

# **BRITISH COLUMBIA MUSEUM ASSOCIATION**

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## **THE SPACE IN FRONT OF THE DOOR**

“History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”<sup>1</sup>

“It is unrealistic to expect any major museum to venture out on the limb alone.(Linett 2009)

“Museums operate in the public domain as a social forum for explorations of the meaning of civility: to the community and to our host planet”<sup>2</sup>

“Civility towards strangers, however, requires that we behave in certain ways towards people who may mean nothing to us, and whom we are unlikely ever to encounter again.”<sup>3</sup>

## **INTENTIONAL CIVILITY**

### **BC INTRO:**

I wish to acknowledge the original inhabitant of this land. I am honored to be here and know that this is a conference about change and inclusion. Change in museums can be understood through many lenses. The microscopic close-lens looks at the role of the director during the process of upheaval or renewal, moving further out using binoculars, one could investigate overall systems that encourage change within the institution, and finally using a telescope we can appreciate museums through their interconnectedness within the panoply of civic institutions created by humans.

I am mindful that this exercise is worthwhile only if we wish to change the museum we find ourselves associated with. And I recognize that many, and even most, people who work in and attend museums like them just the way they are, and have accepted those institutions' prevailing behavioral expectations as incontrovertible and correctly unexamined. If you are one, then this speech is not for you. But remember that our current audiences represent only a fraction of our potential and nothing you have tried in the past has effectively moved the needle!

I am currently most focused on the furthest lens, that is museums within the interwoven civil fabric of other institutions. I wish to move museums from their historic view as the

keeper of the inheritance of our pasts into one of the places that overtly caters for strangers to safely meet in order to create a base of broadly held experience of safety and acceptance within an enriching environment. There are many other spaces where strangers pass each other and some, like train stations, libraries and shopping malls, are indoors and include entrances and multiple activities of interest. These spaces and the many outside locations like parks, sidewalks, etc. are often called public space. So I am interested in looking at what motivates people, especially non-users to enter. Clearly they go into an unaccustomed place because they have a destination that supersedes their timidity.

But even with new and lively offerings, the entry into unfamiliar surroundings must be made to be welcome in order to attract new strangers. The notion of welcome is complex and thoroughgoing. I am interested in who doesn't come, the signaling we send them to stay away, and the ways we can invite strangers to enter if we really wish to.

This view of expansive welcome can only get implemented however, if the staff, most especially the leadership, wishes to question their most basic and unexamined assumptions that brought them to the field in the first place. It is not an easy or comfortable task I am suggesting. It means museums must begin to ask if their door, regardless of their rhetoric, is really the entry to unintentional private, rather than public, space. And in a new book I am involved in about lobbies, it turns out that where the public/private divide is placed, matters.

#### INTRODUCTION:

I have spent my career wanting museums to be welcoming for everyone because I contend we humans collectively own the patrimony held therein. And if the museum is not convivial to all, then something is indeed not "quite right". And whatever is wrong should get fixed!

I would content that our behavior results from our preconceptions about our audience and their needs, and if our current audience is not broad enough to suit us, shouldn't we reexamine and possibly change both our behavior and the underlying assumptions we are making?

But I recognize we are between a rock and a hard place, wanting to keep our current audience satisfied while hoping to welcome new visitors who not only have different expectations but whose expectations might be counter to our current visitors? I know it is unfriendly to suggest that it might be the very nature of our exclusivity that IS the reason for our current audience's satisfaction.

## IN CONTEXT:

But, for me, there is a larger reason for rethinking your museums relationship with others. I believe that all public institutions have a serious, cumulative and aggregate role in creating a more peaceable and respectful environment for people. Taken together, the way that people who work in institutions and treat others might be one of the foundation stones for modelling civic peace. And our role in civic peace might be central rather than ancillary given today's political climate (especially in the US)

The world is always changing, it follows that there is a need for citizens (and the institutions they build) to mindfully create evolve-able guidelines for living honorably together in our culturally, politically and religiously diverse democracy. The current and pressing need for change comes from nation's major realignments in demographics, the use of technology as a constant information source, and (in the US), the clear institutional racism seen in our police and justice system, our relationship to guns and to the truth, and the ambivalence we all<sup>4</sup> feel whenever we actually mingle with those who are unlike us.

