

The Second Stephen E. Weil Memorial Lecture,
ICOM Triennial, Vienna, August 20 2007

Museums Outside-In

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It is a very great honour to be here today and to make a presentation in memory of Stephen Weil. Thanks firstly to the group convened by Professor Joy Davis in Victoria BC Canada which recommended that INTERCOM create this Lecture series. They produced a collection of essays in honour of Stephen Weil called "Museums Matter," which I recommend to you. My thanks also to the executive of INTERCOM who established this new tradition and took a great risk in inviting me to make the second presentation following on the one by David Fleming in 2006 – and since David is always a hard act to follow, that is my risk. And many thanks to our Chairs Elizabeth Edhofer and Franz Pichorner and to the musicians, who with a little help from Dvorak and this beautiful setting have established an ideal environment for us to do some "museum thinking" together.

In my memory of Stephen Weil there is his wit, his charm, his breadth of knowledge and his manner of stimulating us to think in new ways about old ideas.

By way of example: What does a Warwickshire hospital established in the 16th century to care for old soldiers have in common with a 20th Century New York museum? Answer – an endowment!

Stephen's point was that endowment is an old idea that we need to think about in a new way – endowment is a means that individuals use to guarantee certain ends, even when they are no longer alive. The ruler who required soldiers to risk their lives for him, knew that he had to provide for those who survived -- even if he should pre-decease them -- fairly likely, given that his soldiers would be young men. Likewise with museums!

When asked in conversation whether governments should give tax concessions to museum donors, Stephen said yes because "Museums are in the business of selling a service for below the cost it takes to produce it – as long as that service delivers a benefit to society, it should be supported by society".

Stephen's apercu that museums deliberately and consciously "sell a socially beneficial service" for less than it costs to produce is truly worth remembering. I have found it especially helpful in working with people and governments all over the world who are wildly enthusiastic about building new museums or expanding existing museums, but who are surprised when we tell them that the museum's operations need to be subsidized.

"Why can't they pay for themselves?" they ask, astonished.

Then I paraphrase Stephen Weil - "Because museums sell a service for less than it costs to produce it."

When we do the math, it becomes clear that the ticket price required to cover museum costs would be so astronomical that very few people could afford to go. So, while there would be a new or expanded museum (which is great for preserving collections and conducting research) there would be no near-term social benefit – at least not in the term of office of that government, nor during the life of that donor.

The title of Stephen Weil's 2002 book "**Making Museums Matter**" reflects his passionate belief that museums can and should make a difference in society. It does not reveal the degree of impatience he had for museums that do not make a difference – for museums that just perpetuate their existence by collecting and preserving and carrying out their museum functions – as though these daily functions justify their existence. That is why he advocated for always improving museum management, and served on countless professional organizations and helped to found INTERCOM, the ICOM committee on museum management.

Stephen transformed our perspective on museums -- from museum professionals anxiously peering out at the world to seeing ourselves (our museums anyway) as others see us – probably with the same level of anxiety. We are after all is said an anxious lot! He admonished us to think about museums **not in terms of what we do but in terms of what benefits museums can deliver. This is what I mean when I talks about turning museums “outside-in”.**

Yesterday’s stimulating keynote lectures and debate were very much about turning museums “outside-in” by meeting the requirements of successive internet generations as Elaine Gurian explained; and, of the post-colonial, post-cold war world as Professors Jyotindra Jain and Susan Legene suggested. These three speakers made it abundantly clear – each in a different way – that museums that matters from “outside in” will be distinctive but they will have certain qualities in common:

- They will be dialogic not monologic
- They will share authority with visitors and with people around the world
- They will cease to be reductionist when it comes to values and be inclusive
- They will be process oriented -- and understand that collections, like people, have no fixed identities.

Well what might this mean from the perspective of INTERCOM – of museum management? I think my task tonight is to consider what would be the best organizational and management strategies to facilitate these new approaches.

I will propose that the most appropriate strategy for museums wishing to make the kind of difference recommended by some of our keynote speakers would be a civil society model.

