

Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

Peter Samis and
Mimi Michaelson



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Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

What does the transformation to a visitor-centered approach do for a museum? How are museums made relevant to a broad range of visitors of varying ages, identities, and social classes? Does appealing to a larger audience force museums to “dumb down” their work? What internal changes are required? Based on a multi-year, Kress Foundation–sponsored study of ten innovative American and European collections-based museums recognized by their peers to be visitor centered, Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson answer these key questions for the field. The book

- describes key institutions that have opened the doors to a wider range of visitors;
- addresses the internal struggles to reorganize and democratize these institutions;
- uses case studies, interviews of key personnel, Key Takeaways, and additional resources to help museum professionals implement a visitor-centered approach in collections-based institutions.

Peter Samis is Associate Curator of Interpretation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA. He previously spearheaded the museum’s award-winning Interactive Educational Technology programs for many years and also served as an Adjunct Professor on the Technology-Enhanced Communication for Cultural Heritage (TEC-CH) program at the University of Lugano, Switzerland.

Mimi Michaelson is an education and museum consultant. She received her doctorate in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard University, USA, where she also managed Project Zero’s Good Work project for many years.

“Objecthood doesn’t have a place in the world if there’s not an individual person making use of that object.”

—Olafur Eliasson

“*Only connect—*”

—E. M. Forster, epigraph to *Howard’s End*

Figure Acknowledgments

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of a shared question about what engages visitors in museums, raised many years ago when Peter and Mimi first met and spent hours debating this topic in the SFMOMA galleries. Since then, the ideas have evolved and we have enjoyed the support of many in the development of our thinking.

With a dare on the Washington, DC, Metro, Kris Wetterlund further sparked the book's growth; she and Christina Olsen then both introduced us to Max Marmor and the Kress Foundation as potential sponsors of research on "best practices in museum interpretation." Zahava Doering gave us hospitality and both she and Nancy Proctor gave us encouragement as we incubated our ideas and turned them into a proposal.

Inevitably, the topic transmuted as our research began: on the one hand, we came to understand that there was no one set of "best practices," but rather solutions best suited for particular audiences and situations. Secondly, our interviews with practitioners at museums nominated as sites of interpretive excellence revealed their consistent efforts to overcome an entrenched dynamic that ran through the field: the division between "curatorial scholarship" and "community relevance." Each institution we visited was committed to finding ways to bridge this gap, often reconfiguring staff and processes to turn that tension into a creative spark.

Our next set of thank yous goes to those museum practitioners—directors, curators, experience designers, project managers, evaluators, interpretive specialists, and many more—who sat with us and generously shared their goals and frustrations, war stories and success stories, internal processes, and pragmatic solutions. Everywhere we went we were amazed by how passionately these colleagues cared about what they did every day, and how committed they were to turning their institutions' mission statements into a tangible reality. A full list of those we interviewed is in Appendix A, but we take this opportunity to single out the museum directors:

Graham W. J. Beal, Detroit Institute of Arts
Ulrich Borsdorf, Ruhr Museum
Rick Erwin III, City Museum, St. Louis

Charles Esche, Van Abbe Museum
Lori Fogarty, Oakland Museum of California
Christoph Heinrich, Denver Art Museum
Adam Lerner, Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver
Nannette Maciejunes, Columbus Museum of Art
Mark O'Neill, Glasgow Life (former Director of Kelvingrove)
Dan Spock, Minnesota History Center

These directors welcomed us, even at the risk of exposing sometimes conflictual internal processes, the better to advance visitor-centered practice in the field as a whole.

Readers of an earlier version of this manuscript gave us crucial insights that led to its reshaping: our thanks go to Deena Chalabi, Randi Korn, Dana Mitroff Silvers, and Susan Rome. Many others served, wittingly or un-, as discussants on specific points.

For immeasurably improving our manuscript, we are also indebted to Carla Sinz, who deftly wielded her editor's pen.

Of course, none of this would have happened without the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, which underwrote Mimi's work on the project as well as the research and interviews that form the heart of this book. A Kress Summer Fellowship in Museum Education at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute enabled us to come together from our bi-coastal locations in a bucolic New England setting to hash out lessons learned and the chapter structure. Finally, a Kress subsidy is allowing Routledge to print this book in color. Our thanks to Max Marmor, Wyman Meers, Lisa Schermerhorn, the Kress Foundation Board and staff are deep; we only hope the product proves a worthy contribution to the field and repays their trust.

Our hosts and colleagues in the Visiting Scholars program at The Clark added another essential dimension to this book's formative journey, including in-depth seminar discussions with scholar-curators about how museums might live up to their full public mandate. In Europe, Dr. Harald Kraemer shared his vision at museum sites that emphasized the primacy of perception.

We owe a debt of thanks to our fiscal sponsors: the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Museum-Ed. SFMOMA has been consistently supportive of Peter's involvement in this project, giving him work-related leave for research, writing, and the Clark residency. Special thanks go to Neal Benezra, Ruth Berson, and Chad Coerver. Museum-Ed picked up the torch and helped us carry this manuscript to publication. This book could not have happened without the ongoing support of both entities.

