

BY RANDI KORN

In *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen E. Weil reworks Washington Irving's tale of Rip Van Winkle into a tale of Rip Van Recluse, a curator who wakes from a 50-year slumber to find his museum operating in strange and unfamiliar ways. When he fell asleep, Van Recluse was revered as one of the museum's most important staff members because he held the knowledge about and cared for the collections. But when he wakes up, he finds that his museum is focused not on its collection, but on the people in his community. He is bewildered because the institution that once held him and his beloved objects in such high esteem has shifted to accommodating visitors, who, 50 years earlier, had been considered intruders.¹

How well this tale describes the contemporary museum field. Today, museums' focus on the community is championed by AAM and founda-

Self-Portrait

First Know Thyself, Then Serve Your Public

tions that support the field, and staff members around the country talk about their own shifts in focus. However, the processes and projects indicating actual institutional change—i.e., altered work behaviors, museum environments, and museum-community relationships—have been less visible. This is largely because for more than a decade, museums have been responding to outside forces, such as consumer trends, funders' interests, and a competitive leisure market. As a result, the subsequent shifts in focus sometimes lack the depth of knowledge required for ongoing institutional change. And, as several business gurus have argued, successful organizations are the ones that embrace a knowledge of self—they understand and know what they are, what they want to be, and whom they want to serve.

Institutional knowledge and integrity—i.e., behaving in ways that reflect the museum's knowledge of self—are valuable assets. Now, more than ever, as museums focus on the public, they must clarify for themselves and others what they are and what they want to provide for their

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Left: Kazimir Severinovich, *The Peasant*, 1928-32. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia/Bridgeman Art Library. Details on pages 33-35 and 46-47.



constituents.

This notion of knowing one's self and stating one's intent is emerging as a significant idea. Some notable recent books on developing mission statements for the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, for example, explain how to explore the soul of an institution and write statements that exude this kind of "knowing."² At the same time, museums are struggling with issues of accountability on a smaller scale, spurred by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' new requirement to conduct outcome-based program evaluation. This is a systematic way to determine whether a program has achieved its goals and objectives by focusing on its effect on visitors. It requires program

experiences they want to offer visitors, and create the mechanisms that invite people to have those experiences, then each museum is certain to be unique.

Almost all practitioners already think their institutions are unique, and they are right. A museum's collections make it unique, but so do its staff and its organizational culture—the way it works, presents its collections, and provides interpretation. While the collecting focus may or may not change over time, the staff and the organizational culture are always evolving, and each newly crafted mission statement attempts to capture each institutional evolution. Mission statements clarify, particularly for staff, what the museum values, including collections,

If institutions clarify

the kinds of experiences they want to offer and invite people to have those experiences, then each museum is certain to be unique.

developers to state their objectives in a measurable form when seeking funding, and a museum to balance its aspirations against what it can realistically achieve. Articulating program objectives for visitors and communities should be of interest to all museum practitioners, whether or not they are looking for outside funding. Articulating program objectives provides all staff with a clear destination.

Identifying institutional intent is more challenging, because it means that a museum must know its institutional self and the public it would like to serve. It requires staff members to come together to determine what the museum is, whom it wants to affect, and how it wants to affect them.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art sent a letter to members that stated the museum's role as a place "to enlighten, inspire, awe, and ultimately, to help heal—that is our responsibility and the essence of our work."³ These days, such work seems more vital than ever for all museums. The challenge for staff is to make those (or other) ideals their own, so each museum does not sound like every other museum, and to strike the right balance between practitioners' dreams and the realities of the visitor experience. If institutions clarify the kinds of

programs, and scholarship activities. But they usually do not incorporate a vision for the museum's relationship with its visitors and communities or the kinds of experiences that visitors can have. A museum's mission statement should have a companion statement that describes, with great specificity, the kind of visitor experiences it values. The museum then can provide visitors with opportunities to have those experiences.

In the last decade, some researchers have conducted studies

FIGURE 1 Science Museum, London

Visitor Experience Definitions

VISITOR EXPERIENCE	DEFINITION
Social	Chance to spend enjoyable time and share experiences with friends/family/other people
Entertainment/Relaxation	Light relief Relaxation or physical exercise A chance to forget about everyday cares and concerns
Unique	Chance to see rare/beautiful/real things
Personal Identification	Inducing feelings of nostalgia Stimulating memories Promoting a sense of belonging or connection to other people
Parenting	Strengthening relationships between family members A chance to inculcate values in children/grandchildren (e.g., museum visiting, art appreciation, learning about the history of science)
Experiencing a Place	Experiencing "the place" (e.g., doing the London museums)
Museum Learning	See figure 2 for a complete definition

that examine the complexities of the museum experience, while others have set out to prove the learning value of museums in general. Such research is important because it informs practitioners about what is realistically achievable. But only a museum's staff can articulate the institution's soul and vision for the visitor experience. Museum practitioners must think about what they do, for whom they do it, and how they want to present the content and knowledge their museum embodies. Visitor researchers will continue to conduct research, but only practitioners can define how they intend visitors to experience their museum.

