

Museum Planning in India

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ABSTRACT

India has magnificent historic sites and a rich material and immaterial heritage. Yet, many of India's museums do not match the quality and importance of their site or collections with adequate facilities. Further, museum visitors are not provided with the aesthetic or intellectual enjoyment or learning experiences that they deserve while visiting these institutions. There is a need to identify the opportunity provided by museum planning to upgrade the quality and impact of India's museums. The planning process can benefit tiny local museums as much as large metropolitan ones, although implementation of the plans depends on access to funding. The value of the planning process is long lasting for all concerned, be it governing authorities, professional staff or visitors.

INTRODUCTION

India is rich in archaeological sites, architectural heritage and museum collections. Indian museology dates back to the late 18th and early 19th century, when the British began inventing documentation systems to record the dense cultural heritage that surrounded them here. Long before that date, enlightened Indian rulers and lesser nobles had formed collections of stone and bronze sculpture, textiles, jewellery and miniature paintings, along with more exotic artefacts like howdahs (seat or carriage

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Sculpture of Tara, Patna Museum. Source: Batul Raaj Mehta

positioned on the back of an elephant) and palanquins, some of which were the beginning of the grand museum collections of today.

On the basis of that heritage alone, one might expect India to be at the centre of some of the most advanced museums in the world, but that is not the case. This can partially be attributed to the relative lack of physical and monetary resources that could be spared for museology. Another factor has been the common perception, despite the large numbers of Indians who visit these museums is that these institutions are essentially for tourists, so improving these has not been on the agenda of social and economic development. As a result, most museums in India lack fundamental requirements for professional operation.

- *Environmental controls:* Even in some of the larger museums, environmental controls cannot provide the constant relative humidity 24 hours per day that is needed for preservation of the organic and ferrous metal collections, especially in India's challenging climate. Textiles, costume and miniature painting collections have particularly suffered.
- *Documentation:* Digitisation of collection documentation is scanty, impeding visible storage,

interactive, on-line programmes, that could make images of the collection more widely available, both in the museum and elsewhere.

- *Lighting systems:* Lighting systems are often outdated and inappropriate for the material being displayed. Natural light is far too prevalent, with bright sunlight streaming through windows opened as the only source of a breeze in hot weather.
- *Security systems:* Inadequate security systems present levels of threat. Guards chatting on cell phones lack training, morale and esprit de corps.
- *Staffing:* Museums are under staffed and both professional and support staff are woefully underpaid.

In addition to such basic needs, Indian museums could serve the public better and be more sustainable with such improvements as:

- Community and private sector involvement in governance, as a basis for building civil society institutions that are more than government line departments.
- Enhanced learning programmes delivered by trained educators supplementing the ubiquitous guides available for hire.



Zenana Mahal at the City Palace Museum Udaipur decorated for a wedding. Source: HRH Group of Hotels

- Dedicated galleries and programmes for children.
- Museum quality facilities for shipping, receiving and handling incoming and outgoing exhibitions.
- Improved visitor services like retail stores, coffee houses, parking lots and toilets.
- Multi-purpose spaces for events or rental, supported by catering kitchens and chair and table storage, facilitating an additional source of earned income as well as lecture or film programmes.

CONTEXT FOR MUSEUM PLANNING

Now that the economy is producing sufficient surplus and greater resources can be made available to museums, there is an opportunity for what might be called a ‘renaissance’ in India’s museums, whereby these may begin to realise the promise of great collections and stunning sites. In Rajasthan, for instance, there is a keen interest in museum development because of the importance of cultural tourism. Mehrangarh, the magnificent fort and palace at Jodhpur, has led the way with an excellent audio tour, a first-class conservation lab, lively animation by musicians in costume, high quality retail and good food service. Several museums in India’s bigger cities such as Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata and Mumbai have embarked on significant new developments, either within the existing facilities or considering expansions or new buildings. In the state of Bihar, the Buddha Smriti Park has been opened and the intention to build a new museum to celebrate Bihar’s contribution to

the Indian and Asian civilisation has been declared. These museums are meant to build self-pride among young Biharis. Equally of interest in the private sector, are the moves among some developers to incorporate museums, public galleries or cultural centres as part of commercial or mixed-use residential or commercial complexes. As funding is becoming available for museum development in some parts of India, it is an exciting time to be planning there. Professional museum planning is essential if India’s museums are to make the most of the present opportunity and avoid the mistakes that have been made during some museum booms elsewhere. However, there remain many museums that have yet to hear the message or to receive any concrete improvements. Despite the ₹ 50 million grant given for museum upgradation by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, funding remains scarce for the vast majority. But planning is needed whether funds are available or not. Indeed, planning is more necessary than ever when funds are scarce.

