

# CREATING THE VISITOR- CENTERED MUSEUM

Peter Samis  
Mimi Michaelson



# Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

What does the transformation to a visitor-centered approach do for a museum? How are museums made relevant to a broad range of visitors of varying ages, identities, and social classes? Does appealing to a larger audience force museums to “dumb down” their work? What internal changes are required? Based on a multi-year, Kress Foundation-sponsored study of ten innovative American and European collections-based museums recognized by their peers to be visitor centered, Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson answer these key questions for the field. The book

- describes key institutions that have opened the doors to a wider range of visitors;
- addresses the internal struggles to reorganize and democratize these institutions;
- uses case studies, interviews of key personnel, Key Takeaways, and additional resources to help museum professionals implement a visitor-centered approach in collections-based institutions.

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Knowledge center Museumsiam

# Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson



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“Objecthood doesn’t have a place in the world if there’s not  
an individual person making use of that object.”

—Olafur Eliasson

“*Only connect—*”

—E. M. Forster, epigraph to *Howard’s End*

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Figure Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv

## PART ONE

<b>Introduction: Setting the Stage</b>	1
1 Considering the Visitor	9
2 Change Takes Leadership: Moments of Personal Transformation	20
3 Contours of Change	27

## PART TWO

<b>Case Studies</b>	45
<i>I Charting History</i>	47
4 Denver Art Museum: Building a Sustainable Visitor-Centered Practice	49
<i>II Engaging through Audience Immersion</i>	63
5 City Museum: The Power of Play	65
6 Ruhr Museum: Connecting through Adaptive Reuse and Design	70
7 Minnesota History Center: Lessons from a Learning Team	82

<i>III Reinvigorating Traditional Museums</i>	91
8 Detroit Institute of Arts: Reinventing a Landmark Museum with and for Visitors	93
9 Oakland Museum of California: Including a Diverse Public	105
10 Columbus Museum of Art: Museum as Community Living Room	114
<i>IV Creating Social Change</i>	127
11 Kelvingrove: Museum as Cultural Commons	129
<i>V Taking a Critical Stance on Museum Practice</i>	143
12 Van Abbe Museum: Radicality Meets Hospitality	145
13 Museum of Contemporary Art Denver: Experience over Objects	155
<b>PART THREE</b>	
<b>Conclusion: Varieties of Visitor-Centeredness and Change</b>	163
14 Conclusion: Varieties of Visitor-Centeredness and Organizational Change	165
<i>Appendix A: Method</i>	177
<i>Appendix B: Adult Gallery Activities at the Denver Art Museum</i>	179
<i>Appendix C: Make-Up of DIA Visitor Panels</i>	180
<i>Bibliography</i>	181
<i>Index</i>	188



# Figures

1.1	Ice skates exhibited at Canadian Museum of Civilization.	11
1.2	Olafur Eliasson's <i>The Weather Project</i> in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.	12
1.3	Anish Kapoor's <i>Cloud Gate</i> in Chicago's Millennium Park.	13
3.1	The Change Cycle.	33
4.1	Denver Art Museum: seating in the Asian Art galleries.	50
4.2a–b	Denver Art Museum: Two views of the Discovery Library.	53
4.3a–b	Denver Art Museum: Laminated “human connection cards” in the galleries.	55
4.4	Denver Art Museum Contemporary Galleries: facing a portrait wall, comfortable seating and a coffee table on which a creative challenge is placed: “Write a biography in six words.”	56
4.5	Denver Art Museum: treasure hunt Bingo cards placed at child height.	57
4.6	Denver Art Museum: visitors in a maker space adjacent to the galleries.	58
5.1	City Museum: children in aerial tubes above “Monster” playground.	66
5.2	City Museum: first floor grotto, reached via a ten-story slide.	66
6.1	Ruhr Museum: exterior view.	71
6.2	Ruhr Museum: ascending the seven-story ribbon of escalator.	72
6.3	Ruhr Museum: descending into the exhibits guided by a tablet.	73
6.4	Ruhr Museum: <i>The Present: Signs of the Times</i> . Entrance.	75
6.5	Ruhr Museum: <i>Signs of the Times</i> . First object in exhibit.	76
6.6	Ruhr Museum: <i>Signs of the Times</i> . Exhibit of doll furniture.	77
6.7	Ruhr Museum: <i>Signs of the Times</i> . Exhibit of beer bottles with Chinese labels.	77
6.8	Ruhr Museum: 12-Meter Level (History).	78

