

# Book Review:

## *The Convivial Museum*

Reviewed by Paul Orselli

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**Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock. (2010). *The Convivial Museum*. Washington, DC: Association of Science Technology-Centers. Paperback. 138 images. 200 pages. \$22/\$17 for ASTC members.**

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What does it mean to foster a “convivial” museum? Co-authors Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock have answered that question masterfully in *The Convivial Museum*, a book that every museum worker should keep on a shelf nearby (or better yet, in the bag or briefcase you carry with you to work).

I found the book interesting from both a visual and structural standpoint. Rather than ticking through a checklist of convivial “dos and don’ts,” Pollock and McLean have instead packed their book with evocative black and white photographs as well as short text passages and quotations that serve as landmarks rather than mile markers to contemplate along the road to more convivial museums. (Here each picture is certainly worth a thousand words!)

*The Convivial Museum* begins with a discussion of conviviality itself, then moves into broader sections of “Welcome,” “Comfort,” “Being Alive Together,” and “Convivial Practice.” Each one of these main sections addresses key components of conviviality in the form of “Entry” or “Seating,” as aspects of “Comfort,” for example. Every page offers words and images to help you consider (and reconsider) your own notions of conviviality in a museum context.

Early on in the book, the description of a dinner party effectively helps illuminate ingredients of a convivial social experience—making people feel welcome and comfortable, and seeding interesting conversations. This social/food analogy is a good one since it emphasizes sharing and finding ways to entertain and delight

guests. It sets up the notion of allowing museum visitors the time and space to approach things in a way that makes sense to them, to offer surprises, and to reward contemplation. This rather than setting visitors trudging along a path of knowledge in between paying their admission fees and exiting through the gift shop.

So what sorts of things make for a more “convivial” museum? Let’s take a brief walk through some of the key aspects that McLean and Pollock highlight in their book.

### **Welcome**

Let’s start with “Welcome,” the place where every museum visit begins, even before you walk through the front door. As *The Convivial Museum* indicates, a museum with legible signs on nearby highways, a ramp for strollers and wheelchairs, a clear entrance, is truly open to all. There are thoughtful nuggets to consider here: Christopher Alexander says that if a grand museum building is not thoughtfully oriented to its surroundings, it will become “socially isolated, because you have to cross a no-man’s land to get to it.” This is followed up with a series of images showing a variety of approaches to museums, both inside and out. While all these physical welcome sequences are different, they are all accessible with clear signage and orientation.

Ways to soften the often monumental stairs and entrances of the classical “Temple of the Muses” approach are featured in the “Welcome” section as well: a long bench in front of the sidewalk entrance to the Tenement Museum, or entrance doors for cyclists during “Bike

Night” at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. There are no “right answers” or dreaded “best practices” here, just good ideas to pick and choose and adapt.

### **Comfort**

Next we follow the convivial path to consider the importance of “Comfort” in a museum-going experience. How do you make everyone in your museum, from senior citizen to babe in arms, feel “at home”? No small task, but it is surprising how often simple elements, like seating, are glossed over, or worse, deliberately eliminated from museum spaces. The call to arms (or bottoms) in this section of *The Convivial Museum* may well be “more places to sit, please!”

No matter how well designed an exhibition space may be, or how carefully cultivated the “vibe” of a particular institution, McLean and Pollock rightfully point out that no single space, however well designed, will meet the needs and preferences of everyone. So another takeaway from the section on “Comfort” might be to emphasize the need to vary or even change up the rhythms and types of spaces, even within the same institution. These types of possible variations are explored through words and images that ask the reader to consider where concepts such as “Ambience,” “Light,” and “Sound” fit into the convivial mix. It is interesting to consider how much emphasis museums and exhibit designers may focus on lighting while often being deaf to the cacophony inside exhibitions that detracts from the overall experience.

### **Being Alive Together**

In the final broad section of *The Convivial Museum*, the authors take up the social

construct of museum experiences, the notion of “Being Alive Together.” As McLean and Pollock posit:

It is not enough to bring people together. There are plenty of places where people congregate, socialize, and talk. Convivial museums deepen the conversation and foster a genuine meeting of minds by offering up some third thing as a focus of common interest or concern. p105.

In a way, this part of *The Convivial Museum* asks the reader to move back and forth (like a visitor) between the “active” experiences and objects in the galleries, to the “interstitial” spaces like lounges and cafes that hold the entire convivial experience together. How can we encourage active participation or deep contemplation in our museums, but still offer places for a “time out”? There is lots of good stuff to consider here.

### **Convivial Practice**

*The Convivial Museum* ends with a coda of sorts, by offering up its final section, entitled “Convivial Practice.” And here Pollock and McLean help us consider, and wrestle with, aspects of museum and exhibition practice that might well be “baked in” challenges to conviviality, like the notion of admission. If we as a field are truly willing to consider Elaine Gurian’s premise that “... general admission charges are the single greatest impediment to making our museums fully accessible...” (2006) what do we do about it? How do we unspool or recast a huge institutional and cultural notion to become more truly convivial? Again there are no clear prescriptions here, but there are examples and thoughts to help us consider such

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**References:**

Gurian, E. (2006). *Civilizing the museum*. New York: Routledge, 127. Quoted p. 161 in McLean & Pollock.

roadblocks (or merely speed bumps?) on the road to more convivial museums.

The section on “Convivial Practice” ends by acknowledging one of the primary difficulties in becoming a more convivial practitioner, or of helping to foster or create more convivial museums: running out of time. While every museum job description seemingly includes the phrase, “and other duties as required...,” *The Convivial Museum* asks us to step back from our sometimes overwhelming quantitative concerns and to slow down, try things out, and talk things over. In our headlong rush to “keep our numbers

up” we need to acknowledge that the qualitative aspects of our jobs and institutions are essential as well.

*The Convivial Museum* is very much a work that asks you to take the time to consider these qualitative properties of our museums. This book makes you think and ponder. Like a satisfying museum experience, it sets the stage carefully for contemplation and rewards your patience and consideration. Pollock and McLean help you remember the types of museum experiences that got you into this business in the first place. And what could be more convivial than that? ✨