

International Council of Museums Committee for the Collections and Activities of  
Museums of Cities (ICOMCAMOC) Conference

Vancouver (Museum of Vancouver) “City Museums: Collisions / Connections”

Keynote Address by Larry Beasley CM, 24 October 2012

*“The City as Museum and the Museum as City”*

Cities are the most complex and mysterious of human inventions. They are rich in harmony and contradiction; in accord and discord. They are as different around the world as the societies that have created them. They are tenacious and some are actually very ancient. They are forever changing and evolving. As of just a few years ago, they have now become the primary habitat of human beings. And, of course, they are endlessly fascinating.

Also fascinating are city museums – your museums. You are a repository of the history and culture of your city – you portray the essence of your place. I have visited many city museums and they are always jaw dropping and awe inspiring. You tell a very compelling, vivid story. That is what you do – with research and curation and display and all the professional tricks and art of your trade. As a City Planner, frankly, I am not sure I have much to offer that would positively contribute to the already great job that you do to build and deliver the city museum.

What I may have to offer is a different perspective – looking at a civic museum not from the point of view of the curator of the museum but from the point of view of a *creator of cities*. That’s what I do – that is what City Planners are all about – our job is to envision and then manage the creation of the city. So, I want to pose the question of what the city museum can do as a part of the ongoing creative process of a city that is forever changing and being re-created. How can the museum of the city join the design energies and the political energies and the bureaucratic energies and the private sector energies and the people in a city as a civic lens to contribute to the form and personality and quality of that city – not just as an observer but as an actual player?

I think that is an important question – and let me tell you why by giving you a sense of how I do what I do. My profession is an unusual one – it is part *science* and part *politics* but a big part of

it is *art*. Now, having said that, I also have to emphasize that it is a somewhat peculiar art – city planning is a politicized art, it is a collective art. Everyone shapes the city every day with almost everything they do. It would be like if a painter picked up his brush to dab the canvas and a thousand hands grabbed the brush with him to decide just where the paint is to go. The city you experience is created by millions of independent actions. A City Planner is a choreographer of urbanism, working with people who have their own ideas and take their own action – and generating through interaction with people the plans and the management mechanisms for how the city or parts of the city should grow and change or, sometimes, be protected from change.

That, of course, is the great strength of city planning – but it is also its potential Achilles heel because, like art, city planning needs to be about some kind of coherent result rather than just randomness or the lowest common denominator. The more people are all over the place, the more of a problem it is to find a shared way to move forward with your city. On the other hand, the more people share a vision of the city, the more coherent will be the art of building the place. The more people understand what I call the “urban DNA” of the city – not only its history but also its current dramas, its issues, its opportunities, its patterns, the way it tends to grow and the way it tends to fade – the more coherent will be the art of building the place. With that collective view, even if people do not support the same solutions, at least they speak the same language, understand the genesis of ideas and share a sense of the options and implications that can help a city find a positive and maybe even an innovative direction.

Of course, what I am talking about is “urban connoisseurship” – an understanding and sensitivity of cities that informs people about what is good and not so good, what works and does not work, what is progressive and not so progressive. It is an urban connoisseurship that starts at a personal level, and when everyone gets together, it is an urban connoisseurship that becomes collective. It is also an urban connoisseurship that is dynamic and constantly evolving just like the city itself.

This kind of understanding and sensitivity comes from discussion and debate, it comes from education and being informed about what is going on in the world of cities, and in a very substantial way, it comes from tangible urban experience. But, it may shock you to hear, that in almost all cities there is actually *no* agent to convene the discussion and education and

experiences that fosters an urban connoisseurship. Planning departments go out and talk to people when they have a specific job to do – they call it public consultation. Politicians go to the people at election time. The media covers issues from moment to moment. But there is no constant force for an ongoing engagement and dialogue and interface between people and the diverse realities of city life. And cities are certainly worse off because of that.

I think that *force* could be the *city museum*. I think that force could be *you*. In fact, I think you might be the very best institution within local culture, uniquely suited to be that force because of your special skills and integrity and perspective. And I firmly believe that, if you took on such a role, the city would be a better place for more people. City planning and urban design would be a more productive activity. City government and politics would work better. People would be more connected and therefore more fulfilled by their life in their city. And a potential for collaboration would be set up that would be genuinely new in the city simply because of the ethics you would bring to the task.

