

Museum of the Future

Any discussion of the Museum of the Future wrestles with the questions- 'Who is the museum for? What is the museum for?' Historically, museums were for the preservation of collections of objects. The relationship of the visitor to the objects or the visitor's learning was a distant secondary purpose, and for many institutions their missions did not mention the visitors at all.

In 1999, Stephen Weil wrote a profound and compelling article on the transformation of American museums. In the article, Weil gave a colleague's description of museums as having been historically in the "salvage and warehouse business." Weil then traces the emerging museology movement focused on education of the public, of the relationship of people to knowledge and material culture. Weil describes this movement as "museums becoming for someone instead of about something." He calls on museums, as public institutions, to be "an instrument of social change".

Today, nearly 25 years after Weil's vision of museums as civic institutions for somebody, we are still struggling with the notion of who that "somebody" is. Audience-centered could be taken to mean museums provide a service, they are hired for a job, and they are audience-centered through serving that individual. Certainly, individuals outside the institution, the audience, now have far more influence on the narratives about these objects and influence in who is empowered to make meaning of those narratives. Technology has been at the crux of this shift.

One of the museums that I've had the honor to work with is the Museum of the Moving Image in New York. One of this Museum's core exhibitions is now a few decades old, and during those decades the entire foundation of moving images has changed. The exhibition has to be reconceptualized, in a large part due to technology. Previously producing moving images required specialized equipment and expertise; now all of us can be and are content creators, documentarians of our own slice of life. The individual filming on their phone is empowered, and that technology also empowers the museum visitor. On social media, or blogs, or online videos, one can answer the museum back, describe a different interpretation, or focus on a particular part of the story the museum has to tell. Technology has given individuals a voice in cultural conversations with museums.

This empowerment of the individual via digital tools is utterly transformational, and has pushed museums in the United States to reckon with their role in injustice and discrimination. Museums allowing, even encouraging, historical complexity and multiple narratives within their exhibitions is very slowly taking root.

Yet in my view, visualizing the Museum of the Future as serving an individual's needs is to undervalue what the Museum of the Future could be. Instead of interpreting audience-centered as calling for meeting the visitors' individual needs, the Museum of the Future could work towards meeting communities' needs. Centering the audience in museums could mean furthering the civic good and strengthening the social fabric, sharing the authority to determine what is exhibited and how. The technological empowerment of the individual has the power to serve collective good.

This vision of museums of mine, shared with many others, is highly controversial. The International Commission of Museums (ICOM) 2019 meeting in Kyoto exploded in controversy over this very vision of the new museology. The furor from the meeting in Kyoto nearly destroyed ICOM, and this debate continues to play out today. Lonnie Bunch said the proposed ICOM definition was “a clarion call for museums to think and a way to reimagine themselves and to reimagine relationships.” Since the ICOM meeting in 2019, so much else has happened; societal transformation has been profound. Pandemics truly are one of the ultimate disrupters.

As Arundhati Roy wrote in 2020, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging ...our dead ideas... Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

Digital innovations give us another portal to an imagining of a museum anew. In that world, audience-centered institutions do not mean transactional services to a set of individuals. Instead, an audience-centered museum would be a place of dialogue, a place that gives voice, a place that strengthens our communities. What would happen if we can choose to walk through that portal to that world?

Kate Haley-Goldman