

AMM 2016 Keynote Presentation

The On-Demand Museum

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I want to talk about the impact of the sharing or on-demand economy on museums, but before I do, I want to speak, briefly, about the essay that Ben Davis, the national art critic for Artnet News, wrote in last Sunday's New York Times.¹ As those who read it know, he raises a compelling question: why are museums constructing new buildings or additions while laying off staff? His answer seems equally convincing. He addresses the immediate issue – that wealthy donors want to give to new buildings rather than on-going operations and that public arts funding for museums, never generous in the U.S., has declined 15% over the last 20 years.

He goes on to make a larger point of how this reflects what he calls “the irrational extremes of the age of inequality” in America, which is something that every museum – as in every university like mine – must deal with, however awkward it feels in fulfilling our public educational mission as institutions by having to tap the vast wealth of a relatively few. That may have a Robin-Hood-like appeal, but it leads to the paradox that Davis describes: museums could end up with shiny new buildings and hardly anyone left to run or staff them.

That paradox has happened in places already. The American Centre in Paris, a cultural institution that began in 1981, commissioned a decade later a design by the noted

architect Frank Gehry, hoping to attract international attention. But after opening the building in 1994, the American Center struggled financially and closed in 1996, with the building standing empty for nine years.² The new building, whatever one thinks about it architecturally or as a museum space, proved fatal to the institution that, in the end, couldn't afford it.

I don't think architects like Frank Gehry are necessarily to blame for this; after all, he gave the clients what they asked for, presumably according to their program and within their budget. But I do think architects – as much as museum directors – need to ask, as Davis suggests in his article: Do we need a new building or a new addition, even if we have a donor willing to pay for much of it, as we face financial difficulties? Should we take on the on-going operational and maintenance obligations of a new building with money we don't have, even if we have the funds to construct it?

As Davis argues, the answer to such questions has often been “yes,” no doubt in hopes that, like Gehry's museum in Bilbao, Spain, the new building or addition will attract new museum goers and new financial support. And of course, museums – especially the major art museums - have become as much a sign of civic pride and a factor in economic development as they have been about the display of creative work. As many have observed, museums – a bit like new sports stadiums – now represent a city to the world and show that a community cares about the quality of life of its citizens and remains open to new ideas, evident in San Francisco's recent addition to its Museum of Modern Art – now the largest modern art museum in the U.S. When it comes to attracting talent in an

economy in which people can live and work anywhere, the bigger and bolder the cultural statement, the better.

There is another irony in this, which Davis does not address. These new museum buildings come at a time not only when the institutions they house may have to lay off staff, but also when the new economy – which has generated the extreme wealth funding structures such as SFMOMA – seems to challenge the very idea of going to a building to see art and artifacts. This economy – variously called the sharing, collaborative, or on-demand economy – seems perfectly suited to museums, since it is one in which especially young people increasingly seek access rather than ownership, social rather than private space, and experiences over things. To thrive in such a context and to get millennials in the door, museums have begun to emphasize their alignment with this new way of being by highlighting their accessibility, their sociability, and the variety of experiences they offer.

But the new economy also poses some other real challenges to museums. With the rise of digital media, virtual reality, 3D printing, social networks, instant information, inexpensive apps, and endless images of almost everything, always available, some may wonder why they should go to a building to see what we can readily download and read labels that contain much less information than what they can read online. Museums are not alone in this challenge. Colleges and universities face the same dilemmas: donors eager to fund new buildings even as tuition keeps going up, with students asking why

they should go to class to hear a professor lecture about a topic that they can get more rapidly and maybe even more accurately on their phone.

The path an increasingly number of colleges have started to take is to move away from the paradigm of higher education as a vehicle for delivering content and toward the idea of the campus as a place of serendipitous interactions, unexpected experiences, and creative opportunities. I have taught my class nomadically, empowering my students to choose the places in which they want to learn. That has led to countless serendipitous situations in which other students, not in my class, listen in and sometimes even participate in the discussion; to my students never once choosing a traditional classroom in which to learn; and to better retention of the course's content by students, turning the campus into a memory device in which certain ideas get associated with their discussion in certain places.

Many museums already offer such experiences. I can't count the number of times I have serendipitously joined a gallery tour or listened to what others are saying about the art or artifacts in the room, and I often remember what I have seen in a museum by where the objects were hung or standing in the galleries. And most large museums have embraced digital technology whether it is virtual reality that allows visitors to see works in the physical contexts in which they were created or on-demand access to information far beyond what the museum labels can provide.

