

MUSEUM WITHOUT A MISSION: A Case Study on The Role of Mission in a 21st-Century Nonprofit Arts Organization

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INTRODUCTION

There is broad interdisciplinary consensus across the nonprofit arts management field that a clear, robust mission, as expressed in the formal mission statement, is of critical importance to an organization's success. In *A Simple Statement: A Guide to Nonprofit Arts Management & Leadership*, Jamie Grady, for example, argues that a well-functioning organization is guided by a mission that articulates the organization's purpose and philosophical foundation: "The mission statement is at the core of every successful organization. A strong and carefully crafted mission statement can identify the extent of operation, facilitate an organization's decision-making, communicate an organization's values and priorities, and motivate and unite an organization's stakeholders" (6). Likewise, Gail Anderson writes in her introduction to *Reinventing the Museum*: "Values are not just words – they are principles that guide the institution on all levels – the people, nature of communications, sense of place, and reason for being" (6).

In the spring of 2011 the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) – located in East Harlem along the northern reach of Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile – was braving an uncertain period in its 88-year history. Having recently emerged from its near dissolution, the Museum was successfully undergoing a major revival of its historic home while also thoroughly cataloguing its collections for the first time and re-housing many of them. Stabilizing both the building and the collections were unquestionably top priorities. But while these structural improvements brought the institution into 21st-century museum practice, MCNY's purpose for being in a crowded and competitive cultural marketplace remained far less clear. As a result, the organization struggled to understand its mission as a city museum even as its building underwent a stunning renaissance.

This case study allows us to test widely held beliefs across the field of nonprofit arts management scholarship and practice on the role of mission in organizational success. As an experiential analysis, it is based on my own observations and experiences as Director of Grants at MCNY from May 2011 to October 2012. Because this fundraising position encompassed all areas of the Museum (special exhibitions, collections, a large education department, public programs, general operations, and an ongoing capital project) it allowed me an especially expansive view of the museum's operations.

¹ Writing about a former workplace is challenging. I have sought to be as even-handed as possible. Unless otherwise noted all the evidence cited in this study is based either on my own recollections of conversations, meetings, and internal proceedings that I personally witnessed during my tenure at the museum or on museum-approved grant proposals. While several colleagues from that time period have been kind enough to confirm my memories where possible, any errors are entirely mine and also entirely unintended.

While the evidence here strongly supports current research on the function and importance of mission, the lessons are noteworthy as the arts community enters what threatens to be an increasingly unforgiving climate, as forecast by Michael Kaiser, the former head of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts:

Only a few arts organizations are managed well, with consistent vigor and focus. Too many do little or no real planning. These institutions fail to produce interesting art, do not know how to market or raise funds, are governed by weak or ineffective boards, have failed to exploit new technologies wisely, and are clumsy about embracing supporters, both old and new. And while many of these organizations got by in the past, surviving the bumps and bruises, I fear their path will become ever more perilous. I am not optimistic that such institutions will exist two decades from now (Kaiser, *Curtains* x).

This study will first briefly review current scholarship on mission before situating the Museum and its mission in the context of New York City's cultural landscape. It will then provide a concrete examination of the ways in which a weak mission negatively affected MCNY's operations, especially in two key areas of museum practice: exhibitions and fundraising.

THE ARGUMENT FOR THE CRITICAL ROLE PLAYED BY MISSION

A review of current scholarship on arts management reveals a near unanimous agreement that arts organizations imbued with a strong sense of purpose – who *know who they are* – benefit in a number of concrete ways. Their operations grow out of, and are nurtured by, a living, breathing sense of mission. This self-confidence allows organizations to take the considered risks necessary for the creation of exciting artistic presentations that aim for excellence. In the museum context, this translates as the courage to mount stimulating, well conceived exhibitions that open up new ways of seeing and invite dialogue and debate; to truly welcome and involve both new and traditional audiences; and to offer educational and public programs consistent with this spirit of curiosity and openness, what Randi Korn nicely terms a “culture of inquiry” (217). Below is a brief overview of key themes in the literature.

Broad Consensus on Importance of Mission

In her analysis of the Panel on the Nonprofit Sector's recommendations for good governance, Erin Puskar describes the mission as “an organization's *raison d'être*, the ‘why’ that drives all activities as well as artistic and/or educational programming” (5). David M. Conte and Stephen Langley, writing in *Theatre Management: Producing and Managing the Performing Arts*, refer to the mission as the “conscience” of an organization and particularly stress the importance of “a unified vision between management and artistic leadership” (3). In its “Twelve Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards,” the organization BoardSource writes: “Exceptional boards shape and uphold the mission, articulate a compelling vision, and ensure the congruence between decisions and core values” (473). In sum, the mission is both the gravity that holds an organization together and the sun around which all its various parts – programming, education, community engagement, communications, marketing, fundraising, various partnerships, stakeholder relations – revolve.