I'll further describe how this model is already being widely implemented in our sector – not always at the initiative of museums. And I'll suggest some of the characteristics of museum management that are most widely applied in civil society museums.

Museums as Civil Society Institutions

Perhaps not coincidentally one of the ideas for which Stephen is best known is that museums that matter are “civil society Institutions”. The general definition of civil society institutions is that they are organisations that are neither fully in the corporate sector, nor fully in the governmental sector but are organizations directly accountable for their actions to social networks or to society as a whole. They are part of what some sociologists call the “voluntary sector” and what economists call the “third sector”. This sector is said to be the fastest growing economic sector in developed countries. It is also the sector that generates “social capital” by which is meant the ability of people to work together to solve problems.

Before pursuing the implications of this model, I'd like to take a quick poll to find out about the organizational model of the museums represented in this hall tonight:

- **How many of you work in private museums – museums owned by private individuals or corporations?**
- **How many of you work in museums that are charitable trusts or not-for-profit organizations?**
- **How many of you work in museums that are owned and operated by local authorities (cities, counties) or by national, state or provincial governments (i.e. national or state museums)?**
- **How many of you think that the status of your museum may change in the next 10 years?**

It is an interesting mix with government owned and operated museums in the majority and about a quarter of the audience thinking there will be a change of status in the next ten years. Try to remember the composition of the room and your place in the mix as we look at the changes taking place in museums today.

What you have raised your hands about is museum organization. Museum organization can be seen as a continuum with 100% publicly (or government) owned institutions on one side and 100% privately owned institutions on the other. In the centre of this continuum is a range of museum types that I would broadly categorize as “civil society” types.

They are public-private partnerships in that they might include:

- Museums owned by government but operated by non-profit associations
- Museums owned by government but operated by arm’s length agencies or crown corporations
- Museums owned and operated by charities or non-profit-making organizations (such as churches, universities, or trusts) that receive some government funds

These civil society museums are quite a diverse bunch. They come in all shapes and sizes; some charge admission, others are free; but, in addition to fulfilling the fundamental functions of collection, research, education and display, they have these five characteristics in common :

1. Governance that is separate from government (have independent or semi-independent Boards)
2. Multiple sources of funding including: government, visitors, private donors, Foundations, sponsors and service fees
3. Budgetary control
4. Outward looking

5. Community focussed

From this list you can see that museums, when they are civil society institutions engage both cultural capital and social capital.

Over the past 30 years more and more museums have been shifting from government controlled to “civil society” institutions.

- In the UK, for example, the national museums (which as you know are all free admission) are operated by separate Boards and they negotiate multi-year funding agreements based on strategic plans. Whilst government funding is extremely important – additional and alternative sources of funding such as fundraising, events and commercial activities are almost equally so. The Tate for example generates 50% of its own revenue.
- In 2003, the Prado in Madrid became a civil society institution, still strongly linked to government but as a special status institution with its own Board and the long range goal of reducing its level of state support from 80% to 50%.
- In Canada, the national museums were made into Crown Corporations in 1990 – which means they have Boards that operate at arm’s length from government and control their own budgets.

- The Louvre and most of the French national museums also operate under special contracts with government, control their own budgets and have managing Boards.
- Many privately-owned museums are becoming more “civil society” oriented by broadening their boards and expanding their connections to their community.
- While city museums or museums in the local authority sector still tend to be part of government, many of the new museums being initiated by cities and regional governments often with the goal of urban regeneration are being established as charitable institutions – with independent Boards. In establishing a new art centre in Salford Quays (just outside Manchester), the Salford Council transferred their outstanding collection of painter LS Lowry’s art to the fully independent Lowry Trust that manages the art centre and its museum. This is an exceptionally dynamic art centre which, with the Imperial War Museum of the North, has stimulated economic development in a region that just 10 years ago was the classified as one of the most deprived in Europe.
- Children’s museums -- a new and growing phenomenon in scores of European cities – are being initiated and managed by

independent boards as civil society institutions, Here in Vienna you will have the opportunity to visit Zoom in the Museums Quartier. Zoom is strongly supported by the City but operates at arm's length. In Manila, the outstanding Pambata children's museum -- probably one of the leading museums in the world in its commitment to helping street children and combating illiteracy -- is entirely independent of government, but generously supported by the city and private donors.

