Museum of the Future

White Paper

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MUSEUM CONUNDRUM

Recently my colleagues and I were discussing museums over lunch. We all have a passionate interest in museums of all kinds, to one degree or another. We each had a memory to share about a favorite exhibit, a particular artifact, or even a favorite display technique, but something else came up that was very intriguing. Although we pronounced our undying affection for museums of every type, none of us had actually been to one (as a guest) in months. In fact, as it turns out, this relatively diverse group of writers, producers, creative directors and artists, the so-called "interested" individuals who would seem to be the heartiest museum-goers, were all uniformly unenthused about the promise of a museum outing. Why?

We had the typical excuses: the museums are too hard to get to, the parking is a hassle, the price is too high, I can only go on the weekends when the crowds are bad. All of these are legitimate, but none of them so daunting that they would really keep us away if the museum were compelling enough.
And there's the rub—they just… aren't. The more we talked, the more we realized that generally museums aren't worth going out of our way for. In some cases, they aren't compelling enough to even warrant a spot on our recreational pastimes list (when discussing why we choose to go to museums when we do, one person replied, "When there's nothing better to do.").

In light of all other entertainments, museums seem slightly out of touch. Even the word "museum" feels archaic and dusty, like an invention from the 19th Century that has outlasted its usefulness. The word brings to mind the vaulted, marble-floored institutions filled with relics, sarcophagi and other musty dead things behind glass or encased in formaldehyde. This is the iconic Hollywood location; the "Museum of Antiquities" visited by characters ranging from Indiana Jones to Curious George. Of course, that image doesn't necessarily jive with the reality of today's museums, but even the edgy

architecture and the modern compulsion for Science Center interactivity cannot overcome our reluctance to go. We know it's good for us, but so is oatmeal.

Art museums, meanwhile, elicited off-putting visions of stark minimalism: lean, streamlined galleries with a hint of erudition that left us feeling cold and out of place: these galleries are for experts and aficionados, certainly, but not for lay folk. The art itself is beautifully displayed, typically, but in a surreal vacuum of context. In so many cases, the works are presented with a succinct text panel, with barely any room to share even the most compelling stories about the piece, its creator or of its time. This information is surprisingly hard to find; relegated to text on handouts or the monotonous banter of an audio tour.

TOO MUCH STATIC

While we have become increasingly spoiled by instantaneous access to information and entertainment literally at our fingertips, museum exhibits are frustratingly undynamic. The content is selected, processed and delivered down a one-way pipeline; typically, an authoritarian board chooses the content that they deem worthy of our consumption. The result is a museum that communicates through lectures, not dialogue, and there are few ways within the museum itself for guests to pose questions or explore tangential ideas that the exhibits might inspire.

We live in an age of instant gratification and information access. The Internet provides a boundless web of information over which we wield complete control. Type in any subject and in a keystroke you have hundreds of relevant links that let you dive as deep into content as you want; heck, you can even Wiki your own, creating new or modifying existing topics. As you do, you'll inevitably stumble across another topic that strikes your fancy, and off you go

on a whirlwind, stream-of-consciousness infosearch that could continue infinitely, if you so desire.

You don't even need a computer anymore! Hold an iPhone in the air and with a touch on the screen and the right app, you can find out the name of the song that is playing in the elevator, and what artist or artists recorded it. Take a picture of any product anywhere with the same iPhone and another app will "look" at the picture, identify the product and then scan the Internet for more details, including make, model and MSRP. With the tap of another button, you can download the song or order the product online (after price-comparing on multiple sites for the best value, of course). And with the advent of services like iTunes, TiVo and Netflix (along with home theater systems that rival the local Cineplex's), even television and the movies are at our beck and call.

IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

For better or worse, we've grown fond of this control. We are no longer content to simply follow the designated path the curator has delineated for us. We would like to carve our own path, using the museum exhibits as a jumping-off point for further investigation across many disciplines. The Internet continuously points the way to a slew of tangential topics in a make-believe cyberspace. How much more interesting would that exploration be within a dimensional, real-world environment? How might the museum exhibit its artifacts and also provide an opportunity to explore equally fascinating (and sometimes divergent) topics of our choosing?