Creating Exciting Art

Beyond its power to unify, a strong mission provides numerous benefits, from encouraging creativity and innovation to structuring positive growth. “Turnaround King” Michael M. Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center from 2001–2014, argues that an effective mission lays the groundwork for embracing boldness and pushing artistic boundaries. Both of these are key ingredients for making art that matters. The mission, rightly conceived and enacted, will empower an organization to take the risks necessary for creating exciting art (*The Cycle* 10-11). Timidity, on the other hand, is a recipe for failure. In art and culture museums, timidity can result in exhibitions and public programs that feel remote, fusty, fearful, or unwelcoming. They may discourage alternate viewpoints or shy away from edifying controversy. Instead of engaging the public they may seek to pander or merely to entertain.

Fostering Constructive Growth

A strong mission also allows for an organization’s constructive growth, consistent with its founding purpose, yet flexible enough to respond to change both within the organization and outside its walls. Such an example, albeit in the popular performing arts, is found in the Apollo Theater, a fixture in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood since its opening as a for-profit venue in 1934. The performers it launched and nurtured form a “Who’s Who” list of major 20th-century African American entertainers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Sammy Davis, Jr., James Brown, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Stephanie Mills, Michael Jackson, and Savion Glover. Having transitioned to a nonprofit governing structure in 1991 in response to falling revenues and a neighborhood then in decline, the theater has striven in the first two decades of the 21st century to maintain its historic mission while finding relevance within an evolving Harlem now marked by gentrification and gleaming modern condos on the one hand, and burgeoning Hispanic, Arab, and native African populations on the other. The result is a newly conceived slate of programming that, while a departure from previous models, builds on the theater’s legacy by cultivating and presenting the work of a new generation of performing artists, both African American and beyond (Maurrasse 230-233).

Building Audiences

With a strong mission as its foundation, an arts organization is able to coherently attract museumgoers and expand audiences, while building a powerful brand that embodies the organization’s distinctive version of excellence or its “unique role” among museums, “reflect[ing] the spirit and passion of the institution” (Adams 395-396). Donna Walker-Kuhne, who has advised The Public Theater, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the Apollo Theater on audience-building strategies, has said: “It’s important to have not only a dream, but also a *plan*. I have worked with arts organizations who were eager to expand their audiences but had no mission or sense of investment in the process. Ultimately, their efforts never took root and were, in fact, wasted...” (7). These organizations, she suggests, lack not only the will to grow audiences, but also the will to know who they are and what they want. Similarly, Marianna Adams and Judy Koke address the problem of museums that wish to better serve the public, but are hampered by “amorphous intentions, and no straight path” (395).

Building Brand

An organization's brand is essentially its mission enacted and then effectively publicized. It is possible for an organization to have a well-honed mission without much of a brand, and in fact, this is the norm for new or small outfits, especially those with an emphasis on arts education rather than performance or exhibitions. But it is not equally possible to have an effective brand without an effective mission. This interdependent nature of the relationship between brand and mission is articulated by the former President of Lincoln Center, Reynold Levy: "One of Lincoln Center's most treasured attributes is the strength of its brand. The power of an excellent reputation for first-class quality in discharging its multifaceted mission is a prized asset" (287). Without that mission in place, there would be nothing to fulfill. On the strength of a powerful mission, an organization, especially a large organization like Lincoln Center or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, can wield enormous influence and good will, bringing audiences from around the world to experience first-rate art.

The Consequences of A Weak Mission

Conversely, a weak, contradictory, or obsolete mission lies at the roots of organizational failure, whether programmatic or financial. Kaiser relates: "I have observed many organizations that suffer from 'mission drift,' because they are constantly adding programs that fall outside the boundaries of their mission statements.... Eventually, after a series of these projects have been added, no one can explain the real mission" (*Leading Roles* 10). Reasons for diluting the mission usually center on perceived financial prudence: chasing after grant opportunities, accepting convenient partnerships, and embracing "found" projects (as when a patron offers to underwrite an exhibition of a friend's work). But other reasons include a mission that is too vague or one whose original purpose no longer makes sense in the contemporary context.

Whatever its reason, mission drift ends up costing an organization not just in financial terms – by saddling the annual budget with extraneous programming – but also in programmatic terms. Audiences, museumgoers, patrons, and the larger community no longer have a clear sense of the organization's reason for being. In an attempt to please everyone – and do everything – an organization ends up satisfying no one.