- In Antalya, a major tourism destination in Turkey, the city is creating a new city museum which it will fund to a high degree -- but this museum will be set up as an independent organization along civil society lines so that it can be more flexible and more responsive to public needs.
- The Barbados Museum and Historical Society, which is led by ICOM President Alissandra Cummins, functions as a national museum but it is a private-public partnership with government as a generous supporter. In conversation Alissandra assured me that many of their initiatives in interpretation for example would have been more difficult if not impossible were they a government agency.

Over the past few decades there has been a slow stealthy transition of museums from the government to the civil society realm; and like most change in museums, it is not always by choice. This momentous change started with small cutbacks in government grant aid. On average, government

subsidy to individual museums has declined by 20% to 50% over the past 30 years. However, it needs to be said that overall government subsidy to the sector may even have increased. But there are more museums and museums are more professional so they want to do more -- selling even better quality services at below the cost of production! (to paraphrase Stephen Weil)

Museums at a Tipping Point

In many instances, this reduction in subsidy was mitigated by allowing the museums to keep the revenues they earn from tickets, the shops and other activities – revenues that used to be returned to the government treasury.

Paradoxically, governments have been willing to fund new museums and expand existing museums. But they are doing so not for traditional reasons like the preservation of collections and scientific research, but to meet new goals such as:

- Tourism – one of the world's biggest industries
- Social Cohesion – one of the world's biggest challenges especially now that for the first time in human history more than 50% of us live in cities where getting along and solving problems together is necessary for survival

- Urban Redevelopment – with former industrial sites and old power generating stations from London’s Bankside to Istanbul’s Golden Horn being transformed into museums
- City branding to attract new industries and investment
- Stimulating the creative economy which brings added value to industry
- Competition with other cities for all of the five preceding reasons

We might pause to ask: why has government operating funding declined at a time when museums have become more **instrumental** to city, regional and national governments?

I have already referred to two possible explanations:

1. There are more museums. This is surely a very good thing because it makes what museums do more accessible to more people
2. The growing professionalism of museum workers so that museums are doing more things than they were 20 years ago – selling more products for below the cost of production! This leads to bigger costs and hopefully bigger benefits for people.

These are both good things and surely we do not want to limit the benefits of museums by ceasing to create them and ceasing to improve the museum profession.

There is a third reason which is in my view more significant: that is, the restructuring over the last 30 years of economies in all parts of the world. This restructuring has reduced taxes on wealth, sold off (some would say given away) government agencies, services and natural resources to the

private sector, and reduced government support for the public realm – including parks, libraries, and hospitals as well as museums. As a result, there has been enormous growth of private wealth and its concentration among a relative few in every country. Government increasingly sees these individuals as potential museum supporters and their companies as potential museum sponsors.

This is both a political and economic reality – and has been for several decades – to different degrees in different countries.

How have museums responded to this reality? Some have successfully lobbied government to maintain funding levels. Many museums stoically sustain the reduced funding, cut services and cut staff – until eventually the museums gets the idea that they need to earn more revenue by improving their shops, hosting blockbuster exhibitions, attracting sponsors and hosting events. And, at some point, the idea of becoming an institution independent of government (or less dependent on government) starts to feel like a relief.

But something very exciting is also going on. Because the museum must look outside for support -- not only financial but social – it becomes a more outward focussed organization with more links to the community. Good reviews are very important – not just for your professional standing – but because it is important that your museum is embraced by your community. The Deputy Director now needs to learn about the tourism industry and the Head of Education has to learn how to welcome learners of all ages and all

ethnic groups . . . exhibitions becomes more of a dialogue and less of a monologue . . . and so a more vital type of museum has emerged. **A more outside-in museum has emerged**

I would suggest that, whether or not a museum becomes de-linked from government, there is a tipping point in the proportion of government versus income from other sources at which the museum becomes **de facto** a civil society institution. Whether this tipping point occurs at 50% or 75% or 85% single source funding is relative to the local culture, politics and the size of museum.