While history may point to other brutish times, there is considerable agreement that there has been a recent debasing of public discourse in the United States. Politicians and commentators have sunk into acrimonious attacks, stridently repeating untruths in what now passes for rational thought but isn't. The philosophical polarization of American political parties has led to legislative intractability and doctrinaire punditry on both the right and left. There is a constant stream of profane comments to be read on blogs and an emerging explosion of seemingly unmediated retorts to be found in social media. It is difficult to discern if there are any underlying rules of peaceful engagement remaining in situations with so much vitriol.

Furthermore, there is a precipitous rise in the number of identifiable hate groups<sup>5</sup>, a perceived increase in workplace incivility<sup>6</sup>, and an uptick in the amount of violence and bullying in school.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that these actions and the tolerance of intolerant speech are related. For the first time in my lifetime, I am uncertain of the stability of American democracy given the demagoguery which has announced that the outcome of the election may be rigged and therefore should not be countenanced.

And into this quite dangerous time, the institutions we collectively run might have a salutatory role to play. One that is more important than the display of specific content, but rather as a model of inclusive welcoming behavior and one that is mediated by and embraces the cultural differences that has, in part, contributed to the unrest. It is not making something great AGAIN but rather creating a new kind of great and for the first time. In an oversimplified but useful exaggeration – maintaining our institutions for the already initiated alone may be adding to public unease.

As we look at actions and places that exemplify these inclusive behaviors, I am fascinated by the unofficial though culturally dependent “rules” that prevail when, for example, one is standing “in line” at the supermarket. Such voluntary norms are still generally understood, seemingly fair, and informally enforced even while differing country to country. I believe that these are indicators of the public’s unspoken aspiration to achieve amicable interactions between strangers when possible

#### DEFINITIONS OF CIVILITY/ ETTIQUETTE/ SOCIAL NORMS:

It should not come as a surprise that there are researchers in academic pursuits such as sociology, ethics, theology, cultural studies, etc., who study the rules of expected normative behavior, and the informal methods of enforcing them when such expectations are not codified within the legal system. These all concern themselves with overlapping areas of etiquette and manners, ethics, citizenship, social capital, conformity and deviation, altruism, etc. And in the commercial sector, there is related research on the importance of treating customers kindly as an aid to maximizing profits which very much wants to welcome all comers.

With many competing terms, definitions and directions from which to choose, I have decided to concentrate on “civility” as contrasted, for example, to etiquette, manners, politeness, correctness, respect, consideration, etc., and to apply that term as a lens for thinking about museums and their unexamined but customary interactions between people in the public arena.

I am defining the term civility to mean those rules of engagement that are not static, always evolving, permeable, rarely codified, flexible enough to be adjusted to the specific situation, and remaining non-enforceable by legal means. “Laws tend to develop when the normal cultural beliefs, values, and assumptions no longer are sufficient”.<sup>8</sup>

I am not alone in selecting this term, David Carr has said in his book, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*

“Ethics is often used as a synonym for Civility but I contend it is not. Ethics is a standard that can be litigated while civility is a fluid normative behavior condoned or curtailed by public pressure.”<sup>9</sup>

Those who use the term are interested in the behavior leading to peaceable action. For example, Yale Law Professor, Steven Carter has said in his book *Civility*:

“I do not consider civility synonymous with manners (although I do think manners matter). I have in mind an attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens, an

attitude,... that has important political and social implications. Moreover, civility is a moral issue, not just a matter of habit or convention, it is morally better to be civil than to be uncivil" 10

Based on my reading I have chosen to synthesize a more activist definition of civility: the etiquette needed to show respect and the tools required for promoting active conciliation in discourse (verbal or otherwise), especially when negotiating disputed topics. How those assumptions have been translated into action, and what museums can now do to assist in a more proactive, equalizing and respectful relationship with their many publics, including the welcoming of the non-visitor.

