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Mission Matters

WHY ANOTHER PUBLICATION ON MUSEUM MISSION STATEMENTS? WHY NOW?

Simply put, the confluence of issues in society, the external environment, and the world have created new realities and pressures that require museums and museum leaders to examine and rethink how museums can be relevant and more impactful for our citizens and communities.

Museums are not islands: museums exist within a cultural, social, political, economic, and natural environment in which they must play a part. A museum as an unchallenged, venerable institution is a concept that no longer exists.¹ No institution, whether for-profit or nonprofit, can elude public scrutiny or avoid being the focus of a public outcry. Issues impacting individuals, communities, and nations are interrelated and tie to a range of systemic issues such as immigration, racial inequities, local and global economies, disparities of the haves and have-nots, wars fought over water, religious rights, resources, and land rights—these are just a few realities happening in and around museums.

This amalgam of contemporary realities presents an unprecedented opportunity for all museums to undertake holistic institutional assessment, examine operational assumptions, leverage their unique resources, and determine the most impactful ways of being that make a substantive difference in their communities and in the lives of a diverse public. It is a moment to envision a more responsive, visionary, and vital role for museums that contributes to healthy, vibrant communities. By virtue of being an organization in service to the public, there is an ethical and moral responsibility to take actions to make the world better.² Museums must advance inclusion and equity for people of all backgrounds, present the untold stories and histories, and act and care for the fragile environment of our planet.³

Indeed, some museums are uniquely positioned to respond to specific topics and issues in depth by virtue of their content emphasis such as science museums addressing climate change, yet all museums need to do their part to protect the environment regardless of the focus of their institution. This is the time to leverage the role of museums as contributors to a better, stronger, more just world and to become positive agents of change in their communities. Every museum has a responsibility to look at the broader external environment and specific local issues, and to select a path forward that resonates and responds to their geographic location, their communities, and the unique resources of their institution.

A relevant and strategic mission for the twenty-first-century museum has the power to galvanize board and staff around instigating meaningful change in communities and the lives of others.

At its core, a mission explains why a museum exists, how it makes a difference in the lives of others, and how it impacts the future, which implies it explains who it is for.⁴ The mission is the heart of the institution, its compass, and the grounding force that guides all that a museum does and inspires the people who work there. The mission forms the foundation from which agreement about the role of the museum is clarified, which is especially important as museums undertake transformative and systemic change. A mission is the anchor within a strategic framework alongside a vision, values, operating principles, and impact statements, to name a few, that guide the museum toward its greatest potential and relevancy (see chapters 3, 4, and 8).⁵

A strategic mission plays a central role in the identity of an institution—it conveys to its public why it is there, and it communicates to audiences the ways that they can engage with the museum. A relevant mission translates how the museum connects with the contemporary world, builds meaning with its audiences, challenges assumptions and the status quo, and invites new voices into the larger conversation and dialogue that each museum can facilitate. A strong clear mission, as a management tool, should be clear enough to inform who will lead and advance the mission, what skills and experiences are needed in the staff who work there, what the nature of the work is, and what impact the museum seeks in service to the public. It is like a pebble dropped in the lake: the mission ripples through all aspects of the museum.

Missions matter. Taking the time to define the right mission for each museum is a collective effort and one essential to being able to state clearly “this is who we are, this is what we stand for, this is who we serve, this is how we make a difference, we want to do this with and for you.” If the mission is not crafted and thought through with intent, and there isn’t the courage to state the institution’s conviction for its place in the world, museums run the risk of being disconnected, marginalized, and irrelevant to their communities and the public at large, even the threat of closure.

In the end, each museum has a direction and a focus it will choose. It is about being deliberate and defining a realm in which it will engage the public in meaningful experiences and ideas. Whether a museum is national in focus, a specialty museum, a historic house, or a science institution, it has an obligation to be clear in its intent and define how everything the museum does advances the mission. Every museum will not appeal to all, but each museum can put its stake in the ground and declare its greater purpose that is right for its location, community, and place in the world, its unique characteristics, and the leadership and capacity to deliver the mission.

QUALITIES OF RELEVANT MUSEUMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Museums that exude relevancy in the twenty-first century reflect distinct qualities throughout their operations and their vision for the future. These fundamental assertions about museums and thus their mission statements are tied to the greater impact that museums can have.

