

The Cultural District: Collaborative Marketing in the Museum Environment

Introduction

In the literature on museums, geographic location tends to get overlooked or generalized to a city or a region. Architecture is an aesthetic component, but only for historical houses or museums based on a specific site, are the grounds a part of the exhibits. To the visitor of an art, science, or sociological museum, the location is highlighted far less than the artifacts. Visitors may not consciously consider the physical environment of the museum, but in describing museum founding, Neil and Philip Kotler find community and national roots in all three motives.

“Most museums get started in one of three ways...In the first case, someone in a community owns a valuable collection of objects (paintings, antiques, butterflies, old medical instruments) that the person or community believes should be preserved in a museum, existing or new...In the second case, an individual, group, or community decides that the community needs a museum to add stature, visibility, or pride to a community. In the late twentieth century, major urban U.S. museums have come to symbolize a high quality of life and an incentive attracting newcomers and new businesses to the area...A third motivation for starting a museum has been more evident in Europe and Asia than in the United States: amassing a collection of art, history, science, and technology that celebrates and extols the achievements of a people and a culture, bring glory to a nation, and advances the aims of government.”¹

These different motivations inspire different missions. But only limited numbers of the first situation, that of a single donor, financially independent. Instead, museums have become more and more financially grounded in a specific region, state, or country. As of 2005, “in the UK, government is responsible for roughly 60 per cent of museum funding. In the USA, museums receive a median figure of 24 per cent of their funding from government sources.”² This grounding is reflected in changing marketing practices.

¹ Kotler 196

² Rentschler 14. Internal citations: Matty, S. (2005) Museum Statistics England. Report to the Expert Meeting on Statistics and Performance Indicators for European Museums, 13-14 October, Museums Libraries, Archives and

Ruth Rentschler suggests three periods of academic analysis of museum marketing: foundation period (1975-1983), professionalization period (1988-1993), and the entrepreneurial period (1994-present). Focus has shifted from education to accountability (as measured in visitor statistics) to the current period of “collaborative marketing models...which diversify revenue sources by obtaining new audiences, products, venues and multi-art experiences.”³ This paper will explore how the collaborative marketing model has shifted museum identification from that of an individual institution to as a part of a cluster of cultural tourism. Museums have become artifacts in the district or city-wide exhibits called Culture.

Museums still have individual identities. All three of the case-study organizations in this study have easy-to-find websites that focus on the singular personality and presence of the individual institutions, although, as will be seen, two of the organizations place the institution within the context of a larger “district” grouping on their own websites. It is this context that problematizes the tourism-oriented marketing practice. Fiona McLean suggests that the tourism industry transformed during the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ Increased leisure combined with a number of economic booms shifted marketing emphasis from local residents to locals combined with tourists. Regional and city tourist bureaus are taking the same approach in the non-profit sector as with for-profit amusements. Just as Florida’s Disney World is actually a collection of six different theme parks, New York’s Museum Mile is a collection of nine museums, Philadelphia’s Parkway Museums district is a collection of 15 destinations, and Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island Cultural District “will be the home to five major institutions” when completed. New York’s

American Association of Museums (AAM) (2006). Survey—financial snapshot for the field. Pres Release. <http://www.aam-us.org/pressreleases.cfm?mode=list&id=116> accessed 24 November 2006).

³ Rentschler 16

⁴ McLean 64

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi are members of these umbrella labels and contextualized as such.

MET

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) was founded in 1870, with the building now recognized as a seminal New York landmark opened March 30, 1880. Previously, the museum had been located further downtown on 5th Avenue and the move to central park was not universally supported. "The wisdom of the move from the populous centre of the city to a point so remote has been much questioned, and this not by the public only, but by some of the trustees themselves...even if the new site were easily accessible, it must be long before it can become what an art museum ought to be, a place of common resort, and no one will assert that the place is easily got at."⁵ Art lovers in 1880 did not have the subway or bus system that now allows about 17,000 people each day to visit the collection. It was, even at its founding, considered to be representative of New York and the United States, following the Kotler's second and third motivation. "New York is indisputably the representative City of the Union to the outer world, and as such is the fittest locality for a museum such as we describe—to say nothing of the immense advantages offered by its Park in furnishing an appropriate site."⁶ The physical location offered the opportunity for growth, although initially made access more difficult.

Although the building site for the American Museum of Natural History was chosen before the MET location and was almost directly across the park, this physical relationship

⁵ *New York Times*, March 28, 1880

⁶ *New York Times*, October 23, 1870

between the two institutions was not a point dwelled upon by journalists contemporary to the construction. Instead, the two museums, both promoted as significant additions to New York's and the United State's prestige, were viewed independently due to their diverse subject matter.

