

From being about something to being for somebody: The ongoing transformation of the American museum

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AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, the American museum notwithstanding the ringing educational rhetoric with which it was originally established and occasionally maintained-had become primarily engaged in what my Washington colleague Barbara Franco once called the "salvage and warehouse business."² It took as its basic tasks to gather, preserve, and study the record of human and natural history. To the extent that some further benefit might be generated by providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the collections and information thus accumulated, that was simply a plus.

Fifty years later, caught up in the confluence of two powerful currents-one flowing throughout the worldwide museum community, the other specific to the United States-the American museum is being substantially reshaped. In place of an establishment-like institution focused primarily inward on the growth, care, and study of its collection, what is emerging instead is a more entrepreneurial institution that-if my own vision of its ultimate form should prove correct-will have shifted its principal focus outward to concentrate on providing a variety of primarily educational services to the public, and will measure its success in that effort by the overarching criterion of whether it is actually able to provide those services in a demonstrably effective way.

This prognostication makes no distinction between museums and museum-like institutions in terms of their funding sources, scale, or discipline. It applies equally to a large statewide historical society, a campus-based natural history museum, and a small private art gallery. The situation of the so-called private museum requires particular mention. Even the most ostensibly private of American museums-through the combined effects of its own tax exemption and the charitable contribution deductions claimed by its donors-receives a substantial measure of public support. Given the nature of that support, such private museums must inevitably be expected not only to provide a level of public service comparable to that required of so-called public institutions but also to maintain the standards of accountability and transparency appropriate to such public institutions.

Among workers in the field, the response to this ongoing change in the museum's focus has been mixed. Some number-- a minority, certainly-view it with distress. They argue that the museum-if not at the height of its salvage and warehouse days, then not long thereafter-was already a mature, fully evolved, and inherently good organization in no compelling need of further change. Particularly troublesome, in their view, would be to tamper with the centrality of the collection-even to entertain the notion that the collection might no longer serve as the museum's *raison d'etre* but merely as one of its resources.

Another and far larger group of museum workers-including several contributors to this issue of *Daedalus*-is sympathetic to the museum's evolution from a collection-based organization to a more educationally focused one but nevertheless tends to retreat from making institutional effectiveness so exclusive a test of institutional failure or success. Characterizing the museum as analogous in some measure to the university, they argue that the traditional museum activities of preservation (which may include collecting), interpretation (which may include exhibiting), and-above all-scholarly inquiry are not merely instrumental steps toward an ultimately external outcome but are activities that should also be valued in their own right-as ends as well as means. From that moderate position, they nevertheless share with this author the vision of an emerging new museum model-a transformed and redirected institution that can, through its public-service orientation, use its very special competencies in dealing with objects to contribute positively to the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities. Acknowledgedly vague as those purposes may at first appear, so multifarious are the potential outcomes of which this emerging museum is capable that to be any more specific than "quality of life" or "communal well-being" would be unnecessarily exclusive.

Finally, at the other extreme, are those museum workers who question whether the museum truly is an inherently good

organization (or whether it has any inherent qualities at all) and whether the traditional museum activities of preservation, interpretation, and scholarship have any real value in a museum context apart from their capacity to contribute to an outcome external to the museum itself. Rejecting any analogy with a university, they argue that museum work might better be understood instead as a basically value-neutral technology and the museum itself as neither more nor less than a highly adaptable instrument that can be employed for a wide range of purposes.

This essay considers the American museum from this last point of view, both examining the currents that now press against it as well as suggesting several possibly unanticipated consequences that may well follow in the wake of those currents. It is based on the twin premises that, first, those pressures now reshaping the museum will continue unabated for the foreseeable future, and, second, that in yielding to those pressures nothing innate or vital to the museum will be lost or even compromised. As Adele Z. Silver of the Cleveland Museum of Art wisely observed some twenty years ago: ". . . museums are inventions of men [sic], not inevitable, eternal, ideal, nor divine. They exist for the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use those things."³

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International, Kenneth Hudson—perhaps the museum community's most astute observer—wrote:

. . . the most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half-century . . . is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. It was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came to look, to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors.⁴

Among the several factors to which Hudson points in seeking to account for this change is the enormous increase during the postwar period in both the number and the magnitude of museums. By his count, at least three-quarters of the world's currently active museums were established after 1945. In no way has the level of direct governmental assistance to these museums kept pace with that growth. In some countries it has remained stagnant; in others—the United States, for one—its vigorous growth in the 1960s and 1970s has been followed by an actual decline. The result, almost worldwide, has been the same: to change the mix in the sources of support for museums with a decrease in the proportion coming directly from governmental sources and a corresponding increase in the proportion that must be found elsewhere.

It seems clear, at the most elementary level, that the greater the degree to which a museum must rely for some portion of its support on "box office"—not merely entrance fees but also the related income streams to be derived from shop sales and other auxiliary activities—the greater will be its focus on making itself attractive to visitors. Likewise, the greater the extent to which a museum might seek corporate funding—most particularly funding for its program activities—the more important it will be that the museum can assure prospective sponsors that its programs will attract a wide audience. Under such circumstances, it should hardly be surprising that museums are increasingly conscious of what might be of interest to the public. The consequence is that museums almost everywhere have, in essence, shifted from a "selling" mode to a "marketing" one. In the selling mode, their efforts had been concentrated on convincing the public to "buy" their traditional offerings. In the marketing mode, their starting point instead is the public's own needs and interests, and their efforts are concentrated on first trying to discover and then attempting to satisfy those public needs and interests.

