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CAN MUSEUMS REALLY CHANGE?

By Paul Orselli

If someone you knew and cared about (like a relative or a mentee) asked whether they should pursue a career in museums right now, what would you say?

Personally, I would have trouble encouraging someone to go into museum work at this moment in time. Like many folks whose livelihood depends on museums, I am watching in dismay as thousands lose their jobs, and COVID-19 lays bare so many existing weaknesses and inequities inherent in current museum practices and management structures.

What needs to change for museums? My short and snarky answer is "EVERYTHING!" Museums have many unsettled tactical issues concerning worker pay, organizational structures, and community engagement that have been festering for years. But my suggestions for a "new era" of museums involve specific actions, rather than the endless talking and meetings that seem to have substituted for actions in so many museums over the years.

What if we looked at the COVID pandemic as an opportunity, a cosmic "reset button" of sorts, a set of events that

has gifted us the one commodity every museum person truly values: **TIME**. Time to reset and change things that are holding the museum field back from becoming the meaningfully diverse and accessible and sustainable field it should be already.

But to use this time to create real change, museums can't follow their standard game plan of tinkering around the edges of problems and advocating for "incremental" change. What is needed now for museums is systemic change. To quote business strategist Seth Godin from his recent blog post, entitled "When can we talk about our systems?" (<https://seths.blog/2020/09/when-can-we-talk-about-your-system/>)

"It's comfortable to ignore the system, to assume it is as permanent as the water surrounding your goldfish. But the fact that we have these tactical problems is all the evidence we need to see that something is causing them and that spending time on the underlying structure could make a difference.

In a crisis, there's maximum attention. And in a crisis, we

often discard any pretense of caring about systems and resilience and focus only on how to get back to normal. This is precisely why normal is what normal is, because we fight to get back to it.

Changing the system changes everything. And it might be even less work than pouring water on today's tactical emergency."

STAFF > STUFF

One of the first ways museums could begin to become more genuinely people-centered (instead of merely talking about it via their social media accounts) is to clearly prioritize staff over "stuff." This requires museum management and boards and museum organizations to act as if they care more for the people working at a museum than museum collections or buildings. (Of course, you need trained staff to care for collections and facilities properly, but that's an entirely different story).

Pay continues to be the most significant ongoing issue in the museum world. It is wrong, if not downright immoral, to hire someone for full-time work at a museum and to knowingly pay them less than a living wage. And many museum workers are woefully and deliberately underpaid.

Let's pause here to acknowledge that many museum administrators are master rationalizers and can spin stories to justify some of their staff needing to work one (or more!) jobs in addition to their full-time museum employment to make ends meet. So rather than relying on someone's rosy notion of what a "living wage" means in different parts of the country, why not use a common yardstick? Fortunately, MIT has developed a free Web-based Living Wage Calculator (<https://livingwage.mit.edu/>) that anyone can use to determine what a living wage means in different parts of the U.S. All museums should commit to offering their employees a living wage. "Commit" in this instance does not mean instantly changing wage scales, but it does mean making sincere and timely progress toward the needed systemic changes.

One additional item contributing to depressed and inadequate salaries in the museum sector is Salary Masking. Salary masking means deliberately hiding the salary range for any given job. Not showing the salary range in job postings is archaic and inequitable. So why do we keep doing it? (Check out this excellent blog post from Vu Le that goes into more details: <http://bit.ly/SalaryMasking>).

There are many excuses for not indicating salary ranges with job postings, but that's all that they are – excuses! Fortunately, most museum organizations require that salary ranges be included on job listings. The few remaining

museum orgs <cough> AAM <cough> that enable salary masking should join the rest of the museum world and change this inequitable practice. Please join the National Emerging Museum Professionals Network in encouraging Museum Associations' hosting job boards to consider changing their posting requirements for job openings by mailing or emailing a letter to the Museum Associations you are a member of or your State Museum Association. You can find out more at the National EMP website: <https://nationalempnetwork.org/salary-range-on-museum-job-postings-letter-writing-campaign/>.

Suppose museums don't (or won't) commit to paying decent wages and providing more job security. In that case, museum workers will begin to take their own actions, which is undoubtedly responsible for the recent burst of museum unionization efforts. Also, the founding of the Museum Workers Relief Fund (<https://sites.google.com/view/museumworkersspeak/home>) is predicated on the notion that:

"It has become clear to us that when our institutions will not stand in solidarity with us, we must stand in solidarity with one another."

FLATTEN THE ORG CHART!

