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On the Natural Selection of Museums

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In recent issues of the *Informal Learning Review*, Robert Mac West has aggregated the reports of a die-off of museums and the displacement of museum personnel across the country during the current Great Recession. While there have always been isolated spectacular failures, near-fatal budget cuts and reorganizations in the history of the 20th century museum-creation boom, until now museums have mostly escaped the statistical fate of small business failures in our society (even if only in a coma). Budgets were cut, programs curtailed, expectations lowered, and eventually institutions would rise again.

This time it feels different, as longevity and sustainability are tested by questions of relevance, and the many sub-species of museums are tested by the marketplace in competition with one another and with other leisure attractions - those near-relatives like theme parks, movie theatres, and commercial interpretations of corporate activities. This brief essay offers an unscientific look at why individual museums might well go extinct, what some successful ones are doing to manage the kinds of environmental change they can control, and what generally positive trends are emerging as we begin the new century.

Deterministic and Stochastic Factors in Extinction Events

The nature writer and Darwin biographer David Quammen, in his acclaimed book *The Song of the Dodo* (1), offers a basic definition for two kinds of factors that influence the extinction of small populations in nature. While they cannot be applied directly to museums they can help to frame the case that some museum extinctions can be avoided by human preparation and intervention, while some may occur because they are beyond human prediction and control. **Deterministic** factors involve "straightforward cause-and-effect relations that can be predicted and controlled." Because they are predictable and rational and subject to control, Quammen says, "in most cases we can rectify the damage that has been done." **Stochastic** factors, on the other hand, involve series of events or occurrences that are "truly random or because they are linked to geophysical or biological causes so obscurely complex that they seem random." We know this second kind of factor as a trophic cascade that leads in daily human life to airplane crashes, oil spills, stock market panics, and the like. With the large population of American museums now nearing 18,000, it is unlikely that any trophic cascade short of nuclear war will wipe them all from the map, although some individual institutions will most likely be at increasing risk of failure due to the deterministic factors listed below.

Why Do Museums Fail?

In tracking recent historical trends and looking at causes of recent museum failures through published reports and studies, observation of clients, recall of personal experiences and anecdotal evidence from colleagues I assert that important clues emerge as answers to the question *Why Do Museums Fail?:*

- Although most founders and collections donors assume permanence, we don't know the natural life span of a museum; we are still learning about the life cycle of these cultural institutions. There is no moral imperative that they survive in our society, but Americans are predisposed to want them to survive.
- Anyone can start a museum, but not all are prepared to finish and operate one because it requires vision, passion and commitment over time. Successful organizations plan periodic reviews and assessments of their visions, gut checks about their passions, and renewal of individual and organizational commitments.
- Non-profits, like for profit enterprises, need long term capital, cash reserves, and operating surpluses. The term not-for-profit is a misnomer that dooms museums to the hapless region of social services requiring constant government subsidy. Successful museums don't think "not-for-profit" because that is simply a charter characteristic that forbids distribution of surplus to individuals.
- Unlike living creatures, which are biogenic in their evolution from prior forms, museums are created anew with each need, idea, or cause that arises - and not always for reasons that might be enduring, sustainable, or socially useful over time. Successful museums revisit their missions periodically.
- If a niche is too big, a museum cannot successfully fill it except by measured growth over time. Recently a number of local and regional museums have gotten themselves declared as National Museums (of this, that and the other). The durability and effectiveness of these marketing designations remains to be seen.
- If a niche is too specialized, the resources and community interest may not be sufficient to support it and sustain it over time. For example, museums created to honor individual celebrities or artists, single events or sports, or donor/founders have fared poorly in the recent economic climate.
- Museums with a single source or limited sources of revenue may not be able to adapt to changing conditions in a sustainable way. Successful museums have multiple streams of earned revenue and donated support.
- Museums dependent on tax dollars may be cast adrift as political forces change. Even institutions chartered and required by public laws are facing great decreases in their support from government, and some successful ones have long benefitted from public/private partnerships in some form.
- Museums may fail to be properly symbiotic with other entities in their environment (e.g. a municipal, state or federal government, or a university) and so be judged irrelevant or a source of assets to be stripped for cash by the parent. Successful museums in these environments have often marshaled support from their parents and communities long before crises occur.
- Museums may fail to reproduce (donors, trustees, staff leadership). Institutional development means so much more than project-based or annual fund raising. Successful museums continue to recruit, engage, involve and develop lifelong relationships with their stakeholders. Generational changes

that are now underway will test museum preparedness greatly as the Greatest Generation expires (many donors and trustees) and the Baby Boomers retire (trustees and staff leadership).