6.9	Ruhr Museum: parade of native species on the 12-Meter Level.	79
6.10	Ruhr Museum: artifact and information “conveyors” at 6-Meter Level.	80
7.1	Minnesota History Center: <i>Open House</i> . A domestic interior with original stories, not original artifacts.	85
7.2	<i>Minnesota’s Greatest Generation</i> : set portraying a dry cleaning shop, displaying uniforms and garments worn in the 1960s.	86
7.3	Minnesota History Center: exhibition prototyping.	88
7.4	Minnesota History Center: two comments left by Dakota Indians.	89
8.1	Detroit Institute of Arts: <i>Splendor by the Hour</i> in the European decorative arts galleries.	94
8.2	Detroit Institute of Arts: <i>Splendor by the Hour</i> video banquet.	95
8.3	Detroit Institute of Arts: “pull-out panel.” The darker ovals each connect to a short commentary.	100
8.4a–c	Detroit Institute of Arts: Richard Long’s sculpture <i>Stone Line</i> with “layered label.”	101
9.1	Oakland Museum of California: “Cultures Meet” in OMCA’s History galleries.	107
9.2	Oakland Museum of California: <i>You Are Here</i> in the California Portrait Gallery.	111
10.1	Columbus Museum of Art: Impressionist landscapes with visible voting poll.	119
10.2a–e	Columbus Museum of Art: five frames from the <i>MUSEUM DOs &amp; DON’Ts</i> video.	123
10.3	Columbus Museum of Art: child-friendly display demonstrates reason for “No Touching” policy.	124
10.4a–d	Columbus Museum of Art: Wonder Room.	124
10.5	Columbus Museum of Art: an intimate moment in the “Love and War” gallery.	125
11.1	Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow.	130
11.2	Kelvingrove: articulated armor meets its armadillo inspiration in <i>Conflict and Consequence</i> gallery.	131
11.3a–b	Kelvingrove: painting and object label. Note brevity of text and reversal of standard label hierarchy.	134
11.4	Kelvingrove: Raoul Dufy painting with story-based touchscreen interactive, both at child height.	135
11.5a–b	Kelvingrove: touchscreen kiosk below John Pettie painting leads visitors through the heroine’s suitor selection, with the terms of her choices updated to reflect contemporary Glasgow life.	136

11.6a–b	Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, Nitshill: open storage with painting racks arranged by theme; early communications technology.	139
11.6c–d	Glasgow Museums Resource Centre: open storage with 1910 butcher’s van; Rolls-Royce test engine for the Concorde supersonic plane.	140
11.7	Glasgow Museums Resource Centre: school kids on field trip.	140
12.1	Van Abbe Museum: 3-D sculpture made in 2009 after El Lissitzky’s <i>New Man</i> , 1923 (as interpreted by Prof. John Milner and produced by Henry Milner, 2009).	148
12.2	Van Abbe Museum: El Lissitzky galleries with display cases for ephemera on left and computer-based slide show inset in wall.	148
12.3a–b	Van Abbe Museum: El Lissitzky quote with Nedko Solakov commentary.	149
12.4	Van Abbe Museum: another Lissitzky quote with Solakov repartee: “A GOD is playing with/a constructivist puzzle/desperately trying to create a black Square.”	149
12.5a–b	Van Abbe Museum: object labels with space above for tags contributed by curators and visitors.	150
12.6	Van Abbe Museum: Game Master with visitor using the Journey Recorder table in <i>Play Van Abbe 4: The Pilgrim, the Tourist, the Flaneur (and the Worker)</i> .	152



