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## **“The Ideal Exhibition – The Cultural Resource Perspective”**

The original title of this contribution was to be “The Ideal Exhibition – The Cultural Planning View.” Since culture *is* and is continuously being recreated and quite impossible to plan, I am proposing to modify the title to consider the ideal exhibition from “the cultural resource perspective.”

Some twenty-four years ago Barry Lord and I called our firm *cultural resource* planning and management because we hoped to help communities plan and manage their *cultural resources* – helping to determine what is of value to them, and why and how to preserve and communicate their cultural resources at the highest possible standards of excellence in the realities of their situation. Some examples of the cultural resources we have helped to actuate are: Salford’s collection of paintings by LS Lowry (in a stunning new cultural center that won the award for UK building of the year in the year 2000); Johannesburg’s terrifying collection of apartheid-era prisons which has become a site of conscience known as “Constitution Hill”; and the Islamic art collections of the Louvre for which we are helping to plan a new addition to be created in the Cour Visconti.

What then is an exhibition as a cultural resource? Whether it is of the museum’s own collection or a special temporary exhibition, an exhibition is a highly successful communication medium – possibly one of the most successful in the last 200 years when there has been a great deal of competition in the forms of film, sound recording, books, radio, TV and the Internet. For museums are in fact part of the communications sector, along with telephones, radio, television and the worldwide web, and they have been part of the on-going revolution in that sector.

The exhibition is thus an incredibly important cultural resource in and of itself. And it is an especially interesting one because the components of this cultural resource are also cultural resources: paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, artifacts, photographs, media art, installations, and so on. The art exhibition is thus a kind of meta-cultural resource.

Does this ‘meta’ quality fully explain the aura and the allure of an exhibition? Not entirely. A book about the paintings of El Greco, say, depicts those cultural resources, as do film and TV presentations on the artist. You can Google El Greco on the internet or search the databases of museum collections and make your own exhibition.

But a temporary exhibition of a retrospective of selected works by El Greco or the display of the extraordinary permanent collection at El Prado in Madrid – that is something else entirely. But what exactly? And what is it that is so compelling?

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I would propose that the defining characteristic of the art exhibition as a cultural resource is *the organization of authentic objects in three dimensional space where we can explore them in a self-directed way in time*. The exhibition space differs from other constructed social spaces (domestic, academic or ecclesiastical, for example) because it is a space of representation – that is to say, *re-presentation*. In museum exhibitions works of art are *re-presented*, creating a transformative experience for the viewer.

This process of *re-presentation* of cultural resources is a unique quality of museums and galleries. By way of comparison, other communications media merely *reproduce* cultural resources. The more that electronic and print media provide opportunities for the public to access reproductions, the more effective will be the exhibition medium, which continually and continuously re-presents the *actual* cultural resource -- as though we are seeing it for the first time.

So what makes the ideal exhibition from the cultural resource planning perspective? I am proposing a list of five factors, which I will first present to you and then test against a very successful exhibition of this past year.

1. Re-presentation of works of art as a result of new research; resulting in juxtaposition of works not often seen together, a new thesis about the artist, the group or the theme, or re-presentation by means of what the French call *mise-en-scene*.
2. A *transformative* experience -- in other words, surprise and discovery of new attitudes, values or appreciation of meanings. This is the essential visitor experience that exhibitions can deliver.
3. A *self-directed* experience. Visitors may choose an audio or human guide but the possibility of a self-directed experience is always there. This is an important characteristic of the exhibition as a medium of communication.
4. *Engagement* of visitors of all types – scholars, learners, artists and people in the art business, relaxation seekers, escapists, cultural tourists, first-time visitors or diligent students.
5. *Transparency* as to the sources of the exhibition's viewpoint: like orchestras, dramas, operas, or ballet, an exhibition is always a group effort – and the different perspectives of curators, conservators, educators, designers, communication specialists and sponsors create the cultural resource and enrich the experience. As a medium of representation, the exhibition is actually ill-suited to the omniscient presenter (even though we have been accustomed to this approach in the past). Exhibitions are more suited to a multiplicity of voices.