#### MUSEUMS ARE POLITE:

I am willing to stipulate that most museums provide peaceable environments and places of amity for all who enter. They are most often places of decorum and courtesy. The institution expects patrons to embrace an underlying set of nonbelligerent behaviors. Officials train staff in pleasant customer service. So perhaps in a fractious society, it could be argued that museums are already demonstrating a level of sophisticated civility and should serve as models for community behavior.

Yet I would argue that what museums are mostly doing is presenting a model from a former time, when good manners were assumed to be part of the upper class armamentaria to which the rest of society either already aspired, or ought to. Museums, in this formulation, are gracious places but do not want to be inclusive of such behaviors in a diversified culture that might undermine their elevating effect.

Some have written about the good-willed but patronizing underpinnings of museums which often continue to emanate a sense of elitism despite the intention of the staff.<sup>11</sup> This museum culture may be about the conflation of acquisitiveness, collections, class, power and taste. If vestiges of this pervading exclusivity remain, it may be, in part, because museums have been generally lacking in self-critical examination of their common etiquette and what it signals to others. Politeness as previously constructed, I am suggesting, is not synonymous with the civility needed today.

#### APPLICATION TO MUSEUM PRACTICE:

I am convinced that change starts with small and seemingly insignificant actions which can burgeon into quite widespread new beginnings. But even small changes must mirror philosophy if a museum is to remain honorable, consistent, reliable and, in the end, believable.

So in that spirit, I have become interested in four rarely examined areas of practice. They are:

- **Assumptions about Audience:** What are the museum's internal and often unexpressed assumptions about their patrons? Do we believe our visitors are our friends, enemies, students, teachers, colleagues? How does the museum signal these in language, signage, training of staff and activities? What accommodations can be made to welcome the non-visitor and still satisfy the long-standing and loyal following?
- **Assumptions about staff:** What does management think of staff in positions of less power? What do the educators think of the curators, and vice versa? Who has to work on the weekend and why? How should museums adjust their work policies so that the needs of the individual and family are integrated with the needs of the entire organization? What policies make cultural assumptions (i.e. holidays, etc.)? Does the museum wish to broaden them? How should workers treat each other and what are the consequences of incivility in the workplace? What are the policies that respect individual choice of dress, religious practice, sexual orientation, gender equity, etc.? What are the formal and informal systems of mediation that lead to a balance between individual and community within the institution?
- **Assumptions about museum-generated and user-generated knowledge:** How will museums deal with the display of content within a society that has diverse opinions on the subject matter and when the audiences have increasing access to multiple sources of information? Does the interpretation acknowledge and display dissenting opinions? If so, does that help or hinder the overall understanding of the topics? How does the museum distinguish between "expert" and "amateur"? Should the museum have a point of view and/or privilege the view of staff over the visitor? How are cultural and academic expertise differentiated; and in cultural subject matters should both be presented as co-equal authorities? Has the museum adopted the role of teacher and assumed the audience wishes to be the learner? Should that or any other equation between institution and its customers be altered or made more porous?
- **Assumptions about Community and Cooperation:** What actions should follow from the assertion that museums are forums and meeting grounds for their community? What are the rules for use of public and private museum spaces by staff, interested outside organizations, and the public? What organizational or interest-group alliances should the museum be making that it has not made before? Does the museum take positions of advocacy on issues that it feels are in the public interest?

I understand that the questions listed above are not all parallel or of equal weight. But consideration of related overlapping ideas is often MESSY. I have decided that lack of conceptual tidiness should not prevent us from considering this topic. I feel that I am “onto something”. It is the very messiness in what I am proposing that would allow each museum to select their own next steps as they deem relevant and wish to pursue. And in keeping with that untidiness, I have created a self-examination work sheet for any institution that might want to begin. The purpose of the work sheet’s examples is to jump start the brainstorming session -- not provide a definitive list.

