

HOW WILL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) CHANGE MUSEUMS? A FEW PREDICTIONS

By Mark Walhimer

As I write this, on May 15, 2020, we are in the second month of COVID-19 quarantine in the United States. All museums in the USA are closed and many museums have furloughed or laid off museum staff. As of today, the future¹ of museums is very much in flux and the future² is unclear.

If I was to make predictions:

1. Museum Closings: In the USA all museums are dependent on donations (including government funded museums). Sadly, the damage has already been done to many museums and a percentage of museums will close. As of today, I would estimate ten to twenty percent of museums will close within the next twelve months, that could amount to 3500 to 7000 museums³ closing in the USA. The majority of the museums that will close will be small local history museums with no or one or two staff members.

2. Museum Staff, Freelancers and Vendors: Many contracted museum workers (floor staff, educational staff, curators, art handlers, designers, registrars, etc.) will leave the museum field. Since the 1980's and Reaganomics museums have decreased museum full-time museum staff to be replaced by independent contractors. Many of these people will be unable to afford to return to museum work due to student loans, and personal debt accumulated during the COVID-19 quarantine. Also, many museum suppliers (exhibit fabricators, art shippers, art storage companies, etc.) will close.

3. Museum Consolidation: The impact of closed museums and loss of museum staff, contractors and vendors will be significant and will cause the consolidation of museums and museum services.

4. Reduced Museum Services: Many museums that survive will be forced to reduce hours, to close galleries and to increase online digital exhibits. Also, for the short term, "block buster" large scale multi-million dollar traveling exhibitions will be put on hold.

5. Museum Board of Directors: Many museums' Board of Directors will be reorganized to include a greater number of "old money" members, due to the impact of COVID-19

and the loss of wealth of many younger board members.

6. Visitor Need Driven: Both for the need for donations and for the civil societal needs, museums will be driven by the immediate needs for visitors (and donors).

7. Networked and Digital: The costs (both financial and staff / visitor safety) of operating an in-person experience will be greater than operating digital online experiences.

8. Greater Reliance on Metrics: Due to the hesitant reopening of museums, and decreased donations there will be a need for greater data regarding museum costs, museum revenue, visitor return rate, visitor dwell rate to manage costs.

9. Museum Building Cleaning: Prior to and during museum reopening there will be significant costs and efforts to prepare museum buildings to be free from COVID-19 pathogens, including HVAC systems, water systems, and museum collections. These operating costs will be expensive and difficult for the general public to understand as uncovered costs.

10. Greater Need for Collection Care: Prior to and during museum reopening there will be significant costs and efforts to prepare museum collections to be free from COVID-19 pathogens again these operating costs will be expensive and difficult for the general public to understand as uncovered costs.

11. Long Term: Assuming a reopening of museums in the timeframe of September to November 2020, the process will be slow and hesitant. Social distancing will remain in place and visitors will be prevented to gather in groups of more than ten people (preventing museum theater, lectures and group demonstrations). Museums will open only selected galleries with reduced museum staffing, while carefully watching costs and donations. This hesitant start – stop process of reopening museums will continue for at least one year (September to November 2021).

The second to third year of museum reopening will continue in a similar fashion to the first year in a series of starts and stops with limited museum events with slowly growing

groups of greater than ten people. There will be increased efforts to increase museum smartphone applications, museum online events and programming and smaller new exhibitions.

The third to fifth year after museums reopening museums will start to return to more normalized operations. There will be several significant changes:

- Greater “gig” museum staffing, with fewer full time museum staff
- Smaller, less expensive museum exhibitions
- More combined digital / tactile in-person visitor experiences
- More online museum experiences
- More reliance on earned revenue from ticket sales, museum memberships, and visitor paid programming.

Smaller, local, nimble museums will find the transition to the new museum reality less challenging. Large encyclopedic museums will be challenged with the new museum reality, as they are more dependent on corporate sponsors and have large operating costs. In the end, the new reality will benefit nimble visitor-centric museums that

can operate lean; artist, scientist, historian focused visitor experiences.

FOOTNOTES

1. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/alphabet-soup-how-will-post-virus-economic-recovery-shape-up/> website accessed April 17, 2020
2. <https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2020/03/30/covid-19-and-the-perils-of-prediction> website accessed April 17, 2020
3. <https://www.ims.gov/news/government-doubles-official-estimate-there-are-35000-active-museums-us>, website accessed April 13, 2020

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