So this leads me to offer a proposition that is the main theme of my presentation today – for the city museum, my proposition is that you pursue

“the city as museum; and the museum as city”.

Let me explain what I mean and offer a few illustrations of what this might look like in the form and agenda of a museum of the city.

Let’s start with the “city as museum”. We live in a mobile world – we can easily get around to whatever it is we need or want to see and our institutions need to come to us more than ever before. We also live in a virtual world – our reality reaches well beyond our physical capacities and so do other realities that touch us every day. [Oh by the way, I know the organizers of the conference have asked everyone to put away your cell phones in this hall today, but, you know, I feel the opposite – I hope you will take out your phones during this talk and text or twitter your friends and tell them you are listening to me here – if you do that I can be sure that more people will know about what I am saying today than literally anything else the organizers or I could do.]

Wouldn't it be amazing if the museum of the city could tap into these opportunities? Perhaps the city museum of tomorrow could be equal parts physical and mobile and virtual. Perhaps the walls and spaces within which you now collect and curate and educate can be exploded, blown away, redefined. Perhaps the city itself – its streetscapes, its parks, its theatres, its neighbourhoods, its palaces and its slums – could become the actual museum; or at least a significant part of the museum. Perhaps its airwaves and websites and every single I-phone and computer could become a significant part of the actual museum. Maybe you could take the entire museum package on the road.

You could curate its treasures as well as its embarrassments on the streets. You could program and re-set its spaces to expose the meaning of those spaces to different kinds of people in the past, in the present, in the future. You could challenge its contradictions and celebrate its harmonies. You could set up discussions by everyone everywhere about something specific somewhere through social media.

With the city as the actual museum, you could not just interpret your city; you could join the energies that transform it. The artifacts that you could work with would not just be the artifacts that you collect or borrow – they would be the actual walls and spaces and landscape and water and monuments and even the people of the city. And I can just imagine the results that could come from you applying your rigorous research and interpretation and curation and presentation and communication and education methods and skills, with the kind of high integrity, independence and inquiry that is *de rigueur* in the museum world. And what fascinates me about this whole idea is that you can engage in a way that few other institutions can do, and that government institutions find it especially hard to do – integrating high culture with everyday life; integrating fun and lighthearted exploration with serious experimentation and discussion of hard issues; making the funny or sad cross-connections. Yours is a world of emotion as well as hard facts and it is the emotional side that really connects with people, that causes them to stand up and take notice, and remember, and shift their opinions. You really do teach people and they are forever changed by your teaching – that is exactly what we need for urban connoisseurship to flourish.

Just imagine you are entering the City of Vancouver and you are also entering the Museum of Vancouver with a lot of cues and urban incidents to let you know about that. You could bring the museum all around us as a constant force for dialogue and understanding and reconciliation and even to engender critical review on the one hand or love on the other. The “city as museum” could be a powerful contributor to urbanism.

Now, I am not talking about this idea of the “city as museum” taking the place of the actual museum facilities – these have a very interesting potential in the future that I will come back to in a minute – but I am talking about the city museum team reaching out beyond the walls of its buildings to the larger setting around it. So, let me give you a few examples that might be a part of this reaching out. I am going to talk about some things that I have seen that do not necessarily come from museums but could easily have done so. Here are just a few ideas to get people thinking.

One way to curate the city is to refurnish it or redress it for a dream of something else. In Dallas there is a group called “Team Better Block” They are a somewhat rogue group of activists that pull lots of people together, often over a weekend, to create what they describe as quick, inexpensive, high-impact changes that improve and revitalize underused properties and highlight the potential for creating great streets. Their whole gig is to transform one or two blocks of a streetscape to show what it might be like. One day a street will be in a dull malaise, rundown, with high vacancy rates, a real mess. The next day it will have trees and landscape, often arriving in pots, it will have temporary little shops and cafes, with lots of sidewalk presence, there will be art and lighting, there will be all kinds of pedestrian activity – there will be a buzz. Then they invite in the neighbourhood to experience and enjoy the place, with a lot of music and fun. The result is usually that the community is energized to make the dream a reality. Landlords are offered new faith. Consumers make a new commitment to come back to the place. City officials are charged to make the public realm improvements real and lasting. A happening becomes a force, which becomes a change on the ground, which becomes an inspiration and lesson for that place and other places. Now imagine if the sponsor for this is the city museum. Imagine if the idea was diversified by the museum. Imagine if the refurnishing is not from bad to good but from new to old. Imagine if you could transform a 21<sup>st</sup> century streetscape into its 19<sup>th</sup> century form so that people can understand and experience the reality of

