



Museum-building as Nation-building

by Richard Faron

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There's a lot of talk about how museums serve communities. But "communities" are not just "neighborhoods," districts drawn on a map. Community is mapped on the mind, a set of common interests and perspectives. Museums serve as focal points for those interests—external interest in topic or discipline, of course, but also internal interests in identity, self-worth, and self-actualization.

Museum programs serve communities by helping their members realize these goals. But a new age for museums may emerge as various political bodies, commercial ventures and cultural communities around the world recognize that the act of museum building itself can be a catalyst for driving mutual interest and cooperation. Governments and ordinary citizens alike will learn that museum-building can excite, gather and focus populations. Building efforts become a lens through which communities can consolidate knowledge, cultural energy and material wealth in order to achieve a common agenda.

Museum-building can offer everyone in a community the chance for collaboration. By joining together, distant and even disparate groups may discover common ground likely to urge conversations, potential exchanges of ideas, or even a pooling of resources. The activity surrounding a museum-building project can lead to unexpected outcomes, creating a model of cooperation applicable to other, non-museum-based endeavors.

Therefore it seems reasonable to speculate that at some point in the near future, citizens around the world will start to weigh the merits of museum-building. Such efforts are most likely to start gelling at the most local level, for that is where the needs are greatest, and the impact can be greatest as well. Advocates must recognize that museums are one of the few remaining enterprises with the power to provide even the most fragile groups a strong sense of worth and permanence. Communities must take the initiative to either develop and build, or to restore and renew, their own museum resources.

As noted, communities are not just neighborhoods. But every museum is physically located somewhere. To accomplish anything at all, we must all "act locally." But, to avoid becoming irrelevant backwaters—or, worse, symbols of community splintering and Balkanization—we must also "think globally." Advances in communication technology, and the perspective shifts they engender, compel museums to weave their own community—a network of data points uniting those distinct entities into a national whole.

Iraq: An Imaginary Case Study—Museums Jumpstart the Future

As Iraq embraces self-rule, it also confronts reconstruction and with it the beginning of an arduous journey that will lead one day to a full recovery and sustainable self-determined presence. With the passing of time, unrest will give way to ever-greater self assurance and a shift in approach, fueling a monumental push for fulfillment that will define the near—and long-term future of the nation. There are many precedents for this pattern of nation-building and renewal, including the almost overnight transformation of a former theater war, Vietnam.

Less than 30 years after the US military left Vietnam, the country has emerged as an economic player and one of the most successful cultural heritage and eco-tourist markets in all of Asia. One travel-



based web site currently lists 16 separate museums of archaeology alone in the country. While not yet a jet setting "hot spot," Vietnam is most certainly a growing attraction on the world cultural tourism market. It now appears that while postwar development in Vietnam was in part top down, it was also pushed from the bottom up. Street-level nation-building helped to forge the new Vietnam, pumped by commercial ventures that recognized the value of "cultural heritage." At the same time, agencies like UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) served in Vietnam as a temporary form for infrastructure, and as coordinator for projects including building museums, cultural heritage sites and natural parks.

Therefore, if the search for improvement and empowerment in Iraq is to be comprehensive, then it must include an integrated effort to introduce new opportunities for reconnecting with the nation's unique and valuable natural heritage and cultural resources. These opportunities would include new outlets for informal learning, especially within environments like museums. NGOs recognize this facet of recovery, and were already actively engaged in its pursuit even while the war was still underway last year. UNESCO has organized active planning in Iraq that will ultimately include museum-building projects. The Assistant Director General for Culture for UNESCO writes,

"To this purpose, international organizations, museums, and private institutions are invited to contribute to building a long-term educational programme, through preparing workshops for Iraqi (museum) professionals in order to provide for an exchange of expertise and to establish research networks. UNESCO is presently assisting the Iraqi authorities to empower the National Heritage Institute in Baghdad to create resources and professional profiles to assist Iraqi museums and cultural institutions over the next few years. Indeed the vision of modern museums is changing very quickly and marketing, public relations, fundraising, institutional advancement and organization of special events need to be integrated into an institutional framework along with a long term educational programme."

UNESCO appears to acknowledge that the scope and impact of museum-building reaches far beyond the merely traditional assurances for providing for solid venues and secure storage. There is a clear implication, and even a hint

at support, for a museum-building model that creates the means for museums to establish relationships that connect them directly with citizens and the marketplace, and thus play a direct role in nation-building.

The argument is that museums can provide a fragile Iraqi state with a spiritual and secular center by helping to restore a sense of confidence and a feeling of companionship within the extended global neighborhood. A restored museum-building program will nurture the exact forms of inspiration and strength that are needed to sustain the Iraqi people over the long term, stimulating and driving a massive renewal project forward for generations to come.

Museum planning and development must be mainstreamed and considered essential. Therefore funding must be secured concurrently with all other aspects of budget appropriations for reconstruction in Iraq. By instituting a cultural identity and educational development program for museum renewal in Iraq, the United States can, in collaboration with other nations and organizations, support the reintroduction of an educational sanctuary, which would convey the richness and depth of the story of the "cradle of civilization". The birth of Mesopotamian (and, by extension, Western) civilization is a treasured narrative which can bind Iraq together internally and in friendship with the rest of the free world. It is a narrative that represents a point of intersection for all humanity, a way and a means for constructing a shared cultural history, one that emphasizes the greatness of all humankind.

