

Editorial: The Future of Museums: Challenges and Solutions

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Editorial

The Future of Museums: Challenges and Solutions

“Paris and its museums have been sold to the world as unique repositories of beauty and refinement. From Bilbao to Abu Dhabi to Bentonville, Arkansas, ambitious curators, architects and philanthropists have tried to orchestrate similar triumphs, to turn collections and buildings that house them into irresistible destinations. . . . If they are to survive—if they are to remain relevant instead of fading and crumbling—venerable institutions like museums, symphony orchestras, opera companies will have to pander.” A. O. Scott, *Better Living Through Criticism* (2016).

According to the American Alliance for Museums, more than 32,000 institutions in the United States call themselves museums. They range from enormous encyclopedic complexes like the Metropolitan in New York to single-purpose museums like the newly announced Johnny Cash Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. In between are university museums, government-run sites such as the Smithsonian, which is properly referred to as “America’s attic,” and an array of institutions that stretch from coast to coast. Few towns are without one: increasingly, chambers of commerce promote and tout them as engines of commerce, and research organizations such as the Pew Trust turn out reports that examine their economic impact on various regions. Towns both large and small chase an elu-

sive elite class that has money and wants “culture” as part of its lifestyle.

Richard Florida’s 2002 *The Rise of the Creative Class* sold an urban aesthetic and an economic model to struggling cities and towns to re-craft themselves to serve this new “class.” Its result was to deplete the backbone of the cultural middle class that Scott Timberg, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, described in his 2015 *Culture Crash*: “. . . gutting the day jobs in bookstores, record and video stores, publishing houses, newspapers and design firms that once kept artists, writers, critics, and the shepherds of their work afloat,” according to one reviewer. Yet a 2015 study, *Building Better Arts Facilities: Lessons from a U. S. National Study*, from the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago, empha-

sizes the impact museums have had in the post-WWII period on the economic development of one traditionally “backward” region—the American South. In some areas there was growth, but in others devastation.

A recent piece in *The New York Times* about renovations at a Midwestern museum says it all: “The architect Santiago Calatravas’s addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum, completed in 2001, quickly became the symbol of this Midwestern city, plastered prominently on the official tourism website.” Such promotional pressures are also being felt in Europe, where state-supported museums are under scrutiny about their purpose, direction, and cost. Money—a crude and exacting cultural value—is a factor globally, as new museums are sprouting up in Asia. Writing in *Artforum* recently, Winnie Wong indicated that during the late 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party had a slogan: “Every county must have its museum, every commune its exhibition hall.” Between 2013 and 2015, almost fifteen hundred museums were built at a blinding speed. All of these—both “public” and “private”—had a distinctive characteristic according to Wong: “They are all politically legitimizing components of far larger real estate schemes in which developers have been vastly enriched through the appropriation of land from the public.” She closes her muckraking piece with the assertion that in China, “All culture is equal in the eyes of the market, and all culture is treated with the same degree of seriousness, ambition, and incompetence.”

The annual convention of the American Alliance for Museums draws more than 5,000 participants who are the apex of the professional iceberg that acts as a guardian of culture and art, but who lately have heralded a progressive and “change maker” status as they usher in a new era

for museums—a digital and interactive one. In short, they aim to be both populist and cutting edge at the same time—a curious oxymoron. Ohio, for example, has a surfeit of museums led by the world-famous Cleveland Museum, but other institutions in Akron, Massillon, and Columbus boast of their collections, their world-class art (Bellows in Columbus) and artifacts (dress collections in Akron and Native American treasures in Massillon). One could look to almost any state to see its boosterism at work bringing together commerce and culture.

