

Politics In The Museum:

Rights and Responsibilities

2008

Museums are Morphing

“Museums are morphing. Once they were chroniclers or collectors, gathering objects and facts and putting them on display. Now many have become crucibles: places where a cultural identity is hammered out, refined, and reshaped. Along the way they also have become community centers, where a group gathers to celebrate its past, commemorate its tragedies and convey its achievements to others”

New York Times, 7/20/06

2

“...The only purpose of museums is education in all its varied aspects from the most scholarly research to the simple arousing of curiosity. That education must be active, not passive and must always be intimately connected with the life of the people.”

Theodore Low, Metropolitan Museum of Art

3

Rights of Museums

- Define Who We Are
- Define What We Do
- Define How We Act

4

Responsibilities of Museums

- A clearly defined mission
- Sensitivity to the needs & wishes of potential patrons
- Transparency of operations
- Effective programs to communicate/update the public
- Physical facilities maintained in good repair
- Maintain a positive public image
- A governance structure reflective of constituencies served and able to provide necessary resources
- Appropriate physical facilities, maintained in good repair

5

Responsibilities of Museums (cont.)

- Accountability to the public
- A competent and loyal staff
- Clearly articulated policies and procedures that govern actions:
 - Collections
 - Personnel
 - Exhibitions
 - Fiscal
 - Ethics

6

National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) Mission Statement

The National Civil Rights Museum, located at the Lorraine Motel, the assassination site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., chronicles key episodes of the American civil rights movement and the legacy of this movement to inspire participation in civil and human rights efforts globally, through our collections, exhibitions, and educational programs.

7

NCRM Background

- 1982 – Lorraine Hotel foreclosed
- Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation (Save the Lorraine)
- Key Leaders:
 - Chuck Scruggs, Gen. Mgr., WDIA Radio
 - D'Army Bailey, local judge
- 1982 – Hotel bought out of foreclosure for \$144,000
- 1983 – Fundraising campaign commenced
- 1987 – Museum groundbreaking
- 1991 – Museum opened

8

Inaugural Board of Directors

- Diverse
- 66% African American; 34% Caucasian
- Contentious; conflicts between board members

9

Source of Initial Contention

- Power Struggles
- Singular, autonomous power grab by one vs. broad-based decision making governance of many
- Meetings were explosive
- Characterized by vilification and name calling
- 17-year street protest by Jackie Smith

10

Source of Initial Contention (cont.)

“They knew things were happening...but they didn't have any grip on them. All they could do is keep the pressure on me to open up and put them into the process. I was not willing to do that!”

(Memphis Business Journal, April, 2004)

“I would conduct a one-man filibuster to keep them from voting if necessary.”

(Memphis Business Journal, April, 2004)

11

Initial Funding

- \$8.8 million
 - \$4.4 million (50%) State of TN (bond issued)
 - \$2.2 million (25%) City Government
 - \$2.2 million (25%) County Government

12

Role/State of Tennessee

- Museum operates under lease agreement with the State of TN
- Lease renewed every 7-8 years
- State maintains oversight
 - collections/building ownership
 - visits
 - audits
- 1998 lease renewal provision
 - Foundation Board to acquire Museum for \$1 upon retirement of debt, March, 2007

13

The Perfect Political Storm February, 2007

- Founder lobbies State to maintain lease
- Board expresses desire to explore purchase option

14

Initial Museum Strategy

- Meetings with State Legislators
 - Capitol/Nashville
 - Memphis
- Memphis meeting terminated without community input

15

Community Involvement

- Community drawn into fray with volatile public relations campaign
 - "Whites want to buy the Museum for \$1"
 - "Corporations taking over Museum"
 - "Taking our history"
- Media blitzes, radio, television, public meetings, marches, etc.

16

The Telegraph

Date: February, November 01, 2007
Edition: 402564 01
Circulation (DMA): 30 000 (1)
Page (Frequency): 2 (Weekly) (1)
Page: 1
Keywords: National Civil Rights Museum

Museum's racial makeup stirs up controversy

Power struggle

Ben Greenberg's Weblog
Liberate Civil Rights Museum from Corporate Control
View comments
By John Gibson
Arkansas Delta Truth and Justice

THE NATION
Thieves of Black History
beneath the radar
By
Gary Younge

This article appeared in the November 12, 2007 edition of *The Nation*.
October 25, 2007

17

COMMERCIAL APPEAL
MEMPHIS, TN
AUG 21 2007

Public critical of privatizing Rights museum

WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

Date: Friday, November 02 2007
Location: WALLA WALLA, WA
Classification: 14 541 (12)
Type of frequency: Newspaper (2)
Page: A5
Keywords: National Civil Rights Museum

Civil rights museum board's racial makeup an issue in Memphis

AMARILLO GLOBE-NEWS

Civil rights museum's board criticized for racial makeup

18

On-Going Museum Strategy

- Presentations at community strategy sessions
- Editorials in newspapers
- Interviews on television

19

Morphing of Issues

- Primary Issue: Lease vs. Purchase Option
- Diversity of Board (more community vs. corporate involvement)
- Physical condition of Museum/ongoing maintenance
- Transparency of Operations
- Increased community oversight

20

Addressing Contentious Issues

- Attempt to mitigate issues through proactive initiatives
- When avoidance is impossible, act
- Actions must be immediate, objective and professionally delivered

21

Mitigate

- Conduct meetings
 - Group/groups involved
 - Elected officials
 - General public
- Create a well-defined media strategy
 - Newspaper editorials
 - Letters to the Editor
 - Media blitzes
- Marshal strength of advocacy groups

22

Act

- Actions should be immediate, objective and professionally delivered
 - Communicate openly & honestly
 - Exhibit transparency of operation and information
 - Borrow credibility from respected stakeholders
 - Address concerns publicly
 - Define strategic actions taken
 - Present the other side

23

Marshal Strength of Advocates

- ❖ Museum members
- ❖ Volunteers
- ❖ Community of Faith
- ❖ Similarly missioned organizations
- ❖ Founders

24

The Resolution

- Board pursues long term lease agreement
- Developed Memorandum of Understanding w/ State of Tennessee

25

Do's and Taboos of Ethical Leadership

- Do's
 - Clearly define the message
 - Develop a fact sheet
 - Create a strategy for addressing issues
 - Simplify/deconstruct complicated issues
 - Exhibit transparency in all actions
 - Address issues rather than personalities
- Taboos...Avoid
 - Veiled or cryptic comments or insinuations
 - Contentious and emotional public displays
 - The appearance of covert or hidden agendas
 - Being dismissive
 - Writing "poison pen" letters
 - Undisclosed or self-serving agendas
 - Hiding and avoiding all issues

26

Learning

- What appeared to be a bane became a benefit
 - Result: Increased visibility and financial support
- Ignoring does not make the problem disappear
- Issues are dynamic; they change quickly
- "One can build a mountain from a mole hill"
- Open, honest dialogue and transparency are extremely important
- Community awareness & accountability is tantamount
 - Ensure an on-going reality check
 - Community is solidly vested

27