

“Ethnologists, anthropologists, folklorists, economists, engineers, consumers and users never see objects. They see only plans, actions, behaviours, arrangements, habits, heuristics, abilities, collections of practices of which certain portions seem a little more durable and others a little more transient, though one can never say which one, steel or memory, things or words, stones or laws, guarantees the longer duration.” (Latour, 2000: 10)

## THE ESSENTIAL MUSEUM

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### INTRODUCTION

What if our profession created a museum in which visitors could comfortably search for answers to their own questions regardless of the importance placed on such questions by others? This paper will explore the philosophy behind and the ingredients and procedures necessary to produce such a museum. This new type of museum I wish to characterize as “essential.” (This may be wishful thinking. We may, in the end, have to settle for “useful.”)

I contend that most museums are “important” but not “essential” establishments. I acknowledge that the customary museum continues to be valuable for some, beloved by its adherents, and defended against transformation by those who understand and celebrate its value. Nevertheless, I propose that there is room for another kind of museum, one that arises not from organized presentations by those in control, but one that puts control into the hands of the user.

"People are somewhat exhausted after 25 years of blockbuster exhibits being served up with these heavy tomes and yammering 'acousti-guides' and all the learned labels. These days, they want the opportunity to escape that kind of directed discovery." (Ramirez, 2001)

I suggest that while some useful experimenting with such control shifts within museums is already afoot, most especially in resource centers and study storage<sup>2</sup> embedded within galleries, there is no current category of museum in which the visitor is intended to be the prime assembler of content, based on his or her own need.

I am interested in transforming how users think of museum visits -- from an "occasional day-out" to a "drop-in service." I believe small local museums are the best candidates for enabling this transformation because they can program more nimbly and with less fuss than can highly visited larger establishments. If and when these small neighborhood museums come to be regarded as a useful stop in the ordinary day of the local citizen, I believe that, like the library in that very same community, the museum will have become essential.

In this new museum, the staff's role will be changed. Their current responsibility as the controlling authority determining the choice of displayed objects, interpretation, and expressed viewpoint will be diminished and their role as facilitator will be expanded.

We know that many potential visitors have not felt interested, welcome, or included by traditional museums, and have demonstrated their indifference by not attending. I believe there is a correlation between the intellectual control by staff and the lack of relevance seen by many of our citizens.

The essential museum would begin with four assumptions: all people have questions, curiosity, and insights about a variety of matters large and small; satisfaction of internalized questions is linked to more than fact acquisition and can include aesthetic pleasure, social interaction, and personal validation (recognition and memory); a museum could be a useful place to explore these; and visitors can turn their interest into satisfied discovery if the appropriate tools are present and easy to use.

Unfettered browsing of objects will be the main organizing motif in this museum and to facilitate that, the majority of the museum's objects will be on view. The technique of visual storage installation will be expanded and take on renewed importance.

Attendant information, broadly collected, will be considered almost as important as the objects themselves, and thus a data base with a branching program of multiple topics will be available within easy reach. To access the data base, a technological finding aid will be on hand so that the visitor can successfully sort through the multiplicity of available data. Visitors in this new museum, visitors once satisfied with their own search, can offer the results of their investigation or their queries to subsequent visitors. Everyone who enters has the possibility of becoming both investigator and facilitator.

Once the mission of such a museum is established, the staff will concentrate on acquiring and researching relevant objects, locating, collecting and collating associated information from a broad array of sources, and facilitating the public's access to same. While this sounds like the standard curatorial job, the basic mediating role of the curator will have changed. The curator will not select the objects for view, nor determine appropriate topics. Instead almost all information and objects will be made available and the user will mentally combine them as he or she sees fit. The museum will become a visual non-judgmental repository in which many intellectual directions are possible. No topic will be off limits and no idea will be rejected by the staff as unworthy. The museum will grow with the input of its users.

Before the reader finds this model too radical, consider that this is not dissimilar from the way shopping malls, the internet, or libraries currently operate. I wish to align the essential museum with these models.

#### WHY CREATE A NEW KIND OF MUSEUM?

Why create a new kind of Museum? In part because surveys have continued to show that museum visitors remain a narrow segment of our society. Try as we wish to

broaden the user group through many different strategies, we have, by and large, failed to make an appreciable dent.

