



*New Strategies for Museums:
Assets, Audiences, and Alliances*

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“If we build
it, they will
come”

2007

2010

“If we’re
smart, they
will come”

A year into the Great Recession, museums find themselves facing a vastly changed economic landscape. Tourism is down. Endowments have plummeted. Charitable gifts are sluggish. Capital campaigns are ailing and long-term financing has all but disappeared. As operating costs continue to rise, many institutions confront the very real possibility of cutting personnel, programs and hours of operation.

Other threats loom as local governments and philanthropies reevaluate their commitments to annual support. Political interest groups try to exclude cultural institutions from national recovery funding. Congress debates significant changes to tax statutes on charitable giving, the full ramifications of which are ominously unclear.

Following up its first White Paper on Museums in 2007 – a time when many institutions were wondering how best to expand – DMD sat down for a conversation with Stephen Rustow, Principal of SRA/Museoplan, to discuss what museums should be doing to weather the storm.

The era of the “starchitect” may have faded. Today, Stephen argues, the focus should be on smarter design and flexibility with an emphasis on better use of existing space for a broader audience. Prior, the mantra “if we build it they will come” echoed across the cultural landscape. Today’s museum management, curators and marketers should repeat “if we are smart with our space, they will come.” This brings us to our “Three A’s”: Assets, Audiences and Alliances.

1.

Assets

Evaluate each of the museum's major assets with a view to increasing use and finding greater efficiencies.

This starts with the space itself: every part of the museum's physical structure should be evaluated for ways to increase intensity of use and to create synergies. Ask how space can be used differently; are there, for example, lost circulation or reception areas that could become small retail points or temporary exhibition galleries? Many museums have outdoor spaces or roof terraces that are rarely used. Could the museum 'spill out into the street' on exceptional occasions? Are there spaces that can be 'doubled up' by varying several uses over time?

The same approach should be brought to human resources: rather than looking for reductions and redundancies, ask how staff can be encouraged to do more and to explore new initiatives, even outside of their traditional expertise or job description. Define the downturn as a challenge that allows staff to find new ways to contribute to the overall mission of the museum.

Finally, rethink strategies for exhibiting collections: how can works be shown anew? Themed exhibitions that display known works from a different vantage point cost relatively little and permit curators to explore alternate ways of presenting the collection. Small dossier shows built around one or two pieces from the collection with supporting and archival material can re-introduce well-known works in a new light.

Build on Assets

PERSONNEL:
Explore new initiatives outside job expertise.

COLLECTIONS:
Rethink strategies for exhibiting collections.

SPACE:
Increase depth of use.

2.