These 5 points can equally apply to exhibitions of the permanent collection as to temporary exhibitions. Sir Nicholas Serota most famously initiated what is now a trend in the annual thematic re-hangs of Tate's permanent collection more than 10 years ago. It is hard to believe today because reinstallations of permanent collections are fairly common; but just a decade ago, visitors did not understand the purpose of these re-installations (even though they enjoyed them). The research we conducted at the Tate under the leadership of Damien Whitmore (then Head of Communications there) showed that visitors believed these exhibitions must be "new acquisitions" because in their experience there simply was no other reason for changing the permanent collection galleries. Over time, through the application of principles of transparency – and, it must be said, some branding and communication strategies -- visitors got the hang of it.

In this regard, it is inspiring that the Louvre has declared "espaces de presentations renouvelees" of their permanent collection as one of their goals for the new branch that they are planning for the city of Lens in northern France. We are helping to plan the Louvre-Lens and one of the guiding ideas is 'the Louvre as you have never seen it before'. The Centre Pompidou has similarly just undertaken a new presentation of its collection at Beaubourg.

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However, it is a sad comment on the persistence of the past that many members of the general public continue to perceive museums as static, lifeless places that do not change! Again and again, we hear from infrequent and non-visitors that museums are places for “dead” objects. Is this because many art museums do not *re-present* their collections to illuminate new research, to create transformative experiences?

I thought it would be stimulating to test this thesis with *one* exhibition that exemplifies *both* the ideal exhibition and the failure – from a cultural resource perspective. Yes, one exhibition of the past year actually demonstrates both. It’s a tale of two cities.

My ideal exhibition is “Turner, Whistler Monet” which originated at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto under the curatorial leadership of Catharine Lochnan, before touring to the Tate in London and the Grand Palais in Paris. It’s a project she worked on for 20 years – on a hunch that if you brought together the paintings of urban life of Turner, Whistler and Monet you would see more than what was already known – that they painted a lot of the same scenes in London, Paris and Venice, and influenced each other in matters of style – because they portrayed the increasing degradation of the urban environment by pollution which was caused by massive industrialization. The *transformative* element of the exhibition is that much of what has been considered principally as part of the art history of modern style could also be seen to result from the artists’ observations of the gritty, smoggy urban reality of their day. It was the new urban reality that created the style.

The exhibition was a blockbuster, to be sure – significant works by these three great painters almost guaranteed it. But how does it fare on my five point scale from a cultural resource planning perspective?

- *Re-presentation* in a new context as a result of new research – high rating
- *Transformation*: surprise, discovery – high rating. We were able to see these well-known works with entirely fresh eyes
- *Self-directed experience*: again a high rating. Wall texts explained the thesis but for those who chose to explore on their own, there were several cases of archival material (medical texts, newspaper articles and the like) that invited visitors to verify for ourselves concerns about pollution at the time and to see how the visualization of these concerns in the media might have influenced the artists.
- *Engagement of visitors of all types*: a reasonably high rating, simply because there was large attendance. More probably could have been done in marketing the exhibition to environmentalists and bio-artists, who would have found something of great relevance in this particular exhibition that might have escaped them in the title. I find that, as is often the case with exhibitions that are extraordinary cultural resources, there’s reluctance to trumpet the innovative. I suspect it comes from a lack of confidence by the institution and its communication team, a fear perhaps of being criticized in the press, or perhaps an even greater fear of ‘turning off’ traditional audiences who want to see Turner, Whistler and Monet together again.
- *Transparency*: high rating. The meta-story was made clear from the outset. A multiplicity of voices could be read in the texts and heard in the audio guide. The importance of this is that the audience is stimulated to investigate, to think and explore further.
- That was the exhibition in Toronto and at the Tate in London. In Paris at the Grand Palais, *malheureusement autre chose*. The exhibition was a *succes fou* -- and why not? It re-tread the much loved territory of how two “Anglo-Saxon” (to use a popular misconception in current European thinking – that people who speak English are necessarily Anglo-Saxon) painters anticipated the genius of Monet. The thesis presented in Toronto and London was omitted. Now consider our five criteria applied to the Grand Palais version of the exhibition:

