Looking Back and Looking Forward: The Rise of the Visitor-centered Museum

Roy Ballantyne and David Uzzell

Roy Ballantyne (r.ballantyne@uq.edu.au) is research professor in the School of Tourism at the University of Queensland, Australia. David Uzzell (D.Uzzell@surrey.ac.uk) is professor of environmental psychology in the Department of Psychology at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom.

Abstract
This paper presents some personal perceptions about “drivers of change,” which have impacted the role and nature of museums since the 1980s, leading to the rise of the visitor-centered museum. Such changes mirror developments occurring in society. In the case of museums, a decline in public funding has occurred at a time when increased resources are required to enable museums to successfully compete for the visitor dollar in the expanding “experience economy.” The authors suggest that the role and nature of museums in the future will be shaped by their responses to many challenges, the most important being: how to increase visitor numbers without negatively impacting on visitor satisfaction; how to adjust policy and practice as museums approach the limits of visitor growth; how to start to reverse the trend of declining public funding by demonstrating museums’ value to society through the adoption of community-centered policies and practice; and perhaps the most unpredictable, how museums will adjust their policies and practices in the face of possible climate change.

We, the co-authors of this article, met approximately 20 years ago, when Roy Ballantyne visited the United Kingdom on a British Council Scholarship. The aim of the scholarship was to investigate the use of museums as informal education sites to overcome the problems of teaching students within the segregated Apartheid education system existing in South Africa at that time. As part of this process, David Uzzell inducted Roy Ballantyne into the world of museums and interpretation by sharing his knowledge, literature, personal experience, and passion for heritage and environmental interpretation within museum settings. Over a three-month period, the two of us visited many museums, heritage and environmental centers, where we critically discussed our opinions of myriad displays and exhibitions. It was the Margaret Thatcher era, and museums were being “shaken-up”—challenged to pay their way. Museum professionals, who had traditionally been specialists skilled in identifying and classifying objects, were being retrained to communicate the value of their collections and attract the public.

Reminiscing about our past museum experiences, recently, we have been reflecting on what the possible nature and purposes of museums will be like in another 20 years. What role will they play in society? What processes will shape their practices? How will they be funded?
Predicting the future, however, is an inexact science, particularly when attempting to generalize about institutions as varied as museums. Those whose work involves predicting futures, such as economic forecasters and stockbrokers, suggest that “the trend is your friend.” In adopting such an approach to predicting museum futures, we must first view the processes that have driven change and shaped museums in the past. Second, we must consider how a continuation of such processes might influence museums in the future.

There have been many changes in the nature and function of museums since the 1980s. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1980) defines a museum as a “building used for storing and exhibition of objects illustrating antiquities, natural history, arts, etc.” In 2010, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) described a museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” Clearly, over the past 30 years, the expectation that a museum is largely concerned with storing, caring for, and exhibiting objects has expanded to encompass its role as a non-formal educational institution providing a public service through an engaging presentation of objects and experiences to visitors.

According to ICOM, these changes in museums’ roles align with developments that have occurred in society (2010). The Thatcher years, for example, introduced new government policies towards the funding of public institutions, but also saw wider changes such as lower travel costs and the rise of mass tourism.

This paper considers some of the social views that have combined to influence the past, and presumably will continue to shape the future. Museum practice is being altered by decreases in government funding for formal and informal post-school education; a focus on the visitor as “client”; the rise of informal mass education within the “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore 1999); and altered perceptions of the role and place of museums in supporting growth in the tourism sector and demonstrating value in serving local communities.