Technological overlays could enhance the presentational nature of static exhibits and transform them into interactive research tools that put the guest in the driver's seat. Imagine a digital heads-up display, integrated into a clear display case or panel in front of an art piece. With gesture recognition hardware linked to a computer database, the art or artifact becomes the touch

point for multidisciplinary research. Through the display, the guest can explore not just the piece itself, but also the history of the object, the tools and techniques used to create it, the historical timelines that parallel its creation. With the wave of a hand, you could learn more about the artist, link to other works that have a significant connection, grab a virtual magnifying glass and drag it across the canvas to "see" the brushwork up close, or open video clips of experts and curators sharing interesting information about the item, and then record and share your own insights about the item for others to access.

Audio programs have become a ubiquitous part of the museum experience, but often they are simply dry recitations of facts and figures. These could be diversified to provide a unique point of view, to provoke a laugh, an epiphany or an opposing viewpoint. Imagine these audio devices featuring a selection of different voices, each providing their own personal and sometimes biting commentary. What if, instead of the faceless avuncular voice museum audio programs currently employ, we could hear Jon Stewart's take on this exhibit? Or David Sedaris's? Or the artwork creator's voice? Suddenly, each visit to the museum takes on a new personality and a new point of view that contrasts sharply with the last, leading guests to make their own conclusions and form their own opinions.

In this way, the audio track enhances the exhibit like the director's commentary on the bonus tracks of a motion picture DVD. Taken to the next logical conclusion, the audio commentary might be guest-created, with personal observations and Wikipedia-like modifications. Now the audio programs function like blog entries on the Internet, entries that are oftentimes more enjoyable than the articles themselves.

We're grownups, but we still want to play. To make this experience even more intriguing, involve storytelling, gaming and role-playing in exhibits.

Artifacts might be used as milestones in an intuitive, story-based challenge; an intellectual scavenger hunt, if you will, where the visitor is engaged as a researcher or investigator to search for hints, clues and cross-discipline links to solve a puzzle that unlocks another "level" of challenge, opens the portal to a hidden gallery, or even points the way out. Some of these hints might be as obvious as a big "X" on the floor. Some might appear as text-message "Tweets" on the guest's cell phone. They could even be built into the audio tour scripts, as whispered asides for you and you alone. Not all guests would receive the same information or in equal amounts, but if they get stumped, they can visit a public bulletin board (real and virtual), inviting visitors to collaborate and share their findings. Of course, these motivating conceits are fictional, like DaVinci's elusive "Code," but they provide a framework to embark on very real investigation (had regular people ever looked as closely at the *Mona Lisa* before Dan Brown's novel?). Not everyone will play along to the same degree, but the point here is to engage the audience at all. Give them a reason to explore, gather and share knowledge, and support the museum's mission almost as a side effect.

We want to touch things, turn them around, take them apart, see how they work. Play is an important learning tool for both children and adults, and museums should provide hands-on labs for grownups whenever possible. A computer and the Internet cannot provide the tactile experience of molding clay, smelling paint or carving wood, but the museum can. How about a working art studio, where we could slip on a smock and get a first-hand appreciation of art techniques like highlights and shadows, brushwork, color mixing and so on as we slather the paint or work the clay? It might be an adult-scale paleontology dig pit, with real equipment instead of sand pails and shovels. Or perhaps it is a kinetic physics lab, where we could create our own sculptures, build DaVinci's incredible machines, or play with light and sound. This wouldn't be just an assortment of science-center, touch-the-

button-interactives, but a working shop where we could deconstruct, analyze and touch the rudimentary components of the exhibit.

In a sense, the current museum model is turned on its head: the archives, workshops and libraries, the normally back-of-house spaces would all be available to the public for unlimited use, rather than the exclusive domain of the museum staff. This is an institute where the guest is the creator, researcher and arbiter of the museum's everchanging content. Not only would we go out of our way for that, we'd PAY for it too.

