

The Impact of Civil Society Models on Museum Management and Leadership

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New museum management and governance models are developing in the 21st Century in response to new realities such as: the competitive aspirations of cities for museums to “brand” them; the needs of the burgeoning tourism industry for more compelling visitor destinations; the requirements of the knowledge economy that museums be more educational for adults as well as children; the demands from a growing museum profession that museums be more “professional”; and the genuine interest and curiosity of a broader public. These new realities are leading to museums that are

- In conversation with the public -- dialogic not monologic
- Sharing authority with visitors and with people around the world through active websites
- Inclusive in their values
- Process oriented -- understanding that collections, like people, have no fixed identities
- Exciting and ever-changing – with dynamic exhibitions often employing new technologies

This article proposes that the most appropriate management and governance strategies for museums that embrace some or all of these qualities is a civil society model. It will describe how this model is already being widely implemented in the museum sector (although not always at the initiative of museums) and the characteristics of museum management that are most widely applied in civil society museums.

Museums as Civil Society Institutions

The general definition of civil society institutions is that they are organisations that are neither fully in the corporate sector, nor fully in the governmental sector but are organizations directly accountable for their actions to social networks or to society as a whole. They are part of what some sociologists call the “voluntary sector” and what economists call the “third sector”. This sector is said to be the fastest growing economic sector in developed countries. It is also the sector that generates “social capital” by which is meant the ability of people to work together to solve problems.

Most museums fall into one of the following three categories:

- 1. Private museums – museums owned by private individuals or corporations**

2. Government museums -- museums that are owned and operated by local authorities (cities, counties) or by national, state or provincial governments (i.e. national or state museums)

3. Charitable trusts or not-for-profit organizations

Of these categories, only the third is a “civil society” model. However in response to the rapid change in museums, there is a blurring of the boundaries between and among these three models of museum organization. Indeed, museum organization can be seen as a continuum with 100% publicly (or government) owned institutions on one side and 100% privately owned institutions on the other. In the centre of this continuum is a range of museum types that I would broadly categorize as “civil society” types.

They are public-private partnerships in that they might include:

- Museums owned by government but operated by non-profit associations
- Museums owned by government but operated by arm’s length agencies or crown corporations
- Museums owned and operated by charities or non-profit-making organizations (such as churches, universities, or trusts) that receive some government funds

These civil society museums are quite a diverse bunch. They come in all shapes and sizes; some charge admission, others are free; but, in addition to fulfilling the fundamental functions of collection, research, education and display, they have these five characteristics in common :

1. Governance that is separate from government (have independent or semi-independent Boards)
2. Multiple sources of funding including: government, visitors, private donors, Foundations, sponsors and service fees
3. Budgetary control
4. Outward looking
5. Community focussed

Over the past 30 years more and more museums have been shifting from government controlled to “civil society” institutions.

- In the UK, for example, the national museums (which are all free admission) are operated by separate Boards and they negotiate multi-year funding agreements with central government based on strategic plans. Whilst government funding is extremely important – additional and alternative sources of funding such as fundraising, events and commercial activities are almost equally so. The Tate (which provides free admission) for example raises 50% of its annual budget through its own revenue-generating activities such as retail, food services, special exhibitions, rentals and sponsorships.
- In 2003, the Prado in Madrid became a civil society institution, still strongly linked to government but as a special status institution with its own Board and the long range goal of reducing its level of state support from 80% to 50%.

- In Canada, the national museums were made into Crown Corporations in 1990 – which means all museums are governed by Boards that operate at arm's length from government and control the museums' budgets.
- The Louvre and most of the French national museums also operate under special contracts with government, control their own budgets and have managing Boards.
- Many privately-owned museums are becoming more “civil society” oriented by broadening their boards and expanding their connections to their community.
- While city museums or museums in the local authority sector still tend to be part of government, many of the new museums being initiated by cities and regional governments often with the goal of urban regeneration are being established as charitable institutions – with independent Boards. In establishing a new art centre in Salford Quays (just outside Manchester), the Salford Council transferred their outstanding collection of painter LS Lowry's art to the fully independent Lowry Trust that manages the art centre and its museum. This is an exceptionally dynamic art centre which, with the Imperial War Museum of the North, has stimulated economic development in a region that just 10

years ago was the classified as one of the most deprived in Europe.

