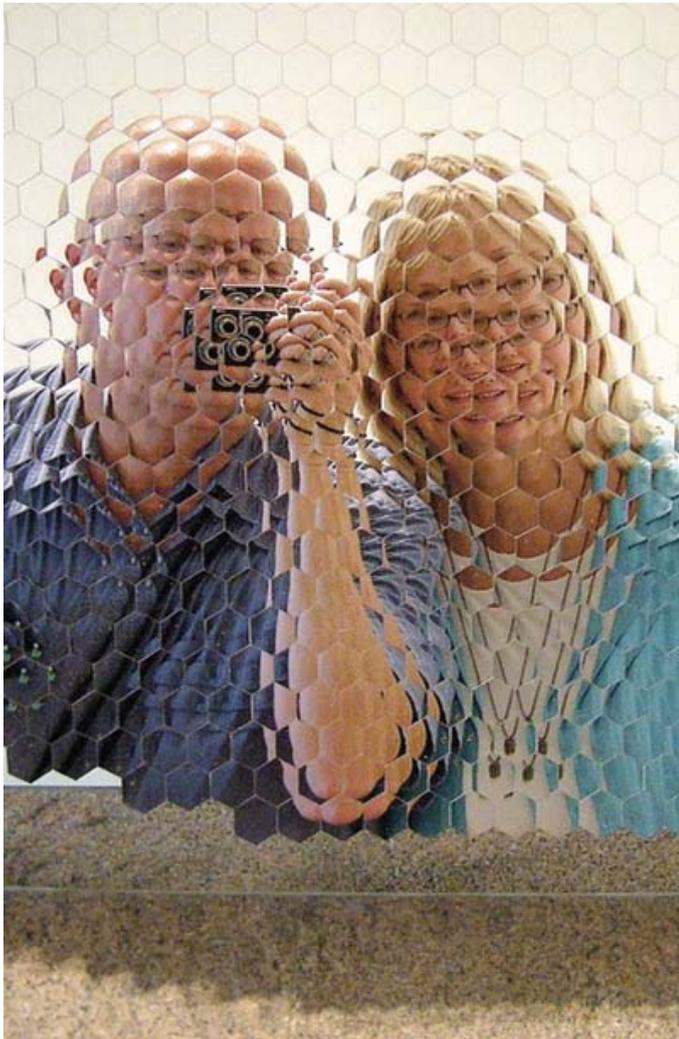


Reshaping the Art Museum

Confronted with urgent demographic realities, art-museum directors are drawing on game theory, interactive technology, and a host of other new strategies to help people feel welcome, engaged, and emotionally fulfilled.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art asked visitors to submit photos from their

trips to the galleries for “It’s Time We Met,” a viewer-generated photography contest, via the photo-sharing Web site Flickr. Museumgoer G. Rowland Williams posted his double-portrait reflection in Anish Kapoor’s sculpture; the image was used in an advertising campaign for the Met.

COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

Thirty-eight million people visited the nation’s 200 largest art museums last year, according to the Association of Art Museum Directors. The recession has apparently not hurt attendance. AAMD president Michael Conforti says that visitorship is up, suggesting that in fraught times like these, museums can provide a reassuring setting for visitors to interact with art, with their heritage—and with one another. “People are trying to connect with things that are more stable, that will be here,” says Conforti, who runs the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

So art museums should continue doing what they’re doing, right?

Wrong, maintain a growing number of museum professionals. If their institutions don’t respond to technological, social, and demographic trends, by midcentury their only visitors will be students and senior citizens. For many directors, the initial exclusion of museums from the government’s economic stimulus package underscored the perception that their field is isolated and elitist, existing for and catering to a small segment of society. From this perspective, they are realizing that no matter how avant-garde their new buildings, their most cutting-edge department is education, which connects with the community in a way the curatorial staff rarely does.