Hudson argues, however—and correctly, I think—that something more profound than mere box-office appeal is involved in this change of focus. He suggests that the museum's growing preoccupation with its audience may be attributable as well to the tremendous increase of professionalism within the museum community during the postwar years. The impact of that development—and, as a principal consequence, the equally tremendous growth in the scale and influence of a great variety of professional associations—should not be underestimated. The policy positions taken by those professional associations—and the insistent repetition of those policies over time—have played a particularly compelling part in shaping the mind-set and

expectations of both new practitioners in the field and the larger public beyond. As the sociologists Walter W. Powell and Rebecca Friedkin point out in their analysis of the sources of change in public-service organizations, beyond such changes in focus as may be attributable to changes in the sources of an organization's support-for museums, the box-office factor-- institutional change may frequently represent "a response to shifts in the ideology, professional standards, and cultural norms of the field or sector in which an organization is situated."⁵

That would appear to be the case for the museum. A broad range of national and local professional organizations have played important ideological roles in reshaping the American museum. Earliest among these was the Washington-based American Association of Museums (AAM), founded in 1906 as something of a parallel to the United Kingdom's Museums Association, which dates back to 1889. Narrower in focus but also with considerable impact have been the more recently established Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) and the Association of Youth Museums (AYM). Of perhaps lesser consequence for the American museum-but of enormous influence elsewhere-has been the International Council of Museums (ICOM). More or less descended from the International Museums Office founded under the auspices of the League of Nations in 1927, ICOM was established in 1946 as a UNESCO-- affiliated Non-Governmental Organization and is headquartered in Paris.

The publications and program activities of these associations amply document the degree to which, over the past several decades, they have changed their emphasis from collections and collections' care to public service. Within the AAM, for example, that shift can be directly attributed to the growing influence that museum educators have exercised over the association's public-policy positions. That influence can be traced on an ascending curve beginning in June of 1973 when a group of prominent museum educators threatened to secede from the organization. In June of 1976-as a gesture of conciliation-a change in the AAM's constitution granted a committee of educators together with other disciplinary groups a role in the association's governance. With the publication of *Museums for a New Century* in 1984, education was declared to be a "primary" purpose of museums.⁶ This upward curve reached its zenith in May of 1991 when the association's governing board adopted the educator-prepared position paper *Excellence and Equity* as an official statement of the association's policy.⁷ Woven throughout *Excellence and Equity* are the linked propositions that a commitment to public service is "central to every museum's activities" and that "education-in the broadest sense of that word-[is] at the heart of their public service role."⁸

A similar shift of focus can be traced in the AAM's program of institutional accreditation, which was first proposed in 1968 and which became operational in 1971. In its earliest phase, accreditation was primarily concerned with how an institution cared for its collection and maintained its facilities. With the passage of time, the scope of accreditation has steadily broadened to consider not only the institutional care of collections but also, as importantly, the programmatic use of those collections. Consider the contrast between the types of concern expressed in the AAM's first accreditation handbook of 1970 and in its most recent one, published in 1997. In the 1970 publication, among the positive traits that might support a museum's accreditation were the avoidance of "crude or amateurish" exhibits, evidence that exhibit cases were dust- and vermin-- proof, and a showing that the exhibits themselves were "selected to serve [some] purpose and not just [as] `visible storage.'"⁹ Regarding special exhibitions, it suggested that the better practice was to offer exhibitions that appealed to the interest of the general public and not simply to that of an "antiquarian or dilettante" audience. In the AAM's 1997 publication, the emphasis shifted entirely. Suggested areas of inquiry include whether the "museum effectively involves its audiences in developing public programs and exhibitions," whether it "effectively identifies and knows the characteristics of its existing and potential audiences," and whether it "effectively evaluates its programs and exhibitions" in terms of their audience impact.¹⁰

Contrasting quotations from two other AAM publications may suggest how far the rhetoric-if not yet all of the operational practices-of the museum community has evolved during this period. Those responsible for the 1968 Belmont Report-a mostly forgotten document that was once thought (wrongly, in the event) to offer an irrefutable argument for the increased federal funding of American museums-were certainly aware that "education" would prove the most likely heading under which such increased funding could be justified.¹¹ They nevertheless seemed reluctant to relinquish entirely the kind of oldfashioned satisfaction ("pleasure and delight") that museum collections were traditionally thought to provide. "Art museums," they explained,

.. . aim to provide the esthetic [sic] and emotional pleasure which great works of art offer. This is a primary purpose of an art museum. It is assumed that a majority of the people who come regularly to art museums come to be delighted, not to be taught, or preached at, or "improved" except by the works of art themselves. An art museum, especially, is-or ought to be-a place where one goes to get refreshed.¹²

Never adequately explained in the Belmont Report was why so much refreshment (particularly in the case of the art museum where that refreshment was disproportionately consumed by the more affluent members of society) should properly be provided at public rather than private expense.

The escalation in rhetoric is suggestive. Over three decades, what the museum might be envisioned as offering to the public has grown from mere refreshment (the museum as carbonated beverage) to education (the museum as a site for informal learning) to nothing short of communal empowerment (the museum as an instrument for social change). Describing the growth of museums in rural Brazilian communities seeking to discover their roots and preserve a unique history, Maria de Lourdes Horta wrote in a 1997 AAM publication:

A museum without walls and without objects, a true virtual museum, is being born in some of those communities, which look in wonder to their own process of self-discovery and recognition.... For the moment, in my country, [museums] are being used in a new way, as tools for self-expression, self-recognition, and representation; as spaces of power negotiation among social forces; and as strategies for empowering people so that they are more able to decide their own destiny.¹³

ICOM, like the AAM, has put an increasing emphasis on the active public-service role of museums. Going still further, however, it has advanced toward a view-similar to that from Brazil-that museums can play a particularly powerful role in bringing about social change. To some extent, that conviction has grown almost in tandem with the number of developing countries included within its membership base. Given that fact, as well as its ongoing relationship with UNESCO, ICOM's current emphasis on social activism must be understood as more than simply a passing phase. It clearly permeates virtually every aspect of ICOM, beginning even with its membership requirements. Unlike the AAM, which continues to use a more traditional approach that defines museums primarily in terms of their activities-to present essentially educational programs that use and interpret objects for the public-ICOM's statutes were amended in 1974 to redefine eligible museums as those that have among their characteristics the purpose of serving (in an earlier iteration) "the community" or (in ICOM's current definition) "society and . . . its development."¹⁴

