

Museum as Dialogue

A Good Museum, According to the Author, Conducts an Argument With Society and Directs Attention to What Is Difficult to Contemplate

By Neil Postman

George Bernard Shaw once remarked that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. He meant that those of us who belong to anointed trades—for example, physicians, lawyers, teachers, and museologists—fortify our elite status by creating vocabularies and procedures that are incomprehensible to the general public. This process prevents outsiders from understanding what the profession is doing and why—and, of course, protects insiders from scrutiny and informed criticism. Professions, in other words, build forbidding walls of mumbo jumbo over which the prying and alien eye cannot see.

Unlike George Bernard Shaw, I raise no complaint against this, for I consider myself a professional teacher and appreciate mumbo jumbo as much as anyone. But I do not object if occasionally someone who does not know the secrets of my trade is allowed entry to the inner halls to express an untutored point of view. Such a person may sometimes give a refreshing opinion or, even better, see something in a way that the professionals have overlooked.

Let me assert, then, what I as an outsider think a museum is. As I see it, a museum is an answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be a human being?

No museum I know of, not even the British Museum, gives a complete answer to this question, and none can be expected to. Every museum, even an unpretentious one, gives only a partial answer. Each museum seems to make an assertion about the nature of humanity—sometimes supporting and enriching each other's claims but just as often contradicting each other.

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There is a great museum in Munich that is filled with old automobiles, trains, and airplanes, all of which are meant to signify (in my mind) that human beings are preeminently tool makers and are at their best when solving practical problems. The Guggenheim Museum in New York City rejects that claim; there is nothing displayed in the Guggenheim that is, or ever was, of any practical value. The museum seems to argue that what makes us human is our need to express our feelings in symbolic forms. We are human precisely because so many of our creations are impractical. To this, the Imperial War Museum in London says, "Nonsense. You are both wrong. We are at our most human when devising ways to kill each other." To which Yad Va Shem in Jerusalem adds with inconsolable sadness, "That is true. But we are not merely killers like sharks and tigers; we are cruel, pointless, and systematic killers. Remember this above all."

Go to any museum in the world, even one that serves only as an archive, and ask, "What is this museum's definition of humanity?" You will be rewarded with some kind of an answer. In some cases, the answer will be timid and even confused; in others, bold and unmistakable. Of course, it is folly to say which museums convey the right answers. All of them are correct: We *are* tool makers and symbol makers and war makers. We are sublime and ridiculous, beautiful and ugly, profound and trivial, spiritual and practical. So it is not possible to have too many museums, because the more we have, the more detailed and comprehensive will be the portrait of humanity.

But in saying that every museum gives us part of the picture, I am not saying that every museum is equally useful. To paraphrase George Orwell, all museums tell the truth, but some tell more important truths than others. And how important a truth is depends on the time and place of its telling. For at different times, cultures need to know, remember, contemplate, and revere different ideas in the in-

In responding to the question "What is this museum's definition of humanity?" the new Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island chronicles the hopes, traditions, and values of millions of Americans-to-be.

terest of survival and sanity. A museum that was useful 50 years ago might be quite pointless today. Naturally, I would never recommend that such a museum be closed, for some day, in changed circumstances, its usefulness may be restored (and in any case, the dialectic of museums requires that its voice always be counted). Nonetheless, for a specific time and place, the truths conveyed by such a museum can be irrelevant and even harmful. Scores of museums—some of them new—celebrate ideas that are not needed.

To help clarify my point, imagine that the year is 1933, that you have been given unlimited funds to create a museum in Berlin, and that it has not occurred to you that you might be shot or otherwise punished for anything you will do. What kind of museum would you create? What ideas would you sanctify? What part of the human past, present, or imagined future would you wish to emphasize, and what part would you wish to ignore? In brief, what would you want your German visitors to the museum to contemplate?

In asking these questions, I mean to suggest that a museum is, in a fundamental sense, a political institution. For its answer to the question "What does it mean to be a human

what is fiendish. A museum can serve to clarify our situation or obfuscate it, to tell us what we need to know or what is useless.