“Art museums have not been very good at communicating,” says Peter Marzio, director of Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts. “Science and natural-history

Reshaping the Art Museum

museums have done a much better job of remaking themselves to adapt to the 21st century” by creating interactive, educational, and family-friendly spectacles. Marzio argues that art museums can succeed “by doing the reverse. Not apologizing for the fact that the picture doesn’t move—you do the moving. What’s lacking is the ability for visitors to understand it because they’re not given information or training.”

Thomas Campbell, the new director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, says that engaging visitors who don’t feel comfortable is one of his primary challenges. “There is an enormous potential audience that simply isn’t coming here,” he says. “They come for school trips, but it wouldn’t occur to them to come again. Without sacrificing standards, we need to remind people that coming to the museum is not a big deal. You’re not taking a test. You don’t have to prove you know about the artists. It’s just fun.”

Certainly the plunge in endowments and tourism has caused directors to reevaluate their priorities. Even as they slash budgets, many are increasing marketing efforts, organizing more special events, and expanding hours and free-entry times. “We’ve gone back into our mission strategy,” says Matthew Teitelbaum, director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who recently unveiled a new expansion by Frank Gehry, laid off 23 staffers, and raised his attendance goals by 30 percent. “We have to create a different sense of accessibility—to be friendly, engaging, welcoming,” he stresses. “Where the institution meets the visitor is the most important thing. We’ve got to get people to come back.”

Indeed, many of today’s art-museum directors are less likely to talk about the esthetic impact of postmodern architecture than about the emotional impact of the coat check. But the changes only start at the door. Directors and their staffs are reconsidering how to install collections, curate exhibitions, design

galleries, write labels, devise programming—and involve audiences, both current and potential, in the process. Fluent in the lingo of target markets and the interactive possibilities of Web 2.0, they are realizing that Facebook pages and yoga in the galleries are just stopgap measures as the world changes around them. As a result, some have begun reaching out to scientists, futurists, game designers, and other specialists outside the art world.

If these leaders succeed, the art museum of the future will offer the customer service of an Apple store, the comforts of a Barnes & Noble, and the dynamism of a town square. It will have areas where visitors can plug in or tune out, where they can immerse themselves in virtual-reality games or speak to live curators in the galleries, and where they can comment on the art they see—or make their own.

This trend represents a sea change from a decade ago, when Arnold Lehman was ridiculed by many colleagues for staging dance parties and offering shows like “Hip-Hop Nation” to lure new audiences into the Brooklyn Museum. When Graham Beal announced in 2002 that he was reinstalling the entire collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts based on a “visitor-centered approach” that presents the objects grouped by accessible themes, “everyone sort of rolled their eyes,” Beal says. “We heard, ‘Oh my god, you’re dumbing down.’”

These efforts seem almost quaint compared with the newest wave of aggressively audience-centric strategies. To an unprecedented degree, market research about the needs, wants, fears, and anxieties of visitors is shaping how museums are designed. “We got a lot of comments that it’s just overwhelming to come to museums,” says Lori Fogarty, director of the Oakland Museum of California, which inaugurates a complete reinstallation of its art, natural history, and science collections this fall. So the new galleries will feature “loaded lounges” where visitors can relax, read catalogues, or do hands-on activities,

Reshaping the Art Museum

along with open spaces that accommodate up to 25 people for concerts, storytelling, or other such programs.

But a bigger change in her plan is connecting people who might never have visited art museums with the people who curate them. Fogarty calls it transparency—“breaking the fourth wall”—having curators answer questions about how and why they choose works. Visitor feedback will be encouraged, and the exhibitions, in turn, will be based on the “wiki model,” with curators representing only one voice in a mix that includes conservators, community members, and artists. “We can’t count on the fact that potential visitors were brought to museums as kids,” Fogarty says. “Many have no cultural or experiential reference; they don’t think of the museum as a place that welcomes them or has anything of interest to them.”

At the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, director Olga Viso is also using a major reinstallation as an opportunity to remake the museum into a more civic space. “We want to be in dialogue with the audience instead of in the place of authority,” as she puts it. Such efforts may mean involving the community in the organization of shows or asking people to vote on the selection of artworks. When the new installation opens in November, says chief curator Darsie Alexander, curators will hold in-gallery office hours—giving visitors insights into the way exhibitions happen, and giving the staff a chance to find out “how visitors encounter work in space—the kinds of questions they ask about art, what they find interesting, and how long they stay.”