Among the clearest articulations of ICOM's evolving position was a resolution adopted by the membership at its ninth General Conference in 1971. Rejecting as "questionable" what it called the "traditional concept of the museum" with its emphasis "merely" on the possession of objects of cultural and natural heritage, the conference urged museums to undertake a complete reassessment of the needs of their publics in order that they, the museums, could "more firmly establish their educational and cultural role in the service of mankind." Rather than prescribing any monolithic approach to this task, individual museums were urged to develop programs that addressed the "particular social environment[s] in which they operated."¹⁵

At a meeting held in San Jose, Costa Rica, in April of 1998, organized by the AAM in collaboration with a number of ICOM's national and other committees-what is referred to as the first summit of the museums of the Americas-the proposition that museums might play a useful role in social development was taken still a step further. By way of a three-tiered finding that amounted, in effect, to a syllogism, the 150 delegates representing 33 Western countries took the position that the museum was not merely a potential or desirable instrument for sustainable social advancement but, in effect, an essential one. The logic of that position went as follows:

First, sustainable development is a process for improving the quality of life in the present and the future, promoting a balance between environment, economic growth, equity and cultural diversity, and requires the participation and empowerment of all individuals; second, culture is the basis of sustainable development; and third (and, in effect, ergo), museums are essential in the protection and diffusion of our cultural and natural heritage.¹⁶

This is the first of the two currents that are today pushing the American museum out of the salvage, warehouse, and

soda-pop business and toward a new line of work. It is powered both by economic necessity-the box-office factor-and by the museum field's changing ideology as transmitted not only through such major professional associations as the AAM, ASTC, AYM, and ICOM but through countless smaller ones as well. It is coupled with the reality that for many of the more recently founded museums in newly populous parts of this country it will never be possible-whether because of scarcity-driven market prices, international treaties and export/import controls, or endangered species and similar legislation-to amass the kinds of in-depth and universal collections that were built many years ago by the longer-established institutions. For those older museums, public service may nevertheless be their more viable future. For younger ones, though, with neither important collections now nor any great prospect of ever acquiring these, public service may be their only future.

II

The second current pushing against the American museum is a local one. Its source is in the not-for-profit or so-called third sector of this country's economy, the organizational domain to which a majority of its museums belong and by which all of them are profoundly influenced. Comprised of well over one million organizations-museums account for less than 1 percent of these-and generally estimated to include something on the order of 7 percent of the nation's wealth, jobs, and economic activity, the third sector itself is in the midst of a profound change as to how it evaluates the relative funding worthiness of its constituent organizations. Increasingly, the principal emphasis of such evaluations is being put on organizational performance, on the kinds of results that an organization can actually achieve.

The genesis of this change may be found in the long-simmering sense that the managers of both governmental agencies and third-sector organizations-lacking in common the reality checks of a competitive marketplace as well as the operational discipline required to demonstrate consistent profitability-have rarely been required to apply their resources with the same effectiveness and efficiency that would be demanded of them in a for-profit context.¹⁷ In the case of federal government agencies, the Congress's desire to assure greater effectiveness has now culminated in the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which was passed with strong bipartisan support in 1993 and which will become fully effective in 2000. GPRA requires every federal agency to establish-preferably in objective, quantifiable, and measurable terms-specific performance goals for each of its programs and then to report annually to the Congress on its success in meeting those goals. For the third sector, where nothing so draconian as GPRA has yet to be proposed, this new emphasis on organizational performance nevertheless constitutes a sharp break with past practice.

Two recent events can be singled out as having further accelerated this growing emphasis on performance. One was the development of the "social-enterprise" model of third-sector organizations by Professor J. Gregory Dees at Harvard Business School.¹⁸ The other was the development and advocacy by the United Way of outcome-based evaluation as the appropriate means by which to evaluate the effectiveness of the health and human-service agencies to which it provides funds.¹⁹

The impact of Dees's social-enterprise model can best be understood by considering some of the ways in which third--sector organizations have previously been viewed. As recently as the end of World War II-a time when museums were still in their establishment stage and when survival (as contrasted with accomplishment) was widely accepted as a perfectly reasonable indicator of institutional success-the three adjectives most commonly used to describe such organizations were "philanthropic," "benevolent," and "charitable." Remarkably, none of these referred either to what those organizations actually did or to what impact they might hope or expect to make on some target audience. Their reference instead was to the high-minded motives of the individuals responsible for their establishment and support: philanthropic (from the Greek for a lover of humankind), benevolent (from the Latin for somebody wishing to do well), and charitable (from the Latin also: *caritas*, or with loving care). In the years since, those adjectives have largely been replaced by the terms "nonprofit" and "not-for-profit," notwithstanding the repeated criticism that the third sector is far too large and its work far too important to define it so negatively in terms of what it is not instead of positively in terms of what it is.²⁰

What is particularly striking about Dees's social-enterprise model is the way in which it cuts through earlier approaches to the evaluation of these third-sector institutions to concentrate directly on what might variously be called organizational outcomes, impacts, or results. In the long run, says Dees, it is those outcomes that matter-not good will, not an

accumulation of resources, not good process, and not even highly acclaimed programs, but actual outcomes, impacts, and results. In essence, those are the organization's bottom line. Thus envisioned, the social enterprise can be seen as at least partially parallel to the commercial enterprise-like it in having the achievement of a bottom line as its ultimate operational objective, yet nevertheless wholly different from it because of the way in which that bottom line is defined. The commercial enterprise pursues a quantifiable economic outcome; the social enterprise pursues a social outcome that may or may not be quantifiable but that, in any event, must certainly be ascertainable.

