

# City Museums and Urban Learning

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Rainey Tisdale

Today's history museums are struggling to connect with their audiences. For example, a 2007 study of 5,500 museum-going families by Reach Advisors found that these families were less likely to visit history museums and historic sites than any other type of museum.<sup>1</sup> Many history museums seem to be operating under an outdated, 20th-century model, and they are having trouble articulating and demonstrating their public value. The public doesn't necessarily want to learn what history museums want to teach them, and they don't necessarily want to learn in the ways that history museums are offering. A handful of city museums in Europe and North America, however, are working to find a new model for public history that does resonate with their urban audience, and their efforts warrant further consideration by the museum field as a whole.

A definition of the city museum is in order. In this context it refers to institutions located in major metropolitan areas that collect and interpret the history of their city: think Museum of the City of New York or Atlanta History Center, for example. It is a museum type that is particularly prevalent in Europe and North America, although it is also sometimes found in other parts of the globe. And although city museums have much in common with local historical societies in small communities across the US and elsewhere, they differ from the latter institutions in the scale of operations and ground they cover, as well as in the complexities of reaching diverse urban populations and competing within crowded urban cultural landscapes.

Despite these differences, throughout the 20th century city museums functioned much like other history museums. They collected maps and street views, as well as objects and archival records documenting historical events, the city fathers, local industry, and major landmarks. They mounted exhibitions about their cities; provided lectures, walking tours, and school field trips;

published educational materials; and built modest but loyal constituencies — the traditional model for local history. This approach worked well enough for decades, and indeed a lot of history museums may continue to putter along in this way for many years to come. But perhaps not the city museums. Across the globe, cities are on the rise, and the expectations of urban audiences seem to be rising along with them.

In 2007, the world reached a major demographic milestone: for the first time since ancient history, half the earth's population now lives in cities. If projections hold, by 2030 the proportion of urban residents globally will increase to two-thirds.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these days there is a constant buzz, in the media and the blogosphere, that cities not only provide economic opportunity but are also our best shot at solving systemic societal problems. We talk of the smart city, the green city, the global city, the comeback city, the creative city. Indeed, today's cities are filled with citizens who want to capitalize on this forward momentum to build lives of meaning and purpose for themselves and their families. These residents truly care about the place where they live. Their hopes and dreams are tied to the success of the city, and they learn through this lens.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this renewed interest in cities and city living, I might go so far as to say that city museums are the canaries in the historical coal mine, and we should be watching their progress with particular concern. In the cities, the gap between the old-school institutions and the forward-thinking ones seems especially stark because the dramatic changes sweeping our entire culture register here first. Urban audiences have been early adopters of new technology and with it, more importantly, new modes of thinking and interacting that they expect to bring with them to the museum. The rate of change in cities is so fast and the complexity of the life out on the streets is so striking that, as Jack Lohman, the former director of the Museum of London, has argued, boxing the city up in glass cases in a museum where it doesn't move at all feels particularly at odds with the contemporary urban experience.<sup>4</sup> And city history museums must compete side by side with their sister urban art museums, which these days tend to lead the museum field in collaborations with audiences and innovative programming. Moreover, the need to broaden both collections and interpretation to represent multiple socioeconomic groups and ethnicities is fiercer in cities, where the diversity of the urban population makes collections of the heritage of "dead white men" feel especially irrelevant.

Consequently, in this competitive environment, what happens to the city museums may signal what lies ahead for us all. A case in point: the city museum in Berlin, for a variety of reasons too complicated to address here,

has been slow to embrace new museum techniques. The commercial museum “The Story of Berlin” now competes directly with the city museum, offering a popular interactive edutainment experience—complete with a tour of an underground nuclear bomb shelter—at twice the city museum’s admission price.

The coming decades could present a tremendous opportunity for city museums: a rising tide of interest in urban life, coupled with an expanding toolbox — geotagging, pop-up projects, psychogeography, mobile apps, hyper-local history — and a growing understanding of how people learn in free-choice environments. Indeed, urban historian Chet Orloff has even suggested that the 21st century will be the era of the city museum.<sup>5</sup> But in order to seize this opportunity, these institutions must understand their audience’s needs more deeply, adapt to meet them, and be willing to let go of some of the old ways of thinking about and doing history. A handful of leaders are paving the way; this themed section offers an opportunity to hear from some of them.

Each of the six city museums featured in this issue — Amsterdam, Chicago, Helsinki, London, Rotterdam, and Vancouver — tells a story of soul-searching, experimentation, and reinvention. Each describes a different approach to the new realities of urban history, from intense audience research to community websites to urban anthropology to mobile apps. But several themes repeat throughout their stories.

The first is transnationalism. Today’s cities are filled with people from a myriad of different countries who no longer fit into nice, neat categories and have complicated allegiances to place. Many of them are first-generation residents and, as both Annemarie de Wildt from Amsterdam and Paul van de Laar from Rotterdam point out, the old history, with its grand narrative and corresponding collections, doesn’t really resonate with this superdiverse audience. But that doesn’t mean these residents don’t care about their city or don’t want to connect with it and with each other. How do you collect and present a new history that makes room for everyone and, as van de Laar puts it, produces “bonding heritage” rather than “nostalgic heritage?”

