



## **INSIDE: A LOOK AT THE EXPANDED CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF DENVER AT MARSICO CAMPUS**

**PLUS: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH SCIENCE AND INFORMAL SCIENCE  
EDUCATION**

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## S U B S C R I P T I O N   I N F O R M A T I O N

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# THE END OF NEUTRALITY: A MODEST MANIFESTO

By Robert R. Janes

## Introduction

The recent INTERCOM 2015 Conference (International Committee on Management) included a panel presentation with a rather alarming title – “Dirty Money: Divestment, Ethical Funding and Trust.”<sup>1</sup> We don’t use words like “dirty” in the museum world – we are deferential and “authoritatively neutral,” or so we believe. The purpose of this Commentary is to revisit the magical belief in museum neutrality and assess its consequences for the ongoing relevance of museums. I also wish to provide a manifesto of sorts, including a framework for constructive action to assist museums in addressing the most pressing issue of our time – climate change and disruption. In the process, I will introduce a moral imperative in the public persona of the mainstream museum, with all of the sharp opinions and grievous emotions that may ensue. Climate change and the role of museums in its amelioration is no longer about science, ideology, or politics – it is about social justice. Furthermore, the majority of museums are choosing to deny this fact in the conduct of their work, and I will also offer some observations on why.

## The Magical Belief of Neutrality

There is a widely held belief among museum boards and staff that they must protect their neutrality (with the exception of their expert pronouncements on quality and excellence), lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness, and special interest groups (Janes, 2013: 349). The meaning of neutrality has changed over the past decade, however, as museums have increased their reliance on corporate, foundation, and private funding, and more and more business people are appointed to governing boards. The unspoken argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate a private sector sponsor, real or potential. The simple truth, apparently unrecognized by the proponents of museum neutrality, is that corporations and the business community are themselves special interest groups, grounded in marketplace ideology. As the poet/farmer, Wendell Berry succinctly notes “Influence and consequence are inescapable. History continues” (Berry, 2000: 127).

Why do museum practitioners rise so readily in defense of neutrality and why is it so entrenched in museum practice? I suggest that neutrality is not a foundational principle of museum practice, but rather a result of the museum’s privileged position in society. It is a matter of record that museums enjoy a high level of public trust – more than any

other social institution and far beyond that of the Internet. This, in turn, has fostered a sense of complacency among museum practitioners, underpinned by the assumption that traditional thinking and practices must account for this privileged status. This perspective is further bolstered by the many museum executives who may have 25 years of experience, but it is the same year repeated 25 times. Hence, complacency, the absence of continuous learning, and the weight of tradition are persistent factors in the inability or unwillingness to rethink the meaning of neutrality and its implications for the role and responsibilities of museums in contemporary society. It may be cold comfort, but museums are not alone in this conundrum - all contemporary institutions are beset with complacency and myopia.

These assumptions and traditions have conspired to create two magical beliefs that are now the stock-in-trade of most museum workers. I call them magical beliefs, but they are also akin to bad behaviors as noted by UK cultural activist, Bridget McKenzie (2012). The first magical belief is that when money gained from corporate malfeasance is given to a museum, it becomes morally pure and acceptable. The second is believing that museums may abstain from addressing societal issues and aspirations because they have complex histories and unique missions which absolve them from greater accountability.

## Reality Intervenes

These magical beliefs are a pronounced liability for museums, as our species and our civilization now confront a threat with staggering consequences – climate change and disruption. With notable exceptions, the global museum community has not responded – vanity architecture projects continue, the yearning for popularity remains obsessive, and the plutocrats (a significant portion of whom are climate change deniers) continue to play in the world’s elite museums. Although I am heartened by some exemplary work (more on this later), there has been no significant mobilization of museum resources to assist with the development of a new narrative – a narrative committed to building sustainable communities beyond the outmoded economy of industrial growth and unbridled consumption (Korten, 2014).