Dees points to a second important difference between the commercial enterprise and the social enterprise. He calls this the "social method." Whereas the commercial enterprise must rely on "explicit economic exchange relationships, contracts, and arm's-length bargains" in order to obtain resources and to distribute its product, the social enterprise operates in a different environment. At the input end, it may, to some degree, rely on the voluntary contribution of funds, goods, and/or labor. At the output end, it typically provides its services to the public either without any charge or at a price below the actual cost of producing those services. Those differences aside, however, in the social-enterprise model-just as in the commercial-enterprise one-the ability to achieve an intended bottom line is what distinguishes organizational success from organizational failure.

For the American museum, this is a fresh challenge. To the extent that it has ever accepted that its performance might be legitimately subject to some overall and even possibly comparative evaluation, its "worst case" scenario was that such an evaluation would, like the AAM's accreditation program, be wholly internal. What constitutes a good museum? At one time, it might have been defined in terms of the loyalty and generosity of its benefactors. At some later date, "good" might have referred to the magnitude of its resources and the excellence of its staff: a fine collection, a highly regarded and well-credentialed group of curators, an appropriately large endowment, and a substantial building. Among government-related museums, a good museum might be one that adhered to the best practices and highest professional standards in the field, one that did things "by the book." Or, and this was particularly the case during the heyday of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities with their emphasis on program funding, it might be a museum whose exhibition and other programs were considered exemplary by knowledgeable colleagues who worked in peer organizations. What now seems so extraordinary-at least in retrospect-is that not one of those approaches took into the slightest account the museum's external impact on either its visitors or its community.

Curiously, a rigorous bottom-line evaluation with its primary weight on just such considerations would not really eliminate any of those other inner-directed approaches. It would simply incorporate and supersede them. For a museum to achieve a solid bottom-line result on any consistent basis, it would still need the ongoing support of generous donors; it would still need a solid spectrum of tangible and intangible resources; it would still need to establish and adhere to sound working practices; and it would still need to produce high-quality programming. In the social-enterprise model, those are all necessary but not-either in themselves or in combination-sufficient. The museum that aspires to be successful must still manage to combine those elements with whatever else may be necessary in order to render the specific public service that it itself has identified (both for itself and its supporters) as its own particular bottom line. And what, for museums, might such a bottom line be? Here, I think, the museum community can find useful guidance in the evaluation model that the United Way of America formally adopted in June of 1995. Prior to that time, the United Way had centered its evaluation process around the programs of its applicant health and human-service agencies. What it determined in 1995 was that it would henceforth concentrate instead on the results of those programs, i.e., on the identifiable outcomes or impacts that those agencies were actually able to achieve through those programs.

The key concept in the United Way's newly adopted approach is "difference." To qualify for funding, the United Way's applicant agencies are called upon to demonstrate their ability to make a positive difference in the quality of individual or communal lives. A 1996 United Way program manual spells out what some of those differences might be. They are benefits or changes for individuals or populations that may be attributable to their participation in a program.

[They] may relate to behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, status, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program.²¹

There are, I think, few people working in the museum field today who doubt for a moment that museums can meet just such a standard. Museums are quintessentially places that have the potency to change what people may know or think or feel, to affect what attitudes they may adopt or display, to influence what values they form. As Harold Skramstad, president emeritus of Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village and an author in this issue of *Daedalus*, asked in 1996 at the Smithsonian's 150th Anniversary Symposium in Washington, unless museums can do those things-unless museums can and do play some role relative to the real problems of real people's lives-then what is the point?

In a sense, given the considerable funding that they receive both directly and indirectly from a variety of public sources, American museums have no other choice but to embrace such a role. To repeat an observation I made during a 1997 conference:

If our museums are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people's lives, on what [other] basis might we possibly ask for public support? Not, certainly, on the grounds that we need museums in order that museum professionals might have an opportunity to develop their skills and advance their careers, or so that those of us who enjoy museum work will have a place in which to do it. Not certainly on the grounds that they provide elegant venues for openings, receptions and other glamorous social events. Nor is it likely that we could successfully argue that museums . . . deserve to be supported simply as an established tradition, as a kind of ongoing habit, long after any good reasons to do so have ceased to be relevant or have long been forgotten.²²

With the ongoing spread of outcome-based evaluation, however, two cautions seem in order. First, museums need to observe a certain modesty as they identify their bottom lines, lest they overstate what they can actually accomplish. Grand proclamations such as those made at the first summit of the museums of America may be important in highlighting the museum field's overall capability to contribute importantly toward social development. Nevertheless, the individual museum that declares "denting the universe" to be its bottom line may only be setting itself up for failure unless and until it can produce a perceptibly dented universe to demonstrate its accomplishment. Museum workers need to remind themselves more forcefully than they generally do that museums can wonderfully enhance and enrich individual lives, even change them, and make communities better places in which to live. Only rarely, however-- and, even then, more often than not in synergy with other institutions-do they truly dent the universe.

The second caution is that museums must take care to assure that the need to assess the effectiveness of their public programs does not distort or dumb down the contents of those programs to include only what may have a verifiable or demonstrable outcome and exclude everything else. The problem is parallel to that faced by the nation's school systems with respect to nationally standardized tests. For all its promise, outcome-based evaluation-like any system-requires a wise and moderate application. Taken to an extreme, it can damage the very institutions that it was designed to benefit.

As part of the worldwide museum community, the American museum is under pressure to make public service its principal concern. Because it is also part of the American not-for-profit sector, the nature of the public service it will be expected to provide can be defined in more specific terms-it is to be through demonstrably effective programs that make a positive difference in the quality of individual and communal lives.

Recast in marketing terms, the demand is that the American museum provide some verifiable added value to the lives of those it serves in exchange for their continued support. Recast in blunter terms, the museum is being told that to earn its keep requires that it be something more important than just an orderly warehouse or popular soda fountain.

