

Gail Dexter Lord

Ngairé Blankenberg

CITIES, MUSEUMS AND SOFT POWER

Preface by
Richard Florida



The AAM Press

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Thank you especially to Sula Blankenberg and Taib Blankenberg: when your eyes sparkle with understanding, questions trip out of your mouths, and you feel brave and strong in and for the world, that is when we know our museums and our cities are working.

— *Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg*

Preface

Richard Florida

A lot has been written about the so-called Bilbao Effect. Hire a starchitect to build an eye-popping museum, the thinking goes, and your whole city will be magically transformed into a center of creative innovation. Would that it were so.

But as the director of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh once told me, “Great art is not made in museums.” An iconic museum is a nice thing for a city to have, but unless it plays a vital role in the community, it’s just another tourist attraction.

The Warhol Museum, which I worked with when I was living in Pittsburgh, was deeply involved in place making and community building. Its satellite gallery, The Mattress Factory, had artists-in-residence programs and classes that drew in and engaged the people who lived in its North Side neighborhood; it is deservedly seen as a key element in the neighborhood’s revival and transformation. In Miami Beach, the New World Symphony, a performing center and school for promising young musicians, wallcasts performances in a public park on a 7,000-square-foot screen, so people from all over can stop and listen and participate.

These are just two examples of the ways, as Gail Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg put it, that museums and the cities that house them can connect in “a soft power embrace.” It is very much a reciprocal relationship.

There’s a recent study that shows how this effect works. A group of economists crunched the numbers and found that German cities that had built opera houses during the Baroque period outperformed cities that hadn’t during the Industrial Era and after, two centuries and more down the road. Why? Because the smart, cultivated people who enjoy being able to go to the opera, and more broadly who want to live in communities that actively support the opera—and all the musicians, singers, costumers, composers, set designers and the like who go along with them—are

precisely the kinds of people who create and support the economic innovations that lead to growth. The same can be said of the people who make up the grass-roots cultural communities that form around active museums.

Arts and culture aren't magic bullets, but they are strongly correlated with strong local economies. The Knight Foundation's "Soul of the Community" study, an expanded version of a survey that I created with Gallup years ago, found that "three main qualities attach people to place: social offerings, such as entertainment venues and places to meet; openness (how welcoming a place is); and the area's aesthetics (its physical beauty and green spaces)." Arts and museums are a critical part of that fabric.

With contributions by 13 experts from 10 countries, *Cities, Museums and Soft Power* is a fascinating and important book that demonstrates what "sleeping giants" the world's 80,000 museums are—as education centers, employers and, last but not least, magnets for creative industries and engines of economic development.

Here's hoping that this book helps awaken them.

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Richard Florida is author of the international bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. He is director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, Global Research Professor at New York University and co-founder and editor-at-large of The Atlantic's CityLab.



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Introduction: Why Cities, Museums and Soft Power

**Gail Dexter Lord and
Ngaire Blankenberg**

NGAIRE BLANKENBERG

My trip to Dubai this time is different. Rather than stay in one of the chilly, mega-brand hotels surrounded by building cranes, I'm in a small boutique art hotel in the Al-Fahidi Historical District, a historic Persian neighborhood that has recently been assigned a new Arabic name. This little network of shops and galleries is within the Historic District of Dubai, also called Khor Dubai, as part of a project to transform the ancient Khor (Arabic for creek) area to qualify for designation as a UNESCO world heritage site.

In my new location, I do what I rarely do in Dubai. I walk outside.