MUSEUM AS EVENT

Ultimately, we see a blending of all these programs and resources until the museum becomes the anchor and hub for a new entertainment, a multi-faceted and wide-ranging event, designed and directed by the museum, that immerses guests completely within the exhibit experience. The subjects of these events could be a single artwork, artifact (a White Star Lines dinner plate, say), even a significant date—1492, for example, or 1968. Imagine an art event that is anchored by a single work, but which allows you to explore your own path within multiple disciplines as defined by the work. The artwork is the catalyst for a totally unique, self-directed experience through a web of interconnected subjects… an "Inter Net," if you will.

Take Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Le Grand Jatte*, as an example. The work is on display, naturally, but surrounding the main piece are supporting, cross-discipline experiences that are unique, yet somehow linked to the original piece, through which you can freely roam. The evening begins with dinner in the restaurant surrounded by Seurat's other works while the artist himself (a performer, in this case) discusses their importance. Afterwards, you might step into Seurat's studio if you wish, don a smock and

get your hands dirty as you paint and begin to understand and appreciate "pointillism."

In the studio, you can see how the artist worked in a world without Photoshop and art supply stores. You might explore the chemistry paint and the colors Seurat used, how his canvases were framed and stretched, even how he made his own brushes.

Another hall then immerses you in a living history of the era, in a pub, perhaps surrounded by (and interacting with) the people depicted on the canvas. By talking with them, you learn their hopes, dreams and daily struggles, and see and explore the social influences under which the art was conceived. Through open discussion you can understand why this piece was created, what the artist was trying to say, what he was responding to culturally or politically. In yet another gallery, you could trace the evolution of the piece in previous and future works. How was the creation of this painting inevitable, and how has it transformed what came after? Who were the other great thinkers, creators and pioneers at the time of this piece's formation? In any case, the subject of the exhibit, whatever it may be, becomes impeccably relevant and indelibly memorable for the visitor.

Ultimately, we see the museum as a versatile destination with multiple uses. A sort of contemporary salon: a place where people can dine, sip coffee, read, share ideas, research, create. With a lush coffee shop or café at its core (that is interwoven with, not isolated from, the exhibits), this new museum would become a hang-out, a social and ideological gathering place, with a library, a theater, even a creative laboratory with accessible studios and workshops.

During our discussion, one of my colleagues blurted, "My God, we're inventing college!" Indeed, like a college campus, this museum provides a

safe haven for open discussion, exploration, invention and research, but this place would be available to students of every age, not just college kids.

OUT OF THE BOX

As we continued to explore these "what ifs," we almost simultaneously realized that we had yet to really smash the old museum model. We may have shaken up the contents of the box, but we hadn't yet taken them out of it. All of these previous notions assume that the museum is a separate institution located off the beaten path in its own separate and self-contained building. But why must the museum insist we go to it? Instead, what if the museum board thinks more like a retail developer: find a way to bring the museum to where the people already are?

There is no good reason for museums to assume the additional effort and expense to physically add restaurants, workshops, libraries and theaters to create a social hub, when these destinations already exist and are thriving. In the latter half of the 20th Century, Main Street gave way to the suburban shopping mall. Ironically, in the 21st century, the mall is ceding to the lifestyle center: destinations where shopping and entertainment (complete with green spaces, multi-use concert venues, even amusement rides) commingle to create a bustling place to see and be seen. These regional neighborhoods, with their residential condominiums and apartments hovering above retail stores, movies, restaurants, even bowling alleys, have become America's new Main Streets.

Museums would fit in this place as naturally as Starbucks.

To get things started, imagine a small gallery installed in a pre-existing retail space. While this could stand alone, this model would most often serve as a satellite to a museum's flagship institution. The museum extends its brand into

a franchise; not of stores, but a chain of exhibit galleries through which the museum's artifacts and programs would rotate. By inserting itself in a residential address that also happens to be a thriving commercial hub, the museum becomes an integral part of the neighborhood, where a visit to the gallery is as daily a routine as a grande latte.