III

Traditional wisdom holds that an organization can never change just one thing. So finely balanced are most organizations that change to any one element will ultimately require compensating and sometimes wholly unanticipated changes to many others. As the focus of the worldwide museum community continues to shift from the care and study of collections to the delivery of a public service, I want to examine at least two other aspects of American museums that may be considered ripe for compensating changes. One is the way that they are divided along disciplinary lines by the types of collections they hold-most typically art, history, and science. The other is the way they are staffed and how museum workers are trained. In

both these respects, the overwhelming majority of American museums and museum-training programs continue to operate as if World War II had only just ended and as if collections were still at the center of the museum's concerns.

With regard to the division of museums by discipline, let me start with an anecdote. During a visit to British Columbia in 1997, I learned of an exhibition mounted earlier that year by the Nanaimo District Museum on Vancouver Island. Entitled *Gone to the Dogs*, the exhibition not only traced the history of dogs in the community back to its pre-European roots but also took into account the various ways in which dogs-"as companions and coworkers"-continued to relate to the community today: from tracking predators for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to acting as "seeing eyes" for the visually handicapped to serving as pets. In a Doggy Hall of Fame, local residents were invited to post photographs of favorite dogs together with brief typed statements as to why they thought them special. A free film series-Dog Day Afternoons-presented feature films about dogs. Supplementary programs addressed local dog-related businesses such as pet grooming and veterinary services and highlighted the work of the SPCA.²³ By all accounts, the exhibition was an enormous success. It brought many first-time visitors to the museum, its popularity required the museum to transfer the exhibition to another local venue and extend the closing date, and, above all, it appeared to have left behind the palpable sense of a public enriched by its recognition of a common bond. In the end, the exhibition proved not to have been so much about dogs as it was about the shared concerns and interconnectedness of a community.

Almost as striking as the novelty of that exhibition, however, was the recognition of how few communities in the United States might ever hope-notwithstanding the ease with which it might be replicated-to see a similar exhibition in their own local museums. The mission of the Nanaimo District Museum is defined by geography, not by discipline. It was established to serve the City of Nanaimo and its surrounding district. In seeking to illuminate that region's cultural heritage and link that heritage to its present-day development, no restrictions limit the range of materials that the museum can employ to illustrate such links. In the United States, the overwhelming number of museums are confined to specific disciplines. In the 1989 National Museum Survey-the most recent broad-based statistical information available-only 8.6 percent of American museums classified themselves as general museums not tied to a particular discipline.²⁴ If children's museums-which are generally multidisciplinary-are counted as well, the total is still barely above 15 percent.

For the remaining 85 percent of American museums, to present an exhibition such as *Gone to the Dogs* would generally be out of the question as beyond their disciplinary boundaries. When collections were at the center of a museum's focus, that kind of disciplinary exclusivity might have made a certain sense. From a managerial perspective, at least, it limited the number of such narrowly trained specialists as discipline-specific curators and conservators who had to be kept on staff. With the refocus of the museum on its public-service function, however, strong arguments can be advanced for releasing the museum from this disciplinary straightjacket-most particularly in communities that have only a single museum or, at best, two. Why should those museums not try to broaden their disciplinary scope? Whatever staffing problems that might entail could readily be dealt with through collaboration with local colleges, universities, and research institutions, by outsourcing, or through the use of consultants. In the words by which James Smithson described his expectations of the institution that was to bear his name-that it be for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge"²⁵-the public-service oriented museum might well conclude that, rather than pursue both these goals with equal vigor, it would make better sense to emphasize "diffusion"where the museum's unique competencies lie-and to leave the "increase" part to possibly more competent academic institutions with which it could closely collaborate.

Easing the disciplinary boundaries of museums would not be as radical a step as it might first appear. A separation into disciplines was never inherent to the museum as an institutional form. In tracing its origin back to those sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities from which it sprang, it seems clear that such a separation was a later development. The Tradescant collection, for example-ultimately to become the founding collection for the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford-comfortably combined both natural history specimens and what its first catalog of 1656 called "Artificialls"-objects that ranged from works of art, weapons, and coins to ethnographic materials and Egyptian and Roman antiquities.²⁶ Many continental European wunderkammers were similar. In the United States, the first museums-such as the one Charles Willson Peale opened in Philadelphia in 1786-held equally eclectic collections. Peale's Museum included not only portraits of American Revolutionary War military heroes but also fossils, shells, models of machinery, and wax figures of North American natives.²⁷ Throughout this century, the case for multidisciplinary

museums has been advanced by museum practitioners as diverse in their views as John Cotton Dana in the first quarter of this century and by the proponents of the ecomuseum in more recent years.²⁸

There is, moreover, ample room within contemporary museum practice to envision museums organized along other than disciplinary lines. One immediate example, of course, is the children's museum. In her 1992 survey of children's museums across the United States, Joanne Cleaver credits Michael Spock and his staff-with their revivification of the Boston Children's Museum starting in 1961-for having pioneered the idea that "the museum was for somebody rather than about something."²⁹ An alternative institutional form-a museum that is about something, but nevertheless is nondisciplinary-is the community or neighborhood museum. One well-established type is the heimat-- or "homeland"-museum, a local institution that first began to appear throughout Germany during the latter part of the nineteenth century and which, after some twists and turns, still survives today.

Although heimat museums were intended originally to document rural life and popular culture, particularly in their preindustrialized forms, the potential role of these museums in education and community development was recognized by the turn of the century. Thereafter, under the Nazi regime, it was only a short step from education to propaganda. The heimat museums were employed to disseminate a pseudoscientific based message of Aryan superiority and to preach a nationalist gospel of blood and soil. Notwithstanding that dark episode, there is nevertheless something remarkably prescient of current museological thinking in these 1936 observations by a German curator writing about a heimat-like museum in Cologne:

The heimatmuseum must not be a kingdom of the dead, a cemetery. It is made for the living; it is to the living that it must belong, and they must feel at ease there.... [T]he museum must help them to see the present in the mirror of the past, and the past in the mirror of the present . . . and, if it fails in that task, it becomes no more than a lifeless collection of objects."