Relevant museums in the twenty-first century:

- Place the public, communities, and audiences at the center of what they do through meaningful engagement that makes a difference in the lives of people. This fundamental responsibility upholds the museum’s social contract with the public to act for the greater good.
- Balance external realities with internal capacity to find the place of greatest impact for the benefit of others. Tapping into the inherent and unique qualities of a museum must be balanced with understanding how to translate contemporary realities into the work each museum undertakes.
- Reflect inclusivity and diversity at all levels of the museum, including representation on boards and staff, the nature of the work undertaken, the voices and histories included, the balance of content and perspectives embraced, and an inclusive organizational culture. This requires that each museum has named and grappled with

underlying biases, assumptions, practices, and modes of behavior that may have supported elitist and exclusionary practices. This leads to reframing new principles and approaches for greater inclusion and success.

- Act with institutional-wide responsibility to uphold environmentally sensitive actions in support of caring for the fragile planet. All museums must do their part in this urgent reality of climate change facing our world and impacting generations to come. Museums must lead by example and empower the public to do their part.
- Facilitate experiences, dialogues, ideas, and engagement onsite and out in the world that are meaningful, inclusive, and respectful of a diverse public. This requires a commitment to lead with humility and listen attentively as a core tenet of operations, welcoming new perspectives and participation as an ongoing way of working and learning.
- Act with integrity, accountability, and transparency, and uphold legal and ethical standards, and financially responsible practices in support of the mission and nonprofit requirements of operation.

In the end, the challenges for today's museums require leaders to act with conviction, courage, and commitment to ask the tough questions, redefine what no longer works, retain what remains useful, stay the course for the long-term to transform museum practices, and undertake the fundamental changes that will be necessary to achieve and sustain relevancy. Significant change takes time and will evolve as new challenges and realities emerge.

EMBEDDED CONSTRUCTS CREATE BARRIERS TO RELEVANT MUSEUMS

Embedded constructs must be addressed to get at the heart of reframing missions, given that many ideologies are so intertwined into thinking and practices that moving forward could be impaired without rigorous examination. Constructs refer to a range of deeply rooted beliefs, structures, and practices such as unexamined assumptions, academic frameworks, systemic racism, and inherent privilege. The following are a few examples of constructs impacting museums.

Decolonization in Museums

Anthropology museums typically hold collections that are based on an academic anthropology framework focused on studying non-Western cultures. Thus, most anthropological collections reflect cultural artifacts of indigenous peoples from the Americas, Africa, and continents across the globe. These diverse cultures were the subject of research, study, and observation by many of the anthropologists of the 1800s and early 1900s, epitomizing the fascination of studying the "other" and the exotic. Many artifacts were stolen and taken to amass cultural collections acquired with disrespect to the people who created them, used them, and attributed sacred and spiritual meanings central to their identity and cultural vitality.⁶ In today's world, a museum that still adheres to the ideology of traditional anthropology advances an imbalanced, racist, and colonial view of the history of humans while sustaining cultural objectification practices.⁷

The San Diego Museum of Man, founded as a traditional anthropology museum of global cultures, has shifted the lens to be about understanding human behavior and interactions rather than using the academic anthropology lens. The museum has initiated a decolonization approach to deconstruct this nineteenth- and twentieth-century exploitive and voyeuristic mindset.⁸

As SDMoM changed its direction in 2010, with exhibitions like "RACE: Are We So Different?" [a traveling exhibition from the Science Museum of Minnesota], it set the stage for . . . a lengthy process of self-examination, and . . . a commitment to institutional decolonization. American and European museums have long been associated with the formation and continuation of empires. Many were created to house and display the material and biological remains, and intangible culture, of colonized Indigenous communities in support of a national narrative predicated upon the concept of white supremacy. As a result, museums have often helped perpetuate many endemic social ills, including that of structural racism.⁹

It should be noted that, as part of reframing the work of the San Diego Museum of Man, the board and staff are planning a name change that reflects all of humanity not conveyed with the current name.

While this is a contemporary example of decolonizing efforts featured in this book, several other institutions such as the Glenbow Museum in the late 1970s initiated a rigorous process of decolonization, where 60 percent of the population are Native born. This effort was evident through featuring first-voice interpretation in exhibitions and mounting the largest repatriation of sacred objects in Canadian history. Similarly, the Museum of Northern Arizona engaged Hopi and Navajo elders in the interpretation and representation of their culture and artifacts also in first voice in a major reinstallation in the late 1970s.

