

# Culture & Museums in Winds of Change: the Case for Cultural Indicators

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Our society is in a period of unprecedented change – in a host of ways – through globalization, urbanization, technologically – and culturally.

We are not simply in the winds of change – it is a storm. It likely will take all sorts of innovations to find our way through it – technological, political, economic, social. To me, the critical shift will have to be cultural.

I think of culture as ‘how we live our lives’ – which involves how well we adapt to changes that occur around us. We might ask ourselves today, do we have a culture of resilience? A hallmark of cultures of the past are the Muses – those forces of inspiration and innovation that help solve problems and address challenges. For me, museums are ‘places of the muse’ that help to do just that. Museums are physical places – but so much more. They are psychological spaces that are invoked – and characterized by reflection, creativity, innovation, dialogue, respect, trust and communication. To be in the presence of the muses requires humility, because the creativity that happens there comes from a place of mystery.

Museums, like so many organizations that have adopted corporate structures, are facing uncertainty. Many museum professionals ask ‘what can I do to make my museum sustainable?’. I wonder if a better question might be ‘what can museums do to help make humanity sustainable?’ This brings us to the topic of this conference... museums as agents of change.

## **Museums as ‘agents of change’:**

your gut reaction...

- **excited?**
- **curious?**
- **dismissive?**
- **fearful?**
- **angry?**

**Regardless of your reaction...  
from the response to my listserve request,  
I suspect we share a commitment to:**

- community well-being
- fostering knowledge
- encouraging reflection and dialogue
- being relevant to community

(Question:

How do museums know that they are relevant and contributing to the cultural wellbeing of the community?)

## **“I’d Turn Back if I Were You...”**



As a field, and as a culture, we are at a cross-roads.  
There is no turning back – too much has changed.  
Where are we, as a culture, if we try to maintain the status quo?  
What lies ahead if we proceed?  
To move forward, we need, courage, intelligence and heart!

## **Museums as ‘agents of change’:**

- **Whether?**
- **Why?**
- **What?**
- **How?**
- **Whether?**

## Whether?

## Whether?



**No museum  
should feel forced  
to embark on this path!**

\*\*\*

- change can be tough & risky
- new skillsets will be required
- new kinds of resourcefulness
- humility, energy and tenacity

... however...

## Whether?

...there are great opportunities!

- for enhanced public relevancy
- for engaging new stakeholders
- for linking past, present, future

so...

I'll return to the question of 'whether?' later.

## What if museums...

Collaborated more with artists & scientists in public places?



What might commuters think if they encountered this big white rectangle on the side of a building? –Perhaps ‘ I wonder what someone will put on that white panel?’

Jenny Bergstrom (Sweden) “This is the Air we Breathe...” 1

## What if museums...

Collaborated more with artists & scientists in public places?



A couple of weeks later they might ask themselves 'is that mural just white?'

Jenny Bergstrom (Sweden) "This is the Air we Breathe..." 2

## What if museums...

Collaborated more with artists & scientists in public places?



Another couple of weeks later they might muse 'Is something appearing there?'

Jenny Bergstrom (Sweden) "This is the Air we Breathe..." 3

## What if museums...

Collaborated more with artists & scientists in public places?



Using science, this artist has painted the phrase “This is the air we breathe” using a material that interacts with air pollutants. Over time, the words appear. At their best, museums are ‘places of the muse’ – and an experience of the muse is psychological. Museums have the potential to stretch out and weave ‘the muses’ throughout all of society – and not try to keep them contained inside museums. Many public conversations could be stimulated in this way. What could museums do to extend such conversations?

