"The Museum and The Public"

The topic on which I've been invited to speak to you this evening is "The Museum and The Public". In doing so, and for the sake of simplicity, I will be using those two big words -- "museum" and "public" -- as if each of them had in back of it some single, monolithic and sharply defined reality. Neither, of course, does. Museums, in fact, are almost infinite in their variety and occupy a field with fuzzy edges. The public is not singular but plural, in no way sharply bounded but perceived and defined differently from one observer to the next. Likewise, from time to time you may find me employing that always slippery pronoun "we" in some way that strikes you as too encompassing. Feel free to disassociate yourself from any such use. In general the "we" intended will be some majority -- or at least plurality -- of people who currently spend substantial time thinking, talking or writing about the museum and its situation.

What I will propose in the course of the evening is that the relationship between the museum and the public must be understood as a revolution in process, a revolution in the most fundamental sense of that term. At its birth -- some two hundred years ago in Europe; only a little more than one hundred years ago in this country -- the position of the museum vis a vis the public was clearly a superior one. A variety of commonly used spatial metaphors made this relationship clear: the museum was established to raise the level of public understanding, it was to elevate the spirits of its visitors, it was to refine and uplift the common taste. There was no ambiguity in this. Museums were created, and maintained by the high for the low, by the couth for the uncouth, by the washed for the unwashed, by those who knew for those who didn't but needed to know and who would come to learn. The museum was established to "do". What was to be "done" was the public. The museum was a place of inculcation.

What I will argue this evening is that by some point -- not more, in all likelihood, than forty to fifty years into this coming century -- the relative positions of the museum and the public will have revolved by a full 180 degrees. In their emerging new relationship -- already to be glimpsed in a myriad of ways -- it will be the public, not the museum, that occupies the superior position. The museum's role will have been transformed from one of mastery to one of service. Toward what ends that service is to be performed, for whom it is to be rendered, and how, and when -- those are all determinations that will be made by the museum's newly ascendant master, the public.

My talk will be in three parts. To begin, I'd like to look briefly at the museum as it was in its earliest days, and particularly at the ways in which it was thought to relate to the public. I'd like then to turn to some consideration of the museum of the near future that we can begin to discern as emerging from the worn and hollowed-out husk of that old museum. Finally, I'd like to use the
bulk of my time, first, to look back at some of the factors that account for the loss of the museum's initially superior position and, second, to examine a number of current phenomena in and around the museum that seem to me symptomatic of the ongoing metamorphosis through which the public is now succeeding to the museum's formerly commanding position.

My basic contention is that we -- and again, feel free to disassociate yourselves from that "we" -- are engaged in a process of adaptive reuse. What we have inherited was a once grand and imposing structure. That structure -- with most of its ideological foundations long since rotted away -- can no longer function in all the ways in which its builders intended. Few of us, though, are prepared to tear it down or even just to walk away and leave it to collapse. It still provides value, and -- properly adapted -- it could provide far greater value still. While this work of adapting the museum so it might better serve the public's needs is far from successfully accomplished, there are -- as you will hear this evening -- heartening signs throughout the museum community that it is well underway.

To begin, then, with some beginnings. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was established in 1870. In arguing for its establishment, Charles Callahan Perkins -- subsequently to serve as one of its earliest Trustees -- was explicit in describing what such an institution might offer to the public at large:

"There exists a modicum of capacity for improvement in all men, which can be greatly developed by familiarity with such acknowledged masterpieces as are found in all great collections of works of art. Their humblest function is to give enjoyment to all classes; their highest, to elevate men by purifying the taste and acting upon the moral nature..."

Beyond the capacity to elevate the taste and purify the morals of its visitors, the museum was also envisioned by its founders as providing a wholesome alternative to the seamer forms of diversion that might otherwise tempt the working class inhabitants of those burgeoning nineteenth-century cities where the earliest museums were established. The original program for the Metropolitan Museum of Art -- like Boston's MFA, founded in 1870 -- proposed that the new institution was not only to cultivate a "pure taste in all matters connected with the arts" but also to provide the people of New York City with a "means for innocent and refined enjoyment." As for uplift, William Cullen Bryant said that the new museum would provide "entertainment of an...improving character." Discussing the advantages of adding evening hours for the public at London's South Kensington Museum -- subsequently to be renamed the Victoria & Albert -- Sir Henry Cole, the Museum's Superintendent, projected the following scene:

The working man comes to this Museum from his one or two dimly lighted, cheerless dwelling rooms, in his fustian jacket [fuschen: an inexpensive cloth combining cotton and flax] with his shirt collars a little trimmed up, accompanied by his threes, and fours, and fives of little fustian jackets, a wife, in her best bonnet, and a baby, of course, under her shawl. The looks of surprise and pleasure of the whole party when they first observe the brilliant lighting inside the Museum show what a new, acceptable, and wholesome excitement this evening entertainment affords to all of them. Perhaps the evening opening of Public Museums may furnish a powerful antidote to
the gin palace.

