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User Studies Article Comparison-Assignment 1
Culture of Archives, Museums and Libraries
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Museums today find themselves at an often confusing crossroads, dealing with interrelated but often seemingly contradictory matters on a variety of fronts. A constricting economy has made it necessary for many institutions to either drastically cut back on or find ingenious methods to support everything from exhibition costs and staff hires to educational programs and lecture series. At the same time, reduced attendance figures and funding have led to both positive and negative outcomes in terms of visitorship. On one hand, the rise of blockbuster exhibitions designed, at least in the minds of hopeful museum directors, to draw in the broadest possible audience, including many who might never come otherwise, has, in the minds of many, altered the idea of a museum's fundamental purpose.

In a more positive development, many organizations, including mid-size or small museums without the money, space or possibly the desire to mount mega-exhibitions have been seeking and debating creative ways to draw from the cultural fabric of their surrounding neighborhoods. By doing so, they attempt to reach out to local populations to a degree which historically has not been part of the mission of many museums. Questions must be answered and tensions resolved, perhaps none more pressing than how an institution often seen as elite might best reflect the character of its surroundings without seeming to pander or simplify. Those in charge can, of course, seek the direct opinions of scholars and community leaders, but are often left to a process combined of equal parts trial and error and analysis.

Two recent articles published in the journal Visitor Studies address this topic. The Great Sustainability Challenge: How Visitor Studies Can Save Cultural Institutions in the 21st Century¹ by Alan J.

¹ Visitor Studies 2007, 10:1, 3-12

Friedman, deals primarily with science centers, but its ideas are applicable to any museum or similar cultural institution.

Friedman, the former director of the New York Hall of Science, begins by expressing the financial concerns and pressure toward providing entertainment in lieu of learning faced by organizations similar to the NYHS. Friedman then focuses on the results of a meeting held in the summer of 2001 by a group of museum directors, including himself, on the topic of “what keeps them up at night,” also known, less colloquially, as sustainability. Participants represented the Liberty Science Center in New Jersey, the Exploratorium in San Francisco and the Experimentarium in Denmark, among other organizations.²

Three core areas involved in sustainability were identified: financial, intellectual and social. Friedman’s piece is, in essence, meant to serve as a reminder that all of these should be interrelated in the workings of a successful institution. It is also a plea for social sustainability to be given equal, if not more weight, in attempts to reconfigure the mission of museums today.

Financial sustainability refers to a museum’s revenues, operating costs and general economic health. This is, of course, an indispensable consideration for any organization. But as the author argues, it is too often given primacy over the other elements of a cohesive sustainability plan. This disproportionate emphasis can then lead to serious problems in all areas if the institution’s economic picture worsens. All three sustainability sectors must, in Friedman’s view, be addressed consistently in order for monetary health to be maintained.

The second form of sustainability, intellectual, involves ensuring that staff members are “current in the thinking of the field, responding to new issues and ideas, and contributing to the advancement of the field? Is there a sense of engagement on the part of the trustees, staff, and stakeholders with the intellectual challenges and delights of science, art, history, or whatever the chosen endeavors involve?”³

² Visitor Studies, *ibid*.

³ *Ibid*, p. 5

This type of sustainability, Friedman posits, suffers when curatorial positions are cut, professional travel decreases and publications are reduced, among other issues.

The final area, social sustainability, is seen as the most critical, feeding the strength of the other two types. A socially sustainable institution is one which is seen as part of its broader society, which includes “audiences, funders, colleagues and other stakeholders.” Such an organization has become such a part of its local community that those who use and support it will not allow it to collapse.⁴ The author suggests that one of the initial ways to determine an institution’s standing within its locality is through monitoring the passage or failure of bond measures regarding the museum or other organization.

