ABSTRACT

As museums enter a new century, we are challenged to demonstrate our relevance to society. Increasingly, institutions have recognized that in order to thrive, we must make our mission-related activities – exhibits and programs, collections and research – meaningful to the public they rely on for support.

Numerous deeply-ingrained habits of practice and of thought have prevented object-based exhibits from responding effectively to visitor interests. For such museums to be truly relevant to our audiences, this paper argues for a fundamental shift in how we think about and organize exhibits.

Exhibits need to become more topical and issue-oriented, rather than generalized and systematic. Furthermore, a successful topical exhibit program needs to operate on two separate, yet integrated, levels:

- long-term exhibits providing context on broadly relevant, interdisciplinary themes
- shorter-term exhibits on specific, current issues embedded within the long-term exhibits, linking that broad content to visitors’ lives

Beyond the crucial role of increasing the museum’s relevance to its audience, such an exhibits program would have numerous ancillary benefits, including more evenly distributed costs, greater creativity, lessened job burnout, and new funding opportunities.

Though specifically addressing natural history museums, aspects of this paper should be relevant to museums of all kinds.
“Museums that respond quickly to community needs are institutions that will continue to enjoy great success as we move deeper into this new millennium. The challenge for museums will be to develop a new model for assembling short-term exhibitions that couples the richness of the museum-going experience – thoughtful packaging of objects and stories in a reflective space – with public interest in topical issues.”

With these words Ron Chew, executive director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum, addresses some of the major concerns facing American museums at the dawn of the 21st century. What is our role, our relevance to society? How can we justify our expense, even our existence? As others before him, Chew finds meaning in service to the community, and stresses the need to connect our institutions to visitors' lives. Without such a connection we risk losing public support, and with it attendance, revenue and funding. Throughout the profession, leaders are echoing this call:

- Edward Able, President of the AAM, cites relevance, accessibility and relationships as the watchwords of the day: "Underlying every plan of a museum to make itself more valuable to its visitors is the issue of relevance."  

- Robert Sullivan, describing plans at the Smithsonian, says “we must get engaged in talking about options that people have and decisions they must make personally and as communities.”

- Ellsworth Brown, President of the Carnegie Museums, summarizing the thoughts of several museum directors, maintains the natural history museum of the new century must focus on "accountability to society.... It will be connected to issues of current and critical interest to humankind."

Clearly, the profession believes strongly that museums need to be relevant to our visitors’ lives and concerns. However, it is just as clear that most museums are not, though not for lack of trying. Exhibition, the museum’s most prominent public face, carries much of the
responsibility for connecting an institution to its audience. And the most frequent approach to this issue, attempted by many museums, is to install temporary, topical displays to interpret the day’s headlines, while the permanent galleries interpret the collections.

But such bifurcated programs generally fail to infuse the museum as a whole with relevance. By themselves, the topical displays can be quite good. But conceived and presented separately from the larger, permanent galleries, they are often unable to forge a link to their institutional setting. Compared to those permanent exhibits, so beautifully built and so impervious to change, the small, temporary, “current-events” display seems out-of-place, an afterthought, almost an apology.

A TRUE STORY

In the summer of 1998, an infestation of Asian Long-horned beetles broke out in Chicago’s Ravenswood neighborhood. Nearly 1,000 trees had to be cut down; my block, at the heart of the invasion, lost 58 of its 60 trees. Clearly, this is a topic I’m interested in. In response to the event, The Field Museum of Natural History put together a small display. It was a pretty good exhibit: it contained specimens of the beetle and damaged wood – the first I’d ever seen up-close – and the text was engaging and informative. No question, they succeeded in interpreting the issue. But in terms of connecting the issue to the institution, in making the Museum relevant to me, they failed.

Originally, the display sat in the Museum’s central hall – plopped down in the middle of a half-acre of marble, visually diminished and physically separated from any other gallery. Lacking context, it felt unconnected to the institution. Later the cases were incorporated, somewhat clumsily, into a temporary exhibit on the history and growth of the Museum’s insect collection.