On another occasion, Sir Henry suggested that keeping the South Kensington Museum open on Sundays -- as well as evenings -- might be a way of, in his phrase, of "defeating Satan".

As it was in New York and London, so too was it in Paris. The conversion of the Louvre from a palace to a museum in the years immediately following the French revolution was multiple in its purposes. In part it was intended to provide a facility for training those artists who would subsequently employ their talents on behalf of the State. In part, it was intended to symbolize the newborn freedom of the people in which access to what had once been exclusive to the aristocracy and clergy would now be universal for every citizen. Such access, however, as George Heard Hamilton has written:

...was not solely for aesthetic pleasure, but for the inculcation of political and social virtue. Though Napoleon's imperial ambition eroded the earlier artistic morality, there remained a strong belief that acquaintance with great art improves the morals as it does the taste of the individual and thus contributes to the general welfare of society.

Founded on a somewhat different premise than the art museum was the natural history museum. There, the goal was not so much to inculcate virtue as to locate the place that its Western and predominantly Caucasian visitors occupied in the terrestrial order of things. And that place, beyond any doubt, was at the top of things, certainly above the dinosaurs -- sometimes portrayed as bird-brained losers -- and the seashells, tigers and swordfish, but also above the little red, brown and yellow people who appeared in dioramas or scale models together with their quaint but primitive hunting weapons, clothing, shelter and cookpots. Through a sort of "pop" twist on evolution, the societies that these people inhabited were not presented as self-sustaining and functional responses to the particular circumstances in which their members lived. These societies were depicted, rather, as passing through one of our own advanced society's earlier stages of development, as living examples of our own long gone past. Consider the following extract from the British Museum's Handbook to the Ethnographic Collections, all the more shocking because it was first published within our own century, in 1910, and republished almost within our lifetimes -- mine, anyway -- in 1925. It reads:

The mind of primitive man is wayward, and seldom capable of continuous attention. His thoughts are not quickly collected, so that he is bewildered in an emergency; and he is so much the creature of habit that unfamiliar influences such as those which white men introduce into his country disturb his mental balance. His powers of discrimination and analysis are undeveloped, so that distinctions which to us are fundamental, need not be obvious to him. Thus he does not distinguish between similarity and identity, between names and things, between the events that occur in dreams and real events, between the sequence of ideas in his mind and of things in the outer world to which they correspond. His ideas are grouped by chance impressions, and his conclusions often based on superficial analogies which have no weight with us.

Key to understanding the art and natural history museums in their earliest manifestations is that
they were both celebratory: the art museum celebrated "acknowledged masterpieces"; the natural history museum celebrated western humankind's place in nature. No less celebratory in its founding days, though, was the history museum. In its European version what it tended to celebrate was military victory. Almost invariably, it was founded and maintained by the State. At the extreme end of the scale was the Gallery of Battles that Louis-Philippe opened at Versailles in 1837. Some 400 feet long -- a football field plus a third -- it was hung with huge canvases depicting the glory of French arms. With each new war -- win or lose -- new paintings were added.

In the United States, history museums evolved in a somewhat different manner. While still celebratory, they were initially private in their inception, tended to grow out of local historical societies, were frequently located in historic houses, and were as much concerned with civic virtue as with military valor. Civic virtue, in turn, was largely defined by success in politics, the professions and/or business. The subject matter ultimately celebrated in most of these museums - at least in the East; a somewhat different tradition developed in such populist midwestern states as Wisconsin and Minnesota -- was the community's first families. Not infrequently, those who principally supported these museums, served on their boards, worked in them or even directed them were none other than the descendants of those very same first families. The stories that these museums told were invariably success stories. The greatest success story of all, and the model for many others, was George Washington's. Campaigning in the mid-1850s for the establishment of Mount Vernon as a historic house museum, South Carolina's Ann Pamela Cunningham called for it to be a "shrine" where "the mothers of the land and their innocent children might make their offering in the cause of [the] greatness, goodness, and prosperity of their country."

Let's turn, then, to the museum of the near future. Will it too be celebratory? Perhaps, or perhaps not. What will be important and what will be different is not so much what particular stance the museum of the near future may take but how the decision to take that stance is to be made. In the museum of the near future, it will be primarily the public, and not those inside the museum, who will make those decisions. And what, in turn, can those inside the museum be expected to bring to the table? The answer, I think, is their astonishing technical expertise. As I recently wrote in another context:

Museum workers are fundamentally technicians. They have developed and passed along to their successors systematic ways in which to deal with the objects (and with information about those objects) that their museums collect and make accessible to the public. Through training and experience they have developed a high level of expertise as to how those objects ought properly be collected, preserved, restored, classified, catalogues, studied, displayed, interpreted, stored, transported, and safeguarded.