In the contrasting attitudes that German museum workers take toward its postwar continuation, the heimat museum can be seen as providing a litmus test by which to separate those who still believe in the primacy of collections from those who now see the museum primarily in terms of public service. Some German colleagues dismiss the contemporary heimat museum as beyond the boundaries of the field because, in addition to holding objects, it also serves as an active cultural and social center. For exactly that same reason, other German colleagues consider it to be an especially valuable and viable kind of museum. Outside of Germany, the heimat concept has taken on a life of its own. With its emphasis on everyday life and ordinary objects, for example, the Museum of London-which opened in 1976, and which Kenneth Hudson has acknowledged to be "one of the finest city-biography museums in the world"-³²might simply be seen as the heimat museum writ large.

With regard to neighborhood museums, perhaps the bestknown model in the United States is the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, opened by the Smithsonian Institution in 1967. As an institutional type, the neighborhood museum was described by the late John R. Kinard, Anacostia's founding director:

[It] encompasses the life of the people of the neighborhood-people who are vitally concerned about who they are, where they came from, what they have accomplished, their values and their most pressing needs. Through the various media of its exhibits the museum reflects the priorities already determined by neighborhood people and other community agencies and is, thereby, able to present the issues that demand attention.³³

Just as few American museums might have had the flexibility to mount the Nanaimo Museum's *Gone to the Dogs*, few might have had the inclination to undertake so bold and neighborhood-specific an exhibition as *The Rat: Man's Invited Affliction*-an early Anacostia project generated by local children and the concern they expressed about the problem of rat infestation in their neighborhood.

Kinard later wrote that it was the *Rat* exhibition that convinced him and his staff that the museum could no longer afford to deal only with life in the past. Its exhibitions, he said, "must have relevance to present-day problems that affect the quality of life here and now...."³⁴ That conviction notwithstanding, the museum's focus on its immediate neighborhood was eventually to change. Scarcely more than a decade after the founding of the museum, Anacostia's Board of Trustees

adopted a new mission statement pursuant to which it was to offer a more generalized-but still multidisciplinary-program dealing with African-American history, art, and culture.³ In essence, it was now to be a community rather than a neighborhood museum with the understanding that the community it served was to be a national one. In 1987, two years before Kinard's death, the Anacostia Museum officially dropped the description "neighborhood" from its name and moved from its first site in a converted movie theater to a new purpose-built facility in a nearby park. In recent years, with additional space at its disposal, its name was changed again-this time to the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture.

In general, neighborhood museums-following the original Anacostia Model-have primarily been considered in connection with economically depressed inner-city or similar locations. There appears to be no reason, though, why their use should be so limited. One possible sign of the wider application of the neighborhood museum concept-particularly in its concentration on contemporary issues of genuine concern to its constituents-is the remarkable metamorphosis that has occurred over the past several years at the Strong Museum in Rochester, N.Y. Founded as a salvage and warehouse museum almost by default-Margaret Woodbury Strong, its patroness, left it more than three hundred thousand objects after her death in 1969, nearly twenty-seven thousand of them dolls-the museum, several decades into its life and after extensive and even painful consultation with its community, determined to change its original focus and to become instead a museum that had special appeal to local families.

From its previous emphasis on life in the northeast prior to 1940-a concentration supported well by Mrs. Strong's collection-it has turned instead to what its director calls "history that informs civic discourse about contemporary issues." Since 1992, the topics examined by its exhibition program have included the Cold War, AIDS, bereavement, racism, drug abuse, and health care. Most recently, it has entered into joint ventures with the Children's Television Workshop for an exhibition built around Sesame Street and with the Rochester public library system to integrate a branch library into the museum.

Some observers argue that museums can only achieve this kind of organizational breadth through the sacrifice of the depth with which they were previously able to address a narrower range of subjects. Others-my Smithsonian colleague Robert D. Sullivan, for one-respond that, whether or not museums are or ever were the most appropriate places for learning in depth, the reality is that an emerging electronic information environment is rapidly reshaping how information is distributed and that breadth-based learning, as typified by the Internet's capacity to provide infinitely branched linkages, will be its hallmark. "In the same way," Sullivan says, that the printed word as a medium of diffusion encouraged linear, sequential, and vertical ways of thinking, the Internet encourages non-linear, non-sequential, horizontal ways of thinking and connecting knowledge. The instantaneous horizontal connectivity of the Internet collapses time and space and evaporates and/or challenges all efforts by information and knowledge rich institutions to remain isolated, fragmented, walled chambers."

The abandonment by the American museum-certainly a "knowledge-rich" institution-of its old scavenger/warehouse business would seem fully synchronous with such a change. All the same, though, many in the American museum community-- and not merely the moderates of whom I spoke earlier-would be very reluctant to see museums lose their capacity to deal with knowledge in depth as well as breadth.

IV

The second unintended consequence of the American museum's shift in its central focus away from the care and study of its collections involves the way museums are staffed and how museum workers are trained. Here, we enter uncharted territory. One thing, however, seems clear: tomorrow's museums cannot be operated with yesterday's skills. While museums will still require the expertise of the discipline-centered specialists who today hold many of their senior positions, the successful operation of public-service museums will require that those specialists at least share these positions with museum workers of a very different orientation and expertise, museum workers who will bring to their institutions a new combination of skills and attitudes.

Along these lines, Leslie Bedford-for many years with the Boston Children's Museum and more recently associated with the

Museum Leadership Education Program at the Bank Street School in New York-has recently proposed the establishment of a training institute that would prepare museum workers for careers in public programming.³⁸ A thoroughly trained public programmer would, in her view, be a "creative generalist" who combines a variety of specialties now found scattered both inside and outside the museum. These would include an ability to work directly with community members to assess the ways in which the museum might appropriately meet their needs, a practical knowledge of how to establish productive collaborations with other community organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, a solid understanding of how best to use all the myriad means-exhibitions, lectures, films, concerts, programs of formal education, and more-through which the museum may interact with the community, and a thorough knowledge of how to make appropriate use of audience research and various forms of program evaluation.