There is no doubt that climate change and the role of museums in its mitigation is the most complex and intractable issue ever to confront museums. Denial is no longer an

option, however, and the conversation must begin within and between museums, as well as with their supporters, stakeholders, donors and sponsors, including fossil fuel companies. Museums and these companies have no choice but to work together to address both the practical and moral complexities of their increasingly suspect partnerships. Sadly, there are no silver bullets to resolve this conundrum and, if museums are able to forge achievable strategies to confront this challenge, there will certainly be sacrifices and wreckage - including museum budgets, programs, and services.

### Three Reasons to Challenge Neutrality

Why should museum workers part company with the time-honored protection of institutional neutrality? The first reason is that each of us is a sentient being on planet earth. As mentioned above, we are now confronting the reality of climate change and the potential unravelling of our civilization. Our inescapable challenge as global citizens is to now phase out more than half of the global use of fossil fuels by 2050, in order to forestall the worst impacts of climate disruption (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013: 3).

The second reason is that we are museum workers – emerging, mid-career, or senior. We know that museums of all kinds are deeply trusted, knowledge-based, social institutions in civil society. We also know that education is a core mission of museums, but museums must ask what sort of education is appropriate and necessary now? What the world really needs are museums that provide cultural frameworks to identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten all of us - such as the false belief that climate change is not real and can be ignored.

It is time for museums to move beyond their internal pre-occupation with collections, popularity, and the dictates of the marketplace, and create visions and missions that are based on key questions, including *why* does your museum exist, *what* changes are you trying to effect, *what* solutions will you generate, and *what* are your non-negotiable values? Museums must seriously consider just how invasive the reigning model of unlimited growth and consumption has become, and change direction. It is unsustainable consumption that is driving climate change, and it makes no sense for museums to ignore this reality, or to partner with corporations that are purposely oblivious to this profound issue.

The third reason is that each of us is part of a family – a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, parent or grandparent – each one of us a part of the web of life born of a deeper sense of time. I cannot overstate that museums are unique social institutions, given their larger view of time. With this in mind, “...for how long would we like our family to

continue? If the next generation matters to us, and the children born to it do as well, then what about their children, and their children’s children?” (Macy and Johnstone (2014: 142). Museums are predisposed to exercise their larger view of time as stewards of the biosphere – why are museum workers ignoring their unparalleled understanding of stewardship?

### Confronting Neutrality

Change is afoot, however, and it is coming from both outside and inside the cloistered museum walls. For museum insiders, the outside agitation will likely be seen as a pointy stick. A collective of artists and activists, known as the Natural History Museum (2015a; 2015b), recently called upon North America’s most prestigious science museums to cut their ties to the fossil fuel industry. The UK’s Tate Modern is under similar scrutiny, and this ferment has now emerged in the US to challenge the museum claim of authoritative neutrality. The claim of neutrality - that topical issues such as climate change and donations from fossil fuel companies are not the concern of mainstream museums - is ultimately doomed, however, as doomed as the tobacco companies who denied the adverse effects of smoking.

The UK’s Museums Association recently joined the fray when its Director, Sharon Heal (Youngs, 2015) noted that: “There will be less public funding in museums and therefore there’s a pressure on museums and galleries to find alternative sources of funding. When that pressure’s on, museums and galleries need to think ethically about where that funding comes from so they don’t abuse or break the trust the public places in them.”

Heal’s comments came in reaction to the public protests against British Petroleum’s (BP) sponsorship of the British Museum and Tate since the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010, saying BP is trying to buy “cultural power” to improve its corporate image. This is noteworthy – a professional museums association weighing in on one of the magical beliefs identified earlier in this Commentary.

Various museums are also moving beyond the constraints of authoritative neutrality, and demonstrating the potential of museums when neutrality is abandoned and reality is embraced. I recommend that museum workers pay attention to the Museums and Climate Change Network, hosted by the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.<sup>2</sup> This website [link in end notes] is intended for anyone interested in the intersection between museums and climate change. Most importantly, AMNH curators are modeling the behavior that should inspire all museums by working directly with communities in Samoa that have been impacted by climate change.