- Children's museums -- a new and growing phenomenon in scores of European cities – are being initiated and managed by independent boards as civil society institutions. In Vienna, for example, Zoom is the country's first Children's Museum and located in the Museums Quartier. Zoom is strongly supported by the City but operates at arm's length. In Manila, the outstanding Pambata children's museum -- probably one of the leading museums in the world in its commitment to helping street children and combating illiteracy – is entirely independent of government, but generously supported by the city and private donors.
- In Antalya, a major tourism destination in Turkey, the city is creating a new city museum which it will fund to a high degree – but this museum will be set up as an independent organization along civil society lines so that it can be more flexible and more responsive to public needs.
- The Barbados Museum and Historical Society, which is led by ICOM President Alissandra Cummins, functions as a national museum but it is a private-public partnership with government as a generous supporter. In conversation Alissandra assured this author that many of their initiatives in interpretation for

example would have been more difficult if not impossible were they a government agency.

Over the past few decades there has been a slow stealthy transition of museums from the government to the civil society realm; and like most change in museums, it is not always by choice. This momentous change started with small cutbacks in government grant aid. On average, government subsidy to individual museums has declined by 20% to 50% over the past 30 years. However, it needs to be said that overall government subsidy to the sector may even have increased because there are today more museums housed in better buildings. Thus government support per museum may have declined. Museums today are more professional so they want to do more so their leadership naturally looks to new sources of funding.

Museums at a Tipping Point

In many instances, this reduction in subsidy was mitigated by allowing the museums to keep the revenues they earn from tickets, the shops and other activities – revenues that used to be returned to the government treasury.

Paradoxically, governments have been willing to fund new museums and expand existing museums. But they are doing so not for traditional reasons like the preservation of collections and scientific research, but to meet new goals such as:

- Tourism – one of the world's biggest industries

- Social Cohesion – one of the world’s biggest challenges especially now that for the first time in human history more than 50% of us live in cities where getting along and solving problems together is necessary for survival
- Urban Redevelopment – with former industrial sites and old power generating stations from London’s Bankside to Istanbul’s Sentralistanbul being transformed into museums
- City branding to attract new industries and investment
- Stimulating the creative economy which brings added value to industry
- Competition with other cities for all of the five preceding reasons

We might pause to ask: why has government operating funding declined at a time when museums have become more **instrumental** to city, regional and national governments?

I have already referred to two possible explanations:

1. There are more museums. This is surely a very good thing because it makes what museums do more accessible to more people
2. The growing professionalism of museum workers so that museums are doing more things than they were 20 years ago – leading to higher costs and hopefully bigger benefits for people.

These are both good things and surely we do not want to limit the benefits of museums by ceasing to create them and ceasing to improve the museum profession.

There is a third reason which is in my view more significant: that is, the restructuring over the last 30 years of economies in all parts of the world. This restructuring has reduced taxes on wealth, sold off (some would say given away) government agencies, services and natural resources to the private sector, and reduced government support for the public realm – including parks, libraries, and hospitals as well as museums. As a result, there has been enormous growth of private wealth and its concentration among a relative few in every country. Government increasingly sees these individuals as potential museum supporters and their companies as potential museum sponsors.

This is both a political and economic reality – and has been for several decades – to different degrees in different countries.

How have museums responded to this reality? Some have successfully lobbied government to maintain funding levels. Many museums stoically sustain the reduced funding, cut services and cut staff – until eventually the museums gets the idea that they need to earn more revenue by improving their shops, hosting blockbuster exhibitions, attracting sponsors and hosting events. And, at some point, the idea of becoming an institution independent of government (or less dependent on government) starts to feel like a relief.

But something very exciting is also going on. Because the museum must look outside for support -- not only financial but social – it becomes a more outward focussed organization with more links to the community. Good

reviews are very important – not just for the curator’s professional standing – but because it is important that your museum is embraced by your community. The Deputy Director now needs to learn about the tourism industry and the Head of Education has to learn how to welcome learners of all ages and all ethnic groups . . . exhibitions becomes more of a dialogue and less of a monologue . . . and so a more vital type of museum has emerged.

