

**Measuring Museum Meaning:
A Critical Assessment Framework**

By Douglas Worts

Isn't it odd that museums - one of society's principal institutions dedicated to culture - do not measure their success or impacts in cultural terms? Attendance, revenue, objects accessioned, exhibits mounted, publications published are some of the measures that museums use to assess their operations. But, it can be argued, none of these are cultural indicators. They do not reflect on the cultural needs, opportunities or well being of the community. Nor do they offer insights into the cultural impacts of museum operations on individuals. What these measures do offer is some insight into the activity of museums as institutions – as non-profit, corporate entities. Exactly what this has to do with the cultural health of individuals or communities is a good question.

In order to explore how well museums position themselves in the cultural landscape of our society, it is important to review what we mean by 'culture'. Is it a particular class of activities that a certain segment of society engages in during their leisure time? Is it a niche form of entertainment – one that has some particular educational value? Is culture something that refers to the past, is embodied in objects, amassed in public collections and exhibited by institutions? In the AAM's 2002 publication Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums, Daniel Kertzner¹ offers Edgar Schein's definition of culture for consideration by museum professionals. Schein refers to culture as "a basic pattern of assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration". Such a definition positions culture within the context of daily life, not as a leisure-time activity, nor as a discipline-based academic specialty. Instead, Schein's notion of culture is seen as a mechanism for human adaptation within a world that is constantly changing, one which requires that the very essence of human worldviews must evolve as the reality of our planetary context shifts. If one approaches culture in this way, it is no wonder that museums can seem disconnected with the mainstream of life and more often than not associated with the planning of vacations in distant places, or scheduling how best to spend a Sunday afternoon with friends or family. Few people think of museums as a locus for transforming human attitudes and behaviour in an effort to maintain (or re-establish) a balanced existence within an unpredictable world. Perhaps this is an idealistic expectation for museums and other cultural organizations – but one can argue, that such a balance is the number one need confronting humanity in our current, globalized environment.

To ask museums to change the way they approach their work, shifting from the traditional discipline-based, object-centred framework of institutionalized activities (including curatorial, education, collections management, conservation, etc.), to one based on the cultural dynamics of people, communities and their relationships to larger natural systems, is to invite potential destabilization within our sector. And yet, this is what seems to be required – not only of the cultural sector, but also of business,

government, education, economics and so on. The world has changed fundamentally in the past century as a result of technological advances, globalization, urbanization, pluralization and exponential population growth. Human adaptation to our changing external reality, and the internal integration of those adaptations, lies at the heart of our present cultural challenge. It seems clearer than ever that museums have the potential to play a vital role in this process, but only if there is the will and capacity to examine the core assumptions regarding what museums do and how they measure their impacts – in cultural terms.

Since 2000, there has been a small group in Canada that has been struggling to pursue this goal of repositioning museums within the evolving cultural landscape of our societies. The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities (WGMSC) was founded with the support of the Canadian Museum of Nature and has been leading workshops and developing resourcesⁱⁱ for museum professionals across Canada over the past five years. It was formed as a collaborative effort, focusing its efforts on engaging the museum community in Canada in a process of awareness, reflection, learning, knowledge-sharing, capacity-building and action related to their role in creating a ‘culture of sustainability’. The Working Group includes:

- Thérèse Baribeau and Linda Liboiron, The Biosphère, Environment Canada
- Anne Breau and Catherine Dumouchel, Canadian Museum of Nature
- Elizabeth Kilvert, Ecological Monitoring and Assessment Network (EMAN), Environment Canada
- Helen MacDonald-Carlson, Thompson Rivers University
- Diane Pruneau, Université de Moncton
- Glenn Sutter, Royal Saskatchewan Museum
- Douglas Worts, Art Gallery of Ontario.

A central goal of the WGMSC has been to better understand how to identify and use cultural indicators to guide the work of museums. One tool, created by the Working Group, is a framework for museum professionals to use as they struggle to ground their practice in the cultural experiences of individuals, communities, as well as museums themselves – specifically related to securing a sustainable future. It is called the *Critical Assessment Framework*.

The Critical Assessment Framework (CAF) uses three lenses to examine the relationship of a museum program to its community. These are the Individual, the Community, and the Museum. It is most useful as a reference in discussing and assessing the relative merits of various program strategies. We consider this tool to be an intermediate step towards the development of actual performance indicators for cultural programming. There is a fourth lens that ultimately warrants being integrated into the framework in order to address larger questions of sustainability – that of the Global Level. However, the Working Group has decided to focus on the first three levels for now.

The Framework functions best when museum staff (and possibly other stakeholders - eg. members of the public) ask themselves a series of questions about the potential outcomes related to any given public program that is being considered. Making detailed notes

about the potential public impacts of these programs can help staff to reshape their ideas, with specific outcomes in mind. A brief discussion of each lens follows.

a) Individual Level

When considering a new public program initiative, ask how well the program will:

- Contribute new and relevant insights
- Capture imagination, stimulate curiosity
- Affirm, challenge, deepen identity
- 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
- Help deal with complexity and uncertainty
- Increase responsible action

Part of the value of asking these questions is to force the issue of ‘how will the success of this initiative be measured’?ⁱⁱⁱ Will it require that visitors engage in reflection about certain issues that are woven into their lives? Is it enough that visitors acquire new information about a particular topic, or is it essential that the focus of the program actually leads to a personalization of the new information and integration into their engagement with the world? When families visit museums together is it important to facilitate cross-generational dialogue about the different ways that groups of different ages and experiences see society? At the individual level, it demands a reconsideration of whether an exhibit, or an onsite program is the best vehicle to achieve certain outcomes.