In this location, the museum also has the opportunity to extend beyond its own gallery walls and provide a thematic overlay to the lifestyle center. Exhibits could become interwoven into the landscape and signage of the entire plaza, providing content while drawing guests to the facility at the same time.

IMAX theatres used to be the exclusive domain of museums, but not anymore. More and more studios are releasing large-format versions of their films (now in digital 3D!) and the IMAX experience is quickly becoming de rigueur at the local multiplex. Rather than compete with the studios, the IMAX could become a shared resource, showing the museum's short subjects during the day and early evening before transitioning to the feature films later on.

In this location, guests are not captives in the museum. With their membership or paid admission, they can enter and exit as often as they like during the day. They can browse the galleries at their leisure, in digestible chunks, and then take a break and discuss the content over a meal at an adjacent restaurant, bistro or coffee house, where still other exhibits are on display.

A NEW BOX

Now, here's the bigger picture. What if these museums weren't just an element in a lifestyle destination, but the signature anchor point of it; the central hub of activity that draws visitors to the location to the benefit of all the other tenants? Unlike the major department stores or movie multiplex that serves that role now, the new museum provides a multifaceted destination that

is comprised of a variety of attractions that appeal to a diverse audience. The museum features galleries and exhibits, but it also has a plush restaurant, a coffee house, theaters, lecture halls, workshops, and of course, a retail store in support of its core content.

This facility could be the size of a typical department store and similarly divided, not in departments, but in programming. The museum's retail store has a street-front presence that equally services the interior galleries and shops. The main entry atrium contains a casual coffee shop; a cyber-café, immersed in exhibits and information, that is immediately adjacent to the permanent and temporary "flex" galleries. There is a fine restaurant on site as well (with a full-service bar), along with theaters that can support movies, live performances and lectures. With integrated audiovisual equipment, all of these venues work together to host a film festival, a themed event "happening," or a Ted Talks-caliber lecture series.

But this is a working space, too. The museum includes a research library that is fully accessible (the café has an online component at each table). There is a practical art studio and working wood and metal shops that members can access (for a fee, of course) and use as their own studio. They can even obtain raw materials and art supplies through the museum store and use the shop tools to craft them into a finished piece.

Visitors will access the institution's offerings in whole or in part, but they all work as one to support the unified mission of the museum. By integrating the museum with the other adjacent programming of the retail center, museum-going becomes a daily practice and the lines separating education and entertainment are not just blurred, they are obliterated entirely. With its mix of social, creative and intellectual activity, the entire destination becomes a

campus for anyone at any age; the societal and cultural heart of today's bustling crossroads.

CHANGING TIMES

What museum staffs cannot forget, whether they like it or not, is that museum admissions are, in the eyes of the guest, entertainment dollars. The money they pull from their pocket to pay the entry fee comes out of an ever-dwindling discretionary budget, and though that entertainment dollar is limited, entertainment options are anything but. Never mind the lofty mission goals and educational standards; today's museum is competing directly with movies, theme parks, corporate brand experiences (e.g., The World of Coke, M&M's World, etc), nightclubs, and restaurants for a tiny share of that precious entertainment dollar. Rather than compete against these other offerings, we see museums collaborating with, intermingling among, and even perhaps branding them.

In these challenging economic times, when endowments are dwindling and promised contributions shrink or disappear entirely, the museum must begin to focus on the sure revenue stream: admissions. True, most museums generate less than 25% of their revenue from ticket sales, and the average visitor spends less than $1.00 on retail and food and beverages, but these are past statistics, not rules. Why not open a restaurant within the museum walls? Why not build a gallery smack in the middle of a retail hub? Why not aggressively pursue the visitor's entertainment dollar? This doesn't mean turning away from the institution's goals, but it does require creativity to find a way to achieve the mission within a new business plan, one that focuses on the desires and interests of the guest, and that means understanding, responding to and delivering on their expectations.