

# Managing Museums

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Museums all over represent a strategic network of Information processing and distributing centres where general public is free to participate in Experiences relating to the transmission of image.’

-Kenneth Boulding

Traditionally, the concept of a museum was limited to an object centric approach covering three aspects viz. collection, preservation and interpretation. Today the ‘Museum’ has justifiably moved beyond the object centric approach towards a more context-based, participatory approach, focusing on a holistic experience for the visitor. As a curator, it is essential to realise this meaningful transformation and translate this into the design and management of any contemporary museum.

## CURATORIAL INSIGHTS

From my curatorial experience, I would like to share conceptualising of two unique museums focusing on diametrically opposite themes: ‘oil’ and ‘leprosy’, though both included curatorial challenges because of the subject’s interdisciplinary nature. While the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) museum displays required research in history, industrial archaeology, technology, politics, environment and economics;

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### Brief history of the changing definition of Museum

Date and Event	Definition of Museum
Formation of International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946	A permanent exhibition maintained for 'exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction' (including even botanical and zoological gardens and libraries with permanent exhibition rooms). Besides the traditional art-archaeology museums, this definition included museums devoted to crafts and industry, science and technology, natural sciences, medical history and even personalia (devoted to the life of a personality).
In the decade of 1970's the concept of Eco Museums, followed by New Museology that emerged in the 1980's.	Unlike the 'traditional' museum managed by experts, this definition advocated 'people's participation' at all levels of decision-making, recommended that the management and interpretation of these resources take place, where possible in situ, i.e. in the context of their original tradition and location. A welcome impact of this philosophy was the shift of emphasis from the object to the visitor.
1990's 'Museum of Ideas'	The Museum does not depend on original objects for its presentation strategy. Such a museum uses high-tech mass communication techniques to convey a serious ideology. But besides presenting a combined historical and contemporary scenario, its interactive capability helps the visitors monitor their own level of tolerance, for example, Museum of The Holocaust, Los Angeles and Eternal Gandhi Museum, New Delhi.

the curatorial content of Leprosy museum was concerned with history, medical science, sociology and literature.

#### *ONGC's Oil Museum, Dehradun*

The conceptualisation of the Oil Museum of ONGC is not only restricted to its technological achievements in the field, existence as Public Sector Unit (PSU) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity, but also addresses global environmental concerns such as mineral oil (hydrocarbons) as a non-renewable resource. A strong academic and historical data was collected to develop such themes as:

- Oil and Gas Industry in India vis-à-vis international activity.
- Emergence of national perspective - Parliament and other records.
- ONGC's own technological development in both onshore and off-shore extraction, an indispensable facet of industrial archaeology but not much appreciated in our country.

As a curator, I needed to know: What triggered independent India's Oil policy? Who christened the organisation? Why did they move to Dehradun instead of Delhi? Usually, no insider investigates such 'minor' matters. After a consistent search, we were able to trace enough documentary evidence to settle these and many other questions. The documentation revealed Keshav Dev Malaviya's contribution in shaping India's oil

policy. The investigation further included display of 40 landmark events and history of all 10 ONGC institutes to give a complete picture that was simultaneously documented in 20 comprehensive volumes currently forming the main records of the museum.

#### *Ackworth Leprosy Museum, Mumbai*

Leprosy is a challenging disease often marred in society by total rejection of a leprosy patient at a time when there is also a sustained effort at finding a cure for the disease. The entire concept was divided into eight sub-themes to enable a narrative.

The museum display is sufficient to explain the concept and/or to induce a more inquisitive visitor to seek additional information on the subject. Museums need

#### Sub-themes of the concept

Sub-themes	Focus area
The Disease	Clinical
History of Treatment	Historical perspective
Official Reports	Awareness
Public Perspective	Sociological
Philanthropic Efforts	Humanitarian
Literature on Leprosy	Emotional
Archival Records	Academic
Health Education	Human concern

not indulge in pedagogic teaching; these should act as catalysts, as stimulants in the quest for knowledge.

Initially, we had no documents to support the various sub-themes. The search that began with the Department of Archives finally resulted in about 400 files which make the Ackworth Leprosy Museum a major centre for historical studies in Leprosy in the Bombay Presidency.

## LEARNINGS

The three core areas within which a museum operates are 'collection', 'preservation' and 'communication'. The function of these three areas has been designated as 'Collection Management Policy' by the Smithsonian Institute, USA. It includes:

- Statement of Purpose.
- Statement of Authority.
- Collection Plan.
- Definition of Collection.
- Collection of Management Policy:
  - Acquisition
  - Documentation
  - Care and maintenance
  - Access
  - Disposal
  - Inventory
  - Risk management
  - Security
  - Temporary custody
  - Lending and borrowing

This complexity of job-handling skills needed in a museum sets it apart from other resource-managing institutions such as the archives. Museums and archives are two independent branches but are mutually reinforcing. To be loyal to its role in the area of continuing and non-formal education, museums need to update knowledge and as a consequence, expand the limits of their collection. A curator, therefore, strives to acquire not just pertinent thematic objects but those with high intrinsic value, lending an identity to the museum. President Abdul Kalam said, the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'is about management of all knowledge and information we have generated and the value addition

we could bring to it'. Besides the knowledge that museums have collectively gathered over time, we have so much information around us that in the management of this knowledge we have to shift from individual to networking.

As a presenter of ideas and objects, museums are essentially an interface between 'resource' and 'community' and involved with transfer of knowledge. While some museumised objects symbolise the spiritual ladder, others mark aesthetic pleasure or evolution of scientific progress and the growing threat to natural and cultural environment. The issue is how must an alert curator communicate all these varied experiences to the visitor? The 'visitor' comes from a wide range of backgrounds and profiles, determined by age, education, profession, socio-economic standing and even gender.

This really draws us to the issue of empowerment of the curator whose duty it is to manage the complex functions of today's museums. These complexities have been succinctly paraphrased by the British Museum Association as:

- Academic knowledge of the subjects.
- Concern for physical care of the objects.
- Concern for aesthetic and educational values.
- Concern for presentation of exhibits.
- Concern for the visitor.
- Concern for developing an image.

The curator, therefore, needs:

- Motivation
- Skills:
  - Cognitive (communicative)
  - Affective (aesthetic)
  - Manipulative
- Knowledge:
  - Conceptual
  - Factual

Today, it is mandatory for museums to review their communication strategies and it is equally mandatory to induce a change in the mindset of those who must orchestrate such a change.

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