

***Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility.* Robert R. Janes and Gerald T. Conaty, eds. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2005. 196 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Shelby J. Tisdale

The idea for the book, *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*, emerged from a panel discussion on museums and social responsibility at the annual meeting of the Canadian Museum Association in 2002. The themes of the different chapters presented look closely at social responsibility and use specific examples of museums connecting with communities to examine a variety of issues that affect our everyday lives. These include such topics as the social and natural environment, crime, economic inequality, and political issues such as the repatriation of human skeletal remains to native peoples. A question that runs through this book is how museums can continue to be relevant and sustain themselves when they are challenged by the perils of the global marketplace, declining attendance, reduced public funding, and earned revenues. The examples offered demonstrate that there are museums moving beyond their preoccupation with the bottom line and that are embracing activities that address the “troublesome aspects of our contemporary world that help to make sense of this emerging search for significance in the museum world” (p. 3). Many of the authors suggest that museums have two choices: (1) they can stay where they are and maintain status quo in their mission of collecting, preserving, and caring for the collections and quite possibly become irrelevant, or (2) they can connect with their surrounding communities, and possibly world communities depending on their mission, and address the many issues and choices that humans are faced with on a daily basis. Instead of the exhibitions and educational programming being determined by the collections and developing stories around them, these stories are based on connections with the communities and focus on topics that pertain to social responsibility internally and externally using the collections.

The book is divided into 10 chapters based on the papers presented at the CMA annual meeting. Robert R. Janes and Gerald T. Conaty’s “Introduction” provides a brief history of museums and points out that museums are a product of the society that supports them (p. 1)—that they essentially became the “temples of the dominant society” where their “reality had been constructed by the educated classes of society and that the perceptions of more marginal groups were mostly excluded from this reality” (p. 3). They argue that because our societies are more complex and diverse, that “museums are no longer the monolithic institutions of the past” and many are focusing instead on “telling particular stories with larger meanings” (p. 3). These stories often reflect issues and people that have been marginalized by mainstream society—First Nations peoples, immigrants, the chronically ill, and criminals. Others relate to the ongoing issues in nature and environmental degradation through educational programming. The chapters that follow provide examples of museums that are continuing traditional museum work but have chosen paths that embrace socially responsible missions that require intuitive appreciation of certain values that are largely absent or unspoken in contemporary museum work (p. 8). These values, as outlined by these authors, include idealism, intimacy, depth, and interconnectedness.

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Each chapter demonstrates how museums incorporate these values into their searches for meaning as they build new kinds of relationships with their publics.

In “History is as History Does: The Evolution of a Mission-driven Museum,” Ruth J. Abram discusses how the Tenement Museum located on Manhattan’s Lower East Side tells the stories of the changing and ethnically diverse occupants of this single tenement through its exhibits. The staff decided to select dramatic stories that capitalized on the “power of place” and used the artifacts to support these stories. The goal was to have the museum be accessible to all of the public and that it be a safe and neutral place where a dialogue could take place concerning the tough issues of immigration, race, and other enduring social issues in this culturally diverse neighborhood.

Two chapters focus on the incorporation of the indigenous voice in exhibition planning and interpretation. In “Our Story in Our Words: Diversity and Equality in the Glenbow Museum,” Gerald T. Conaty and Beth Carter address the history of relationships between indigenous peoples and museums and discuss how the Blackfoot became full partners with the Glenbow Museum in the development of an exhibition that interprets their culture. The result of this partnership was the exhibition *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*, which opened at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada in November 2001. This was the first significant modification to Glenbow’s First Nations exhibits in over 25 years and became a model for how the curatorial staff works with First Nations peoples. Paul Tapsell, a descendant of the Maori tribes Te Arawa and Tainui, also discusses the importance of including the voices of the peoples represented in exhibitions, in “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Human Remains at the Auckland Museum—Te Papa Whakahiku.” He also describes the history of the removal of Maori human remains and the attempts by the tribe to have these individuals repatriated. Tapsell discusses in detail the consultation process for the repatriation of Maori human remains and associated funerary and sacred objects from the Auckland War Memorial Museum. In both these cases the voices of the Blackfoot and the Maori have become an integral part of each museum’s goal to become more socially responsible.