The effects of mission drift are compounded by the fact that it is the mission that functions as the yardstick by which an organization assesses its strengths and weaknesses. Michael Kaiser nicely summarizes this evaluative function: "A mission is a contract between ourselves and our public that defines how we are going to measure success" (*The Cycle* 9). Without a clear tool, self-evaluation becomes a wobbly endeavor, relying on the subjective impressions of various stakeholders, who, while often well intentioned, come to the task with competing or irrelevant agendas.

For an institution in the midst of rejuvenation such as MCNY in 2011-2012, this lack of clarity can be particularly hazardous: "Without a sensible vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing and incompatible projects that can take the organization in the wrong direction or nowhere at all.... In failed transformations, you often find plenty of plans, directives, and programs but no vision" (Kotter 525).

SITUATING THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK: ITS CHALLENGES AND ITS SENSE OF MISSION IN MAY 2011

As a museum dedicated to a major city enjoying a huge popularity across the globe, MCNY's potential was great. Its collections encompass approximately one million objects, with particular strengths in a stellar collection of photography, including 2,300 Berenice Abbott and 1,400 Jacob Riis images; rare manuscripts, maps, and prints, including nearly all images of the over 3,000 existing prints by Currier and Ives; a comprehensive Broadway Theater collection, including the Yiddish theater; notable collections of costumes, including leading works by couturiers; a leading collection of New York furniture found in any museum with particular strengths in the early 19th century, along with supporting collections of glass, silver, and ceramics; a collection of paintings and prints featuring the New York waterfront; and a notable collection of portrait paintings with especial strengths in the pre-antebellum period.

In 2011, a new state-of-the-art curatorial center housed the photographs, costumes, and paper-based objects (while furniture and other objects were still in less adequate storage facilities in Brooklyn). These collections were all in the process of being fully catalogued for the first time. Starting with the Photography Collection, the Museum's holdings were also undergoing digitization and were being made accessible to Internet viewers. In addition, MCNY enjoyed the support of several loyal generations of New Yorkers who grew up visiting its period rooms and dollhouses.

On a less positive note, in the late spring of 2011 the Museum of the City of New York had recently stared down, or was still facing, a series of threats to its very existence. These had encompassed a badly deteriorated facility; a dropped plan to move operations to downtown Manhattan; difficulties in attracting visitors to a neighborhood wedged between the Upper East Side to the south and a revitalizing Harlem to the north; and, arguably most serious of all, an internal – and therefore also external – confusion about the very nature of MCNY's purpose as a city museum: history, arts, culture, design and architecture, current events forum, all of these, or something else entirely? While the first two of these perils had been resolved, the second two were still in play.

A Renovated Building

In 2003, as it underwent a change in leadership, the Museum had been jeopardized by a museum structure, erected in 1929, that was in shambles. Covering the entire block between 103rd and 104th Streets, across from Central Park's Conservatory Garden, the hulking six-story, red brick colonial revival building was hampered by no climate control, moldering and uncataloged collections sitting in boxes in the basement, leaking pipes and roofs, and exhibition spaces completely unsuited to modern conditions. Staff members from that time recall drafts, water dripping into buckets, and space heaters under desks. In the summer, air-conditioning units were stuck in windows. Other museums refused loans given the appalling conditions and the likelihood of damage to fragile items.

Various ideas had been floated to move the Museum to another facility in a more hospitable locale. Under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani a plan was formed to relocate the Museum to the Tweed Courthouse downtown near City Hall. However, with the election of Michael

Bloomberg, these plans fell through when the new mayor decided he would like to showcase his revamped Department of Education in the coveted Tweed building. Other abandoned plans included a merger with the New-York Historical Society and an eventual move to the new facilities at a rebuilt Ground Zero.

Ultimately, the Museum leadership decided to keep MCNY on Fifth Avenue and press for the modernization of its historic home. By 2011, this capital project had grown to \$89 million, of which \$80 million had been raised. The City, along with several significant private partners, provided this funding. MCNY is one of the 34 cultural organizations in New York City designated as the Cultural Institutions Group, or CIG, which ensures public investment especially for capital expenses.

With this funding, the state-of-the-art curatorial center had been completed on parts of the ground floor and underground, a new exhibition space had been added to the back of the first floor (over the new curatorial center), the top two floors of administrative space boasted Herman Miller-designed carrels, and a new education facility was about to open on the ground floor level. The exhibition space on the south side of the building was newly renovated (with proper climate-control) and the grand white marble staircase in the entrance rotunda was restored, one of the few historical features that remained.

