

September 11th: Art Loss, Damage, and Repercussions

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THE DOWNTOWN INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

by JOHN HAWORTH

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This past weekend my museum had Native American storytellers read to capacity crowds. The National Museum of the American Indian's Heye Center in lower Manhattan is on the rebound. Let me start by reading from the story Coyote in Love with a Star by Marty Kriepke de Montano. This children's book published by the museum tells the tender story of Coyote coming to New York. On the cover is a picture of Coyote with the shirt "WTC [World Trade Center] Rodent Control."

Coyote the trickster had an idea—he would change himself into a sunflower! He did and, sure enough, one of the flower sellers picked him up and put him in his basket. Safe among the flowers, Coyote boarded the train. When the train reached the last stop, everyone rushed out of the doors. Coyote changed back into himself and followed the crowd. Soon he was staring up at two huge towers that stretched to the sky. The lobby of the tower was packed with people going to work. Surely someone with all his skills could get hired too.

Coyote was right. He found a job, and it was in his field, too. He became the Rodent Control Officer in the World Trade Center. But he was always homesick. On clear nights, Coyote would escape the noise and hurry of the city by going up to the observation deck to watch the stars as they danced across the sky. Once, when the stars came very close, he noticed one star that was more beautiful than all the rest. She was so beautiful that Coyote fell in love with her. (p. 14)

Here is the "quick history" to put my museum in the context of New York City history and downtown:

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My own "sound bite" is that the National Museum of the American Indian is about the People Who Were First Here, and—looking across the waterway—Ellis Island is about the People Who Came Here. The downtown New York cultural community—with significant museums focused primarily on history, architecture and cultural ideas—is second as a group only to our colleagues on Fifth Avenue [uptown]. Downtown itself is the third largest central business district in the country, and as we are recovering from 9/11, we need to celebrate, honor and support this cultural cluster. As the city, state, Mayor's Office, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, Regional Plan Association, and Municipal Arts Society, the American Institute of Architects, and others work through "What Next?", it is critical to have the cultural groups front and center in the rebuilding effort.

The building that houses my museum, the United States Custom House, itself was empty for about two decades. The custom agency itself moved into the World Trade Center.

In the 1980s there was considerable public discussion about the future of the Museum of the American Indian, once located at Audubon Terrace. Several options were put on the table, including moving the institution to Dallas, Texas. The compromise was a remarkable public-private partnership. The United States Congress passed legislation in 1989 to create the National Museum of the American Indian, and we currently are building a major museum on the National Mall in Washington. The Attorney General's Office in New York assured us that there also would be an ongoing—permanent—presence in New York. David Rockefeller was a strong advocate for the use of the U.S. Custom House as our New York headquarters. With the financial help of then Governor Mario Cuomo and then Mayor Ed Koch—certainly in difficult times financially for both the city and state—over \$17 million was provided by the New York State and New York City governments toward the capital renovation of the Custom House to accommodate the museum. The architectural firm of Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn did the renovations—with considerable national recognition and kudos. Though we have federal operating support—allowing us to be one of a handful of NYC museums with a free public admission—there is an expectation that we raise private sector funds to support educational programs and exhibitions.

EFFECTS OF 9/11 ON OUR GALLERIES AND COLLECTIONS

Fast forward to 9/11: Our building is four blocks from Ground Zero. Fortunately, our facilities staff moved swiftly to clear the building systems and close the air vents, thus minimizing infiltration and damage to our collection on exhibit. As an institution dealing with "organic" materials (textiles, Plains Shirts and so forth),

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our concern about dust and possible environmental contaminants was very high. In addition, because we are an institution with a Native American cultural base, the respect of traditions, including ceremonial protocols, informs the way we work. Major concerns about the air quality in lower Manhattan are well reported. We relied officially on the Environmental Protection Agency reports, which were posted throughout the museum in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Post 9/11, there was a massive neighborhood clean up, and inside our building, there was an extraordinary cleaning effort, as if we were asbestos contaminated (which we were not). Our landlord, the General Services Administration, cleaned the historic interior on a highly professional level. A Seth Eastman watercolor exhibit was on view 9/11 in an open area that was, fortunately, out of harm's way. (The exhibit was extended thanks to our lending partner, the Afton Press in Minnesota). The Reginald Marsh murals and the Tiffany work in the Collector's Office was all fine. The Rotunda and Collector's Office were part of a massive interior clean-up effort.

SECURITY

Our security measures have been stepped up significantly since 9/11. Security officers now do routine bag checks, and magnetometers have been installed. We are working very hard, however, to ensure that the visitor experience will continue to be positive and engaging. We are training not only the security officers, but also other staff members who interact directly with the public. The Smithsonian has an extensive design review process to deal with Fire Safety, egress and signage—and all of these issues are being given considerable attention. How shall I say this? We've always been focused on these matters, but now, even more so.

