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## Review: *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* by Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson

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**Keywords** visitor-centered; museums; case studies; museum interpretation; organizational transformation

**Abstract** The transformation of art museums from intimidating repositories of collections and curator-driven exhibitions into welcoming and socially relevant centers of visitor input and engagement has been a leading trend within the museum field for several decades. *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* documents relatively recent international success stories within this institutional and cultural shift. Having undertaken a multi-year study of American and European art museums recognized by their peers as visitor-centered, authors Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson, with the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, present ten clearly articulated case studies. The authors conclude that successful visitor-centered transformation is situational and occurs along a continuum of innovative approaches to connecting with audiences that promote immersion, cognitive impact, inclusivity, and social relevancy. Their research resulted in an unexpected discovery; such innovation often necessitates dynamic leadership and difficult organizational change. Despite the potentially biased case study selection process and lengthy timeframe between research and publication, *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* provides a relevant historical guide and source of inspiration for its intended audience: curatorial, museum education, and museum studies students and current practitioners seeking to sustain the field.

Samis, Peter, and Mimi Michaelson. *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*. New York: Routledge, 2017. (ISBN 978-1629581910)

**About the Author** Diane VanderBeke Mager holds a Master of Science in Education from Bank Street Graduate School of Education in the field of Leadership in Museum Education, and a Master of Decorative Art History from Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum/Parsons The New School for Design. She is a Program Presenter at Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research and has previously worked as an educator at Cranbrook Art Museum and Edsel & Eleanor Ford House. Her research interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century design history and museum education, and she enjoys writing essays, short stories, and children's historic fiction.

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In 2011, authors Peter Samis, Associate Curator of Interpretation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Mimi Michaelson, a museum consultant and social science researcher, began a study of American and European art museums recognized by their peers as visitor-centered – committed to bridging the gap between curatorial scholarship and community relevance. With the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the authors queried fifty colleagues for nominations; visited twenty museums; and conducted thirty-two, one-day interviews with eleven directors, seven curators, seven educator-interpretive

specialists, and seven cross-departmental teams to determine what it really means to be a visitor-centered museum.

Samis and Michaelson adopted a peer-to-peer research approach. While their text does not address the potential for bias during the nominating and selection process, it does recognize the irony of labeling museums as leaders in visitor-centered practice without actually interviewing the visitors in those institutions. Unable to conduct their own on-site visitor research during single-day visits, they gave preference to museums that already had extensive evaluation data. Ultimately, they selected ten institutions to feature in detailed case studies, placing them along a continuum of visitor-centered approaches, including physical, immersive, emotive, cognitive + co-creative, and meta-cognitive (fig. 1).

Figure 1:

*Table 14.1* Continuum of Approaches to Connecting with Visitors

VISITOR-CENTERED MUSEUMS: A CONTINUUM OF APPROACHES						
.....						.....
City Museum	Ruhr Museum	Minnesota History Ctr	Detroit Institute of Arts Kelvingrove Gallery	Denver Art Museum Columbus Art Museum Oakland Museum of CA	Van Abbe Museum	MCA Denver
PHYSICAL	IMMERSIVE	EMOTIVE	COGNITIVE +	CO-CREATIVE	META-COGNITIVE	

The authors consistently cite the museum professionals they interviewed, while including additional opinions from notable leaders in the fields of museum evaluation, interpretation, and education. They broadly define the visitor-centered approach as making museum collections and programs accessible and relevant to new and existing audiences, regardless of visitor age or background, and whether novice, experienced, or expert. Through case studies, Samis and Michaelson skillfully present successful museum transformations toward this visitor-centered approach. They unexpectedly discover that adopting a visitor-centered practice requires strong leaders and innovative, sometimes difficult organizational changes. “Key Takeaways” are listed at the end of each chapter, providing convenient points of reference.

Introductory chapters address the debate surrounding the transformation of art museums into visitor-centered institutions. Over the past few decades, art museums have lagged behind more responsive, audience-friendly science and history museums. Samis and Michaelson attribute this lag to turf wars between art curators and museum educators and to institutional fear of “dumbing down” didactic materials to engage audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience. The authors side with art museums that learned to work collaboratively and adopted visitor-centered missions, seeking to make collections and exhibitions accessible and socially relevant by reducing visitor anxiety and providing

interpretive hooks without relying upon technological gimmicks – what Samis calls “Visual Velcro.”

Detailed case studies begin with Denver Art Museum, a cognitive + co-creative collections-based institution at the center of the authors’ continuum. A pioneer in the field for over thirty years, this museum adopted a visitor-centered mission and introduced formative and summative visitor evaluation, experimental in-gallery activities, and innovative pairings of curators with “master teachers.” These transformative techniques continue to prepare art museums for twenty-first century audiences that increasingly see themselves as active participants in their learning process.

Having set the stage, Samis and Michaelson turn to the left of their continuum with three play-based, immersive, and emotive museums for multi-generational audiences. City Museum is a singular artist and founder’s play space that pushes the boundaries of physical experience while celebrating its connection with the St. Louis community. Ruhr Museum represents a forceful director’s sense of spectacle and adaptive reuse of a coal washing plant in Essen, Germany. It highlights local history, design aesthetics, and sensory and emotional engagement, bordering at times on information overload and disengagement. Minnesota History Center, a destination experience and repository of oral histories and collections, void of curators and docents, prioritizes stories and visitor conversations over objects.