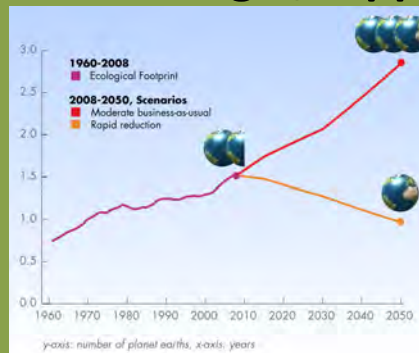
Jenny Bergstrom (Sweden) “This is the Air we Breathe...” 4

## Why?

## Why?

- **Change is already happening – and its cultural!**
  - Globalization, Pluralization, Urbanization, Climate Change (e.g. pipeline projects are changing local/national/global culture in profound ways & we all need to engage – go Louise!)
- **Change is rooted in adaptation**
  - slowly, with intention, (recommended!), or...
  - unmanaged systems contraction.... even collapse.
  - we still have some choices!
- **Culture is dynamic and continuously changes... so must organizations... all organizations!**
- There are **risks in change**, but also great **potential roles for creative muses**

## Why? A Global Challenge / Opportunity



I will use only one image on the global scale – but keep it in mind... it affects everything we do/ don't do! Image is from the Global Footprint Network and shows that currently humanity is consuming the Earth's resources at a rate 1.5 times that of what the biosphere can reproduce. Climate change and systemic global inequity are real.

There are global limits – which will affect global and local systems.

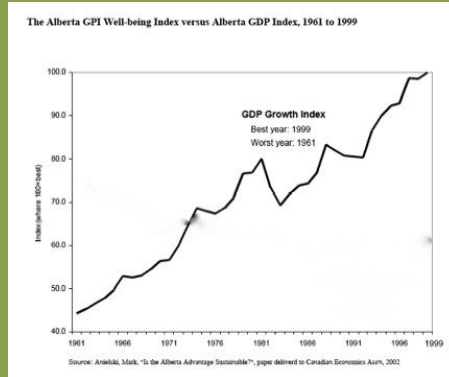
We have choices – but we have to first engage with the problem, then change our actions and (perhaps even most importantly) human systems (e.g. energy, consumption, economics, etc.)

Choosing the 1-planet option means major cultural/values shifts.



# Why?

## Alberta, Canada: Does GDP = Wellbeing?

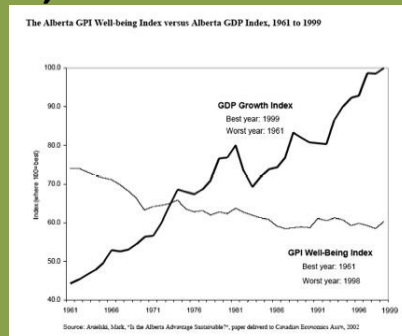


Mark Anielski

One slide on the economy is essential – because it drives virtually all of our living culture. Most economists believe that wellbeing is tied to continuous, maximized economic growth. But because our economy is closely tied to consumption of materials and energy, 7 billion + people make this proposition impossible (especially if we continue to burn hydro-carbons!). Anielski showed Albertans this graph of GDP growth and asked them if it reflected their experience of the past 40 years. Most people were unsure. Although GDP grew, did quality of life grow too?

# Why?

## Alberta, Canada: GPI and Wellbeing



Mark Anielski

GDP measures financial transactions, but doesn't distinguish between transactions related to feeding a city, and responding to a fire, car accident, or cancer treatments. The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) recalibrates economic activity to take the qualitative aspects of economic activity into account. When Anielski showed those being interviewed the GPI graph for Alberta – they overwhelmingly said that this is what they had experienced over the 40 years. Check out economists who promote 'steady-state economics' – Herman Daly, Mark Anielski, Peter Victor. Economics is probably the most significant factor affecting our contemporary living culture (globalized, urbanized, consumer-based)

# Why?

## Some Museum Realities

- Declining attendance
  - Declining tourism (in some ways this is a good thing)
  - Declining core funding and grants
  - Increasing reliance on revenue-raising activities
  - Increasing admission prices
  - Museum jobs generally pay poorly
  - Growing professional sense - need to be more relevant
- => Retool museums for outcomes, not just outputs

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Most museums believe that they exist to collect, research, preserve, exhibit and educate. Prevailing assumption that it is for benefit of society – assumption is extremely vague! Traditional museum activities are ‘means’ (or outputs) – need to serve ‘ends’ (or outcomes) We need to clarify the desired outcomes – framed for individuals, communities, the organization, and the world. How well will exhibits stand up to the test of creating cultural outcomes in society? What other strategies might produce better outcomes?

