Exhibition Studies: Issues and Ideas

How Do Museum Studies Programs Address the Nature of Museums Today?

by Bruce Altshuler, Anna Leshchenko, Rick Riccio, Richard Sandell, Marjorie Schwarzer, Nora Pat Small, Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, and Carol B. Stapp

In keeping with this issue’s theme, Exhibitionist queried a number of directors of museum and exhibition studies programs both in the United States and abroad. We asked two questions about the ways in which these educators are thinking and teaching about museums today, and we asked them to reply in about 150 words. Here are the questions and the seven responses we received to each question.

Question 1: Please describe the key assumptions about museums and their roles that underlie your museum studies program, i.e. would you say the 2007 ICOM definition provides a good conceptual framework, or would you modify this in any way? A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

Bruce Altshuler, New York University: Museum studies programs must take a very broad view of what a museum is. In practical terms, we want students to maximize their possibilities of employment in institutions that satisfy the interests that brought them to the field. The 2007 ICOM definition rules out some of these, such as corporate and for-profit museums, and non-collecting institutes of contemporary art. But more importantly our programs should go beyond limited definitions of the museum in thinking about curricula, for in responding to social, technological, and disciplinary change museums constantly are pushed to develop boundary-stretching practices. In this regard theory-oriented courses seem to me to be equal in importance to practical training classes, for it is primarily in such courses that students learn to think critically about the institutions in which they will work. And it is critical thinking that prepares them to deal with new challenges that confront museums and museum-like institutions.

Anna Leshchenko, Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow: The ICOM definition is regarded as an institutional approach, which is more necessary for legal issues not for directing museum’s future development. In the educational process we try to provoke theoretical thinking, not rigidly institutional. We emphasize museum’s cultural nature, focusing on the Museum as a cultural form (a so called cultural approach influenced by Cultural Studies).

We aim at preparing a more flexible museum staff. Flexible because one person has to deal with many tasks at a time quite frequently as there are plenty of small museums with few workers all over Russia. There is also much speculation on ongoing staff reduction in big museums, so the flexibility is vital. Another problem our museums are facing in the near future is having to work on business terms. That is why museum workers will have to learn fundraising. Our task is to train them in a way which will not convert a museum into a circus.

For us this shift from an institutional to a cultural approach is important, because it allows us to 1) explain how and why the museum appeared and how it is continuing to form culture, not just existing as a fixed institution that “collects” and “serves the society;” and 2) research on and within the museum (for those who do not just work, but...
reflect and write theoretical articles).

**Gretchen Sullivan Soren, Cooperstown:** I think that our mission statement says a great deal about our focus: "The Cooperstown Graduate Program trains creative, entrepreneurial museum leaders committed to programs for the public good." We believe that museums are public service institutions that must serve the needs of their communities and that must change with their constituents. This does not mean, of course, that they will disperse collections as their communities change, but rather that they will continuously seek ways of offering services and programs that visitors find useful in their lives. Education, study, and enjoyment are all part of this equation, but so might be a farmers’ market at an historic site in a food desert like Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York or a latch-key program for after school kids whose parents are at work. Collections, exhibitions, and programs (particularly in history and science museums) should address audience and community needs and foster community discussions about things that matter in people’s lives today. Museums must become much more aware of their constituents, not simply with occasional programs, but with exhibitions and collections that interest a broader audience. Museums that do not serve the public good are not good museums and perhaps are not worthy of the benefits they derive from their not-for profit status.

**Nora Pat Small and Rick Riccio, Eastern Illinois University:** We find that the 2007 ICOM definition of museums works well for our graduate program in Historical Administration, in part because it can be applied to a wide variety of institutions. Because we see museums as public institutions we incorporate public history, in all its messiness, into our curriculum. Because museums need to collect and conserve we incorporate collections and archival care and management, as well as historic preservation into the program. Because history is fraught with controversy and research skills are essential, we ground students in good history methodology. Because students need to practice all these new skills, we incorporate many applied projects, both group and solo, into their academic year. Accepting a basic working premise, however, does not preclude us from encouraging students to think about what museums have been historically, how and why they change, and what they might be in the future.