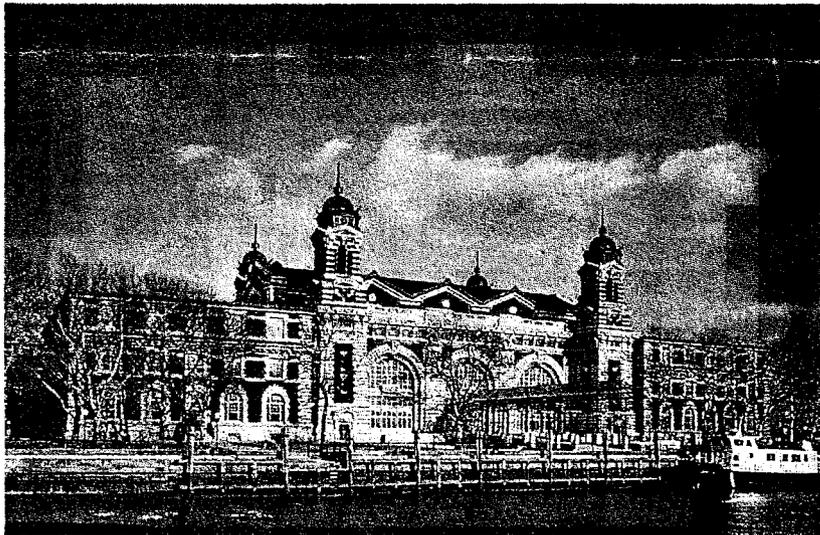
In the U.S., we have a society that most certainly can be improved by museums. What kinds of museums does it need? Consider the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, popularly known as EPCOT Center in Orlando, Fla. (I should not have to justify calling it a museum, because like Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, EPCOT is an attempt to create a living portrait of what it means to be human in a particular time and place; it is the world's largest animated diorama.)

Unlike Disney World, which is located adjacent to it, EPCOT is not intended to be merely an amusement park. Like all great museums of the world, EPCOT wants to fascinate and enthrall, but it clearly has an educational agenda and has had one from its beginning. It wants to tell part of the story of human intelligence and creativity and wishes its visitors to leave feeling inspired and instructed.

A few years ago, I was one of 30 consultants brought to Orlando by EPCOT's directors, who wanted us to make recommendations to enhance EPCOT's educational functions. Indeed, it is worth remarking that the consultants were told many times that it was never Walt Disney's intention to create in EPCOT one more amusement park; instead, EPCOT was to be his greatest monument—a museum celebrating the possibilities of humanity's future. The fact that EPCOT had strayed from that intention is why the consultants had been summoned.