It should be mentioned that although the CAF provides a tool for generating discussion amongst museum staff, it stops short of providing a set of performance indicators. These can be identified separately, in relationship to individual programs being considered. Performance indicators should have two characteristics to be useful – 1) it is measurable and 2) that the measured value is moving towards or away from a desired goal. In a recent exhibit of artworks created by official war artists, some of the performance indicators used at the Art Gallery of Ontario were as follows: a) the rate at which visitors contribute comments or drawings about their reflections on war, b) the rate at which visitors review the writings and drawings of other visitors; c) the rate at which visitors talk to others about the works of art and the issues of war and conflict that are woven into the artworks. There are countless indicators that can be used to provide insight into whether visitors actually engage in reflective and meaningful ways with museum programs – but all too frequently, museums do not dedicate the time or resources to collect this essential feedback in order to improve their methods of engaging audiences.

b) Community Level

Ask how well the program will:

- Address vital & relevant needs/issues within the community
- Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national and global levels
- Engage a diverse public
- Encourage social interactions and debate

- Stimulate intergenerational interactions
- Link existing community groups to one another
- Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships
- Have tangible impacts in community

It seems obvious that museums should be attempting to create programs that are meaningful to community, but difficult to know how to gauge that meaningfulness. By asking themselves the above questions in relationship to potential programs, museum staff can help keep their focus on the ultimate purpose that any museum would presumably create a public program – to benefit the public. Too often, museums that have developed an identity around a particular set of objects, as opposed to being committed to addressing the shifting cultural needs of community, will find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Will they assess their ‘success’ in terms of the outputs of exhibits, publications, programs and such, or in terms of the outcomes on individuals and communities?

c) **Museum Level**

Ask how well the program will:

- Challenge personal and institutional assumptions amongst staff and collaborators
- Be guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes
- Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals
- Identify and value staff skills and resources
- Empower, transform and affect all who are involved
- Create a community of learning within staff
- Engage key players / champions / detractors early on in the process (external and internal)
- Include multiple perspectives
- Engage different learning styles
- Integrate different dimensions of sustainability
- Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge
- Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations

One of the most important capacities of any organization is the ability to adapt to the forces which are relevant to that organization. Some of these are internal forces – such as emerging skills, visions, conflicts, resources, etc.; and some are external – changing demographics, societal values, new technologies, and so on. Peter Senge has written extensively on the challenges involved if institutions are to be ‘learning organizations’^{iv}. Because ideally museums are linked to the cultural dynamics and wellbeing of community, it is particularly important for them to be as consciously connected to the evolving needs and opportunities of their cultural context as possible. However, some museums have been created with such narrow internal sense of purposes – eg. the preservation and promotion of a particular private collection of art – that the institutional mission actually becomes an impediment to its public accountability. To use the analogy of tossing a pebble into a pond, museum programs are the pebbles, but the goals are actually the ripples sent out across the pond. Of course it is important to be conscious of the pebble being tossed, but at least as important is to be conscious of the ripples, and their impact on the various constituents that make up the culture of the pond.

My personal hope is that museums increasingly will maximize their potential to be culturally relevant by being much more responsive to the needs and realities of their communities and mindful of the impacts (or lack of impact) that their work has on those communities. It is hard to conceive of a more pressing issue today than our ability to create a bridge to a sustainable future, particularly in our rapidly changing world.^v Being responsive to critical issues in ways that brings history into a vital relationship with the present and engaging citizens in active ways not only justifies public funding of cultural organizations, but it also makes sense that there are cultural mirrors that enable a society to see itself more clearly and adjust its actions accordingly. But many questions remain regarding how we will assess our societal needs and what types of mirroring and engagement strategies can be developed. Will collection-building and exhibition-generation, the traditional mainstays of museum work, continue to consume the bulk of our limited resources? If not, what alternatives can we imagine – partnerships with the mass media? ...increased use of community forums? ... a more integrated collaboration with the education system?

If museums are fundamentally the ‘place of the muse’, involving a creative interaction with forces that are not fully known and not fully controllable, then museum professionals may want to focus as much on measuring creative and reflective interactions – at the personal, community and institutional levels. The Critical Assessment Framework is a modest attempt by one group of museum folk to broaden the frame of how museums measure their effectiveness in cultural terms.

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ⁱ Kertzner, Daniel, “The Lens of Organizational Culture“, Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums, AAM, 2002. p.40

ⁱⁱ These resources are available – please contact Douglas Worts at douglas_worts@rogers.com and I will forward electronic copies.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that the work of museum educators (eg. George Hein, John Falk, Lynne Dierking, Lois Silverman and many others) and audience researchers (eg. Molly Hood, Randi Korn, Ross Loomis, Deborah Perry and many others) have contributed enormously to this lens of the ‘individual’. And yet much remains to be explored as the framework expands from education to culture.

^{iv} Senge, Peter, The Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of the Learning Organization, Doubleday, 1990

^v see Worts, Douglas, “On the Brink of Irrelevance: Art Museums and Contemporary Society”, in Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries: An International Reader, edited by Les Tickle, Veronica Sekules, Maria Xanthoudaki, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003