Often "museum learning" is used as a catchall to describe the entire visitor experience. But few practitioners actually describe what they really mean by learning. What does visitor learning look like? What does it sound like? In reality, there is a continuum of visitor experiences, of which learning may or may not be a part, but over the years "museum learning" has accrued considerable political weight. Indeed, projects are more likely to be funded if factual learning is a specified outcome. In addition, it is socially acceptable—who doesn't value learning? When a museum or researcher documents factual learning, the event is written about and published, but other outcomes are not as touted.

Museums should craft a vision for the visitor experience that reflects the unique qualities of the institution, collection, and staff. Each museum should push the limits of its new vision by deconstructing ideas, phrases, and words so all staff members understand how their visitor experience is distinct and different from another institution's. And as museums begin to articulate their vision for the visitor—not tied to any outside force, but emerging from within—they will create a language that fully describes the diversity of museum experiences.

As *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman has noted, some museum directors already are pondering these issues, but perhaps not as explicitly. In August 2001, Kimmelman wrote about a meeting he attended in Austria at which 70 museum directors and curators from 35 countries discussed museums in the 21st century. He noted that while the directors seemed to focus on boosting attendance, "the question that hung in the air was, money aside, to what end?" Museums, he wrote, do not seem to know whether they are more like universities or Disneyland and their priorities need restating.⁴

Yes, museums' priorities do need restating. Determining the vision for the visitor experience is the first step toward rethinking priorities, just as thinking about the public and its place in a museum, and the museum and its place in a community, requires exploring and learning about one's institutional self.

Recently, as part of an informal search for museums that have defined a vision for the visitor experience, I contacted Patterson Williams, dean of education at the Denver Art Museum. When I asked if her museum had a statement of intent regarding the visitor experience, she noted that the education department has a mission statement, but it does not discuss the visitor experience. "When we work with different kinds of audiences," she added, "I'm interested in different kinds of 'learning' and I am not sure that the word I would choose for the museum experience is always 'learning' . . . It seems we need to broaden our idea of the

(Please turn to "Self-Portrait," page 50)

FIGURE 2 Science Museum, London
Categories of Learning

CATEGORIES	OUTCOMES
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquire new knowledge Accommodate/assimilate new knowledge into existing schemas Set prior knowledge into context Learn how to apply existing knowledge Reinforce prior knowledge through repetition/direct concrete experience Connect concepts Draw analogies
Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge beliefs and values Increase appreciation of range of view-points in other people Inspire interest and curiosity Inspire awe and wonder
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop skills of co-operation and communication Helping others learn
Developing Skills (Mental & Physical)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prediction Testing theories Deduction Making and telling stories Problem solving Decision making Investigation Classification Observation Measuring Physical skills (e.g., manual dexterity, craft skills) Acquire skills related to specific qualifications Acquire skills of artistic appreciation and criticism Acquire skills of numeracy, literacy, use of information technology
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase self-confidence and self-efficacy Motivate to investigate further Associate curiosity and thinking with enjoyable experiences



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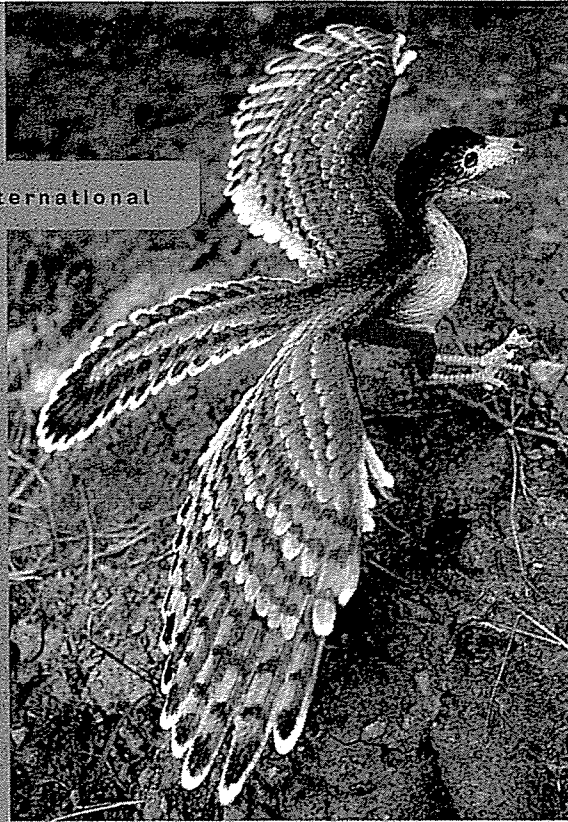
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Self-Portrait

(Continued from page 35)

goal of museum visiting beyond what is traditionally meant by 'learning.' Now if 'learning' means having anything new happen—a new feeling, thought, sight, smell, etc., then 'learning' may be a useful word. But it is often used to suggest information retention or skill improvement."

