

A PLACE NOT A PLACE

Reflection and Possibility in
Museums and Libraries

DAVID CARR



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Let us imagine that, of every faith—including all tribal faiths—we can ask:

- What is the path of a human being toward the divine?
- Who is the human being who is an adherent to faithful practice?
- How does the deity or the faith “see” the human?
- How do such objects as these assist a person along the spiritual path?

These questions attempt to suggest the value of objects that communicate about faith, especially in secular cultures with strongly compartmentalized areas of understanding—and variable histories in the tolerance of difference.

When museum collections hold powerful objects, it is often difficult to know how to address their power. We may allow the language of art to make them conversational and reduce them as emblems of faith. Religious practices, and the meanings of spiritual objects and artifacts, are not part of our common talk, though religion appears in the news and among our leaders in abundantly political and sometimes exploitative ways. The topic is always hot, the issues are always troubling, and they do not go far away. Politics is often imbued with implications and assumptions pertinent to private beliefs. Although a museum cannot address these social and political implications of faith, it can begin to construct a vocabulary for expressing experiences of faith objects. We know it is possible to do this responsibly and usefully, as we began to do in the exercises described here.

NOTES

1. The Five Faiths Project, led by Carolyn Wood and Amanda Hughes, uses the Ackland's collection of religious art in photography and storytelling workshops, posters, exhibitions, and related programs. This author was invited to participate in its colloquies and in the design of its final gathering. The exercises described here were first presented at the colloquium in August 2002. For information about the project, contact fivefaiths@unc.edu, or see the Web site of the Ackland Museum of Art, www.ackland.org.

2. The Ackland Art Museum, “Five Faiths Project,” <http://www.ackland.org/education/fivefaiths/ff_index.html> (4 February 2005).

OBSERVING COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS

Care to understand what they can do, what they are, and what they might become. There is no more important task for museums and libraries than to seek renewed understandings of how cultural institutions and the lives they affect can interact with each other, how we can act toward each other, and how we might think differently about a future in common. The rhetoric that once addressed the possibilities of the new millennium has come true: the rules and values of the previous century are all worth questioning.

We have so much more to understand whenever our community or society is under stress; our definitions and our anticipations of need have to be revised. In these unanticipated circumstances, our institutions have no choices about our responsibilities to serve and to assist critical thought and human judgment. Our responsibilities in cultural institutions suggest that we should constantly reinterpret our values and organizations, that we can begin to think with others, and that institutional success may have nothing to do with anything any of us can count or measure. If lives do not change because of what we do, perhaps we have misinterpreted our purposes.

When citizens are challenged by their own understanding of order and governance, when they ask difficult questions about what their lives and destinies mean, when they require trust and solace, and when we have no forum at hand to debate essential issues, I think it becomes even clearer that the tasks of a culture's institutions are to assist in the management of human questions, to create fair and trusted forums for self-exploration and self-presentation, and to help conduct the conversations essential to civic enrichment. Museums and libraries should do this together.

After twenty years of thinking and observing, I believe that these are simply the critical things that robust institutions do. I do not question for a moment that collaboration among institutions is both the genius and the future of our essential cultural institutions, the public library and the educative museum. According to my values, a capacity for collaboration (with individuals or with consortia) is the essential characteristic of the strongest of these institutions.

On two occasions, I have served as an evaluator of major collaborations between museums and libraries. From 1991 through 1995, at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, I observed the original Rex's Lending Center project, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.¹ Second, from 1998 through 2001, I observed the Art ConText project in Providence, funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services and the Pew Foundation, where the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art collaborated with the Providence Public Library system to support the presence of artists in library-based community residencies. On another occasion, I addressed the collaborating staffs of the Howe Library of Hanover, New Hampshire, and the Montshire Museum of Norwich, Vermont, as they developed small museum exhibitions for rural public library settings. I have lately assisted the Queens Museum of Art as it readies itself for a Queens Library branch within its future structure.

The characteristics of these collaborations hold much in common. The projects are unprecedented and therefore required a careful approach as institutional experiments in processes and goals. In each case the largest challenge is to communicate usefully among planners, and to communicate effectively with partners. Ideas must be restated and re-envisioned steadily, in order to develop them appropriately and flexibly. The value and purpose of each collaboration will affect the programs, policies, and identities of the partnering institutions. Boundaries and divisions of responsibility, clarifications of roles and functions need to be articulated for a balanced partnership. New missions and conditions will emerge, grounded on past missions of course, but no less fresh, engaging, and challenging to everyone.