#### WORKPLAN:

How would a museum go about looking at its assumptions? An absolute prerequisite: the idea must be endorsed by the leadership of the organization. Nothing is more debilitating than undertaking a process the outcome of which has no chance of implementation. So if the idea originates with staff, it must lead to a negotiation with the leaders for adoption and follow through.

To begin such a review museum staff, and outsiders who are embedded in real communities of interest, need to envision together the optimum relationship between the museum and its audiences (visitors, each other, experts, distance users, families, etc.) and the subsequent action steps that would best fit with that. Such work obviously requires a serious commitment and more than a single superficial meeting.

Next a staff team would need to analyze the language, tone and intent of the museum’s current written materials (e.g., signage, fundraising brochures, personal and other policy, training materials, exhibition labels, etc.) to discern the unspoken assumptions about audience and each other that were previously embedded but are no longer useful or appropriate. And they would need to ask front-line service people (security, front desk, switchboard, etc.) how they were trained and what instructions (overt or covert) they had received from their supervisor.

The same staff team would then identify mismatches between desired outcomes and current policies and customary behaviors. Thus would begin the process of rewriting and retraining. I imagine that along the way, the institution’s mission and vision documents could need corresponding realignment to better capture and help shape these emergent aspirations.

One of the overt outcomes that has occurred in other kinds of institutions upon undertaking such a project has been the promulgation of a set of “civility” expectations that have become part of the package of employment or other public documents.

## WHAT OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AND WRITERS ARE TACKLING THIS PROBLEM AND WHO CAN WE LEARN FROM?

If this sounds too tangential to our essential work let me cite some examples to the contrary: There is a section in Wikipedia “Civic Virtue” that lists the prominent organizations in the US now dealing with Civility as a central issue.<sup>12</sup> In their reference section can be found examples of the following:

- Some universities and town governments who are used to holding public forums full of oppositional people have taken intentional civility to heart and produced rules for engagement that citizens in these communities must ascribe to in order to enter into debate.
- Some interactive websites and blogs have created rules for engagement and often these rules are called civility. <sup>13</sup>
- There is human resources management literature trying to help employers engage successfully with generation x’ers and beyond who have found that life and work need a new balance, with their elders’ profession-driven hierarchical work ethic no longer providing a satisfying armature for employment.
- The multi-national business community provides books, courses and consultants to train their business people in multi-cultural communication. For example: “Currently, many global business managers are trying to use hyper-norms, which are norms that are forming transnationally by which all cultures can live.”<sup>14</sup>
- And school reform is now looking at programs of student “citizenship” to begin addressing the lack of personal safety in the schools.

## CONCLUSION:

If museums choose to be more explicit and proactive creating new policies governing acceptable internal and external institutional behavior, they can lead the rest of us incrementally to new models of normative human interchange that are more welcoming, inclusive, porous, fluid, and accepting of deviations within limits. Our institutions can become models for the way civility is promoted in the public arena. This exercise is not a distraction or tangential to the work we do but rather goes to the heart of our reason for being. I believe, we have a public responsibility for aiding civic discourse and peace that transcends our subject matter specializations but goes hand-in-hand with our almost sacred responsibility for holding our and all people’s patrimony.

As citizens we need collectively to create a common appreciation for civility in all the protocols surrounding human interchange. We need to adhere to informal rules of negotiation that accept the dignity and humanity of all. Social guidelines will continue to evolve as they always do, but I believe that the rise of violence and incivility in the world

obliges us to be intentional about our organizations' informal rules of human interaction if we are to preserve what is best about democracy.

