

# CITIES, MUSEUMS AND SOFT POWER



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**M**useums and cities throughout the world are connecting in a soft power embrace.

Soft power is a concept that emerged a quarter century ago to describe international relations based not on military nor economic might, but on influence. Soft power is the ability to influence behavior using persuasion, attraction or agenda setting. Where the resources of “hard power” are tangible—force and finance—soft power resources are intangibles, such as ideas, knowledge, values and culture. Networks and connectivity enable soft power to spread its influence farther and deeper via Web-based networks and networks of cities. And where there are cities, there are museums. The emerging soft power of museums responds to three social realities: competition among cities for talent, tourism and investment; the forces of globalization and information technology, resulting in new forms of citizenship; and the growing public participation of women. Strong, vibrant cities need equally energized and robust museums.

*Monocle Magazine* and the UK-based Institute of Government have rated countries on their soft power since 2011, using

metrics such as the number of embassies and cultural missions, tourists per year, annual attendance at major art galleries, number-one albums internationally, number of foreign correspondents, UNESCO world heritage sites, think tanks, universities in the top 200, foreign students, restaurants with Michelin stars and even the number of footballers playing abroad in the world’s best leagues. When aggregated, these indicators are thought to predict how influential a country might be in persuading others to agree with it.

The British Council identified the link between soft power and culture in its 2013 report, *Influence and Attraction: Culture and the Race for Soft Power in the 21st Century*. Its focus, like *Monocle’s*, was on civil society institutions, such as broadcasting and educational institutions, NGOs, businesses, foundations and trusts, and creative individuals—philanthropists, artists, sports personalities and performers.

Not so long ago, museums and the arts were mainly impacted by hard power, which was where their funding and gov-

ernance originated. National governments of all types and large private corporations were the main patrons. They exercised influence, both directly and indirectly, on what museums displayed and collected and how they presented their material. During the Cold War, for example, the CIA, in its propaganda war against communism at home and abroad, secretly financed abstract expressionist exhibitions to promote the superiority of American freedom and creativity. In the more distant past, museums were repositories for war trophies, whether acquired from internal wars of aggression against indigenous people or other marginalized religious and ethnic communities, or from external conflicts and colonial conquest.

In the museum setting, these trophies became objects of curiosity, displayed to communicate ideas about power and the hierarchy of “civilizations,” so that there would be no doubt about the justice of “our empire” or the superiority of “our civilization.” The objects that had been gifts between rulers somehow validated the no-



Canadian Museum of Human Rights

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tion of high cultural achievement among civilizations that had diplomatic relations. Natural history museums established a scientific standard for displaying collections in a systematic way that would soon be employed by museums of anthropology and ethnography. Art museums organized their galleries by country and school, such as “Northern Renaissance” or “Italian School,” as though the political reality of ever-changing borders (and accompanying bloodshed) were somehow transcended by the glory of art.

Now museums are in a process of transformation from government and private organizations to institutions of civil society. This transformation started in the United States, which has been highly innovative in creating and sustaining the voluntary, nonprofit sector. In the last 40 years, economic changes such as the increasing concentration of wealth in private hands have stimulated the growth of civil society institutions worldwide and in Canada. More and more museums are being shifted from the governmental and corporate sectors to the nonprofit sector. This shift in patronage has led to new governance structures that reflect a plurality of voices and influences. As a consequence of their place in civil society, museums are finding themselves with new roles, responsibilities and expectations.

As government financing decreases both proportionately and in absolute numbers, the museum sector has become more dependent on new forms of support from foundations, philanthropists, sponsorship and earned sources. This has resulted in a change from inward-looking, collection-focused institutions to outward-facing, donor- and visitor-focused ones. This generational change occurred in two stages, and we argue that they are about to undergo a third—becoming centers of soft power.

The first stage was heralded by the American Association of Museums in 1992 when it released its landmark report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. This led to a fundamental

change in the museum profession: museums proclaimed their roles as educational institutions with a mandate to provide physical and intellectual access for the entire public. Over several decades, museum educators were liberated from their gloomy basement classrooms to take a central role in teams identifying the main messages of an exhibition, editing and re-writing text panels, selecting artifacts and communicating with stakeholders. A new emphasis on evaluation accompanied this transformation. Museum educators, like their colleagues in schools, colleges and universities, were passionate about measuring their success in sharing knowledge. It was no longer enough for an exhibition to be “beautiful” or “original” or “steeped in research,” much to the discomfort of some curators and designers. Museums needed to be broadly educational and attract the full diversity of the public—whether or not these visitors had prior subject-matter expertise.


The second transformation followed within a decade and can best be characterized as “Experience and Branding.” From within the museum sector, there was a strong impetus to expand and intensify the impact that museums were having on the public. Books like *The Experience Economy* argued that people were no longer buying products but rather experiences. Museum professionals knew that they provided experiences in their galleries and programs. Now these experiences needed to be enhanced and packaged—packaged through branding.

Museums suddenly had a new importance in the city. They were contemporary landmarks. Not only brands in and of themselves, but also incorporated into the brand of the city. Museums were now seen as an integral part of the promise of their cities.

In 2000, the opening of Tate Modern in London was seen as a triumph of branding. Tate became synonymous with London as the capital of “Cool Britannia.” New technology and impressive architecture

certainly intensified the experience. The remarkable success of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, inaugurated in 1997, proves that the experience of space and place can be more memorable than the exhibitions. The Guggenheim “brand” expresses the meaning of this museum—its sophistication and its relationship to the world of nonobjective art.

The explosion in “experience architecture” highly influenced the brand of the museum and the brand of the city. In many cases, the experience of the building was the experience of the museum. When Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin opened in 2001, it was without exhibits—the building itself was the storyteller. The most prominent Canadian example is the Canadian Museum For Human Rights, Canada’s first national museum outside the national capital region. Opened in 2014, the museum has already made Winnipeg the only Canadian city on National Geographic’s 16 must-visit cities. And its iconic architecture, likened to a dove, won the Museum Canada’s National Cultural Tourism Award for 2015.

The third stage in the generational transformation of museums is just beginning: the shift from sites of branded experience to places of soft power. We are very honoured to have assisted two major Canadian exemplars of this shift: the Canadian Museum For Human Rights which is the world’s first national human rights museum and Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada’s national immigration museum. Both are well positioned to lead Canada’s museums and cities into the world of soft power. 

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