Some directors warn that such efforts can detract from the museums’ core mission. “I do not think this is a time that museums need to take, due to economic circumstances, a radical new direction,” says Timothy Rub, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art. “It’s precisely the kind of time when it’s imperative to reaffirm the fundamental mission of museums:

curatorial work, conservation, and education. Marketing and special events are less a core function of museum work than curatorial work is.”

But as Bonnie Pitman, director of the Dallas Museum of Art, explains it, “It’s not that the mission is going to change; it’s about how we respond—how we champion the experience and power of art. And how it embraces and engages and educates our community.” Every third Thursday, when the museum stays open until midnight, visitors can find storytelling, spoken-word performances, poetry readings, concerts in the galleries, and, in the case of the King Tut exhibition, belly-dancing demonstrations. Pitman herself leads the “Insomniac Tour” of the collections—it starts at 10 P.M.

Pitman took a page from natural-history museums in her institution’s year-old Center for Creative Connections, which attempts to slow down the classic three seconds that visitors spend in front of artworks by presenting eight masterpieces in a way that invites viewers to focus on materials. For example, Courbet’s *The Wave* (ca. 1869–70) is covered with a Plexiglas box with a movable magnifying glass affixed to it.

Campbell cites interactivity as the key to connecting with audiences who are new to the Metropolitan. “We take so much for granted,” he says. “You walk through gallery after gallery and there’s really very little explanation of certain objects, certain paintings in these rooms. There’s an assumption that you have a general knowledge of the history of European art. Modern technology provides the opportunity to provide more information without turning galleries into intrusive didactics. It’s really just a question of choosing applications.”

Last year the American Association of Museums created a new group, the Center for the Future of Museums. “The average museum director and curator don’t have time to read about economic theory,

Reshaping the Art Museum

climatic theory, biosciences,” says director Elizabeth Merritt. “There are experts who spend all their time thinking about these things, but they don’t usually talk to museums. We want to be the ambassadors.”

The first lecturer Merritt hired was futurist forecaster and game designer Jane McGonigal, who describes how museums might tap into the collective energy and creativity of the hundreds of millions of people playing computer games. She cites the “science of happiness,” a new field of psychology that focuses on behaviors and strategies that can increase one’s sense of well-being. Museums, she explains, can create experiences using the same tactics games do to produce a sense of fulfillment: provide clear goals, feedback, a feeling of success, and social interaction. “How many people come back from museums feeling they’re stupid?” asks Merritt. “With games, we give instructions, say, ‘Here’s something specific you can do.’ And they go away feeling good. That’s a thing game designers are doing all the time.”

Art museums are beginning to listen. The Smithsonian American Art Museum was the first to offer an alternate-reality game, *Ghosts of a Chance*, which was played on Facebook, on Google, on phones, and in the museum itself. At the North Carolina Museum of Art, education director Susan Glasser is harnessing play theory to turn viewers into participants rather than passive observers in a game called *The Grand Tour*. Visitors will receive a “travel portfolio” with a profile of their travel companion, a historical figure. In the gallery of Italian painting, for example, they’ll get four types of currency—esthetic, monetary, personal, and historical—with which they may purchase a “souvenir” from the collection. Information about the artworks and their value is on the back of the card. The scenario brings visitors to authentic works of art, Glasser notes, using “the make-believe of games that people find so compelling.”

The fact remains that the audience of the typical art museum is much less diverse than the general pu-

blic. School programs brought more than 3 million children into AAMD-member museums last year. But a study released by Merritt’s group offers more sobering statistics. While the minority population of the United States will be almost the majority by 2034, the study says, only 9 percent of that group are a part of the core museum audience. Art museums “need to focus on getting our audience to look a bit more like the nation,” says Julian Zugazagoitia, director of New York’s El Museo del Barrio. “If we do not achieve this, we will be failing not only our audiences but the nation. And we’ll be out of business by 2034.”