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- *Re-presentation* in a new context as a result of new research: – low rating because this was an old show of an idea based on formalist art history for which no new research was needed or conducted.
  - *Transformation*, surprise and discovery: low rating. The best word to describe the experience would be puzzlement. If the thesis were indeed a stylistic one – what a weird selection of paintings! Urban and industrial, when there is so much more to all three artists' oeuvres, why?
  - *Self directed experience*: low rating. It must be said that the mise-en-scene was superb. The paintings looked gorgeous. But since the selection of works was inappropriate to the theme in Paris, it was actually necessary to connect to the audio guide or one of the guided tours to understand the stylistic links. The no-doubt offensive texts and archival materials on air and water pollution in London and Paris were removed and replaced by archival exhibits from the writings of de Musset – a well-worn source.
  - *Engagement* of visitors of all types: here we have to give a relatively high rating because the exhibition was a big success in terms of attendance. This shows how misleading quantitative measures are when we take a 'cultural resource' planning perspective. There were queues around the Grand Palais to see an exhibition which in essence reinforced (poorly) some old ideas with a re-presentation of great paintings poorly selected for that purpose, because they had originally been selected for quite different reasons.
  - *Transparency*: low rating. A new catalog was produced that all but obliterated the contribution of the originating curator and institution. A fantastic cover-up, so that visitors were unable to discover for themselves what the original thesis had been, let alone who had developed it. The Parisian approach insisted on the canonical art-historical approach to these artists.

I hope I have demonstrated that exhibitions are powerful and important media of communication; that they can be appreciated and understood as cultural resources – and that the criteria provided by a cultural resource planning perspective can be a meaningful alternative to the currently dominant approaches that are either quantitative or art-historical.

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Museum and gallery exhibitions are primarily “affective” experiences that engage the senses and the emotions and therefore produce unexpected responses in visitors and occasional surprises at the ticket office (with reference to yesterday). Perhaps one of the greatest pleasures of museum work is just this unpredictability and we ought to glory in it.

However, financial necessities, education targets and audience development goals require that museums analyse their audiences – on the reasonable assumption that the more we know about them, the more we can meet their needs – and reduce (if not entirely eliminate) this unpredictability. And there we get into this field of audience analysis.

It used to be years ago that museums simply didn't collect enough data about the ir visitors but the good news is that that is no longer the case. Let's have of show of hands for how many of you collect data of some type of your visitors? (Many hands) Just as I thought.

So people are collecting lots of data. The council of Europe collects data and does research, the British government does research and all the councils do research. There is simply a tonne of data. But the bad news is that nobody gets time to analyse the data and this is really a problem that my very short talk is going to address. What usually happens is that the education department collects its data to see if educations working; the marketing department collects its data; the ticketing department collects ticketing data, which is probably the most reliable, and everyone is pretty much at war with everyone; they only trust their own data. And of course the curators don't trust anybody's data and then they develop a reputation for not caring about the visitor, which is not true. Curators actually are great show people. If they weren't they would be working in universities and not museums. So in fact they care passionately about the visitor they just don't trust the data.

So what's needed is a strategy around the data and I have a really simple strategy which makes life in some ways easier and in some ways more difficult.

There are two types of data; quantitative and qualitative data. For me they need to be separated because if you try to do both you will get too much data and you will not be able to analyse it. The good news is that quantitative data if done properly only needs to be done every 5 years. You can then use sampling techniques in order to deal with the qualitative issues that I think are more of interest to everyone in this room.

Quantitative data is basically how many visitors, what is their social, economic, demographic background, or what age are they etc. In my survey there are only 13 questions. It's a 15 minutes survey that should be administered by a survey professional that stands and asks the questions and fills in the form and makes sure that 100% of forms are useful. The 13 questions are straightforward and clear.