- Museums may fail to maintain the "will" to live and prosper in their environment. It has been said by many that complacency is one of the grave dangers to any organization, and successful museums constantly assess their state of being to avoid the discovery that they are, one day, "post-classic."
- Museums may fail to adapt to changes in their environment. Urban institutions in particular have already been confronted with the challenges of changing demographics and community interests. Successful museums seek more ways to include community needs and interests in their governance and programming.
- Museums may be oblivious to the ways they are perceived in their environment. If museums don't find out what their community thinks of them, they may be quite surprised to find out. Successful museums take the time to know how they fit into their neighborhood.

What Are the Positive Trends?

In the past few years I have noticed generally positive trends for operations, service and sustainability that give hope to the question of the long-term viability of museums as integral parts of our society:

Operating Trends

- More civic engagement with communities
- High public trust and high expectation of quality and variety in programs
- Growth of niche audiences such as aging Boomers and minorities
- Competition with entertainment venues for leisure time activity
- Growth of adult educational programming
- Collections made more accessible to all
- More use of interactive technologies
- More of a role for education in exhibit development
- Increase in outsourcing for content and design expertise
- Increase in complexity of operations
- Need for fiscal diversification
- Growing leadership gap - where is the next generation?
- Clustering of museums and attractions
- Blurring of roles and boundaries between cultural and commercial
- Growth of user created content

Service Trends

- Move towards library attitudes and standards for capability to serve stakeholders, audiences, visitors in sharing collections and program information
- Front line training in hospitality and service including security
- Flexible or extended hours to meet public needs

- Horizontal integration of functions for both projects and regular operations, with resources and accountability attached
- Expanded use of community scholarship for project and program planning and presentation
- Great recent increase in multiple opportunities for contact with audiences and customization of the visitor experience through social networking sites, blogs, podcasts, cell phone tours, website downloads, game-playing, etc.
- Leadership in creating school curricula for museum visits that support state standards
- Increased multiple use of auditoriums and theatres for debates, lectures, performances, readings similar to what some libraries offer
- Increased integration with social needs of the community for job training, computer access, gathering places, refuges, etc.

Sustainability Trends

- More museum people at cabinet-level or sub-cabinet level positions in state governments, whether in departments of Education, Cultural Affairs, or Natural Resources - giving museums the potential for more recognition and funding of their work
- Increasing numbers of foundations dedicated to support of municipal and state museums
- Development of multiple income streams to mitigate dependence on sole source funding including endowments, membership programs, facility rentals, retail operations, special program fees, etc.
- Emphasis on LEED construction for reuse of materials and efficient/cost effective ongoing operations
- Increasing use of partnership agreements for funding, programming, training and contracting activities

What Matters in the End?

What does this mean? It means that to prepare to deal with deterministic factors for failure/extinction as organizations, museums need to know themselves, measure data important to their effectiveness and impact, assess the threats in their environments, and plan and act accordingly. Jim Collins, in his monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (2), illustrates some of the measures not just for success, but greatness: Superior Performance, Distinctive Impact, and Lasting Endurance. Where does your museum stand, and where does it need to direct its efforts at sustainability?

Museums as individual organizations are not necessarily immortal. In the end, if your museum does sustain a mortal blow from a trophic cascade like the collapse of a government or a natural disaster, be sure that your mission stays intact and that you are further prepared to undergo either a responsible discorporation and transfer of assets to another museum, or a resurrection based on the idea that will best serve the needs of your community.

(1) Quammen, David. 1996 *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography In An Age of Extinctions*. pp. 293-294. Scribners, NY, NY

(2) Collins, Jim. 2005. *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*. p.6 Jimcollins.com, Boulder.

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