# Tables

0.1	Museums Studied	3
P2.1	Six Elements Common to Visitor-Centered Museums	45
P2.2	An Approach to Organizing the Museums Treated in This Book	46
14.1	Continuum of Approaches to Connecting with Visitors	165

# Figure Acknowledgments

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Inevitably, the topic transmuted as our research began: on the one hand, we came to understand that there was no one set of "best practices," but rather solutions best suited for particular audiences and situations. Secondly, our interviews with practitioners at museums nominated as sites of interpretive excellence revealed their consistent efforts to overcome an entrenched dynamic that ran through the field: the division between "curatorial scholarship" and "community relevance." Each institution we visited was committed to finding ways to bridge this gap, often reconfiguring staff and processes to turn that tension into a creative spark.

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Ulrich Borsdorf, Ruhr Museum  
Rick Erwin III, City Museum, St. Louis



Charles Esche, Van Abbe Museum  
Lori Fogarty, Oakland Museum of California  
Christoph Heinrich, Denver Art Museum  
Adam Lerner, Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver  
Nannette Maciejunes, Columbus Museum of Art  
Mark O'Neill, Glasgow Life (former Director of Kelvingrove)  
Dan Spock, Minnesota History Center

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On a personal note, Peter wishes to thank his 92-year-old mother, still alive, who taught him the love of art, and his father, now deceased, who inculcated the ethos of community service. Speaking of community, he sends a shout-out to the *barristas* of Berkeley, witnesses to his many weekend and late-night writing sessions!

Mimi remains grateful for the foundational teachings offered by early mentors: Howard Gardner, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, and Bill Damon; as well as for the lessons gleaned about the arts, research and thinking from Shari Tishman and other colleagues at Project Zero. Mimi also sends a nod to Michael, Charlie, Luke, and Malcolm, as they continue to remind her of the importance of youthful perspectives.

This book wouldn't have happened without Mitch Allen of Left Coast Press, our originating editor. His sage counsel and conviction that the book had an important place in the museum literature kept us going through all the iterations of the manuscript. Ryan Harris did the early production work, preparing text and images for Routledge. At Routledge, we have worked with Elizabeth Thomasson and Anna Callander, and Katherine Wetzel of Apex CoVantage has managed the production process. Our thanks to all involved!

Now that the book is done, its life truly begins. We hereby acknowledge you, our readers, fellow practitioners, and your dedication to making our museums worthy sites of community meaning-making, experience, and exchange.

**Note:** Graham Beal and Ulrich Borsdorf have retired since the interviews conducted for this book.

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## Part One

# Introduction

## Setting the Stage

Replete with their own histories and missions, museums come with varied stories and metaphors. From treasure chest to learning lab, museums mean different things to different people. This is not a new story, nor a stagnant one. In fact, diversity of purpose and institutional change go hand in hand as natural parts of cultural evolution, leading to innovation in the field. It is not surprising that museums around the world are again changing, this time with many in transition toward a more visitor-centered future. What this visitor-centered change looks like and what the players reveal about the process provides the substance of our story. In the pages that follow we share a glimpse of some of the transformations we have witnessed and the voices of those leading the way.

I don't think museums, as they have existed and existed for a hundred years are going to survive if they don't make changes—even with billionaires on the board, even with some of the huge resources that some institutions have.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of a well-respected museum director talking about the inevitability of change in today's museums. Directors, many of whom have worked in the field for decades, spoke with us about dramatic transitions currently taking place. Talking about how museums need to evolve to stay relevant, the director continues:

I really do think that if they are going to be vital—you know, they may be able to survive financially, but will they truly be sustainable within their communities, as places that are really connected to their community? It's going to be a reality that there are going to have to be some changes.