Museum visitors remain predominantly well-educated and relatively affluent, while the majority of our citizens remain outside our doors. So I began to consider how else museums might operate if they really wanted to broaden their audiences; that is, if they wanted the profile of visitors to include more people from the lower, middle, and working class, and more users who fit in minority, immigrant, adolescent, high-school credentialed, and drop-out groups than is currently the case. If the rhetoric about museums continues to suggest that museums are inherently important civic spaces, then we must propose new strategies that would involve more of the citizenry.

In the last half century, curators, who are generally steeped in museum traditions, have seen their role criticized and in response they have generally changed their voice and intention from that of a benevolent but authoritarian leader into that of a benign and helpful teacher. They have incorporated new strategies of exhibition technique and given credence to the theories involving various learning modalities. (Gardner, 1983, Hein, 1998).

Overall the traditional museum has generally become less “stuffy” with added visitor amenities that encourage seating, eating, researching, shopping, and socializing. These changes have helped most museums evolve from being formal “temples” of contemplation into more inviting gathering places. The iconic museum has begun to look different from its turn-of-the-century forbear.

To enlarge the audience from the continuing relatively static profile, many have previously encouraged additional approaches: expanding collections to include works created by under-represented peoples; adding exhibition subject matter to appeal to specific disenfranchised audiences; utilizing exhibition techniques that appeal to many ages, interests and learning styles; and fostering mixed-use spaces in response to theories of city planners (especially those of Jane Jacobs.) (Jacobs, 1961) I suggested

that museums should combine these steps with continued thorough-going community liaison work. (Gurian, 2001, Gurian, 2005b) Most recently I have advocated for free admission as an important audience building strategy. (Gurian, 2005a)

Reluctantly, I now concede that these measures, while good, will not permanently expand the audience very much. I am newly convinced that the potential for broadening the profile of the attendees visiting the traditional museum is limited. Instead, museums of inclusion may be possible only if the object-focused mission is separated from the equally traditional but less well understood intellectual control of staff, and a new mission is substituted that satisfies a range of personal motivation by facilitating individual inquiry. In short, while I am not advocating that all museums need to change in this way, I am saying that the role, potential relevance, and impact of the traditional museum, while useful, is more limited than I had formerly believed.

I concede that the public wants, and may even need these time-honored, often iconic, museums. I remain a member of that public. However, the history of these museums is intertwined with the history of social and economic power. Described by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach as the “Universal Survey Museum,” (-- one which operates as a ritual experience intended to transmit the notions of cultural excellence--), they state: “The museum’s primary function is ideological. It is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs and values.” “The visitor moves through a programmed experience that casts him in the role of an ideal citizen – a member of an idealized ‘public’ and heir to an ideal, civilized past.” “Even in their smallest details... museums reveal their real function, which is to reinforce among some people the feeling of belonging and among others, the feeling of exclusion.” (Duncan and Wallach, 2004 pp. 52, 54, 62.)

If the view of Duncan and Wallach is only partially correct then it is not just object choice or intimidating architecture that is keeping the majority of the public from feeling welcomed in museums, it is the nexus between those objects, what is said about them, and by whom.

## LIBRARY

Have you ever wondered why some contemporary collecting institutions, like libraries, serve an audience both larger and more diverse than museums while others, for example archives, do not? I believe that library's easy access and intention to provide non-prescriptive service for its users are differences that deserve to be explored and emulated. I suggest that the perception of the library as a helping rather than teaching institution interests a broader array of users. I propose that there is a link between the public's greater use and appreciation of libraries and the fact that they are funded as a matter of course (rather than exception) by politicians. Changing museums so that they too serve a broader audience may result in enhanced funding opportunities.

The process for acquiring library materials uses a system equivalent to museums – but unlike museums, each item once accessioned is treated and presented in much the same way one from another. Except for occasional holdings of rare books, there is no value-laden hierarchy imposed on the collection or access thereto. Most importantly for purposes of this paper, within a broad array of possibilities, the determination of the topic for research is in the mind of the user rather than pre-selected by the librarian.

Most library filing and access systems are ubiquitous. When visiting a new library, most patrons having made use of another library, can easily find their way and for those not completely acclimated, there is the help-desk where a librarian is available if needed, but unobtrusive if not.

In order to facilitate queries, libraries use knowledge locator systems – i.e. catalogues -- that once understood allow users to find information they seek, in a manner and time that fits within their ordinary day. Additionally, there are helping aids embedded in the catalogue (such as key words) that allow the inexperienced user to succeed. So, unlike museums visits where the unfamiliar attendee tries to see “everything,” library patrons can, if they wish, drop-in casually, focused on an errand that can be completed quickly.