In neither setting did this issue-based display build any bridge between the Museum and my life. Y’see, I’m not interested in this beetle because of its taxonomic classification. And I’m not interested in this beetle as part of the Museum’s collection. I’m interested in this beetle because it’s eating my trees! And that issue remained stubbornly outside the Museum’s sphere of interest, as expressed in its permanent exhibits. A tiny display case
spoke to me, while the massive galleries spoke only to themselves.

Like most large museums, The Field builds many of its exhibits around its collections. And it has organized those collections according to scholarly systems of classification. Unfortunately, exhibits based on abstract, generalized themes are ill-equipped to deal with specific, issue-based displays. Thus the Asian Long-horned Beetle display never found a comfortable home – timeless exhibits provide poor context for contemporary information.

(In the interest of full disclosure, I must mention that I worked at The Field for several years, and one of my duties was developing such “current science” displays. Despite much strategic planning around the need to get topical issues on the exhibits floor, we were never able to establish a workable system. Seeing the beetle exhibit on a return visit several years later, I was both delighted that The Field had not given up on addressing current issues, but also saddened to see that an effective formula remained elusive.)

THE PROBLEM: THE ETERNAL EXHIBIT

Why do museums struggle so with relevance? Many obstacles stem from the logistical differences between temporary and permanent installations. But these differences themselves derive ultimately from an attitudinal conflict between what I call the Topical and the Eternal.

All too often, we conceive out permanent exhibits to be much more than merely “permanent.” Subconsciously (or sometimes overtly), museums actually intend their galleries to be Eternal:

- Museum exhibits speak Truth, with a very capital “T”. The perfectly-known content we impart to our pilgrims is not subject to change. (Though many museum professionals struggle against this outdated attitude, it remains deeply entrenched in our attitudes and our processes.)
- Since the content will not change, the exhibit won’t be changing either. Design doesn’t need to be flexible, adaptable or expandable.
• If the exhibit is Eternal – unchanging and unchangeable – then it must also be Perfect. There can be no mistakes in content or design, and no references to currently-fashionable ideas which may seem dated in a few decades.

• Perfection takes time. Lots of time. And long lead times preclude rapid response to breaking news.

Of course, to paraphrase Voltaire, the Perfect is the enemy of the Good. Crushed beneath the burden of creating a Testament for the Ages, exhibit teams avoid risky experimentation and reflexively reach for the safe and the familiar – which all too often are also the typical and the expected.

Another problem lies in the unspoken value system of the exhibit profession. Most of the prestige goes to permanent exhibits, which will define the institution to our visitors and our colleagues for a generation to come. Prestige also surrounds big exhibits, impressive for their sheer size. And prestigious projects receive more resources: staff, money, space and time. As a result the smaller-scale, shorter-time frame exhibits are devalued, despite the fact that these are the very projects most likely to connect with our visitors’ lives.

Of course, bigger isn’t always better. More objects means more information – valuable in a research collection, but counter-productive when trying to convey a clear message to a non-expert, casually interested audience. There’s a maxim in advertising: if you can’t write your idea on the back of a business card, then you don’t have an idea. Similarly, the goal of an exhibit isn’t to be comprehensive, but to be engaging.  

(In my more radical moments, I have been known to advocate that no exhibit should be more than 2,000 square feet or take more than 18 months to produce. Bigger exhibits are just too complex, both for the people making them and the visitors using them. The huge investment of resources discourages creativity and risk-taking, while the lead time diminishes relevance. \^)
THE SOLUTION: FRAMEWORK GALLERIES, TOPICAL EXHIBITS

Framework Galleries

When the former Yugoslavia was disintegrating into its component, warring parts, most American museums stood silent. After all, the Balkan conflict concerned a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time. And with no collection or curator devoted to these particulars, many institutions felt they had no way to respond. Locked into a world of strictly bounded categories, exhibits had nothing to say.

But what makes the Balkans so horribly fascinating is that they are not “particular” at all, but rather are the current manifestation of universal themes: Ethnic identity. Cultures in Conflict. Religion. War. Death. These ideas, well-represented in any decent anthropology collection, are of great interest to our audience. And these are the issues our taxonomically-organized galleries tend to ignore. We view our collections as encyclopedic, and we build encyclopedic exhibits to present them. It’s small wonder then that for most people, going to a museum for today’s news seems as silly as going to the encyclopedia for today’s weather report.