an antique street. What if the effort included players in costume - docents who could also be the interpreters of what used to be? Or what if the streetscape is re-vamped to illustrate a use or activity that was once typical on the street, to show how an area has evolved? I think the experiential quality of such heritage curation could be more powerful than all the exhibits that can be pulled together in a museum space – and the experience would be accessible to more people. Or what if the streetscape is fitted up in an imagined future form to explore new forms of urbanism? The ideas are endless, but the point is that the streetscape – and there could be many of them all over a city – would become an integral part of the museum; an extension of the museum; a rich canvas upon which the museum can do its job of curation and education and all the rest. As an analogy, I think of the temporary changes regularly made around Vancouver by the movie industry to make a film scene. They are always pretty interesting even though they are done for private purposes. The public interest in public stories would be even more provocative.

Of course, once we start talking urban interventions, we do not have to stay on a street. The city museum could also be the agent for installation of temporary parks – borrowing the “porta-park” idea from the recreationalists – or of tableaux to tell all kinds of stories in different spaces or buildings or of plays and other performance art to tap into the essence of a place or the anxiety of a community about urban change or to expose social tensions or contradictions or for any number of other fascinating motives. In Dallas they are initiating a spontaneous temporary program they call “activating vacancy”. For a city with vast empty surface parking lots and wind-blown empty sites, you can imagine what they have in mind. In all of this, the city museum would find the setting for its work within the fabric of the city; expropriate that setting for a time; and then move on to other places – with just endless possibilities.

Another method of outreach and use of the city as museum is suggested by what in the late-90’s in Berlin was called the “InfoBox” or the “Red Box” in Potsdamer Platz. Once the Berlin Wall came down, a huge redevelopment of the once no-man’s land was envisioned that would heal the terrible scars. People were excited; people were worried; people were perplexed. So the authorities decided that they needed to have a vivid focus for explanation of the new plans and input about those plans. In the vast open field of the future development they planted a temporary structure that was five-stories high, painted bright red, which offered the whole story about the place – its ecology, its history, its political traumas and ultimately its future

development form. As people went through the building, they learned a lot and then they were engaged by staff to offer their stories and their ideas and their reactions to the new proposals. The Red Box was big and bold and it drew hundreds of thousands of people over the several years that it existed. Now just imagine a similar installation by a city museum, perhaps more modest in size but nonetheless effective. Every city has new development areas and they are both interesting and difficult for people. If the city museum zoomed in with the right kind of dispassionate and helpful facility, it could do a great service for a community. What would be especially powerful is that as museum professionals you would know better than almost anyone about how to make the installation fun and moving and meaningful as well as just informative and engaging. What might be even more interesting is that the installation could stay through the development and occupancy process for the new area to become an outpost for exhibitions and presentations by the museum on an ongoing basis. For example, look at the pavilion for the first transcontinental train, now permanently placed adjacent to the Roundhouse Community Centre, near False Creek in Downtown Vancouver. It is very popular with residents and visitors alike; and it vividly informs people of what the area was once all about as well as giving them a fun experience of an authentic train – the very train that made that first fated trip. Maybe cities like Vancouver that have so much redevelopment need their green and red and yellow boxes all over the cityscape to interpret change through the artistry of the city museum.