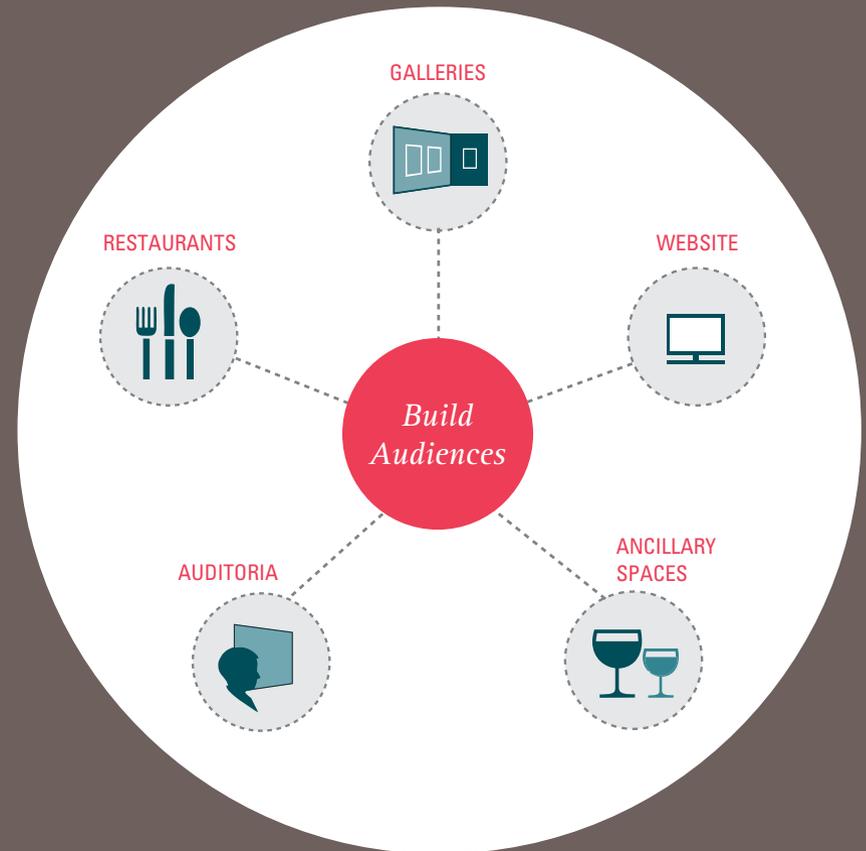


Secure existing audiences and build new ones.

Although tourism is down, museums can emerge from recessions with stronger overall attendance; local populations travel less and often seek cultural diversions at home. This is the moment to reach an audience that has not yet adopted the museum as a place to go on a regular basis. Position the museum as a 'cultural space' that targeted audiences check out monthly or even weekly. Beyond exhibitions, the focus should be on programming, events and support services that attract new users.

One successful strategy is to adapt the concept of a 'season,' a sequence of special events promoted as an interrelated series that lasts a limited time but recurs year after year. The series encourages return visits and automatically suggests 'renewal' from one season to the next. Creating a thematic link to works in the collections promotes a kind of exclusivity between the series events and the museum's traditional mission.

The other audience segment to build is those who find the museum via its website. The standard, informational use of the website should be supplemented by 'web-only' features that project the museum's presence online in ways that compliment the 'bricks and mortar' location. For relatively little investment a regular stream of web-events can be created – virtual visits, discussions with artists or curators, educational programs and even participatory events: a design competition to accompany an architecture show for example, or a hypertext anthology that gives access to the research behind an exhibition. The objective is three-fold: to offer a richer experience to those who already come to the museum; to capture the attention of an audience who will find the door on-line before they find it 'on the street'; and finally, to make the on-line address its own special destination and resource.