Particularly relevant to museums holding indigenous artifacts is the fact that for many cultures, in particular Native American tribes, the concept of keeping an object in perpetuity is antithetical to tribal customs and beliefs. The remarkable U.S. legislation, the Native American Graves and Protection Rights Act of 1990, acknowledged this disparity in museum and Native cultural concepts resulting in many objects being repatriated to their tribes. In some cases, memorandums of understanding have been established between museums and Native tribes for the safekeeping of cultural objects with the agreement that tribal leaders may borrow sacred and ceremonial objects for use in rituals. As one example, the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff has such a memorandum of understanding with the Hopi Tribe.

The Complexities of American Art

A museum with American art in its name prompts a different set of questions: How is American defined? Does the art have to be created by an American citizen? Does this include an undocumented immigrant? Is there representation of female artists and the full spectrum of artists of color, male and female? This example points to the importance of addressing the underpinnings, definitions, and assumptions inherent in the history of a museum dedicated to American art or a museum dedicated to a nation's artistic heritage. This can be an opportunity to generate thoughtful, inclusive, and empowering conversations that may lead to a new paradigm of public engagement, efforts to broaden representation in the collections, and a more expansive view of artists of diverse backgrounds, and thus a revised and inclusive mission.

The Influence of the National Narrative

The challenge of confronting historical misrepresentation and untruths in museums is one that some museums have been addressing in order to honor all the voices and experiences of a people, an event, or a place. This challenge is not limited to U.S. museums but is happening with museums across the globe when difficult truths and stories about abuse, racism, human atrocities, and war are not fully told (see chapters 2, 5, and 6).

In 2011, the Colombian Government signed Law 1448 which intends to provide comprehensive reparations to nearly 8 million victims of the internal armed conflict since 1985. This Law founded the National Center for Historical Memory (NCHM) with the objective of "designing, creating, and administrating a Museum of Memory, destined to achieve the strengthening of the collective memory regarding Colombia's recent history of violence, making sure to combine efforts from the private sector, civil society, international cooperation, and the state." The National Memory Museum (NMM) constitutes thus as a symbolic reparation measure aiming to restore the dignity of victims, the public acceptance of wrongdoings, the preservation of historical memory, and guarantee the non-repetition of acts of violence and human rights violations.¹⁰

In the spring of 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice to honor the men, women, and children who were brutally killed through lynchings, beatings,

burnings, and torture from the 1800s into the 1900s. At the same time, the Equal Justice Initiative opened The Legacy Museum, where the exhibition “From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration,” presents the evolving story of this horrific past connecting the history of slavery to contemporary forms of oppression, bias, and discriminatory actions. Bryan Stevenson, an attorney, and the executive director and visionary for both projects, believes the museum and the memorial will help tell the larger story and help “change the national narrative.”¹¹

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND MUSEUM PRACTICES

Just as the world changes, so too has the vision of some museum leaders regarding the role of their institution. Through the research for this book, several illustrative examples were found where museum leaders are undertaking transformative change, including new voices, abandoning elitist and exclusionary practices, and addressing contemporary issues (see chapters 5 and 6). Note the categories for organizing the missions and their correlating definitions are outlined in the introduction of chapter 6.

Issues-based Museums

The Coastal Discovery Museum in Hilton Head, South Carolina, leverages the unique setting and fragility of the Lowcountry, the unique natural habitat along the South Carolina coastline, as a springboard into larger conversations about visitors taking responsibility as stewards for the planet. See the Coastal Discovery Museum mission and vision in chapter 6.

The Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, embraces environmental consciousness holistically whether evidenced in a LEED building, internal best practices, or programs that help the visitor understand the interconnected relationship between humans and the plant kingdom. See the perspective in chapter 5.

The Anchorage Museum in Alaska is dedicated to addressing the pressing issues in the Arctic and the Circumpolar North. Through agreements with other museums in the other eight Arctic Nations, they have mounted, created, and addressed issues shared across the northern region of the world as vanishing glaciers, changing climates, and communities now underwater plague the North with pending global impact. At the Anchorage Museum the intersection of indigenous peoples in Alaska and the issues of the environment spotlight ways to bring stories long kept separate into an integrated and informative way of thinking about the environment and Native cultures together. See the perspective in chapter 5.

