

Joining the 21<sup>st</sup> century while remaining honest to our mission as university museums

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In 1999, Elaine Heumann Gurian, a brilliant woman who has worked for decades in museums and consults internationally, wrote an essay entitled “What is the object of this exercise? A Meandering exploration of the many meanings of objects in museums.” Like so many contemporary theorists, she turns away from the traditional definition of museums as repositories of collections, and insists that the essence of a museum is “in being *a place* that stores memories and presents and organizes meaning in some sensory form. It is both the physicality of a place and the memories and stories told therein that are important” (Gurian 2004:270). Furthermore, she asserts that “Museums ... are the tangible evidence of the spirit of a civilized society” (Gurian 2004:269). Let us keep this idea in mind as we ourselves meander on the unique and common issues of the university museum.

First let me introduce my institution, the University of Alaska Museum of the North, located 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle in Fairbanks, Alaska.<sup>1</sup> We were founded in 1926, and for decades the collections were dispersed in a variety of places on campus. In 1980, we opened a building where, for the first time, all our objects were in one place, and all the curators’ laboratories were together. This was to be the first phase of a two-phase building project that did not get started until 2001. After much fund raising, community friend-building, and a myriad of problems I’d rather forget, we finally opened our expanded museum in 2005.

### **Where are university museums in the world of museums?**

We learned a great many things during the planning, construction, and operation of this expanded facility that are relevant to the question of where university museums fit in to the world of museums in general. In preparation for this essay, I opened up several recent

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<sup>1</sup> For images of the University of Alaska Museum of the North, see our website: [www.uaf.edu/museum](http://www.uaf.edu/museum).

publications on museums, hoping to find insights into the unique issues that confront university museums, or at least, to read something about them. I was sadly disappointed

A thought-provoking and original book, *The Museum in Transition* (Hein 2000), contains no mention of university museums. *Museums of Tomorrow: A Virtual Discussion* (Berger 2004) deals solely with art museums, ignoring the numerous university art museums. *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Carbonell 2004) not only omits university museums, but has very little on natural history or science museums and nothing on museums that conduct research. University museums are also absent from *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift* (Anderson 2004). Only *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Marstine 2006) addresses our institutions in an essay by Janet Martine and Lyndel King entitled “The university museum and gallery: A site for institutional critique and a focus of the curriculum” that demonstrates the value to students’ education of challenging and radical exhibitions.

There was published well over a decade ago a book specifically about the relationships between museums and universities, published as *Museums and Universities: New Paths for Continuing Education*, (Solinger 1990). Surprisingly for a book so entitled is the absence of many references to university museums. Except for one essay written by Robert Dyson, then Director of the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania, all contributions are by museum professionals from non-university museums and academics. Dyson’s addressed the reinvigoration of an old and venerable institution. He wrote that in 1987, the University museum altered its mission statement to include both research and public education. He stressed that this educational mission was strengthened by his museum’s presence on a university: “The museum benefits in special ways from its setting in a university. First, the staff of 21 formal curators is greatly enlarged by the proximity of faculty whose varied special interests lead them to participate from time to time in the museum’s educational activities” (Dyson 1990: 68) In our own renovation and expansion activities, we took advantage of our university colleagues. For example, the community had asked for an art gallery to exhibit the excellent collection of Alaska art we had, and we responded with the Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery. In this process, we drew heavily on the expertise in the art, anthropology and linguistics departments.

To go back to this brief and cursory glance at museum literature, it was not until September 2000 that university museums became the center of attention, during a conference in Paris sponsored by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on “Managing University Museums.” It was at this event that many members of what would become UMAC met.

The publication of this conference, *Managing University Museums*, came out in 2001. It is a fascinating and useful book that presents a variety of university museums in North America and Europe, and I recommend it highly. With the exception of Peter Tirrell who in “Strategic Planning and Action for Success in a University Museum of Natural History,” who discussed the success of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, few writers addressed the topic of actual management.

Indeed, Melanie Kelly, in her conclusions to the book commented that most museums at the conference did not seem embrace a “business-oriented approach as the way forward.” She asked many questions, including:

- # Is the business and marketing model positively innovative, or is it a brash and inappropriate intrusion?
- # Are universities naturally reluctant to take risks?
- # Do university administrators need to be convinced about the advantage of investing in their museums?
- # Do academics see museums as rivals for funding?
- # Or are they allies in trying to find ways to preserve integral scholarly values at a time when the cultural environment in which they work is changing?

These are all important questions that we all address periodically, I suspect. Let me answer a few of what I consider the easy ones. University museums are in the very best position to take risks because they are at institutions of higher learning which have at their core the principle of academic freedom. Yes, university administrators need constantly to be convinced of the value of their museums. As for funding rivalry, this is not limited to academic departments and museums – at most universities everyone believes that the next unit gets more resources, and that’s not fair.

