

Looking Ahead

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The previous two articles have highlighted the progress of the Illinois State Museum over the past 125 years, a truly dynamic history. Throughout the preceding essays, the authors have attempted to capture the tenor of those times, focusing on the role the Museum has played. Museums in general have matured as institutions during the past century. They are today organizations respected for their high standards and integrity. Public surveys demonstrate that museums are valued for both the information and experience they offer. The purpose of this final essay is to look ahead briefly and share with you my thoughts on where the Illinois State Museum as an institution may be going in the future.



We live in a time of dynamic social and technological change. Perhaps the changes we are witnessing today can best be compared with the social changes of the late nineteenth century at the peak of the Industrial Revolution when dramatic demographic changes were taking place. Cities grew dramatically in that era as foreign immigrants and rural residents seeking jobs and a better life flocked to the new urban meccas. Times such as these inevitably affect the civic life of a society, as social alliances and networks are diminished or lost. Robert Putnam, in his best-selling book *Bowling Alone*, has argued recently that such a condition is true again today. He believes that we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures—the PTA, church, recreation clubs, political parties, or bowling leagues—thus shrinking our access to “social capital.” This social environment negatively affects our civic health. In

the early twentieth century this was remedied with the founding of numerous civic institutions, many of which are the well-known organizations in which we are losing interest today. After a century, most of these major civic institutions—public and private—have grown somewhat antiquated and need to be reformed in ways that will invite renewed active participation. As early as the 1970s, futurists were forecasting the dramatic changes that would accompany the coming “Information Age.” Today we are all aware of how new technologies are changing our daily lives as we move from a service economy into what authors Joe Pine and James Gilmore have called the “Experience Economy.” But for those of us concerned with the health and viability of these civic institutions—in our case a museum—we must truly recognize and then consider the challenges and opportunities associated with this changing social milieu before we plan for the Museum of the twenty-first century.



Spring school rush at the ISM-Springfield illustrates the popularity of museums and the need for expanding facilities to better serve educational needs for the twenty-first century. Photograph by Marlin Roos.

So how does the evolving social environment that is leading toward globalization of our economy, information exchange, and experience affect the museum as an institution? How should the vision for the museum's future be modified to strategically position the institution to move forward into this new century? Students of human history will tell you that if one thing is constant, it is change. Given that premise, the institution itself must adapt, modify its programs, and at times reinvent itself to successfully serve its audiences. That said, there are some fundamental qualities that endure and have proven necessary for success.

James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, in their book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, explored the reasons for long-term success among productive corporations. Among the attributes identified for such visionary organizations are: an investment of time spent building an organization, not

just focusing exclusively on its products and services; a distinctive core ideology with a sense of purpose and values that inspire and guide the organization; the establishment of major goals that energize and focus people and that create momentum and stimulate progress; a collective passion for the organization's ideology, that establishes an *esprit de corps* among its members; a receptiveness to trying many ideas and keeping those that work; the grasping of opportunities when they arise; the translation of the core ideology into everything the organization does; and finally, a vision for the future, grounded in the organization's core purpose and values.

The Illinois State Museum has a clear sense of mission: *to foster an understanding and appreciation of Illinois by collecting and disseminating information on the state's natural, cultural, and artistic heritage.*

Given this mission, the Museum has always aspired to be one of the top institutions of its kind. Its vision is to continually improve its position as the premier institution that researches, collects, and provides diverse audiences with learning opportunities on the rich natural, cultural, and art history of Illinois. Through dynamic program offerings, the Museum will continue to enhance visitors' appreciation for scientific and cultural content and process, thereby stimulating and empowering its multiple audiences to make better-informed decisions about contemporary natural and social issues facing Illinois, the nation, and the world. Through technology, the Museum will disseminate the story of Illinois to a global audience.

The foundation for the Museum's core ideology is grounded in a set of shared values that are fundamental to the institution's success. They are:

- *Sense of mission*—a belief in the importance of the Museum's responsibility to study, conserve, and interpret the State's natural, cultural, and artistic heritage.
- *Stewardship*—a conviction that the State's collections are a timeless, irreplaceable treasure that must be held in trust for present and future generations.
- *Service*—a commitment to its service to the people of Illinois.
- *Excellence*—a commitment to maintaining the highest standards.
- *Teamwork*—a commitment to working together.
- *Accountability*—a belief in the ethical and moral standards of the museum profession.
- *Intellectual freedom*—a belief in the free expression of ideas, as manifested in pluralism, appreciation of diversity, and respect for one's colleagues.

continued

Future Issues

Following are some issues that I believe will play a role in shaping the character of the Illinois State Museum in the several years ahead. Although the Museum does have a clear sense of mission, vision, and an institutional culture (shared values) that translate into its core ideology, some issues call for elaboration: (1) the Museum's connection to its community—the people of the state; (2) its role in the “information marketplace”; (3) its advocacy role as it provides a forum for dialogue and social discourse; (4) its potential as an economic engine; and (5) planning for the expansion of the flagship facility in Springfield.