In our opinion, the dominant driver of change has been declining public funding for institutions. This has motivated museums to find and secure new sources of funding to support and grow museum activities. During the 1980s, governments (national, regional, and local) began to adopt an economic rationalist approach in relation to museum funding. This viewpoint says that the “market” and money can always do things better than government (Pusey 1991) and that “generally speaking, markets usually provide more satisfying answers to questions of choice, consumer preference and so on” (Stone 1992, 57). Governments have decreased their financial support for post-school and non-formal education institutions such as museums. Museums have thus been challenged to earn their keep. They are required to find new ways of generating their own money to make up for budget shortfalls due to government cuts. Many now rely on donors and visitor ticket incomes to help cover the costs of an ever-expanding expectation of service delivery by the public and government. A major outcome of the need to generate money to help fund museums has been to place visitors and their satisfaction at the heart of institutional strategic planning.
Over the past 20 years, it’s become essential to attract more paying visitors through entrance fees or fee-based special exhibitions. This is unlikely to change much in the next 20 years. Museums have increasingly had to compete—not only among themselves, but also with other attractions and experiences—for the visitor dollar. Competition has given rise to what we call the visitor-centered museum. Institutions spend much of their time and money exploring visitor motivations, needs, and satisfaction in order to attract them onsite through the marketing and delivery of satisfying experiences. Funding agencies increasingly use visitor numbers as a crude measure of a museum’s success. Visitor attendance is seen as a good indicator of demand and perceived worth. The perception is that you must be doing something right if people flock to your exhibition or experience. What museum director would feel secure when confronted by a downward trend in visitor numbers? Arguing for the quality or educational value of a museum’s exhibitions in the face of declining visitation would not be a comfortable position in which to find oneself.

The visitor-centered museum of the future will almost certainly seek to grow visitor numbers for many years to come. Museums will become even more important within the experience economy as they attempt to attract an ever-growing share of the leisure and tourist market. In seeking market share, however, they will compete with theme parks, theaters, movies, historic buildings, cultural experiences, clubs, and other entertainment opportunities. They will need to provide new “WOW” experiences that are costly and involve the use of expensive high-tech equipment. But if museums seek to become more like theme parks, will they have to provide all the other facilities that go along with the “WOW”: fast food outlets, shopping concessions, chapels for fun weddings, and so on? It has become notable that our airports are now shopping malls with an airfield attached. Will our galleries and museums become shopping malls with some nice objects you can browse? In the late 1980s, in order to make the Victoria and Albert Museum in London more attractive and “accessible” to the general public, the museum launched an advertising campaign. The most notorious poster said: “V&A: An ace caff, with quite a nice museum attached.” This was heavily criticized by museum professionals. Maybe the V&A was prescient?

To compete with other entertainment experiences, museums will have to access more funding. What strategies will museums adopt to grow their funding base? Will different museums attempt to increase visitation in different ways? Perhaps some museums in the future will target specific visitor segments: zoos and aquariums, for instance, might cater to young mothers, families and children. Others may adopt a shotgun approach and provide a wide range of different visitor experiences: “themed” displays of their collections for local repeat visitors, and the occasional traveling blockbuster to attract both locals and tourists. Still others may seek to become ever more “iconic” and increase their attractiveness in order to secure their place on the tourist must-see list. (The “icons” include the Holocaust Museum and National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.; the Metropolitan, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York; the British Museum in London; the Louvre and Musée d’Orsay in Paris; the Forbidden City in Beijing; and the Vatican Museums in Rome.)
When one considers that China on its own was expected to generate around 52 million outbound tourists in 2010, the strategy of increasing international tourist visitation to iconic museums is easy to appreciate. However, it should be borne in mind that providing experiences for international visitors brings with it a host of costly difficulties for museums in addressing issues of cross-cultural communication.

What happens in the future, when museums reach their limits in visitor growth? Every museum surely has a threshold number that—when exceeded—leads to a decline in visitor satisfaction and halts further expansion of visitation. Our own recent observations suggest that some iconic museums are already burdened with excessive visitor numbers. Clearly, positioning and marketing iconic museums within the mass tourism market is leading to excessive crowding during the high tourist season, resulting in service failure and visitor dissatisfaction. Standing in a long queue with many other day-trip tourists on a hot or rainy day for the privilege of paying a not-insubstantial amount of money to visit the Palace of Versailles or the Vatican Museum does not get visitors into a proper state of mind to appreciate the cultural treasures they have come to see. If you’re then forced to join a seething, rowdy mob in an unending human “crocodile”—shuffling from room to room, apologizing to those you continually bump into, while trying to listen to a guide, and peering over others’ heads and shoulders at the sights—you will clearly experience the negative impact when visitor numbers exceed their limits.