And because the library is free and is usually close-by, this pattern can be repeated often.

In their past histories, both libraries and museums were seen as august, quiet, imposing places. Why has the library “democratized” more than the museum, and why do both the citizen user and the politician funder feel that the library is more “essential” and worthy of more sustained support than the museum?

“A central feature of public librarianship in the United States is that librarians have worked to develop a climate of openness by defining library policies to create an institution where all are welcome. In 1990 the American Library Association adopted the policy, “Library Services for the Poor,” in which it is stated, “it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies.” (ALA Handbook of Organization, 1999-2000, policy 61). This policy was adopted because there had been a shifting level of emphasis in the interpretation of “openness” since the establishment of the public library. Open doors are very different from proactive service.” (de la Peña McCook, 2001:28)

While museum and library rhetoric relating to public access written post World War II might have sounded the same, Libraries took on the process of transforming themselves much more seriously and continuously. Libraries “examined how the set of techniques, developed and promoted by the Public Library Association allowed public librarians to engage in user-oriented planning, community-specific role setting, and self-evaluation.” (de la Peña McCook, 2001: 34) Perhaps museum personnel are also ready to turn the museum writings of the past into a set of actions that will produce the same inclusive outcomes.

SHOPPING MALLS ANOTHER USEFUL MODEL

Moving on to another example, shopping malls display materials chosen by others and placed in a visually pleasing and stimulating environment. Like the contemporary museum, the mall incorporates additional amenities that facilitate browsing, strolling, and eating, and offer ancillary activities such as performances and social and civic events. The mall and the museum are both mixed-use spaces. Yet in the aggregate mall users are of a much broader demographic than even the patrons of libraries.

While specific marketplace ambiances differ worldwide, all peoples, no matter what class or culture, are experienced shoppers and browsers. It is a skill everyone has learned from infancy. By extension, early training in museum use, as espoused by many, may continue to have relevance in audience development. However except for an occasional school class visit, most young museum visitors are the children of the current users. Aligning museum-going with known elements of shopping practice might expand that.

Two avenues to explore more fully may be the study of shopper's behavior (motivational theory) and scrutinizing the mall's systems created to satisfy that need. In reviewing papers on consumer motivation, there appears to be a predictable sequence. The shopper decides that he or she "needs" something and determines the possible location to fulfill that need. That need leads to intention – the planning to go to that location – and then action. Once the shopper arrives, he or she begins a search which involves locating, browsing, and comparing. The material is laid out to be visually inspected, and often touched; shoppers process their experience, combining and recombining what they are seeing until they make a self-directed decision: to buy or not to buy.

The system is codified and relatively easy to learn. The grouping of merchandise is often repeated shop to shop (for example by size, by types, or by price.) The purchase system is well marked, easy to find and often separated from the inspection of merchandise. The wayfinding system is replicated in many locations. And there are browsing aids and amenities to be found in convenient places.

One can argue that the placement of articles in shops is as carefully controlled as the exhibitions presented in museums. I would not contest that, given many marketing studies that substantiate that position. Yet I would point out that people, because of comfort in their role as experienced shoppers, feel empowered to by-pass the shop-initiated preferred outcome and operate instead on their own. Those shops that wish to have more restricted clientele intentionally impose barriers to free exploration, much like traditional museums.

As unrelated as we might wish these activities to be, I am suggesting that the shopping and library experience have some important elements in common with each other and these might usefully become embedded in the new type of museum I am proposing – i.e. ubiquitous systems, free exploration, and a large volume of visual material on view. Most importantly the decision to frequent a library or a mall originates from an internalized impulse, question, or need (a quest if you will) that is sufficient to lead to action.

I understand that associating museums with shopping may offend some and that there are important differences as well. Nevertheless, I expect that when consumer motivation theory is better understood and the physical facility of the museum adjusted to satisfy the individual's broader needs, the public will change the way they think about the usefulness of museums.

#### WHAT DOES A MUSEUM HAVE – COLLECTIONS!

After this encomium to other venues, what is the special reason one would go to a museum at all, you might ask? The museum's comparative advantage remains the visual, and sometimes tactile, access to special physical things (some of them natural, some unique and original, and some purpose-built environments.) The museum remains one of the few places where one can come face-to-face with hard-to-find, sometimes beautiful, and potentially intriguing stuff. It is the physicality of realia that makes museums special.

