



Out of the United States of Mind

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A Are we unnecessarily limiting our ability to create innovative visitor experiences in this country due to the self-imposed constraints of our domestic museum mindset?

This article was derived from an AAM panel session of the same title at the 2003 Annual Meeting. The session, chaired by John Chiodo, included observations by three international museum professionals: Silvia Singer, Director, Espacio Centrale Educativo Betlemitas, Mexico City, Mexico; Tim Walker, Director, The Dowse Museum, The Hutt, New Zealand; and Chris Cawte, Managing Director, MET Studio Design LTD, London, England.

Chris opened his presentation by asking:

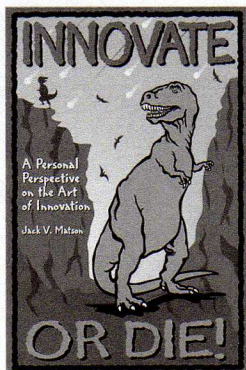
“Are American museums out of step with the rest of the world? Is it important? What can America learn from what is happening elsewhere? We are here to challenge, and provoke.”

Originally, our objective was to identify alternative interpretive techniques that museums outside this country were applying to their exhibition design. Unexpectedly, what we found was not more innovative ideas but a greater willingness to implement them. Chris observed that “America’s exhibitions are serious and reverential, treating their audiences, subjects and collections with the utmost respect. The time had come to be less inward-looking, and to challenge yourselves. Being unprepared to take risks in the museum field is not peculiar to America—it is the natural state of clients with responsibilities to various stakeholders, the public and board of directors. Clients everywhere need to face up to their natural conservatism.”

“Innovate or Die”¹

Innovation is a word in excessive use these days. We hear it and use it all the time. As we continue to tell ourselves that we need to be more innovative, are we bold enough to actually embrace truly innovative solutions? Chris commented that

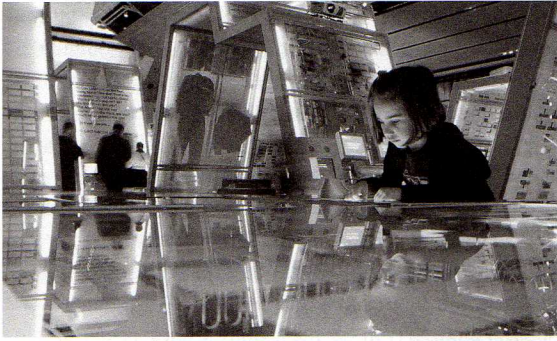
“I’d love a pound for every time we see the words ‘innovative, ground-breaking, unique, challenging, cutting-edge’ in a client brief. These words are being devalued. And they are dangerous words to put in front of a designer. They are emotive words for designers; designers feel they own these words. Put them in front of a designer—and not mean them—at your peril.”



It’s as if we believe that if only our institutions were able to find an innovative enough team, we could just sit back and watch the magic emerge. Somehow, in the end, we seem to be a bit disappointed by the results. The in-house team, or “those consultants,” under-delivered. While we say we want innovation, we regularly find ways of shying away from it when we see what it asks of us and of our stakeholders. Something seems to keep getting into the way. Could this be our comfort zone?

One might challenge our domestic mindset: do we have the courage to embrace our own visions? I speak not of the skill, but of the will. As a design professional for over 20 years, I’m convinced the skill exists. But what of our will?

“You’ll always miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.”²



Innovation around the world

So, are there museums outside the United States that have been able to break free of their natural conservatism and embrace innovative solutions? Chris, Silvia and Tim were all asked to produce specific and unique examples of such innovation. Chris cited the Turbine Hall in London's Tate Modern. "It is a huge space, built for contemplation, where visitors can sit and even lie down for hours on end, engaging with a single exhibit. Also worth considering are the great European tradition of the expos, where the most vital stories at the heart of a nation have to be told in a single building or interior and where emotional resonance has to be relied upon to draw you in. Also, Naturalis in Holland, Magna in the UK, and The Natural History Museum in Paris are great current examples of dynamic approaches to their subjects."