In Indianapolis and Providence I interpreted my role to include an advisory, evaluative, and catalytic component, almost an advocacy. I offered formative advice as well as interview- and observation-based evaluations of the successes and weaknesses in process and progress. My naïve questions among participants often led them to insights about the adaptations that they had made over time, not simply in relation to the funded project, but in relation to closeness between institutions as well. At times, my task was to make progress visible.

As a result, I have not only attended to the outcomes of these collaborative projects, I have been able to view their evolution from a nearby perspective. I should add that it has been my advocacy for these same twenty years that libraries and museums serve virtually the same values, the same communities of learners, and the same intentions. To be clear: these were projects of a kind I had always hoped to witness, and embodiments of values I had long endorsed.

Many common values inhere among the experiences of museums and libraries. All museums and all libraries are centers that depend on practices of literacy, imagination, and awareness: thinking, remembering, reading, responding, imagining, integrating, reflecting, connecting, communicating, and problem solving. (Schools share these interests also, but often in differing proportion, and under completely different circumstances.) What public partnerships might evolve surrounding these critical activities? In what ways might cultural institutions address these innately human processes and engagements as matters of course in their programs and policies? What must happen between institutional partners before an effective, mutually designed project can begin?

When two institutions collaborate, what becomes possible? A broader audience can be envisioned, and shared information about users and their needs can expand the cultural frame of a community. The use of applied information in the museum and the exemplary value of the artifact in the library can be mutually enhancing. Recognizing that people of intellect and good will can engage productively in situations of complexity and relevance, partnering can change the processes and the contents of the organizations and their professionals. It is likely that partnerships with other institutions—academic programs, health care agencies, faith communities, civic organizations—become more possible as well.²

It is not just good and useful to collaborate; it is also responsible and ethical. In my experience, when visible, concerted striving extends cultural institutions to reach thoughtfully toward their publics, the people will reach back to the institution with gratitude and pride, knowing that their possibilities as a community have been extended.

Cultural institutions exist in a community not simply for knowledge, delight, and instruction but also for the negotiations and explorations needed in a contemporary life—growing up and growing through, finding a vocation, reading the best of what is written, managing the brutal onslaught of junk information and other distractions of commercial culture. We know that we must see our institutions as places meant to advance useful encounters and reflections; they make us more functional and more confident as citizens.

If we are strong learners, we also know that there are no easy questions in our lives worth taking on. All of the best problems are difficult, and none of them will end. There also seems to be no end to the permutations among our critical, fire-breathing issues: ethics, politics, economics, religion, race, gender, medicine, community, even the values of kindness and generosity. Every one of them touches every other. We need only read the news to know that these dragons animate the everyday, and that it is a rare day when one of them does not singe our attention, or mark us with its teeth. We need to restore and rescue ourselves, make ourselves more aware and more informed, somewhere.

The permeable borders of our best institutions—the least insular and arrogant ones—are the ways we have of establishing new mutual exchanges, new programs, and a new ease of communication between libraries, museums, and communities. When institutions explore these borders, they are likely to find that they have discovered or created room for negotiations and conversations, and even the vast imaginary spaces needed for institutional change to happen. Information flows into the institution; it changes the place and the people inside it, and different information flows out. When invited and respected, the public will advance its interests by participating in the processes of institutional renewal.

It seems to me that there are three main forms of collaborative purpose; each has an associated basic model and probably multiple variations.

Thematic collaborations integrate museum collections and information resources in ways that stimulate both the presentation of content and the likelihood of independent discoveries among users. (A collection of relevant written materials is introduced to a museum gallery; a collection of artifacts, tools, or specimens is displayed in a library; a special museum, botanical, or historical collection is digitized and made available in both institutions. The successful interaction and collaboration can lead to new planning questions, “What do we share? How can our partners join us?”)

Constructive collaborations recognize the mutual value of unified attention when institutions address a systemic or community-wide issue; new structures and relationships are designed to increase public focus and generative responses. (A physical environment for collaboration is emphasized. The museum uses its galleries as new spaces for literacy initiatives; libraries hold public conversations about family learning with museum educators present; museum workshops are held in library spaces; teachers are invited to use human and material resources from multiple partners.)