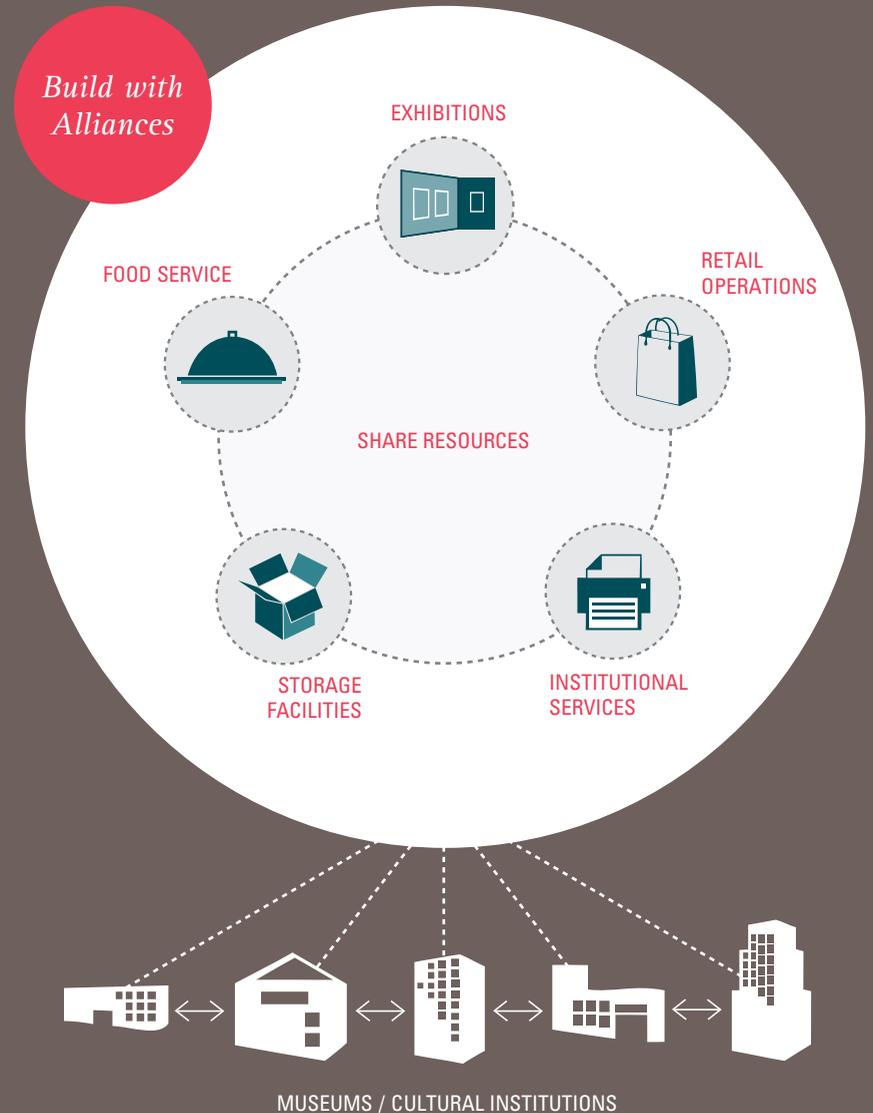
3.

Alliances

Form strategic alliances with other institutions to share services, resources and even collections.

Most museums try to do 'everything', maintaining their own exhibition and event schedules, their own food service and retail operations, and their own institutional service and support uses, from library and reference collections to conservation and storage facilities. Since many small- and mid-size institutions have relatively similar needs, each individual museum essentially creates and maintains services that are duplicated by others; when considered collectively there is a substantial underutilization of resources. Focus on which services and resources might be shared with neighboring institutions. Look for economies of scale that can be achieved by grouping and sharing the costs of certain recurring services (e.g. printing, website maintenance, even cleaning services for physical plant).

Museums should also consider alliances with other cultural organizations, especially performing groups, as museums have an abundance of what performance groups need most: space. Consider the museum as a venue, which can be given over to performances. Obvious events include film series, concerts, spoken word, theatrical and dance presentations. There may well be synergies between the museum's collections and the kinds of performances that can be staged so that the alliance reinforces the identity of both institutions. At the same time, such selective partnerships and 'hybridization' allow the museum to distinguish itself from others by the exclusivity of the alliances it makes.



And...

Become green(er).

This is the ideal moment for museums to (re)evaluate how they can save energy and incorporate green principles in their daily operations. Opportunities run the gamut of the museum's services: from supplies to trash-handling, fabricating exhibitions or remodeling interiors. The best strategy is to examine the use and reuse of materials over time, to look seriously at internal recycling and to evaluate all systems in terms of life-cycle costs. Relatively small new investments may produce large long-term savings, for example, by creating or purchasing reusable exhibition and display systems rather than rebuilding anew for each installation. Be(com)ing green also brings secondary benefits in positioning the museum as an institutional leader and a good community citizen.

Finally, if one has the resources, this is an excellent time to build: construction and capital costs are low and competition for what work exists is very intense, assuring both favorable pricing and scheduling of work.

Credits

SRA CONSULTANCY

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SRA/Museoplan is a specialized, multidisciplinary consulting practice working with museums, private collectors, and architects to plan, program and design the presentation of cultural collections. SRA/Museoplan offers a broad range of services – needs analysis, programming, project review, gallery planning and exhibition design – both for institutions planning to expand and those that seek to use their existing facilities more effectively and efficiently.

For more information, please consult our web-site at www.museoplan.com

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