Speaking of support close to home, on a more personal level, each of us owes a great debt to our spouses: Peter's life partner Mary Curtis Ratcliff and Mimi's husband Brian Dowley. They have truly been our coaches: patient, steadfast, encouraging us to stay the course to reach our goal. They could well be called the champions of this sometimes challenging, jointly authored manuscript.

On a personal note, Peter wishes to thank his 92-year-old mother, still alive, who taught him the love of art, and his father, now deceased, who inculcated the ethos of community service. Speaking of community, he sends a shout-out to the *barristas* of Berkeley, witnesses to his many weekend and late-night writing sessions!

Mimi remains grateful for the foundational teachings offered by early mentors: Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Bill Damon; as well as for the lessons gleaned about the arts, research and thinking from Shari Tishman and other colleagues at Project Zero. Mimi also sends a nod to Michael, Charlie, Luke, and Malcolm, as they continue to remind her of the importance of youthful perspectives.

This book wouldn't have happened without Mitch Allen of Left Coast Press, our originating editor. His sage counsel and conviction that the book had an important place in the museum literature kept us going through all the iterations of the manuscript. Ryan Harris did the early production work, preparing text and images for Routledge. At Routledge, we have worked with Elizabeth Thomasson and Anna Callander, and Katherine Wetzel of Apex CoVantage has managed the production process. Our thanks to all involved!

Now that the book is done, its life truly begins. We hereby acknowledge you, our readers, fellow practitioners, and your dedication to making our museums worthy sites of community meaning-making, experience, and exchange.

Note: Graham Beal and Ulrich Borsdorf have retired since the interviews conducted for this book.

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Part One

Introduction

Setting the Stage

Replete with their own histories and missions, museums come with varied stories and metaphors. From treasure chest to learning lab, museums mean different things to different people. This is not a new story, nor a stagnant one. In fact, diversity of purpose and institutional change go hand in hand as natural parts of cultural evolution, leading to innovation in the field. It is not surprising that museums around the world are again changing, this time with many in transition toward a more visitor-centered future. What this visitor-centered change looks like and what the players reveal about the process provides the substance of our story. In the pages that follow we share a glimpse of some of the transformations we have witnessed and the voices of those leading the way.

I don't think museums, as they have existed and existed for a hundred years are going to survive if they don't make changes—even with billionaires on the board, even with some of the huge resources that some institutions have.¹

These are the words of a well-respected museum director talking about the inevitability of change in today's museums. Directors, many of whom have worked in the field for decades, spoke with us about dramatic transitions currently taking place. Talking about how museums need to evolve to stay relevant, the director continues:

I really do think that if they are going to be vital—you know, they may be able to survive financially, but will they truly be sustainable within their communities, as places that are really connected to their community? It's going to be a reality that there are going to have to be some changes.

As the director notes, many of the transitions have to do with museums reaching out to the community—to visitors and potential visitors—in new and authentic ways. While the degree may vary, in some cases the modifications are dramatic, involving a fundamental reconsideration of mission and

2 Introduction

how the museum itself is structured. Everyone connected to the museum is potentially impacted—both visitors and staff alike.

These kinds of transformations inevitably give rise to a debate that places museum directors, curators, exhibition designers, and educators at center stage in a dialogue about audience. Ultimately, the debate is focused on bringing to life the notion of a visitor-centered museum: a museum where audience matters as much as collections. As one interviewee said: “We have to keep reevaluating: Who’s our audience and what do they need from us?” For a visitor-centered museum, these questions are the starting point of all museum business.

In this book we explore aspects of this ongoing debate. We begin with the premise that the debate is good, an inevitable part of a process that moves everyone forward. We don’t suggest that change is easy, but do endorse the idea that the challenge is worthwhile. We also believe that the current focus—a new audience-centered paradigm—is here to stay. This new vantage point carries other essential elements with it, including the need to honor multiple voices and multiple sources of knowledge. Furthermore, to meet the variety of needs that come with a more diverse public, an array of approaches or “entry points” is vital.

We understand that the term “visitor-centered” is sometimes highly charged. On the one hand, it can represent a banner and rallying cry for educators who interact daily with visitors and see missed opportunities for connection with the public. On the other hand, that banner can turn into a red flag for curators, who fear that it may mean they need to let visitors define the messages—and even the exhibitions—they present. That is not our intent here. What we do suggest is that understanding where visitors are coming from helps us understand how to engage them in a dialogue that is meaningful to all. It allows us to connect with our audience even as we honor the expertise of museum professionals, including curators, educators, designers, et al. We use the term “visitor-centered” because we believe visitors are a population that museums have historically been happier to speak to than to listen to—and that real two-way communication is what visitors deserve.

In the pages that follow, we present examples of innovative visitor-centered practice and museums in transition. These two threads—visitor-centered interpretation and museum change—form the foundation of this book.

The Study

What does it mean for a museum of art or history to really be visitor centered? With the generous support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, five years ago we began a study to address this question. We visited twenty museums, studying ten of those institutions in depth: seven in the United States and three in Europe. The museums were chosen following a query sent to more than fifty colleagues in the United States and Europe soliciting nominations for examples of innovative visitor-centered practice. Colleagues were