I would suggest that, whether or not a museum becomes de-linked from government, there is a tipping point in the proportion of government versus income from other sources at which the museum becomes **de facto** a civil society institution. Whether this tipping point occurs at 50% or 75% or 85% single source funding is relative to the local culture, politics and the size of museum.

Does the museum director and his or her team have a different role before and after this tipping point has been reached?

Management versus Leadership?

Much of the recent business literature on this subject makes a big distinction between the two roles:

These texts say that **Management** is about “**doing the thing right**”.

But

Leadership is about “**doing the right thing**”

I question whether this distinction is valid for museums

Museum workers have spent most of the last 50 years in fighting for recognition of museum professionalism, by which we mean all the standards for preservation, research, education, display, and ethics. Universities have played a key role by establishing degrees in museum studies and museum management. Surely these professional standards are tools for leadership as well as guidelines for management.

Even within a 100% government controlled (or private sector controlled) museum, the director invokes the principles of museum management in order **to lead** the institution to “do the right thing” – be it safeguarding heritage, ensuring that all members of the public have equal physical and intellectual access to the collections and challenging the staff to be more effective at communicating with people.

Two examples in Vienna are inspiring on this point. The Director of the Museum Moderner Kunst has eliminated admission charges to make his museum – which is a state museum – more accessible to the public. The Director of the Museum für Volkskunde has initiated a project called “museum inside out” which makes the collection broadly accessible and

encourages public dialogue and discourse. These examples demonstrated that leadership can emerge within governmental structures.

However, it must be said that it is particularly challenging for a museum director to be a leader (focussed on doing the right thing) when he or she is a manager in a government structure or a corporate structure where all other managers are rewarded **not for being leaders but for being “managers”** – for carrying out government policy and doing it right.

That’s why museum directors in these situations often sound like the squeaky wheel. While other department heads can be moved to Treasury one year and Transport the next (doing the thing right in whatever department), the museum director has a professional calling to be in his or her position and **to both “do the right thing” and “do it right”**. This often makes the museum director feel out of step with colleagues – and be perceived by those colleagues as being out of step.

It is far easier (though not necessarily financially easier on a personal basis) to be a museum leader in an independent civil society institution – where the governing body expects the Director – even demands that the Director – guide the museum both to do the right thing – to set policy – and to see that it is implemented right.

So should we be concerned about the creeping institutional transformation of museums to civil society institutions? Should we be worried that in this brave new world of “civil society museums” all the management, ethical and technical skills we have fought for will be ignored in favour of vague ideas of “leadership” that march to the tunes of tourism and social inclusion?

Yes, this is a concern. It is a special concern because right now we are failing to train museum curators and managers to be leaders: as a result, we will see more and more museums led by lawyers and journalists rather than museum professionals.

But it's an equal concern that many talented museum managers and leaders are locked within underfunded government structures without access to the tools either to do the right things or to do them right. Instead of thinking of the transformation museums are undergoing as a “slippery slope” we should see it as an opportunity and urge that museums in the public and corporate sectors be given tools to fulfill new roles in a changing society.

The keys tools for these new roles are:

- budgetary control,
- ability to seek outside funding
- support for engaging more deeply with the community including the establishment of advisory committees that reflect the demographics of our changing societies

- training in working in teams. The old academic model which keeps curators, educators, marketers and programmers on separate tracks reflects a government departmental or hierarchical form of organization that is not well suited to filling contemporary social needs.

For several hundred years, museums have been one of the most successful social means of communication and learning. They have transformed from private treasure chamber, to the scholar's study, to academies of art and science, to government institutions.

Now museums are in the midst of another transition – from the government/corporate sector to the realm of civil society.

This transformation places museums at the heart of social change and tremendous challenges. Museum organizations that advocate for the profession and the Universities that educate museum professionals of the future have challenging tasks in the years ahead -- to make sure that museum training and professional policies equip museum workers at all levels to be creative participants in the evolution of civil society as well as museum leaders.