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# Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

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Leslie Bedford

If you came of age working in a children's museum, as I did, then you have probably wondered for years if the "grown-up" museums, art and history in particular, would ever see the value and necessity of becoming visitor-centered. It often seemed it would never happen. And then it did.

In their excellent book, *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*, Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson reveal how several established institutions became committed to putting people, play, and community on equal, if not superior, footing with objects, the academy, and the connoisseur. Both the transformation and the book about it are cause for celebration. You should order a copy and immediately add it to your professional bookshelf.

However, before unpacking the authors' thoughtful analyses and engaging case studies, I should acknowledge that for some, especially longtime readers of *Exhibition*, the book may not initially be a revelation. Even if you work in a place that doesn't support it sufficiently, you are likely to be familiar with visitor-centered interpretation. You know it requires diligent visitor studies and ongoing evaluation; that objects don't "speak" without being given a voice and life, what the authors call "interpretive hooks" or "visual Velcro"; that the average person feels intimidated in art museums; that people visit museums for many different reasons, and many other important discoveries from years of museum panels, publications, and practice.

You are also likely to know, particularly if your museum values the new model, that visitor-centered interpretive methods require visitor-centered organizational models and processes. In other words, the same old curator-lead/designer-assigned/educator-tacked-on-at-the-end system won't cut it. And the role of leadership is critical. Therefore, if this is familiar territory, you may find yourself asking – while reading this lively book – "So, what else is new?" But while your professional canon and toolkit may already incorporate these truths, you will still love the book's marvelous case studies. They make your prior knowledge concrete and vivid and inspiring. In other words, this book was written for all museum professionals, regardless of experience.

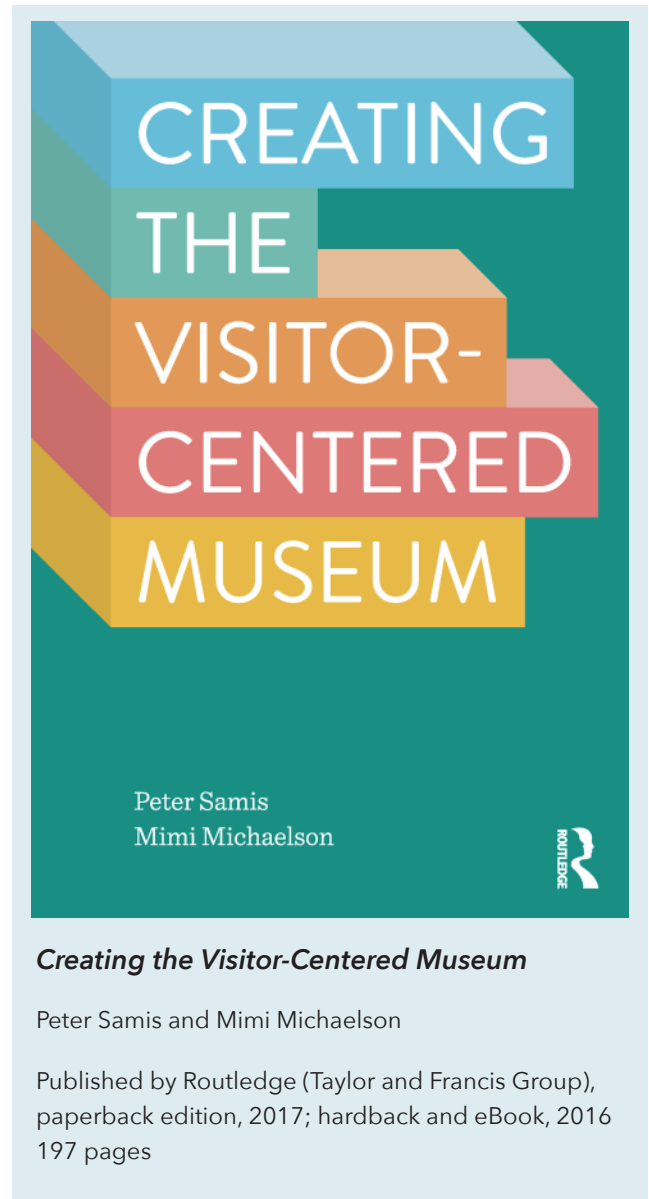
The book's chapters are short and plentifully illustrated with excellent photographs, charts, and well-chosen quotes from the various informants. Each ends with a few pithy and useful "Key Takeaways." The book thus models the authors' principles of visitor- (or in this case, "reader-") centeredness. Unblemished by jargon, it seamlessly blends theory and practice and reflects the authors' several years of intensive research and reflection.

In sum, I applaud Peter Samis, the associate curator of interpretation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and educator and consultant Dr. Mimi Michaelson – with the support of the enlightened Samuel H. Kress Foundation – for tackling the glorious but often cautious world of art and history

museums. They have brought to life 10 quite different institutions to illustrate their central premise that there are infinite and infinitely creative ways of being a visitor-centered museum.

