

## YES, WE CAN – THE AMERICAN WAY

### Art and Museum Libraries in Transition – Some Survival Strategies

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Let me begin by thanking you for the invitation to speak to you here. I had the pleasure of meeting some of you in 2003 in Dresden, when I gave a talk on “doing more with less” in art and museum libraries. In the intervening six years, this theme has continued as a *leitmotiv*, certainly in art and museum libraries, and indeed in libraries of all kinds. It has taken on a new and more urgent meaning. Not only are libraries having to do more with less, they are especially vulnerable to being downsized, absorbed, or even eliminated as a result of financial pressures, reorganizations, and/or technology-based changes in management, and patron research behaviors.

In this presentation I will report on a variety of strategies that a number of art and museum libraries are engaged in to stay relevant and survive during these particularly challenging times. I should add that what I have to report from the USA is not new, and that I have learned from the presentations earlier today that you are already quite aware of much of what I want to convey. The institutions represented were not chosen; they chose themselves, as a self-selected sample of organizations based on participation in a study tour of German libraries, which took place last week under the inspired leadership of Evelin Morgenstern. This

presentation is an attempt to contribute some of our experiences and ideas in exchange for support given us by the Initiativefortbildung fur Wissenschaftliche Spezialbibliotheken und Verwandte Einrichtungen and the Stiftung Checkpoint Charlie.

The 11 participants in the study tour were asked to contribute a short paper on the following: library strategies for meeting the challenges of planning, reorganization, new management structures, development of strategies undertaken to address new technologies, patron needs, sustainability issues, and changing research behaviors.

They came from a variety of institutions, representing five art museum libraries, four college or university libraries, one art and design school library and one major urban public library. Here is the distribution and the identity of the libraries represented:

- Art Gallery of Ontario (Karen McKenzie, Chief Librarian)
- Art Institute of Chicago (Amy Ballmer, currently Reference Librarian at the City University of New York Graduate Center)
- Frick Art Reference Library (Deborah Kempe, Chief of Collections Management and Access)
- Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens (Kristen Regina, Chief Art Librarian)
- Metropolitan Museum of Art Libraries (Linda Seckelson, Principal Reader Services Librarian)
- The Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University (Debbie Verhoff, Head Librarian)
- Bryn Mawr College (Camilla MacKay, Head, Carpenter Library and Visual Resources)
- Haskell Indian Nations University (Marilyn Russell, Library Director)
- Indiana University Libraries, Bloomington Campus (Tony White, Head, Fine Arts Library)
- Yale Center for British Art at Yale University (Ian McDermott, Assistant Librarian, Reference Library and Archives)

- New York Public Library, Art and Architecture Division (Clayton Kirking, Chief, Art Information Resources)

While each one of the 11 libraries is substantially challenged by the current financial situation and by larger issues, their responses and strategies very much reflect their institutional culture and history. In addition, the responses grouped themselves somewhat according to the type of institution. For example, the three libraries associated with large research universities and the art and design school were the most “evolved” in terms of multifaceted strategies for change and adaptation. The art museum libraries were less so.

This is in no way a value-judgment, but a reflection of economic realities and circumstances. Art libraries in large universities benefit from the role libraries occupy in general, and across disciplines in the large university context. Museum libraries do not have the large research university apparatus as an organizational context in which to develop and thrive.

But before we discuss the survival strategies specifically, let me take a moment to review “the situation” they are reacting to. The financial downturn is a concrete fact of life, resulting in reduced budgets, and often reduced staff. That is the most recent manifestation of the current situation, which also involves much more abstract developments that have been in the making for quite some time and are familiar to all of us. Namely, the existence of Information in electronic form, and the internet – those phenomena that have made so much possible - are also at the heart of changing user behavior that is challenging the traditional role of the library. User expectations have changed. Users expect that

information will be free or inexpensive, convenient, always available from anywhere, interactive and able to be manipulated. Despite these developments, libraries must remain determined to have a role as information mentor, educating their constituencies to employ critical and evaluative skills as they use the information they receive both in and outside libraries.

The changing role of libraries has already resulted in dramatic shifts. For some time already, we have observed the trend toward library consolidation within institutions. I am referring to the dissolution of departmental or satellite libraries. This has been going on, particularly in university settings where decentralization was most common, for some years already. A recent example was the near demise of the Arts Library at UCLA, which was slated to be absorbed until a great national furor over how the matter was handled at least temporarily left it in place.