Another example of mindful museum practice is the WILD Center, a natural history museum in New York State's Adirondack Park.<sup>3</sup> Not only does the Center save 20% to 30% of its operating costs through the use of sustainable strategies and technology, it also hosts the Youth Climate Program. Its purpose is to map a path to lower carbon emissions, and the summit now has more than 25,000 high school and university students participating each year – with outreach, educational, and leadership opportunities for students.<sup>4</sup> This museum is brimming with creativity and mindfulness and is an outstanding example of what is possible with a responsible vision.

### **A Modest Manifesto**

The future has arrived, as the examples above clearly indicate, even if there is yet to be a general reckoning by the museum profession and its leaders. In an effort to move beyond the rhetoric or what “should” or “ought” to be, I offer the following “nuts and bolts” proposal to support museums in their efforts to engage in climate change awareness and mitigation. This proposal is meant to operationalize the modest manifesto contained in this Commentary.

### **Premise**

Museum staff and boards of directors may want to get involved in climate change discussions and action, but they do not know how to proceed.

### **The Question**

How can museums and galleries become involved in the climate change issue; how do they inform themselves; what might they do in response; what resources are available; can they collaborate with other museums and environmental organizations; and what are the risks of becoming involved in this issue?

### **Assumptions**

1. Museums are largely insular organizations, even within the museum community, and they have little or no contact with non-museum organizations in their communities, such as environmental or social agencies that are concerned with climate change.

2. Museums have minimal experience in engaging with broad societal issues and aspirations. They speak from a position of authoritative neutrality, both internally and externally. They are averse to “taking a position” on any issues beyond their internal agendas.

3. Museums are uniquely qualified to contribute to the issue of climate change, based on their singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, long-term stewardship, knowledge base, public accessibility, and unprece-

ented public trust. Museums are key intellectual and civic resources that are untapped and unacknowledged, and possess unfulfilled potential. They are civil society spaces where substantive issues can be aired, discussed and acted upon.

### **Concept**

Develop an international (Canada and the US) framework of resources, contacts, ideas, and projects to assist museums, art galleries, and related institutions in assuming responsibility for promoting climate change awareness and mitigation.

**The Museums/Climate Change Initiative (M/CCI)** – This initiative might include:

1. A website with literature, videos and other resources that provide essential and accessible background information and contacts on the consequences of climate change and disruption.
2. An online discussion forum devoted to museums and climate change – ongoing questions, concerns, learning, ideas, failures, successes, and problem solving.
3. The development of a network of engaged museums that are willing to share their work and their perspectives – matching people with people; museums with museums; and museums with other social agencies, and non-museum organizations.
4. A listing of foundation, private, public, and other funding sources that are willing to support museum involvement in climate change work.
5. A focal point to collaborate on the development of a fleet of national traveling exhibitions (small, modest, and effective) devoted to the impacts of climate change and disruption that can be circulated at minimum cost among North American museums. The M/CCI would initiate this exhibition by providing seed funding to encourage partner contributions.
6. The provision of guidelines, professional advice, and resources for hosting community-based dialogues on the political, cultural, economic, and emotional challenges of climate change. Many museums are not skilled at hosting genuine public dialogue. Exhibitions are not enough; they are simply drawing cards for more substantive citizen involvement - which could include presentations and social action theater and cultural projects.
7. Linking environmental organizations, such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Sierra Club, and ForestEthics, with museums for mutual support, collabora-

tion, and action.

American Alliance of Museums  
Canadian Museums Association

### **Considerations**

This is admittedly experimental and untested, as museums exist in a social vacuum despite the respect they enjoy. They command a significant amount of public and private resources in Canada and the US, yet they have remained “above the fray.” They are rarely, if ever, called upon to exercise their social responsibilities, and the majority have never volunteered to do so. As a consequence, they remain detached – primarily concerned with consumption, earned revenues, and popularity. Museums and galleries must now be challenged to assume a broader sense of stewardship for the world around them. Many will reject this opportunity, taking refuge in tradition. Many others will embrace it. The potential for museum engagement in this critical issue is vast.