“Cities are full of huge communities of people that don’t necessarily feel they own the institutions,” says Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Marketing and “shows placed in whatever cultural heritage month” are clearly not enough, she says, advocating an “innovative, intellectually rigorous, and engaged approach” that takes cues from trends in music and popular culture and involves artists in creating conversations. “The future is dependent on the field being able to engage more completely and authentically in our time,” Golden says. “You can’t have a divide between education and curatorial to be effective in this moment.”

Curators often give talks to collectors, donors, and peers—but rarely to community-based groups, points out Chon Noriega, head of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center and an adjunct curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. That’s one suggestion he gave to AAMD members when he spoke on diversity at their recent conference. “It gives you a reality check about other parts of the world,” he says.

Zugazagoitia, Golden, and Asia Society Museum director Melissa Chiu are among the handful of AAMD members who direct culturally specific museums. No directors of the museums at historically black colleges belong to the organization. To some it seems as if the AAMD is turning away the colleagues who

Reshaping the Art Museum

know the most about how to connect with diverse audiences.

“There’s been a lot of criticism of the homogenous nature of the organization,” acknowledges North Carolina Museum of Art director Lawrence Wheeler, head of the AAMD’s membership committee. But while members believe it is important to have the leaders of culturally specific museums represented in the museum-director mix, he says, the problem is how to include them—the group has a cap of 200 members and their annual budgets must be over \$2.5 million.

“Nobody wants to have different classes of membership,” he says. So why not modify the criteria for membership? “We are beginning a planning process to change these policies,” he says. The organization also needs to do more to bring minorities into the profession, he acknowledges.

Museums will have to prepare for other demographic trends, says Georgia Museum of Art director William Eiland, head of the AAMD’s Professional Issues Committee. “Museums are going to refashion or redevelop programs for an aged population,” he says, as well as look at the effects of women becoming parents later in life and at how the volunteer population may change. “I don’t think any of us has thought about how these issues are going to have impact on our audiences, our staff.”

Gary Vikan, director of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, believes that the primary mission of art museums will evolve even further to include more social benefits. That may mean providing services for autistic children, a possibility he is discussing with specialists at Johns Hopkins University; or, as AAM director Ford Bell has suggested, it may mean providing space to teach English as a second language to immigrants.

But for all the talk of accessibility, the cost of admission remains an elephant in the room. Most directors interviewed for this story defend their entry fees

as good value compared with other sorts of entertainment. While a few museums have abolished admission fees entirely—among them the Walters, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art—others are gradually expanding the times when entry is free. The Cincinnati Art Museum recently eliminated charges for special exhibitions. In Chicago, meanwhile, where the Art Institute announced that it was raising its admission fee from \$12 to \$18—while eliminating all special exhibition charges—several aldermen have protested on the grounds that the museum is “completely out of touch” with the economic climate.

The free-admission policy allows the museums to be “much more the living room of a community and much less a place of exclusivity,” argues Indianapolis director Maxwell Anderson. His museum’s Web site provides real-time data about visitors by zip code, education, income, age, marital status, occupation, and ethnicity.

Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, says he looks daily at audience studies to get a “fine-grained sense of what someone who has just been in the galleries thought—or felt.” But he adds a cautionary note to the talk of outreach. “Museums are venues of artistic experience, places of social engagement—they’re a cultural center,” he says. “Museums should be accessible to all. But that doesn’t mean everyone needs to or should enjoy the benefits of a museum. Not everyone enjoys football or Sartre. What makes a vibrant museum community in this country is the vast variety of choices available to everyone.”

And for all the innovations in programming, marketing, and education, Campbell argues, the core mission remains the same. “We can make ourselves more user-friendly, but ultimately one of the key experiences of visiting a museum is that moment of standing in front of an object,” he says. “Suddenly you’re responding to something physical, real, that changes your own perspective. And great museums

Reshaping the Art Museum

will always do that, as long we get people through the doors.”

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