The economic justification for museum development may be expressed in relation to at least three rationales: Cultural tourism is the most dynamic sector of tourism, the world’s largest industry. Global surveys indicate that on average, cultural tourists are older, better educated, stay longer, are less harmful to the environment and spend more per capita and per day than mass tourism customers. A more long lasting economic advantage to be gained from museum



Musicians greet tourists at the Mehrangarh Fort Museum, Jodhpur. Source: Batul Raaj Mehta

development is a heightened ability to attract and keep knowledge workers; the people at the creative edge of economic development around the world and especially in India, whom economist Richard Florida calls ‘the creative class.’ Providing a supportive, open, tolerant environment for these workers, especially for the entrepreneurs among them who are starting up new enterprises in response to the opportunities presented by social, environmental, cultural and technological change, is the key to future prosperity for India’s cities, states and regions.

A still longer lasting benefit of museum development is to strengthen the appreciation of the nation’s cultural identity, especially by India’s huge and growing young population. This is a contribution to social stability that is crucially needed, especially in view of the diversity of India’s population.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROCESS

Museum planning should be a continual process, not a once in a lifetime event. Nevertheless, it is typically when the museum is faced with a need or an opportunity for new construction, expansion or renovation that it hurriedly seeks to plan. In India, as

elsewhere, this often results in the mistaken expectation that architects or exhibition designers can do the planning for us. This is a fallacy: architects know about buildings and designers know about design, but they cannot be expected to understand how a museum functions and what it needs. Museum planning is the responsibility of museum professionals.

Museum directors and curators may groan at the suggestion that they should add planning to their already bulging portfolio of responsibilities. One option is to commission museum planning professionals. Even with such assistance there remains an important role for India’s museum professionals to play in the museum planning process. For many institutions planning may have to be done primarily in house.

Many senior museum staff members could effectively lead their organisation through an institutional planning process, with or without the aid of professional museum planners, if the museum’s funding authority were willing to provide adequate support, such as:

- Leave of absence from regular duties.
- Support staff for the planning activity.
- Full and unfettered access to records and information.

- A reasonable expense budget for travel and obtaining specialist resource materials or specialist advice, if and when required.

A group that cannot find the funds for outside consultants, seldom finds adequate funds to support its own staff either. A museum management that is unwilling to open the institution to outsiders frequently puts roadblocks in the way of its own staff's research when directed at internal problem solving. The most effective solution is to involve staff at all levels in a planning process led or advised by professional museum planning consultants. A consultant is sufficiently knowledgeable in both museum needs and the building process to plan, set priorities and work with local authorities, architects, engineers, exhibition designers and others to ensure that the final product will meet the needs of its users, both staff and public. They can anticipate and help resolve any conflicts that may arise. Planning consultants must strive to ensure that the museum's needs remain paramount as the basis for cooperation among the architects, engineers, designers and bureaucrats.

THE PROCESS

With a collaborative approach, India's museums could benefit from museum planning of either a broader or a more focused scope for:

- Comprehensive long range planning, which is required when a museum is contemplating a major expansion or renovation or a new policy direction or when some public or private agency is thinking of starting a new museum.
- More focused plans to meet such immediate needs as preserving, documenting or digitising museum collections for a specified period, developing an enhanced visitor services plan or designing an interpretative master plan to improve the museum's displays and the visitor experience of them.

Long range or more immediate, all planning exercises include two main components:

- The process of research, evaluation and concept development which involves both staff and professional museum planners who are working on site at the museum.



Locals visiting the Mehrangarh Fort Museum, Jodhpur. Source: Batul Raaj Mehta



Buddha Smriti Park, Patna, Bihar. Source: Batul Raaj Mehta

- The product, which is a planning document that will be useful to management and staff as a guide to implementation in the months and years after the study is completed. Effective presentation of this product to the museum's governance authority with attractive visual aids is essential to making it effective in the life of the institution.

Master plans for renovations or expansions, strategic planning for the entire institution, feasibility studies for new museums, new wings or new sites and interpretative master planning for an entire site are examples of museum planning that are currently being developed or considered by some Indian museums.

Master plans for renovations or expansions

Many of India's museums would benefit from renovation of their aging facilities that may not have been purpose built in the first place or do not meet the standards of 21st century museums. The need in these circumstances is to establish priorities. A master plan for such a renovation provides the museum's governing authority, its management and staff with

a comprehensive review of its goals and functions to meet the long range priorities of the future and not just the immediate needs of the present.