The traditional "top-down" hierarchical business structures of most museums contribute to the isolation of museum departments and functions. Instead of creating collaborators moving toward common goals, most museum org charts create multi-level "silos" that compete for limited resources – often pulling in different directions. Front-line and public-facing museum workers often feel that decisions handed down from the "higher-ups" are arbitrary or "out of touch" with the operational realities of running the museum.

Worse yet, museum employees facing severe issues such as the reported instances of sexual harassment or even physical abuse(!) from managers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art were routinely ignored or dismissed, (<https://hyperallergic.com/579531/philadelphia-museum-of-art-concludes-workplace-assessment-after-allegations-of-abuse/>).

The museum management hierarchy simply sought to protect itself. Hierarchical structures in museums also contribute to pay inequities across departments. Shouldn't the roles of Education, Exhibits, and Development departments be viewed as equally important to museums' purpose and function, and therefore compensated equitably?

Museums can systemically change staffing and management approaches by "flattening" their org charts and promoting workers' and departments' true interdependency.

What would a museum system built on self-organization principles look like in practice? At its core, “self-management” means knowing what you are responsible for and having the freedom to meet those expectations however you think is best. “Self-organization” is being able to make changes to improve things - beyond what is required of you. Simple in theory, but everyone has to truly commit for it to work!

Examples from the for-profit world include the company Zappos, which details the approach it took in successfully changing to a form of a self-organizing structure called a “Holacracy” in this Web article: <https://www.zapposinsights.com/about/holacracy>.

Changes in museums often come at a glacial pace. Since many people benefit from the “status quo” of current museum organizational structures, the notion of self-organization may seem difficult to accept and implement. However, if we are genuinely interested in exploring needed systemic changes in the museum world, changes in existing dysfunctional organizational structures need to be seriously considered.

COMMUNITIES AS TRUE CREATIVE PARTNERS

Whose stories are museums telling, and who is visiting museums to experience the exhibits, programs, and events related to those stories? As researchers like Susie Wilkening have shown (<http://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/danta-stories.html>), museum visitors are concerned about race and science issues, but can museums provide what their communities want and need – and in a timely way?

There are large groups of people that museums are simply not reaching. Visitors to cultural arts organizations, including museums, continue to trend older and whiter than

the demographic directions the U.S. general population is heading.

How can museums counteract the notion that “museums are not for me”? I would contend that rather than trying only to tell people stories, museums also need to engage with their communities as real creative partners. That way, museums no longer become the only authorities and sole judges of the value of certain stories over others. This systemic shift to co-creation with communities may well upset museums with a “Curators Uber Alles” approach, but the realities of demographics point in a different direction. An excellent example of a museum that sought to reinvent itself with a more community and visitor-centric approach is the Oakland Museum of California (<https://museumca.org/>). A free PDF of a book outlining their work, “How Visitors Changed Our Museum” is available through the OMCA website: <https://museumca.org/files/HowVisitorsChangedOurMuseumBook.pdf>.

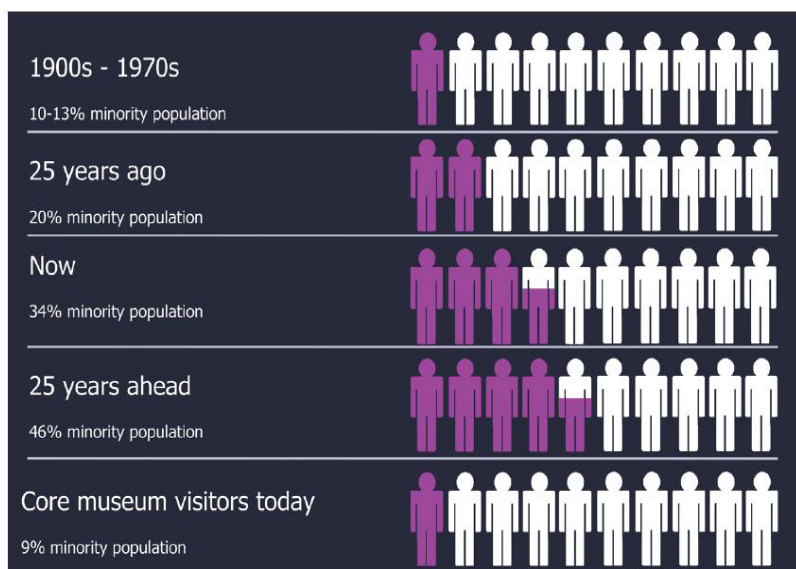
Another way museums could become more community-minded is to foster more cooperation and resource-sharing *between* museums in the same geographic area. A great example of exactly this kind of local cooperation is the Chattanooga Museums Collaborative: <https://www.nten.org/article/sharing-back-offices-in-the-cloud-the-case-of-the-chattanooga-museums-collaborative/>.