## What if museums...

### Shifted traditional programs to be more issue-based?

(Royal Saskatchewan Museum ‘The Human Factor’)



## What if museums...

Developed research agendas based on contemporary cultural issues?

### Royal Saskatchewan Museum Human Ecology Program

Research Questions:

- What do cultures of sustainability look like?
- How can they be fostered?
- What makes or would make them resilient?
- What indicators do they use, or need to develop, to help them adapt to changing conditions?



© Douglas Worts

**What?**

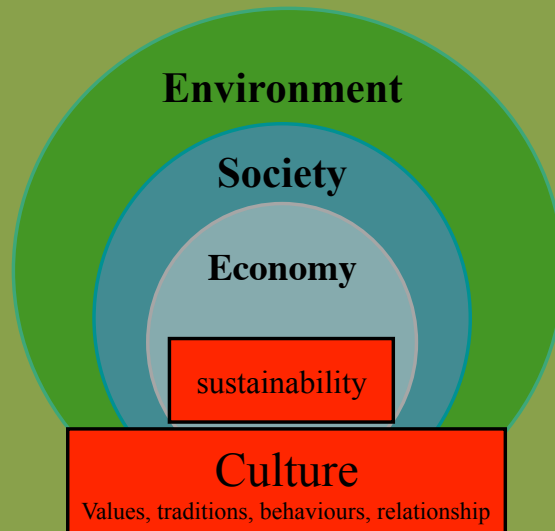
## WHAT?

A 'change agent', is likely to...

- be tuned in to the forces shaping the living culture
- help assemble stakeholders to craft a vision that all can 'own'
- help identify & prioritize the trends that demand attention
- help identify forces that shape trends in community/society
- help generate innovations => meaningful, positive change
- mobilize insights from history & artists, youth and elders
- ensure that effective measures track shifts in societal trends
- be humble in the face of the challenge
- NOT lead specific cultural changes (if they are facilitators)

## WHAT?

### Sustainability Model



Douglas Worts

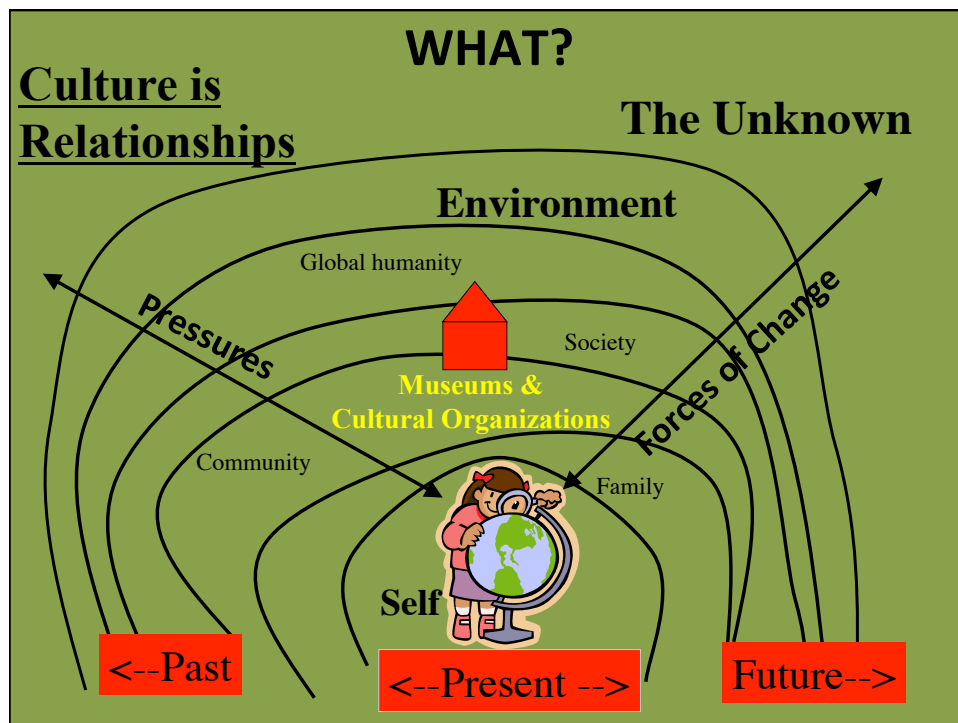
## What is culture, and how does it relate to 'cultural organizations'?