**Richard Sandell, University of Leicester:** Quite a lot of the research that is carried out at Leicester (which directly informs and underpins our approach to teaching and learning across our programmes) is concerned with institutions that fit fairly comfortably into the familiar museum definitions, such as that offered by ICOM. Indeed, there are key parts of our curricula that consider collections (tangible and intangible), for example their care, management, interpretation, and learning and social value. But at the same time, there is a lot to be gained from resisting definitions of museums that potentially sideline or exclude organizations and practices that have a lot to bring to the field of museum studies. We have students working in historic environments; contemporary art spaces; wildlife, nature and landscape agencies and so on, and our conversations with them are always enormously valuable to our ongoing efforts to inform new thinking about museums and the field of museum studies.

---

"...a cultural approach is important, because it allows us to explain how and why the museum appeared and how it is continuing to form culture."  
Anna Leshchenko

---

**Gretchen Sullivan Soren** is Director and Distinguished Service Professor at Cooperstown Graduate Program, Cooperstown, New York. She may be contacted at SORINGS@oneonta.edu.

**Carol B. Stapp** is Director, Museum Education Program, The George Washington University, Washington, DC. She may be contacted at cstapp@gwu.edu.

---

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please log on to the NAME listserv at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NAME-AAM/
Marjorie Schwarzer, John F. Kennedy University: Museums provide places for wonderful, powerful, meaningful encounters with ideas, environments, and objects. As such, they need a committed, passionate and talented professional workforce to advance their role as safe, secular, accessible public sites that enable these kinds of experiences and explorations. At the same time, professionals need the tools and well-honed critical thinking skills to sustain museums financially, while not sacrificing their greater humanistic missions. That’s a pretty tall order, but a critical one given the economic, environmental and societal pressures all cultural and educational endeavors face. The ICOM definition is one such tool that museum professionals need to do our work. Even though it reads like a “sellable sound bite” to position museums to politicians, funders and other prominent stakeholders, it also as good a starting point as any for a conversation about the complexities facing museums, and by extension, society.

Carol B. Stapp, George Washington University: The ICOM definition functions effectively as an official description of a museum, stating the basic characteristics for legal and fiscal purposes. Similar to attempts to pinpoint “What is a museum?” by AAM and IMLS, it reads like a checklist. The one reference to the essential determinant for an institution that meets all the other criteria to qualify as a museum—“in the service of society”—constitutes the heart and soul of museums and sets a high standard for judging their public value. The Museum Education Program is predicated on understanding and advancing the museum’s public dimension, “service of society,” following through on the tagline for AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums, which boldly declares “because museums can change the world.”

Question 2: In your role as an educator of a new generation of museum professionals, do you foresee (or perhaps you are experiencing now) basic changes in your current assumptions about museums?

Bruce Altshuler, New York University: My basic beliefs about museums have remained unaltered, but my assumption that certain ideas did not need defending has changed. One of these notions is that of the museum as site of rational inquiry and coherent discussion. Of course I understand that museums serve diverse ideological purposes, and I appreciate the lessons of postmodern critique, but I find it difficult to accept, for instance, the Creation Museum as a museum. Other notions that I did not previously think were in question concern the importance of museums providing, among much else, places for unhurried experience of works of art and for deep engagement with cultural, historical, and scientific concepts. So while I used to feel the need to argue for less conservative notions of the museum, I now feel compelled to defend some traditional museum values in the face of ideological challenges and the spectacularization of museum experience.

Anna Leshchenko, Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow: My current assumptions are not positive. Very few of our students after graduating start working in museums, which is explainable. Museums are very dependent on State cultural policy. The situation in Russia is rather tough as culture areas receive scarce support from the state budget and museum workers are considered "saints" for working almost for free, they are actually “social outsiders.” After the financial
crisis (2008) more students came to museums, presumably as they could not find another alternative, but now the economic situation is getting better and very few stay for a long time, though they seem to enjoy this work. Another negative “warning” is hearing from my students that museums they see abroad are better, and “not that boring.” Those students who are able to change the state of affairs are more likely to sell their ideas in business and other high-paid jobs.

Gretchen Sullivan Soren, Cooperstown: Last month we invited a speaker who happens to be an alumna to come to Cooperstown from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. We asked her to speak about dialogic learning, the topic Jack Tchen wrote about in the 1980s. The students were more excited than you can imagine about the idea of bringing visitors into the museum to discuss immigration, racism, disease, global climate change, or any number of other topics that are in the news right now. They all wanted to go out and work in institutions that really fostered this kind of active community engagement. Many, many museums are still in the old paradigm of “telling” rather than “engaging” or “listening” in any meaningful way. I think museums will have to move in the direction of, dare I say it, shared authority—not just giving lip service to it, but actually participating in the difficult work of dialogue.