A master plan for a renovation or expansion is likely to include:

- A review of the museum's goals and priorities in discussion with the governing body, management and staff.¹ Attention may be needed to consider improvements in display as well as collection stores, enhanced retail and food facilities or a theatre in order to offer more attractive visitor services.
- An analysis of the collections, their categories, classifications, growth rate and long term requirements for conservation, documentation, digitisation and security. As museum professionals, museum planners must often insist on making collections related requirements central to all future development.
- A review of the museum's permanent collection displays, temporary exhibitions, learning programmes, events and activities, research programmes and visitor services and projection

of their long term space and facility requirements. Getting this right may often involve comparison with other 'best practice' examples elsewhere, but must be grounded in demographic analysis of the resident, school and tourist markets that the museum is serving.

- An analysis of the museum's existing and potential resident, school and tourist market.
- A functional programme or brief for the building that describes the space and facilities required to fulfil museum functions at the desired standard or level of service. Such a programme or brief states the requirements for the architect and engineers to fulfil in order to meet the museum's needs and must originate from within the museum profession.
- An analysis of the existing building and its capability for renovation and/or expansion. Since many of India's museums are in heritage structures, it is very likely that a conservation architect will be helpful here, applying the building programme responsibly within the constraints and opportunities afforded by the historic building.
- A recommended building plan, phased or staged in an affordable way. Whether for a heritage building refit or a new structure, this product will be the architect's work developed in collaboration with and based on the museum planner's functional programme or brief.
- An implementation strategy that the museum planner should prepare in consultation with the museum's governance authority. Very often such a strategy may be projected over several phases and many years of development, while at the same time aimed at realising definite milestones within the life of the current government.

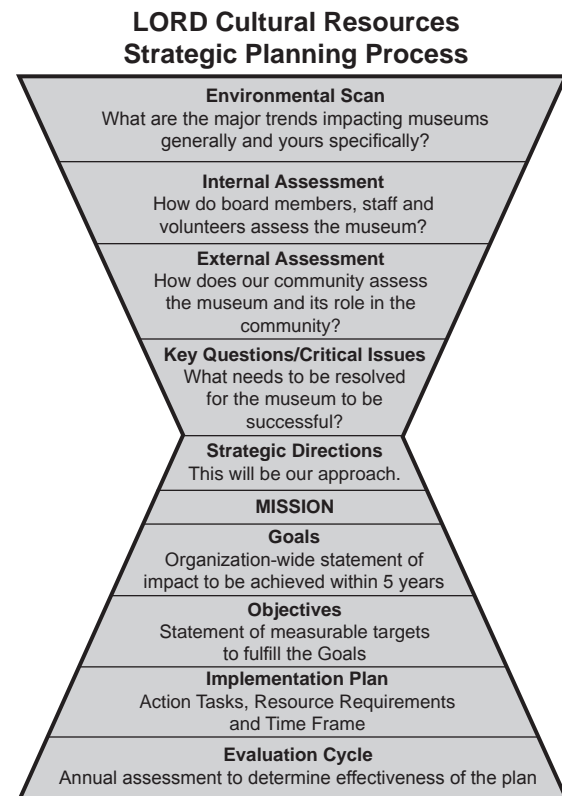
Strategic planning

India and its museums are in the forefront of the economic and cultural change sweeping across the world. Museums must retain their traditional values where appropriate, along with being open to adapting new, effective means of fulfilling their mission or inflecting that mission to meet changing needs of their present day public.

Particularly important for India's museums is to consider what kind of an institution it should be and whether governance changes could help the institution to achieve its mission more completely. Many Indian museums suffer from the difficulties inherent in their status. The museum derives no benefit from its own revenue generating activities and the perception that it is a public institution discourages private sponsorship.

Even though salaries and benefits may be low, their annual increase results in budgets where staffing and related costs rise above 60-80%, as the total government financial support of the museum is held constant or even reduced. This leaves sparse resources even for building maintenance and nothing at all for museum programmes. It may be worth considering the addition of an advisory board for the community and private sector representatives to contribute both financially and otherwise to the museum.