**Culture** is the foundation of values, traditions, behaviours and relationships that are the foundation of human ability to live in the World

Culture may include the arts and heritage, but it is much more! And for culture to serve the needs of our times, it has to promote consciousness/ awareness /mindfulness (thanks Bob!)

Culture is not the same as the cultural sector, which is largely a niche of the leisure-time economy and products of cultural industries.

It will require a huge step for the cultural sector to see itself as a vital centre of cultural change.



Culture is a living set of relationships, constantly being renegotiated. Relationships are always dynamic and depends upon feedback loops. Culture is messy. Culture is not limited to the impersonal collective - but a critical core unit is the individual. Both individual and collective dynamics need to be taken into account.

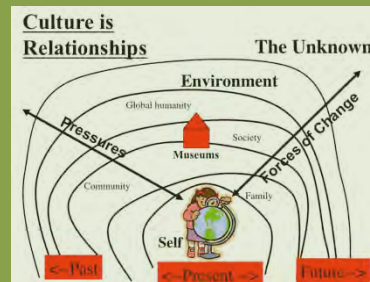
Museums need appropriate feedback mechanisms and cultural indicators in order to get beyond simply creating programs that a niche market is interested in. Our culture has become dangerously unconscious of the way the world is changing (e.g. believing that technology will save the day)

There is an opportunity for museums to play a meaningful role here, but it means venturing into uncharted territory and rethinking some of the roles it has seen as central in the past – e.g. discipline-based expertise.

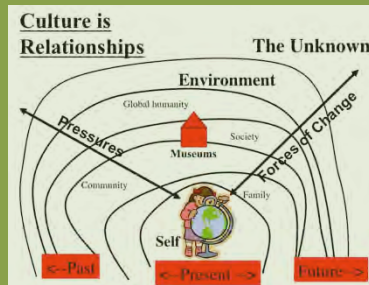
## WHAT?

### What Museums Can Offer:

- Public trust
- Perceived 'neutral' spaces
- Access to diverse stakeholders (?)
- Power of historical objects, stories, art
- Can foster dialogue amongst scientists, artists, economists, business leaders, political officials, elders, youth, NGOs
- Can offer insights into challenges and ask good questions
- Humility about how challenging and messy all of this is



## WHAT?



### Possibilities for Museums:

- Focus on issues that shape the community (the living culture)
- Identify the trends that characterize the community
- Build relationships amongst stakeholders - around the issues
- Create a cultural vision with other stakeholders – a ‘story of change’
- Have faith that your collections and building(s) will be useful – but may not be where your attention is always focused!

## What if museums...

### Create more issue-based programs?



### **RACE: are we so different?**

#### Science Museum of Minnesota

- Explores race from biological, cultural and historical perspectives
  - Participatory and dialogic
  - Links past, present and future

## What if museums... showed art and fostered reflection, dialogue and action?

(Ed Burtynsky – “Shipbreaking No 4”, Bangladesh, 2000)



Artists can help citizens to become more conscious about systemic issues - even encourage responsible action – Burtynsky’s work has helped do this.

Our life in the global world draws materials and labour from around the world (including beaching old freighters on beaches in Bangladesh) - even if we don’t consciously experience that connection each day.

Artwork, to be effective in the public domain, must grab viewer’s attention, pique curiosity, stimulate reflection and lead to personalization. What is the potential of museums to extend this process into dialogue and action (without being prescriptive). Museums have to be very conscious of the potential for ‘aestheticizing’ artworks that point to living social issues.