Museums are a growth industry that has become embroiled in a vigorous debate about what constitutes a museum, about the rules by which museums are expected to play, including questions about accreditation, about aesthetics, and above all about money and resources. The new Whitney Museum (formerly on the Upper East Side) has moved to a hot-property district in lower Manhattan known for the High Line, a popular tourist destination that draws an estimated 35,000 gawkers on a weekend. Some museums have hired directors who have never worked in a museum before, such as the appointment of a new head at the Brooklyn Museum (a woman) who joins the growing ranks of heads drawn from the arts world and known for either their ability to increase attendance or to draw a different crowd. There are “old” museums—such as the Corning Museum of Glass (founded in 1951), which gets three-quarters of its funding from the Corning Corporation and which draws 400,000 visitors a year; according to tourist authorities, it is the centerpiece of the local \$140 million annual recreation and tourism industry.

None of this is new, as the once-director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, writing about a 1824 Parliamentary debate over the purposes of the

National Portrait Gallery, noted. Its placement mirrored a key question that continues to bedevil museum directors: who and what is it for? Prime Minister Robert Peel argued that one of the “purposes” of the National Gallery was to “cement the bonds of union between the richer and poorer orders of the state.” When in 1838 a site was chosen the Parliament decreed that it be located in Charing Cross and Trafalgar Square, “where the rich would be able to drive their carriages from the West End and the poor would be able to walk from the East End.”

At a later date, according to MacGregor, the Parliament asked the government to survey major employers in Westminster to determine how many of their employees had gone to visit the British Museum, the National Gallery, or the Natural History Museum. The results were quite remarkable and worth quoting at length from MacGregor’s moving and elegant essay: “In 1856 Jackson the Builders had 338 men who had made 583 visits to the National Gallery. Hooper the Coach Makers had 46 employees who had made 66 visits. And Cloughs the Printers had 117 employees who had made 220 visits to the National Gallery. Linen drapers, butchers, and hairdressers were disappointing—only one visit out of 25 employees. The only firm that registered no visit at all was, sadly, the publisher Murray, who is, of course, the only one surveyed that is still in business today. But the question was answered: the poor did use their pictures.” We have reprinted the whole of MacGregor’s piece in the “From Our Archives” section of this issue to provide some historical background.

Museum professionals and certainly their boards are aware of the myriad challenges all cultural institutions—both large and small—face, but, in general, the public remains ignorant of them ex-

cept when one is threatened with closure or there is a major crisis that throws their very existence into question, such as the recent case of the Detroit Museum of Art that had to face the proposition that it might have to sell off chunks of its world-famous collection as the city of Detroit struggled to emerge from bankruptcy. For the public the loss of a prized institution or the deaccessioning of a painting to pay the light bill is akin to losing your front teeth—namely, something you failed to appreciate while they were still there, but deeply mourned when they left.

The nation’s oldest continuously operating artist society, the National Academy, sits on Fifth Avenue next to the Guggenheim and has a collection of paintings donated by members such as Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, and John Singer Sargent. Recently it has experienced staff layoffs, been forced to sell works, and, in 2008, brought in a new director to stanch the financial drain, but who lacked curatorial experience. As public and private institutions, museums are still sites of cultural contention as they try to “engage” their audiences using interactive gadgets or positive “outreach.” Much of the time it works, but occasionally it goes awry, as the venerable Museum of Fine Arts in Boston learned after it sponsored a “Kimono Wednesday” to promote Monet’s *La Japonaise*, which they own. Protesters objected to an opportunity to try on a kimono at the museum, saying that it was racist. The administration backtracked and allowed visitors to “touch and engage” some kimonos, but said they could not put them on. Beyond that the educational staff scheduled discussions on other Wednesdays to “engage (again) in culturally sensitive discourse.” There are numerous examples of museums that are making efforts to catch up in a digital age and interact on “multiple platforms,”

so much so that one critic said that they sounded like executives in media, retailing, consumer goods, and other allied industries. They, like their counterparts in the publishing world, are chasing the “app” generation.

