

# An Advocate for Cultural Attractions

*TEA Interviews Barry Howard*

*Over the past three decades, Barry Howard has achieved international prominence in the field of interpretive design. In addition to a full slate of current projects, he has been energetic in promoting the participation of the US in Shanghai Expo 2010. Mr. Howard envisions the future of museums in the form of Cultural Attractions. In this interview, we asked him to expand on that concept.*

**Having created exhibits for so many, how would you summarize museums' essential core function?**

Museums continue to play a vital role in their communities because of the need for meaningful educational content. That need is stronger than ever, because as technology and globalization bring all of mankind closer together, minimizing and even erasing cultural differences, they stimulate deeper appreciation for those very differences. We as human beings feel the need to seek out and connect with those things that define us and our heritage.

But while museums are more important than ever, and capital funding is often more accessible than might be imagined, these venues are increasingly strapped for day-to-day operating funds. Museums need new methods of staying ahead of the curve. Of course that includes doing all the things that are often talked about in the field today: great storytelling, updated media and technology, savvy branding and marketing, elements that help generate revenue. But I think we need to go further and reposition museums as Cultural Attractions.

**How would a Cultural Attraction differ from a museum?**

It could still be an educational nonprofit with a scholarly mission, of course. The difference is it would be located in a mixed-use complex and positioned as the central defining feature of that complex. I see this as a potential strategy for museums to become more visible and accessible to the general public, more prestigious and more sustainable economically as well.

The Cultural Attraction would enter into a mutually beneficial, synergistic alliance with a development entity. That alliance would position the Cultural Attraction as the anchor, and the complex as the ongoing patron of the institution. Synergy between the Cultural Attraction and the commercial components of the complex would produce a uniquely themed visitor/customer experience.

**This Cultural Attraction mixed-use concept brings to mind the current trend of hotels adding waterparks.**

It does have things in common with that model in terms of synergy and the creation of a family destination or even a resort. The difference is the unique content and educational value that a Cultural Attraction offers. It can be as much fun as a waterpark, but its value transcends pure enjoyment, and resonates long afterwards.

Location is part of any good business plan, and the Cultural Attraction needs to place itself in the path of the modern family. That museums are able to draw as much traffic as they do in less than ideal locations is a testament to their power as family destinations. By applying the Cultural Attraction model I would hope to see these institutions quickly prove themselves as economic engines for mixed-use developments as well as the greater geographic regions in which they are situated.

**Are some kinds of museums better Cultural Attraction candidates than others?**

This general approach is applicable to every museum, regardless of subject or content. However, it will be particularly welcome to heritage centers, and museums of history, cultural anthropology, and ethnicity, which have always found it very hard to support themselves.



Cultural/commercial synergy at the Mall of America.

### **Where can we look for examples?**

There are numerous unplanned situations where a Cultural Attraction has fueled attendance for a wide spectrum of mixed-use activity and brought noticeable benefits to its region. In California's State Capitol, the Old Sacramento State park development that attracts some five million visitors annually owes much of its success to the California State Railroad Museum, its most prominent tenant. And there is little doubt that Bilbao, Spain would hardly have become a world-renowned and celebrated visitor destination without the Guggenheim collection housed in Frank Gehry's extraordinary envelope.

In the US, think of synergistic urban centers such as Times Square in New York or Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, Balboa Park in San Diego, or the Staples Center in Los Angeles - and any number of arts-entertainment-retail districts, in any number of metro areas.

The proposed Mills development at the Meadowlands in New Jersey promised to incorporate a National Boxing Museum. The Mall of the Americas has just announced a major expansion including a performing arts center, dinner theater and museum, in an effort to appeal to a more mature, upscale and urban shopper. Previously, the focal attractor there was a kid-oriented amusement park, featuring rides and a Camp Snoopy.

### **What about the role of design in visually defining the destination? That's surely a critical factor in the success of the Guggenheim Bilbao.**

Of course it needs to be iconic. We all strive for that. A museum can be iconic in terms of the physical structure that embraces it, the methodology used to impart information, and/or its actual storyline. A certain segment of the audience is going to respond to a well designed building. Others will be most impressed by an immersive theatrical experience, and yet others, by the clever way in which information is communicated. Having it all in one package is the best possible model, but that kind of perfection is rare.

There are a variety of ways in which you optimize a great museum through design. But that said, design alone does not make a venue sustainable. There are rational constraints. A good, experienced designer will recognize all of the elements that relate to a Cultural Attraction and within that framework will endeavor to make it an excellent product. We all dream, we all have aspirations. A designer without dreams and aspirations is not a designer. In my own work, I try to respect every one of the constraints inherent in a given project and wherever possible see them as opportunities. In either case my commitment is always to the uniqueness of what I am trying to create.

### **Museums have been struggling for some time. Why has this strategy not emerged more forcefully?**

I think it is going to take time for developers to really recognize its benefits. For one thing, feasibility analysts look for a certain number of comps on which to base a model. So there's a certain leap involved when it comes to shaping a new paradigm. Also, in my experience the word "museum" tends to make a developer go to sleep - it conjures up certain pre-existing notions that mask the real potential.

And there's the hurdle of community support. No project of this kind is going to succeed without strong vision, leadership and community support. Political entities, community councils, administrators, educators and the public must rally behind the project. Getting that backing takes considerable time and effort, but it is critical.

Still, as I have pointed out, the paradigm does already exist, in a mostly unplanned form.



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## DESIGN DEVELOPMENT



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What I am advocating is that it be done as an intentional model rather than happening by accident. Rather than open a museum and have it become a de facto anchor for development, let's plan it that way from the outset so that the museum can draw a financial benefit from the situation.

### **And what of the benefits to the developer?**

For the developer, the unique cultural content would differentiate the complex from all others, enhancing its value as a unique destination and thereby growing its market.

Mixed-use developments can now be found in almost every large city across the country, and it seems to me that they need new kinds of anchors. The existence of so many such destinations, each having similar retail venues and cinemas, has diminished their stature as destinations. At the same time, the exponential growth of in-home entertainment has cut deeply into the cinema business, weakening their power as anchors.

I think there's no question about the viability of the integrated leisure destination concept. Much of our industry turns on it. The most successful of these projects give rise to further development in more dining, retail and entertainment or educational offerings, plus residential and office use.

The cutting-edge for both museums and mixed-use development now lies in the subtle integration of the two - the next major step in urban development. ■■■■

*Designer Barry Howard (barry@barryhowardlimited.com) has brought his talents to bear on a wide variety of international projects including The American Freedom Train for the US Bicentennial, the California State Railroad Museum, museums and interpretive centers at Hoover Dam, Mount St. Helens, and Niagara Falls, the expansion of the national Railway Museum (York, England) and the Samsung Auto Museum in Seoul, plus exhibits for numerous world's fair pavilions from New York 1964 to Taejon 93. Current projects include the American Money & Gold Rush Museum in San Francisco, the Guam Museum of Art, History and Culture, the Southern California Railroad Experience and the Harlem Visitor Center in NYC.*



Barry Howard on a photo shoot