Aside from the occasionally shared admission discount scheme or advertisement cost-sharing, most museums seem committed to doing everything independently from their institutional neighbors. Perhaps the crushing economic realities brought on by the pandemic will encourage a broader systemic notion of cooperation between local museums in all sizes in all ways – from co-created exhibitions and programs to shared ordering systems. Let’s work together to succeed, rather than trying to limp along alone because of some misplaced ideas about institutional pride or independence.

MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Given the continuing mismatch between cultural institutions’ operational needs and the available funding sources; the COVID-19 crisis has made even more evident the weak financial positions of so many museums.

This raises a sort of “museum lifeboat” question – should unsustainable museums be allowed (or even encouraged) to go out of business so they



Source: Reach Advisors analysis of census data and survey data.

Figure 1: Contrast between US population changes and current museum visitorship (via AAM).

don't take away limited resources from more vital institutions? This is a tricky proposition since many museums really can't survive without constant (if erratic) infusions of cash from both private and governmental sources.

The long-term systemic solution here is to create reliable public funding streams for all museums through political pressure, both at the local and national levels. We should support and vote for politicians that view museums as necessary to civic life as libraries, police stations, or garbage trucks. A politician that continually tries to eliminate organizations like IMLS, NEH, and NEA is no friend to museums.

More systemic public funding of cultural organizations would also reduce the dependence of museums on wealthy donors and reduce the systemic and ethical dilemmas caused by balancing selling objects from the collections versus preventing the firing of staff -- which brings us back to "staff versus stuff" again. Although in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, "stuff" seems to be winning the battle -- if you consider examples such as the Museum of Modern Art (with an endowment of over one billion dollars) terminating every single contract of all 85 of its freelance educators in April 2020, or the Royal Academy in the U.K. that is refusing to sell one Michelangelo statue to save the jobs of nearly 150 museum workers in September 2020.

LEAVING THE "NUMBERS GAME" BEHIND

Ultimately, to change the current museum "system," we need to leave the "numbers game" behind.

The notion that admissions numbers are an accurate measure of a museum's worth or a way to measure the value of a museum visit to a visitor may be a more severe sickness impacting the museum world than even COVID-19. Randi Korn's book, *Intentional Practice for Museums: A Guide for Maximizing Impact*, offers meaningful alternatives to the museum admissions figures "numbers game."

Many museums leaders and boards continue to be deluded by an "edifice complex." The reckless rush to build larger and grander new museums without considering whether we can sustain those new buildings has to stop. If we cannot sustain (parse that word in as many ways as you like) existing museums worldwide, should we really be adding to the number of new museums?

Lastly, we need to consider more carefully how to disrupt

the current system regarding the limited number of museum jobs. Should we keep pumping out more and more museum studies and museum design graduates (often burdened with significant education debt) with little hope of them gaining full-time employment in a museum? It is no accident that the focus of AAM's TrendsWatch 2020 is "The Future of Financial Sustainability" (<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/trendswatch-2020/>).

BACK TO THE HARD QUESTION(S)

All of the challenges and possible systemic solutions highlighted above bring us back to the original question: Can Museums ***Really*** Change?

Can we bring the required sense of urgency and the necessary hard decisions to the tasks ahead? Museums have talked a great game for years (even decades!) about systemic inequities and failings in the museum field -- often with little, if any, real change. The current moment requires not just talk but timely, and creative, actions.

Are we prepared to leave people behind (whether directors, board members, or staff) who cannot evolve and adapt to the changes needed in the museum field? No matter how much you like an individual personally, or how well they may have fit their role in the past, sometimes folks just don't grow along with your organization. And then it only deepens the pain to delay conversations about moving on.

Perhaps everyone in the museum field should take a lesson from the dinosaur skeletons on display in so many of our institutions -- if you don't adapt, you will surely become extinct!

Paul Orselli has been causing trouble in the museum business for nearly 40 years, most recently as the Chief Instigator of the museum exhibit development and design company, POW! (Paul Orselli Workshop, Inc.) Visit the POW! website: www.orselli.net and the POW! YouTube page: www.youtube.com/c/PaulOrselliWorkshopInc to find out more about Paul and his work.