The museum of the near future, as thus envisioned, would in itself be an ideologically neutral organization. It would, in essence, be one of a range of organizations -- instruments, really -- available to its supporting community to be used in pursuit of its communal goals. As an intricate
and potentially powerful instrument of communication, it would make available to the community, and for the community's purposes, its profound expertise at telling stories, at eliciting emotion, at triggering memories, at stirring imagination, at prompting discovery -- its expertise in stimulating all those object-based responses, and more.

And how might the community choose to use the museum? In as many ways, certainly, as different communities at different times might have different needs. What we know already is that the museum has proven itself to be a remarkably flexible instrument. The history museum, for example, has shown that -- the descriptive phrases come from Professor Joyce Appleby at UCLA -- beyond celebratory it can also be compensatory or even deal with complexity, that beyond praising history's winners, be they military, political, professional or economic, it can also seek to soothe the pain -- or at least recognize, memorialize and try to understand the losses -- of history's victims. Our repertory of museum types has expanded enormously in just the past two decades. Consider, for example, the Famine Museum that opened in Strokestown, Ireland in 1994, or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, or the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem. In much the same way that Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial differs from the celebratory war memorials of earlier conflicts, these museums are places of memory, places for inward and sober reflection. Likewise, the art museum and the natural history museum have each cloned off variants of itself that can serve a multiplicity of public purposes.

How was this revolution set into motion, how was the museum so unceremoniously dethroned from the sovereign position in which it was first established? One factor, certainly, was money. As the Report submitted to the White House in February by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities makes clear, the dependence of this country's museums on government for their support currently exceeds that of other arts institutions by a ratio of almost four-to-one. In the case of museums, just under 30% of the 1995 income was from governmental sources; for the other groups surveyed, non-profit theater was the highest at 6.5%. Symphony orchestras and opera companies were each at 6%. So disproportionately great a dependence on governmental support must inevitably require that museums -- far more so than other cultural organizations -- keep themselves at all times finely tuned as to how they are being perceived not merely by their visitors and potential visitors but also by the larger tax-paying public upon whose good will and at least tacit approval they have made themselves so dependent. In those by-gone days when museums were supported largely by the contributions of their well-to-do Trustees, a touch of royal arrogance might not have been wholly unexpected. With so radical a shift in their sources of support -- only 22.8% of their support was received through private contributions in 1995; every other group surveyed by the President's Committee received between 30 and 40% -- whatever arrogance the museum may have once displayed toward the public has long since been converted to deference.

In accounting for the public's growing ascendancy, money figures in a second way as well. Given the recurring fear that current levels of governmental support might fall victim to budget-balancing, museums have become ever-more intense in their pursuit of earned income, whether through increased admissions revenue and/or the net proceeds from such auxiliary activities as
on-site and off-site gift shops, mail order catalogues, restaurants, facilities rentals, foreign travel tours, and more. Consider this irony. Sir Henry Cole originally envisioned the museum as a wholesome alternative to the gin mill. Given the innumerable social events for which the museums rents itself out these days, it's by no means clear that the museum itself has not become the gin mill. In its pursuit of earned income, the museum has inevitably -- kicking and screaming, certainly, but nonetheless inevitably -- put itself in a marketing mode. In planning special exhibitions, and in creating the special merchandise it hopes to sell in conjunction with such exhibitions, the degree to which these will appeal to the public must necessarily be taken into serious account.

The American Museum of Natural History's current exhibition Endangered! Exploring a World at Risk is a case in point. According to The New York Times (March 13, 1997), the American Museum will be spending an estimated $200,000 to $300,000 to publicize the exhibition. Asked whether he thought such an expenditure for a single five-and-a-half month exhibition was unusual, New York City's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Schuyler C. Chapin said "I think the American Museum is increasingly moving in a new, more visible direction, using the tools of modern marketing in a precise way. And I think the museum is trying to bring in a larger family audience," Among the special gift shop items that this family audience will find available for purchase are a 55-cent pencil with the exhibition's logo, a $7,500 chessboard made of Cambrian slate with gold and silver chess pieces in the forms of endangered species, a variety of exhibition-relevent plush toys and a CD-ROM titled "The Encyclopedia of Endangered Species". By yet another metamorphosis, museum visitors, once the people to be "done", have been transformed into customers. And, as customers -- like those legendary people who pay the piper -- they can with increasing frequency call the tune.