In terms of innovative technique and approach, Chris used the example of the Drugs Information Centre for the Narcotics Division of the Hong Kong Government. "Here the source and identity of the voice and imagery for the project became the main factors for its success. This project was aimed at the most difficult of all audiences, disaffected teenagers, who think they know all there is to know about drugs, who are almost allergic to the voice of authority, and for whom peer pressure is such that to admit any opposition to drugs is seen as an 'uncool' act, almost a

betrayal of one's own generation. We certainly had to get out on the street to get the right approach to this one and all the answers were right there in reality. We used the testimony of real drug addicts, the hard and uninterpreted facts of physiological science, the graphic language of the Hong Kong streets, and photography of the real city of Hong Kong. Everything had to be for real and completely stripped of the traditional voice of authority. We injected emotional content where there would have been a government information commercial. Already the exhibition is so successful that narcotics divisions from other governments around the world are coming to see what they can learn from it.

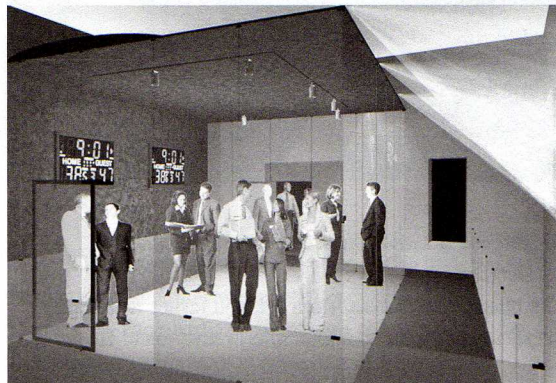
Espacio Centrale Educativo Betlemitas — Mexico

Silvia Singer is entrusted with the creation of a "new type of museum in Mexico that offers accessible experiences around the controversial topic of economics in the complicated Mexican social context." Imagine the challenges they face and the risks they are taking. They see their success as tied to their ability to "communicate in a manner that reflects [their] audience's social reality, and offers new forms of communication that assure inclusiveness, tolerance and respect." The museum will be part of a Cultural Center that integrates a formal museum with a social events center and economic studies center. The idea is to increase the museum's relevance to the community by providing a "comprehensive cultural offering that addresses audiences from diverse backgrounds."

In order to achieve their goals Silvia and her team embraced the following four strategies:

1) *"Employ the full force of the museum experience as an opportunity to shift the visitor's view of things."*

The museum is developing exhibits that seek to change the way the public views their role in national economics by inviting visitors to engage in group activities that simulate economic decision-making. The museum offers group gaming activities that encourage critical thinking and help visitors make connections between cause and effect.





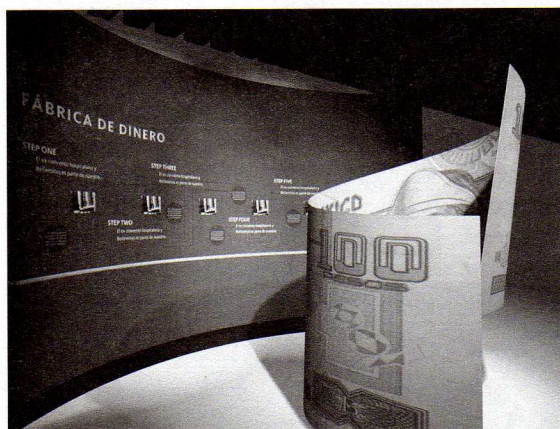
2) *“Refocus the museum’s emphasis from the preservation of collections to engaging in effective communication in ways that are directly applicable to the visitor’s daily life.”*

The museum is creating a non-collections-based institution that uses popular culture as the vehicle for communicating complex ideas. The voice of the graphics text, the use of street imagery, and the context of daily life all act as accessible and familiar vehicles for advancing the concepts of the interpretive program, and also help to avoid alienating specific audiences.



3) *“Address issues that effect people’s lives in real and tangible ways and embrace controversy to gain credibility.”*

The museum approaches its exhibit topics by plainly discussing the causes and effects of: the public’s needs and desires; national inflation; underground markets; and the connections between economics and culture.