As the director notes, many of the transitions have to do with museums reaching out to the community—to visitors and potential visitors—in new and authentic ways. While the degree may vary, in some cases the modifications are dramatic, involving a fundamental reconsideration of mission and

## 2 *Introduction*

how the museum itself is structured. Everyone connected to the museum is potentially impacted—both visitors and staff alike.

These kinds of transformations inevitably give rise to a debate that places museum directors, curators, exhibition designers, and educators at center stage in a dialogue about audience. Ultimately, the debate is focused on bringing to life the notion of a visitor-centered museum: a museum where audience matters as much as collections. As one interviewee said: “We have to keep reevaluating: Who’s our audience and what do they need from us?” For a visitor-centered museum, these questions are the starting point of all museum business.

In this book we explore aspects of this ongoing debate. We begin with the premise that the debate is good, an inevitable part of a process that moves everyone forward. We don’t suggest that change is easy, but do endorse the idea that the challenge is worthwhile. We also believe that the current focus—a new audience-centered paradigm—is here to stay. This new vantage point carries other essential elements with it, including the need to honor multiple voices and multiple sources of knowledge. Furthermore, to meet the variety of needs that come with a more diverse public, an array of approaches or “entry points” is vital.

We understand that the term “visitor-centered” is sometimes highly charged. On the one hand, it can represent a banner and rallying cry for educators who interact daily with visitors and see missed opportunities for connection with the public. On the other hand, that banner can turn into a red flag for curators, who fear that it may mean they need to let visitors define the messages—and even the exhibitions—they present. That is not our intent here. What we do suggest is that understanding where visitors are coming from helps us understand how to engage them in a dialogue that is meaningful to all. It allows us to connect with our audience even as we honor the expertise of museum professionals, including curators, educators, designers, et al. We use the term “visitor-centered” because we believe visitors are a population that museums have historically been happier to speak to than to listen to—and that real two-way communication is what visitors deserve.

In the pages that follow, we present examples of innovative visitor-centered practice and museums in transition. These two threads—visitor-centered interpretation and museum change—form the foundation of this book.

### **The Study**

What does it mean for a museum of art or history to really be visitor centered? With the generous support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, five years ago we began a study to address this question. We visited twenty museums, studying ten of those institutions in depth: seven in the United States and three in Europe. The museums were chosen following a query sent to more than fifty colleagues in the United States and Europe soliciting nominations for examples of innovative visitor-centered practice. Colleagues were

Table 0.1 Museums Studied

<i>In-Depth: Site Visit + Interviews</i>	<i>Site Visit Only</i>
Oakland Museum of California	Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam
Detroit Institute of Arts	Amstelkring, Amsterdam
Columbus Museum of Art	Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Ruhr Museum, Essen, Germany	Museum Insel Hombroich, Neuss, Germany
Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, NL	Riverside Museum, Glasgow
Kelvingrove Gallery, Glasgow, UK	Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow
Denver Art Museum	Nitshill Open Storage Facility, Glasgow
Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver*	Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Minnesota History Center	Minneapolis Institute of Arts
City Museum, St. Louis	The Pulitzer Foundation, St. Louis

\*Site not studied in depth; select interviews conducted only.

asked to nominate museums with exemplary interpretive practices regardless of size or type, and to highlight the criteria that informed their choice. In selecting our final set to visit we prioritized art museums because historically they have been underachievers in this area, and we wanted to see what examples those art museums that have taken this path could provide. That said, we kept in mind that other types of museums have been pioneering visitor-centered approaches for years—approaches from which all museum practitioners might have much to learn.

As much as possible, we tell this story through the voices of those interviewed, making plentiful use of excerpts from the thirty-two interviews we conducted—eleven with directors, and seven each with curators, educator-interpretive specialists, and cross-departmental teams. These quotes convey a sense of the drama, the stakes, and the dedication of the colleagues engaged in implementing a visitor-centered mission.<sup>2</sup>

The limited time spent in each museum's galleries—one day—precluded conducting on-site visitor research ourselves. For this reason we gave preference in our selection process to museums that had already conducted extensive evaluations in their galleries. We are aware that it might seem ironic to be talking about visitor-centered museums without having taken the time to study the visitors within them, but our primary purpose here is to speak to museum professionals from the perspective of their peers. For a more detailed discussion of Methods, see Appendix A.