The movie title “If it’s Tuesday it must be Belgium” speaks to the type of experience that many international travelers have on the twenty-first-century European Grand Tour. The fact that we can refer to “iconic” museums suggests they are already more about appearance than substance. How many people who snake around gallery after gallery in the Louvre, looking for paintings they might recognize, actually want to be there? In some cases, perhaps, people don’t go to look at the paintings, but go to see them—there is a difference. The motivations for visiting are many and varied. Of course, it can be to have a ‘heritage experience’, but we also know they may be there through social pressures. Some people’s motivations may revolve around issues such as identity, i.e. visiting a museum is an important part of how they see themselves, what sort of person they are. And in other instances they may simply be ‘heritage twitchers’, i.e., simply ticking off the sites they have visited like birdwatchers tick off sightings of rare birds.

Museums are likely to become victims of their own success. What strategies will they use to deal with the problems of crowding, inadequate facilities, and the resultant declining visitor satisfaction ratings? It is likely that museums will approach the issue of visitor growth in one of three ways:

1. Increase the size of buildings and facilities to enable visitor growth to continue.
2. Limit numbers through the use of booking procedures, as is the case in many other entertainment venues.
3. Significantly increase the cost of visitation until price limits visitor growth.
The Tate Modern is an example of a museum adopting the first approach. Nicholas Serota, director of all the Tate museums, has noted that the Tate Modern has been so successful in attracting visitors that its galleries are overcrowded and visitor services are of poor quality. The facilities have taken a battering and need painting, the toilets are dirty, and the cafés are chaotic during peak visiting times (Vogel 2010). Rather than developing a plan to cap and limit visitor numbers, however, the Tate is attempting to raise more money (GBP 213 million) to increase the display space. Serota “insists that despite the rocky economy and the recent announcement of government cutbacks for arts financing, the Tate Modern must grow” (Vogel 2010, 36). Whether this is the correct strategic approach to be adopted in the future by other museums when confronted by the problems of overcrowding is debatable. Is such a response sustainable? Is it possible that museums can just continue to fund growth in their facilities to expand visitor numbers? Is such a strategy just postponing the day of reckoning?

The second approach to limiting visitor growth has been adopted by the Cenacolo Vinciano, which houses Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in Milan. If you wish to see the painting, you have to go online and book and pay long before you wish to visit. (During the tourist season that can be months ahead.) You can also pay to join a tourist group that already has prepaid tickets for the day of your visit. This is a similar approach to booking theater tickets to a popular show, and has the advantage of limiting and controlling growth in visitor numbers, thereby overcoming the problems of queuing and crowding. Such an approach has a certain elegance in allowing much greater planning and control.

The third approach allows the free market to limit growth by steadily increasing visitor costs. Visitor numbers decline when some find they are unwilling or unable to afford to visit. Such an approach will have the benefit of potentially increasing the amount of money earned by the museum, but the experience could become elitist, if visitors pay ever-higher admission prices until only the wealthy can afford to enter. Allowing free entry to the museum on one day a week—as happens at MoMA in New York, for instance—may eliminate the accusation of elitism. At MoMA, visitors are allowed free entry between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Fridays. Such an approach does not help with visitor crowding on free days, but if an institution were to use a booking system for all visiting times, it would potentially deliver the same quality of experience for both paying and non-paying visitors.

There may be a fourth option. One of the usual distinctions between museums and interpretive centers is that in museums you find real objects. There is no such requirement in an interpretive center, which is concerned with ideas and stories. As we stated at the outset, the traditional role of museums has been the collection, conservation, and display of objects. If the object itself is less important than its totemic meaning and value, then virtual experiences might occur away from the site where the original objects are held. One can imagine the usefulness of this scenario for school parties visiting overcrowded museums, and in other cases where *learning about* the object is more important than *seeing* it. Taking a 3D virtual tour through a historic environment may be what some visitor groups would prefer. This happens already in fragile environments where the press of visitor numbers would do irreparable damage—for example, in
caves with prehistoric art. In those cases, the carrying capacity of the physical environment is readily recognized and we have practical strategies for dealing with it. We may need to be more imaginative when it comes to devising acceptable solutions for not only the physical carrying capacity of some of our museums, but also their psychological carrying capacity.

