating reservations for all museums could be made by calling one number. Teacher training in the use of various museum resources could be one service of such a center.

4) A large exhibition and auditorium facility would be handy for those special events that draw large crowds, but are undertaken only once or twice a year by a single institution.

5) A regional development and public relations service to provide joint membership privileges in all participating institutions; to produce regular calendars of events and news releases; to coordinate annual giving, capital campaigns and special activities planned by member museums; and to help prepare more effective applications and follow-up for government and foundation operating subsidies and project grants.

6) A regional manpower service to advertise job openings and do the preliminary screening of applicants, coordinate a well organized volunteer corps matching skills to specific tasks in member institutions, recruit and train low-cost temporary student help and finally, sponsor a rotating internship program to develop badly needed museum professional help.

Cooperating in any or all of these areas could result in considerable savings for each member institution, but in my view the most radical and exciting opportunity for pooling museum resources lies in

the establishment of a regional collection facility.

7) Housed in an economical warehouse structure, a regional collection center could provide proper environmental controls, strong security, expert registration and conservation services, a good reference library, technical laboratories and study carrels, a school circulating service and a well managed packaging, shipping and receiving area.

But more important than these first rate facilities and services would be the uses to which a centrally organized collection could be put. Too often, incredibly valuable materials are tucked away—inadequately exploited for either their research or educational potential. With materials accessibly housed and referenced by a thoroughly documented and cross-indexed catalogue, promptly retrieved from a computer memory bank, the possibilities for a significant increase in the use of our collections by scholars, exhibits designers, curriculum developers, teachers and interested amateurs becomes immediately apparent.

This increased use would bring problems and raise touchy policy issues for participating museums. For example, maintenance, security and curatorial standards would have to be extremely high to satisfy everyone. Inventory controls would have to be airtight. Each object would have to be coded as to the permissible uses to which it could be put and under whose authority. All these problems, however, are presently faced by museums maintaining independent collections, and perhaps they would have a better chance of being solved under the watchful eye, mutual prodding and pooled funds of a collaborative effort.

No matter how extensive or limited the effort, the implementation of any of these regional collaborative programs will be a tough job. Fears of loss of identity will have to be confronted and allayed; old jealousies and hurts put to rest; standards debated and codified; the

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**“The pooling of certain basic services and facilities by a number of museums within a workable area...is worth examining closely.”**

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scope of the region carefully defined; new corporate entities recognizing joint ownership, control and responsibilities will have to be established. But for all these problems the rewards would be great.

In a system of regional collaboratives, the distracting yet essential secondary concerns of a museum's operation could be handled in a less costly and more efficient manner. Expensive museum buildings could become truly *public* facilities, used almost entirely for exhibition and educational programs. Freed of their routine chores, museum staffs could put their energies to use in new ways. Instead of housekeeping collections, curators could return to research, teaching, publication and other interpretive work. In place of answering telephones and taking reservations, teachers could conduct more workshops and classes, lead tour groups and prepare new programs and materials. Designers could immerse themselves in the planning, rather than the execution, of exhibits. Directors might even devote their talents to guiding museums instead of fragmenting their attention with business management and fund raising tasks. The total result would be a more adventurous staff; a more useful facility; a more relevant and effective museum capable of tuning in to its audience and responding to their needs.

But are we ready for these strong

measures? Do we really want more effective museums? Are we willing to trade some old autonomy for some new freedoms?

There are some hopeful signs. Several regional museum programs and facilities have been tried or proposed. A national exhibits laboratory was suggested a few years ago. A computerized catalogue network is being formed in New York. Several successful community arts funds are in operation. The consulting, technical and circulating services of state museums and the Smithsonian are being used by many museums. Discussions have been held among several museums interested in sharing exhibits and programs, research and staff training to provide services at the neighborhood level. Even the amalgamation of several museums into a regional institution can be seen in the case of the new Oakland Museum.

But I sense no thoroughgoing trend towards regional collaboratives. Nothing parallels the example of the medical profession's interest in large clinics, group practice and the pooling of specialized diagnostic and treatment facilities among hospitals. Nor do I see exciting precedents like the regional associations of small colleges to share libraries, laboratories and field stations, fund raising and even students and faculty to enrich the total educational mix without adding greatly to operating costs.

Is it that we do not all share a common sense of urgency? Are we willing just to muddle through in feeble isolation rather than expose our deficiencies to colleagues in the profession? Is the maintenance of our own splendid empires more important to us than the quality of our service to the public? I'm not certain. But my conviction remains that unless we are able to help each other solve our problems and bear down hard on being effective in our communities, we will find ourselves left behind with the rest of society's irrelevant institutions.