Does the museum director and his or her team have a different role before and after this tipping point has been reached?

Management versus Leadership?

Much of the recent business literature on this subject makes a big distinction between the two roles:

These texts say that **Management** is about “**doing the thing right**”.

But

Leadership is about “**doing the right thing**”

I question whether this distinction is valid for museums?

We - - and ICOM especially -- have spent most of the last 50 years in fighting for recognition of professionalism, by which we mean all the standards for preservation, research, education, display, and ethics. Surely these professional standards are tools for leadership as well as guidelines for management.

Even within a 100% government controlled (or private sector controlled) museum, the director invokes the principles of museum management in order **to lead** the institution to “do the right thing” – be it safeguarding heritage, ensuring that all members of the public have equal physical and intellectual access to the collections and challenging the staff to be more effective at communicating with people.

Two examples here in Vienna are inspiring on this point. The Director of the Museum Moderner Kunst has eliminated admission charges to make his museum – which is a state museum – more accessible to the public. The Director of the Museum fur Volkeskunde has initiated a project called

“museum inside out” which makes the collection broadly accessible and encourages public dialogue and discourse. These examples demonstrated that leadership can emerge within governmental structures.

However, it must be said that it is particularly challenging for a museum director to be a leader (focussed on doing the right thing) when he or she is a manager in a government structure or a corporate structure where all other managers are rewarded **not for being leaders but for being “managers”** – for carrying out government policy and doing it right.

That’s why museum directors in these situations often sound like the squeaky wheel. While other department heads can be moved to Treasury one year and Roads the next (doing the thing right in whatever department), the museum director has a professional calling to be in his or her position and **to both “do the right thing” and “do it right”**. This often makes the museum director feel out of step with colleagues – and be perceived by those colleagues as being out of step.

It is far easier (though not necessarily financially easier on a personal basis) to be a museum leader in an independent civil society institution – where the governing body expects the Director – even demands that the Director – guide the museum both to do the right thing – to set policy – and to see that it is implemented right.

So should we be concerned about the creeping institutional transformation of museums to civil society institutions? Should we be worried that in this brave new world of “civil society museums” all the management, ethical and technical skills we have fought for will be ignored in favour of vague ideas of “leadership” that march to the tunes of tourism and social inclusion?

Yes, this is a concern. It is a special concern because right now we are failing to train museum curators and managers to be leaders: as a result, we will see more and more museums led by lawyers and journalists rather than museum professionals.

But it's an equal concern that many talented museum managers and leaders are locked within underfunded government structures without access to the tools either to do the right things or to do them right. Instead of thinking of the transformation museums are undergoing as a “slippery slope” we should see it as an opportunity and urge that museums in the public and corporate sectors be given tools to fulfill new roles in a changing society.

The keys tools for these new roles are:

- budgetary control,
- ability to seek outside funding
- support for engaging more deeply with the community including the establishment of advisory committees that reflect the demographics of our changing societies

- training in working in teams. The old academic model which keeps curators, educators, marketers and programmers on separate tracks reflects a government departmental or hierarchical form of organization that is not well suited to filling contemporary social needs.

For several hundred years, museums have been one of the most successful social means of communication and learning. They have transformed from private treasure chamber, to the scholar's study, to academies of art and science, to government institutions.

Now museums are in the midst of another transition – from the government/corporate sector to the realm of civil society.

This transformation places museums at the heart of social change and tremendous challenges. ICOM (especially INTERCOM and ICTOP who have organized this evening) and museums associations around the world have a most challenging task in the years ahead -- particularly to make sure that museum training and professional policies equip us all to be creative participants in this change as well as museum leaders.