The “Old New York” aspect of the Museum, which had been its dominant character and focus since its founding, was largely erased in the renovation. Even the specially designed chandelier hanging over the rotunda would eventually be removed. Only the exterior with its formal façade featuring statues of Alexander Hamilton and DeWitt Clinton retained its earlier feel.

Still left to be completed were the north side of the building, a more gracious upstairs café space, and most critically, the design for the display of the Permanent Collections, which would involve several of the six floors. These plans for the Permanent Collections kept shifting along with the overarching concept of what the Permanent Collections space should be and do, and even which floors it would cover. With the overall plans in flux, one piece of it, an interactive exhibition on social activism, was slated to open in May 2012 on the second floor. This space would feature a series of installations featuring 14 New York movements ranging from the mid-17th century to the present. How this would interrelate to the complete scheme was undecided.

Meanwhile, with parts of the massive building closed for construction, much of it remained open to the public, including a small café on the ground floor and a gift shop next to admissions.

An Uncertain Destination

In May 2011 MCNY was largely empty of visitors. The only other cultural sites nearby were El Museo del Barrio across 104th to its north and, across Fifth Avenue, the northwestern quadrant of Central Park, which remained relatively tourist free compared to the southern reaches of the Park. To the east, in East Harlem proper, were banks of public housing projects and to the south lay a number of medical facilities, anchored by the Mount Sinai Hospital

complex. The Jewish Museum, at 93rd Street, was ten blocks away, and the Guggenheim, at 89th, even more remote. Moreover, there were no restaurants or shops, save those at El Museo, to act as enticements for tourists and locals from other areas of the city.

Complicating matters further was the existence across Central Park of another city-related museum, the New-York Historical Society, which was better known, better marketed, and arguably, better at bringing exhibitions and events to the public. It also had the luck of being next door to the hugely popular American Museum of Natural History and being flanked by a neighborhood, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, full of shops and eateries.

A large percentage (40% by one accounting) of MCNY's visitors were Europeans accustomed to the great city museums of their own and neighboring nations.² The Museum's own surveys otherwise showed that the most loyal visitors were educated, middle-class New Yorkers from solid, un-chic neighborhoods such as Riverdale in the Bronx and Forest Hills in Queens. Despite free admission underwritten by Target for neighborhood residents in East Harlem, very few locals visited the Museum. The most reliable source of foot traffic were the numerous school groups who came for its education programs, for which schools were charged a fee of \$125 per class. With the recession, this fee limited the participation of some schools, though the overall number of school groups was fairly stable. Most of the Museum's own outreach was focused on the Upper East Side, the nearby uptown neighborhood known for its wealth and staid character. The Museum's most stalwart patrons continued to be concentrated in the city's old-money families and their circle, the descendants of the same families that had founded the Museum and donated much of its collections.

Exhibitions on view that spring were the period rooms, a dollhouse, a small display of toys on the ground floor, and a 20-minute film about New York City history that looped around, showing every hour. While in need of refurbishment, the period rooms – which traced the city's interior styles as enjoyed by successive generations of its upper crust from the Dutch founding to the early 20th century – were a staple of the museum and its most popular feature. Nevertheless the period rooms were slated for removal during the next phase of the capital project, with no plans for their reinstatement.

In addition, there was one special exhibition on the theater actor Joel Grey, best known for his lead role in *Cabaret*. It featured several photographs from the Museum's own collection, as well as borrowed works and objects, some from Mr. Grey himself. About half the exhibition featured photographs taken by the actor of close-up city scenes (a cobblestone, a brick, a bit of shadow). A recently published book of these photographs was prominently for sale in the Museum's shop. The two parts of this exhibition – the theater actor and the art photographer – were loosely cobbled together.

Members of the museum staff were disheartened one afternoon to overhear a man's one-sided conversation into his cell phone: "Don't bother coming over here. There's nothing to see." Another visitor exclaimed to her friend on the elevator: "This is a really weird museum."

² This number was cited in internal discussions. Since there was no precise mechanism in place to accurately capture this kind of data, it was understood to be a rough estimation.