Of course, the encyclopedia does have an entry on Weather, describing general meteorological principles. And if you could combine that background information with concrete examples of what's happening in the sky today, you'd end up with a better understanding of both.

This is precisely what museums need to do. We must re-imagine our permanent galleries in a new way, building intellectual frameworks relevant to the typical visitor. Recall the spotted owl controversy of a decade ago. A discussion of this issue would feel incongruous in a typical Hall of Birds, because visitor interest in the owl does not stem from its classification. But imagine a gallery on a relevant theme: Environmental Issues, Humans and Ecology, or Sustainable Resource Use. Issues which Ellen Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History, calls "pressing and enduring." Even if there's no owl in the paper today, such issues still pop up often enough to be part of the cultural zeitgeist. And galleries on these themes create appropriate contexts for discussing specific examples that do make the news.
Some museums are already rethinking the themes underlying their permanent galleries, recasting them in visitor-relevant terms. In particular, two history museums have begun to free themselves from the straightjacket of chronology. A chronological approach to history certainly makes a lot of sense – to an historian. To the visitor, however, seeing life in the 1800s amounts to little more than an exercise in trivia. The challenge is to make the past relevant to the present.

The Missouri Historical Society recently opened a new introductory exhibit, *A Sense of Place*. Rather than dividing St. Louis history into periods, they divide it into themes: politics, transportation, entertainment, etc. Each area then displays artifacts from throughout the city’s history, showing how people at different times have responded to the same needs. From there, it’s a simple step to discussing these issues in our own time.

Going a step further, the Minnesota History Center has created entire exhibits on ideas such as “Home,” “Family” and “Work.” These themes hit people where they live, engaging the audience emotionally as well as intellectually. And this engagement is exactly what museums need – not just in small, temporary exhibits, but in every display in the entire institution – if we are to make ourselves relevant to our visitors.

In shifting focus from rigid disciplinary content to fluid, interdisciplinary themes, these exhibits follow the lead of scientists. Major natural history museums – The Field in Chicago, the American in New York – have established Centers for environmental study, crossing traditional disciplinary lines and bringing their considerable collections-based expertise to bear on pressing conservation issues. By taking the same information they’ve always had and putting it together and organizing it in different ways, scientists come to a better understanding of how the world works. It’s time our exhibits helped visitors do the same.

**Topical Exhibits**

Establishing contextual “framework” galleries is only half the story. They provide the background, but in the foreground the visitor’s attention is focused on issues of the day. Research shows that visitors vividly remember museum experiences that somehow have a
connection to their own lives. And while many people will visit a museum once, whether they return depends, to a great extent, on whether they can make personal connections and see something of themselves within.

Therefore, to connect with our visitors, we must address issues that are important to them. As noted, the most direct way of doing this is through small-scale exhibits on topical issues. Placed within a traditional systematic hall, such displays have little effect. But if placed within a gallery that provides a meaningful thematic framework, that same display creates a tremendous synergy. The permanent exhibit provides background information to explain the current situation. The current situation provides a familiar example of the timeless background theme. The evidence of the past is applied to the context of the present. And visitors can see how the issue, the science behind it, and the museum that does this science, are all important and relevant to their daily lives.

Producing such timely exhibits would require a fairly flexible process. We would need an infrastructure specifically designed to support change -- a modular, easily replicated system which would reuse and recycle material. Such exhibits could form a special “What’s New” area in each gallery. And as new displays are rotated in, old modules could be incorporated into the permanent exhibit, thus keeping it ever fresh and relevant. (Long after Dutch elm disease and DDT have passed from the headlines, they remain recognizable touchstones for wide segments of the audience.) In this way, the gallery becomes self-renewing, with more recent display modules constantly replacing and updating the old.

THE ROLE OF THE SMALLER MUSEUM

One of the more interesting efforts at re-envisioning an exhibit program comes from the Cranbrook Institute of Science in suburban Detroit. A medium-sized museum, they haven't the collections to present an all-encompassing survey of the natural world. So they don't try. Instead of the traditional "Hall of Birds," "Hall of Geology," etc. – all of which would have major gaps in them – they're creating nine new exhibits based on unifying ideas of modern natural science: plate tectonics, evolution, genetics, etc. Within each "topic room," they use objects as examples illustrating the concept at hand, while other interpretive devices extrapolate to the broader themes. In short, they’ve moved away from things as the
organizing principle of their public programs, and reinvented themselves around ideas.