But the sustainability challenges are much more dire for small institutions. The Museum of American Folk Art had to effectively dissolve its library. The collections are in storage, and the library staff was dismissed. The future of the American Craft Council's unique collections documenting the post World War II American craft movement is in question as the organization is forced to move, and the library may also be moth-balled. Small, independent library operations like these are particularly vulnerable, unless their stewards have the foresight and opportunity to forestall their dissolution by partnering or collaborating with another institution that could adopt or absorb the collections.

Another trend we are seeing in the United States is the vulnerability of visual resource collections. Several major visual resource operations have recently been merged into other parts of their parent organization, having been eliminated as separate entities, and their staffs have also been let go. While this is a frightening and discouraging development, it is not difficult to understand that centralization is attractive to organizations under financial stress, and visual resources, or image libraries are in special danger because of the increasingly ubiquitous availability of image material through the internet and image databases.

The theme that was the most consistent among the responding libraries was – no surprise – outreach. We all know what this means, but it becomes meaningful only if we think of it in terms of specific applications. Here are examples of the kinds of outreach these libraries are engaged in. Keep in mind that outreach must be considered for all of the library's constituencies, internal and external: for the parent institutions' staff – faculty and students – in a university, for curators and educators in museums, and for both universities and museums, editors, development staff, and others –ALONG WITH OUTSIDE OR VISITING CLIENTS. These were the kinds of activities or programs cited

- Classroom based or group instruction on use of library and other resources; this involves teaching research and searching skills as well as how to interpret and evaluate the information (critical evaluation skills)
- Individualized consultations/instruction, with or without appointment
- Office visits or "housecalls" to help faculty, students or curators at "point of need"
- Lectures, programs, such as book discussions, talks about special collections, etc.

- Library orientations
- Advocacy program, such as “Friends of the Library” with planned events and other networking, development and marketing activities
- “Embedded librarian” program; a librarian becomes part of an academic department, physically, with an office and is available as a resource to the faculty and students; or, a librarian attends all sessions of a course and serves as a library liaison for the professor and the students, working closely with the professor on focused library instruction based on the course syllabus
- online research guides, or “pathfinders”
- enhancement of library web pages with clearer and more robust information on what the library has and how to use it
- establishment of scholar-in-residence, or visiting scholar programs
- increasing hours of service; this may seem counter-intuitive in libraries where staff reductions have taken place, but if it can be done by re-orienting priorities and tightening up workflows, it is one of the strongest weapons we have to enhance our value by providing more service
- establishing new avenues of reference service (email, chat, instant messaging) and social networking capability

Some of these practices and techniques have already been in place as standard activities for a long time, such as orientations and instruction, research guides and book discussion programs. But some are quite new, such as the concept of the “embedded librarian.” But new or familiar, libraries are rededicating themselves to a new posture of outreach, intensifying their efforts to reach existing and potential constituencies in new ways as part of their strategy to remain relevant.

Some of the libraries hinted at the importance of expanding usership, trying to enhance our relevance by marketing our services to attract more patrons. This applies of course to museum and special libraries in particular, and is more or less appropriate, depending on the culture of each institution, but I believe that this is of key importance. To expand our user communities, we must keep

pace with popular technologies including wireless and the capacity for social networking; we must equip ourselves with the kind of flexible study spaces and access to technology found in academic and large public libraries. Those of us in museum libraries need to catch up, especially if we intend to enhance our value to larger communities of users.

Digitization is of course another obvious method for expanding usership and taking the library to where our users are, providing access to unique materials and protecting valuable and vulnerable items. The importance of digitization does not need to be argued here. We all understand this very well.

Another theme through most of these 11 case studies is organizational restructuring. Many libraries in the United States are being “flattened,” reorganized to be less hierarchical and more team-based or project oriented. Cross-training is an important aspect of this kind of organizational change. Nearly every aspect of librarianship now involves technology and an understanding of electronic catalogs and databases. It is no longer possible to have the compartmentalized organizational structures of the past. The automated ILS, or integrated library system has fostered a different kind of collaboration within the library organization – for example, forcing reference librarians to understand the basics of the MARC format, thereby breaking down the organizational barriers to create a more interactive structure.