## The Authors

This book is written from two points of view: one of the authors is a long-time museum professional; the other comes from social science research. Peter has worked in both curatorial and educational roles, and been a pioneer in the use of digital technology in museums. Over the years, Peter has



## 4 Introduction

observed an interesting dichotomy, particularly prevalent in art museums: on the one hand, museums are increasingly eager to embrace portable technology as a way to provide interpretive information without disrupting the visual field of the gallery; on the other, the majority of art museum visitors do not choose to use these technologies. For Peter, a primary research question that inspired this study was: *What are museums doing for these visitors?*

Mimi has a doctorate in Human Development and Psychology and studied creativity and cognitive development. As a former Project Zero manager, she has broad research experience, including as Senior Project Manager of Harvard's Good Work project. Combining interests in moral action and creativity, Mimi's concern is in how museums see their social mission and in their promise as centers of engagement.<sup>3</sup> For Mimi, a primary question that inspired this work was: *How do museums see their social mission as the mission extends to meaningfully engage broader audiences?*

Peter and Mimi have long held a joint interest in what kinds of interactions or experiences attract and stick over time—what we call *Visual Velcro*.<sup>4</sup>

Each of us brings our particular background as lens and bias to the work. We hope these different perspectives are also a strength.

### Documenting Two Types of Change

We started out looking for innovative visitor-centered interpretive practices, yet we discovered something more: a visitor-centered focus leads to organizational transformation. The two are so integral to each other that we found they had to be considered in tandem. This book grew out of the exploration of these two intersecting trails. Adopting a visitor-centered approach to exhibition development often leads to structural change in the museum itself, including new museum roles and forms of staff collaboration. The latter phenomenon was discovered en route, the former by design.

### *A Visitor-Centered Approach in Exhibitions*

By our definition, a visitor-centered approach puts collections/exhibitions and visitor experience on equal footing. The museum cares about visitor experience in the galleries and solicits visitor input in crafting these experiences. From this vantage point, visitors matter as much as collections do—ideally, for everyone who works in the museum. In the museums we visited, there is a level of buy-in from the staff. While there may not be equal enthusiasm from all, staff commitment is not incidental, but crucial. Successful directors work to increase this level of commitment.

Collection care and research continue to be important, as do the many logistical and financial aspects of running a museum, but they are integrated with a visitor-centered goal. Furthermore, these museums often demonstrate a desire to reach beyond their traditional core audiences to a much broader

community. Reaching an expanded audience is deemed central to the new museum mission.

As a baseline, a visitor-centered approach requires museum staff to find ways to welcome visitors in a wide variety of ways: offering plentiful and comfortable seating, clear and interesting labels tailored to audience interests, family-focused spaces or activities, and helpful staff. (See sidebar: Judy Rand's *Visitors' Bill of Rights*.) Such museums move beyond a focus on subject expertise. Significantly, the welcome remains present in the gallery even when no live programming or tours are happening. In other words, there are welcoming and engaging components even when a visitor is *alone* in an exhibition. The museum provides entry points for a broad spectrum of people to connect on their own terms. Ultimately, the forms of engagement—analogue or digital, mobile or fixed—matter less than the sensitivity to audience needs that is evidenced in their design.