What exactly does “visitor centered,” this “new audience-centered paradigm,” mean and look like? Samis and Michaelson approach the question from two perspectives. The first is via a discussion of core commonalities of practice: formative visitor research, varied forms of integrated gallery interpretation, community connection, a visitor-centered mission, strong leadership in service of that mission, and new forms of teamwork. These are the building blocks that have evolved over time. A second, more complex definitional lens comes from the case studies. They narrate the myriad paths 10 different institutions have taken in implementing these critical practices: City Museum (St. Louis); Ruhr Museum (Essen, Germany); Minnesota History Center (St. Paul); Detroit Institute of Arts; Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (Glasgow, Scotland); Denver Art Museum; Columbus Museum of Art; Oakland Museum of California; Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, Netherlands); and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. Some have strong collections, others none at all; together they illustrate different philosophic approaches to engaging with the public.

These 10 were selected from among a larger group of institutions nominated by museum professionals as models of “innovative visitor-centered practice.” The list was narrowed down to those which had already done substantial evaluations in their galleries. These in turn





were visited and core staff interviewed using a research-based protocol. Needless to say, there are many other institutions that deserve to be included but were not. Most of the museums in this book are either art museums or museums with significant art holdings. Given the backgrounds of the authors and the art-centered mission of the Kress Foundation, this focus makes sense. But the authors also say that they “prioritized art museums because historically they have been underachievers in this area, and we wanted to see what examples those art museums that have taken this path could provide.”

The case studies are the heart of the book and make for compelling reading. Each tells a story, often an emotional one, of how change can happen – sudden insights, conflict, loss, courage, self-doubt, empathy, and even death. They offer an inexhaustible menu of innovative and proven ideas both in interpretation and, equally importantly, in process: the visitor panels that shaped exhibition decisions at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the community advisory groups Oakland used to connect with their diverse city; the theatricality of Minnesota’s installations developed by developer, rather than curator-led teams; the multiple interpretive strategies brainstormed, tried, evaluated and revised in the galleries of the Denver and Columbus art museums; the ways in which Kelvingrove disciplined itself to tell “the most interesting stories about the most interesting objects” in order to make them accessible to every single member of the public. The reader finds herself eager to hit the road and visit each one.

We also learn about transformative leadership. Clearly, for Samis and Michaelson, the directors at each of these institutions are the key players and they are quoted at length. I am a bit on the fence about this. Not because I doubt the centrality or brilliance of these directors – several of whom I know and admire enormously – but because I believe it is more complicated than that. There are indeed institutions where financial or social crises prompted rapid and fundamental change. But in most cases, such transformation builds on the work of earlier directors and other core staff and consultants whose projects helped define the new values, and also on years of cultivating community relationships and listening to people and taking them seriously.

In many cases, Samis and Michaelson, and the leaders they interview, acknowledge this nuanced and incremental reality directly. But the overall impression, for me anyway, was of a preference for “heroic” rather than “collaborative” models of leadership, which makes me uneasy. Certainly, any of these professionals would agree that for visitor-centered practice to thrive and endure, every member of the museum has to have bought into the new model, has to have been systematically and frequently trained in myriad ways of making visitors feel welcome, and has to be empowered to speak up when old habits begin to creep back in. It would be interesting to learn how these institutions did bring staff along – not the curators who either changed or left – but the front line, gift shop, docents, marketing, and development staff.



One might argue that the changes Samis and Michaelson describe don't go far enough, especially today when museums are being challenged – and not for the first time – to not only diversify staffing, boards and exhibition content, but to undertake more radical steps such as “decolonizing” their collections. Somewhere in between visitor-centered practice and tackling institutional racism might be a book like *Magnetic: The Art and Science of Engagement*, which also uses case studies to talk about institutional change. But it addresses concepts and models of change that go beyond what happens inside the doors to highlight an institution's place in its community, its civic value and sustainability.

*Creating a Visitor-Centered Museum* is after something equally critical and certainly more achievable. In my opinion, if they are to succeed, the comprehensive changes being discussed throughout the field depend on this first step of visitor-centered interpretation. For instance, Samis and Michaelson note that many art museums, hoping to engage visitors, turn automatically to technologies like audio tours or websites. And then they discover that visitors don't use them. The truth is that we are not in charge; they, the visitors, are. And listening to and respecting “them” should be central to not only the practice but also the training of any museum professional and sadly, as Samis and Michaelson point out, it is not.

Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson employ eloquence and passion to paint the landscape of museums, coloring in many of the

most important details, and offering myriad roadmaps and visions for the future. Now it is our task to take up their challenge and do what we have been advocating for so long – finally bring our institutions into the 21st century.

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