Those ideas, perhaps, may not be as relevant to visitors as to scientists. Nevertheless, the Cranbrook example is instructive. The difference between small museums and large isn’t merely one of degree; it’s a difference of kind. A small museum is not just a scaled-down version of a big museum; it’s a totally different beast. Large museums, with their encyclopedic collections, aim to present the totality of the natural world. Small- to medium-sized museums, with more limited resources, cannot compete on those terms. But by the same token small museums aren’t saddled with the need to display and justify a comprehensive collection. Unable to present all the details, they can focus their energies on general themes.

Small museums are also flexible. Large institutions, burdened with layers of bureaucracy, acres of exhibit space, and sizable staffs comfortable with the status quo, require enormous effort to alter. Small museums can more easily re-invent themselves, adapt to new conditions and seize opportunities as they arise. They become “change-ready” museums: opportunistic, pro-active, and responsive to change. They can experiment with alternative exhibit formats that are interconnective, upgradeable, and regenerative, thus blazing new trails for the profession as a whole.

INVENTING THE NEW MUSEUM

And that is precisely what I propose – a comprehensive overhaul of the exhibition program. The "Topical Museum of Natural History" would rip out existing galleries and re-imagine them, employing a new organization based on ideas rather than things, and a new approach based on current events rather than eternal “truths.”

The specific themes highlighted in such an exhibits program would grow out of an institution’s existing collection and research strengths, its physical space, its resources, etc. However, these themes must be made meaningful to our audience. Staff would identify the hot topics most likely to impact visitors today and into the future: Biodiversity. Local ecosystems. Cultural diversity. Genetics. Economics. Population dynamics. But focus groups and front-end evaluation would help us understand what in each topic is relevant to
the public. The information is the same; it’s simply a matter of ordering and organizing it into patterns meaningful to the visitor.

Next we must develop a space around each of these themes. The new exhibits still showcase collections, but they focus on concepts. They are interdisciplinary, drawing on many different collections in a truly integrated way. (The gallery is not organized around a collection, but rather around an idea that may be represented in many collections.) They employ modern exhibit techniques and philosophy. They are beautifully built, but also modular, designed to easily incorporate change.

Finally, we must develop a system for responding to current events, for quickly putting together an exhibit module on a breaking story which also links to the gallery theme. Such a system will need to overcome the professional reluctance to cut corners in order to meet a compressed time frame. More importantly, it will also need to figure out how to access the necessary staff, who are usually assigned to long-term projects and thus unavailable to work on late-breaking stories. Perhaps only a team – better yet, an Exhibits Department – dedicated to keeping galleries relevant can make a rapid response.

Thus, the role of the Exhibits Department changes. For one thing, these galleries can no longer be "exhibits" in the traditional, passive, one-way mode. If we’re going to talk about people’s lives, we can expect they’re gonna’ want to talk back. Exhibits thus become places where science and public life meet. Such built environments inform and illuminate the issues of the day: through programming, through displays, and by facilitating public forums and discussion.

For another thing, "maintenance" has to include maintaining intellectual as well as physical integrity. Science marches on; we must keep the museum in step. Not only do we need to identify opportunities for topical displays, creating and installing them in short order, but we must also continually monitor and update the permanent galleries as well. Exhibition becomes an on-going process, rather than a limited project leading to a defined product. In short, Exhibits staff become knowledge workers in addition to being skilled laborers.

To make such a program work, we need to get clever about planning and resource allocation. We must be aware of upcoming events, publications, conferences and stories
that will be in the news. 17 Even unforeseeable events can to a certain extent be planned, by following the “obituary model” of journalists. Just as newspapers have life histories of famous people prepared in advance, so too museums can prepare boilerplate exhibits on recurring themes: volcanoes, snow storms, warfare. 18 Some tweaking will be necessary to adapt the exhibit to the specific news item, but the bulk of background research would be done in advance.