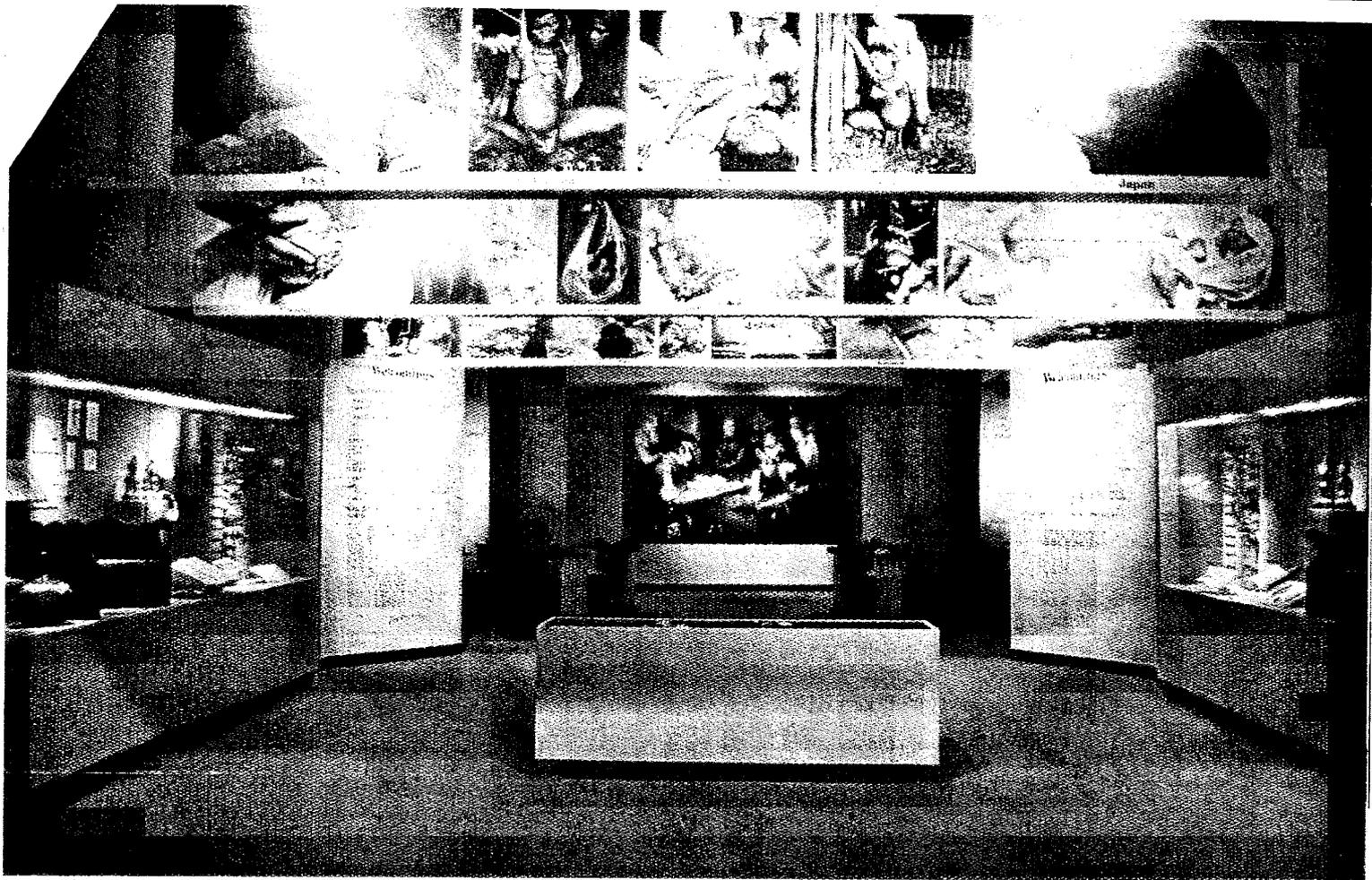
But from my point of view, the task was hopeless. The problem is not that EPCOT has become more amusement park than museum; the problem is that EPCOT is providing a mistimed truth to a people in desperate need of moral and civic guidance. It is like trying to enlighten a miser by putting forward the idea that a penny saved is a penny earned. The miser already knows this, indeed lives by that philosophy. He will learn nothing from hearing it restated. What the miser needs to consider is something along the lines of the Robert Herrick poem that begins, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." To quote André Gide, "That education is best which goes counter to you." He meant we learn by contrast and comparison, not by redundancy and confirmation.

The unstated theme of EPCOT is *Technology über alles*. In every exhibit, in every conceivable way, EPCOT proclaims that paradise is to be achieved through technological progress, and only through technological pro-



Formerly the Main Building of Ellis Island, the Museum of Immigration offers a counterargument to cultural homogeneity.

being?" must be given within the context of a specific moment in history and must inevitably be addressed to living people who, as always, are struggling with the problems of moral, psychological, and social survival. I am not urging that museums be used as instruments of cheap and blatant propaganda; I am saying that a museum is an instrument of survival and sanity. A museum, after all, tells a story. And like the oral and written literature of any culture, its story may serve to awaken the better angels of our nature or to stimulate



gress. The message includes the idea that new is better than old, that fast is better than slow, that simple is better than complex—and if they are not, we must change our definition of “better.” To the question “What will it mean to be a human being in the future?”, EPCOT answers, “You will find fulfillment in loving your machines.” People who flock to EPCOT warm to this message, as a miser will warm to being told that a penny saved is a penny earned. But these people will learn nothing from it.

To be sure, there certainly are places in the world where the advice to seek salvation in technology may be useful. I have visited a few such places in my travels and have thought that a large dose of EPCOT’s philosophy would go a long way in eliminating some unnecessary inconvenience and misery. In the U.S., this philosophy was inspiring and useful in the 19th and early 20th centuries; it helped us build a new colossus; it gave us confidence and wealth and vitality and power.

But for a society that has now totally committed itself to the idea that technology is divine, there couldn’t be a more mistimed vision of the future. What can EPCOT teach Americans, or inspire us to think? We have already organized our society to accommodate every possible technological innovation. We have deliriously, willingly, mindlessly ignored

all the consequences of our actions and have, because technology seemed to require it, turned our backs on religion, family, children, history, and education. As a result, American civilization is collapsing. Everyone knows this but seems powerless in the face of it.