## APPENDIX: SAMPLE CIVILITY WORKSHEETS:

### ***ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT VISITORS:***

#### VISITOR BEHAVIOR AND STAFF OVERSIGHT:

- How does the museum expect its visitors to behave? How is it enforced?
- How is staff trained to interact with visitors and to reflect these assumptions?
  - Do we allow or even encourage our security and floor staff to profile visitors as potential security or disruptive risks? How are “suspicious” visitors identified and treated?
  - Do we exclude any people from even entering the museum? If so whom and how?
- What kind of activities do we consider too boisterous, too dangerous, or too violent and how do we train our staff to intercede?
- How can we be welcoming to all and still maintain an appropriate level of security?
- How approachable are floor staff and how do we signal their availability to our visitors?
  - What do they wear?
  - Do we have both security and floor staff and why?

#### CULTURAL BEHAVIORAL DIFFERENCES:

- Do we understand that what constitutes courtesy may be culturally or class-based and not universally observed? How can we study and change that?
- Do we know what parts of our overall expectations for behavior might be misunderstood by some sectors of our potential audience?
- Do we have an implied or actual dress code for our visitors? If so what is it and is it inclusive of minorities in the community?
- What does the museum believe is an acceptable noise level? Do we really need all spaces quiet or just some?
- In what ways are we dampening social interaction and is that appropriate?
- Can we vary the rules of engagement for different spaces, and how will the public know about these variations?
- How do we expect visitors to queue? Do we understand that queue behaviors differ in different cultures and we are sending a friendly signal as to the general etiquette we expect on line?

#### AMENITIES:

- Have we understood that placement of amenities and wayfinding signs serve as signals for welcome?

- Where are our seats and do they encourage crowd watching, nursing, resting, contemplation, family interaction, meeting and regrouping?
- Do we wish to redesign to encourage more congregating?
- Where are our toilets and how are they fitted out
- What do we sell in the shop? What is our average price point?

#### FOOD SERVICE:

- Are our rules against eating, drinking, picnicking, congregating, lounging, and talking necessary in all locations?
  - Where is our food service and can we embed food within additional spaces to encourage different activities at the same time?
  - What food do we serve? Is it recognizable to many groups? What is the price point?

#### INTERACTIVITY:

- What is our position on group interactivity? Do we want to promote intergenerational learning and/or peer interchange, without creating interference for the quiet needed by others for their enjoyment?

#### TECHNOLOGY:

- What are our rules for picture taking, tweeting, texting, and phone calling within our premises?
  - Are our posted rules about technology use being disobeyed because they are no longer relevant or the norm? Are we therefore promoting disobedience and flaunting of authority?

#### SPACE:

- Can our floor itself become useful sitting space without becoming a safety hazard? Is it really only for walking especially for children?
- Can multiple activities go on in the same space without interference one to another?

#### TEXT:

- How are our labels and wayfinding signs designed? Do they work for the non-English speaker, the handicapped, the illiterate, the child and the unfamiliar user? Should they? Should there be multiple and duplicative ways of learning the same material?

#### LEARNING LEVELS:

- What learning levels do we expect our visitors to have? (Novice, enthusiast, expert.) Do we make accommodations for all or some of these levels?
- Do we expect our audience to come singly or in social groups? How do we make accommodations for these differences?
- Do we expect our social groups to split up and experience the museum individually or do we accommodate chatter and discussion in the presence of the object?

## APPENDIX: CIVILITY WORKSHEETS:

### ***ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT STAFF:***

#### INTERNAL WORKING ASSUMPTIONS:

- What is the tone of our Human resources policy, sexual harassment, etc.?
- How transparent are our pay bands?
- What is our recruitment policy especially toward minority hiring?
- Working conditions
- Individualized performance, hours, locations, etc.
- Contractor and salaried.
- Hierarchy, porousness, matrix management
- Ethical standards
- Economics and its tension with public service.

#### ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

- What is the staff role vis-à-vis the public? accumulator, learner, teacher, lecturer, or orchestrator?
- How have we trained them to be interlocutors? as learner/teacher
- How does management recognize expertise? By degrees, cultural experience, traditional hierarchies, avocation?
- How is learning, change, sharing, experimentation rewarded?