In 1979 New York held its first Museum Mile Festival, and designated an uptown portion of 5th Avenue from 82nd to 105th that included nine museums as such. Free evening admission and live performances made the event "New York's biggest block party." The 12 participating organizations included El Museo del Barrio, Museum of the City of New York, Mount Sinai Medical Center, International Center of Photography, The Jewish Museum, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Church of the Heavenly Rest, National Academy of Design, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Y.I.V.O Institute for Jewish Research, Goethe House, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷ The MET served as the anchor of the mile with its southern location on 82nd street. This first festival did not increase the day's attendance at the MET, but proved a boon to the less prominent museums included in the event. The Jewish Museum had over 2000 visitors, when an average day brought 1200-1500. The Museum of New York at 103rd Street had 600 patrons, "A bonanza...for the only museum dealing with the city's history and an institution much visited by tourists and less so by natives."⁸ The International Center for Photography received 7 times its daily visitors as a result of the festival. Clearly this collaborative-marketing event proved successful at attracting patrons to the smaller museums in the collection. In the three decades since the first event, the make up of the organizations has changed—the Neue Galerie New York has been added (2001)—but the annual event continues.

⁷ *New York Times*, June 22, 1979

⁸ *New York Times*, June 27, 1979

The influence of this collaborative marketing extends beyond one day a year. The Museum for African Art, opened in 1984, was a nomadic member of the New York cultural family. Located first on the Upper East Side, it has also had residencies in SoHo and Queens. The permanent building, set to open in 2011, will be located at the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 110th Street. Notably, the museum website positions this building as “the first addition to Manhattan's storied Museum Mile since the 1959 opening of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.” The “Museum Mile” designation is more than an opportunistic marketing feature. The perceived financial and stature advantage of being grouped with the cultural collection has become strong enough to drive site decisions by other museums.

Barnes Foundation

Albert Barnes created the Barnes Foundation in 1922, specifically purchasing a piece of property in Merion, PA close to his home to house his impressive impressionist art collection. This purchase included the promise to “maintain and expand the arboretum [John Lapsley] Wilson began in the 1880s.” This location became an intimate part of the identity of the founder and the foundation, such as when A.H. Shaw wrote an article for the *New Yorker* entitled “De Medici in Merion.”⁹ The decision to locate the collection and art school in the suburban, Greater Philadelphia area, rather than in downtown Philadelphia was not haphazard. Barnes had an antagonistic relationship with various Philadelphia cultural leaders leading him to look for a site outside the city, and eventually to refuse admission to figures such as writer James Michener and art historian John Rewald.

⁹ Anderson 33

Barnes additionally linked the foundation with the surrounding community in 1950, when he amended “the bylaws enabling the Board of Trustees of Lincoln University, one of America's first historically African American universities, to nominate four of the five trustees of the Barnes Foundation, upon the demise of all original trustees.” Biographers indicate that Lincoln was chosen to administer this important duty specifically because of its lack of prominence. Because it was a small university, it was beyond the radar of the Philadelphian elites.

However, in the last two decades the Barnes Foundation has become as famous for its controversy as for its collection. A 1996 expansion of access brought concerns from the suburban neighbors about traffic particularly in regards to the building of a new parking lot. Bankrupt by 2000, Years of financial mismanagement left the organization seeking relief. By 2004 the foundation’s proposed move to center city Philadelphia inspired multiple lawsuits, only to be finally settled in 2008. Art advocates fell on both sides of the conflict, as some advocated the move would increase access and others emphasized the need to respect the founder’s intentions. The same Merion neighbors who had protested traffic, now fought to keep the foundation in their suburb. Three Philadelphia-based non-profit organizations—the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lenfest Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation offered that bailout in the form of \$50 million toward the cost of a new building and \$100 million that would become a new endowment.¹⁰ The Barnes Foundation will open in 2012 in a new building located at the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and 20th Street, Philadelphia.

¹⁰ Linett 1

This new location inspires a new marketing strategy. Instead of the isolation of the original location, the new building “will become a vital part of Philadelphia’s cultural corridor, joining such beloved landmarks as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Franklin Institute, the Rodin Museum, The Academy of Natural Sciences, The Free Library of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.” The Barnes will join the others as a part of the Parkway Museums District, which notably focuses on tourist needs by including the Four Seasons Hotel. Although the new building will preserve the idiosyncratic manner in which the artwork is presented in the 1922 site, it will not contain an integral part of the original vision—the arboretum.