### Judy Rand's *Visitors' Bill of Rights*<sup>5</sup>

A list of important human needs, seen from the visitors' point of view:

- 1) Comfort: "Meet my basic needs."  
Visitors need fast, easy, obvious access to clean, safe, barrier-free restrooms, fountains, food, baby-changing tables, and plenty of seating. They also need full access to exhibits.
- 2) Orientation: "Make it easy for me to find my way around."  
Visitors need to make sense of their surroundings. Clear signs and well-planned spaces help them know what to expect, where to go, how to get there, and what it's about.
- 3) Welcome/belonging: "Make me feel welcome."  
Friendly staff make visitors feel more at ease. If visitors see themselves represented in exhibits and programs and on the staff, they'll feel more like they belong.
- 4) Enjoyment: "I want to have fun."  
Visitors want to have a good time. If they run into barriers (like broken exhibits, activities they can't relate to, intimidating labels) they can feel frustrated, bored, or confused.
- 5) Socializing: "I came to spend time with my family and friends."  
Visitors come for a social outing with family and friends (or to connect with society at large). They expect to talk, interact, and share the experience; exhibits can set the stage for this.
- 6) Respect: "Accept me for who I am and what I know."  
Visitors want to be accepted at their own level of knowledge and interest. They don't want exhibits, labels, or staff to exclude them, patronize them, or make them feel dumb.



- 7) Communication: "Help me understand and let me talk, too."  
Visitors need accuracy, honesty, and clear communication from labels, programs, staff, and volunteers. They want to ask questions and express differing points of view.
- 8) Learning: "I want to learn something new."  
Visitors come (and bring the kids) "to learn something new," but they learn it different ways. It's important to know how visitors learn, and assess their knowledge and interests. Controlling distractions (like crowds, noise, and information overload) helps them too.
- 9) Choice and control: "Let me choose; give me some control."  
Visitors need some autonomy: freedom to choose, and exert some control, touching and getting close to whatever they can. They need to use their bodies and move around freely.
- 10) Challenge and confidence: "Give me a challenge I know I can handle."  
Visitors want to succeed. A task that's too easy bores them; too hard makes them anxious. Providing a wide variety of experiences will match their wide range of skills.
- 11) Revitalization: "Help me leave refreshed, restored."  
When visitors are focused, fully engaged, and enjoying themselves, time flies and they feel refreshed: a "flow" experience that exhibits can aim to create.

### *Structural Change*

When we speak of structural change, we refer to a reconsideration of key museum roles by the museum leadership itself—for example, revisiting the role or tasks associated with curators, educators, or designers and the relations between them. Revisited roles entail changes in how professionals work together, including the tasks people take on and the make-up of collaborative teams. These changes often impact who leads a team or takes final responsibility for an end product. Most museums have long-established and clearly defined protocols and hierarchies. New ways of working ultimately shift traditional structures and may end up equalizing roles or flattening hierarchies.

Stemming from their training, each group knows its territory and its discipline, often working on its own in its well-understood domain. While each of the traditional roles continues to be important, as visitors' needs become more central we witness a questioning and changing of the boundaries between traditional positions—in particular among those most directly tied to exhibition development: curators, educators, and exhibition designers. Not surprisingly, these are the areas where we also saw the most organizational tension.

A consequence of each group working within its own territory is that roles have traditionally been highly segmented, and departments siloed. However, in our interviews, along with the shifting of traditional roles we also heard a shaking of the silo mentality. We saw new teams, with new members, leaders, and duties—and most importantly, a new outlook. Of course, accompanying this change, new challenges surface.

Taken together, the movement toward a visitor-centered approach and shifting museum roles and structures are combining to transform the museum world. In fact, while these changes are not universal, and may even be slow in coming, we believe that their impact will redefine how museums operate in the years to come.

## Notes

- 1 To protect subjects, we selectively protect the anonymity of the speakers.
- 2 When not specified otherwise, the voices woven throughout the narrative come from these interviews.
- 3 Understood as related to “*vital engagement*, an absorbing and meaningful relationship between self and world,” J. Nakamura (2001).
- 4 Peter Samis. “New Technologies as Part of a Comprehensive Interpretive Plan.” In Phyllis Hecht and Herminia Din (Eds.), *The Digital Museum: A Think Guide*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2007, pp. 19–34.
- 5 Judy Rand. Reprinted by permission of the author.