

Rising to the challenge: Fostering a 'Culture of Sustainability'

Douglas Worts



Museums have long considered themselves to be 'socially responsible.' After all, what else would you call preserving the past through collections, research, and exhibitions? And yet, when one tries to be specific about how museums address the dynamic cultural needs of our constantly evolving world — in a socially responsible way — the discussion becomes rather vague. Identifying the cultural needs of community

and measuring the cultural impacts of museum programs are no mean tasks. But, if any group in society should be able to meet this challenge, it should be museum professionals.

It is shocking then, that the museum sector has developed no cultural measures of success by which to gauge the impacts of their activities on the cultural well-being of communities. There is more than a little of the 'trust us, we are a museum' attitude, which effectively sidesteps the call for public accountability related to the social responsibility of museums.

For millennia, humans have found ingenious ways to integrate the wisdom of the past with the needs of the present. At its core, our cultural well-being is based on how well this balance between wisdom and ingenuity is maintained. Human values and behaviours direct our lives both individually and collectively, consciously and unconsciously, toward either a sustainable future, or an unsustainable one. Cultivating global markets is one example of the ingenuity of how Western culture has adapted to new opportunities for expanding capitalist ventures. Food is a big part of any culture and, because of our place in the global economy, many of us in the West can access food from other corners of the world. But with this opportunistic adaptation, there must be an accompanying wisdom of the implications of exploiting such potential. This is where society lacks the adequate feedback loops to inform us of the dangers of our actions on the global stage.

As we know, human beings are now extracting more from the Earth's biosphere than nature can regenerate. If humanity is to share the Earth's resources in a sustainable way, while using a globalized economic system, then each person must become more conscious of the implications of their actions and live responsibly, based on global/local equity and democratic participation. This is the cultural challenge of our day. We can surely learn from the past, but 'culture' will have to mean more than history. Culture needs to be understood as how we live our lives, and not what we do in our leisure time. It will further

demand that, both individually and collectively, society stops valuing the endless pursuit of economic growth and profit — arguably our most prominent indicator of success. Wisdom and ingenuity will be required to shift our values and actions towards living sustainably.

In 1987, when the Brundtland Commission first coined the term 'sustainable development' (which later spawned the related term 'sustainability'), it was clear that humanity needed to change in some very fundamental ways. Ironically, in recent years the term 'sustainability' has been hijacked, by those with a vested interest in the status quo, in order to buttress attempts to maintain it. This is true for museums as well. There is an increasing number of museums attempting to find funding to enable them to go on doing what they have always done, while claiming they are addressing 'sustainability' issues. Meanwhile, a growing phalanx of cultural organizations think that the future of museums simply means new, energy efficient buildings. Both situations reflect the mind-numbing resistance to meaningful change that is so pervasive throughout Western societies.

So, museums continue to do largely what they have always done, with a special focus on collecting and exhibiting objects of various types. The lenses we use to understand the significance of collections tend to be rooted in the disciplines of history, art history, biology, and so on. But these lenses do not necessarily bring with them the cultural wisdom that is needed to adapt wisely. In some ways, as Western countries industrialized, they traded in holistic cultural wisdom for specialized academic expertise — and the gap between these two is becoming increasingly obvious.

When will museum professionals develop a robust set of indicators that will help identify the cultural issues of our day and enable us to better assess the cultural outcomes of museum activities? When will we set aside inadequate and inappropriate

Inadequate and inappropriate economic indicators and institutional habits have been forcing cultural organizations increasingly into the cul-de-sac of tourism and leisure-time activity — a glorified niche in the edutainment sector.

economic indicators and institutional habits that have been forcing cultural organizations increasingly into the cul-de-sac of tourism and leisure-time activity — a glorified niche in the edutainment sector? The cultural challenges of the coming decades will not be addressed simply by technological, economic, or political developments — rather, a cultural shift will be required. Can museums play a leadership role in this process? I think so.

Museums can begin to redefine how they operate, the leadership skills they nurture and the feedback loops they attend to. In place of attendance, revenue, and collections development, new measures of success must be developed. A few years ago, the Canadian Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities (www.geocities.com/wgmsc) developed a Critical Assessment Framework (CAF), designed to help museum professionals create new performance measures related to both culture and sustainability. The CAF uses a stratified approach to cultural indicators — integrating individual, institutional, community, and global levels of feedback. Forging a new set of benchmarks and indicators to guide museum work will challenge the courage and creativity of museum professionals, but there are optimistic places to begin. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (www.sitesofconscience.org) is one of the inspired developments within the museum world in recent times. So too are the new experiments in ecomuseology — such as the Ha Long Bay Ecomuseum in Vietnam. Here, museums are striving to engage citizens within their communities in meaningful ways, and to deepen the ways that people live responsibly.

At their best, museums are 'places of the muse' — where individuals experience timeless human themes: compassion, wonder, challenge, fear, achievement, love, death, sacrifice, and creativity. In a parallel vein, museums can provide a space for the negotiation of current social challenges, as they bring together individuals and communities. While visitor grazing remains an all-too-common characteristic of contemporary museum visitation, there are opportunities for exciting new roles for museums as agents of change. It will require humility and courage, wisdom and ingenuity, but museums can add tremendous value to society by fostering social responsibility and

nurturing a culture of sustainability. Does the museum community have the will? **M**

Douglas Worts is a well known expert on public engagement and museum accountability. From 1982 until 2007, he was an interpretive planner for the Art Gallery of Ontario; he now works full time as a consultant on culture and sustainability. Contact him at: douglas_worts@rogers.com www.douglasworts.org



with eMuseum:

- engage** - Dynamic collection information ensures online visitors always find something new
- educate** - Customizable profiles deliver appropriate content to every level of learner
- entertain** - Virtual exhibitions guide visitors through a discovery tour of your museum

Share your collections online.

Power your site with  eMuseum.

 **GallerySystems**
Collect. Manage. Share.

646.733.2239
info@gallerysystems.com
www.gallerysystems.com