## WHAT?

### Change Agents in other Sectors:

Inspiration can be found in countless examples of change agents in other sectors, including:

- **Hundreds of thousands of organizations now dedicated to transforming our world**
- **Sustainability Reporting and Planning** (ISIS Accelerator, Global Reporting Initiative [GRI], Balanced Scorecard, etc.)
- **Benefit Corporation** (B-Corp)
- **Natural Step** – Gold Standard for Sustainable Business
- **Strongly Sustainable Business Model Group** – OCAD University
- **Municipalities** – reducing carbon, grappling with need for resilient transportation & building systems
- **New generation** – young people are demanding ethical employment!
  - => museums have great potential to carve out a new niche!



## How?

## How?

### Museum Association (UK) Rising to Challenge



#### **Museums:**

- enrich the lives of individuals,
  - contribute to strong and resilient communities, and
  - help create a fair and just society.
- Museums in turn are immensely enriched by the skills and creativity of their public.

## How?



### Happy Museum

- Initiative in Britain
- A growing phenomenon of museums embracing the role of 'change agent'
- Explicit, negotiated (and revised) principles (see below)
- Funding for experimentation and documentation (23 projects so far)
- with a focus on measurement of public impacts!

### Principles:

1. Create conditions for wellbeing
2. Pursue mutual relationships
3. Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past
4. Be an active citizen
5. Learn for resilience
6. Measure what matters

## How?



Essential is the creation of a 'Story of Change' as part of the planning process

### Story of Change Planning

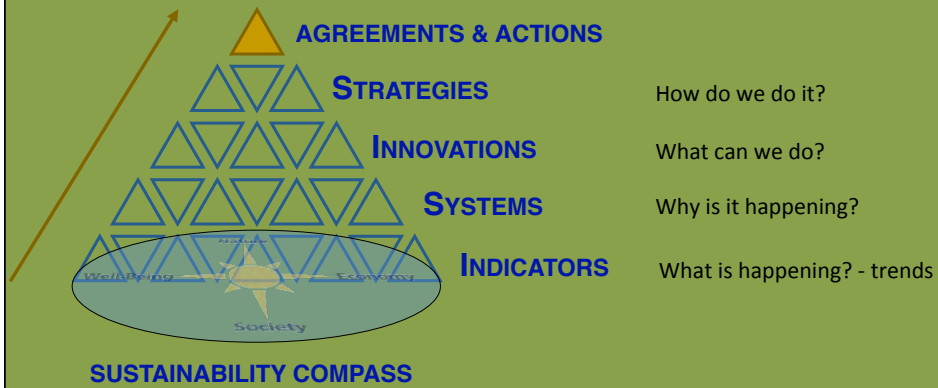
Vision	The people who matter	Why? The difference we make	What? The activity and participation	How? What we invest or commit
		the outcomes	the outputs	the inputs

# How?

## ISIS Accelerator and the Pyramid Process

Uses **ISIS** to build understanding, creativity, skill and agreement

Resulting in Trust, Commitment, and Disciplined Implementation



## ISIS Accelerator and Pyramid



From "Public engagement and museum accountability: a Pyramid 2030 workshop":  
BCMA 2013

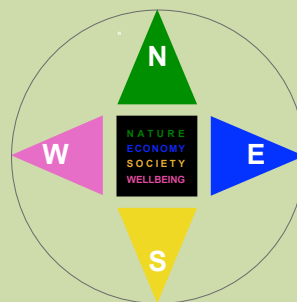
**FREE Resources:** To access resources for conducting your own community dialogue on sustainability planning, check out: <http://pyramid2030.org> -- and get in touch with me if you want some assistance

**For more information on ISIS Accelerator:** check out <http://worldviewsconsulting.org/isis-accelerator.html>

# The Sustainability Compass

A tool for understanding sustainable development

- N is for Nature:**  
 Healthy air and water quality, sustainable resource use, sufficient habitat (especially for endangered species), the preservation of scenic beauty
- E is for Economy:**  
 Vital businesses, good infrastructure, the sufficient production of goods and services, a solid financial sector, and good jobs or people at good wages
- S is for Society:**  
 The health of our communities, institutions, schools, cultural traditions, and the arts, and the organizational structures and legal frameworks that protect equality and opportunity for all
- W is for Well-Being:**  
 Our *individual* health, happiness, education, satisfaction, and fulfillment, as well as the health of our families and primary relationships, and the quality of our living and working environments



Compass of Sustainability © AtKisson, Inc. If you wish to use the Compass outside Pyramid 2030, please contact us.