Many visitor-centered museums will certainly have to confront the issue of limiting visitor numbers in the near future. Museums need to become sustainable enterprises. How can this be accomplished without compromising the ability to fund future growth and cover the increasing costs of maintaining and improving visitor experiences? Solutions to this problem will require museums to reconsider their overall aims and practices in the service of their visitors, communities, and society.

There is, of course, an alternative scenario to the high growth model. As museums attract more and more people, they may become less-desirable destinations for certain segments of the population. It’s sometimes said that airlines become profitable by flying first-class and business-class travelers at inflated prices; economy class is just public relations. Might this happen with museums? Specialist museums could be designed with high-income target audiences in mind, thus securing the operational revenue requirements without having to provide all the “economy class” facilities that people demand.

One might imagine a scenario in the current world financial climate in which museums that depend on public sector funding no longer receive the state and federal aid they have traditionally enjoyed. In that case, they may no longer feel obliged to provide the facilities and services that a democratized museum public expects. Indeed, they may not be able to afford such services, due to rising costs and declining visitation. Focusing on high-income market segments may seem to be a (short-term) solution. The gated communities that are an increasingly common feature of our urban environments follow this model, especially as the differences between the rich and poor become more commonplace in both the global North and South.

The authors suggest that visitor-centered museums of the future should attempt to decrease their overall dependence on visitor contributions to their budgets and start to access a greater percentage of their funding from donors and the public purse. In order to obtain increased funding from these sources, however, museums will need to better show how they serve their communities: what value they add in educating visitors about important cultural, social, environmental, historical, and citizenship issues of the day. They will need to design exhibits that address issues such as racism, migrants, homelessness, drugs, social tolerance, environmental issues, environmentally sustainable behavior, poverty, and other “hot” issues within their communities.

At the beginning of this paper, we argued that one has first to consider the processes that have shaped and changed museums in the past. Second, one must ask how a continuation of such processes might influence the characteristics and nature of museums in the future. Of course, we are assuming that the processes of the past will influence the future in much the same ways as
they have in the past. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, however, there is an uncertain future facing us: climate change.

Climate change is what Rittel and Webber (1973) refer to as a wicked problem: one that may not be fully understood until after the formulation of a solution. It’s characterized by solutions that may cause further problems and unintended consequences, and that are not right or wrong, but better or worse. Furthermore, in a pluralistic society in times of stress, there is no such thing as the uncontested public good. Climate change will challenge priorities and may lead public services as well as private resources to give priority to meeting the more basic needs on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, i.e., while museums may seek to satisfy the goals of self-actualization and esteem as the pinnacle of Maslow’s hierarchy, financial cuts in public services and the credit crunch may lead to organizations only being able to satisfy basic physiological, safety and security needs.

Climate change will present challenges that are difficult even to imagine at present. These challenges could impact directly on museums and their mission to conserve heritage. This may require the adoption not only of new technologies for different temperatures and humidity levels, but also new skills in the workforce to manage the contents in different ways. Given the projected rise in sea levels in coastal areas, many museums may have to be relocated. But the impact of climate change extends beyond this. There is no part of the everyday that will not be affected. We have discussed the prediction that tourist and visitor numbers will continue to rise. Climate change may make that scenario less likely. Mass international tourism, relying on cheap air tickets, may reach its peak within the next few years. Although sustainable tourism proposes carbon-offsets to address the problem, it is not proving to be an effective way to manage the complex impact of the production of greenhouse gases. At present, people are still flying—using resources, creating waste, and ultimately impacting negatively on the environment. This may not be a trend that global society will be able to sustain for much longer.

The challenges to tourism—and thus museum visitor growth—are very real. However, in addressing such challenges, the position of museums as keepers of the past and the collective memory will become more important than ever as societies are forced to change and environments are transformed.

This paper has attempted to provide some insights into the future of museums, and in particular, the approaches they might adopt to meet future challenges such as declining public funding and increasing visitor numbers. Visitor-centered museums will need to continue to improve their visitor experiences and increase the contributions they make to their communities, while also dealing with an entirely new set of challenges associated with climate change. We believe that museums will continue to enjoy an interesting and exciting future, and that meeting these challenges will only serve to reinforce the important role that museums can, do, and will play within society.

References