It is this potential that is the focus of this proposed framework. A support system must be developed to enable museums to reach their potential as social organizations of the highest order. The narrow timescape that dominates societal thinking is a major determinant in the unsustainable consumption that is unraveling the biosphere, and is the underlying cause of climate change. No social institutions have a deeper sense of time than museums, and museums by their very nature are predisposed to exercise their larger view of time as stewards of the biosphere.

### **Budget – Two Year**

1. Website design, development, and two year maintenance and upgrading = CAN\$25,000
2. “Climate Change” traveling exhibition. I’m currently consulting with some colleagues to get an accurate cost = CAN\$100,000
3. Workshops for museum staff on the methods and techniques of community dialogue (in person at museum conferences or online) = CAN\$75,000
4. Funding for individual museum projects (8 demonstration projects at CAN\$15,000 each = CAN\$120,000)
5. Administrative expenses for those volunteers overseeing the Museums/Climate Change Initiative = CAN\$30,000.

**Two year funding (excluding a traveling exhibition) = CAN\$350,000**

### **Possible funding sources:**

- Private donations
- Foundations
- Provincial and state museum associations

### **A Mile High View**

With the activists now at the gate, both inside and out, what are museums to do? Denial, indifference, or anger will be of brief utility, as the citizenry, governments, and some museum workers are awakening to the impending horrors of unchecked climate change and the immorality of climate change denial. Is this new public interest in the accountability of museums an opportunity or the harbinger of irrelevance? It is an untold opportunity surely, as museums possess an extraordinary constellation of traits and abilities unlike any other organization in civil society. These foundational traits can be summarized as follows.

Museums are expressions of community and locality; museums are a bridge between science and culture; museums bear witness – they assemble evidence based on knowledge and make things known; museums are seed banks of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia; the bulk of museums are free to choose and act, with the notable exception of government-owned museums; and last, museums are some of the most free and creative work environments in the world (Janes, 2009: 178-182). There are no other social organizations able to match this singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, and public trust. These gifts must now be put to work in combating the specter of climate change and its impact on the biosphere. This will be a painful and arduous task, but complacency will exact a much greater price in the long-term.

I referred earlier in this Commentary to humanity’s need for a new narrative - a new story built on sustainable communities, not unbridled consumption. Museums also need a new story (Korten, 2014), a story about museums assisting in the creation of a new, caring, and more conscious future for themselves and their communities. This can only be done through authentic engagement with contemporary issues and aspirations. Fossil fuel corporations and many other multinational corporations are not contributing to this new story – they are stuck in the past and fighting a rearguard action to preserve a way of life that is no longer tenable. Their rhetoric is agonizingly familiar and destructive - time is money; consumption means happiness; corporations create wealth and governments consume it; economic inequality is unavoidable; rampant environmental damage is regrettable; and humans are individualistic competitors (Korten, 2014: 2-3).

Although I have focused on climate change in this Commentary, enhancing the well-being and durability and individuals and communities embraces many other issues that

fall within the expert purview of the museum world – be it the loss of biodiversity, poverty, food crises, or water crises. It is not that museums should be expected to fix these problems. Rather, they can provide the knowledge, experience, and civility that build the understanding and public dialogue which are essential to progressive civic action. Some museums are, in fact, addressing these issues. Fort Calgary in Alberta, Canada, for example, tills the original North West Mounted Police garden (1883-1914) on their museum site, and provides employment opportunities for community members at risk, gives volunteer opportunities to community members at large, and grows and distributes produce to charities in downtown Calgary.<sup>5</sup>

### Shifting Perspectives

Socially responsible museum work embodies a significant shift in traditional museum assumptions and practices, beginning with values. The museums and related organizations discussed in this Commentary are value-based and not driven by the marketplace. These museum workers ask “why” their museum does what it does. These museums, and those that intend to have a future, also do not confuse business literacy with marketplace ideology. The former is essential for a well-run museum; the tyranny of the latter precludes humanitarian mindfulness.