Money, however -- or, rather, the need for it -- does not by itself wholly account for the loss of the museum's once-superior position. Contributing to that loss as well has been a general and ongoing decline in the respect generally accorded to institutions of every sort, from the presidency of the United States down to the local day-care center. Museums, although relatively untouched by scandals and touched only modestly by mismanagement, are in no way exempt from this loss of public trust. As the University of Chicago historian Neal Harris observed in a 1986 address, the "museum's voice is no longer seen as transcendent. Rather it is implicated in the distribution of wealth, power, knowledge and taste shaped by the larger social order."

With the loss of its transcendent voice has come the loss as well -- or at least the tarnishment -- of the public's confidence in the museum as a disinterested, neutral and objective agency. In a dozen different contexts, identity and interest groups of every kind insist that the mainstream museum is neither empowered nor qualified to speak on their behalf. Increasingly, such groups are creating their own museums from which to speak in their own voices and address what they consider to be their own issues. In recent years, Native Americans, Asian Americans and African Americans have been particularly active in the establishment of specialized museums. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center now under construction on the Pequot 's tribal reservation in Connecticut will, with its 316,000 square feet, be among the largest
museums in New England. The newly expanded Museum of African American History reopening this month in Detroit will quadruple its former space. It will display important materials relating to slavery, a topic -- compensatory, not celebratory -- that is scarcely touched in any depth at most mainstream history museums. In Los Angeles, the Japanese American National Museum tells the story of the wartime detention centers in which innocent American citizens were held and treated as prisoners.

Consistent with this distrust of the museum's objectivity has come a growing recognition that the museum, in and of itself, is a morally neutral entity. The nineteenth-century view was different. As Carol Duncan describes the situation that prevailed in Europe, "public art museums were regarded as evidence of political virtue, indicative of a government that provided the right things for its people...[E]ducated opinion understood that art museums could demonstrate the goodness of a state or show the civic-mindedness of its leading citizens." In the United States, of course, it was the latter part of Duncan's formulation that applied: the museum stood as tangible evidence of the civic-mindedness of the community's leading citizens. In the century since, we have come to understand that museums can be used just as easily for malevolent purposes as for benevolent ones, that the same technical skills that might be called upon to create a museum of tolerance could as easily be employed to create one of intolerance, and that the museum is simply an instrument -- what really matters is in whose hands it's held and for what purposes it's intended to be used. Just as we recognize today that "art" is simply a noun and not a value judgment -- those judgments come through such adjectives as sublime, terrible, interesting, disgusting, charming, and dull -- so too is "museum" simply a noun. Whatever positive values it acquires must come through the appropriate adjectives.

Beyond all of these factors, however -- beyond money, beyond loss of public confidence, and beyond the recognition that they are not inherently virtuous organizations-- perhaps the greatest single factor contributing to the loss of the museum's once superior position has been the bankruptcy of the underlying ideologies on which it was founded. Where this can most clearly be seen is in the case of the art museum. No sooner had their founders begun to establish such museums in the United States than the link between art and moral uplift began to unravel. New ways of painting began to take hold -- painting intended to be looked at for its own sake, and not because it depicted some character-forming scene from history, mythology, or the prevailing religious tradition. In time, new ways of looking at older paintings would also take hold. Instead of appreciating them for their moral probity or elevating sentiment, visitors were encouraged to value them in terms of such formal elements as line, color, composition and painterly skill.

And what of the argument that the link between art and morality need not necessarily be broken, that line, color, and composition -- even in their most abstract manifestations -- might still be the stuff of moral uplift? "We know in our hearts," writes Robert Hughes, "that the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art is a pious fiction. The Rothko on the wall does not turn its lucky owner into Bambi." And what of Sir Robert Peel's observation to Parliament in 1832 when -- discussing London's proposed new National Gallery of Art -- he suggested that in times of political turmoil "the exacerbation of angry and unsocial feelings might be much
softened" by exposure to works of fine art. Nobody believes that any longer either.

In the case of the natural history museum, the ideology that went bankrupt was the one which placed western Caucasians at the pinnacle of creation. Being required to share that pinnacle with the former diorama and scale model people was humbling enough. Far worse, though, was the discovery that -- rather than having transcended the rest of the natural world -- the people on the pinnacle, the whole lot of them, the Caucasians and the diorama folk alike, were locked into a profound interdependence with that world, and that -- for better or for worse -- their futures were inextricably intertwined. Over the past several decades, the center of interest for the natural history museum -- and that of many zoological parks as well -- has shifted from taxonomy to ecological and environmental issues. To the extent that the natural history museum has defined an increase in public awareness and activism with respect to those issues as its principal purpose, it appears today to be far more focused as an institution than either the art or history museum.