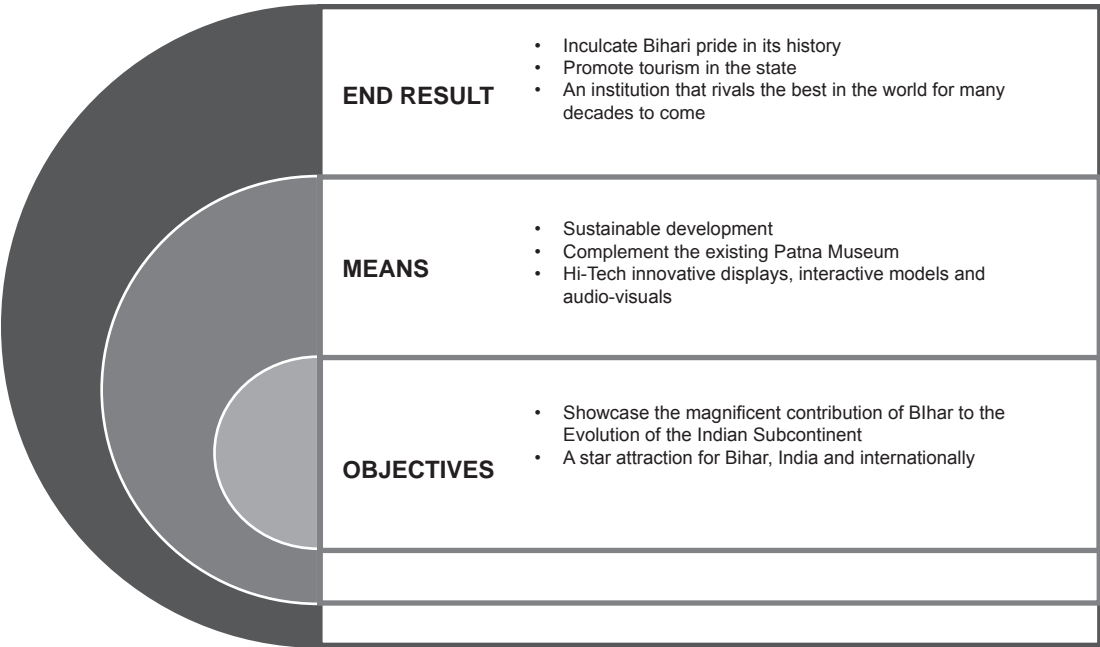
Strategic planning is the best way to review all aspects of a museum's policies and operations and provides a blueprint for change that may encompass new management systems, introduction of new technology, expanded public activities, re-design of exhibition galleries and building renovation.



Strategic Planning diagram. Source: Lord & Markert 2007, p. 39

A strategic planning process for museums usually includes:

- A review of the museum's mission and mandate aimed at evolving a new or refreshed vision for the future of the institution.
- A review of the current governance model, exploring options that could involve wider social, academic



The visioning diagram for the proposed museum at Patna © Lord Cultural Resources

and private sector participation, at least in an advisory capacity, potentially stimulating more diverse sources of financial support.

- A scan of internal and external changes that are influencing the museum’s ability to carry out its functions or offering opportunities for new directions.
- An assessment of each museum function to determine how it currently responds to these changes, ranging from a review of policies to an inspection of current space use and facilities, staffing levels and annual operating budgets for recent years. Attention must be paid to both actual and potential sources of income, attendance projections and current operating cost allocations.
- An identification of three to five key issues that the governing authority must address to facilitate the museum’s progress at this time.
- Recommendations for revisions to the museum’s mission, mandate and statement of purpose if required in order to fulfil a new or refreshed vision, with objectives spelled out in relation to each key issue.
- Recommendations for alterations to existing policies and procedures in some or all of the museum’s functional areas in order to achieve these objectives.
- Recommendations for a new management structure and staffing plan if needed.
- An implementation plan that staff originates, setting

deadlines and itemising tasks to fulfil each objective according to a schedule related to present and future budgets.

A successful strategic planning process can be instrumental in the development of an institution, as it enables governing bodies, management and staff to respond to change in a positive, organised fashion, whether that change is internally or externally generated and to take a more active role in fashioning the museum as a responsible civil society institution.

A strategic plan can be instrumental in responding to long range space and staffing requirements and opening up the potential for new public involvement in support for the institution. As strategic planning considers all museum functions and the context of the community that the museum serves, it can be a prelude to more focused planning such as the master plan for an expansion or a renovation outlined above. Most remarkably, a strategic plan can result in a first ever understanding of the museum’s real needs by everyone from the highest authority to the ground staff.

Feasibility studies

A feasibility study advises those who commission it on the viability of establishing a new institution or of expanding an existing museum. The feasibility of profit making ventures ultimately comes down to whether

these will make sufficient profit to justify investment. For non profit cultural institutions like museums, it focuses on whether a new or increased level of government funding is justified by the achievement of the institution's mission or the educational, economic and heritage value of the institution. Every effort should be made to establish or transform an institution so that it is free to maximise other sources of funding from its own revenue generating activities, sponsorships and donations, as well as a certain proportion of government funding in most cases. A well managed museum that is in charge of its own finances and generates its own revenue may be expected to generate about one third of its annual operating budget if the governing authority subsidises the other two thirds, for the cost of maintaining the culture or heritage that the museum is preserving.