While current technology makes it possible to see almost any item on a computer screen, the computer cannot accurately reproduce the nuances, especially of scale and texture that individuals absorb in the actual presence of the objects. It is the “evidence” in its tangible form that the public values.

## VISIBLE STORAGE

If the public wants access to things, then it stands to reason that museums should provide access to lots of things, in fact why not set up visual investigation of all, or almost all of what the museum holds? The exhibition method currently in use which attempts that is a technique called study, open or visible storage and there are contemporary examples in many places. However the scale of these vis-à-vis the square footage allocated to prepared or “curated” exhibitions is small. In this model I am suggesting that the amount of visual storage will be substantial.

I understand that when browsing amidst organized displays in today’s typical museum, the visitor is already participating in a limited “free choice learning” space (Falk and Dierking, 2000). Most exhibitions are currently organized to allow visitors to wander at their own speed, and in their own pattern. I am also aware that some organizing structure is a comfort for the novice user, so I am not suggesting random placement of objects. In the essential museum there would be “light arrangement” – a framework— which might generally mimic the museum’s own collections storage strategy, i.e. by topic, by material, by culture or by artist.

Some portion of the collection and display square footage could be reserved for changing installations responsive to a timely idea. As an analogy, we have all visited libraries that shelve detective novels together alphabetically by author, yet some books from that section are removed to appear, for example, in a shelf of new acquisitions, in the librarians choice of “good reads” or picks related to a current movie or holiday.

This paper, in some ways, extols a return to a very old-fashioned role for museums – publicly available visual storage. It is ironic that after a quarter century of narrative

exhibition development, museums, to follow this line of reasoning, would have to focus again on the non-narrative aspect of their collections and paying renewed attention to collections care and collections management systems.

Prior to the advent of modern exhibition techniques in the 1950's museums often had much of their collections on view with very little interpretation. Some visitors found that boring; others, bewildering. So why return to it now? What would be different from and better than those previous static displays?

To confess, I never found those installations tiresome. I have found that even without any of the associated information available, these old fashioned visual storage installations were often the source of magic and wonder. Wandering in the aisles of the Museum of Contemporary Zoology in the mid-60's with my own then small children was a delight. Their interest roving between cases and their associated flights of fancy are indelible experiences for this museum writer.

But I am in the minority. For most people, uninterpreted collections were mystifying. This new proposal adds a critical ingredient: information – lots of it, connected to the objects on view.

#### INFORMATION SYSTEM NEEDED

In the past, most object-centered museums contained only terse labels using highly refined and often technical words. There was no accompanying easy-to-understand omnibus system which held both information about the objects and cross-disciplinary references. Instead, techniques such as user-friendly finding-aid systems existed in libraries, as card-catalogues with key words.

Comparable systems are rarely available to museum visitors. To be fair, without technology these systems were at best clumsy. While the technology needed to create a fully responsive system for museum use is not yet fully developed, there are

experimental prototypes in various facilities that museums could employ to start down this road.<sup>3 4</sup>

I am proposing coupling the power of the object's physical presence with the speed of the Internet and am suggesting that the result would encourage the visitor to find out more than just the information the museum has about a subject of interest. I am eager that the proprietary information held within individual museums be combined with related information from other sources for the public to use. It is the availability of linked (and often unexpected) information connected to the physical objects and made readily available on the spot through an electronic search engine that would make the museum fully interesting to the visitor.

The fundamental difference between what I am now recommending and what has been tried in the past is a freer relationship between the object and its many possible spokespersons. I am interested in making museum collections, and all associated information, accessible in ways that are analogous to browsing in the stacks. Further I am interested in expanding our information system to become like Wikipedia (with all its faults) -- a collection of accumulated explorations.