My favourite of these outreach concepts that use the city as the theatre for activity is something variously called the “BG Lab” in New York City and the “BMW Guggenheim Lab” in Berlin. These are the brainchild of Charles Montgomery, a native son of our very own Vancouver – it was Charles that introduced me this morning. As Charles describes it, these labs bring together willing, curious participants and offer resources and logistical support for them to undertake informal urban experimentation. That is why they are called “labs”, because they turn the city into a laboratory. He is quick to point out that these labs are not research institutes but rather a fun and provocative place to talk about new ideas. In the New York case, they tested the emotional effects of public places on participants using sensors and in Berlin they added various games and tests to augment the data. Everybody had a good time, information was collected, and a lot was learned. Now that information and those people can be part of actively shaping

these cities for a better future. Well, of course, this idea has so many possibilities for the kind of outreach and city engagement that a city museum might want to do. For example, what if the lab can be used by residents to do a neighbourhood audit? You could start the lab in a successful beloved area where the participants could document all kinds of metrics and take all kinds of measurements. Then you could move the lab to the participants' neighbourhood to see how their home-base performs in comparison. Because this would be a completely experiential process, learning would be fast and solid and I bet people would act directly on what they have discovered. What if the data collection could be channeled through social media to sites where it can be instantly mapped and analysed against other norms and standards and regulations – the whole idea just gets more and more powerful.

And I think the city museum might take all of this even one step further. Why not actually convene people to key locations in a city to participate in that place in a certain way – to make a point or to learn something or to shift the use of a space. We've seen hundreds of cyclists convened to reclaim streets from cars. We've seen crowded white dinner parties convened to repopulate dead spaces. We've seen schools of children convened to use crayons to rededicate a pedestrian mall and playground. The convening possibilities of social media are amazing and the civic museum, using the city as its museum, could tap into groups of people and have them become part of the museum experience in vastly more effective ways than are possible by trying to draw them into the museum building. And the experience can be more fun and hip and edgy and enticing.

Now, let's shift to the opposite side of my original proposition – let me turn to the idea of the “museum as city”. This is really the concept to turn the museum of the city into the agora of the city – the place where people come together to learn about issues, debate the future, consider new propositions and evaluate the various development moves that are changing the cityscape every day. Again, the idea is that the museum barriers come tumbling down and the physical plant of the museum becomes not just a repository but also a safe and respectful gathering place. We live in a world where there is wide-spread debate but the convenor of that debate is often not what I would call disinterested. It is often not led by the needs of the people but rather by the needs of those hosting the debate. We have seen what can happen when people *en masse* rebel against that arrangement and use social media to convene their own debate and expose their own



information. In Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East this provoked its own forums and facilitated a people power like we have not seen for decades. That was a very good thing, but we all know that that same power can be manipulated for other than altruistic motives.

Wouldn't it be amazing if the museum of the city could tap into these same energies and networks within the context of high ethics and a dispassionate dedication to the fundamental needs of the people and fair democracy of the people? Wouldn't it be amazing if you could become the acknowledged epi-centre for a rich community inquiry and discussion of all the important urban issues of the day? I can tell you that there is no place to do that and no one is doing that in almost any city right now.

But a city museum could be that place and you, the curators and programmers could be that convenor. Wouldn't it be great if every citizen could expect to find a solution to their urban problem or an answer to their civic question by coming to the museum? Perhaps marginalized people would find a special voice to explain their life position and to draw out resolutions to help them cope that are not coming from the politicians or social workers. Perhaps regular folks who feel under siege from the change around them could think first of the city museum as the place to go to understand that change and to be offered a way to affect it. Perhaps people interested in the preservation of urban heritage or the introduction of new urban structures could come first to the city museum to introduce their proposals to the people and to build support for those proposals before starting into the complex City Hall processes for formal endorsement or approval. Perhaps the city museum could be the custodian for web-based voting by citizens on those new ideas or proposals.

Once we have the "museum as city", you will enter the fray of the urban revolution or evolution.

You will become the agent of change and the advocate for the fairness and equity of that change. You will become the actual voice of the people or the facilitator of their voices. Just imagine what it would be like if entering the Museum of Vancouver you were also entering one of the City Halls of Vancouver, where the business of the day is actually conducted not just observed. Once again, the "museum as city" could also be a powerful contributor to urbanism.

Now, I'm not talking about these new functions displacing the fascinating activities and shows that you already do. I am talking about adding this agenda to what you already do. So let me offer just two examples to give a taste of what this might be all about.