Nora Pat Small and Rick Riccio, Eastern Illinois University: Actually, we do not foresee any truly basic changes in our current assumptions about museums. We anticipate that museums will continue to collect, preserve, and educate, and that we will continue to ask our students to consider what the essence of a museum is.

We do, however, expect to continue to examine and revise our curriculum, as has been the practice since our program’s inception, to reflect changes in the ways collecting, preserving, and educating occur in museums. Digital media already have had an almost immeasurable impact on the way museums and other cultural institutions function. We have an enormous challenge in keeping up with the technology, but perhaps an even larger one in challenging our students to think both creatively and critically when it comes to using that technology.

Richard Sandell, University of Leicester: In my own teaching and research, I have been delighted, over the past 15 years or so, to see a mainstreaming of concerns around audiences and, more particularly, issues of diversity, equality, and even social justice, in museums in many parts of the world. Few practitioners today would openly question the value of museums reaching out to and engaging with more diverse audiences and constructing narratives that help to shape our understanding of social and cultural diversity. But, at the same time, I am increasingly worried by recent signs of change which seem to suggest a return to values that view the learning and social value of museums as somehow peripheral to the “core business” of museums. This is a worrying trend and one that requires us to equip new generations of practitioners to defend the value of more inclusive museum practices and to take forward more progressive understandings of the museum and its role in society.

Marjorie Schwarzer, John F.Kennedy University: If only every board member, politician, funder, director, and consultant could take the time to contend with the dialogs that our students and faculty have in our work.

“We have an enormous challenge in keeping up with the technology, but perhaps an even larger one in challenging our students to think both creatively and critically when it comes to using that technology.”

Nora Pat Small and Rick Riccio
"My basic beliefs about museums have remained unaltered, but my assumption that certain ideas did not need defending has changed.”
Bruce Altshuler

(continued from page 85)

together. I’m optimistic about what the “new generation” of leaders brings to museums. They are curious and fluid in their thinking. I’m less optimistic about the willingness of those in positions of power to engage with them. Do they hope the march of time and change will stop?

Obviously much has changed since I entered the field in the 1980s: technology and social media; the blending of diverse cultures and ethnicities; the turn away from communal experience toward individualistic self-satisfaction; the growth of fundamentalist religion.

These (oft-times contradictory) developments—and many, many more—impact how museums facilitate encounters between ideas, environments and objects. I think the new generation grasps what’s at stake. Our role as mentors and educators is to work together to sustain museums as vital grounds for dialog and reflection amidst an ever-changing cultural landscape.

Carol B. Stapp, George Washington University:
My role as an educator of prospective professionals positions me to highlight the continuing significance of museums as potent social forces. While it is imperative to recognize and accommodate demographic, technological, economic, and political trends, the fundamental mission and meaning of museums can continue to guide policy and practice. By conceiving of museums as catalysts for learning and anchors for community, predictions about the transformation of the institutional context (virtual! user-generated! out-sourced!) do not negate the underlying tenet of the museum educator as an advocate for accessibility and accountability. Admittedly, I’m still tied to the love of audience + object; museums may not be the sole locales where such compelling encounters can occur, but they serve as an indispensable link in a continuum of opportunities for supporting human and environmental well-being through expanding the capacity for enlightened decision-making.

Although the programs seem fairly comfortable with the ICOM definition, they do not feel constrained by it as they develop their course offerings and prepare students for the museum field. Both as a practical matter of education for future employment and in terms of museum theory, the programs acknowledge that the definition of “museum” is expanding and shifting. Accordingly the respondents see their programs as preparation not only for museum work specifically, but for a wide range of cultural institutions. Among the most important areas for inclusion of study are:

- digital communication and media technology
- corporate business practices
- fundraising strategies and philanthropic relations
- community/identity politics and activist organization agendas
- audience research (user behavior, learning style, and expectations when engaging with museums)
- trends in academic/scholarly research practices and standards.

Liza Reich Rauson and Tiffany Sakato contributed to this commentary. The Editor