Going beyond Bedford's proposal, the fourth of these skills-- knowing how to make appropriate use of audience research and various forms of program evaluation-ought to be in the curricula of museum-training programs at every level. In some instances, its current neglect-particularly in the case of management training-may in part be due to the tangency of such programs with graduate schools of business. In the for-profit sphere, where at least short-term success or failure can be determined from financial and other periodic reports, evaluation simply does not perform the same critical function of measuring effectiveness and distinguishing success from failure that it does among governmental agencies and not-for-profit organizations.

Critical to understand here is the changing standard of not-- for-profit accountability. As effectiveness becomes more firmly established throughout the third sector as the overarching criterion of institutional success, accountability will eventually boil down to a single hard-nosed question: is this institution demonstrably using the resources entrusted to it to achieve what it said it intended to achieve when it requested and was given those resources? In contradistinction to what he calls "negative accountability"-being able to show that no financial improprieties have occurred and that all of an institution's funds can properly be accounted for-Peter Swords of the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York has referred to this enhanced standard as "positive accountability": being able to show that the resources entrusted to an institution were in demonstrable fact used to accomplish its intended purpose.³⁹ In such an environment, an organization without the capacity to monitor its outcomes on a regular and credible basis-- unable, that is, to render a positive account of its activities-- may no longer be fundable. Nor will meeting such a requirement simply be a matter of appropriate staffing. It will also be a matter of budget. Monitoring program impacts is costly, but it will no more be a dispensable frill tomorrow than filing tax returns or tending to workplace safety are today.

For museums particularly, the work that needs to be done here is daunting. In many instances it may start with something so basic as getting a museum's leadership to articulate just what it is that it hopes or expects its institution to accomplish. That so many museums continue today to be so unfocused about their purpose-avoiding any reference to outcomes at all and/or mistakenly defining them in terms of organizationally controllable outputs-is only the beginning of the problem. Compounding it further is, first, that the range of potential museum outcomes-educational, experiential, recreational, and social-is so extraordinarily wide and, second, that the achievement of those outcomes may be far more difficult to ascertain than are the frequently quantifiable results that can be achieved by health and human-service agencies.

On occasion, museums may provide anecdotally recoverable and even life-transforming "Oh Wow!!" experiences.⁴ Most often, however, the impact of museums on their communities-- on their visitors and nonvisitors alike-is subtle, indirect, frequently cumulative over time, and often intertwined with the impact of such other sources of formal and informal educational experiences as schools, religious bodies, and various social and affinity groups. Museums must not only educate themselves as to how their impact can be captured and described; they must also educate those to whom they are accountable as to what may and may not be possible in rendering their accounts. In no way, however, do these complexities make evaluation any less essential. On the contrary; because the value that the museum can add to a community's well-being may not be nearly so self-evident as that provided by an emergency room or a children's shelter, credible evaluation will be all the more critical to the museum's survival.

At the level of institutional leadership, the most important new skill of all will be the ability to envision how the community's ongoing and/or emerging needs in all their dimensions-physical, psychological, economic, and social-might

potentially be served by the museum's very particular competencies. Given its tremendous technical facility in assembling, displaying, and interpreting objects--and given moreover the enormous power that the well-interpreted display of those objects may have to affect what and how people think or know or feel--what can the museum contribute? Can it be a successful advocate for environmentally sound public policies? In what ways might it help the community to achieve or maintain social stability? In what ways might it energize and release the imaginative power of its individual citizens? Can it serve as a site for strengthening family and/or other personal ties? Can it trigger the desire of individuals for further education or training, inspire them toward proficiency in the creative arts or the sciences? For the newly reshaped American museum fully to achieve its public-service objectives, though, even those new skills may not be sufficient. Needed as well may be some attitudinal changes-- two in particular. First, museum workers generally must learn to relax their expectations as to why the public visits their institutions and what it may take away from those visits. Exhibition curators, for example, may sometimes imagine a far greater congruence than is really the case between the intensity with which they have prepared an exhibition and the interest that the general public may take in the educational content of that exhibition. The public is not a monolith. It comes to museums for many different reasons and it gets many different things out of that experience.

In *Speak to My Heart*, an exhibition opened by the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture in 1998, a label text described the community role of the contemporary African-American church as being, among other things, "A safe place to be . . . a haven from the stressful workaday world, a place for personal growth and community nurture, and an outlet for the development and use of natural talents." How pertinent might such a description be to the museum? Is the museum only important as a place in which to receive the authorized curatorial word, or might it have some other legitimate uses as well? That so many different visitors may choose to use the museum in so many different ways should not matter. That it is so potentially open-textured as a destination, so adaptable to a variety of public uses should not--at least in the emerging and visitor-centered museum--be regarded as a defect. Rather, it should be understood as one of its greater glories.

The other attitude in need of change involves the museum's relationship to the community. The emerging public-service-oriented museum must see itself not as a cause but as an instrument. In some considerable measure, the cost of maintaining that instrument is paid by the community: by direct community support, by the community's forbearance from collecting real estate, water, sewer, and other local taxes, by the considerable portion of every private tax-deductible contribution that constitutes an indirect public subsidy from the community. For that reason alone, it might be argued, the community is legitimately entitled to have some choice--not the only choice, but some choice--in determining just how that instrument is to be used.

In the emerging museum, responsiveness to the community-- not- an indiscriminate responsiveness, certainly, but a responsiveness consistent with the museum's public-service obligations and with the professional standards of its field--must be understood not as a surrender but, quite literally, as a fulfillment. The opportunity to be of profound service--the opportunity that museums truly have to use their competencies in collecting, preserving, studying, and interpreting objects to enrich the quality of individual lives and to enhance their community's well-being--must certainly outdazzle any satisfactions that the old salvage, warehouse, or soda-pop business could ever have possibly offered.