There is one concept that has long been afloat in Vancouver that would be a perfect format for the museum as city. It is called an "urbanarium". The idea of this is to have a place where everything about the city can be collected and explored and where people can get together to talk and work toward better city forms and processes and images and institutions. Usually it has a physical focus in a grand model of the city, such as the wonderful one in the Shanghai Planning Museum. This model has to be big enough so it really thrills people to see it and so they can really understand what they are seeing. This model has to be always changing and being updated so it is current to the state of the city and to the agenda of change in the city at any point in time. This model has to be backed up with maps and aerial photography and all kind of statistics so that people can see the relationship between the three-dimensional form of the city and the inputs that generate that form. This model might also be backed up by a social model and an ecological model and even an institutional or political model. Then, these models become a framework for discussion and experimentation. Proponents can insinuate their new ideas and plans into the model so we can all judge the fit. We can use the model to test the impacts of big events and climate change. And, to a great degree, the model can become a focal point for all the dialogue we need to explore any aspect of the future of the place. It seems to me that a city museum is the perfect institution to become an urbanarium. You have the venue and the profile and the expertise and the power to convene. Around the model you can create endless programs and events. With the programs and events, the link between people and their ideas can be facilitated with their government and with the private market place.

A related idea is exemplified by a place called the "Centre for Dialogue" at Simon Fraser University here in Vancouver. This is simply a well-designed place, an agora, for community discussion and debate. It is designed to facilitate exchange. It is staffed to offer assistance and logistics. It has all the digital technology for every kind of documentation and broadcast. This strikes me as the kind of facility that a city museum could offer to the community and as they use the space, the museum becomes the centre of the community. As a convener, the museum becomes the arbiter. And, it seems to me that the dialogue can be both active and passive –

sometimes more edgy; sometimes more safe. For example, what if the agora had a wall of ideas or even a wall of protest where, as in Chinese culture, anyone can post their thoughts and once a month those thoughts are collected, collated and presented to the local government and to the world. Of course, a blog could also be included and with social media, hundreds of conversations could be going on all at the same time. All of this dialogue would be channelled into the continuing change process of the city – and it could really make a difference, both in what specific aspects of change are endorsed and how people understand that change.

And whether we are talking about the “city as museum” or the “museum as city”, I see a big role for what are called charrettes. These are big workshops where regular people come together with urban experts to consider problems and find solutions, usually through the medium of design. These involve a lot of drawing and a lot of talk and a lot of site exploration in a high-energy environment where expert knowledge and local knowledge are merged into fresh solutions to tough urban problems. These can be convened in the heart of the museum building or they can be offered in tents on key sites that are facing direct change. In any event, they become the place where surprising solutions can be found. The civic museum could become specialists in these charrettes and by offering such a venue as a regular feature in a city, they could transform how people deal with hard challenges or big opportunities, how they come together, how they find common ground or, at least, how they frame realistic choices. I could see charrettes becoming the standard *modus operandi* of the civic museum as it embraces its mission to be at the centre of civic discourse.

My point in all of this is that the city museum can be as much about urban creation as it is about urban curation. In the future, I think the city museum could even be a central actor in that creation – connecting citizens with the vectors that re-define the city. If the museum of the city – your museum – could become the “museum as city” and the “city as museum”, then we could truly join forces in both building urban connoisseurship and choreographing the ongoing re-invention of the city. But more than for City Planners, you would become a vital force for the people of your city and an agent for the kind of informed natural spontaneous democracy that seems to have gotten lost in the halls of power for a very long time. Our cities need a design fix at this point in history; they need a political fix; they need an environmental fix; they need a

social fix – and for that they need to raise the bar of both the processes and the knowledge that we bring to bear. No one is in the wings right now to offer that – it is a real gap in urban life.

But in a dialectic of both exploding the traditional museum concept yet reinforcing its solid core presence as an artful arena for urban discovery as well as urban memory, the future museum of the city can be that vital urban force – you have the venues; you have the resources; you have the morality; you have the know-how; and you have the independence. I am hopeful that you also have the courage.

It might interest you to know that, in the Catholic faith, the patron saint of City Planners is Saint George. His mythology was that he “slew the dragon and saved the city”. In a metaphorical sense, the museum of the city may be the Saint George of our time. If you can slay the dragon of our own urban discontent, our urban disconnect, then it may be you who finally saves the city of our dreams. And that, ladies and gentlemen, would be a very good thing.

Thank you.