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A Review of "Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values"

Douglas Worts^a

^a WorldViews Consulting, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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Book Review

Holo, S., and Alvarez, M.-T. (Eds.) (2009). *Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 216 pages, ISBN 0-7591-1221-5/978-0-7591-1221-6 (hbk) USD\$39.95.

Reviewed by Douglas Worts

WorldViews Consulting, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

“[Now] is the moment to clearly identify [sustainable values for museums] and to make the case that it is only in fulfilling those values that museums can articulate and claim their indispensability to society and to its continuing betterment . . . The purpose of this handbook is to lay out another [i.e. non-financial] set of values that can provide indicators of our success.”
(Holo and Alvarez)

Museum professionals everywhere may well be excited by the title of this book, *Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values*. Who doesn't want to see museums shift their focus away from balance sheets in order to embrace values and activities that can help museums achieve their full potential as cultural organizations? This is one of the few efforts by museum professionals that attempts to address the emerging challenge of sustainability with which societies around the world are grappling. It raises many interesting questions and offers food for thought and discussion across the museum field. At the same time, there are issues that surface about the use and abuse of the terms *sustainability*, *values*, *culture*, *creativity*, *ethics*, and more.

The idea for the book was born out of a think tank called the International Museum Institute, a partnership between the Fisher Museum of Art at the University of Southern California and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Selma Holo, Director of the Fisher, along with Mari-Tere Alvarez, a project specialist at the J. Paul Getty Museum, edited the volume and wrote introductions for each of its sections. Their goal was “to propose a set of sustainable values that any museum could adopt (or adapt) . . . values that would allow for a qualitative evaluation of museum success.” Such a stated focus on evaluation is a natural beacon for the interest of audience researchers, although there is regrettably little in the way of formulating performance indicators or evaluative strategies that can be directly taken from this book.

One of the strengths of the book, also a weakness, derives from its use of over 40 professionals from across the museum field, who were engaged to contribute short articles—most from two to four pages in length. The diversity of contributors provides an interesting snapshot of the wide range of perspectives that occupy the

museum world. Each contribution is a brief personal reflection on the topic of museums and is placed into one of the 10 “sustainable values” that the editors suggest are essential for museums to embrace if they want to survive into the future. There are no formal references within the volume, which would have helped the reader to situate the content in the larger world of sustainability, values, culture, and museums. What, you might ask, are the 10 values being proposed in this volume? They are a mixed bag: public trust; primacy of our collections; relevance; inclusion; globalization: finding and claiming your niche; creativity and experimentation; new alliances; authentic experience; generation and dissemination of knowledge; communication. After reading all the various commentaries and contributions I was unconvinced that most of these are actually values—although nobody ever really defines what they mean by the term *values*. I could see that some of them described principles, beliefs or goals, but not values.

As a student of culture and sustainability over the past dozen years, I have come to appreciate that values are indeed a critical part of what defines our culture—and therefore are essential to be addressed in a book like this. But I was expecting to see a discussion of values such as equity, responsibility, trust, honesty, generosity, self-reflection, humility, respect, compassion, and so on. It was a surprise to encounter “primacy of our collections” and “generation and dissemination of knowledge” proposed as values. Both of these seem to reflect traditional museum strategies, not values capable of guiding the future development of museums.

There are many places in the book where one encounters valuable insights. In the Introduction, for example, the editors assert that leaders of museums will need “to be more transparent, more inclusive, and less protectionist about their operations and policies.” They also warn readers that “the values that we propose both recognize and accept that we live in a time that takes no institution’s survival for granted simply ‘because it exists.’” These are encouraging signs of a field that is ready to examine its foundational assumptions, but the book’s unevenness suggests that the field is not yet quite up to the task.

From a visitor studies perspective, one of the worthwhile voices is that of Tom Freudenheim, a retired museum director with extensive experience, whose contribution, positioned in the Communication section and titled “Reality Check”, asserts the importance of having visitor studies data that provides staff with insights into visitor experiences. Such studies, which he acknowledges are more common than they were 20 years ago, are still not widespread across the field. He also raises a significant question about “what do we know about people who don’t visit our museums, and might we learn something from them?” Where is Molly Hood when we need her?

Steven Seidel from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, writing in the Generation and Dissemination of Knowledge section, brings a potent and nuanced perspective of how knowledge is constructed and changes over time. “How we orient ourselves to the evolving nature of our knowledge and, perhaps even more significantly to our ignorance, may be the most defining quality of our individual and institutional character.” He argues that if the mission of the museum is to contribute to the generation and dissemination of knowledge, evaluation and assessment in museums must provide insights into what happens in the minds of those who become engaged. Seidel speaks of the importance of engaging people in conversations, but

warns that “to make an invitation into a conversation genuine, one has to demonstrate that one is truly listening.” Advice worth heeding!

One might also be encouraged by potential-filled statements of the editors when they say “as we see it, creativity might actually consist of breaking the boundaries and expectations of what a museum is traditionally seen to be.” This is counterbalanced by statements such as one by Indianapolis Museum of Art Director Maxwell Anderson, which refers to “those functions indispensable to the furtherance of a museum’s core mission, which is to collect and preserve what we have collectively inherited.” Although Anderson clarifies that he considers collections necessary but insufficient to address the cultural needs of today, there is a lurching quality in this book between conservative museum thinking and progressive museology. Ultimately it fails to lay down a solid foundation for the future.

With the notion of *sustainability* included in the book’s title, I had hoped that there would be a discussion of the term. As a concept, sustainability has its contemporary roots in the work of the World Commission on the Environment and the Economy, laid out in *Our Common Future*, which is the United Nations publication of the Commission’s work. The insight of this group, headed by Norwegian Gro Harlem Brundtland, is that there is no local sustainability without global sustainability. Yet over the past decade or so, as the term has come into popular usage, its meaning has frequently been applied to the opposite of what was intended. Rather than asking how our local organizations and lifestyles can change in order to create global sustainability, many people now ask how they can sustain their organizations and lifestyles. The former approach springs from a vision of societal transformation; the latter is an attempt to hold onto the status quo. In *Beyond the Turnstile*, ensuring that this term was clearly defined would have helped give focus to the various contributors.

In summary, I commend the editors and authors for undertaking this difficult task of looking at museums through the lenses of both values and sustainability. Through it they will help to stimulate dialogue about the often contradictory potential and limitations of museums. Vanda Vitali, Director of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, states clearly that “museums are institutions that need to feel and express the pulse of society”, while she warns of the need to “acknowledge the inherent limits of insights and wisdom that may be provided by any museum”. It might have been more instructive to start with a discussion about society’s need for cultural engagement and cohesion in a world that is being massively changed through globalization, urbanization, and pluralization. This could have been a more fruitful context within which to discuss the potential new, adapted, and old roles that museums could play in creating a culture of sustainability.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Douglas Worts (www.douglasworts.org) is a culture and sustainability specialist with WorldViews Consulting, in Toronto, Canada. His museum career has spanned over 30 years, employed primarily by the Art Gallery of Ontario, where he focused primarily on exhibition development, audience engagement, and visitor studies. He is a founding director of the Visitor Studies Association and has taught graduate courses in Museum Studies at the University of Toronto. He is a Fellow of Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD). E-mail: douglas_worts@rogers.com.