## **The business model**

As for the business and marketing model, it may not be to our liking, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might as well become familiar with using tables, charts and graphs to convince those who control money that we know what we're doing with it. When we began our campaign, we crafted a business plan, with the assistance of a community committee of financial experts. This, incidentally, enhanced the value of the document.

Once we have a business model, we need to make sure our programs are in step with other museums. I want to stress that we always must endeavor to remain true to our academic mission and concerns for the physical objects in our custody. But in addition we must survive in this interesting world.

The so-called "new museology" is not so new, for in 1917, Newark museum director John Cotton Dana urged museums to become more inclusive and welcoming to broader public. This was the first crack in the elitist armor of museums, but it took quite a while for the concept to become firmly established. So long in fact that it was not until 1992 that the publication of *Excellence and Equity: Museums and the Public Dimension* heralded role of museums as mainly educational institutions. Now, as Kenneth Hudson asserts, "it is now almost a universal conviction that museums exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt ...its prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors."

More and more institutions today are accepting the philosophy, clearly articulated in 2000 by Hild Hein, in her aptly titled *The Museum in Transition*, that for a museum to successfully attract and maintain a diverse audience it must change its focus from simply the presentation of objects to the production of experiences. In her treatise on the museum's transition from only maintaining and interpreting objects to creating experiences, Heim points out how manufacturers of illusion such as theme parks and the media compete with museums for attention. Instead of stubbornly refusing to change, or enthusiastically accepted all the trappings of a theme park, Heim urges museums to maintain their standards while they create experiences.

## **How do we survive?**

In Anderson's *Reinventing the Museum* (2004), Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler ask, in an essay written in 2000, "Can museums be all things to all people: Missions, Goals and Marketing's Role." Just a few decades ago, many if not most university museums would have considered marketing activities inappropriate for such serious institutions. But times have changed, and museums, all of them, must compete with theme parks and other forms of popular entertainment. The first step in developing a marketing plan is to recognize that no single museum can be all things for all visitors. As a consequence, we must identify goals that fit in with our strengths and core mission. Kotler and Kotler suggest museums address several questions:

- # Who are our constituencies?
- # What level of attention should we pay to those constituencies?
- # What strategies should be set for each constituency?
- # What is the optimal program mix?
- # How can we expand community service?
- # How can we reposition ourselves to become more popular and entertaining – while remaining true to our mission?

That last question is the most difficult for university museums, because our central mission, to preserve and research cultural and scientific heritage, does not automatically lend itself to popularity and entertainment. But it is doable. At UAMN we address the other questions from the perspective of the last one, that is, always being conscious of what we really are and never diverging too far from that identity. As a museum director, it is my responsibility to wake up every day, look in the mirror, and ask myself if I am still honest or if I have gone outside our mission. Thank goodness, I have always been able to say yes to the first question. Everything we have done thus far is solidly founded in good research, directly relates to our Alaskan mission.

When we were fundraising for the expanded museum, we thought it wise to craft a business plan to demonstrate that we have thought seriously about future revenue and expenses, so that we would remain in a healthy financial position once the new wing opened. This exercise proved valuable for several reasons: it forced us to think critically about the future; it

demonstrated to prospective donors that we knew what we were going to do; and it addressed the same questions that Kotler and Kotler ask in respect to marketing the museum.

We have three different major constituencies. As a university museum, our first responsibility is towards the students and faculty. Although they certainly bring in grants and contracts, the research and collections division costs a good deal to manage, and thus needs the revenue brought in by our next constituency, tourists to Alaska. As the principle income-producer, considerable attention must be paid to this audience. We depend on the good will of our small community, which has its own needs we must address.

Let me describe briefly how we balance the needs of the tourists and the community. 80% of our annual visitation comes to the museum between 15 May and 15 September, the vast majority of them being from out of state. Our community of 70,000 spends little time at the museum in the summer, preferring outdoor activities, so we can pay attention to local people during the rest of the year. For the summer, we try to have interesting special exhibits on Alaska, and offer two revenue-producing shows, one on the aurora, the other on the experience of winter. Visitors are inevitably disappointed that it does not get dark enough in the summer to see the northern lights, and thus appreciate an interesting, entertaining, yet scientifically accurate multimedia presentation on the aurora. Visitors also are fascinated by winter, and always ask “how do you survive at -40?” *Winter* is an interactive, audience participation program that answers that question.

In the fall, winter and spring, we offer excellent school programs for the children of the community. Every year we work with the Fairbanks schools to improve our offerings and serve the curricular needs as well as we can. It is during this same time that we install special exhibits from outside Alaska, bringing to our community traveling shows on various topics such as nature photography, American painting, and science for children. Lectures, workshops, a variety of free days, and film series round out our community public programs. We are always looking for new ways to improve our interactions with the community, and continually seek advice on this formally from our Museum Advisory Council which meets four times a year, and informally on a daily basis.