The authors then group three traditional, cognitive + co-creative collections-based museums with strong leaders, recent reinstallations, and diverse audiences, all in non-tourist destination cities and seeking repeat visitors. The Detroit Institute of Arts focuses on helping visitors find personal meaning in art. The museum forms cross-discipline exhibition teams; relies upon outside consultants, evaluators, and visitor panels; and develops multiple in-gallery interpretive methods. The Oakland Museum of California engages Experience Developers, curators, evaluators, and outside consultants eager to prototype and test ideas in the galleries and utilize participatory technology to create a welcoming town square for its audiences. The Columbus Museum of Art is a community living room fulfilling its bold mission to provide “great experiences with great art for everyone.” Through teamwork, constant informal visitor evaluation, and groundbreaking in-gallery “connectors,” the museum sets industry standards of exhibition design and visitor learning outcomes including increased critical thinking, close observation, conversation, collaboration, experimentation, personal relevance, and awareness.

Scotland’s Kelvingrove Museum, operated by *Glasgow Life*, is another traditional, cognitive + co-creative collections-based institution at the center of the continuum, but the authors set it apart for its unique social mission to inspire learning and wellness through culture. It presents “the most interesting stories about the most interesting objects,” making collections available to all via Open Museum kits and offsite Open Storage. The museum collaborates with the community, serving the disenfranchised, prioritizing families, and intentionally leaving out the needs of experienced or expert gallery visitors, often to their dismay.



The final two museums fall to the far right on the authors' continuum. Metacognitive and radical, these visitor-centered organizations call museum practice into question. The Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, is a proponent of social activism and "radical hospitality," with an Experience Designer who encourages contemporary artist interventions in the galleries. A Live Encounter Tagging System offers visitors the opportunity to add their voices to object labels. The Play Van Abbe option presents visitor paths for the Pilgrim, Tourist, or Flâneur, with accompanying props for guidance and Game Masters employed in the galleries to encourage exploration and enrich museum conversations. The Museum of Contemporary Art Denver is favored with media buzz and a loyal following. Unburdened by a permanent collection, its focus is on social practice. The subversive Director, Chief Animator, Department of Fabrications prioritizes live programming and conversations between high and low culture over the pre-packaged art exhibitions presented in the galleries.

These case studies are intended to provide a current sampling rather than a comprehensive list of successful visitor-centered institutions. They reinforce the widely accepted goal of creating visitor-centered art museums in America and Europe. Some of the selected art museums are in destination cities with tourists; others rely on local, repeat visitors. All of them direct resources toward visitor-centered interpretive approaches, and those with collections give equal value to their objects and audiences. At the time of the study, most of the cited museums were in transition and responsive to structural changes and creative solutions, either recently established or experiencing major gallery reinstallations.

On a macro level, the authors note that each of the institutions selected for an in-depth evaluation share six themes: formative visitor research; multiple in-gallery interpretation methods; connection with the community; a visitor-centered mission; firm leadership with buy-in; and new types of teamwork. These institutions successfully combine visitor evaluation and interpretive approaches to encourage connection with objects and stories, a sense of play, and deep conversation within the galleries. On a micro level, the authors acknowledge that diverse audiences have diverse needs and interests, requiring diverse interpretative techniques. They praise accessible, in-gallery interpretive methods, acknowledging that learning through technology appeals to some visitors while other visitors require human interaction. Object labels are deemed best if kept brief and void of jargon, and interpretive materials are favored if designed to appeal to both novice and expert visitors in order to avoid "dumbing down" content or experiences. A trend toward live programming, which may or may not promote connection with collections, is also recognized.

Minimally, American and European art museums are tasked with object preservation and presentation, and most include some form of education in their missions, but creating truly visitor-centered art museums remains an ongoing process. Samis and Michaelson conclude that successful visitor-centered museum practices are varied, situational, and mission-driven, necessitating time-consuming organizational transformation and structural change. They surmise that there are multiple paths toward creating a visitor-centered museum, with no single best interpretive practice and no optimal leadership or structural model. Instead, they provide examples of visitor-centered institutions that effectively promote formative audience research, creative interpretive programs, multi-disciplinary teams, and dynamic leadership styles.

*Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* fulfills the authors' goals to chart the waters and contribute to the conversation regarding the relevancy and sustainability of art museums as stewards of public culture. The text is well written and organized. The five-year span between research and publication is evident as some programming ideas cited have been discussed and emulated by those in the field, and portions of the text have been previously presented. In spring 2013, the authors shared their initial premise, research, and conclusions in "Making Meaning in Nine Acts," published in *Exhibitionist*, the journal of AAM's professional network NAME. The article's lighter tone paints vivid pictures of eight of the ten case studies codified, substantiated, and refined in this capstone publication.

The book serves to encourage or remind current art museum professionals and to instruct and inspire future generations of practitioners. According to the authors, institutions that undergo successful visitor-centric transformations generally have dynamic leaders and fall into one of three categories: those who hire Experience Designers, those with visitor-centered curators, and those who establish cross-disciplinary teams. By documenting the trend toward ending the dichotomy between curatorial and education practices, this text may contribute to more holistic training for future curators, educators, and evaluators – each conscious of exhibition "Big Ideas," visitor needs, and learning outcomes – resulting in more effective cross-disciplinary teams. Documenting successful mission-driven leaders, those willing to take risks, provoke change, encourage experimentation and collaboration, and allocate funds toward visitor-centered exhibitions and programs, may contribute to the development of resilient future museum leaders. Despite ongoing industry challenges, the authors' case studies and conclusions breed optimism for deeper, relevant engagement and increased connections between staff, audiences, objects, and experiences along a continuum of visitor-centered innovation.

## List of Figures

Figure 1. "Continuum of Approaches to Connecting with Visitors" by Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson published in *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* (2017), Table 14.1, p. 165.

## References

Samis, Peter, and Mimi Michaelson. *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*. New York: Routledge, 2017. (ISBN 978-1629581910)

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