ENDNOTES

¹Notwithstanding that museums throughout all of the Americas might appropriately be so designated, the phrases "American museum" and "American museums" as used in this essay are intended to refer solely to museums in the United States.

--Barbara Franco is director of The Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Her observation was made in conversation with the author, June 1998. ³Barbara Y. Newsom and Adele Z. Silver, eds., *The Art Museum as Educator: A Collection of Studies as Guides to Practice and Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 13.

⁴Kenneth Hudson, "The Museum Refuses to Stand Still," *Museum International* 197 (1998): 43.

Walter W. Powell and Rebecca Friedkin, "Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations," in Walter W. Powell, ed., *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research*

Handbook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 181. "American Association of Museums, *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1984).

-American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992).

Ibid., 7.

"American Association of Museums, *Museum Accreditation: A Report to the Profession* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1970). "American Association of Museums, *A Higher Standard: The Museum Accreditation Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997).

11American Association of Museums, *America's Museums: The Belmont Report* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1968]

12*Ibid.* 2.

"From a presentation made during the Smithsonian Institution's 150th anniversary symposium, Washington, D.C., 5-7 September 1996. The full text appears in *Museums for the New Millennium: A Symposium for the Museum Community* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Museum Studies, Smithsonian Institution, and American Association of Museums, 1997). The quoted passage is reprinted in *Ibid.*, 107-108.

41COM Statutes, sec. II, art. 3. "ICOM News 71 (September 1971): 47.

Taken from the May 1998 interim report to the American Association of Museums' Board of Directors and the International Council of Museums' Executive Committee on the summit meeting of the museums of the Americas on the theme "Museums and Sustainable Communities," San Jose, Costa Rica, IS18 April 1998.

17See, for example, judge Richard A. Posner's observation in *United Cancer Council vs. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, 165 F3d 1173 (7th Cir

1999): "Charitable organizations are plagued by incentive problems. Nobody owns the rights to the profits and therefore no one has the spur to efficient performance that the lure of profits creates." J. Gregory Dees's views can be found in two published Harvard Business School "notes": *Social Enterprise: Private Initiatives for the Common Good*, N9-395-116 (30 November 1994) and *Structuring Social-Purpose Ventures: From Philanthropy to Commerce*, N9-396-343 (15 April 1996). 9F, or a basic description of the United Way's approach, see *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach* (Arlington, Va.: United Way of America, 1996).

20Nancy R. Axlerod, the former president of the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, suggested that these negative descriptions of third-sector organizations were no less inappropriate than that offered by the father who, on being asked the gender of his three children, responded that "two were boys and one was not."

21United Way, *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach*, 2. 22Stephen E. Weil, keynote address to the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic

Association of Museums, Rochester, N.Y., 13 November 1997. 23Information about *Gone to the Dogs* and about the Nanaimo District Museum generally was kindly supplied by Debra Bodner, the museum's director/curator.

2"All figures are from the Data Report for the 1989 National Museum Survey, American Association of Museums, Washington, D.C., 1992. 2"In his 1826 will through which the Smithsonian Institution was ultimately to be established, Smithson specifically mandated that it be ". . . for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men."

26Arthur MacGregor, "The Cabinet of Curiosities in Seventeenth-Century Britain," in Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums*:

The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1985), 147-158. 2"Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967), 242.

2"The writings of Dana (1856-1929)-beyond question this country's most original thinker about museums-have long been largely out of print. That situation should be remedied in October of 1999, when a generous selection of those writings is scheduled to be published jointly by the Newark Museum and the American Association of Museums. For a brief overview of his life, see the chapter "John Cotton Dana and The Newark Museum: The Museum of Community Service," in Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and their Influence* (Nashville: The American Association for State and local History, 1983). A selected bibliography of Dana's museum-related writings was published in *The Newark Museum Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 1979): 58. For a description of the ecomuseum movement, see Nancy J. Fuller, *The Museum as a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project*," in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullin Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Community: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 327-365.

29Joanne Cleaver, *Doing Children's Museums* (Charlotte, Vt.: Williamson Publishing, 1992), 9.

"For a brief history, see Andrea Hauenschild, "'Heimatmuseen' and New Museology," a paper delivered at the Third International Workshop on New

Museology, Toten, Norway, 14-19 September 1986. "Quoted in Alfredo Crus-Ramirez, "The Heimat Museum: A Perverted Fore

runner," *Museum* 48 (1985): 242-244.

'=Kenneth Hudson, *The Good Museums Guide: The Best Museums and Art Galleries in the British Isles* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), 102-103. 3John R. Kinard and Esther Nighbert, "The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.," *Museum XXIV* (2) (1972): 203.

"Ibid., 105.

'Zora Martin-Felton and Gail S. Lowe, *A Different Drummer: John Kinard and the Anacostia Museum 1967-1989* (Washington, D.C.: The Anacostia Museum, 1993), 37.

3"Scott G. Eberle and G. Rollie Adams, "Making Room for Big Bird," *History News* 51 (4) (Autumn 1996): 23-26.

;7Robert D. Sullivan is the associate director for public programs at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The quoted language

comes from "The Object in Question: Museums Caught in the Net," an unpublished essay presented at the annual meeting of the Visitor Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 7 August 1998. 38Letter to the author, 14 December 1997.

3"Peter Swords discusses this in "Form 990 as a Tool for Nonprofit Accountability," delivered at the "Governance of Nonprofit Organizations: Standards and Enforcement" conference, New York University School of Law, National Center on Philanthropy and the Law, 30-31 October 1997. 4For a report of one such experience together with an argument that such experiences should be given greater weight in visitor studies, see Anna Mt. Kindler, "Aesthetic Development and Learning in Art Museums: A Challenge to Enjoy," *Journal of Museum Education* 22 (2 and 3) (1998): 12-15. "I am grateful to Camilla Boodle, a London-based museum consultant, for her suggestion that visitors may find a museum rewarding without necessarily accepting its authority. Conversation with the author, August 1998.

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