
Museums and Sustainability: Economy, Culture and Community

Thank you very much. I am very honoured to be invited to speak to you today about Museums and Sustainability: Economy, Culture and Community. Barry Lord (my partner and co-founder of LORD Cultural Resources) and I have been engaged with the issues of museum sustainability for the 20 years we have been helping museums to plan their futures. Since 1981, we have conducted more than 1000 assignments for museum of all sizes and types on 5 continents - including several very valued assignments here in Ireland. Our practice has included voluntary museums, museums with two or three paid staff and large national museums.

In the past two decades museum practitioners have experienced much change, for example:

- Economic booms and busts
- Changes of government cultural funding policies
- Transformation from homogenous to multi-cultural societies
- Transition to information-based economies from formerly industrial or resource based ones
- Two to threefold increase in the number of people with higher educational attainment, especially among women
- Dramatic increase in the number of museums
- Rise in the total attendance at museums.

Indeed, museums are one of the great institutional success stories of the last 250 years. We are finding that people the world over who aspire to build civil society and to sustain civil society seek to establish museums. The term 'civil society' refers to an idea of community in which citizens enjoy equal opportunity to participate in public life and culture. It is significant that in our time museums are seen as embodying civil society values such as openness and universal access as well as trust and freedom of expression and debate. A recent survey conducted by a national polling organisation for the American Association of Museums in 2001 found that museums are among the most trusted institutions among the American people.¹

Yet within this museum success story, we seem to see the seeds of our decline. Some people focus on the fact that while overall attendance has increased, so too has the number of museums, and as a result many museums have fewer visitors. There are winners and losers! Other critics focus on the limitations of public funding and decry that some museums have cared less for their collections than for public access and "social equity." Still others see evidence of decline in the intellectual level of museums as a result of catering to commercial interests of sponsorship and tourism.

¹ Footnote reference to come

Since all of us live at least a part of our lives in the non-museum world, we know that these issues are not limited to museums; but are challenging all aspects of the public realm. It is perhaps more helpful to look at these issues as they impact on long term museum sustainability and what strategies museums might usefully apply – rather than dwelling on these problems as “bad things” (which of course they are).

Here is a definition of sustainability that is both broadly applicable and useful for museums:

The ability of a system to function into the future without being forced into decline through the overloading of the key resources upon which it depends.

I would propose that there are five key resources upon which museums depend:

1. Collections – the products of nature and human labour and creativity
2. Ideas -- intellectual life
3. Community support
4. Energy -- as in buildings, heat, lighting, labour
5. Money

I think you would agree that each of these five key resources is currently under duress through overloading – *potentially leading to decline*. Each situation is quite different. Some museums are collections rich, but poor in ideas: the staff may be isolated, non-professional, or just ‘stale’. Some museums are rich in capital funds for new exhibitions but poor in ideas and community support so they turn to entertainment rather than creatively utilizing collections and authentic stories to engage the public. Some museums are rich in energy in that they have a new building; but they threaten the “ecology” of existing museum systems by draining community support; or they do not have adequate operating funds to run the building. I could describe numerous scenarios, many of them familiar ones. What becomes apparent is that these five key resources are interdependent; and therefore an increase in any one or two resources (even money) does not fully prevent overloading of other resources . . . does not fully prevent decline.

Fortunately there are two processes that people who work in museums and people who work with museums can use to augment all five key resources thereby helping increase sustainability: collaboration and planning.

Collaboration is a powerful process for increasing museum sustainability because it can reduce the need for scarce resources. Collaboration of staff (amongst several museums and other organizations) reduces costs and stimulates more ideas; collection sharing increases the use of a collection resource; the merger of two separate museums into one could increase public service and community support for the one new institution and decrease expenses and energy. The downside of collaboration is that it is initially very labour intensive; but the outcome in terms of sustainability can be very significant.

It is often said that the future is the only thing we can control; so planning is the process we use to control the future (or to give ourselves that illusion). Planning is an effective strategy for museum sustainability because it helps museums anticipate their needs and allocate resources more efficiently and effectively.

