

A Victoria Conversation: Stephen Weil and “Museums Matter”

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At a time when museums seem to be increasingly dominated by the demands of egocentric donors and budget-busted public officials, the fears of procedure-mongering auditors and claims-averse lawyers, and the sensibilities of metrics-numbing managers, sycophantic fund-raisers and over-enthused public relations types, a war-weary but hearty group gathered in Victoria on Vancouver Island to take refuge under the tent of Stephen Weil’s teachings and to “talk museum.”

Stephen E. Weil (1928–2005), a man of disarming physical bearing, bow-tied and of intense brow, was the former deputy director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and an intellectual leader in the museum field through his work at the Smithsonian Institution, his engaging books (such as *Making Museums Matter*), pithy articles for the American Association of Museums, his teaching at the Getty Leadership Institute, and his participation in numerous conferences and workshops around the globe.

This was no monastic gathering, for almost all of the participants are fully involved in navigating the currents swirling about museums these days—involved and implicated in the daily task of designing, running, consulting for and teaching about museums—and have been so for decades. Nor were they all of the same tribe. Some had spent long parts of their lives close to Weil; others were touched by him through his work, writings, and workshops. Among them were his wife Wendy Luke, col-

leagues, students, and museum practitioners inspired by sundry aspects of Weil’s thinking, and others who found overlaps and intersections with his meditations.

As might be expected, there were celebrations of Weil’s life and story—his marvelous quotes, period photographs and renditions, reminiscences—all with the kind of understated dignity that characterized his public persona. Weil’s presence also served to instruct when organizers put the group through its paces with his famous museum dilemmas, once more proving the contention that “museums are good to think with.”

There were also formal presentations analyzing Weil’s work as well as discussion of topics and approaches inspired by or even tangential to it. Peter Linett’s excellent summary, “Reading Weil: A Premature Appreciation” (in this issue) should serve as the basic introduction to Weil for young professionals in years to come. Other contributions presented the kind of thoughtful self-analysis and practical awareness that made Weil such a good commentator and ethnologist of the museum world.

Weil was an advocate for museums that made a difference in society. He saw museums as purposeful social enterprises that could and should pursue their goals rationally and competently. Foremost, he saw them as loci of collections mobilized to fulfill an educational responsibility to the public—as varied as it might be. In that sense, museums were part of an enlightenment impulse to democratize knowledge.

Weil appreciated the intricacies and nuances of museum practice in light of the legal, structural and managerial demands made upon these institutions, and he sought increasing rationalization of procedures and professionalization of its workers. He did more than talk—he also led efforts to raise the level of frank discussion and debate. I don't think Weil saw museum management developing into a science, but he, as a lawyer, did see it evolving sets of commonly accepted principles, rational methods of argument, and a strong body of empirical case practice. The museum business could be a refined and disciplined art.

Weil's work over the decades helped shake a museum world out of its somewhat elitist, internally directed stupor. What intrigues me most is a stance perhaps embodied in his quote, "We are all living in somebody else's dark ages." He had the wonderful ability to look at the museum world from outside itself, and much like an anthropologist, take nothing of its lifeways for granted. The museum's assumptions, values, goals—indeed its very lexicon with its terms and definitions—may be bunk. Weil was ready to admit that possibility. He was willing to challenge his own beloved institution and his colleagues by examining how the museum was seen by others. Indeed, he reveled in doing so. This gained him a toehold to say that from the corporate perspective we needed to be more rational, more evaluative, more convincing; from the public perspective to be more forthcoming and responsible, and so on. Simply, he saw that the museum could be a better, stronger force for society than it was.

If the offerings of the participants at the conference provided a report card of sorts on how museums are doing in terms of the high hopes Weil set out for them, the results were mixed. All sorts of externalities

bear on the museum, so that while headway might be made, control of the institution writ large is quite diffuse. In some cases, museums have retreated from Weilian challenges, becoming absorbed in their own function rather than social purpose. Assessment is increasingly made in terms of finances and the balance sheet—not impact or societal value. Irrationalities of support and management abound.

Yet there were also reports of health and vitality. On the international scene particularly, societies lacking a museum tradition have been finding great utility in creating one. Museums seem to be identifying with an intent—in some cases to project national identity—but also to serve numerous communities at local levels. I saw some of this at a conference only a few months earlier in Thailand, where some 800 new museums are coming into being—not through fiat of the state, but due to local Buddhist temples, which have sought the rationalization of their collections and the realization of community service functions. I'm not sure what Weil would have made of this, but to find that an institution such as a museum had a usefulness in such a context would surely point to its vitality and its unfolding richness.

Similarly, at the conference, there was some discussion of the impact of new international cultural treaties on museums around the world. UNESCO's 2003 International Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, now ratified by 68 nations, was the subject of the triennial meeting of ICOM (International Council of Museums) in Seoul. Under that treaty, museums, if they seek it, may take on increased funding and legal responsibility for the preservation of living cultural heritage within their societies and may also assume large roles in consulting

with communities and cultural exemplars represented in their collections. This could put some of Weil's ruminations about the legal functions, educational roles and public purposes of museums into hyper-drive.

The museum world is still, happily, multi-paradigmatic in design and purpose, as Weil would appreciate. Yet, this graying gathering of former young Turks (many of whose passions were given shape by Weil's disciplined voice) offered perhaps a sense that the time has come for a fuller, more pronounced and vigorous statement of what museums stand for. Despite

the conference's polite but edgy conversations, we do not yet have that statement. I do not know how and from whence such a statement will come and what form of institutional practice will be required—but I do know that Stephen Weil's contributions and inspirations can play a strong role in moving museums forward in the twenty-first century.

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