An Unsettled Mission

The Museum's formal mission statement in 2011 was as follows:

*The Museum of the City of New York celebrates and interprets the city, educating the public about its distinctive character, especially its heritage of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation. Founded in 1923 as a private, nonprofit corporation, the Museum connects the past, present, and future of New York City. It serves the people of New York and visitors from around the world through exhibitions, school and public programs, publications, and collections.*³

Gail Anderson, in *Museum Mission Statements: Building a Distinct Identity*, notes, "most museum mission statements fall short because they simply list museum activities and fail to identify a greater purpose.... They are uninspiring and vague, and many sound formulaic" (14). In contrast, MCNY's mission statement is arguably too specific. While falling somewhat short in articulating a driving purpose, it quickly seizes upon arbitrary details. Why specify "diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation"? Are there no other interpretive frameworks through which the city can be understood? Parts of the statement are poorly written, especially the business about "connecting" the past, present, and future. Yet its emphasis on New York City is surely correct given that MCNY is a city museum. In the final analysis, while the mission statement as written leaves room for improvement, semantics is not the paramount issue. The problem in 2011 was not so much with the mission statement as it was with the Museum's applied sense of its mission.

Much of MCNY's confusion over mission derived from a perceived contradiction between its role as a city museum and its role as an arts and cultural organization, especially given the nature of its collections which were strongly oriented toward the arts. This tension, which was not inevitably destined to be a major roadblock, had become one nevertheless. An example of this conflict was the Museum's decision to reorient a successful education program that featured live performances for children and hands-on art projects toward a study of land use, architecture, and transportation. The rationale for this refocus was the belief that MCNY was not an arts museum, and therefore had no business conducting arts education programming. Instead of a museum that featured art (whether visual or performing), the Museum, as it understood its own mission, was to be a place that examined New York City's past, present, and future, as explicitly directed by the mission statement. But the placement of the arts outside of the Museum's focus raised more questions than it answered.

First, was the collection itself, on which any museum is founded. This fundamental purpose remains in place even as museums have typically broadened their missions in the late 20th and early 21st centuries to function as "responsive institutions" that engage and empower various communities (Black 281). While innovative and expansive uses of their collections have enlivened, and arguably improved, how they operate and interact with museumgoers and the community in general, museums must still conserve their particular holdings and make them available to the public in meaningful and timely ways.

³ As of April 2016, the mission remained unchanged. See <http://www.mcny.org/?q=content/about-city-museum>

The arts are the great strength of MCNY's collections. Its more notable holdings – photography, costumes, prints, the Broadway Theater collection, paintings, furniture – are solidly within the purview of a traditional art and culture museum, as well as squarely relevant to a more civically-focused city museum. Yet, while the Museum's senior leadership was positive about aspects of the collections – principally the maps and photographs – it tended to view the preponderance of them as either problematic or as a downright burden. The inability to think through the plans for the display of the Permanent Collection (as described above) was clearly a function of this ambivalence.

Second, New York City already had a history museum, the well-regarded New-York Historical Society. Was there a place for another one (in addition to the various historical sites and smaller museums located across the five boroughs such as the Brooklyn Historical Society and the Morris-Jumel Mansion in upper Manhattan)?

And third was the incomparable place of the arts in New York City life and history. The rich and varied role of the arts – visual, theater, dance, music, literary, design, fashion, popular – could provide the key to many important and compelling stories illuminating, among other topics, immigration, diverse populations, class tensions, and towering fame and accomplishment. Just three of many examples are the Harlem Renaissance, Edith Wharton's New York, and the Astor Place Shakespeare riots (in which 25 people were killed and 120 injured in a dispute over which Shakespeare actor, one American and one English, was superior). The story of New York necessarily includes the story of the arts, which in itself also includes commerce, politics, class conflict, and the roles of racial, ethnic, and religious groups.

The Museum sought to resolve these mission-related tensions by focusing on the city through a lens of architecture and design, with public programs that centered on current events. The status of the arts (outside of architecture and design) was left as an open, and contested, question. While the arts, especially the performing arts, were banished from the Education department, many of the planned special exhibitions were arts centered, including one on American Impressionism and another on the Yiddish Theater (neither of which ultimately got off the ground due to difficulties in funding, borrowing, and the like).

EXHIBITIONS

As New York City readied itself for the upcoming ten-year anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Museum of the City of New York was busy with the opening of a major new special exhibition on the colonial revival style of architecture and interior design (with the Museum's own building as exhibit #1). The exhibition, *The American Style: Colonial Revival and the Modern Metropolis*, which occupied the new gallery on the main floor, also provided the content for much of its education programming that summer and fall. Showcasing a number of borrowed items from other museums, the exhibition helped to mark a turning point in MCNY's evolution to a fully functioning modern museum.

The American Style was well received critically, garnering a coveted review in the *New York Times* by Edward Rothstein: "Though this is a small exhibition, there is much to see and

think about... Who can leave this exhibition, look back at that building's columns, broken pediments, fan windows and simple geometries and not begin to see what was once unseen?" However, the exhibition did not increase foot traffic to any great degree. And as a subject for children's education programming it was also something of a hard sell, as exemplified by the valiant effort of a young member of the Museum's teaching staff to engage a group of African American middle-school students on the distinctions between Ionic and Corinthian columns. While polite, the students wore expressions that varied from disbelief to boredom.

