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“On Museums, Culture and Sustainable Development”

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What good are museums? How do they contribute to society? What measures do we have for gauging their impact? Can their role be modified to better serve the cultural needs of an ever-more complex society? These and other related questions have nagged me for many years.

Increasingly, I am convinced that museums need a larger and more fully articulated framework in which to operate than that which currently exists. For the most part, museums see themselves in some kind of vague public service role – a role that is loosely thought to be fulfilled through the occasional visits of individuals. Frequently cited statistics indicate that a large portion of the North American population visits museums in any given year. If examined closely, the financial cost of these visits can be very high (from about \$5.00 per visit to over \$140.00 per visit). But in addition to the financial aspects of understanding the effectiveness and impact of museums, I would argue that the real cultural needs of our society cannot be met through the occasional nature of most museum visits. Culture is a process that is much better integrated into people's lives than that. For the most part, the cultural life of Canada (and most other western nations for that matter) is more significantly reflected and directed by both popular culture (for example: television, media, etc.) and by the economic orientation/preoccupation of our society. Although unavoidable in our world, such strong private-sector influence over social/cultural dynamics creates a dangerously superficial situation that does not penetrate into the emotional, intellectual, imaginary and spiritual depths of human cultural needs. If museums want to play a more substantial role in promoting the healthiest cultural dynamics

possible, particularly in the realms of facilitating symbolic experiences with significant objects or through creating relevant forums for debate and discussion about our histories and futures, then there needs to be some serious rethinking of the overall framework for museums. This should include the development of a set of performance indicators that reflect meaningfully on the qualitative, as well as quantitative, impacts of the museum.

Having been involved with the area of Sustainable Development (SD) for more than a year, I am inclined to think that SD might provide a conceptual reference point that could help to reframe the role and potential of museums. The term Sustainable Development has many unfortunate associations with a perspective that multi-national corporations are using to rationalize their continued growth. However, the notion of sustainability as a holistic world view that aims to meet the needs of the human population while maintaining the natural environment in an undegraded form provides a potent vision for all individuals to work towards, regardless of one's professional or personal situation. Applying this thinking to museums, one could imagine that the public dimension activities of these organizations could aim to create optimal means of fostering consciousness within society of the needs and impacts of human life on this planet, as they work towards meeting the cultural needs of individuals, communities, countries, humanity and the environment. In this context, the range of people-oriented needs includes physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual. If adopted, such a vision would challenge museums to rethink many of their core assumptions, for example that exhibits should be their principal communication vehicle, and that collection-building should be a major preoccupation.

Through the LEAD-Canada (Leadership for Environment And Development) and LEAD-International programs, I have come to believe that a sustainable future for the world can only happen through a conscious participation in the issues that confront the global population. However, it is naive to think that people will gain a functional and responsible perspective on these issues until they have (at least) a good grounding in local/regional/national/community dynamics. This is an immensely complex task, especially in the face of global economics, immigration, population trends, community fragmentation, pressurized work environments and rising poverty levels. If

museums saw their main objectives in relationship to using symbolic and historic objects in facilitating healthy community dynamics relating to both archetypal and timely issues – at individual, community and global levels – then it may be possible for museums to reinvent themselves in a much more relevant form.

For this to take place, many things would have to happen in museums. First, there would have to be a reassessment of whether it is objects, or people, that are at the centre of the museum's mission. Traditionally, museums have chosen objects to constitute their principal reference point – usually objects as understood from the perspective of one or more academic disciplines. Moving towards a more people-centred model would cause great chaos for many museums. Secondly, there would need to be a serious diversification of public communication modes within the public programming stream of most museums. Exhibitions, the traditional mainstay of public programming in museums, have the potential to be good at providing certain types of experiences, but are usually limited to the use of declarative statements about those viewpoints that authorities in a specialized field believe to be true. An increasing number of museums (although mostly in science and children's museums – not in art or history museums) have already embraced the interactive, forum-based exhibit experience. For these organizations there is a commitment to engaging visitors in a knowledge-building process that negotiates rather than declares beliefs. But even at their best, exhibitions are generally not powerful or convenient enough to foster an integrated, ongoing and frequent-contact relationship between museum and the public, with the exception of a handful of museum enthusiasts. For museums to play a more integrated role, they need to re-evaluate the place of exhibits in their public programming activities. Although museums should never foresake exhibitions as a communication mode, there needs to be a serious expansion of alternative communication vehicles (such as community satellite programming, television, radio, internet, popular press, schools, etc.). Ideally, these modes need to be constructed within responsive communication links that allow for the flow of ideas, feelings and experiences both into and out of the museum. People need to feel that they are connected to the world they live in – that they are more than helpless receivers of information that someone decides is good for them. Such a change in direction is nothing less than a revolution for museums.

My work with SD has led me to believe that much of the focus to date in environmental biology, global economics, international law, inter-governmental agreements, and the like, will not lead humanity towards sustainability unless individuals at the grassroots level feel part of the process. And the process needs to honour a sense of the past (on individual and collective levels), the reality of the present (on individual and collective levels), and options for the future. In this sphere, museums can play a critical role – they have collections and insights that can provide access points into the experiences and wisdom of the past; objects that can help to focus on contemporary issues; and spaces that can bring people together to imagine and work towards an acceptable future. However, if museums continue to wander down the object-centred paths they have long been on, then the critical cultural roles relating to sustainability will likely be played, for better or worse, almost exclusively by the private sector (through mass media and commercial interests – who will be players regardless) and governments. But museums do have a chance to play a more central role in negotiating and facilitating our collective futures than they have in the past.

The challenge for museums is greater than a shift in philosophical position and vision – it will also require new competencies. As a 1997 report of the Human Resources Task Force of the Canadian Museum Association has made clear, there are many core competencies that are needed to operate a cultural organization. It is my opinion that many of these core competencies, such as those related to 'vision', 'valuing diversity' and 'managing change', are currently absent within the museum world. Additionally, knowledge of the dynamics of symbolic experience, identity building, assessing/understanding community needs, developing vibrant communication linkages to people and creating relevant focal points and forums for idea exchange are all functions that museums have very little experience with and competencies in – yet seem critical if museums are to be meaningfully engaged in contemporary life.

If the museum field decides that it wants to secure a relevant role for itself into the 21st century by embracing a central vision of Sustainable Development, then it will have a lot of work to undergo many changes in its practices and its performance indicators, as

well as develop new professional competencies. The challenge is formidable, but the opportunities and the needs are immense.