For the history museum -- founded primarily on a "great man" and celebratory approach to its subject matter -- it was not so much the case that its underlying ideology was repudiated as that such an approach simply became just one -- and by no means the dominant one -- out of a great many different ways to "do" history. Whereas an historic house in New York City had once meant something on the order of the Morris-Jumel Mansion or Edgar Allan Poe's Cottage in the Bronx, it just as easily today can mean those three circa 1863 buildings that make up the Lower East Side Tenement Museum on Orchard Street. Whereas history museums that focused on political leaders were apt to take for their subject such tried, true and golden oldies as Jefferson or Lincoln, today we can find history museums that operate in the thicket of everyday contemporary life. Consider, for example, the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle -- named for and celebrating the life of Seattle's first elected City Councilman of Chinese descent -- or, a hemisphere away, the newly established museum on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and the other leadership of the African National Congress were only recently held as prisoners.

The Smithsonian announced this past February that it will be assisting in the establishment of a National Museum of Industrial History in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The Museum will occupy a massive abandoned steel mill that still stands there on a 160 acre site. How very different that new museum promises to be than the earlier museums we associate with steelmaking: the Morgan Library and Frick Collection in New York, the Carnegie in Pittsburgh. That its frame can be enlarged to include not merely those who financed the making of steel or captained its great companies but also those whose labor actually produced it is symptomatic of how very far the history museum has evolved from the approach with which it began.

Another example. When the Whitney Museum mounted an exhibition about the landscape architect and urban planner Frederick Law Olmstead in 1972, it was cast in the conventional hagiographic mode. Olmstead was portrayed as a heroic figure who triumphed over whom or whatever might have would frustrated the full flowering of his talents. From a New York perspective, the greatest of his triumphs, of course, had to be the creation of our beloved Central Park. Unmentioned, however, beyond vague references to "some shanties" that had to be moved
and some "squatters" to be sent on their was that there was actually a small town -- Seneca Village, a poor African-American and Irish community located toward the Western edge of the Park near 86th Street -- that had to be destroyed to make way for Olmstead's new construction. This past January, The New York Historical Society opened an exhibition entitled Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village. In a manner more compensatory than celebratory, it tells the story of this lost community and its all-but-forgotten citizens. Included as part of the exhibition is a study center where visitors can consult files that pertain to those inhabitants of Seneca Village who can still be identified and explore the possibility of finding some family relationship. In that connection, New York Historical Society is also presenting several workshops on genealogical research. To return to the principal theme of this evening's talk -- the changing relationship between the museum and the public -- such an example might seem to suggest that the near future, when the museum of the near future will conceive of itself wholly in terms of its ability to serve the public, might even be nearer than first appeared.

Not quite, though. These are still only isolated examples, and a great deal of hard work remains to be done. In all fairness, one might ask why so much work should be undertaken at all. If the original premises upon which the museum was founded no longer appear valid, why are we struggling so hard to wrestle it onto some other foundation? Why not just let it go? Let me suggest two answers. The first has to do with the all-but-unique power of objects. Notwithstanding that the museum as we know it has been with us for some two hundred years, we are only in the foothills of learning about the ways in which the museum's visitors respond to the objects it shows. Some things we already know: that the response to a real, three-dimensional object -- a moonrock, George Washington's false teeth, an original painting by Rembrandt -- is entirely different from our response to a photograph, video image or verbal description of that same object. Whether this response is attributable to some Benjaminian "aura" or to the power of association -- the moonrock is more than a just a rock; it's tangible proof that there really is a moon; it's also a souvenir of what was truly a grand adventure; it's also makes a claim to be "true" in a way that words or pictures never can -- the fact remains that authentic objects displayed in a museum-type setting can trigger powerful cognitive and affective responses. In an effort to sort such responses into some sensible pattern, the touring exhibition that marked the Smithsonian Institution's 150th Anniversary last year was divided into three sections respectively entitled "Remembering," "Discovering," and "Imagining". Even those categories barely scratch the surface.

What we are now learning about visitor response has come as something of a surprise. That museums serve an educational function has long been a basic rubric of the field. It has also been long been supposed that the way they serve that function is through exhibitions in which the curator -- by the artful arrangement of objects and placement of labels -- spells out a lesson in such a way that the visitor, having carefully visited the exhibition, will have learned all or some part of that same lesson which the curator was trying to teach. In a paper published last year, Zahava Doering -- who directs the Office of Institutional Studies at the Smithsonian -- argued that this might not be the case at all. Rather than communicating new information, she says, the primary impact of visiting a museum exhibition is to confirm, reinforce and extend the visitor's
existing beliefs. The "most satisfying exhibition[s] for visitors," she says, "are those that resonate with their experience and provide new information in ways that confirm and enrich their [own] view of the world."