Her response suggests that even the most thoughtful audience advocates are short on words to describe the unique qualities of a museum visitor's experience. Perhaps that is because most practitioners know how deeply personal museum experiences can be; to describe them in professional terms may lessen their value. Nevertheless, it is important for the field to think about the experiences our institutions can offer, to push the boundaries of what it is possible to experience in a museum.

Take, for example, work being done at the Science Museum in London. Ben Gammon, head of visitor research, and his colleagues define museum learning as being at the core of the visitor experience, but they also believe that museum learning is one of seven experience types (see figure 1). Staff also identified five categories of museum learning—cognitive, affective, social, developing skills, and personal⁵ (see figure 2)—as well as barriers to learning, and, perhaps most impressive, specific indices of learning in each of the five categories to help answer these questions: What does museum learning sound like? What does museum learning look like? Staff figured out how they see the museum and how they want it to be experienced by others. In other words, they wrote a precise vision for the visitor experience. And this statement won't just be stored away in a drawer; it is part of a larger institutional document that will guide the staff through program development and evaluation. Staff also conduct visitor evaluations to see if and how their vision for visitors is realized.

At the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), Deputy Director Bonnie Pitman and her staff have developed a visitor experience matrix that connects three art experience levels to four types of learning. The muse-

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um hypothesizes that its audience includes individuals who are at one of the three levels of engagement with art—an awareness level, an appreciation level, or a commitment level. Staff are integrating these levels into their objectives for new installations of the collections, interpretive materials, and public and school programs.

The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History in Texas frames its vision for the visitor experience as “learning,” but staff have clearly articulated what they mean by that term—a definition very different from the one at the Science Museum. The Fort Worth museum created a doctrine that states that staff will “Create Extraordinary Learning Environments [ELE] for a core audience of 5- to 11-year-olds and the people who bring them to the museum.” They define an ELE as “a stimulating, multi-dimensional, immersive place where visitors have opportunities to hear real stories, interact with cool stuff, construct their own knowledge, and because of their experience, visitors will never be the same.” Staff also identified what an ELE should be and what visitors will have an opportunity to do: An ELE should be:

- fun
- immersive (meaning that you forget everything else)
- learner-driven (a learning environment, not a teaching environment)
- multidimensional
- accessible
- resource-efficient
- connected
- and encourage discovery

While in the ELE, visitors will:

- see and touch cool, real stuff
- hear stories
- test their ideas
- have fun
- catch themselves doing something they never thought they would do
- do things they cannot do at home or school
- play
- interact with others
- experience A-ha!

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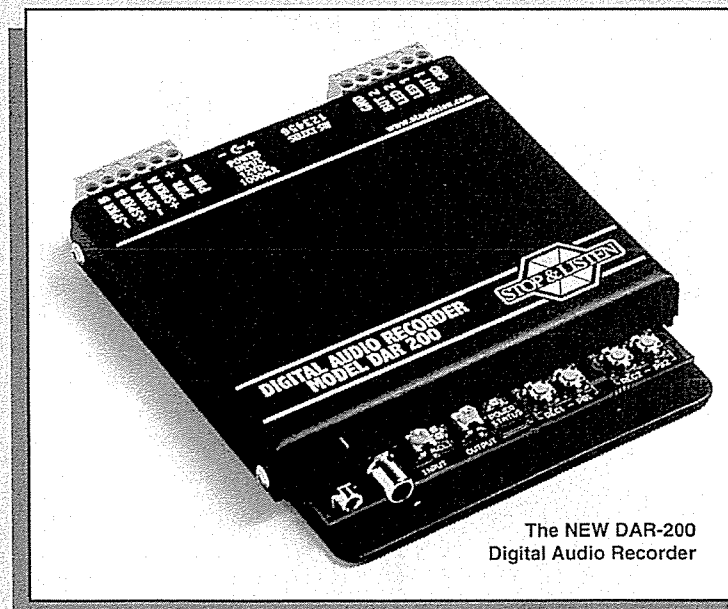
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