4) *“Employ art and science as communicational devices.”*

The museum uses installation art, and invites national artists to contribute to a joint interpretive voice. This

creates exhibit experiences with varying points of entry, and broadens the arena of interpretation by including multiple points of view. It also helps popularize the ideas being shared by invoking the voice of cultural heroes.

These strategies were not immediately appreciated or accepted by all stakeholders, but Silvia’s perseverance and determination to advance this program has brought her and her team much closer to their goal. The entire cultural center is now housed in a fully restored 18th-century Spanish monastery in the prestigious historic center of Mexico City. The nearly-completed interpretive program for the project is now funded, financed by Mexico’s leading financial institutions.

The Dowse—New Zealand

In another part of the world, Tim Walker is leading his museum away from their traditional public image, which they now recognize as a significant barrier to participation, as they seek new ways to engage a broader audience. Tim describes how his New Zealand colleagues are “developing ‘brands’ that don’t include the image ‘museum’ or ‘art gallery’—including the physical symbolism of the museum building itself. This movement was headed by the National Museum project ‘Te Papa’”.

What is worth noting is how this approach, which reinforces the democratization of the museum experience, has been “controversial with more conservative museum audiences and museum staff but popular with many existing and significant new audiences.”

The results have been highly successful, but could they have been achieved without stepping out of the comfort zone?

Tim has faced some sizeable challenges. He has had to develop strategies to “navigate the competing expectations of a complex web of demanding and frequently hostile stakeholders. Chief among these were the museum’s board, the city council, the artist and craft community, loyal supporters and friends of the museum, and the staff. Faced with a divided and demoralized staff as well as an increasingly disenchanted city council, [Tim] was charged with the task of redefining the strategic vision, mission and strategies that would give the community more prominence in the museum. [He] was also asked to restructure the staff to ensure a more direct community focus for the museum, develop a revenue strategy, and review its governance structure.”

In response, Tim employed some ambitious partnering opportunities to help democratize the museum experience and broaden the institution’s financial support. Over time,

wide-ranging strategies “evolved and served to create a sense of cohesion and common purpose among diverse stakeholders that hitherto had been absent. The focus shifted to new models and opportunities that might be possible. An effective tactic was to build projects that were complicated in interesting ways and therefore are liable to lead to exciting outcomes.”

Some of the partnering strategies included:



• *Partnering with Marginal Groups: RESPECT Project*
 Most noteworthy is this recurring festival, now in its fourth year. The museum staged three outdoor music festivals featuring hip hop, rap and graffiti artists, which galvanized a number of previously antagonistic stakeholders. The festivals have been held on the museum grounds and required significant maneuvering with the mayor’s office and the local legislative representative. Graffiti artists were invited to paint one side of the museum, while inside the building the graffiti artists mounted a special exhibit. Tim writes: “the creative engagement with this ‘marginalized’ community that was, at the outset, suspicious and reluctant to participate in the event, eventually led these groups to become active supporters of [the festival] and the art museum. The collective learning that was derived from the creative engagement with these and other traditionally marginal community groups (e.g. prison and mental health creative spaces) also enabled the museum to strengthen its mission and identity. Taking our cue from the title of the festival’s title, ‘Respect,’ we suggest that the art museum has itself gained a measure of ‘respect’ by deliberating seeking out, and in some cases actively generating, resistance from its stakeholder groups. Moreover, rather than attempt to mediate and overcome resistance within the existing discursive arena, the art museum has ‘raised the stakes’ by consciously expanding the discursive arena within which it engages. Within this arena it has taken on a ‘provocateur’ role in which the museum acts as producer, disseminator and consumer of resistance within the immediate community it serves.”



• *Partnering with the Community: Dob an Artist*
 Here Tim invited the public to mine their own community and in effect “curate” a new exhibition on unknown local artists. “Local people were, via a cut-out form in the local newspaper, invited to ‘snitch’ on a creative person—i.e.; to ‘out’ an artist (whether it was themselves, a family member, a neighbor, etc.) This had the result of unearthing about 300 ‘artists,’ gaining national media coverage (including a spot on the prime national TV news magazine program), and powerfully shifting the perception of what/who the Dowse (museum) was for. Key works were selected and shown in an exhibition of creative people from the district, alongside artists that have established national and international careers, as well as artists in prisons and mental health contexts, etc. This show also reversed a sense that the local community was uncreative.”