A parallel conclusion was drawn by Russell J. Ohta of Arizona State University West who studied visitor responses to the admittedly controversial exhibition Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art when it was shown in Phoenix last year. Although each of the visitors he studied experienced "rich moments filled with deep personal meaning," none of those meanings resembled each other. The meaning in each case was forged from the visitor's own personal identity. What they primarily experienced was neither about art nor about the flag, he concluded. It was primarily about themselves. "In essence," he writes, "the exhibition became a looking glass for visitors. They experienced what they were capable of experiencing They experienced who they were." He concludes by quoting the anthropologist David Pilbaum's dictum that, in looking at things, we tend not see them as they are but as we are.

What this research suggests is that among the services which the museum is able to offer to its community is this capacity to provide the individual visitor with an important degree of personal self-affirmation. While some religious organizations may perform a similar function, it's difficult to identify many other secular institutions that can play so communally valuable a role for an adult population. It's also difficult to identify many other secular institutions that play such a conservative role. As Doering points out, the museum -- understood in this mode of providing individual self-affirmation -- functions far more strongly as an instrument for social stability than as any kind of a lever for radical change. To what extent might just such an insight serve to justify the continued funding of museums by government at its current, or even a higher, level?

A second answer as to why museums might justify all the effort that will be required for their readaption might be based on what is a relatively new concept for museums, i.e., that they have a vital role to play in building what The Museum Group -- a Baltimore-based consulting organization -- calls "healthy human communities". That relates to an idea that's been advocated for some time now by Elaine Heumann Gurian, a member of the Group and well-known for her work over many years at the Boston's Children Museum, the Smithsonian, and the Holocaust Museum. This past winter, Gurian proposed that the American Association of Museums expand its official statement of principles -- a statement that seeks to encapsulate the various educational, stewardship and public service roles that museums play, and to do so within a framework of diversity -- to include the notion that one of the museum's core functions was to be "a place of safety". In an increasingly atomized and even hostile environment, she argued, the museum ought emphasize the fact that it has traditionally been and still remains one of the few public spaces in which people of every background can gather together for peaceful exchange in a secure surrounding. In that mode, the museum might be understood as a contemporary descendent of such earlier public gathering places as the Roman bath, the medieval cathedral and the New England village green. Although the AAM's leadership was not as yet prepared to adopt Gurian's proposal, it did engender considerable discussion and -- as they say on Wall Street -- it certainly remains in play.
During a meeting just this past month at the North Carolina Museum of Art, the Raleigh architect/artist Thomas Sayre expressed a similar idea. Discussing the various ways in which public space might be conceptualized, two of his examples seemed particularly relevant to the museum -- one to the museum that once was, the other to the museum of the near future. The example relevant to the museum that once was, the museum of inculcation, was this:

Public space as the display of "civic virtue". This is space which has traditionally had the large equestrian statue proclaiming a host of attitudes and emotions about seminal events in the culture. The potency of this kind of public space comes from the extent to which the public agrees or "buys into" the civic virtues, themselves. Nowadays, this kind of space is losing its potency. We don't agree so readily on what is civic virtue.

In contrast to that, Sayre proposed another kind of public space -- a public space that seems in its way only a slight variant on Gurian's notion of the museum as a place of safety and also akin to Duncan Cameron's vision of a quarter-century ago that the museum -- in addition to what it already was -- ought properly be a site for community confrontation, interchange and debate. Sayre's description:

Public space [as] a confluence of voices, as [a] forum for exchange. This admittedly utopian vision sees public space as a place where our multi-cultural society orchestrates its many voices into a dynamic whole. It is a place where the melting pot melts. Its function is something like fluid dynamics.

To be a place for personal self-affirmation, to contribute importantly to the health of human communities, to be a place where the melting pot melts -- all in all, and combined with what we already think to be of value about the museum, those seem some reasonably powerful arguments to justify this ongoing effort to build the museum of the near future.

In the few minutes remaining, I'd like to mention just a few of the phenomena occurring in and around museums -- phenomena that, in some instances, seem to resonate with one another -- that seem to me symptomatic of this changing relationship between the museum and the public. One involves a toning down of that omniscient and impersonal voice in which the museum of yesteryear was accustomed to address its public. This change is particularly evident in natural history museums. Consider, for example, the renovated dinosaur halls that the American Museum of Natural History has opened over the past several years. In contrast to the scientifically authoritarian tone of the Museum's old galleries, humility is now the order of the day. What the labels make clear is that the book on dinosaurs is far from closed. So far, the labels say, this is what we think we know and this is why we think so. But we're just people and we've been wrong before, and we may well be proven wrong again. Moreover, there are some things -- like, what color were dinosaurs? -- that we may just never find out.

At the National Zoo in Washington, the Think Tank is a recently-opened building where the public can watch and interact with scientists who are studying animal intelligence. The methodologies for this are all experimental. Asked by members of the public why one approach
or another is being used, the scientists openly acknowledge the experimental nature of their work. That, they say, is how science is. At the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, Michael Spock made it a practice to include in each exhibit hall photographs of the curators and preparators who had been responsible for its installation. It was important, he thought, for the public to understand that its interaction with the indubitably authentic specimens on view was in no way an inevitable one but had been shaped and mediated by real human beings with all the possibilities for error and/or bias that any such human undertaking might entail.