Exhibits of course are just one piece of the puzzle. Educational programming must also reflect the new approach, becoming flexible enough to incorporate the day’s news. Indeed, we will need to develop whole new current-events programs, involving the public both in their planning and their presentation. Systems could be implemented to develop new programs in short order. Such programming would present information not as an end to itself, but as a springboard to discussion and debate.

We need PR to promote the new approach, to get the press and the public to think of the museum as the place to go for background on breaking stories. Following the lead of the Newseum in Arlington, Virginia, we may create a dedicated media space to host journalists, stage live and taped broadcasts, etc. 19 Curators must be ready to speak on topical issues as they arise, and not always from the comfortable position of unassailable authority; a museum presenting its point of view must be prepared to acknowledge and listen to others’.

This process will require a steady cash flow to sustain it. 20 Funders will benefit from the overall sense that the institution is now vitally engaged in the life of the community. Furthermore, Development may find that this ongoing program of small-scale exhibits creates a stream of new, focused funding opportunities (often an easier “sell” than the traditional big project / big gift combo).

The Director and the Board must be committed to the program. A change this sweeping won’t be achieved overnight, nor without some pain. Metamorphosis is a lot of work. But the payoff is enormous, and it is essential.
ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

And what is the payoff? Primarily, we’re aiming for a revitalized institution, one relevant to its audience, and an audience that in return feels connected to its institution. Any museum that pulls this off will realize tremendous advantages in funding, equity, opportunity and accountability. 21

But there are ancillary benefits as well. A traditional gallery takes years to plan, millions to build, and starts to fall out-of-date the day after it opens. An exhibit program organized around a combination of Framework Galleries and Topical Displays avoids these problems, and has numerous other advantages as well:

- smaller exhibits are cheaper and easier to build
- modular design further reduces costs – we’re not reinventing the wheel every time
- continual updating encourages recycling and reusing exhibit materials, realizing additional savings
- continual updating ensures galleries remain current and relevant
- smaller projects can be completed in less time; exhibit staff benefit by seeing the fruits of their labors sooner, gaining experience working on a variety of projects, and suffering less burnout
- the lower costs of a module (as compared to an entire gallery) encourage the creativity and risk-taking that are too often stymied by the fear of failing on a high-profile, mega-buck project
- an on-going exhibit program allows for flexibility and the ability to seize opportunities as they arise, rather than as they can be worked into a long-term schedule.

CONCLUSION

We live in a world awash with information: 24-hour cable news, talk radio, the Internet. Studies show that people rarely think of museums as a source of current information. 22 Yet those same studies show that the public trusts museums more than they trust other sources.
To thrive, or even survive, in this increasingly competitive information marketplace, museums need to overcome our deficits while holding onto our strengths. We must find ways to make our trusted information relevant and important to our visitors.

The effort is great, and not without risk. But the end result is a totally new museum, a new paradigm for the profession, and a secure rooting in the lives of our supporting communities.

NOTES
6. Other institutions have also struggled to make exhibits address societal issues, rather than purely scientific ones. Describing an Ontario Science Center exhibit, Hooley McLaughlin notes “what makes the Human Genome Project cutting-edge is not the building of the [genetic] catalog, but the ethical, moral, existential, and even religious questions the research stirs within us.” (McLaughlin, Hooley. “The Edge of What? Cutting-Edge Science and the Common Touch.” ASTC Dimensions, Sep/Oct 2000, pg. 7)
7. Chew, pg. 48
8. Chew, pg. 47, also argues for a commitment to a shorter exhibit process.
9. Brown, et. al., pg. 42


14. Weil, pp. 27-41

15. Ellis, David in Mintz (above)


17. LeBar, Wayne, et. al. “Presenting the Latest in Science and Technology: How Science Centers Can Meet The Challenge.” Presentation to ASTC Annual Conference, October 2000, Cleveland. LeBar also noted the need for resources specifically dedicated to “breakthrough” galleries.

18. Ibid.


21. Kostner, pg. 286


The author wishes to thank those who offered ideas, comments and encouragement during the development of this piece: Rich Faron, Rachel Hellenga, Kathryn Hill, Claire Pillsbury, Beverly Serrell, Linda Schubert, and Michael Spock.

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