

The Brand as Bling: Why the AGO and the ROM Remain Irrelevant

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by Robert Ferguson

What's ahead:

- **The standard museum practice to renew a brand is erect a new building.**
- **Until museums start telling people everywhere why they are truly different and important, they will remain irrelevant and underfunded.**
- **Become greater than your building by redefining "visitor" and concentrating on becoming an indispensable source of information.**

After six years of planning, fundraising, and construction, Frank Gehry's new Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has finally been unwrapped. Will this gamble – the latest example of a museum attempting to stand out in a "popular" world full of distractions – pay-off?

Museums everywhere were told long ago to promote their distinctive attributes and create "catalysts" to attract new audiences. But no one really told them how. When their time for organizational renewal came along, the AGO and the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) chose the standard industry practice: deciding renovation is a magic formula for generating more attention, more visitors, and greater revenue.

By spending hundreds of millions of dollars physically transforming their respective exhibition spaces, these two organizations have placed enormous faith in the "build it and they will come" cliché. Don't let the veil of marketing superlatives fool you into thinking bling meaningfully transforms either museum.

It may not be fair to accuse museum managers of being swept up in the euphoria of big money, hob-nobbing with the monied elite, consultants' dreams, celebrity architects, even vanity, but they should have known that branding their organizations is a more involved process. By the time the new building smell wears-off (which it already appears to have done at the ROM), the AGO will realize it has generated short-term awareness, but little lasting impact. By then, however, the protracted period of renovation

will have left the AGO with very little energy, and even less money, to do something about it.

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And what the future holds for this pair, now that construction is fait accompli, should be of tremendous concern to anyone (including taxpayers) who made the new building projects possible. By embracing architectural sensationalism as a primary tactic, museum managers are indeed leading their respective institutions into a new era. But it will be an era, according to authors John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, whose hallmark is an unsustainable cycle requiring more money for imported blockbuster exhibitions, each one demanding expensive advertising to attract the larger audiences that will be necessary to pay the bills. And in their 2006 book, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age*, they point to a Getty Leadership Institute research paper that dismissed this merry-go-round as little more than "a form of pyramid selling or Ponzi scheme."

The ROM's and AGO's lack of sophistication about branding is, sadly, characteristic of the sector. Branding isn't supposed to be a temporary mechanism to grab media attention, yet the pattern established by irresponsible decision-making leads people to believe museums exist for themselves instead of serving society. Managers

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will have no one but themselves to blame if their museums remain as irrelevant as when they began this process. No wonder they struggle to maintain audiences, or that the Prime Minister can blithely defend his government's \$45 million arts and culture funding cuts.

Bling has left museums looking like the emperor in his new suit – fully exposed and speechless. The message museums send by enshrining themselves in these glittering malls is that they're satisfied to be locally-based venues for sociability instead of intellectual leaders willing to challenge audiences' thinking.

And that's precisely how a museum can become greater than its building: if it stops following the standard industry practice; stops grousing about being an undervalued source for information; and, starts concentrating on how to be an indispensable, outwardly-oriented, source of knowledge. In other words, if it becomes as innovative in thinking about how to communicate with audiences outside the museum's walls as they are adept at erecting those walls in the first place.

Whoever decided a "visitor" had to go through the turnstile really handcuffed the sector's imagination and created the conditions that make museums look inflexible and arrogant. Museums could be important institutions, but they make themselves appear irrelevant by refusing to communicate broadly. The AGO can run all the "Whoa, Gotta Go" campaigns it likes, but it would be better off redefining the term "visitor" to encompass a broader user base of people who rarely – or maybe never – darken the museum's doors. The new AGO should be able to communicate anywhere target audiences ask to be engaged, and provide experiences to audiences regardless of where they live – not just where in-person visitor numbers are greatest.

At the National Geographic Society, turnstiles don't matter. Very few people actually visit the Society's museum in Washington compared to the millions who stay closely and regularly connected to its brand via Society-produced magazines, books, and television shows. The Society understands the alchemy of content, and how these kinds of mission-connecting communications encourage people to believe in its relevance.

Unfortunately, this won't happen as long as our museum sector persists in believing it doesn't need to engage audiences beyond exhibitions. One wonders if the ROM is

even interested in the concept of meaningful connections: Kelvin Browne, the ROM's Executive Director of Marketing & Commercial Development told *Toronto Life* "Even if they do not recall what they saw there [at the ROM], visitors will remember the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal." This is a remarkable public admission for the person in charge of getting people to understand what the ROM is all about. No wonder the ROM has struggled since reopening: if it's only as meaningful as its facade, the ROM has a very weak and ineffective brand indeed.

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What does this mean for the controversial Portrait Gallery of Canada? Being "homeless" could be it's golden opportunity to do what any national museum should be aiming for, which is to reach-out and build a community of interest regardless of where those people live. It's vision is to "provide a unique visual history" of Canada and "to connect Canadians to each other" – tough to do if you're always worried about the turnstile count. Yes, it would be nice if it could showcase its treasures in a gorgeous old mansion across from Parliament; its portraits deserve a nice home. But "place" distracts from mission. The Portrait Gallery will have a stronger organizational brand if it can actually get Canadians from Bonavista to Prince George to Whitehorse – not just those from the 613 and 819 area codes – talking about its work. And if they can focus on what counts, they'll be in a better position to convince citizens, politicians, and funders alike that their organization does, in fact, make a significant impact, which it does.

It's time for our museums to realize they live in a big world and that to be successful they have to escape their singularly parochial City-State outlook. In the Age of Google, the awareness and sustainability museums crave will emerge only if they are intrusive about transmitting and commercializing the stories from their collections beyond their backyard. Until museums start telling people everywhere why they are truly different and important – in a substantive and believable way – they will remain irrelevant and under-funded. And no glittering new building can fix that.