

A Statement on the Future of Museums: What does disruption-innovation look like?

--Geoffrey Alan Rhodes, 1/29/23

When we consider the extreme disruptions and innovations in popular media over the last few decades, one lesson presented is that many of the forms which we thought essential (i.e., the length of television programs, the aesthetics of page design, etc.), could, in fact, be discarded. Technological change, and the resulting major disruptions and innovations in production, programming, and distribution revealed what people most valued, and what they could live without. I like Clayton Christensen's popular analogy, 'understanding the job', in which we imagine a product or service being hired by users to do a certain job. We can ask: What job is someone hiring a museum to do? Can we imagine a new, technologically changed, institution that can do that job better?

It is one thing to do this thought experiment with milkshakes or cordless drills, but with museums... I like museums. I am sentimental about them. And yet it seems sentiment is often set aside during technological innovation. I think people loved horses before cars. I remember in the late 90s, many film lovers couldn't imagine digital video becoming popular, because they loved the material of film. Book lovers enjoyed the paper pages and typesetting. And, when thinking about museums, it is also tricky to describe who is hiring museums— is it the ticket-buying audiences? Or the donors? The founders? There are different people hiring museums to do different jobs.

An anecdote:

In 2005 I visited a wonderful exhibition curated by Michael Prokopow at the Toronto Design Exchange: *By Design: Historical and Contemporary Objects from Canadian Collections*. Michael had sent requests to museums across Canada— rural and metro, big and small— and collected about 35 objects, one from each museum, objects which those institutions thought represented 'good design'. Also displayed were mission statements, and other descriptors of the museums. I remember several, beautiful farming tools. There were a couple pairs of shoes, a sofa, an airplane turbine, and a snowmobile. For Michael this was a fascinating survey of Canadian material culture. But what struck me was how all these museums held collections made up of things that people couldn't bear to throw away. First people preserved the things, later museums were created to take over the job of keeping these things out of the garbage pile.

Museums are not like books or movies, because museums do not just provide an experience, they also perform a material function: keeping things out of the trash pile. All the same, the technological disruption that upset books and television also disrupts museums. For a very long time, the high-resolution historical information that was embedded within the objects in museums' collections could only be reproduced with great effort (copies, replicas, detailed films, etc.). By circumstance, the sites that stored and preserved collections were also the sites of curation. This tie between object and information has been, and will be, disrupted by technology, and seems to point towards more and more

digital, virtual museums. But a virtual museum, that delivers curated experiences without objects, does not solve the trash pile problem— would people become willing to throw everything away?

The job of preservation. The job of curation (creating narratives and experiences based on objects). The job of providing an awe-inspiring cultural experience (a getaway, a destination, a cultural focal point). In the future, these jobs could be performed through different sites and different institutions.

An analogy:

We can think of the traditional clothing store, and its contemporary online analogue. Where once the storage, curated display, and user experience were all had within a single site, now the digital display is the site of curation, the objects are stored in warehouses (or stored in a cloud of crowd-sourced homes and warehouses), and the user experience— trying them on— is had at home. These three sites are separate, but work in communication to deliver an outcome.

So, perhaps the present-day activities of museums will be divided among new future sites. I am unsure if this is good, bad, or indifferent. But an interesting question: If museums were to become separated into sites for curated information, sites for preservation, and sites for authentic experiences— which would we call museum?