# Critical Assessment Framework

A method for assessing museum programs and initiatives:

Assess on 4 levels:

- Individual
- Community
- Institutional
- Global

Note: museum attendance and revenue are not cultural indicators

For more info:  
<http://worldviewsconsulting.org/working-group.html>

Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities

**Critical Assessment Framework**  
 Douglas Worts & Glenn Sutter - WorldViews Consulting - April 2008

Criteria for assessing initiatives aimed at 4 levels of cultural adaptation

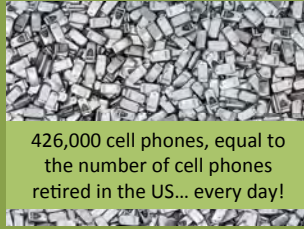
(Rating performance without indicators is subjective. Discussions are useful and will generate criteria.)  
 When considering a new exhibit program initiative, how well do the program will? Points on West 0-4

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Personal Level (members of community)</b>					
Contribute and/or generate new insights					
Capture imagination					
Stimulate curiosity					
Encourage personal reflection					
Enhance ability to think critically and creatively					
Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values					
Demonstrate relevance and make connection to daily life					
ACTIV, challenge, disrupt identity					
Help develop sense of place					
Help deal with complexity and uncertainty					
Stimulate responsible action					
Stimulate critical thought					
<b>Community Level</b>					
Address vital and relevant needs / issues / opportunities within community					
Generate information and connections at the personal, community, governmental, national and global level					
Engage diverse public					
Provide a voice for diverse groups					
Encourage social interaction and debate					
Act as a catalyst for action					
Stimulate intergenerational inspiration					
Link existing community groups to one another					
Increase or enhance long term collaborative relationships					
Participate empowered community groups					
Enhance the credibility of all involved					
Reach in practice and processes that have tangible impact in the community					
<b>Institutional Level</b>					
Challenge personal and institutional assumptions					
Conduct to clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes					
Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals					
Create a community of learning within staff					
Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge					
Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations					
<b>Global Level</b>					
Address issues of global significance - revealing links to local realities					
Forest global ecosystem health					
Reduce global ecological footprint					
Enhance global social justice and equity					
Forest justice consciousness of global impacts of local choices					
© The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities - June 2008 (adapted)					

For elaboration, see Worts, Douglas, "Measuring Museum Meetings: A Critical Assessment Framework," *Journal of Museum Education*, vol. 31, #1, Spring 2006, Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, pp. 41-49.

## What if museums...

Helped artists and scientists to foster social change?



426,000 cell phones, equal to  
the number of cell phones  
retired in the US... every day!

Check out:  
[www.Chrisjordan.com](http://www.Chrisjordan.com)

When artists, like Chris Jordan, create artworks that attract public attention, stimulate reflection about personal behaviour and its aggregated impacts, it is a gift for the public and for museums. The opportunity that too often is missed by museums is actively fostering dialogue and facilitating response – both individual and collective.

Courtesy: Chris Jordan

## ... revisiting **Whether?**

Being an 'agent of change' is both  
**Challenge and Opportunity:**

**It will require:**

- Revisiting missions
- Clarifying cultural issues & needs
- Becoming as relevant as you can be
- Measuring what matters – generating and using cultural indicators

## A new day for museums...?



Photo Raul Pacheco-Vega

Stephen Weil...frequently said that museum professionals need to understand the difference between the 'means' and 'ends' of museum work. It sounds simple, but the field and public alike assume that museums collect and exhibit – by definition. But both of these activities are actually means, not ends. If we can become clear about the desired cultural ends (defined for individuals, groups, society and the world), then we can better use the tools we already have – like collecting and exhibiting – but also develop many new ones that can help us to achieve the end of a global 'culture of sustainability' that respects individuals, groups and regional differences, then what emerges is a stratified, conscious humanity that is sustainable, resilient, vibrant, humble, responsible and enriching – in short, a new day for museums.

## Thank You!

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