There are “Young Collectors Party” events in some venues, and the recent overnight pajama party at the Natural History Museum in New York was reportedly a big hit. Underneath all this activity is an old problem: Who is going to pay for all of this? Over two-thirds of all American museums report financial stress and thirty-five percent indicated to the Alliance that governmental aid was in decline. European museums are feeling a similar pinch, with the National Center for Popular Music in Sheffield, England, going belly-up after only fifteen months and after spending \$18.3 million on a set of buildings. Other museums are straining to keep up with crowds—exemplified by the Louvre, which had 9.3 million visitors in 2014 and the British Museum, which had 6.7 million. The cost of success can mean climate control problems for the paintings and long lines for the patrons.

To cope with increasing numbers—particularly at encyclopedic museums—the solution is to expand, redesign the atrium, or invest in other substantial or cosmetic additions; however, for the “boutique” museums such as the Frick in New York or the Taft in Cincinnati, they run the risk of irritating patrons who prefer their intimate and homelike spaces to visiting an aircraft carrier. For some critics and dedicated museumgoers small *is* beautiful, particularly at mission-centered places such as a church, a mosque, or a synagogue, such as the Eldridge Street site in Chinatown or the Afro-American Museum in rural Wilberforce, Ohio. Museums with lagging fortunes often try, like professional football teams, to find

an appropriate suitor, but that strategy has had mixed success, with some promising mergers such as the National Gallery takeover of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, but there are vexing legal and logistical problems in almost all recent shifts. In North Miami, Florida, The Museum of Contemporary Art is embroiled in a dispute with the city that founded it because the trustees wanted to move it to the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach that has money and patrons who would support the collection and an expansion. But underneath all the wrangling was a larger question: Who owns the museum? The community? The donors or the board members? At last word both sides had been ordered into mediation by a judge. Occasionally the U. S. Congress elicits some interest in museums, as in a recent inquiry by the Senate Finance Committee concerning a dozen private museums opened by individual collectors. The senators questioned their tax-exempt status because they often have limited hours and are seen as tax havens by legislators looking to squeeze offshore enterprises of some of their dollars. These limited-access museums, often in remote areas, or near the homes of their wealthy art collectors, have proliferated in the past ten years and the verdict about whether they are good or bad for both art and art lovers is still out.

The historic preservation movement has made a valiant effort to protect sites placed on the chopping block because of financial neglect or exigency, but the museum world lacks such a coherent effort except for a curious movement afoot that is reminiscent of the “deschooling” craze of the 1970s led by the publication of Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (1971). Illich saw schools (now, substitute museums) as the culprit, with a need to renew them with community networks and professionals (substitute curators)

who would work in a collaborative manner with the learners (substitute viewers) processing the experience—an interactive one—from the cradle to the grave. Hence, there are museums such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond that try to entice the younger set by offering evenings with tango dancing sessions.

A white paper from the Alliance of American Museums in 2013 posited that a revolution is once again demanded to shift the paradigm (that old buzzword coined by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962) before we are all hustled into cyberspace with our electronic gadgets to sit on a secular cloud without any putti to charm us. Throughout the report one sees the rhetoric of the higher education business with its "change agents" compared to principals in primary and secondary schools and using the language of a transformative movement. One "Chief Learning Officer" at a Michigan museum wrote: "I truly believe that it is the time for the perfect storm—the perfect opportunity for museums and other nontraditional educational institutions and catalytic players to gather speed and power with stronger, tighter collaborations to bring about a tsunami of transformative improvement in education and make it more focused on learning." One of the purposes of a museum is to teach, but what happens when the local population shifts or becomes a destination place for an emerging element in the cultural landscape? The critic A. O. Scott sums the dilemma posed by the emergence of Brooklyn (my birthplace) as "a patch of real estate that currently seems to be home to more cultural clichés per capita—more self-consciousness, more gentrification, more liberal guilt and creative-class anxiety, more vintage clothing and artisanal mayonnaise and think pieces about all

of the above—than any other county in America."

