

MAKING CHANGES: MUSEUMS AND PUBLIC LIFE

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A **museum** is a "permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the *tangible and intangible* heritage of humanity and its environment, for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment", as defined by the International Council of Museums.

The UK Museums Association definition (adopted 1998) is:
“ Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

What we mean by “policy”?

1. The first is policy at the research level, the collection of information, data, facts, statistics which inform a field and provide the foundation for policy formation.



2. A second aspect of policy, lies in the formulations it makes possible, the identification of policy objectives or policy alternatives, the sorting of policy decision which might be taken by government, private and/ or not-for-profit agencies. Policy formulation is most often based on policy research, on analysis of conditions needs, on diagnosis of the public purposes, or the economy, or equity demands, of ways to best address the conditions under which we live as citizens. Familiar questions of this kind in culture relate to tax policies, intellectual property issues, trade regulations, issue of access, funding and financing guidelines, training expectations, certification or evaluation devices.



3. A third area of cultural policy, is less external to cultural institutions themselves. Both policy research and policy formulation do consistently locate themselves at distances from most cultural institutions, including museums. Policy analysts sit at policy schools or policy institutes, for the most part, or they work through think tanks. Policy professionals also inhabit government, law firms, planning organizations. Most of them do not work within cultural institutions.



Policy considerations matter because they can help to delineate and then enrich the conditions within which people conduct their lives. Cultural policy matters because cultural institutions, including museums, have that kind of generative responsibility or the ways in which people learn.



Policy is implicit in the rounds of daily business, in the selection of priorities in the making of budgets in the titles and tactics and technicalities that move us through an institutional day or month or year.

At the Rockefeller Foundation, from 1985 forward, they built a founding program for museums. They had not founded museums systematically before that time. Rockefeller's interest began when officers of the foundation, building new guidelines, recognized that museums bring the disciplines of the arts and the humanities together, making them unusually opportune targets for a foundation devoted to both.

That was a practical objective, which led them quickly to a larger rationale.

Museums play major roles in urban and communal life. They are repositories of history and belief, of artifacts, but also of ideas and ideals. Museums are durable agencies for reflecting issues and changes in the society.

They tried to built a museums program that would reinforce priorities of the most venturesome professionals in the field.

In the 1989, the new museum program was described to Rockefeller's Board of Trustees in this way:

“ By and large American art museums have focused on painting, sculpture, and architecture that are rooted in Western traditions. Natural history or natural science museums have presented non Western materials, but have selected and displayed them as archaeological objects from the past or as curiosities, without reference to current realities or to intercultural connections. The work of American minority artists and that of contemporary third- world artists has been exhibited to a limited extent in alternative or ethnic museums”.

The museum program was intended to help advance such trends, to support efforts by American museums to include third- world and minority cultures in scholarship, curating, and presentation.



This was the period in which venturesome museum directors and curators were changing the exhibition and academic boundaries of their institutions, exposing all Americans to the work of cultures that had been considered marginal or uncuratable, silent, or even dead. The extent to which this activity reflects change in museum policy is reflected by the change in the description of Rockefeller's museum program from 1995:

“Museums are key civic institutions in which definitions of identity and culture are both asserted and contested. Museums of art, history, or natural history have deep power derived from their socially assigned role to classify and define people and societies and to posit standards for excellence focused on culture, artifacts, and works of art. The specific activities of museum – collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting can support or challenge the constantly changing core values of society”

In the last two decades, leaders in American museums had moved from a mostly mono-cultural to a determinedly multi-cultural agenda, from a Western-centered aesthetic to a global span of aesthetics, from the scholarship of Euro-America to a global scholarship.

And, in fact, at Rockefeller today, the museum funding goes less and less to blockbusters, to ground-breaking, assertion-making exhibitions. More of the funding supports intense, scholarly, sharply focused shows and facts of diversity.

Museums throughout the America are giving more attention to education and to outreach efforts. For example the model program called “A Place for All People” at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, which invites residents of the city to interpret works of art in their own terms, in their own way. Or at the Seattle Museum of Art, an exhibition room contained the works of local children based on museum master works that they had made their own.

The sense of the public has changed in American museums- the sense of public participation, of the partnering, the sense of public purpose. Museums are increasingly involved in economic development in their communities, and increasingly dedicated to community and neighborhood development.

As one archeologist writes, the museum is “the embodiment of a people’s dreams and determination and a symbol of national rebirth the most extraordinary circumstances”. The museum elicits resonance and wonder. It elicits inspiration, an immediate and personally felt cogency of belief and hope, against all odds.

Museums, after all, are our most privileged and permanent, best patronized, most expert, most visited, most beloved cultural entities.

Important links:

1. <http://www.campkumbayah.com/information.shtml>

2. <http://www.amazementsquare.org>

Thank you for your attention 😊