HOW THE MUSEUM'S STAFF RESPONDED

Staff responses to 9/11 on various issues were diverse—from perceptions about air quality and security, to how best to address individual employee issues and overall staff morale in the context of such difficult circumstances. Indeed, staff members at all levels had a broad range of responses! From a management perspective, dealing with those concerns—along with the urgency of all that was going on last Fall—was complicated and extremely challenging.

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On September 11th, one staff member was near the World Trade Center and was hit by building debris. Another person was coming to work from New Jersey and was in the PATH train station at time of impact. Another had a child in a neighborhood school. Others have had terrible commuting problems for months (and still do). Some staff have lost what counselors might refer to as a "sense of boundaries and what is appropriate." Others responded to 9/11 by going overboard with communication, while still others became unusually silent. Many people were in a "panic" mode for weeks. Overall, the staff has been strong, capable, professional and dedicated to the museum's mission throughout these difficult months.

The museum welcomed the staff back with a special lunch and had regular and frequent meetings, especially those first few weeks after 9/11. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services with both one-on-one and group counseling have been provided. All of this has been extremely tiring and has tested my own capacities as a museum professional and manager. There have been departmental jurisdiction questions, complicated by our residing in a building with other tenants (for example, the General Services Administration, Federal Protective Services, and Bankruptcy Courts). We are still ironing out how best to handle a myriad of policies to address emergency responses, fire drills, disaster preparedness plans (which take into account both people and collections) and even the protocols of employee telephone trees, the need for quality time for staff with discussions, and, of course, trying our best to listen to one another's concerns and issues.

LESSON LEARNED

I was asked by IFAR to address what lessons were learned as a result of 9/11:

- From watching visitors, I have learned that people really are "paying attention"; they are really looking at our exhibits on a far deeper level with greater focus and concentration. That's good!
- I have learned that staff considerations should always inform what we do and how we do it.
- I have come to appreciate more fully who has the commitment to do museum work, and especially, who is committed to the public service role that museums have.

My downtown museum colleagues and I continue dealing with enormous "downtown" issues, concerning both employees and public. With a lot of help from our community and staff, however, the museum was able to reopen the doors on October 1st.

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When the museum opened in 1994, the projections were an annual audience of about 250,000. In reality, we attracted roughly 300,000 the first year, 400,000 the second year, and at least a half million in subsequent years. The National Museum of the American Indian has become one of the most popular family destinations in the New York metropolitan area, clearly establishing itself as one of the cultural anchors downtown. Our attendance—due to cutbacks in school visits and the public's apprehension about coming downtown in the aftermath of 9/11—was off by more than 50% in both October and November; however, December was more encouraging, though still lower than the previous year by about 25%—with about 25,000 visitors! Yes, indeed, visitors are coming to "The Platform" [World Trade Center viewing platform] to pay their respects; the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island have reopened, and the downtown community—with tremendous and focused support from the Alliance for Downtown NY and NYC & Company—is on the comeback trail, though we still have a long way to go.

How about our programs? What about our facility? We are developing a raw ground—floor space—the Pavilion, which is directly underneath the Rotunda—as a family destination complete with active public programs, residencies, and exhibitions. The City of New York came through with \$1 million in capital funds this current fiscal year (FY 2002), and we are moving forward with plans to open this facility in early 2004. Given the severe losses in public spaces from 9/11—although I do speak with my own institutional bias!—this space is especially for downtown right now.

CURRENT PROGRAMS AND RESPONSES

What now? What programs are planned? This spring, we'll have a significant program focused on the Mohawk Ironworkers (complementing the current Iroquois beadwork exhibit "Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life"—which was positively reviewed recently by the New York Times, among others) with an accompanying photography exhibit. The Mohawk Ironworkers helped build many NY skyscrapers, including the World Trade Center, and they also are involved in clearing Ground Zero. Our Mohawk friends have been coming frequently to the museum these past few months. We also have a major Mexican exhibit opening in the summer, a residency by a Native American cultural leader, Walking Thunder, this spring, and a vibrant exhibit program. We were slowed down by 9/11, but frankly, the Show Must Go On, and it does, and it will.

In sum, life in lower Manhattan has new and different challenges, and certainly, public safety and security are key issues. I envision a future that puts cultural institutions in the limelight as entities to attract a global

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audience to our neighborhood. Lower Manhattan is very much on the rebound; however, the positive cooperation of people at every level—from the community board to the board room to the street to our cultural institutions—is critical to assuring success.

In closing, I will again read from Coyote in Love with a Star :

Every night when the stars came out, Coyote waited until the beautiful star came near the observation deck, and then he howled and howled, begging her to take him up into the sky. He wanted to dance with her. At first she just ignored him. But one night, after he pleaded and begged, the star danced over and pulled him into the sky, and they began to dance together. As they danced across the sky, he was so happy he thought his heart would burst.

I look forward to days when all of us will again be so very happy that our hearts will burst. Thank you for inviting me to be on this panel.