Cross-training and project or team approach to the work we do is very sound, adaptive and efficient. It leads to reinvented and streamlined

workflows and provides library staff with welcome variety. Everyone becomes more versatile and as a result, more invested in their work as they learn how everything fits together toward achieving the common goal of providing the best service. This is an important step toward the kind of nimbleness libraries must develop to adapt to changing circumstances.

Emphasis on project or team activity incorporating cross-training has the additional advantage of breaking down the standard unit-based organizational structure we are all accustomed to. While efficient up to a point, unit-based organizations tend to become rigid and territorial, and do not encourage the organic kind of communication that leads to optimal workflows. In reexamining the standard structure, many libraries are also experimenting with different ways of providing reference service. Some are establishing a tiered service model, some are combining service points, joining reference and information service desks with circulation, and all kinds of variations on these themes.

The third theme that emerged from the libraries represented in the group has to do with collaboration. The growing costs for electronic subscriptions, storage, and collection building – militates against the sustainability of libraries continuing to exist independently and in splendid isolation. We recognize that stand-alone libraries, especially small ones, cannot provide their constituencies with the electronic resources now essential to doing research, and may not even be able to sustain the expense to maintain their OPACs. In addition, the

cost of storage for overflowing collections, of maintaining collection development commitments to adequately provide needed materials for increasingly interdisciplinary research and the need to digitize unique material all argue for collaboration and affiliation with other institutions. This is not new, but it is newly important. There are precedents for art museum library collaborations with academic or other research institutions. And there are precedents for college libraries that have shared collection development arrangements that work.

The recent establishment of New York Art Resources Consortium, or NYARC, has created a shared catalog for three of its four members. These are libraries of the Frick, the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum. The fourth member, the libraries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is working with the other three on various collection sharing activities. One goal is to establish a working model for shared collection development – not a new idea, but one with many challenges, many potential rewards, and few successful examples to learn from. Another goal is to work toward a plan for coordinated and possibly shared storage. We don't all have to pay to store the same materials; we need to collaborate on sharing stored materials and discarding duplicates. Our interlibrary loan relationships need to be improved, and the service needs to be fast and reliable. Consortial purchase of expensive online products makes sense, as would a centralized digitization facility. Perhaps we could eventually consolidate basic functions like processing, cataloging and

conservation activities. We are in the early phases of this project as yet, but for small-ish institutions which are not part of a large university, collaboration is clearly the means to ends that simply are not otherwise possible to achieve.

One other theme is worth mentioning. Several of the museum librarians wrote about the need to find ways to educate museum management and raise awareness about the challenges facing libraries and the opportunities available to and through libraries. One way to do this would be to challenge the institutions' working culture and comfortable assumptions about libraries and their collections by raising awareness about rare book holdings as significant museum collections, and presenting the acquisition of significant rare books as events equivalent to the acquisition of art objects. Other strategies could involve establishing closer working relationships with curators for collection development and in providing ongoing training for use of electronic resources, and taking a more active role in developing exhibition related content and services. Museum librarians are the experts, the information mentors, if you will, for training docents and other educators in use of the library's unique tools and should have a "front and center" role to that end. These activities are among the library's most effective marketing devices to enhance recognition and relevance.

I would like to end by highlighting some of the points from the materials provided by my colleagues. Libraries find themselves in a permanent state of flux, requiring enormous flexibility and nimbleness to navigate the challenges

facing us successfully. Libraries which address the needs of art students must recognize their special requirements. These students need their libraries to be collaborators and facilitators for publishing and content creation, interactive and vibrant partners with the students. Sharing collections continues to be of increasing importance. Libraries are no longer defined by their own local collections. Libraries also play a role in providing access to and archives of digital content and images produced by their constituencies. Some large university research libraries are storing huge percentages of their print collections in offsite storage to make room for "research commons" with space for more computers, classrooms, presentation spaces and quiet work areas, scanning stations, printers, - everything necessary to support a digital research environment. The art museum libraries are at the other end of the spectrum. It is not inaccurate to describe the constituencies of many art museum libraries as insular, even change-averse and primarily print-based as compared with many academic art libraries. This has magnified the need for rapid change today.

We have our work cut out for us. "Yes, We Can"

- Reach out
- Expand user communities
- Digitize
- Reorganize, cross train and break down internal barriers
- Collaborate
- Educate our internal and external audiences

I believe that these are the keys to our future and I wish us all luck, Godspeed and lots of fun getting there.

Thank you for your kind attention, and thanks also to my 10 colleagues who provided much of the content of this talk.