## APPENDIX: CIVILITY WORKSHEETS:

### ***ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MUSEUM-GENERATED AND USER-GENERATED KNOWLEDGE:***

“For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we will become more polarized and set in our ways. And that will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.”<sup>15</sup>

### PROMOTION OF OVERT DIALOGUE IN CONTENTIOUS ISSUES:

- Does the visitor know the institution’s point of view? And is it printed publically available for the interrogation of the user?
- Should exhibitions that display scientific explanations allow for spiritual or religious alternatives as well? Should they allow people with other opinions to lead tours within their exhibition publically countering the argument?
- If an exhibition will knowingly disturb the expressed beliefs of some members of the general public, what action/warning/negotiations should the museum take prior to its opening?
- Should memorial museums allow/consider the opinions of those who were persecutors? Those who were conscripted against their will?
- What line of argument does the museum use when some groups are unhappy? (e.g., protected freedom of speech, censorship, excessive kow-towing to the sensibilities of minorities, political correctness).
- In the midst of controversy, is the museum willing to modify its stance? Does the museum see modification as cowardice?
- Does the museum wish to produce multiple point of view exhibitions that include multiple communities?
- Are there ways for the public to comment on the exhibition? Are their comments available for others to see and comment further upon?

### SHARING AUTHORITY:

- How do we encourage public debate in formats and language that is welcoming of thoughtful response?
- Have we built in and encouraged opportunities for sharing knowledge from those outside of the institution?

- What are the design methods of response (comment cards, talk-back boards, blogs, twitter, etc.) that the organization has built into their exhibitions and programs, that allow for further discussion and input?
- How do we use techniques like crowd-sourcing, tagging, cloud-building that encourages people outside the staff to contribute to our knowledge base?

## APPENDIX: CIVILITY WORKSHEETS:

### ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT COMMUNITY AND COOPERATION:

#### THE CREATION OF THE REAL FORUM OR MEETING GROUND

- How are community organizations made welcome?
- What is the pathway for public presentation by ordinary citizens?
- How are contemporary issues and things that immediately affect the surrounding area addressed in the museum? (e.g., zoning, pollution, disasters, etc.)?
- What social and/or political service can be helped by access to the institution?
- What groups (nursing homes, day care, handicapped, ESL classes, social service, grieving groups, etc.) would be assisted if invited to use the museum in ways that helped address their mission?
- How has the institution trained itself to be helpful in times of local catastrophe?
- What is the relationship between the museum and the homeless, and what is the etiquette that is observed?

#### ACCESS TO ASSETS:

- What assumptions about preserving objects, protecting the building, and securing our patrons that can now be discarded or transformed?
- How has technology made it possible for us to do things that no longer need human intercession?
- Are physical and staff assets to be made available to other organizations?
- Will we customize access to collections for use by others according to their need? (college courses, Alzheimer visitors, etc.)
- What staff participation is encouraged in outside organizations that support community wellbeing unrelated to the institution's mission?
- What is the museum's relationship the formal education and home-school systems of its community?

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<sup>1</sup> Speech in London (16 December 1970); as quoted in *The Times* [London] (17 December 1970) and in *Great Jewish Quotations* (1996) by Alfred J. Kolatch, p. 115, [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abba\\_Eban](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abba_Eban)

<sup>1.</sup> <sup>2</sup> Fraser, J. (2004). "Museums and Civility." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 47(3): 252.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Billante and Peter Saunders, "Why Civility Matters," *Policy* 18, no. 3 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Kim Severson, "Number of U.S. Hate Groups Is Rising, Report Says," *New York Times*, March 8, 2012 2012.

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<sup>11</sup> C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>12</sup><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civility#References>

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<sup>15</sup> Obama, Michigan Commencement address on the role of government in a democracy. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/01/obama-michigan-graduation\\_n\\_559688.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/01/obama-michigan-graduation_n_559688.html)