Book Review:

Museums in a Troubled World

Reviewed by ***Robert Garfinkle***

In my difficult college and post-college years, conversations with my mother had a familiar if unwelcome pattern. She'd express her opinion about my current choice of major or girlfriend or job prospect and I'd feel criticized and react defensively. Then she would inevitably say, "I wouldn't tell you these things if I didn't love you so much."

Robert Janes hails from the same school of parenting as my mother. In *Museums in a Troubled World,* Janes turns a critical eye toward his child—museums—and doesn't approve of much of what he sees. The book takes on the entire field and challenges us pretty much across the board, systematically deconstructing our missions, practices, and values. Few in the museum business escape Janes' critique (except curators; more on that later). He decries museums' adoption of what he calls the free market ideology, "driven by numbers and measured by consumption" (p. 20).

But here's the thing: He really loves us. His disappointment in museums is matched only by his belief in their power to transform the world. Janes is a romantic about museums, believing we are uniquely positioned in the society to save us from environmental and cultural destruction. Like my mother, he believes in our great power and wants us to exercise it.

The "Troubled World" that Janes spends many pages describing is a familiar litany of catastrophes. The book laments wide-scale environmental destruction, massive disruptions due to climatic changes, the dramatic loss of biodiversity, and the trend toward cultural homogeneity. Using as his broad frame the language of political economics and analysis, he decries the ideology (his word) of human consumption and materialism that underpins the severe challenges we face.

Museums, he feels, have also fallen prey to this marketplace mentality, concerned more and more with a preoccupation with commerce and economic concerns above all else. While he acknowledges that sound business practices and models are virtues for museums, he laments the market model seeping into every aspect of museums, to their long-term detriment. In particular collecting and collections care, research, and community engagement suffer distortions and failure if managed with commercial models. He asks, rhetorically, "In their celebration of materialism, have museums become the unwitting handmaidens to a value system that is at odds with our survival as a species?" (p. 93). His answer is yes.

But if his critique of society and museums is sweeping, so too is his faith in museums to lead society toward a better future. He tells us why governments, business, universities, even religious institutions are unable to offer useful societal direction to answer these challenges. "This leaves museums with the obligation to probe our humanness and, in assuming this responsibility, museums are unique and valuable social institutions that have no suitable replacement" (p. 18).

It is quixotic, really; Janes paints a picture of many of society's institutions (including museums) steeped in materialistic values and engulfed by a corporatist mentality bent toward consumption. He hopes and expects museums to be able to change their ways and become a beacon, leading society out of this morass by thoughtful stewardship and civic engagement.

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Robert R. Janes. 2009. *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance, or Collapse?* New York: Routledge. 208 pages. $41.95 paperback.

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His confidence in us is flattering and humbling, and yet I'm left wondering how museums are expected to pull this off if indeed much of society is pulling in the other direction.

Janes wants museums to take our familiar role of stewardship and greatly expand it. He acknowledges the longstanding role of museums as preserving collections and material records. Stewardship, he states, "means to assume personal and organizational responsibility for the long-term care of public resources" (p. 27). What is needed now, he says, is to assume that the public resources we are responsible for include our planet and all its inhabitants. While acknowledging that stewardship can veer into paternalism, he nonetheless encourages museums to step forward on these issues of planetary health and human survival.

Janes describes a number of examples in the field that embody the values and practices he believes museums should aspire to. These are indeed inspiring projects, but it is hard to see how such efforts could be scaled up for significant impact. Perhaps I'm too embedded in the marketplace model, but there's a disconnect here. On the one hand Janes sets out a broad critique and equally broad ambition for museums to serve the world. On the other hand, the programs and practices he highlights as examples to serve that world are small-scale.

It's understandable that the critique is stronger than the vision; it's easier to describe where you've been than where you're going. Janes clearly states the values of a future museum as grounded in being "a locally-embedded problem-solver, in tune with the challenges and aspirations of the community" (p. 173). From vision to strategies or models, though, the road is bumpier. Janes doesn't address the social or economic viability of the future museum, except to say the current consumerist model is unsustainable. But what, really, is that new model? And what are the transitions between here and there?

His critique of museums' traditional role in society includes criticism of administrators, marketers, fundraisers, boards, museum architects, and most other players in the museum. There is also a thoughtful reexamination of the "most sacred cow" (p. 88) of collections and collecting in museums. He notes the growth of collections as a kind of museum "consumption" and calls into question whether museums can continue to be "organisms that ingest but do not excrete" (p. 84, quoting Suzanne Keene (2005).

In a curious concession to conventional museum practice, though, he takes only a gentle swipe at curators and curatorial expertise (pp.160-161). He sees curators as the bulwark against marketeers and the relevatism of knowledge, even as he concedes the role of curator requires some "reconsideration." This analysis seems inconsistent with his belief that museums must change dramatically up and down the organization and become much more willing to share authority with the communities they are part of.

A few other aspects of the book are problematic. The prologue, a set of stories and parables designed to situate the problems of museums and humans, didn't work for me. It's a simplistic straw man, and it undermines his credibility as a thoughtful critic of a complex world. His chapter on "The Mindful Museum" is a jumble of analogs and models that don't add up to the

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model of museum practice he seeks to articulate. This is where, perhaps, a broad vision of museum practice could have been articulated; instead, the variety of ideas from meditation to personal transformation to ecology to business fail to coalesce into a clear path forward.

These flaws, however, only serve to show the ambition of Janes' task. This is an important book for all of us in the museum field to read and consider. For me, *Museums in a Troubled World* was both inspiring and discouraging. I'm discouraged by the scale of solutions described in the book, compared to the scale of problems to be addressed. The task looks daunting, and the path dimly lit. Yet Janes does not flinch from calling us forward. I'm inspired by Janes' belief in the power of museums and his vision of museums as necessary and irreplaceable civic institutions. Like a great teacher, Janes asks for the very best in us and these public trusts we work in. Given the enormous challenges facing our planet and its inhabitants, let's hope our actions in the coming years make him (and my mom) proud.

References:
Keene, S. (2005). *Fragments of the world*. Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.