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Here they are:

- Origin
- Resident or Tourist
- First time museum visitor (at any museum?)
- Number of visits in past three years to this museum
- Purpose of Visit
  - tour museum
  - special exhibition (indicate which one)
  - a particular work of art or gallery
  - attend a special lecture or program
  - other
- What prompted the visit
  - Ads – TV, newspaper, radio
  - reviews
  - word of mouth –buzz
  - Internet – website
  - banners
  - other
- Age
- Education
- Member/Subscriber
- Main Language
- Cultural Identification
- Length of Stay
- Services used
  - Food
  - Shop
  - Information
  - Audio guide
  - Tour guide
  - Lecture
  - Others

Just a few pieces of advice: firstly, age breaks and economic breaks should be standardised to the census or national government data collection so that comparisons can be made. Secondly, please ask the questions, 'Is this the first time you've been to a museum?' 'Is this the first time you've been to this museum?' This first question is rarely asked but we will never be able to measure the progress of what we do until we get that real sense of a conversion rate. How many visitors are we adding from this broader public were talking about? Cultural identification is another issue which I'd like to address in the round table. How do you correctly ask that question?

So there you are, once every five years you hire out a survey company to collect this data. Once you have this data then you can use a simple sampling technique in order to get into the qualitative research.

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Qualitative research addresses the experience of the visitor in your museum. It's not everything you need to know but it's very very valuable to understand the many issues that concern us. The first rule about qualitative research is that this has to be enterprised by the whole institution. First thing you need to do is get the director to be enthusiastic and then you need to form an interdepartmental committee. This should be led by the communications and marketing department but it needs to include representatives from education, the visitor service team, the curatorial group, security ( who after all deals with the public more than anyone else in the institution), it should even include a member of the cleaning staff. A representative from every department should be on this committee. What you're trying to do is find out what the visitor wants to know and why and how will they use this information if they had it.

What actually motivates your visitors (not just what reminded them that day) but really why? What did they enjoy, not enjoy? Do they want minimal information about the pictures or maximum? Do they read the long labels and then just walk past the pictures. Or is there a positive correlation between reading a label and looking at the work of art? Did they understand the thesis of the exhibition?

Did the name of the exhibition attract them – or was it the illustration on the ads? Do they remember the name of the sponsor? Did they buy the catalogue – what about other products.

Will they tell their friends about this exhibition? What will they say about it? People who study buzz tell us that “buzz” like everything is constructed – so knowing how the museum can influence word of mouth by constructing messages to “take away” helps build visitor confidence and the ability to describe this experience to friends. This is especially important for first time or infrequent visitors.

When you know that you can get a list of 550 questions, many of which are repetitive and many of which will be unrealistic and so on. But you then prioritise them and then make the commitment to get all those answers. If you don't answer the questions that your staff actually have, its absolutely guaranteed that when you get the results that you as communicators need, the others wont believe you. That's a problem. If the visitor services team doesn't believe what you have learned from the museum visitor then what use is it because they won't act on it. So this has to be quite a strategic approach.

There are many different methodologies if you want to find out, for example, long labels versus short labels, the impact long labels have on dwell time in front of a picture, that can be done through tracking studies, mini surveys can be conducted in the gallery to see what people say about their experience, focus groups and discussion groups can take place to get you more deeply into the character of an exhibition, the art historical thematic or whatever it might be.

The good news is that if you have conducted an omnibus survey within the last 5 years these techniques can be employed in a targeted way with small numbers of visitors that correlate to the known demographics of your audience and they will be statistically valid. I think this is quite important because otherwise people often say that qualitative research is not real data but in fact it can be statistically valid if that five year survey is done correctly.

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So in conclusion I would say that the key to knowing your audience then is three-fold:\

- Have a sound base of demographic information which you collect only once every 5 years. Those who collect this data every year, I call doorstoppers because you get this great huge stack of paper which you can use to keep the door to your office open or closed as you choose. But its all together more data than you can possibly analyse.
- Know what more you need to know and why. Consult your colleagues in all departments to find out what they need to know and how they will use the information. Its need to know, not just like to know.
- Invite your colleagues to participate in the research design as well as the analysis. In the end, it's the only way that the museum as a whole will be able to digest information about its audiences and use it to create more ideal exhibitions.