During a staff meeting that summer Museum leadership acknowledged that the city museum should be contributing somehow to the upcoming 9/11 commemorations. Hasty plans were made to hang a series of photographs of the still-standing World Trade Towers as well as some paintings by a young artist, now deceased. While the photographs by Camilo José Vergara were generally well received, neither display represented a weighty response to the moment. It is also notable that both of these were art-based.

In the fall of 2011 the Museum did manage, in a significant step, to increase the number of its special exhibitions to four (with three on show concurrently): *The American Style: Colonial Revival and the Modern Metropolis*, June 14-October 30, 2011; *Kevin Roche: Architecture as Environment*, September 27, 2011-February 5, 2012; *Cecil Beaton: The New York Years*, October 25, 2011-April 22, 2012; and *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011*, December 6, 2011-July 15, 2012.

Unlike *The American Style*, which was organized by Museum staff, *Kevin Roche* was borrowed from the Yale School of Architecture. It featured the work of Pritzker Prize-winning Irish architect Kevin Roche, who has designed a number of famous buildings around the world, including New York City. Notable among these was the Ford Foundation headquarters and additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since the original show had not focused on New York, nor made the case for Roche as a particularly significant New York-based figure, MCNY modified its version to concentrate on Roche's buildings in New York. This exhibition was located in the renovated north gallery on the Museum's main floor.

Cecil Beaton, also MCNY-organized, was the first show to appear in the newly reopened south gallery, likewise on the main floor. Using several photographs from the Museum's collection, it showcased photography, set design, and some interior design elements by the midcentury English designer, celebrity photographer, and man-about-town. In addition to his photography for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, Beaton designed costumes and stage sets for dance, theater, and Hollywood. Most of the works appearing in this exhibition were either done in New York or featured New York-based subjects. The corridor leading to the exhibition was decorated with large pink and black stencils that evoked Beaton's signature style (a kind of overripe classicism).

With *The American Style* occupying the new gallery through the end of October, the Museum in September 2011 offered visitors three special exhibitions on the ground floor along with the renovated reception hall and the gift shop. Several smaller displays, including the paintings and photography featuring the Twin Towers, were upstairs on the second floor. MCNY had turned a corner; it felt like a museum.

And yet attendance that autumn fell below internal projections. Due to its tight budget, MCNY spent little for publicity and marketing. But there was also a sense that these offerings didn't excite the visitors who did find their way through the Museum's doors. Guards and Admission staff reported dissatisfied customers and unkind comments. The city museum wasn't doing what people expected it to do.

Taken together, these three exhibitions – *The American Style*, *Kevin Roche*, and *Cecil Beaton* – reveal three issues: First, all were on subjects relating to architecture or design. Second, all focused on relatively arcane topics not of obvious interest to the typical New Yorker or tourist. And third, none of these exhibitions focused primarily on New York City.

MCNY's mission statement sets forth three goals for its activities:

1. To celebrate and interpret the city, educating the public about its distinctive character.
2. To especially focus on its heritage of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation.
3. To connect the past, present, and future of New York City.

Held against these standards, the three exhibitions missed the mark. The theme of *The American Style* was the resiliency of the colonial style over time, not its perpetual transformation. It is also not a particularly New York phenomenon, though New York is an important site. And far from being a celebration of diversity, the colonial style is quintessentially WASP. It was specifically intended to help turn immigrants – who might buy an Ethan Allen dining set or colonial-themed wallpaper – into proper Americans. *Kevin Roche* was even less concerned with the above themes. *Cecil Beaton* touched on New York, but it was certainly not about diversity, opportunity, or perpetual transformation. It is not clear what exactly is meant by “connecting” the city's past, present, and future. But to the degree that it means providing the city with an understanding of its past, these exhibitions, while not wholly irrelevant, achieved this in a roundabout manner at best.

September 2011, in addition to being the anniversary of 9/11, was also the month that protests began downtown, centered in the financial district's Zuccotti Park, that would become known around the world as Occupy Wall Street. A spirit of rebellion was in the air. MCNY's genteel exhibitions that fall, with their fan windows and pink wallpaper, were out of step with the day's events, and seemed strangely remote from the city they were supposed to be illuminating. (The gallery devoted to social activism would not open until the next spring.)