The examples thus far given are fairly conventional, and cannot be considered especially innovative. We must move beyond them, and imagine new ways to serve our audiences. Given the choice, I will always choose to explore a gallery of real things than gaze at images on a screen. However, as Hilde Hein makes clear, contemporary audiences (read that younger than this writer) are less concerned with seeing real objects than with having real experiences. Even in 1990, Robert Dyson of the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania recognized that different approaches were needed for the young, with their visual and aural learning styles, and older people with more traditional styles, such as reading. Hein points out that a public that grew up with television and computers willingly accepts simulation as a substitute for reality. Instead of bemoaning this reality, and fighting its consequences for learning and understanding, she urges museums to focus on improving the experiences they offer. Hein challenges museums to do that – but with an important caveat:

As coauthors of experience understood to be real, museums are competing for the public's allegiance with such manufacturers of illusion as movies, television, theme parks, and advertising. In that light, museums must become as discriminating in the selection of the experiences they purvey as they formerly professed to be solicitous of their collection and care of objects. Confronted with the observation that not all experiences are born equal and some are more meritorious than others, museums must cast themselves responsibly together with that mission (Hein 2000:16).

This is quite a challenge for museums – creating engaging yet educational experiences that can stand up to the barrage of media experiences today available.

In 2003, critic Maurice Berger conducted a two-week symposium online with 28 artists, art historians and museum staff to speculate on the future of museums. The resultant volume, *Museums of Tomorrow: A Virtual Discussion* (2004) (which completely excludes university museums) brings together in somewhat cohesive fashion the wide-ranging comments by the participants. It is of course noteworthy that the conference took place in cyberspace as opposed to a well-equipped auditorium. Although the focus was on art museums, Berger did comment passionately about the *possibilities* for all museums. He urged the participants to speculate on how museums might flourish by relating to the ever-changing worlds in which they exist. “It

would not be a terrible thing,” Berger asserts, “if museums learned from TV or the Internet or from other social or cultural forms.” How horrifying is such a concept to us?

At UAMN, we tried to balance the reality of our young audience with our commitment to excellence and integrity. We constructed a building with a genuine “wow” factor that is, I’ve observed, particularly appealing to the young. We wanted a striking architectural statement that expressed in form the sense of place that is Alaska, and were very pleased with the result. As a museum and a research university, we chose to be daring and thought-provoking. The building is completely different from any other in Alaska, a unique structure unlike all the other boxlike buildings of the state. It expresses the dynamism and diversity of this state through abstract sculptural forms and vast interior spaces. The public areas have curved, sloping walls – and few right angles. The exhibition centerpiece is the Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery, situated in a glorious space, with its dynamic curves, angles and 40 foot high rear wall with a computerized simulation of the aurora. Many shades of glacier blue provide suggestions that one is actually inside a glacier. Just walking into the building and through its public areas offers the visitor a special experience unobtainable anywhere else in the state.

We also created a unique sound experience of the Alaska environment called “The place where you go to listen.” In a small white room a visitor sees a large lit screen washed with colors that change slowly as the sun moves across the sky. Penetrating chords of musical sounds are generated, via computers, by the light of the sun and the moon. The changes in the light and sounds are by nature slow and subtle. There are also, however, sensors located at 6 sites around Alaska that pick up seismic activity, which it turns out very common in the state. Whenever the earth shakes, deep and resonant notes are generated, again via computers, seeming to shake the room. And, when the aurora is dancing overhead, both in the winter when you can see it and the summer when you can’t, “aurora bells” announce its presence through music. This remarkable experience was created by a wonderful musician, John Luther Adams, in collaboration with scientists from the university’s Geophysical Institute, a research unit world-famous for its studies of the earth and its skies.

When we first wrote our business plan in 2000, we projected visitation numbers and other sources of income, as well as future expenses. We opened our expanded museum in May, 2006,



and have a better idea of realistic numbers in those two broad categories. Because of this, we are currently (December 2006) embarking on a revision of the business plan that will inform our activities over the next five to ten years. Like its predecessor, this plan will revolve around how we can improve revenue sources through serious consideration of our constituencies to ensure the future health of our research and collections, as well as provide valuable experiences for our various visitors.

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Elaine Heumann Gurian's comment that "Museums ... are the tangible evidence of the spirit of a civilized society." It is worth remembering those words as we strive to make university museums in tune with contemporary practices, responsive to the needs of our multi-generational audiences, preservers and protectors of cherished heritage, and sites of the production of knowledge. All these goals are, I believe, achievable – but only through embracing them all together as interconnected means of the survival and, indeed, the flourishing of our unique institutions.

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