The question of access, a common one in museum studies, was a prominent feature of the Barnes Foundation controversy. Barnes intended his collection to be available for the working man—and then restricted viewing only to those attending the art school or with his personal approval. In the 1990s the Board extended viewing rights to paying patrons who scheduled ahead of time, but were still limited in number. The new building will certainly situate the collection in the center of a major urban population, which promises both increased attendance and increased restriction, because the parkway on which it is to be built is 10 lanes wide. The traffic neighbors complained about will be nothing compared to this river of cars. “The Philadelphia Museum of Art, perched on a rise at the head of the Parkway, had long viewed its Parkway location as a barrier; it gets almost no pedestrian traffic and hears plenty of complaints about the lack of parking.”¹¹ The relocation will remove the unique outdoor

¹¹ Linett 2

component of the Barnes Foundation, while not necessarily solve the problems of physical access.

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

Like the new Barnes location, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) is still under construction. But unlike the Barnes, the Guggenheim will be born, as it were, collected. Abu Dhabi will be the fifth satellite location supplied by the Guggenheim, having been preceded by Bilbao, Venice, the closed Las Vegas, and Berlin, with other locations in the works. The Guggenheim describes this array as a “global network.” These museums are linked through both collection funding and through Frank Gehry architecture. Although the Guggenheim will curate the programming and guide acquisitions, the “emirate will build, own, and maintain the building. It will acquire its own permanent inventory of contemporary art.”¹² Thus, not only is the new museum geographically rooted by name, its finances are intimately involved with its emirate of origin.

But the Guggenheim will not be lonely. “While Dubai's development has been rapid and spectacular, Abu Dhabi is planning its future carefully, and envisions the Guggenheim within a larger cultural district on Saadiyat Island. This natural landmass, located 1,640 feet offshore, will also be home to national, maritime, and Classical art museums, a performing arts center, and an art park. ‘They are transforming themselves into a Western-oriented cultural destination,’ says Anthony Calnek, deputy director of communications for the Guggenheim Foundation.”¹³ On its “Under Development” website for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim presents three sub-categories: The Building, Saadiyat Island, and Saadiyat Cultural

¹² Brake 17

¹³ Ibid

District. Even the page on the individual “The Building” emphasizes the physical structure in relation to other institutions. “The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is the largest museum in a series of cultural institutions planned as part of the Saadiyat Cultural District, which will serve the world as a destination for the advancement of knowledge and the understanding of culture through the arts.” The new museum’s identity is inescapably as a member of the Guggenheim Foundation’s branches and as a member of a “cultural district”. An additional institutional relationship is also in effect as a result of the shared location with a branch of the Louve. Whether these multiple collaborative marketing ventures prove successful will have to be discovered in three years, when the museum is scheduled to open.

Conclusion

The collaborative cultural marketing seen in New York, Philadelphia, and Abu Dhabi is not unique to those locations. Houston markets a “Museum District” with over 15 organizations, Chicago’s Field Museum, Adler Planetarium, and John G. Shedd Aquarium have been linked by a “lakefront Museum campus,” and Pittsburgh has a 14 square block area “between the newly designed David Lawrence Convention Center and Stanwix Street, the Cultural District encompasses 88 retail shops, 47 dining establishments, eight public parks and art installations, and five world-class theaters in which 1,400 performances are held each year.” The growth of these districts, many of which are named and marketed by city-based tourism bureaus, speaks to the increasing financial dependence on tourism. For smaller institutions with limited resources for marketing, this type of assistance is a great benefit as seen by the experience of the Museum of the City of New York during the Museum Mile Festival. But by presenting cultural institutions as a grouped exhibit rather than emphasizing their unique

qualities, what is lost? Kyle Chayka expressed this concern in a recent blog in *The Atlantic*. “On one hand, expansion leads to greater public access to art and greater opportunities for the museum itself. On the other, what might be good for the brand might be bad for the art, and vice versa.”¹⁴

The three case studies present three different examples of what can happen when grouping institutions by geography because a major factor in marketing. Whereas the MET provides an anchor for New York’s Museum Mile without losing its own prestige, the Barnes Foundation looks to be subsumed into Philadelphia’s Parkway Museum District and will fall under the shadow, literally, figuratively, and curatorially, of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In order to increase geographic accessibility, the Barnes will also lose its botanical component; perhaps altering the context of the fine art contained within. Finally the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will never have a life as an independent institution, because it is geographically and titularly contextualized from conception.

The impulse for collaborative marketing clearly makes sense from a financial viewpoint. But before participating, institutions need to carefully consider the transformation in identity from independent to one-of-many, and the potential Disney-fication of the cultural landscape.

¹⁴ Chayka

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