Community Connector

How does the Museum plan to maintain its relevancy with the changing social milieu of the twenty-first century? Much is currently written in the museum literature about museums needing to connect more closely with their communities. This is especially important during times of rapid social change. Museums, because they link the past with the present, give a sense of place that helps individuals connect their own lives to their world. As institutions, they do help in developing “social capital.” The informal learning environments provide secure and relaxing surroundings that offer opportunities for people to reflect on their place in the larger world—in both time and space. The museum environment offers people an opportunity to think outside the constraints of their daily lives. Public surveys have demonstrated that museums are noted for their integrity and therefore are one of the more trusted institutions in our society. Ralph Appelbaum, renowned New York exhibit designer, has argued that in the world of constant media and entertainment, many parents are seeking “real experiences” to balance the “virtual world” in which their children live. Here, museums play a central role.



Bald Eagle mount.



Quilt created in 1950 by an Illinois artist.



Artist's conception of exhibit on the history of agriculture.

Information Resource

Museums are information centers. This function is supported by the wealth of data inherent in the collections of natural and cultural objects combined with the collective expertise of a highly trained professional staff. Nevertheless, having and disseminating information is not enough. The digital age of communication is redefining the niches and roles that individual institutions will play in the information marketplace. With a click of the mouse, it is easy today to query vast storehouses of information at the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, or the Metropolitan Museum, these U.S. institutions used only as examples. This means that in the future too, distance will no longer be a factor for accessing information. Every institution, including the Illinois State Museum, will inevitably define its niche by emphasizing the strengths and uniqueness of the resources that it holds. In the case of this museum, this is its focus on research, collecting, and public programs on the natural, cultural, and art history of Illinois. Given the immediate availability of information on a global scale, this institution has a unique opportunity to integrate its regional offerings into this larger global context, therefore establishing the relevance of “the Illinois story.”



Electronic Interactive Bulletin Board.

Advocator and “Town Hall” Environment

During the twentieth century the Museum tried to instill in its audiences an appreciation for the nature, art, and cultural history of Illinois, but seldom was it identified as an advocacy organization. In the future the Museum needs to assume a greater leadership role in advocating the need for a sustainable environment and in promoting tolerance and recognition of the strengths of diversity in our society. With population expansion, increasing social diversity, and accelerating social change, the Museum has a crucial role to play in empowering people to make better-informed decisions on issues like sustainability and the social dimensions of diversity. If museums are to be relevant, they must address and inform on these paramount issues that have unquestionable implications for the future of us all.

Following this lead I am reminded of the comment by Robert McCormick Adams, former secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, when he said that “the museum has moved from the castle to the forum.” Museums as information centers and places of shared experiences are excellent venues for dialogue, debate, and the exchange of ideas on subjects for which the Museum can make a contribution. The Museum in this new century will have the opportunity to become a “town hall,” where environmental, cultural, and social issues can be presented, discussed, and debated, with a goal of enlightening and broadening the perspectives of its audiences.

Economic Engine

Tourism has become one of the largest industries in Illinois and, for that matter, the nation. Cultural tourism has gained a significant market share of this overall travel industry. For example, in Chicago, museums attract more patrons than do all the professional sporting events combined. Museums are truly economic engines. In many cities, new museum facilities have led the way for redevelopment efforts that revitalize downtown areas and attract tourist dollars to their respective communities. The Illinois State Museum has that opportunity.

Venue for the Twenty-First Century

The Illinois State Museum for several years has been planning for the expansion of its facilities. Increased space for exhibits and educational programs is needed to strengthen the opportunities for family and lifelong learning, to enhance school services, and to provide a venue to adequately display the State’s treasures—collections that tell the story of Illinois. The Museum has a conceptual plan that would dramatically improve its ability to serve its audiences. The vision is to more than double the size of the existing museum, allowing the Museum to realize much of its untapped potential. This plan will permit the Museum to more adequately exhibit its many Illinois treasures and provide far more space for interactive educational programming. As a center for lifelong learning, it will stimulate the learning process for children as they explore the wonders of the natural and cultural world, while at the same time providing experiences for adults in which they can observe, reflect, and discuss their reactions to engaging and changing presentations by the Museum. The expanded Mu-



Artist's rendering of People of Illinois theater and exhibit.

seum will be a “museum for the twenty-first century,” serving as an information hub, promoting unique learning opportunities for all ages and learning styles, informing its audiences about major environmental and social issues, and providing a “town hall” for discussion and social discourse. An expanded museum would be a significant economic engine as an important cultural attraction in the state’s Capitol Complex.

As cited in the preceding essay by Dr. Bonnie Styles, when quoting Stephen Weil, she emphasizes that beyond information, values, and experience, museums stimulate and empower people so that visits to the Museum can have a lasting positive impact on their lives. The Illinois State Museum in the future will have an even greater positive impact on its audience. Almost a century ago, in his Founders Day address at the Carnegie Institution in Pittsburgh, William A. Hornaday of the Smithsonian Institution made a succinct, albeit enduring, caveat that still echoes with merit. Hornaday proposed that museums “furnish food for thought, expand the human mind, and illuminate the soul.” We believe that is true today more than ever and is a thesis to which we subscribe. Bring on this new century. ☺

Suggested Readings

- Collins, James C., and Jerry I. Porras. 1994. *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. New York: Harper Business, HarperCollins Publishers.
- Garfield, Donald. 1996. The Next Things Now: Designing the 21st-Century Museum. *Museum News* 75(1):34–45, 58–61.
- Pine, B. Joseph, II, and James H. Gilmore. 1999. *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.



Bison effigy pipe, Ojibwa (Chippewa), ca. 1800–50.



Illinois plant fossil from the Pennsylvanian period.



1930 painting by an Illinois artist.