A second theme is the desire to build an audience-centered museum where the public shifts from *visitors* to *participants*. To this end, Lynn McRaney describes Chicago History Museum’s multi-year process of creating an institutional culture that prioritizes understanding and meeting the needs of core constituent groups. Many museums are grappling with this issue right now, but it means something slightly different when the topic at hand is the city, and your participants are also your citizens. If you truly are an audience-centered city museum then civic engagement, rooted in location and enabled

by technology, is a natural next step. It stands to reason that city museums, which serve the needs and interests of city residents, should be actively engaged in helping these residents create better cities. Several of the city museums featured here refer to their roles as community builders and conveners of civic dialogue, but Viviane Gosselin at the Museum of Vancouver takes it the farthest, describing her institution's work as "civic museography, a form of curatorial action designed to identify and address issues of public concern and interest."

A third theme raised by several authors is that of personal, or even personalized history. This means making room for the public to explore and reinforce their own individual identities through museum content, and making room for memories and emotions as well. As Museum 2.0 continues to permeate our work, we have moved from *great men* to *everyday people* to simply *you and me*. For a long time we've known that people get the most out of history when they make personal connections to the past but now the Information Revolution is enabling these connections like never before. First, social media creates exponentially greater opportunities for sharing one's own memories. And second, the sheer volume of digital data now available allows all of us to serendipitously encounter previously lost parts of ourselves — and everything we care about — in the historical record. Annemarie de Wildt from Amsterdam addresses this topic in detail, particularly as it relates to an engagement technique her museum has experimented with extensively: the community website.

And speaking of history, several of these museums are choosing to take it out of the driver's seat and throw it in the back. They make a case that if a city museum truly wants to be visitor-centered, history is no longer the heart of what it does. Instead, city museums need to start with the lives of current residents — their needs, their interests, their concerns — and then work out from there, blending the present with not only the past but also the future to create a collective conversation about what matters to all of us — what we want the cities we share to be like. In this light, history is useful to help us understand what worked and didn't work in the past, and to explain how we ended up with the city of today. But it's not the beginning or the end of the conversation. Moreover, this shift is not just about combining the past with the present and future; it's also about taking a more interdisciplinary approach, where history blends with art, science, and everything in between, in the name of place-based learning. Jari Harju writes about reframing Helsinki City Museum's historic tram collection as part of a contemporary cultural center. More than one author reports dropping history or historical from the city museum's name.

And Paul van de Laar describes Museum Rotterdam's process of determining that the contemporary city should be the focus — spearhead — of everything that it does. What would happen if historical societies all over the United States redefined themselves by de-emphasizing history and putting *place* — and the people who care about that place — front and center?

As history takes a back seat, we are seeing a general opening up of the range of topics it is appropriate for a city museum to explore. On the one hand, this simply means that subjects like urban youth culture, contemporary photography, or trash removal are popping up in city museum galleries. Indeed, Viviane Goselin at Museum of Vancouver makes a case that sex is a perfectly natural topic to encounter in a city museum. But, on the other hand, it also means dealing with controversial issues. Homelessness, drug addiction, prostitution — cities have their dark sides, and city museums don't have a great track record of addressing them. But, if approached thoughtfully, such difficult topics have the potential to foster dialogue and expand the museum's audience. Jari Harju at Helsinki City Museum tackles poverty, the city's Roma community, and the still-raw Finnish Civil War. If this approach seems reminiscent of the brief spurt of issue-based topics addressed by some US museums in the 1970s and 80s, remember that museums define their relationships with constituencies differently today. Now city museums are far better equipped and positioned to truly become centers of civic engagement where difficult conversations can take place.

Lastly, in so many cases new technology tools are making all these other changes in approach possible. Developments in GPS-enabled mobile technology in particular are allowing museums to take place-based education out into the streets like never before. Using mobile apps, the public can customize their learning experience, approach local history on their own terms, and integrate it directly into the contemporary urban environment. I predict the bronze historical marker and the neighborhood walking tour are endangered species; for city museums GPS is a game-changer. While new technology has affected every institution featured here, no other city museum in the world has experimented with digital tools as intensely as the Museum of London, and Frazer Swift outlines how.

In conclusion, these six city museums are participating in a quiet revolution that is transforming the way urban history is practiced, creating collaborative, hybrid institutions that are also part community center, part contemporary art space, part digital information hub, and part city plaza. In their eyes I see a bright future where the city museum is a vehicle through which urban citizens actively engage with their city and connect with each other. But it remains to be

seen whether these institutions point the way toward transformation for history museums in general. Let's have that conversation.

### Notes

1. Reach Advisors, "Family Visitation at Museums, Part II: Historic Sites and History Museums," Museum Audience Insight, August 2007, [http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum\\_audience\\_insight/2007/10/august-e-news-f.html](http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2007/10/august-e-news-f.html) (accessed October 2012).
2. Population Reference Bureau, *World Population Highlights: Key Findings from PRB's 2007 World Population Data Sheet*, Population Bulletin (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau September 2007), <http://www.prb.org/pdf07/62.3Highlights.pdf>.
3. While many city museums consider tourists to be a significant portion of their visitation, I would argue that residents should be the primary audience and first priority for any city museum.
4. Jack Lohman, "The Prospect of a City Museum," in *City Museums and City Development*, ed. Ian Jones, Robert R. Macdonald and Darryl McIntyre (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2010), 63.
5. Chet Orloff, "Museums of Cities and the Future of Cities," in *City Museums and City Development*, ed. Ian Jones, Robert R. Macdonald and Darryl McIntyre (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2010), 27.

### About the Author

Rainey Tisdale is a museum consultant who specializes in city museums. She blogs at [citystories.net](http://citystories.net) and teaches in the Museum Studies Program at Tufts University. She is currently co-authoring a book on museums and creative practice (Left Coast Press, 2013).