The object becomes the fulcrum around which all kinds of information are arrayed for an individual's exploration with the potential for cross-disciplinary connections like those referred to by Ian Wedde as "discourse spillage," in which he whimsically suggests we could go to "an exhibition about war for information about bicycles." (Wedde, 2005: 286)

Originally, museums held collections records that were hand written and contained only a small amount of information -- the name of the object, the history of ownership, the dimensions and material, and some attribution as to the maker. But what of the stories? Stories (as in oral histories) even when fondly appreciated by curators or registrars did not seem appropriate to record, and many were lost. That is changing in some quarters. Information now linked to cultural artifacts of indigenous people often contains associated stories. I am suggesting that the essential museum, in order to be

encyclopedic, should gather and include such stories. Janet Hoskins in her volume *Biographical Objects*, has said, "What I discovered, quite to my surprise, was that I could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately. People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled." (Hoskins, 1998: 2)

In collecting stories as relevant and useful data, the museum would have to become comfortable with transcribing seemingly antagonistic, competing, or overlapping knowledge systems often described as "differing world-views," commonly polarized between "science" and "myth." The internet as an example contains "accurate," personal, and potentially faulty information. The internet makes opinion blogs, factual reporting, and skewed viewpoints all available at the same time. It is up to users to decide what they wish to see and how to regard it. Accordingly, users sometimes go to their choice of "reliable" third parties to differentiate between and choose among the information gathered. That is why some folks use *Consumer Reports* when deciding on the right dishwasher to purchase. In the essential museum, the curator would be one of several "reliable" commentators whose views would always be available as part of the record.

There is a vigorous discussion among those who favor a fully open internet, trying to find the best path between inaccurate, offensive and slanderous material on the one hand, and censorship that impedes individual freedoms on the other. The museum interested in such an allied information system would have to wade into that murky stream and get wet. I do not find such a prospect sufficient to deny the public such broader information. It is the mixing of unique proprietary information and the associated rumination by others that would make visiting a museum a new and intriguing experience. One of the quickest and cheapest ways to begin this process would be to have the internet itself easily available in the exhibition space.

What I am proposing is the creation of a visual and technological support system that allows individuals to delight in the adventure of making individualized connections

amidst real things. I am interested in supporting the visitor whose quest may be information gathering but equally others who come with more subjective goals. “While studies show that some visitors may seek and experience relaxation, social bonding, self-identity, self-esteem, and other outcomes from the museum experience, it is still relatively rare that museums choose to focus explicitly on facilitating outcomes other than cognitive gain....What museums can uniquely offer is an opportunity for individuals to encounter collections of evocative artifacts, and a laboratory for understanding the powerful connections between people and things.” (Silverman, 2002: 75, 77)

I am suggesting that this become a two-way street with these self-same visitors leaving some imprint behind that allows others to enjoy and participate in their new discovery. Technology makes that possible. As an example, young people are creating and downloading personalized tours of museums on their Ipods and giving them to friends.

#### ESSENTIAL REFERENCE TOOL

To fulfill the need as I describe it, the essential museum will have to create an understandable reference aid that is replicated, at least in general outlines, in many other museums. Like the Dewey Decimal System, imperfect as it may be, there are a number of such models or analogous systems. The phone book is available in most households to be consulted when needed. The internet utilized by the computer literate is currently even more convenient, and is used often to find answers to questions in a timely manner. On the internet, Google’s search engine is not much different than Yahoo’s. Every railroad has a timetable quite like each other’s, and every newspaper reader can find a set of useful and timely information (such as the weather forecast or the starting times of movies) within every issue. Individual members of the public having learned how to use finding aids in one context can assume that they will be available in other related venues.

Museums would have to invent and then generally adopt such a transferable system. Some within our profession have been working on collections management systems based on agreed taxonomies and these might prove useful. In effect, the system may

partially exist. However, regardless of the current state of these electronic finding-aids, they are not generally known by or available to the museum visitor.

## COLLECTIONS CARE

A renewed focus on visual storage could be useful at this time in our history. A report on the state of American collections concludes that they are in substantial disrepair. (Heritage Preservation, 2005) Much of the museum community has not adequately financed the care for their collections because, compared to other activities, collection care has not risen to a high priority. This lack of funds may be exacerbated because grant funders, politicians and the public do not currently see a connection between collections care and public service. Funders are right to believe that once collections are conserved they will most likely be locked away again awaiting some an uncertain rebirth in an exhibition in the unknown future. Addressing collections care for its own sake has not made for a compelling case.

Further there is unfocused collecting in many museums compounded by problematic deaccessioning decisions that can provoke public controversy. So in addition to substantial collections care, the system I am proposing also requires a focused mission with rigorous decision-making about which collections to retain. In this transformed museum where the objects fit within the mission, where most objects are visible (and perhaps sometimes touched) and where abundant attendant information is available, collections care would rise to higher priority for funding.

## THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR IN THE ESSENTIAL MUSEUM

To transform the museum, those in leadership positions will have to take delight in helping patrons learn what they wish. This will require staff to rethink their role, their passion and their skill set. I am respectful of the scholarship curators have amassed and do not suggest that they discard it, but I am recommending a change their role from teacher and transmitter to facilitator and assister.

“Clearly, in this kind of contestable, unstable and multi-user knowledge domain, the museum-based researcher needs disenchantment as well sympathy,

intellectual rigor as well as relativist flexibility, in order to find and disseminate the narratives about collections that will entertain and inform audiences, and add to the nation's useful store of scholarship." (Wedde, 2005 p. 287)

Exhibitions other than open storage should be continued, but these exhibitions should occupy a smaller percentage of the available square footage than currently allocated and their content and installation design should be adapted to allow for frequent change. Rather than exhibitions that take years to develop, cost a great deal of money and remain unchanging for decades, I am suggesting that the developer's identity be revealed in smaller exhibitions that are more personalized and involve open and evolving dialogue with the public.

Having struggled for decades to get museums to see education as a priority, I am now suggesting that the word needs a changed definition -- from one implies the inter-relationship between teacher and student to one that clearly denotes the facilitation of individual inquiry. In the essential museum, fostering individualized learning will be listed first in the mission preceding the usual "collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and researching" menu.

To help create prepared staff who embrace this new concept, museum trainers will have to rethink their course offerings, elevating customer focused assistance to a valued endeavor. Students would study such topics as motivation theory, inquiry based technology, and oral history in addition to their subject matter scholarship.

#### SPACE AND DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS NECESSARY TO IMPLIMENT THIS NEW MUSEUM MODEL:

To be welcoming, this new visible storage and knowledge system will need to be coupled with responsive space design. Attention will be paid to creating comfortable physical amenities including access to terminals, research tables and implements for close looking that fit the needs of visitors. These will be combined with platforms for story tellers or performers, and added interactive elements of interest to families.

The shopping mall and the library have space elements worth emulating. Their designs intentionally allow patrons to enter anonymously, and to sit and stroll without committing to organized activity. These amenities allow 'lurkers' - unfamiliar users - to figure out the services and customs required without drawing attention to themselves. Access to facilities such as toilets is available without entrance fees, and malls and (increasingly libraries) offer opportunities to socialize while eating.

In a paper entitled "Free at Last" I wrote, "I have reluctantly but unequivocally come to the conclusion that the first encounter with the ticket taker may be the single greatest impediment to making our museums fully accessible. (Gurian, 2005a) I believe that the essential museum, like the library and the mall, must be free to enter.

Library designs include other special elements that also fit within this new model. They include:

- Spaces both for small group interaction and for private contemplation that don't interfere with each other.
- Help desks that are in a physical location that can be easily seen, but do not require the visitor to interact.
- Front doors that are convenient to public transportation and foot traffic as well as parking for the automobile.
- Hours of operation that suit neighborhood users.
- Acceptance of behavior, clothing choice, sound level, and styles of interaction that are consistent with norms of courtesy within the individuals' community.
- And unobtrusive security systems.

## SMALL MUSEUMS

I believe that the museums most receptive to this transformation will be the smaller natural history, cultural, and local history museums. It is these rather unprepossessing and certainly underfunded places that hold the most promise for me. I suggest we leave the great, national, omnibus, encyclopedic museums alone to continue on their

valued way. I do suggest, however, that the open storage that many are installing become more fulsome with the adding of the kind of information overlay and finding aids suggested throughout this paper.

In the small museum the audiences, current and potential, are local, and can get to the museum easily and often. The collection has local relevance but is usually neither rare nor valuable enough to need intrusive security. The associated stories are easier to find because they often reside in local memory. And these institutions have particular importance to local schools. These local museums have the advantage of being below the radar screen and thus can experiment with less risk. They can become relevant to the people who use them with more ease than large museums.

Over the last century there have been many examples of smaller museums which have experimented. They often had charismatic directors with vision and talented devoted staff. These institutions became the incubators of new ideas which were later emulated when deemed to be safe and no longer novel.

In the United States, some of these historic experiments are well known – the New Museum under the direction of Marsha Tucker, the Exploratorium under Frank Oppenheimer, the Wing Luck Museum under Ron Chew, the African Art Museum under Susan Vogel, the Newark Museum under John Cotton Dana, the Boston Children's Museum under Michael Spock, and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum under John Kinard. Many of them have successfully continued under new leadership. However once famous, the pressure to maintain that high regard has sometimes blunted their ability to experiment.