The National Museums Liverpool in England, under the leadership of David Fleming, has leveraged its museums as places for addressing contemporary issues, controversy, social change, and social justice (see chapters 2 and 6). This amalgam of institutions, the International Slavery Museum, the Museum of Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, and the World Museum, to name a few of them, has focused on contemporary issues and inclusion of the people in Liverpool, the United Kingdom, and beyond to heighten relevancy. Summing up his position, Fleming states:

I think that if museums wish to remain relevant in today’s society they need to make sure that they’re dealing with difficult issues—some of the issues that they have studiously avoided dealing with in the past. It’s the only way, really, to connect with modern people: we’ve got to be more honest than we used to be.¹²

Community-building Museums

Some museums are inextricably linked to their communities, sometimes creating a vital lifeline for the health and well-being of a community, whether defined geographically or by cultural identification or other self-defined characteristic.

The Tamástslikt Cultural Institute in Oregon focuses on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla values, beliefs, history, language, and cultural traditions. It is an urgent endeavor to represent and document the traditions through Elders' voices, especially pressing as Native languages are endangered not just in this Native community but in many other tribes across the United States, Canada, and the world. Roberta Conner, the executive director at Tamástslikt, stated "the greatest sign of our success is when a member of the tribe entrusts us with their families' treasures because they know we will care for those objects and tell their stories for generations to come."¹³

The Anacostia Community Museum of the Smithsonian Institution was born out of a conviction to reflect and connect with an underserved, predominantly black community in Washington, DC, to tell their stories, and celebrate a community that had been marginalized. This organization continues to do groundbreaking work building upon John Kinard's vision and groundbreaking work of the 1960s.¹⁴

A more recent story of a community-based museum is the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, where an institution on the brink of closure was saved through a reframing of purpose and mission to be by, for, and with the community. In Nina Simon's perspective, she chronicles the journey of the reinvention that turned the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History into a community hub that has enlivened the city and become a magnet for building a vibrant level of public engagement¹⁵ (see the perspective in chapter 5).

Content-centered Museums

For many museums, persistent questions from the public have demanded inclusion in historical accounts, and formerly unheard voices and stories reveal the full story of a community or people.

In September 2017, the long-awaited National Museum of African American History and Culture opened on the Mall in Washington, DC. This Smithsonian museum, many years in the making, tells the African American story that in turn tells the broader and more complete story laying bare the underbelly of American history around lynchings, slavery, and racist ideology in the United States. Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, stated in reference to the goals of the museum:

Understanding race, understanding our tortured history can help us with the world we live in today.¹⁶

We are in a divided America, where race and issues of white supremacy are at the forefront of our conversations. I think the museum is a place that helps us explore things that are difficult, helps us explore where race matters and how it's divided us. I also think people come because they believe that by looking at the history of America through an African-American lens, they're finding moments of optimism, moments to believe that no matter how bad things are, you can effect change if you're willing to struggle and to demand America live up to its stated ideals.¹⁷

The Museum of History of Polish Jews in Warsaw vision is to "create a platform for social dialogue . . . offering a profound, transformative experience and promoting new standards of relating to history." Their mission statement is to "recall and preserve the memory of Polish Jews, contributing to the mutual understanding and respect amongst Poles and Jews as well as other societies of Europe and the world" (see chapter 6).

The Kenya Wildlife Service is working against the clock to protect the wildlife within their national parks system. Simply put, their vision is "to save the last great species and places on earth for humanity." This example highlights the urgency with which education and action is required in order to avoid irreparable damage and permanent loss (see chapter 6).

Experience-focused Museums

Experience-focused museums are often attributed to childrens' museums, interactive science museums, and historical sites. More and more, museums in all areas are integrating experiences into their approach for engaging the public.

In children's museums, there is a focus on parent-child relationships, exploratory experiences, early childhood education, and the growth of toddlers and children into responsible and caring human beings. At the Bay Area Discovery Museum in Sausalito, California, their commitment to getting it right translates into the significant allocation of funds to undertake research on childhood education and creativity that informs decisions and strategies, influences programmatic choices, and guides the way staff engage with visitors (see the perspective in chapter 5).