In this concluding section of my presentation, I would like to touch on four aspects of planning that are particularly effective in addressing museums sustainability issues:

- Accountability
- Financial planning
- Environmental stewardship
- Cultural Diversity

Accountability

In the past and still today, museums have taken an academic approach that can be hostile to the practice of accountability, as if there are arcane, shamanistic aspects of museum practice that cannot be held to up public scrutiny. Contributions from government and the charitable and foundation sectors are critical components of museum funding. Museums are privileged within the cultural sector in most countries receiving a higher level of public support than theatre, music, dance or film. We believe that this is fully justifiable on the grounds that museums collect and preserve for future generations (in perpetuity) so it is unrealistic to expect today's gate receipts to pay for the on-average 70% of museum costs that can be attributed to the cost of collecting. Barry and I and John Nicks conducted a seminal study called *The Cost of Collecting*² in 1989 which demonstrated that on average collection-related costs amount to about 70% of the running costs of museums. And in most countries the combination of governmental and philanthropic incomes is in the range of 70% of museum revenues (with the balance coming from a variety of earned sources) this fact. Yet when museums make less than 10% of their collections accessible to the public or fully accountable, it is very hard to make the case for public and philanthropic funding. Thus collection accountability strategies like collection care standards, collaboration amongst museums in sharing collections and open storage or visible storage help museum make a better case for sustainable funding for this unique core function.

Communities support museums in many non-monetary ways such as: land, tax forgiveness and in-kind services. In return they expect the museum to be accountable or at least transparent in reporting on how they use resources. The private and charitable sectors may provide museums with funding, leadership, volunteers and other forms of in-kind support. Again, there will be an expectation of accountability -- or this support will not be *sustained* indefinitely! As planners, we help our museum clients to assess the needs of the community and to develop strategies that are relevant and meaningful. This is especially important when museums are formulating five-year strategic plans or planning new buildings and exhibitions.³ how to meet them. We also advise government and other funders on meaningful measures or criteria to which museums should be accountable. The number of visitors is important but it should not be the sole measure!!

Financial Planning

You have wisely called your conference 'After the Opening.' It is key to have a vigorous business plan for operating years 1 through 5. Do not fall into the trap of showing continuing increases in revenues. There will be a decline likely in year 3. Plan for it. Plan facilities for change to cater for repeat visitors. Don't be fooled by the old saying "We can't be all things to all people." Sustainability depends on being many things to most people, much of the time! We specialize in developing operating plans that integrate building, programs and people. "In 20 years, we have seen that most museum expansions improve the visitor experience and raises the number of visitors. All increase the cost of operations more than the increase in revenue from visitors. Plan for an endowment or more public funding as part of your plans for the museum's physical upgrade. Plan for financial sustainability.

² **The Cost of Collecting** by Barry Lord, Gail Dexter Lord and John Nicks (HMSO. 1989)

³ Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, ed., **The Manual of Museum Planning** 2nd Edition (London, The Stationery Office, and Alta Mira Press, California, 1999)

⁴ Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord, **The Manual of Museum Management** (The Stationery Office, 1997)

Environmental Stewardship

May Cassar has spoken at this Conference about how museums can reduce energy dependency. Museums also increase sustainability by re-using existing buildings, revitalizing neighbourhoods and encouraging the use of public transportation, fighting urban sprawl and creating incentives for smart growth. Our book on museum planning has a chapter on building fabric and strategies for recycling, re-using energy and materials as well as detailed strategies for building zoning.

Cultural Diversity

Today, culture is the very air we breathe. The future is one of cultural interdependence. Museums, both because of their collections and because of their role as community gathering places, can be forces for intercultural communication and understanding. *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*⁵ contains some remarkable case studies that demonstrate how museums of nature, history and art have created extraordinary exhibitions that bring new voices into the museum and new approaches to their collections and stories. By embracing cultural diversity, museums will be doing a great deal to prevent themselves from being marginalized in communities and countries that are increasingly multicultural in composition. Finally in embracing cultural diversity, museums contribute to their own sustainability and to the sustainability of civil society.

⁵ **Manual of Museum Exhibitions**, edd . Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord (Alta Mira Press 2002)