There are local history museums in many countries that are taking on new forms of experimentation. They serve their local public without fanfare. The annual Gulbenkian prize list always includes a few in the United Kingdom. The Molndahl Museum in Sweden and the children's art museum in Rosario, Argentina are two of my current favorites. Many of the ideas in this paper have been inspired by these two museums.

Ron Chew, the director of the Wing Luke Museum, has written, “At the small museum, there are no inflated expectations, no pretensions, and no awful waits. The exhibitions may be small and somewhat idiosyncratic, but they mirror the small, somewhat idiosyncratic world we know, close to home.” (Chew, 2002)

## FUNDING AND APPROBATION

It is my hope that with this important transformation, local governmental agencies will begin to see that these newly dynamic institutions right in their own backyard, are serving a real public need and should be supported. They will see the essential local museum as a service that is as relevant and constant as the local library.

And as this new form emerges, it is my hope that the museum community will begin to value the unique position of these small local museums, create a separate niche that has criteria all its own and begin to develop a rhetoric that no longer compares them with the much larger iconic museums.

## SUMMARY

In summary to create more inclusive museums I believe that we must change our basic mindset and emulate aspects of those institutions deemed essential by a large cross-section of our citizenry. These include libraries and shopping malls. In order to be regarded as essential, museums would have to understand, respect and facilitate each visitors' individual quest and applaud a broad motivation for entering.

In order to become essential, the museum will provide visible access to holdings in a lightly organized manner, concentrate on access to information systems that are easy to understand, repeatable, and transferable. In addition to making the object and the associated proprietary information available, the museum will accumulate and merge information that resides elsewhere – in books, records, movies, slides, etc, -- so that each object becomes the impetus for unexpected exploration. Finally, museums would

have to include ways for the public to add information to the system and respond to the information left by others.

Physical layouts and concomitant training will be needed to ensure visitor's ease upon entry, welcoming attitudes among staff, help available only when needed, and clear ways to learn how to use the system by simply watching.

This proposal turns museums upside down, transferring authority to the visitor and transforming the staff, who have been knowledge accumulators, preservers, and translators, into knowledge brokers and sharers. Some museums have experimented with bits and pieces of this in the past. I am certain that this new system could – and should -- be created, wholesale, in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been evolving over two years. An early form of this paper was used as a Keynote Address delivered at the British Columbia Museum Association, October 18, 2005, in Kelowna, British Columbia. It was the natural successor to two previous papers and incorporates some ideas and sentences from these:

GURIAN, E. H. (2001) Function Follows Form: How Mixed-Used Spaces in Museums Build Community. *Curator*, 44, 87-113,

GURIAN, E. H. (2005b) Threshold Fear. IN MACLEOD, S. (Ed.) *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*. London, Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Museum of Anthropology (MOA), University of British Columbia, Vancouver, CA piloted open storage in the 1970's which continues and has 13,000 objects on view. MOA and works with students to produce small occasional exhibitions within this visible storage. [http://www.moa.ubc.ca/exhibits/permanent\\_exhibits.php](http://www.moa.ubc.ca/exhibits/permanent_exhibits.php) The experiment started a small trend with many adherents and new examples being proposed. Among large institutions, the British Museum of Natural History and the Hermitage in Leningrad have relatively new installations. Augmenting visible storage with ancillary information was the logical next step. As an example, in 2001, the New York Historical Society opened a whole floor devoted to open storage augmented with additional information downloadable into hand-held pda's and computers embedded in the space.

<sup>3</sup> See the Institute of Museum and Library Services conferences called "Webwise" for a list of topics on organized Metadata and public access to cross-platform archival records for example. "What approaches do cultural heritage institutions use to support collection discovery? How can cultural heritage institutions learn from one another and adapt behaviors of the different curatorial traditions to improve discovery and open up our collections?"

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<sup>4</sup> See

NISO FRAMEWORK ADVISORY GROUP (2004) A FRAMEWORK OF GUIDANCE FOR BUILDING GOOD DIGITAL COLLECTIONS, National Information Standards Organization, Bethesda, MD, 2nd edition, <http://www.niso.org/framework/framework2.pdf>. for a working definition of “metadata” and its uses.