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Designing for Connection: Redefining Museums in the Digital Age

In a world marked by an epidemic of loneliness and increasingly segmented echo chambers, shared moments that foster genuine human connection are more important than ever.

By Joseph Wisne, Roto President / CEO

We live in a digital age dominated by screens and in which human contact is increasingly mediated through data algorithms. Yet, over the years, studies have shown the profound power of shared in-person experiences to amplify their impact. Whether collectively listening to music at a live event, watching a movie in a theater, or exploring exhibits at a museum, the simple act of engaging in a location-based activity with others enriches the experience and contributes to improved well-being. In a world marked by an epidemic of loneliness and increasingly segmented echo chambers, these shared moments that foster genuine human connection are more important than ever.

To understand what makes “genuine human connection” so powerful is to break down its elements.

“Genuine” experiences are authentic and substantive in their content and approach. They prioritize “real” over reproductions and share reliable evidence that educates participants while also empowering them to reflect and form their own perspectives.

“Human” moments excite all our senses, literally activating our brains through what we see near and far, feel in our hands and hearts, and hear in all directions. They evoke feelings and elevate shared experiences by often being the spark that prompts direct social interactions.

“Connections” flourish in spaces that offer participants a sense of intrinsic belonging in the world, encouraging bonding and discovery as they engage with compelling stories or purposeful play. These environments create an inclusive atmosphere where we feel a shared sense of purpose, united for even a few moments together.

Institutions across the spectrum excel at and exist to create these “genuine human connections” in our society and culture that both need and crave them. Each organization has a particular specialty: aquariums exist to create human connection through nature, science museums through discovery and big ideas, children’s museums through play, collections museums through objects and empathy, heritage museums through stories, and art museums through, of course, art – both through their collections and the works participants create themselves.

In each of these institutions, technology can be a powerful tool. Applications such as AR/VR, gesture control, projection mapping, gamification, and generative AI, can all positively contribute to creating spaces that support connections, empowering new depths in experiences, engagement, and education. Though the museum field cannot be expected to finance innovation in the core technologies themselves, we are the future leaders in creating impactful multisensory experiences with emerging technology. And while big tech companies and game studios will continue to advance core state-of-the-art technologies, it is museum exhibition designers and artists who are best positioned to deploy these technologies in new and clever ways to deliver genuine human connections to the broadest public audiences.

At Roto, creating genuine human connection is more than a guiding principle. It is core to our essence and foundational to our culture.

While not the exclusive venues in which these kinds of interactions can happen, museums hold a distinct advantage in their ability to leverage their scale, often central locations, increasingly flexible programming, and strong public trust to deliver for the cause of human connection what no other cultural force can.

This is the exciting future of museums and attractions Roto envisions for the coming decades. It is time the cultural sector moves beyond simply showcasing the landscape of genuine human connection. It’s time we became its architects. Together, let’s forge a future where museums no longer fear a threat from technology, nor chase the trends established for virtual environments, but instead exploit technology as a tool for the real environment to unite visitors in a celebration of our shared humanity.
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BRAD KING, EDITOR
This book helps university museum leaders to help them plan strategically in the context of the issues and needs of the 2020s by examining trends affecting them and directions in response to those forces.

11:00 – 11:30AM
GAIL DEXTER LORD, AUTHOR
This book presents a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the principles of museum organization, the ways in which people work together to accomplish museum objectives, and the ways in which museums, large and small, can function most effectively.

NOON – 12:30PM
BETH REDMOND-JONES, EDITOR
This book explores how international cultural organizations (i.e. museums, aquariums, art centers) serve individuals with mental health and neurodiverse challenges.

4:30 – 5:00PM
BEVERLY SERRELL & KATHERINE WHITNEY, AUTHORS
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