A study of this type may include some or all of the following basic components:

- A concept statement that clearly identifies the object of the study or the cultural capital that will be developed by this new institution or expansion.
- A market analysis to identify both local and tourist markets for the venture.
- A community needs assessment to ensure that the new or expanded facility complements rather than competes with other institutions. Joint ventures or participation in 'mixed use' developments can be explored.
- A collection search to identify collecting opportunities for a new museum or an analysis of an existing collection to identify its space needs for display and storage, including the option of visible storage for some parts of the collection.
- A plan for the museum's public activities to meet identified market needs and interests.
- A building programme or brief that describes the space and facilities required to preserve the collections, present the public activities and house all museum functions, including enhanced visitor services.
- An analysis of site or building options for the new museum or expansion of an existing museum. If an historic structure is involved, a sensitive conservation architect may be an important part of the team here, whereas real estate advisors may be more relevant if the plan is for a cultural centre in a new mixed-use private sector development.
- Projection of capital and operating costs.
- Identification of sources of revenue.
- An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed expansion or new facility in light of

actual and projected resources.

- A statement of feasibility in terms of justification for the projected level of subsidy required or a recommendation for an alternative solution to the identified needs.
- A recommended course of action including a staffing and administration plan.

Master interpretative plans and exhibition planning

In the professional jargon of museums, 'interpretation' means all the ways in which the museum communicates the meaning of the site or its buildings to the visitor. It ranges from way-finding, learning programmes or audio tours to gallery signage, labels, branding, orientation galleries or theatres and web sites. In museum exhibitions, it implies determination of the museum's communication objectives and mission and its tool of expression. An 'interpretative master plan' is a creative response to what the museum has to offer to optimise the visitor experience.

Interpretative planning determines the resources available to communicate meaning such as collections, real or simulated environments, learning opportunities, interactive devices, audio-visual programmes and so on. Interpretative planning should always precede exhibition design.

An interpretative master plan for an entire museum or an exhibition plan for an individual display is a vital step needed before exhibition design can begin. These normally include:

- Analysis of the museum's resource, that is, the collections, historic site or knowledge that the museum wishes to communicate and the relationship of that resource to the institution's over all mission.
- Analysis of the space and facilities which the museum has or could have at its disposal to communicate its objectives. In some cases, this may mean discovering new uses for some spaces and transforming the functions of others.
- A visioning session with the museum's governing body, professional staff and other stakeholders to explore 'best practice' examples elsewhere, to consider the range of possible means of expression, including alternative technologies and to evolve a shared vision for the future.
- Consultation with an exhibition steering committee that should include museum educators, security staff, retail and other visitor service providers, marketing and financial officers, as well as curators, conservators and registrars.
- Determination of the communication objectives

consonant with the exhibition mission and vision.

- Elaboration of optional means of expression to achieve those communication objectives, with the understanding that for each objective many of these expressive media will not be implemented or may have to be abandoned due to financial, technical, scheduling or material supply reasons, so that it is important to have alternatives in view throughout the design, fabrication and installation process.
- Guidelines for the curatorial research needed to provide or support the content of the exhibition.
- Guidelines for selection of artefacts or works of art for the exhibition, to be developed in consultation with the relevant curators.
- Guidelines and a style book for graphic and oral text for way-finding, signage, labels, audio tours, film scripts, learning programmes, web sites and social media.
- Capital, staffing and operating cost implications.
- An implementation schedule that may be phased over years ahead for a master interpretative plan or may describe a very quick march to the deadline for a new permanent collection display or temporary exhibition.

CONCLUSION

Museums in India now have the opportunity to take a more prominent role in the economy, to take charge of their own finances to the extent possible and to involve the private sector and the general public in their emerging role as civil society institutions. Museum planning must be a vital part of this transformation to avoid building too large or too small or erecting institutions that may not be sustainable. Professional museum planners can be an important aid in this process, but senior museum personnel and museum governance authorities must play an active part. An Advisory Board must be set up to motivate private sector sponsorships or donations. Museums are often thought to be about objects, but these are really about people. Museums are means of communication. Their media are three dimensional objects in three dimensional environments, supported by oral, printed or screened verbal interpretation. With these materials and media, museums communicate meaning about art, history or science. The people whom museums are addressing are not only their visitors today, but also the children and grandchildren of those visitors. Hence, museums must have the resources to research, document and preserve the objects and keep them safe.

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Note

- ¹ For example, we recently included a photograph of an Indian museum's storage room in a presentation to the museum's governing authority, stimulating them to realise the need to improve not just display but also to improve their collection stores.
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