

ATTIC OR CATALYST? Museums at a Crossroad

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In preparing to fill a museum board position, I voraciously read all I could find about the institution's past century. But, I was stopped in my tracks when an old brochure summed up the role of the institution as "the community's attic." The concept "community attic" raises an important question, one of relevance, and the subsequent issue, value. Certainly we can identify with the attic concept. We all harbor those dark dusty spaces filled with items connecting us to our own personal history. Intermittently we blow the dust off, reminisce, and then close the door to the past and forget it for a while. If this is how museums are perceived, it is not then surprising that museums sometimes face low attendance and promulgate a message which, along with a yawn, evokes a "been there, done that" response. Economically, we ask whether we can afford to house this menagerie of "old stuff"? What good is it and what is the cost of keeping it? Under the scrutiny of tough economic times, if this is indeed "the community attic," our place to stash all the "old stuff" no longer in use, the concept jeopardizes the real and far more important roles that a museum plays in a community. Yet, unless we reconsider the role of museums throughout Northeastern Wisconsin and re-evaluate their purpose now and in the future, we jeopardize these institutions simply because we have not taken a good look at what they fundamentally do, or at least should do, for us and our communities.

A popular term attached to modernism in Western civilization is "alienation," now known in business as disengagement, that feeling of ennui which makes us disconnected and transient, devoid of a sense of belonging. In terms of our own history, the history of the place we call home, museums ground us. For our children, they present a tangible community to call home along with the security of being part of a larger community-family with deep roots. In a sense, museums provide what we in business diligently strive for and are more than willing to pay for, community branding, who we are, how we got here and what we've accomplished. Museums, give us a sense of place, a sense of identity and the comfort that we are a part of a larger community, we are not alone. And that gives us a sense of personal value and importance.

Museums should make us think. In business, we clamor for critical thinkers, employees who can "think outside the box." In the classroom, we promise that "one of the outcomes of a course will be critical thinking skills." But, critical thinking skills require careful tending and regular work outs. Good museums provide exhibits that do just that, they make us stop and question, they leave us with ideas and questions that require mulling over. That is critical thinking. Ideally, the museum is a place where we see something and really begin to think about it, to challenge it. These are transformative ideas because they come from the specifics of an exhibit and transform into applicable concepts used in other sometimes seemingly unrelated areas of life. An example of this is the Pulitzer Prize collection: *Capture the Moment* Exhibit which came to Northeast Wisconsin several years ago. The photographs were so moving, curators accompanied the photos with tissue stations. What on the



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surface was artful photography, in reality became highly engaging and made visitors question everything from world hunger to war to the wonders of scientific invention. The exhibit crossed all generations and socio-economic backgrounds reaching the common denominator: the human condition. That is what a good exhibit does, it fosters critical thinking. An exhibit such as this does something else, it starts people talking, which is important because when we define the real work of museums, one element is to provide a forum for community understanding and dialog that expands to the world, building the future at home and globally. When we consider museums in this light, its value and purpose changes for the community as it becomes an intellectual center.

With so much easy access to information, how can museums be relevant? If museums disappeared, what would that mean to each of us today? Even more importantly, what would it mean to the next seven generations? Of course, the very act of posing these questions makes museums relevant and conveys an understanding of why they need to reset themselves for the twenty-first century. Today, the American Association of Accredited Museums' Center for the Future of Museums examines how museums of the future will present themselves considering technology, funding and leadership. How will museums reshape themselves to fulfill their role as vital community resources that have transformative value and cultural impact for our communities? The relevance of museums lies in their ability to intellectually challenge and enrich us. As much as museums aid in looking backward, they have an amazing ability to make us look forward, to connect to the present and to connect within our communities and to better understand who we are. For business, museums are an integral part of the triple bottom line.

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