Also symptomatic of change are several recent instances in which museums have reformulated their missions entirely in an effort to connect more directly with their visitors and potential visitors. Two recent examples are The Strong Museum in Rochester, New York and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. Established just two years apart in the mid 1960s, both museums were created by the gifts of very large private collections -- in the case of the Glenbow, some 1.2 million objects -- both were provided with substantial funds to underwrite their operations, by a very considerable private bequest in the case of The Strong and by public funding from the Province of Alberta in the case of the Glenbow, and both were left relatively free to develop their own missions. For a variety of reasons, they have both also found it necessary -- some twenty to twenty-five years after first opening their doors -- to rethink what they were doing. In its original conception, the Strong -- which concentrates on the history of the northeastern United States -- chose the year 1940 as the end date for both its collecting and interpretive activities. With the passage of years, however, there came a growing recognition at the museum that its ties to the community were becoming progressively weaker. Attendance was in decline, public interest appeared scant, and nobody below the age of fifty could any longer make much of a connection with the Museum's cut-off date of 1940. The Strong Museum gathered its collective courage and did what very few museums have ever dared to do. It went to the community to ask if there was something else, something different than a museum concentrating on history up to 1940, that the community might find more useful. There was. What the community wanted was a museum that would be more oriented toward contemporary issues, a museum that would be oriented toward family visitation, a museum where parents might take their children to learn important lessons not fully taught in school. Since 1992, the Strong has mounted exhibitions dealing with AIDS, the Cold War, bereavement, racism, alcohol and drugs. It is also working with the Children's Television Workshop on an exhibition that will be built around the characters from Sesame Street.

At the Glenbow, there was what its Director Robert Janes calls a "philosophic shift". Whereas the collection and its management had previously been at the core of its operations, the focus was shifted instead to public service and communication. "Museums," he writes, "exist to communicate and in the process provide answers to the question...what does it mean to be a human being? Although collections are the indispensable means to that end, they are not the end in themselves." Reflecting that shift of focus is the Glenbow's new statement of its mission. Unlike traditional mission statements, filled with such museum-specific verbs as "collect," "preserve," and "exhibit," the Glenbow's new statement is oriented around the response of its visiting public. "To be a place where people find meaning and value, and delight in exploring the
diversity of the human experience.”

In contrast to these older museums making mid-course corrections in order to place greater emphasis on the public service aspects of their operation, new museums are being established that provide this emphasis from the outset. At a Symposium held in Washington this past September in celebration of the Smithsonian's 150th Anniversary, Irene Hirano of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles described how her own museum had been founded in 1985. Members of the local Japanese American community, she said, had become aware that the experience of the World War II detention camps in which they and their families had been incarcerated was slowly being forgotten. Sensing the need, in her phrase, to "give their history a home" and fearful that their story would never be properly told if the telling was left to others, the community determined to take the responsibility itself to "ensure that [its] history and culture was documented." Of the various means by which this might have been done, a museum was the community's instrument of choice.

At that same Symposium, Maria de Lourdes Horta of the Museu Imperial in Brazil talked about the remarkable cluster of small history museums that are springing up in Brazil's rural countryside.

Under the stress of development and the need to survive, communities are taking hold of the idea of a "museum", whatever that may be in their minds, and are starting to take the job in their own hands. This is the case of some projects developed with the assistance of....educators and museologists in the south of Brazil....Working with teachers and children, the process involves...old people and field workers, who start to dig into their past, looking for their roots, recovering self-pride and a sense of belonging to a given group with a unique history. A museum without walls, a true virtual museum, is being born in some of those communities that look in wonder to their own process of self-discovery and recognition.....For the moment, in my country, [museums] are being used in a new way, as tools for self-expression, self-recognition and representation, as spaces of power negotiation among social forces, as strategies for empowering people so [that] they are more capable to decide their own destiny.

The art museum is changing too, if not as dramatically. One of the factors driving its change is simply the unavailability to new museums of the kind of old master art -- or even not-so-old master art -- that was once collected by the great urban museums such as those in Boston, New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Chicago. Most of that art is already in museum collections. Given the explosion in art prices over the last two decades, what isn't already in museum collections is prohibitively expensive. Concurrently, increasingly restrictive ethical codes together with the world-wide spread of export controls, have made it virtually impossible for these new museums to collect the once-so-cheerfully-plundered art of other cultures. Nor is it likely that many will inherit important private collections. The era of heroic collecting may well be on the wane. Accordingly, these new museums have had to learn to do more with less. And many of them have done so with remarkable ingenuity. Of necessity, their energies must be directed at public programming rather than collection care. That, in turn, has required that their
focus be more outward than inward.

