

Amazing Small Museums Across Canada: Their Needs and their Visionary Future

Robin Etherington

Foreword

Our country needs its small, community museums. The Canadian Museums Association is committed to ensuring we meet the needs of museums of all sizes. We asked Robin Etherington, Executive Director of the Bytown Museum, a great supporter of the CMA and champion of small museums, to connect with colleagues across the country in order to gather insights on what of Canada's small museums need most. I am grateful to Robin for leading these conversations and sharing their observations, below, which will help guide our work, going forward.

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Introduction

I am honoured to have served in various positions in Canada's amazing cultural organizations. I am also honoured to have served with and consulted with exceptional colleagues in museums, galleries and science centres throughout the course of my career; but intensely during this time of dramatic change and revolution due to Covid-19. Museums have been in the flux of change for some time now, in order to serve their diverse communities, youthful audiences and ever-changing society due to constantly new technologies.

Please be assured that there are brilliant young leaders, alongside established, accomplished leaders in our Canadian cultural arena. All of them are wisely guiding their institutions during difficult and tumultuous times. Many of us immediately pivoted and placed our collections, programs, exhibitions and services online and increased attention to diversity and inclusion and Truth and Reconciliation issues.

Winston Churchill would be pleased with us, as we indeed are not "wasting a good crisis."

This brings us to a recognition and discussion of challenges that we are facing and issues that we are addressing. And they are not necessarily new ones due to Covid. It is just that Covid-19 is exposing them to bare light-bulb illumination as it is exposing flaws and problems inherent in our health care, education, social and governance systems.

Based on conversations with numerous colleagues across Canada, it appears we are actually dealing with similar if not exactly the same concerns, issues and needs. They are: effective and substantive advocacy, consequential government recognition of culture including a contemporary national museums policy and augmented operational funding, upgraded governance at the level of all three governments as well as at the Board level, profound professional development at all stages of our professional careers, and last but not least resources.

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Advocacy

Advocacy is crucial for all museums, galleries and science centres in order for them to gain government, corporate and community attention. All of us are responsible: the Canadian Museums Association (CMA), provincial and territorial museum associations, Boards, politicians and management staff in museums, galleries and science centres.

Yet, we must partner and focus our messaging on how we need governments to support museums and we need a targeted campaign. To date, the provincial and federal governments consider culture as art, artists, Netflix, festivals and film industry. The Department of Canadian Heritage has not updated the national museums policy or the Museum Assistance Program (MAP) de facto since the mid-1970s. MAP still doesn't recognize digitization as an important museum function in spite of the fact all museums are digitizing their collections to increase public access. The Province of Ontario has not increased its Community Museums Operating Grant funding for close to fifteen years and the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries did not allocate Covid emergency funding for community level museums. In its White Paper, they plan to give substantial funding to the Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Place and Trillium; however, no funding specific to community museums.

Advocacy for operating funding from provincial and federal governments for community level museums, galleries and science centres is now beyond critical, as Covid is causing many museums to consider significant reductions of staff and services or even long-term shutdown.

Along with fundraising, one of the most important roles of museum Boards is advocacy. The CMA can facilitate this by targeted messaging and education.

Governance

We need to review and update the governance construct for Boards. We have all observed that the governance construct of Boards is archaic and dysfunctional. We need a comprehensive review of governance and that entails all three levels of government having the political will to make substantive changes. For the most part, provincial governments oversee the regulations for Boards. However, if the museum is federally registered as a charity, Industry Canada and Corporations Canada oversee and regulate the Board.

Government needs to mandate governance training for all Board members and provide funding and guidelines for the governance training. Here is where the CMA and all provincial museum, gallery and science centre associations can play a role by designing and providing governance seminars and webinars.

Governance is complex and complicated and deserves several articles on it. However, another key observation that colleagues made on the issue of governance is that Boards have to proactively and actively recruit community people from our diverse communities, First Nations and youth. Boards need to represent their communities by a constant balance of age, gender, First Nations, Metis and Inuit and diversity overall.

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Professional Development at All levels of Our Careers

Before I summarize comments about professional development, I need to highlight a consistent concern that the museum studies programs do not recruit students from the diverse communities and do not craft their courses to the interests and needs of students from the diverse communities. In turn, this lack of students representing diversity and the First Nations cascades to museums' and galleries' serious difficulty hiring professionals from the diverse communities in their geographical area or from across Canada. By extension, Boards have difficulty encouraging representatives from the LGBTQ2+ and diverse communities, First Nations, new immigrants and youth to join the Board.

Museum Studies programs in Ontario and across Canada must be updated to provide theory and practical training on contemporary issues and 21st century skill-sets. These include but not limited to well-developed and intense courses on: management (HR, financial, project, facility, operations), business practice, legal requirements, governance, fundraising, advocacy, online exhibition and programming development and uploading onto online platforms, as well as technologies, social media and communications as applied to museum work. Online programming and social media usage will be an essential part of museum work moving forward and all museum professionals need to be skilled in it, along with complex management and legal realities for charities and not-for-profit organizations.

In addition, museum and gallery professionals want ongoing and advanced professional training to stay current and to further their careers. Museum Studies programs, the CMA, provincial and territorial museums associations and colleges can partner on this requirement and constantly provide seminars, courses and webinars on a broad range of current topics and augmented skills.

Resources

All museums, galleries and science centres are faced with unprecedented challenges and new requirements due to Covid-19 and to the actions for museums articulated in the Truth and Reconciliation report and the movements for equity for citizens in all of the diverse communities.

We are aware of and in support of the Truth and Reconciliation actions to be taken and the need to do programming and exhibitions and recruitment that are applicable for First Nations and diverse communities. The sincerely true problem is a lack of resources at the community museum and gallery level. Governments have not increased operating funding and most grants are project based which are inefficient for long-term changes in programming and exhibitions and community development by museums. Museums, especially community level museums, need resources for: training on First Nations and Canada's diversity and capacity to develop program initiatives for First Nations and diverse communities; training and skills development on new technologies and acquiring the new technologies; technology – museums need robust Internet systems, laptops, virtual tours and social media platforms and enhanced training on setting them up and using them; training on the legal regulations for use of technology; and training on legal, occupational health and safety and Canada Revenue Agency requirements, fundraising, governance and advocacy. Last but not least, we need resources for professional staff, annual operations, maintenance and future development, to name a few of the ongoing costs and requirements to operate and advance a museum, gallery and science centre across Canada.

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These are but a few of the issues that museums and galleries across Canada and globally are facing. We need all three levels of government, the Canadian Museums Association, provincial and territorial museums associations, ICOM, Boards and all of us to focus on a thoughtful and contemporary strategy to resolve the problems and ensure that all museums, galleries and science centres will continue to contribute to Canadian culture, education of all citizens and to provincial and federal GDP. Of great importance is for our museums and galleries to be relevant in the 21st century from a subject matter, community engagement and use of technology perspective.

We are an essential part of Canada and Canadian culture, and we have an exciting future as part of the lives, entertainment and education of all Canadians. We all know that there is no return to pre-Covid-19 museum and gallery operations, programs and services. Online collections management, programming, exhibitions, meetings, public lectures and professional training, as well as the expansion of our community audience to a national and global audience, will be our future. We need to strategically partner and work to ensure their exhilarating success by way of a modern governance model, targeted advocacy, advanced professional development opportunities for all museum professionals, acquisition and sound use of enhanced resources, proactive involvement of our young professionals in decision-making and thoughtful development of engaging and relevant programming for all Canadians.

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