Nevertheless, there were some real successes for these exhibitions. Along with the positive reviews for *The American Style*, the *Cecil Beaton* exhibition and its accompanying book received good press in the *New York Times* by Joseph Berger, among other publications. But the most significant impact was the opportunity presented by *Kevin Roche* to open doors at the Ford Foundation, whose headquarters were featured in the show. Ford, which had not recently supported MCNY, provided both a generous grant for the exhibition and hosted a reception and talk with the architect at its home on East 43rd Street.

At the end of October 2011 *The American Style* closed, to be replaced in early December by *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011*. This show, guest curated by an urban and architecture historian, took full advantage of the MCNY's ability to borrow once again from other museums and collections. The richly textured display traced the development of Manhattan's street grid from its founding in 1811 to the present, with a section devoted to future and fantastical visions for the borough. While not a subject that might immediately seem sexy, it proved from the get-go to be a wild success with both critics and visitors. A glowing, front-page article by the *Times*'s architecture critic Michael Kimmelman and another in the *Wall Street Journal* by Ada Louise Huxtable further drove a wave of visitors to the Museum.

Suddenly, there were lines in the previously sleepy café and the Museum Shop was ordering new inventory. By the time the show closed the next July, it had fueled a 20% increase in Museum attendance (with much of that increase concentrated in the opening months of the exhibition when excitement was high) and provided over \$100,000 of earned income from the companion book.⁴

Unlike the previous three exhibitions, *The Greatest Grid* hewed to MCNY's mission. *The Greatest Grid* educated visitors by revealing a largely unknown history that lies in plain sight right under their feet. It showed transformation over time. It celebrated the opportunity taken by the planners to shape the city forever. It discussed the role of immigrants and the development of neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side and Harlem. And it was organized chronologically, as well as thematically, from the city's early days to the present, with a section on New York's the future. It also notably combined history and design into a seamless whole. Most important, *The Greatest Grid* fulfilled the expectations that people bring to a city museum.

In the wake of this success, however, the Museum's leadership revealed little awareness of the mission-related factors driving it. Instead, its popularity and critical praise was attributed solely to the exhibition having been well conceived and well executed.

FUNDRAISING

In 2011 the proposals for general operating grants regularly sent to potential funders consisted of a two-page cover letter and an attached 11-page proposal. For renewal funding, an additional report on the previous fiscal year was also included. Each of these three documents began with minimally varied versions of the same paragraph:

The Museum of the City of New York, unique in its position as an interpreter of the city and its rich history, educates the public about New York City's distinctive character, especially its heritage of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation. We have welcomed visitors from the city, the region, and the world to our landmark building on Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile since 1923. In the 21st Century, the Museum increasingly functions as an essential forum for understanding the city's dynamic past and exploring critical issues of today and tomorrow.

⁴ This data is taken from the exhibition report sent to funders.

This paragraph is a slight re-wording of the official mission statement (see above). After this opening gambit, the proposal read as a laundry list of MCNY's activities from special exhibitions, the capital project, the digitization of the Photography Collection, and so on. There was little "glue" holding it all together, and no overarching purpose expressed beyond what appears in the paragraph above. The cover letter, which was updated regularly, served to highlight upcoming special exhibitions or other noteworthy happenings (all of which were also discussed in the proposal itself). The report, when included, was yet another iteration of the same activities.

There was a lot to be desired by this approach from the point of view of grant writing. It was repetitious, dull, and far too long. The day when foundation staff welcomes 13-20 pages of text, single spaced, is long gone. The documents came across as out of date, as well as tin-eared toward current funding priorities, which center on increasing access and presenting art that speaks meaningfully to diverse audiences.

But the problem with these proposals was not merely one of style. On the contrary, the stylistic flaws were a function of the far more significant problem of a vague mission. When there is no *raison d'être* – or gravity, glue, or conscience (to evoke the various metaphors employed for an effective mission) – at the center of an organization, it is reduced to a mere roster of activities. It is also the case that the decentralized impression communicated by these proposals – that there was no glue holding things together – was an accurate reflection of the Museum's operations.

The three principal areas of operation – exhibitions, collections, and education – were not in sync. The professionals running these areas were not always kept abreast of the other areas, and the mandates for their particular area often contradicted the direction for others. This has already been seen in the example of the Education Department being told to eschew the performing arts, while the Collections team catalogued the Broadway Theater Collection (along with the Fine and Decorative Arts Collections) and the Curatorial and Fundraising team sought to launch an exhibition on Yiddish Theater.

The impact of the poorly conceived proposals is hard to gauge with any certainty, given the number of factors that go into successful fundraising. But they certainly did not help. And there is no question that raising general operating funds was exceedingly difficult; it was the main reason a new Director of Grants was hired.