You would never guess from a visit to EPCOT that the technologies celebrated there have played a central part in our deepening cultural crisis. In the case of illiteracy, and the toxic environment, and increasing violence, and indifference to politics, a direct connection can be drawn to the society’s obsession with the sanctification of technology. In other cases, the connection is indirect but unmistakable. And, I might say, inevitable. For when a society invests most of its material and psychic resources in the development of machines, when it begins to believe that the only possible avenue to the fulfillment of its humanity is through technological ingenuity, when it redefines its aspirations and values to fit the requirements of its technology, it is likely to find it has paid for its mechanical marvels at a culturally ruinous price. But there are no such warnings over the gates at EPCOT, no price tags metaphorically attached to its delightful displays.

Of what use, then, is EPCOT Center to such a society? It does not help us to remember

The exhibition *Generations*, organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, addressed global conditions of birth and childhood, a model of truths worth telling.

anything of importance. And because it celebrates precisely what already preempts the attention of the entire culture, it prevents its visitors from contemplating alternative visions.

In those words—alternative visions—you have in condensed form what I believe is the essence of a useful museum. For as I see it, that museum is best that helps to free a society from the tyranny of a redundant and conventional vision—that is to say, from the tyranny of the present. Museums should be thermostats of culture, for it is essential to the survival of any culture that it maintain a dynamic balance in its symbolic environments. And to achieve that, its educational institutions must provide what its economic, political, and social institutions are failing to provide.

The most vital function of museums is to balance, to regulate what we might call the symbolic ecology of cultures, by putting forward alternative views and thus keeping choice and critical dialogue alive. Without

Tell Us Where You Stand

U.S. museums err if they adopt the Disney attitude of applauding and confirming our culture's predilection for technological solutions and its corollary, pervasive materialism. So says Neil Postman in the accompanying article. Instead, says the author, what the U.S. needs are museums that "regulate . . . the symbolic ecology of cultures by putting forward alternative views and thus keeping choice and critical dialogue alive." Our *Your Vantage Point* question for this issue:

How do museums reconcile the need to tell museum visitors what they might at first not want to hear (because it contradicts the messages they receive from other segments of society) with the growing trend toward making institutions more responsive to members of the public, whom we want to enter our doors?

Let us and your colleagues know what you think. To air your opinion, turn to the reader service card facing page 104, and write your comments on the card. Then drop the card in the mail (we've already paid the postage). As part of a regular feature of *Museum News*, we'll collect your comments and report on them in the November/December issue of the magazine.

Thanks.

such alternatives, societies inevitably find to their despair that whatever paradise they single-mindedly pursued has turned into some or another wasteland. And nobody needs a museum in a wasteland—except, perhaps as a cemetery.

In the U.S., we do not now need museums that dazzle us with modern electronic equipment (our culture already dazzles us with electronic equipment to the point that we are all but blind), and we do not need museums that celebrate that fact. In a word, we do not need museums that say, "This is what you are. Come and applaud yourself"—especially not if what we applaud is our own ruin.

What we require are museums that tell us what we once were, and what is wrong with what we are, and what new directions are possible. At the very least, we need museums that provide some vision of humanity different from the vision put forward by every advertising agency and political speech. That is why I have eagerly participated in plans to create a Museum of Childhood in Los Angeles. This is a museum that would remind people of where the idea of childhood came from, what that idea has contributed to world civilization, and why it is important to preserve it. In a culture that has allowed the idea of childhood to decay, this museum will be useful. So is the Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island. America once was (and still is) a land of immigrants, and Ellis Island is where 30 million of Europe's wretched refuse first entered America, bringing with them energies, hopes, traditions, and values that are now being obliterated by a furious technological materialism. Ellis Island can offer a forceful counterargument to the prevailing idea of the citizen as homogenized consumer—of people as a massive and undifferentiated mouth for the products of technology.

A museum, then, must be an argument with its society. And more than that, it must be a timely argument. A good museum always will direct attention to what is difficult and even painful to contemplate. Therefore, those who strive to create such museums must proceed without assurances that what they do will be appreciated.

In addressing the purpose of theater, George Bernard Shaw provided an answer that tells us precisely why museums are necessary—and why a museum of the kind I have been describing is necessary. He said, "It is an elucidator of social consciousness, a historian of the future, an armory against darkness and despair, and a temple in the ascent of man." □