The disruption made possible by this technology stems not from the devices themselves, but from the economy that they have engendered and the opportunities they have made

available. In their book *Platform Revolution: How Networked Markets Are Transforming the Economy--And How to Make Them Work for You*, its authors – the historian Geoffrey Parker, the economist Marshall Van Alstyne, and the entrepreneur Sangeet Paul Choudary - show how the industries and institutions most vulnerable to digital disruption are information intensive, with relatively few gatekeepers, and a asymmetry of information between experts and the general public.

Those traits characterize museums, as they do colleges and universities. And so the greatest danger we face stems not from the potential disruptions we face, but from our dismissing the threat as something that doesn't apply to us. The impressive buildings, lovely landscapes, and valuable objects in our institutions may look solid, stable, and eternal, but they are hardly that. If anything, as Davis points out, our buildings can become an albatross as much as an asset. They can comfort us into complacency even as the economic underpinnings and social assumptions underlying our institutions shifts out from under us.

Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary argue that gatekeeping institutions and information-intensive industries will have to behave more like platforms if they hope to survive. Platforms like Facebook, Uber, and Airbnb succeed because they link people, peer-to-peer, eliminating intermediaries, easing access, and allowing individuals to customize their experiences, and museums have begun to experiment doing the same.

At the Cleveland Museum of Art it has a 40-foot long touch-screen wall that displays digital images of all 3,000 objects on display, enabling visitors to pick what they want to see and download their favorite images to an Ipad and have a custom tour of the galleries

made for them to see their selections. This is the museum as a mass-customizable experience. Visitors can also follow the tours of others as well, which reflects the leveling of platforms in which consumers become producers and in which crowd-sourcing and the wisdom of the crowds becomes a more valued guide than the judgments of experts.

The Cleveland example also shows how the museum-as-platform can help us reimagine the physical museum. Raphael Vinoly's design of the new addition has created a vast public space surrounds by the galleries, creating a place for socialization and reflection prompted by the art around it. Like so many aspects of the new economy that flips the old one on its head, this design suggests that the art is not an end in itself, but a means to the insights and interactions of museum-goers, museum staff, and the communities in which they reside.

That idea may offend some, but taking offense at the new economy is almost as bad as dismissing it. As we have seen in everything from our politics to our pop culture, skepticism of elites and the questioning of expertise have become increasingly widespread as we enter "the age of the amateur," as some have called it.⁴ Museums arose out of a previous era of amateurism, as did colleges and universities, and our institutions would do well to revisit that history and look to it not condescendingly, but as part of where we need to go. Look at how much Cleveland's digital wall, for example, recalls the way early museums displayed almost every item they owned on their walls.

The museum as a platform also has implications for the role of art or artifacts in contemporary life. In the 20th Century, the "age of mechanical reproduction," as Walter Benjamin put it, in which we could mass-produce images and make them widely

available, the museum piece itself became a kind of fetish item, with people going to museums to see “the real thing,” having seen endless reproductions of it before.⁵ That led to the museum as we have known it over much of the last century, with the most treasured items in a collection displayed largely at eye level and with enough separation from each other that the visitor can admire it and study it without the distraction of other works.

That way of organizing museums and displaying work has become so pervasive that we have come to think it as “normal,” as what a museum should be. But in the 21st century – the century of social networks and peer-to-peer evaluation – that may change dramatically, as we have already started to see in the example of Cleveland’s touch-screen wall and in the interactive technologies that have begun to make their way into many museums. In our current age of digital reproduction, when we can download not just the images but all the information we could ever want about a work of art or an historically significant artifact, what matters less is the item itself than the networks within which the item exists and the evaluation of it not just by experts, but also by peers.

In that light, the visit to the museum might take many forms. First, it might not involve physically going to the museum at all. Recalling Andre Malraux’s 1952 polemic for a “Musée Imaginaire” or museum without walls, the idea of a virtual museum – the museum as an app – is now not only possible as never before, but also already in existence as anyone with a Wi-Fi-connected digital device can visit art and artifacts of almost every kind whenever and wherever they want.⁶ The museum’s role in this case

may be not just one of housing those works, but of curating and connecting them in the most illuminating way, whether seen in person or on a screen.

This greatly levels the playing field for museums. It is no longer the case that the big museums in the major cities have an advantage over all the others; indeed, the more those museums keep constructing large buildings in the face of staff layoffs, as Davis points out, the more 20th century they remain and the more they hamper their ability to compete in the 21st century. The association of a museum with its building – and a university with its campus – can lull an institution into continuing to think in 20th century ways and to miss the cultural transformation happening around us as everyone who now has a mobile device and an internet connection has instant access to as much information as existed in the largest libraries in the world just a couple of decades ago. The 21st century digital museum will likely demand fewer walls – and probably more modest museum buildings – with more staff able to attract and interact more effectively with virtual visitors.