• *Partnering with Local Businesses and Government: Wild Wheels*
 “This is a partnership with a shopping mall and a hospice, where we are the broker. Basically, it’s a one-day outdoor event where the local community are invited to decorate anything on wheels (themselves on skates, bikes, cars, buses, etc.) The winner gets a \$2,000 shopping voucher from the mall. On the event day the police collect money for the hospice. As the hospice is a hugely valued charity in this community, this arrangement has the effect of powerfully casting the Dowse as a key community organization. The project also attracts sponsorship dollars from local companies—including car dealers, truck companies, etc.—who would never otherwise support the arts, but who will do anything to support the hospice. (Hutt City has traditionally relied on automotive/wheels manufacturing, sales and service for its economic infrastructure.)”

What is interesting about all these innovative approaches to partnering is that they were never ends in and of themselves. Each had a purpose, and the museum developed creative ways of achieving its goals.





Innovation?

Clearly, innovation can lead to great success. So why are we so reluctant to innovate?

It is worth taking a closer look at what it takes to be innovative. It is the result of a problem-solving process that requires study, experimentation, and a lot of hard work. But most of all, to innovate one must take risks. The Innovation Network refers to it as The Challenge—The Pull:

“Innovation, by definition, means doing things differently, exploring new territory, and taking risks. There has to be a reason for rocking the boat, and that’s the vision of what could be - the challenge. The bigger the challenge and the commitment to it, the more energy the innovation efforts will have.”

To create something new, one must provide room for failure. Dr. Matson, Director of the Leonhard Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Education at Penn State’s College of Engineering and author of *Innovate or Die*, describes his teaching philosophy as to:

“... stimulate creativity by encouraging students to risk failure and to realize failure is essential to developing design skills and judgment. He centers his techniques on teaching people to unlearn years of practicing risk aversion, stressing the connection between creativity and risk.”

To innovate, one will probably need to step outside of their “comfort zone.” Ironically, organizations seeking innovation often do exactly the opposite. As Julian Burton at the London School of Economics puts it:

“A common problem for organizations is the need to stimulate creativity and innovation. The habitual reaction ‘how do we plan innovation?’ is to go to great lengths to control the creative process, iron out any uncertainties, avoid conflict and at all costs stay firmly within the comfort zone.”

With institutional resources, reputation and even survival on the line, many museums are reluctant to accept the risks required to innovate. Similarly museum professionals, knowing they will have few opportunities to work on major projects during their careers, also want to avoid failure.

Perhaps part of what it takes to implement innovative solutions is education, convincing stakeholders of the benefits of innovation to bring them along. Tom Kelly of IDEO writes in his book *The Art of Innovation*:

“When somebody champions an idea, it’s amazing what a difference that person can make. I couldn’t recount the times we won a job or successfully finished one because someone decided to go to the mat for the project.”

Any discussion about finding newer, more effective solutions, or breaking out of the box, or developing ways to be more innovative, is irrelevant if we don’t muster the courage to step out of our comfort zone. We must bring forth the will to overcome the resistance of our institutional inertia. If we don’t “go to the mat” for our ideas, our bold visions will never become more than a mirage.

Chris’s final words sum it up well:

“We believe that the time has come for America’s museums to come out of the classroom, get back out on the road, avoid the turn for Disneyland, and look again at art, at street culture, at youth and irreverence, re-making emotional links with non-typical audiences who will be passing through your halls once only. It’s time to stop preaching to the converted and to challenge your visitors – not in the high-handed didactic manner of the past, but by engaging with real life, real meaning and real cultural imperatives.”

Footnotes

1: Borrowed from the title of the book *Innovate or Die* by Jack V. Matson, published by Paradigm Press; 1st edition December 1981, ISBN 0965444902

2: Hockey great Wayne Gretzky (taken from a screen saver from Tapety Images)