Civic collaborations address the cultural values of a community, and the issues of concern in a nearby civic environment, in order to enhance wider

understanding. The collaborating cultural institutions attempt to develop new awareness, respect, and responsibility—and accord among multiple players. (The potentially divisive characteristics of a community—ethnicity, religion, history, ancient misunderstandings—can become significant themes for documentation, analysis, and explanation, rather than points of division. It is possible that an endangered civility and environment of respect can be recovered through dialogues, oral histories, and demonstrations of tradition.)

There may be other models or ways of understanding collaboration; these three have common approaches emphasizing expansion, restoration, and social change.³ In effect they are models of the behaviors every community requires. All address the idea of a community as a treasury of cultural knowledge with the potential for exchange and engagement, if appropriately catalyzed by its institutions. For an institution of integrity and care, simply paying attention to a public is often expensive and inefficient, but it is essentially just. At the very least, these models might simply be seen as ways to create otherwise unlikely events for communication and conversation. In an insular community, even the smallest steps can become revelations—or revolutions.

Collaborations require an institution to open itself, and even the robust institution should observe several cautions when undertaking a collaborative relationship. We hesitate to take on the ways and practices of another institution, especially when its record or stance in a community is unproven; we look for leadership, authenticity, integrity, and commitment. We are hesitant to begin an open-ended relationship, not knowing where it might lead. We are challenged by the possibilities of collaboration: we have never done things this way before. We may be vulnerable; we may not succeed; we may require more work or resources than we anticipate. We worry about giving more than we receive. All of these concerns are true and reasonable for all partners. But we should also recognize that none of these things has much to do with the future that is to be created, or with the combined mutual strengths of institutions in a well-balanced alliance, cautiously working through hesitations together. In my view collaboration never weakens an institution or makes it less vital to its users.

Perhaps it is useful to embrace collaboration initially as an end in itself. Assume that all good and useful relationships are founded on something that will become clear—a commonly shared question, a subject matter, or a mutual aspiration. Literacy? Creativity? Problem solving in art, literature, history, science? Let the collaborative agenda emerge. Let the collaboration build itself without a grant as its goal. Let a project follow,

not precede, a series of explorations where the new relationship itself is the objective. Begin by attending to communication, vocabulary, practices, services, programs. These are anticipatory to trust and its evolution.

What if we revise our sense of mission as we meet together? What if we find that our institutional self-interest is at risk? What if we come to understand the purposes and responsibilities of our institutions anew, without significantly compromising their foundations or collections? How shall we create nonephemeral situations, nonfragile alliances, noncompetitive relationships? What if we question all our guiding assumptions about what it is possible to do in a community?⁴ These questions are part of both process and engagement; I think that the confident institution must ask them as a matter of course.

Here are eight observations to summarize the vital characteristics drawn from my observations of collaborations over time. In fact, the phrase "over time" suggests a separate and most important observation: collaborations evolve. The concepts that follow appear to be modest, but they are truly achievements of tenacity and leadership; they are not qualities that appear immediately, easily, or clearly—and they require periodic renewal.

1. *Any collaborative project requires adaptable, tenacious champions in each partner institution.* Each partner must bring a committed champion to the partnership. The champion is a person who is inspired and ambitious for the success of the project, the institutions, and the community. The great champion will emerge as an ego-free advocate, who places the goals of others before any personal achievement. Altruistic champions make the values of the project contagious through continuous advocacy, energy, example, and demonstration that the shared goals of a project are convivial for all partners.
2. *The community always completes the alliance as an equal partner, and should be represented, at least by surrogates, around the table.* The energies of a community are essential to any success, and they must be invited by continuous outreach and public expression. The institutional partners must also be present in the community, together, in public.
3. *Differences among institutions can be profound.* Unequal assets and personnel, academic preparation of professionals, service vocabulary and patterns of discourse, proximity to the community, experience in outreach and public forums, generosity and benefits to users, assumptions of mission and service, assumptions of public need, pace

of change, and history of institutional innovations are merely some of the differences. These differences are challenging and they do not go away; however, they can evolve and become sources of energy rather than contention. Institutions can change and renew each other; there is a strategic value to collaboration for this reason. Consequently, institutional differences should become critical topics in the dialogue between partners. One goal of a successful collaboration is assurance that the integrity of practice in each institution becomes more robust and generative through the partnership.