Two examples of what Friedman considers to be successful social sustainability are provided. The first is the Science Career Ladder at the New York Hall of Science, a program which for 23 years has trained high school and college students to be “explainers”, paid workers who guide people through exhibitions, give brief lectures and answer any questions visitors may have. Explainers are ethnically diverse, reflecting the local community in Queens. Many graduates of this program have come back to work at the NYHS, including the current Vice President for Education. In this way, the museum is sustained through a corps of employees who are both of the museum and part of the community which surrounds and supports it.

The second example grew out of the 1991 incident in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Riots and killings broke out in the aftermath of a car accident which caused the death of a Guyanese boy who was struck by a car within the motorcade of a prominent Hasidic rabbi.⁵ Following the cessation of violence, the Brooklyn Children’s museum, as a non-ideologically fraught arena used by both the African-American and Jewish communities, was selected as the venue for a meeting and dialogue. This was accompanied

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4

⁵ ‘Crown Heights Riots’ entry in Wikipedia. Accessed 2/17/09 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crown_Heights_riots

shortly after by a series of exhibitions on both of the ethnic communities and their relation to each other as well as the broader community of Queens and New York City residents.

Perhaps understandably, Friedman is able to offer few specific solutions for the economic and intellectual parts of the sustainability equation. He advocates greater understanding of financial complexities on the part of key museum employees, the lowering of admission prices and a judicious application of fiscal restraint. In terms of intellectual sustainability, he points to consortiums of museums and educational institutions which can address some of the problems mentioned, citing the National Science Foundation and the Center for Informal Learning and Schools as examples. He sees visitor studies as crucial to the social aspect of sustainability, as it “makes viewers into researchers” and provides a relevant statistical and anecdotal tool for museums to better integrate and serve new types of visitors. While it offers few proscriptions for action, the piece offers a valuable look at the importance of looking at the mission and management of cultural institutions from a holistic, integrated perspective in the future.

The second article, Social Identity As A Motivator In Cultural Festivals, by Alexa Reynolds Delbosc⁶ examines the results of several visitor studies conducted at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia. They were conducted at a series of one-day cultural festivals which reflected the ethnic makeup of the local Melbourne community. Those queried in the surveys included members of the Irish, Bosnian, Pacific Islander, Dutch and Mauritian communities. Each member of the community (or person allied with a member of the community, through marriage, dating or friendship), as well as those without a particular ethnic tie, were asked why they’d visited the event that day. A set of options (to meet members of the _____ community; to learn about the _____ community in Melbourne; educate children about a particular culture; to have a day out; curiosity), as well as an “other” write-in section were offered. Participants were also asked whether they were ancestrally tied to the particular

⁶ Visitor Studies, 2008, 11(1) p. 3-15

community, how involved they were in the activities of the community and how closely they identified with an individual community.

Of total survey respondents, 74% were ethnically aligned with the community being celebrated on the day of their visit. Of those who were non-community members, 64% said they felt a strong identification with the community being spotlighted. While the reasons for this were not immediately clear, Delbosc theorizes that “admirers” of the particular culture, as well as those who had a spouse or friend who were part of the culture, might account for the high level of interest from what she refers to as “non-community members.” Based on the results, she posits that a high percentage of visitors to each festival had a tie to the represented community, even if not a genetic one.

For those who were related to communities by blood, the motivation to visit in order to spend more time socializing and networking with other members of that community was paramount, whereas non-members cited the wish to learn more about the particular community.

The percentage of native visitors seeking to socialize and encounter other people from those communities was quite a bit higher for ethnicities which have more recently become part of the cultural fabric in Melbourne, such as the Mauritian population. This suggests that these festivals were highly valuable for those who were just establishing a community, still involved in the process of putting down roots and creating neighborhoods.

Though it must be acknowledged that conclusive or even remotely definitive results can be had from an examination of several cultural festivals, the results of the Melbourne visitor’s study point toward ways in which institutions everywhere can interact with their local communities to gain a sense of what those communities want, need and would find interesting. Additionally, the results with the Mauritian community suggest that cultural centers can utilize special events to begin reaching out early on to relatively new local communities, simultaneously making their institution a focal point for those communities to meet and exchange ideas.