Further illustrating the muddy approach to fundraising was a meeting called by Museum leadership with the four-person grant writing team in early 2012. It had been recognized that funding for special exhibitions was not as robust as it should be due to a lack of long-term planning. The fundraising team could not raise money for exhibitions without knowing which exhibitions were slated for the coming year and beyond. In advance of the meeting the Curatorial Department had sent up several copies of a hand-written list of roughly 30 ideas, most limited to a word or two such as "American Impressionism" or "Graffiti." With no other information, each member of the team was asked to choose two exhibitions to be responsible for. The exhibitions picked that day were woven into the working plan for the next several seasons, with several

subsequently presented, including *City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection* and *Affordable New York*.

It is an understatement to say that this is *not* the way to plan programming at a major cultural institution. Fundraising should never drive programming, and even worse, development staff, including junior level employees, should never choose special exhibitions by virtually pulling names out of a hat. These exhibitions could only be chosen in this haphazard way because there was no overriding mission to drive the process instead. In the absence of an effective mission, short-term thinking prevailed over establishing long-term priorities.

Notably, the one area where fundraising was a great success during this timeframe was the capital project. Some of this achievement was due to city funding, of course. And much was due to the commitment of the board and the leadership's passion for the project. The impact of these factors cannot be discounted. But the urgency driving the need for major renovations was absolutely clear. The very existence of MCNY, which is implicitly mission-driven, was at stake. Clarity drives fundraising, and it is the mission that provides clarity.

CONCLUSION

This case study analyzes the Museum of the City of New York from May 2011 into the summer of 2012 during a period of both dramatic transformation and daunting challenges for the nearly 90-year old cultural organization. Its uncertain path forward was compounded by a mission that was alternately unclear and disregarded.

In 2011-2012, as the Museum of the City of New York hoped for a revitalized presence in New York City's vast array of cultural offerings, its ill-defined and contradictory sense of its own mission, as a lived experience, failed to provide a guiding vision for the organization across its operations. Its principle activities – exhibitions, collections, and education – were working at cross-purposes. Its distinctive role in New York's saturated arts and cultural environment was left unclaimed. It was unaware of how it could serve the public in ways that truly mattered to its key stakeholders. All organizations need to define what they can do uniquely well, whether that *something* is narrowly or widely conceived. The Museum had not answered that key question for itself. It did not know *who it was*.

As a direct result of its lax mission, the Museum's leadership made a number of preventable mistakes such as relying on short-term planning, letting fundraising dictate programming priorities, mounting exhibitions that were irrelevant to visitor expectations, and putting off plans for the display of the Permanent Collections. The Museum also failed to broaden its appeal to new audiences or to reflect the dynamic, multicultural world of 21st-century New York City.

This study has used insights from across the entirety of the arts management field, from the performing arts to museums, and from a variety of perspectives including the role of missions, approaches to audience and visitor development, and the importance of considered risk-taking. There are many lessons to be learned from exchanging our particular perspectives

across disciplines. The performing arts, with their greater emphasis on keeping true to *mission*, can serve as constructive examples for museums as they seek to attract nontraditional visitors and re-envision their roles in the community. Michael Kaiser explains how efforts to expand attendance that are decoupled from mission or from the organization's existing supporters often end in up creating more problems than they solve:

Very rarely does a significant programmatic shift away from mission result in long-term gains of family size or generosity [*family* is Kaiser's term for institutional supporters]. When a museum of fine art switches course to feature popular artists in a one-off attraction, attendance may spike, bringing in new potential patrons. If this programming trend continues, it is possible that these new patrons will stick around. It is just as likely, however, that dissent will soon follow from loyalists and donors who support the museum on its founding principles. In this case, one has simply swapped audience A for audience B, and at considerable risk: it may take years for the new audience to build the loyalty and generosity of the traditional audience (*The Cycle* 10).

In his conclusion to *The Art of the Turnaround: Creating and Maintaining Healthy Arts Organizations*, Kaiser states: "There is no reason for an arts organization to exist unless it does important programming" (177). Such programming must be planned, and as Kaiser notes earlier, "The plan must include... an explicit discussion of the mission of the organization. If the goals of the organization are not clearly delineated, and priorities clearly set, it will be impossible to develop a suitable plan" (3). The on-the-ground experiences at the Museum of the City of New York confirm the wisdom of this advice, even as the organization provides a less than stellar model. But surely MCNY is not the only arts and cultural organization to have encountered mission confusion in today's demanding climate. Its example is presented in the hope that it will aid other organizations in gaining firmer footing as they make and share meaningful art with the public.

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