The Tenement Museum offers tours of the living quarters of poor, immigrant families in New York City between the 1860s and 1930s. The experience of walking through this site helps the visitor relive and feel the conditions of the people who lived there while striving to care for family members. With current issues around immigration, this museum is relevant to the issues of the day around immigration, prejudices, and deplorable working conditions (see chapter 6).

The Museo Interactivo Economía in Mexico City focuses on "the use of economics as a lens for people to discover how the world works," using interactive exhibitions and presentation of topics not typically featured in a museum setting (see chapter 6).

All of the examples of leadership described in the prior pages are just a few ways that museums are contributing to the world in which they exist with goals to make a difference—some locally, some nationally, and others internationally.

The Power of Collaboration to Lead Change

Some members of the museum community have come together as leaders to instigate the necessary change that has been slow to manifest in museums. "Museums and Race: Transformation and Justice," a convening organized by The Museum Group, held in January 2016 in Chicago, brought together leaders representing ethnic diversity and generations of museum professionals to discuss and outline strategies to help advance museums and the museum field into reflective and inclusive institutions with meaning and connections to a widely diverse public. One of the predominant discussion points was around the power of collaboration.¹⁸ This convening was followed by workshops and conversations at the American Alliance of Museums meeting in Washington, DC, in the spring of 2016.

At the same time a group of visionaries and activists, participated in MASS Action, a group that has met once a year since 2016 at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and as a result of a collective effort produced the MASS Action Toolkit.¹⁹ This toolkit is a manifestation of the group's commitment to make accessible new ways of advancing equity and re-envisioning museums as integrated, connected, and inclusive institutions. Janeen Bryant, a participant in "Museums and Race" and MASS Action stated,

Diversity and its oft-used counterpart inclusion . . . should always be coupled with measurable tactics and a clear strategy for change. Any recommendations for a 21st-century reality require adaptability and recognition that we are no longer sure of where our goal posts are day to day. As a field, our drive, purpose, and curiosity require us to define a way of working beyond assimilation to . . . actualizing what museums could be in the future.²⁰

Another collaborative effort is the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice created and led by Robert Janes, former director of Glenbow Museum in Calgary. The mission of the coalition is "Building museums' capacity to promote awareness, mitigation and resilience in the face of climate change."²¹ In a recent address at the Alberta Museums Association/Western Museums Association conference in Canada in 2017, Janes emphatically stated that the urgency for museums to take responsibility, and participate in addressing climate change, is now. Janes opines:

One challenge is the widely-held belief that museums must protect their neutrality, lest they fall prey to bias and special interest groups. The unspoken argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate their audiences or sponsors, real or potential. This claim of neutrality underlies the belief that museums may abstain from addressing societal issues, because they have complex histories and unique missions which absolve them from greater accountability.²²

In his address, he highlights two essential lessons from the LGBTQ community. The first is the need to have conversations about uncomfortable subjects, like queer rights and climate change, and the second is the need to focus on the *immorality of inaction*.²³

These examples of collaborations emerged because of inaction in the museum field evident by the avoidance of grappling with the issues of the day, and the uncomfortable reality of abdicating responsibility. The reality is that museums must change.

THE ROLE OF A RELEVANT MISSION

The role of a relevant mission is its alignment with the world in which it exists. A relevant and vibrant institution assumes a leadership position that befits who the museum is, where it is located, and its capacity to hit the right mark, role, and path forward. As the reader moves through the various chapters of this book, many more examples will be revealed with the goal of inspiring other museums to make a difference and enhance their impact.

This book presents a re-envisioned paradigm about missions and museums. The examples and discussions throughout this book highlight the need for inspired and visionary leaders who exhibit the highest level of humility and the courage to dismantle injurious, exclusionary, and outdated practices. The subsequent step is to reframe thinking, re-envision public engagement, and define an approach that makes a difference and by association becomes more relevant in this complex world.

Museums are in the intersection of choices. Choices about what the legacy of a museum will be. Choices about declaring why your museum matters. Choices about how to undertake the work that museums can uniquely do to make a difference. Choices about who the institution is really for and who it serves. Choices about how your museum and mission can impact change. Choices about how you will ensure that your museum remains relevant in the twenty-first century.

Take stock in the many visionary examples in this book and determine what courageous vision will be the legacy of your museum. Envision your museum as an integral player in your community, respond to issues that improve lives, and engage in ways that make your museum a contributor to a better world. The moment is now.

NOTES

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