For smaller museums, their past disadvantage of having smaller budgets, less space, and fewer items in their collection can become an advantage in a future in which access rather than ownership becomes ever more important. Just as Airbnb has become the world's largest hotelier without owning any real estate and Uber, one of the largest ride-sharing companies without owning any vehicles, so too may more museums thrive and accomplish their mission without owning any artifacts or works of art. In the 21st century, linking people and helping them meet their needs and enrich their experiences have become where the greatest value lies. And those museums that focus on that, regardless of their size, will be the ones that thrive.

This may sound like pandering to the public and a put-down of professionals, but it is not. What it does suggest is that museum professionals' roles – like the professors' roles in universities - will be changing from one of delivering information and conveying knowledge to one of guiding the learning of others and learning from them in turn. In the new economy, what one's peers think seems to matter as what experts think, and so tapping visitors' ideas and responding to visitors' thoughts becomes part of the museum experience and something that museum staff need to embrace.

And yet, for all of the change that the new economy will bring to museums, it also brings us back to some of the oldest and most basic roles of these institutions. Museums have long played a critically important role in stimulating new ideas and in prompting people to see themselves and their world differently, and if we think about that as what we really are here to do, it frees us from the ways our predecessors have carried out that mission. Placing works on the wall or in vitrines on the floor is just one of many ways to stimulate new ideas and to prompt reflection, and in the digital age, there are so many more ways to do this that we should not limit ourselves to pre-digital formats.

Museums are not alone in this. In my world of higher education, we too struggle with separating our mission from our methods and letting go of the way we have done things in the past. Why sit in a lecture when you can get the same information faster and maybe even more accurately on your mobile device? And why come to a campus when you can now get a degree in some fields entirely online? The pervasiveness of digital access forces us to re-examine why we have museums – or universities – in the first place.

Our predecessors established such institutions so that people would have exposure to and inspiration from the products of human imagination and understanding in hopes that they, our visitors or students, might make their own contributions to the store of human accomplishment (or at least see their own lives differently and more expansively). That institutional role has not changed, even as the way in which people access images or information has. So how do we create a new kind of museum that complements rather than competes with the virtual “museums” most of us carry around with us on our smart phones?

One answer lies in Marshall McLuhan’s useful observation that every new technology turns the old one into an art form, an insight that might help us think differently about the future of the museum in the age of digital reproduction.⁷ While museums preserve artworks and artifacts, in the digital age, they might themselves become an art form, offering experiences not available through any other means. What might that look like? As with art itself, these institutions must ensure that people will continually return to the museum, much as they do their mobile devices, to experience something new.

A weakness in the digital environment lies in its continually trying to assess what we like and to connect us to more of the same, which might work when trying to sell something, but which fails to offer people what they didn’t know they needed until experienced. For museums, this might mean moving away from chronological, geographical, or thematically related exhibitions toward the unexpected juxtaposition of apparently unrelated works within a collection. Asking the visitor to find the commonalities and differences among what’s on display, with enough background information, of course, to

make the exercise fruitful and not frustrating could be another space of departure of curatorial work.

Such seemingly random relationships may sound irrational or even an abrogation of curatorial responsibility. This approach, though, does what no digital environment can, which is to help visitors make creative connections among things and co-curate the experience they have in a museum on a continual basis. This is especially important in a century in which innovation and entrepreneurship have become key to social and economic vitality and this places museums in a more central role, not as the result of a healthy economy, but the source of it.

This, in turn, implies a new social role for museums as not just the place for us to see works on display, but also a place to instill the habits of mind that will help us adjust to the rapid economic, environmental, and demographic changes occurring all around us. While we will no doubt continue to go to museums for the aesthetic and historical pleasures they offer, we may increasingly go to them to see their art and artifacts as representations of creative leaps, as the expressions of the lateral thinking, the unexpected interpretation, and the playful re-imagination of reality that remains a vital part of 21st century life.

Museums will be as important in the future as they have been in the past, but only if they remain open to rethinking themselves and willing to explore the opportunities that the 21st century has to offer. And in doing this, they will help every one of us adapt to the

very different world in which we live, not to fear it, but to embrace it as one of great creative eras in human history. In such an era, no institution may be more central than the museum.

Notes

1. Ben Davis. "How the Rich Are Hurting the Museums They Fund," *New York Times*, JULY 22, 2016
2. John Morris Dixon, "Frank Gehry's American Center in Paris," *Architect*, March 11, 2010
3. Fred Bernstein. "Technology That Serves to Enhance, Not Distract," *New York Times*, March 20, 2013
4. David Elfanbaum, "The Age of the Amateur," October 8, 2014
5. Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Los Angeles: Prism Key Press, 2010.
6. Andre Malraux, "Museum without Walls." *The Voices of Silence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 13 – 130.
7. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill: New York, 1964, p. 38.