

BUILDING MUSEUMS: A handbook for small and midsize organizations

By *Robert Herskovitz, Timothy Glines, & David Grabitske*

St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012. viii + 179 pp. 14 tables, 31 b&w illustrations, 2 appendices, glossary, further reading, and index. \$29.95 (softcover), ISBN 978-0-87351-847-5; \$19.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-87351-856-7.

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Every brilliant idea eventually needs logical reconsideration, and the Minnesota Historical Society's book *Building Museums* is the resolutely practical advice museum organizations need when considering the exciting idea of creating additional space for their facility—whether new or renovated.

The authors Robert Herskovitz, Timothy Glines, and David Grabitske possess a total of 60 years of experience advising on museum construction. They provide a wealth of important information applicable to the critical challenges involved in making the myriad decisions required to properly plan and carry out a building project. Eight chapters address: initial imagining of the project, requirements of schematic design, costing a capital project, design detailing, what makes a museum building unique, construction documentation, managing the work, and issues connected with occupying the new space. Useful appendices and other back matter include: information on necessary museum space functions, interpreting construction drawing symbols, a glossary of unfamiliar terms, and an annotated bibliography.

Quite usefully, the book is structured to access information at different levels. Many photographs, sketches, and charts present material visually. Bolded headings set off the subjects detailed in the text. Sidebars identify the essential “Keys” in every section. The writing is clear and appropriately detailed for those who may never have undertaken a building project before and construction jargon is defined. Ample margins also allow readers to make pertinent notes.

By following *Building Museums*, even novice construction planners will surely end up with improved finished products. Very valuable tips such as drawing attention to the need for adequate “clear space” to allow for the largest artifacts in the collections to be moved easily between the spaces in your museum (p. 62) are numerous. Warning about the need to plan building occupation schedules to accommodate off-gassing of volatile organic compounds from the new construction materials (pp. 103-7) is important information as is the discussion about recent reassessment of established standards for temperature and humidity control (p. 78; cf. Hatchfield 2011).

The authors rightly place responsibility to ensure that new construction will meet the unique needs of museum facilities where it belongs—on museum workers. Their caution about relying solely on the advice of architects and other consultants such as lighting designers who may not have the necessary knowledge of the distinctive requirements of museum buildings is well taken (p. 87). I personally have worked in a museum whose designers ignored the difficulty inherent in moving artifacts over a ceramic tiled floor between elevator and exhibition hall. The bump, bump, bump, bump . . . of artifact trollies on their way to and from the gallery will be problematic for the life of that building, shortening the lives of the artifacts making the trip (to say nothing of the stress on museum workers). This difficulty could and should have been avoided by means of thoughtful attention to such devilish little details early in the review process. Someone experienced in museum work should have taken the time to imagine beforehand how museum workers actually would transport artifacts down a hallway finished with ceramic floor tiles. The responsibility of the planners to protect the vision for the professional functioning of the building is an onerous one (p. 23). Numerous threats to this vision will arise.

After the facility program and conceptual design have been completed, strict and detailed attention to the construction documents cannot be stressed enough (p. 111). For example, my own failure to follow up on my facility program requirement to have floor loadings to accommodate mobile storage shelving units ended up with renovation that failed to include the necessary load bearing capacity. As a result, the long-planned adaptive reuse project ended up with a collections storage area that was nearly full the day we finished installing our holdings on fixed shelving. The devil certainly lives in such details (p. 133)! Much time, energy, and money can be wasted in a construction project by neglect of any single detail.

Despite its many wise counsels, from the perspective of a museum worker who has led museum new build and adaptive reuse renovation projects, I would have preferred increased emphasis on some matters.

One shortcoming of *Building Museums* is insufficient stress placed on the need for prior strategic planning. Although minimal references to mission-related concepts are made (pp. 8, 11), this critical and rather involved process is not specifically identified as a prerequisite for planning a museum construction project as it should have been.

Another defect of the book in my view is an under emphasis on designing museum buildings for use by the disabled (including staff who might be so affected). Although the need to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements is repeated (pp. 50-56), the idea of “universal design” (accessibility for all including the disabled and aged; cf. Fletcher, Siegel, & Bloomer 2011) is never mentioned. When planning museum construction projects, it should be understood that we *all* are only ‘temporarily able-bodied.’ Neither does the bibliography cite the ADA (U.S. Department of Justice 2013) as it should have done.

Although the authors advise that volunteers should be involved in helping to design new procedures for the new building upon its occupation (p.129), they unfortunately fail to emphasize sufficiently the involvement of a museum building’s most intensive users (i.e. staff) in its detailed planning. For example, the Schematic Design chapter addresses planning for visitor access (p. 29; cf. p.30 researcher access), but it too neglects to stress that staff must be

centrally involved in this planning to ensure that the design contemplated will work properly for them (ceramic tiled floors a case in point).

Despite brief mentions, the ins and outs of phasing a building project are glossed over much too quickly (pp.15, 113). As is often the case when bid solicitation determines that construction costs are over budget, phasing becomes an option. The significant consequences of phasing construction are not addressed (cf. Morris 2010; Grant 2010).

Finally, in light of my personal interest in problems surrounding museum worker task saturation, time poverty, and stress under *normal* conditions in this field (Thistle 2011), the authors make no mention of the impact of a design and build project on the well-being of museum board, staff, and volunteers. Preparing to construct new museum spaces, raising sufficient funds, supervising the project, and the extremely strong pressures to open the finished product as soon as possible are characterised by extremely high stakes. These overbearing pressures and additional work take a very heavy toll on everyone involved in a museum construction project. It is crucial, therefore, that rest and recovery also are part of the planning for a capital project. Otherwise, museum workers (who already are fully loaded camels *before* a capital project is even contemplated) are liable to burn and drop out under the high intensity exigencies that construction and its immediate aftermath engender.

Despite these shortcomings, *Building Museums* is undoubtedly a very valuable practical resource for anyone involved in planning museum construction. It clearly outlines effective processes to begin a project by asking the right questions, develop finished designs to meet the needs of the organization, set out the requirements for properly supervising construction, and to complete the project to maximum benefit. Please, don't carry out any museum building project without studying this important resource.

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