In addition to being value-driven, the competent museum is reality-based. This means becoming more involved in the broader world by embracing a sense of urgency and seeing things as they *really* are in terms of the challenges to our collective well-being. A fundamental question, as planetary destruction proceeds, is the fate of our social and cultural enterprise – will it diminish or wither away along with “every last lump of coal; every last tree, and every last ton of tar sands?” (Heinberg, 2011: 282). Furthermore, what is the role of museums in charting a path to sustainability that *will preserve and use* our irreplaceable cultural legacy? Like it or not, this question lies at the heart of contemporary museum governance and management. This question belongs to all museums irrespective of size and type. Contrary to the wishful thinking of museum practitioners, climate change is not the exclusive purview of science and natural history museums. The multidisciplinary legacy of the museum world – all of its intellectual capital and resources - must now be mobilized.

Third, the successful museum and its workers are intellectual activists. “Intellectual activism” is defined as activities that do not necessarily create new knowledge, but make existing knowledge more accessible, understandable, and useful to others (Gross, 1993: 164-170). Most importantly, intellectual activism creates the conditions for fresh discoveries through the conjunction of challenging ideas, or stimulates others to discover. Competent museums do

this work everyday – the challenge now is to broaden the understanding of museum practice to include activities that are undertaken for a purpose greater than personal or institutional gain – the second meaning of activism.

Along with being value-based, reality-based, and activist, the final attribute of the mindful museum is its respect for personal agency – fostering the motivation and capacity for staff and boards to take action in the world. Many people, including museum workers, shy away from expressing their values and assuming their personal agency - for fear of losing their job or their friends. This fear is exaggerated. Overcoming this fear and discomfort will require courage, and the comfortable *status quo* will be too constraining when important issues are identified that need to be addressed. There is genuine worth in discomfort, however, and I will conclude with some discussion of this.

The essential role of the conscious museum in the twenty-first century is embedded in the undeniable fact that the Western world’s, citizen-based democracy is dependent upon participation, and to participate is to be permanently uncomfortable – emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and psychically (Saul, 1995: 190). Museums must embrace this discomfort, including the uncertainty and non-conformity that this requires, in order to become the authentic participants they are equipped to be. The current preoccupation with authoritative neutrality negates this responsibility and, along with it, the opportunity for museums to achieve their true potential. Integrity is the antidote to neutrality and, irrespective of the high-sounding principles that define the meaning of integrity, it may also be thought of as simply a “fine sense of one’s obligations.” With the demise of neutrality in the museum lexicon, perhaps integrity could assume a preeminent place in contemporary museum practice.

### End Notes

[1] INTERCOM is the International Council of Museums International Committee on Management. The INTERCOM 2015 Conference “Leadership for a Sustainable Museum” was held in Washington, DC from October 28-31, 2015. Available online: <http://www.intercom.museum/>.

[2] Museums and Climate Change Network: <http://www.amnh.org/our-research/anthropology/projects/museums-and-climate-change-network/about-us>.

[3] The WILD Center at New York State’s Adirondack Park: <http://www.wildcenter.org/visit>.

[4] Youth Climate Program at the WILD Center: <http://www.wildcenter.org/youthclimate>.

[5] Fort Calgary in Alberta, Canada: <http://www.fortcalgary.com/visiting/community/>.

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# CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF DENVER AT MARSICO CAMPUS EXPANSION

By Kim Tinnell



Figure 1: The front of the expanded Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus. Photo courtesy of the Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus.

On November 20, 2015, the Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus opened its much-anticipated \$16.1 million expansion. The expansion includes eight new exhibits (all of which have bilingual English and Spanish text), an expanded entrance and admissions area, a café with seating, a larger gift shop, a dedicated entrance for school groups, and an enlarged parking lot. The Children's Museum of Denver was founded in 1973 and has been located in its current location next to Downtown Denver and the Platte River since 1984. In the late 2000s, the Museum was experiencing increased visitation and faced crowding issues. It spent the next several years planning and fundraising for this expansion, which resulted in the building growing by