4. *The greatest challenges in partnerships usually involve communication.* A responsible individual other than a champion should be designated as the agent or broker for communication, continuity, and follow-through between institutional partners. In each partner, this agent is the advocate for collaborative goals.
5. *Every project should involve and present several themes to its audiences, in both library and museum.* Respect for the learner; diversity among users; service to youth; outreach to community; provision of relevant, usable information; innovations in technology; involvement of staff as participants, volunteers, and advocates—these themes are the real legacies of innovations.
6. *Changing institutions by creating an ethos of partnership is a difficult task.* Most institutions are impermeable to other structures, and territoriality reaches deep into an institution's character. A long-standing project has the benefit of years; necessary interactions can occur over time, and gradually institutions will weave themselves together, think and plan with each other. Change itself might best be considered an unspoken goal, a secondary outcome of interaction. The goal of a partnership might be simply to stir things up, and in the end this stirring (and subsequent cooking) may be more important than other goals. The lasting changes in an institution may be less visible and less dramatic than a funder may wish them to be, and it is probable that such changes are not measurable in any significant way.⁵ However, their importance is undeniable.
7. *Steps should be taken to make institutional renewal a visible process.* It is useful to hold open, joint conversations between all members of the partnership, in order to confirm its objectives, examine the extent of the project's reach, and reduce obstacles to communication. These conversations can take the form of public forums, focus groups, or expanded staff meetings. The fluency of such meetings will develop over time. Board members of all partners should be

participants as well, to make the embrace of change evident to participants.

8. *A major innovation becomes a defining instrument for an institution*, because it requires articulating values and taking actions that extend its character and interests; such innovations also require an institution to place the community at the center of its work.

Differences between institutions and their missions will create dissonances; these tensions will require conversations and may never be fully resolved. Perhaps the most important, and somewhat paradoxical, quality of change is the value of the discomfort it causes, and the new thinking required whenever a standing institution bends a bit and takes steps beyond the familiar. Issues are raised, and questions must be answered, as the collaborating institution finds itself in a new situation.

For both institutions and individuals, transformations require flexibility; they cause us to learn about both our weaknesses and rigidities more readily than we might wish. At the same time, such changes also cause us to learn about our strengths. Our tendency is to notice negative evidences and worrisome discontinuities first. Consequently it is important to use the situation of change as a way to redefine what an institution does best, and to assure that our best institutional strengths guide our transformations. In collaborations, our task is not simply *to change*, nor is it *to change each other*, and not simply *to change with each other*, but *to change together, for others*.

A strong library brings these things to any partnership: community trust, mastery of information and its forms, egalitarian groundings, commitment to users, and an understanding of a current and fluid world. A strong museum brings these things to any partnership: a desire to communicate beyond its collections, a sense of connection between the future and the past, a grounded sense of purpose among its neighbors, and an understanding of a current and fluid world. Such qualities distinguish a contemporary institution, one that is worth sustaining and extending through partnerships. These are also among the reasons to see the library and the museum as the community's essential catalysts for change, and ideal partners for the common weal.

At its best, collaboration of any kind should mean that a new, compelling energy has entered an institution's life, creating experiences that can inspire a long, lively, and welcomed embrace of self-renewal and permanent change.

NOTES

1. See "Rex's Lending Center and the information life of the child at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis." In Kay E. Vandergrift, ed., *Ways of Knowing: Literature and the Intellectual Life of Children* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 89–118. The Rex project—introducing a self-contained lending library to Children's Museum users—has now become an extraordinarily successful children's branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County library system.

2. It is useful to consider the potential contributions of academic partners as sources of scholarship, advice, expertise, connection, internships, and community outreach agents. Most academic institutions value and advocate community service; and many university departments (education, history, anthropology, and the arts, for example) have clear contextual ties to the work of museums and libraries. Involvements of this kind may also lead undergraduate students to consider museum and library careers, especially if funding for a few internships has been secured.

3. Cultural heritage digitization projects and other information technology initiatives create an entirely new set of possible project models. Partners in the performing arts, public education, or academic institutions will inspire still others.

4. These questions were suggested by Marsha Semmel, Michael Spock, and Harold Skramstad, in conversation on May 21, 2003.

5. In Providence, for example, a major achievement of Art ConText has been the rethinking of the community as a collection of common spaces, where both the museum and the library can have an evident presence. In Indianapolis, one outcome of Rex's Lending Center was the curation of information as an artifact in the museum, and a consideration of information components in future exhibition planning.