In the textile souk, the South Asian sales people first call out in French to entice me into their shops. "C'est jolie," they say. "Entrez!" I am flattered that they think I am French, despite the decidedly unfashionable rivulets of sweat creeping down my back. They try to capture my attention. "Mary!" they call out. "Eveline!" "Shakira!" I can't help laughing at these names, evidence of a growing globalization. "Ah, my friend—a beautiful pashmina. Silk. Come in. Just to look." Dubai, like many cities around the world and particularly those in the global South, has undergone a remarkable transformation over the last 75 years. In the 1930s, it was a small village of about

GAIL DEXTER LORD

My trip to Winnipeg this time is different. It is neither 25 degrees below zero, nor 30 degrees above, as on so many occasions over the past 14 years. It is a drizzling autumn day at "The Forks," for thousands of years a historic meeting place for indigenous people on the banks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. Now it is a popular mixed-use leisure and cultural park with theaters, retail shops and space for festivals, concerts, skateboarding and pow-wows. Today is different because I'm not here just for meetings. I'm here to visit the world's first national museum dedicated to human rights, on its first day open to the public.

Today will change this city for decades to come. As home to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Winnipeg has decided to rebrand itself as "The City of Human Rights Education." Even before it opened, the museum operated a successful summer school in human rights education for teachers from across Canada, broadcast a lecture series called "Fragile Freedoms," featuring some of the world's most famous human rights experts, and trained a remarkable 350 volunteers. The nearby University of Manitoba maintains the archives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the official enquiry into 200 years of abuse suffered by Canada's indigenous

20,000 people, desperate to recover from the collapse of the pearl trade.

Today the lure of gold brings almost 11 million people a year to the sky-piercing high-rises along these reclaimed shores. Laborers and domestic workers chase work they can't find at home, service workers and entrepreneurs look for new horizons, investors capitalize on the boom and the postboom. Consultants and advisors and tourists come for the air conditioned shopping, good hotels and great food at every price point. We all arrive through one of the world's busiest and best airports to discover a city full of promise and optimism.

I stroll through the perfume souk, the spice souk, the utensils souk, all active working markets, noisy with the loading and unloading of goods from Iran, South Korea and Singapore, the insistent sales pitches, the bargaining, the traffic. I reflect on what museums need to achieve for their clients, the government agencies and the varied residents of this burgeoning city-state. What could museums or a heritage district offer for Dubai's permanent, temporary and transitory residents, many of whom either do not know about museums and heritage sites or think of them as places for "others" in distant countries?

What good is a museum or heritage site in this city of gold, driven by

people as governments colluded with churches to forcibly remove children from their families and place them in faraway "residential schools" with the stated purpose "to kill the Indian in the child." Becoming the Human Rights Education City is a bold move and a challenging one: Winnipeg is also home to a large population of marginalized aboriginal people.

The museum looks as if a giant space ship has landed. As I enter with hundreds of proud and excited people, we are dazzled by the architecture, which takes us on a one-kilometer human rights journey along alabaster ramps. At each exhibition zone, friendly docents explain the history of human rights, indigenous perspectives, the Holocaust and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. People here assume I'm another visitor from Winnipeg, not the consultant from Toronto who for the past 14 years helped plan this museum.

I reflect on my Aunt Millie who lived in Winnipeg. She was the founder of the Nellie McClung Theatre Group, named for a famous suffragette. I remember my father's stories of how cold he felt selling newspapers at the corner of "Portage and Main," the crossroads of two economies—bootlegging liquor to the US during Prohibition and the Winnipeg Grain Exchange.



Visitors outside the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art. Museums exercise their soft power by offering socially inclusive spaces to an increasingly diverse public. Photo © Javier Tles 2004.

development and aspiration, where history is for some just another word for outdated, while for others it is so deeply personal and familial that it has no place in the public realm?

Power.

Funny enough, it is the same for both the city and its residents. A museum here can confer power on the city's residents, and power on the city's government, at home and internationally.

Museums empower. Museums are power. Soft power.

After many decades in decline, Winnipeg has transformed itself into a regional center for the knowledge economy, with universities, insurance firms, medical research, and a thriving arts and theater scene. Now it's part of an international network of cities that feature museums of conscience, collecting the stories behind human rights. Winnipeg and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights are now ready to exercise their soft power.