

Challenging Choices for Museums

By Dan Martin & Robert “Mac” West

Last month, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) estimated that up to a third of all US museums won't make it out of the Covid-19 crisis alive. Some indeed will fail, but we hope the percentage won't be that high.

Museums in crisis will follow one of several paths: struggle and survive, downsize, merge, and possibly move or close.

For those that close, the buildings will be sold and the collections relocated or sold. Closing is not something most museums ever planned for and may not be simple for them. They need help winding down operations, disposing of buildings, exhibits and collections and unwinding legal obligations. Many steps must be taken and the sequence will matter. Reuse and closure need be well considered or they could be damaging to the museum's discipline (science, art, history, natural history, children etc.) and the community.

Asset sales, reuse zoning regulations, other land use regulations, employment issues, addressing past and recent gifts and funding requests for a soft landing could multiply the organizations and agencies that need to be consulted during the process and make communities critical stakeholders. Bankruptcies are everyday matters for the courts, but the fall of a community institution has greater external issues that impact communities more than business closures.

Generally, the best outcomes will respectfully unwind past relationships and supporters and preserve or move valuable collections. There are significant legal and ethical issues around relocation and the disposal of collections. In many ways it will be more like the probate that follows an individual passing than a bankruptcy.

The actual building closure, sale and reuse will follow a well-worn path. Building re-use has become a societal strategy for generations now. Court houses, train stations, churches, schools, factories, colleges, warehouses, shopping centers, stores and even military bases and ammunitions test sites have seen new life breathed into them over the years. An irony is that some of these reuses were to house museums.

In the best case studies: Museum campuses are respected by preserving the best parts of their design and physical structure on site or moving key elements offsite, the facilities relationship to surrounding buildings and spaces is enhanced, the collections with enduring value have been passed on to new caring and possibly better resourced owners such that some of the educational and research mission for the museum's audiences continue and the new use is economically and environmentally sustainable.

Of course, not all of this is likely to happen, but those stewarding the planning and disposition process should be incentivized to try and have some direction on the value of the respective criteria.

But before choosing to close, many options should be identified and considered. These include: combining with other educational attractions, significant philanthropic infusions of capital, shifting to public ownership (for some this could include school systems), moving under the umbrella of universities (some of which are themselves troubled) and, if the site is especially valuable, relocating to less expensive facilities and selling the current physical campus. Many communities will be fiscally stressed by Covid-19 and not in a position to help.

Today, there is new opportunity in real estate. Some office sites are now vacant as are small city convention centers and they may welcome a new user. There are also many vacant department stores at malls – some of which have been converted to museums in the past. Many malls are changing into mixed use sites and some have successfully made the transformation. The first example we saw of this was more than twenty years ago when a Canadian art gallery (museum) moved to a temporary site at a mall and did better there than it had in the original structure, to which it had to return.

Those that survive will find their world has changed.

They'll need to find, possibly redefine and reconnect with their audiences for in-person as well as new virtual experiences. They may find that they've acquired the collections of museums that went under. Hopefully securing and funding the integration of new collections from closed museums can and will make sense under the umbrella of their existing mission. Presenting, preserving and making the new acquisitions a part of the visitor experience will take some analysis and thought. We might see some results where STEM, history and humanities (including art) museums merge. The STEM to STEAHM (STEM + Arts and Humanities) conversation has been brewing for years now.

The in-person experiences may need to diversify, respond to newly raised social issues and expand, and there may now be new standard safety measures that change the experience. On-site eating, school trips and even shopping may need to be done a little differently. The same goes for any interactives in the visitor experience.

Free virtual tours have really had a moment under Covid-19. Free visits build appreciation and brand but are really marketing and won't pay the bills. This is especially true as for many, household spending is contracting to the bare essentials. It will take a lot of creativity to remain an attractive place to visit in person rather than online.

Museums online have shown us new ways to see our own collections. A shot of a dinosaur from a drone overhead is nothing like what we see from standing below. A 3-D/360-degree view that can be controlled opens a new eye for any large object including sculpture and space. The big change is that the viewer is in far greater control of what they see and how they see it – and many know what to do with this power. For others, the remarkable new ways of seeing collections freed-from-the-floor can become a type of video game or a produced curated experience. Screen and headset experiences developed for offsite can be adapted and offered onsite too – to enhance that experience.

Notably many local PBS stations have gained control over shows they've presented by putting them behind a stream-able paywall in return for the purchase of a membership. Museums can act similarly to offer games, 3-D virtual and produced shows to all for a fee but less for members.

Collaboration with others, like game designers and filmmakers, will develop a more robust digital experience. Existing museum touch screens could be integrated and enhanced through the online experience. Multiple story lines can take participants through the collections differently, creating self-directed narratives that keep you in a collection and offer up-close artifact experiences taking you through the glass cases that are not accessible in an actual visit. Make learning about collections and the stories behind the artifacts a part of the game. Also look for ways to make these activities (whichever they are) relevant to the audiences and the location.

Partnering with well-known cinema and game producers may open doors to financing these endeavors but be sure to step into the virtual world wisely. Sell the access, not the actual artifacts, keep the narrative accurate and within the museum's mission, reputation and market positioning. If you're already well-known and respected, keep it that way. An interesting example here might be London's Natural History Museum and David Attenborough.

Be sure to get a fair percent of the revenues in the trade of access to the museum contents and artifacts for online experiences as these experiences are out of the building, your complete control and admission revenue collection. While these new approaches and revenue opportunities carry a lot of hope the museum should budget for failure also. Making this effort should not only take the museum through covid-19 but also secure a sustainable future

Online experiences are here to stay, with virtual school and travel limitations. Online experiences as marketing may help your museum build visitation by expanding interest and geographic reach.

It also may generate interest in your online store (for those unable to visit) and in your educational experiences for educational systems, including universities. All are under pressure to be video ready if cataclysm strikes again, and will likely convert some classes to all-online.

Running a museum will be tough whether or not you make it through Covid-19. There is hope and opportunity that museums will successfully weather the virus and prosper afterwards.

Let us know if you want to discuss these ideas and if we can help. This conversation should precede the end of Covid-19, especially if, as is being mentioned more frequently, it goes on for another year or more?

Our team of MFA and ILE has been working with museums and communities for many years (more than fifteen collaborative projects together) with more than a hundred communities and a similar number of museums as clients between us. We want you to succeed and can work to help you during these trying times.

Contact:

- **Dan Martin at Market & Feasibility Advisors, LLC**
dan.martin@mfallc.com or 312.933.7898, and
- **Dr. Robert “Mac” West at Informal Learning Experiences**
ILEinc@informallearning.com or 720.612.7476

About the Authors

Dan Martin and the consultants at Market & Feasibility Advisors, LLC (MFA) have completed more than 500 projects in over thirty US states and ten countries including property re-use, redevelopment, repositioning, feasibility and master planning for museums, other educational attractions, many types of real estate (including many malls), and community & economic development.

*Mac West of Informal Learning Experiences ILE has devoted over two decades to developing resources for the informal learning field. This includes institutional and project feasibility and master planning studies, developing programming and exhibits and providing content in his area of evolutionary biology. ILE also maintains the Traveling Exhibitions Database and publishes the bimonthly journal *The Informal Learning Review*.*