A recent 2015 issue of the Alliance's glossy magazine summarizes a developing trend by focusing on "Diversity in the Museum Workplace," while *The New Yorker* was commenting on the Metropolitan Museum's embrace of both modernism and a close relationship with important international galleries whose track record for insider trading is notorious. Given the tough economic circumstances facing all museums, a "pay to play" system has evolved whereby galleries support museum shows, which in turn increases the value of a featured painter, which put more money in both the galleries' pockets and in the museums' coffers. Calvin Tompkins, the author of the *New Yorker* piece, admits that no one really knows what contemporary art is "but every self-respecting city has its museum of modern art, and climate-change-denying business leaders will spend lavishly to get their names on its [the Metropolitan's] walls." A new forty-million-dollar museum has just opened in trendy Aspen, Colorado, that is "modest in size, collects no art and has free admission—[it] offers at least potentially, a working model for what a new kind of twenty-first century museum, regional or otherwise, could be," according to *The New York Times*. When it opened in 1979 it was a small one-gallery space that catered to local artists. Now its director, who came from the Berkeley Art Museum, eschews traditional interpretive texts, hosts art usually found in Los Angeles or New York, and sits atop a mountain in striking distance from the small Aspen airport where, according to one critic, private jets for the local millionaires and billionaires sit like waiting cabs. The Huntington Museum in San Marino, California, is on an equally pricey swatch of land and money that is sustained by an enormous endow-

ment (\$400 million), has a world-class research library, the largest Chinese garden outside of China, and annually hosts 600,000 visitors, who can dine in one of two restaurants, stroll around a cactus garden, or visit a Shakespearean garden. One critic summed up its impact: “At its best, the Huntington manages to bring all these varied cultural impulses together in a single place, allowing them to interact, and somehow keeping it all magnificently balanced. Not a bad mission at all.” Few museum complexes are able to accomplish that, but several—as you will read in several essays—are trying to pull it off. It just takes money and taste.

The American Alliance for Museums’ annual conference in 2016 boasts about its “Power, Influence, and Responsibility” in a keynote statement about its mission: “Museums are powerful community assets economically, culturally, educationally and as places to convene and discuss issues of the day. They memorialize historic events and bear witness to political and social change. They strive to foster healthy dialogue and provide a venue for healing and renewal. Museums use their power to teach respect for cultural differences and foster community cohesion and sustainability. **How is your museum using its power?**” (Bold in original.) Is this a statement by an institution on the rise or in decline, just like a mainstream church in search of an audience to educate and teach?

The genesis for this special number of *The Antioch Review* came about during a conversation two years ago with an old friend, Ivan Gaskell, who had recently left a position at Harvard’s Fogg Museum to direct a program at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. We were

at a dinner at the National Arts Club and talking about art, museums, and money. The Arts Club is a mini-museum of its own on Gramercy Park South that has supported and sheltered artists of all sorts since its founding in 1898. Ivan had the idea to bring a group of American and European curators together to explore the question of “The Future of Museums” and I agreed to publish their remarks for future audiences about the problems they faced and the solutions they had forged. We would not publish the “proceedings” (a common practice) directed at a professional audience, but rather include commentaries that would inform and enlighten the average museumgoer about what was going on beyond the proscenium arch that frames the entrance of every museum great and small. With financial help from the Delmas Foundation and the Bard Graduate Center, a symposium was organized by Ivan and the speakers were asked to address that old Leninist question: “What is to be done?” This is a question that numerous cultural institutions both here and abroad have been forced to face as the result of demographic, cultural, and economic realities.

Our authors come from New York; Glasgow, Scotland; New Haven; Cambridge, England; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Annapolis; Newark; Los Angeles; Athens, Ohio, and Yellow Springs, Ohio. They are all distinguished students and practitioners in the museum field and they have been on the front lines in this international debate about the present condition and the future prospects for all these institutions—both boutique and encyclopedic—that amazed us as children and inform and edify us as adults.

• Robert S. Fogarty