In the southwestern corner of Virginia, for example, the William King Regional Art Center in Abingdon -- without a single work of art that a major New York City museum would consider fit to hang in its galleries -- provides a broad range of community and school programming that would, pound for pound, knock the socks off anything to be found in New York City. Closer to home, the James A. Michener Museum of Art in Doylestown, Pennsylvania -- a museum that limits its program to Bucks County -- seamlessly supplements its rather slender collection of Bucks County paintings with masterfully designed displays about the writers and other creative individuals who have been associated with the County, individuals such as S. J. Perelman, the playwrights Kauffman and Hart, the writer Jean Toomer, and the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein. In so doing, it has evolved itself from what was originally a museum of visual art into a novel new form: a museum of human creativity. For the new art museum, the strength of its imagination -- not the strength of its collection -- may frequently be its only hope for distinction.

Impacting also on how the museum and the public interact -- or, at least, on how they may be perceived to interact -- is an idea implicit in post-modernism. It is the proposition that no text is completed except through the act of "reading" it and that every text, accordingly, must have as many versions -- all equally correct -- as it has readers. Translated into museum terms, that would suggest that the objects displayed in the museum do not have any fixed or inherent meaning but that "meaning making" -- the process by which those objects acquire meaning for individual members of the public -- will in each case involve the specific memories, expertise, viewpoint, assumptions and connections that the particular individual brings. As you may note, this notion has considerable resonance with some of the visitor research considered earlier.

Adherents of this "meaning making" paradigm claim that it is unduly restrictive to conceive of the museum's relationship to the public purely in terms of its educational potential. Writing in Curator magazine two years ago, Lois Silverman of Indiana University argued:

Hindered by [their] historical focus on a nearly exclusively educational mission, other potentialities of museums lie seriously underutilized in exhibitions and institutions alike. Museums in a new age can become places that actively support and facilitate a range of human experiences with artifacts and collections -- social, spiritual, imaginal, therapeutic, aesthetic, and more.

Among the interesting implications that Silverman draws from the "meaning making" model is that a museum visit made in company -- whether that be the company of partners, family or friends -- is likely to produce a richer harvest of meanings than a visit made by an individual alone. "Often," she writes, "visitors learn new things through the past experience and knowledge of their companions. Thus.....people create content and meaning in museums through the filter of their interpersonal relationships." Again, you may sense some resonance between this and the experience of The Strong Museum where the community expressed its interest in having a museum that encouraged family visits. From this post-modernist perspective, the relationship of the museum to its visiting public in one sense seems clear -- they are partners in giving a
meaningful voice to those objects which, according to a previous generation of museum practitioners, were once said to speak for themselves.

One final symptom of change: at a Smithsonian-wide exchange of ideas held in Washington last month, Doering astonished some number of participants with her radical suggestion that museum visitor studies might become more useful to museums if they focused -- at least in part -- on whether the visitor's expectations with respect to an exhibition had been satisfied rather than on whether the expectations of the exhibit's curator had been met. Underlying this suggestion was a recognition of the disconnect between what curators have traditionally expected of the exhibition medium -- that visitors will learn the lesson the curator has set out to teach -- and the emerging reality that visitors may inevitably bring their own agendas to the museum and that, from their point of view, the satisfaction of those agendas constitutes the essence of a successful museum visit. As she noted in the abstract for her session:

The visitor paradigm most commonly found among museum staff today is the "baby bird" model, which sees the visitor as a relatively undeveloped appetite needing our wise and learned feeding. The staff expects to provide these visitors with motivation and with learning experiences. The actual range of visitor expectations is more sophisticated, more complex, and more challenging than most of us suspect.

Is not that precise shift of focus -- subordinating a concentration on the museum's expectations of the public to a concentration on the public's expectation of the museum -- at the very center of the revolution about which we've been talking this evening? I would submit that it is.

Finally, then, when that revolution has run its course and when the museum of the near future is firmly established, what might we expect it to be like? In the glorious phrase that Northrup Frye once used to describe the potentialities of an open society, there will be a "reservoir of possibilities". From that very rich reservoir, it will be the public -- voting with its feet, voting with its credit cards, and acting through its elected representatives -- that will determine which combinations of those many possibilities best meets its needs and wants. No longer the passive body that -- in the museum's first conception -- was to be raised, elevated, refined and uplifted; that was, in short, to be "done," the public will have succeeded to active control of this quite remarkable and uniquely powerful instrument. The museum will still do, but this time it will be the public -- in all its plurality -- that determines what it does By then, perhaps, that might not even seem like such a revolutionary idea.

© 1997 Stephen Weil. All rights reserved.