Three chapters focus on educational outreach. First, Joanne DiCosimo from the Canadian Museum of Nature (CMN) provides an overview of “One National Museum’s Work to Develop a New Model of National Service: A Work in Progress.” To develop this model the museum followed a systematic process of consultation, analysis, pilot testing, and then further consultation and analysis. DiCosimo details the steps in developing the model, which is a useful tool for any museum rethinking its approach to educational outreach to include a wider audience. In the case of the CMN, their outreach was embedded in new ways of looking at social responsibility in terms of the nation as a whole. In “Engaging Young Minds and Spirits: The Glenbow Museum School,” Michèle Gallant and Gillian Kydd discuss the collaboration between the Glenbow Museum School, local schools, and Chevron Calgary Resources (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Chevron Texaco Corporation), The Calgary Foundation, and individuals in the community to develop a unique school program. They discuss the four main areas of the program that they believe define its uniqueness, including: “what makes this different from traditional field trips; the philosophy of the program and why [they] do it; the impact on the students, teachers, museum staff and parents; and the role in the community” (p. 71). They operate from the premise that “museums are public places with enormous potential for human growth and

enjoyment” (p. 71). Through the development of the innovative and highly collaborative educational outreach program, they demonstrate that the old model of the isolated classroom and teachers needs to change, as does the old model of the isolated museum (p. 84).

The Liberty Science Center in New Jersey approaches their education program a little differently. In “Liberty Science Center in the United States: A Mission Focused on External Relevance,” Emlyn H. Koster and Stephen H. Baumann profile three of the Center’s mission-driven learning experiences that have strong emphases on social responsibility. Their primary goal is to reach underserved audiences. One educational program focuses on youth smoking through plays and websites while another is learning “live” through the real-time observation of a cardiac surgeon performing surgery on a patient. The students are able to ask the surgeon questions and have the opportunity to learn firsthand in a classroom set up in the Center. Both institutions have come up with innovative ways to reach wider audiences.

Susan Pointe’s chapter “Is Art Good for You” points out the challenges of being relevant to a very different type of audience. Her art gallery located inside a hospital was not being utilized other than to exhibit some of the hospital’s art collection and she was under pressure from the hospital administrators who were considering using this space for other purposes. Pointe had to first determine who her audience was and then develop a plan to reach out to them. She did this in several ways by taking the art and artists to the patients and bringing the families of patients into the gallery to see the art as well as to have the opportunity to create art. In “Telling It Like It Is: The Calgary Police Service Interpretive Centre,” Janet Pieschel also discusses reaching out to a very different audience than that of the typical museum. She had the difficult task of developing an interpretive center within the administration building of the Calgary Police Service and her target audience was primarily at-risk youth. The goal of this Center was to “educate young people about crime, the consequences of crime, and the poor lifestyle choices that our youth can make” (p. 177). Pieschel reviews three exhibitions at the Center: (1) substance abuse, (2) juvenile prostitution, and (3) domestic abuse, family violence, and healthy relationships. These exhibits are all done as dioramas with audio tracks of youth in trouble and are based on real life stories. While the Center focuses on prevention through its exhibitions it also offers assistance to young people who are being abused or using drugs and alcohol, for example.

In “Negotiating a Sustainable Path: Museums and Societal Therapy,” Glenn C. Sutter and Douglas Worts describe the development of *The Human Factor* exhibit at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. This chapter explores “the links between sustainability (in the Brundtland [Commission’s] sense), culture, and the potential of museums as agents of social change” (p. 131). They believe that “while museums can and should be addressing sustainability through the non-formal education system, they also have a broader role to play as active facilitators of social change at local and regional levels” (p. 131). Sutter and Worts argue that, “[M]useums can help by encouraging people to become more conscious of critical relationships that link them to nature and to other people. Some of the roles that museums can play include being storytellers through non-formal education providing sanctuaries that inspire reflection, and acting as catalysts to spark needed social change” (p. 137). They apply the classic model of sustainable development that integrates social, economic, and environmental concerns to the development of their exhibit.

These chapters present case studies in which individual museums and science centers have searched for ways to be internally and externally sustainable by connecting to communities to develop ways of coping with environmental and social degradation and to create new levels of understanding history and cultural diversity. This is accomplished through educational outreach, incorporating oral histories and voices from the past as well as the present into exhibitions, and bringing the public into a dialogue with museums as ways of expressing their interests and concerns about the social, political, and physical environment surrounding them.

The authors are as diverse as the museums they work in and include anthropologists, scientists, social activists, and artists. Some chapters are more “academic” while others are less so. Collectively, they represent experiments at redefining what museums can be. Although the chapters could have been arranged in a more cohesive manner, each one offers possible ways in which museums can become more socially responsible and more connected to the publics that they serve. Some authors provide useful step-by-step guidelines while others are more general. This book would be useful in museum studies programs and should be read by those working in museums wanting to move beyond mere entertainment and who are looking for ways to engage younger audiences. Museum staff that are searching for ways to create a dialogue about relevant issues such as globalization, environmental degradation, and high crime rates or wanting to develop more meaningful, positive relationships with indigenous peoples and other populations that tend to be marginalized should consider reading this book. As museum lovers and workers we cannot sit back and assume that our exhibits will bring people to our doors. These authors make a good argument that when museums take on the challenge of becoming socially responsible and connect to the communities whom they serve, they become more relevant and sustainable. This is important to consider when we are asking ourselves, “Why do museum matter?”

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