A special note of interest to this subject appeared in a recently published article by Ann Hitchcock of the National Park Service in *Museum News* (DATE). The article carefully reported on six lessons learned from the aftermath of museum looting and destruction in Baghdad. While not the focus or central intent of her article, Lesson 5 confirms the absolute value of developing museums as part of a comprehensive and inclusive plan. Hitchcock writes,

"Citizens who have a sense of pride and ownership in a museum, library or archaeological site are more likely to protect it than attack it. Even if they do not visit the museums or read the books, they may appreciate its role in the community and the cultural or natural heritage that it preserves."

Although it suffers from being too parental, the analysis is nevertheless on target. "Buy-in" is NOT an impulse exclusive to the people and markets of the US and Europe. Buy-in counts everywhere and with everybody. If people within a community share an understanding for the mission



and value of a local or national museum, then they won't loot it. Rather, they will nurture and grow that venue, and with it the community that surrounds it. It's too simple an answer to suggest that Iraqi museums were attacked solely because the people either associated them with the wrong body politic or even less that they didn't appreciate their "civilizing" value. What is more likely—and, in fact, honestly worse—is that the people found that they could make no claim of kinship or emotional affinity with the museums and therefore could assess no value.

Sgt. Thomas Ciota recently completed a yearlong tour in Iraq performing a variety of duties including operations intended to inhibit the flow of cultural artifacts out of country. During a checkpoint operation 65 Miles South of Baghdad in 2003, U.S. Military Police searched a vehicle driven by three (3) Iraqi citizens. Hidden in the trunk were cuneiform tablets, various statues and ancient ceramic seals. One member of the group admitted that they were indeed transporting artifacts to a specific market near the Syrian Border in order to sell them for cash.

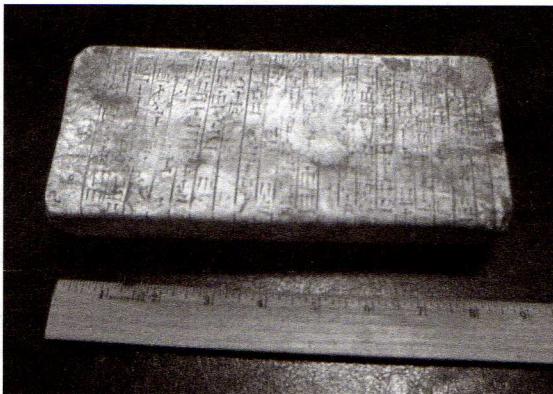
Investigations by various agencies since the war began have suggested that many politically disparate groups have been paid to obtain artifacts from archaeological sites. Whether known or unknown to the men detained by Sgt. Ciota these men were positioned as the first step in a long operational network designed to ferry objects out of the country.

While culture is generally a unifying influence filling out and defining day to day life, cultural programming will yield to the numbing pressure and severe change of a life ravaged by war. Long standing traditions that serve to protect cultural artifacts or that keep separate the sacred from the profane are in fact often pushed aside or discarded when people are faced with simple but powerful needs like hunger.

The true perpetrators in Iraq and elsewhere are in fact anonymous traffickers in antiquities who feed at the top of a smuggling food chain from far, far away. Sophisticated and ruthlessly organized these top-level directors seem quite prepared to take advantage of local peoples disrupted by the circumstances of war and loss. This pattern suggests that attempts at real Museum Building must therefore be undertaken in parallel or in sync with nation building and that these efforts must be socially as well as economically comprehensive.

The artifacts (pictured here) and recovered at that checkpoint were turned over to Military Authorities in the Coalition Provision Authority in Baghdad. The Officers that Sgt. Ciota turned the items over to were Army Reservists on Active duty. In the Civilian life they were conveniently and

fortunately professors from stateside universities. One, an Army Reserve Colonel, became truly excited upon examining the Cuneiform tablet. He remarked that while he was familiar with these artifacts he never imagined that he might one-day hold one, fresh out of the ground in his hand. The inscriptions he suggested to Sgt. Ciota recorded details regarding the collection of taxes.



Both of the officers were extremely happy that the Military Police were able to recover and return these important pieces back to the Iraqi people.

As time passes and as a national museum program matures, new institutions will be seeded throughout the region. They will begin to apply innovative ways of communicating, building on an effort to present the widest range of cultural content to an ever-expanding audience. Museum-quality exhibitions are a powerful tool, and a widely-understood and proven medium of popular expression. The most effective displays can set the tone for even the most diverse communities by delivering fresh and relevant information on a regular basis. Museums can spread content through conversation, extending the impact of the message beyond the walls of the building itself. In doing so, they provide the public not only with knowledge, but also the drive to enjoy and become directly involved in contributing to a new and open-ended social experience.

Epilogue

Museums enrich and inspire our imagination. Museums bind the past with present and by doing so offer us a chance to connect with our future. Museums also remind us that it is our duty to save for succeeding generations some form of, and perhaps appreciation for, our artistic, cultural and scientific heritage. This heritage is the foundation of our identities—as individuals, as communities, as nations. It is the vital work of museums to validate these communities—the individuals they comprise, and the nations they compose—and ensure that they are appreciated, understood, and persevered every bit as well as the objects they happen to produce.