

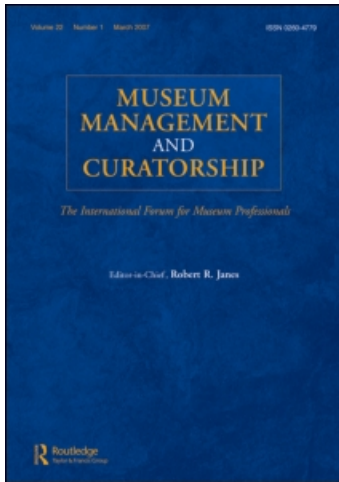
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Museum experiences that change visitors

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Transform, transforming, and transformative are common terms for describing museum spaces, the creation of objects on display, and experiences for visitors. But is there evidence that museums profoundly change visitors through their objects, collections, exhibitions, public programs, and websites? The nature of transformational museum experiences and potential ‘triggers for transformation’ are the focus of this article. Two case studies describe ways in which visitors articulate change they have experienced. Included are projects about teachers and artists during an intense two-week summer institute in an interdisciplinary museum and about visitors to a traveling exhibition highlighting the role Canada plays in international development. Individuals’ comments and questions indicated that experiences with authentic objects and the unexpected, highly emotional responses, new cultural and attitudinal understandings, as well as motivation to become more proactive in the way they live their lives, may have been triggers for transformational experiences.

Keywords: museums; evidence of value; on-site and online experiences; personal change; transformational museum experiences; visitor experience

Experiences that transform

*“What’s Hot, What’s Not?” [at the Exploratorium] invites visitors to see themselves in new ways by representing their body heat as a grayscale video image . . . they practice the inquiry skills of observing, experimenting, comparing, **transforming** [author’s bold], and inferring. Intriguing representations seem to motivate visitors . . . but they also lead to prolonged engagement through open-ended exhibit design (Gutwill 2008, 194).*

When I spend time in museums and exhibitions and read about museums in the media and publications, I am aware of the many ways in which museums use the terms ‘transform’ and ‘transformation’ to describe their spaces, objects, and experiences for visitors. Extended labels, didactic panels, and catalogues in art museums quite frequently use language that prepares visitors to expect to feel ‘transformed’, or explain an artist’s intention to ‘transform’. For instance, during a trip to Boston in November, 2008, I visited an installation at The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, called *Look Closer* by sculptor Tara Donovan (<http://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/exhibit/donovan/>). Actively gesturing and highly engaged visitors filled the galleries. The introductory panel and introduction to the catalogue describes how ‘Accumulation becomes transformation’ as Donovan ‘turns ordinary, manufactured

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objects into astounding works of art Donovan creates astonishing visual experiences that attest to the poetic wonder of close looking and bigger thinking about the materials that surround us'. During the same visit to Boston, the large signage on the outside wall of the Museum of Science tells visitors that they may have opportunities to 'transform, explore, inspire, create' during their visit to the museum. Perin (2008, 1) explains how the movement toward the public understanding of current research has the potential to transform the work of science museums and science centers, as they become centers of dialogue for citizens with the scientific community.

If artists' and scientists' intentions are to transform through images, displays, and dialogue, is there evidence that indicates visitors change in some fundamental way when they experience objects and ideas in museums? If some sort of 'transformation' happens, does it happen in the museum or afterward? Does change need to be transformative in order to be change? In the following sections, I explore the meaning and potential outcomes of 'transformational experiences' through, for instance, the reframing of oneself in relation to an object, expanding vocabulary to describe a museum experience, and/or leaving with a vivid impression or memory that will last beyond a museum visit. Two case studies describe how visitors articulate change they have experienced, and actions they may take, as an outcome of a museum program or exhibition visit.

The nature of transformational museum experiences

Pipilotti Rist: Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters), Museum of Modern Art, November 19, 2008–February 2, 2009 (<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/307>): . . . *A printed text at the entrance asks visitors to explore the space and themselves within it, to stretch and even sing, to – yes – pour their bodies out after a couple of visits over the weekend I'm still under its calming influence: My body never before realized museums could be so physically rapturous and **transformative*** [author's bold]. (Houpt 2009)

Transformational experiences seem to happen if we discard old ways of thinking and provide new opportunities for individuals to invent personal knowledge and explore new ideas and concepts. Creating challenges in which people can discover the interconnectedness of ideas are important to personal change. For example, Peck (1987, 181) views an individual's capacity for transformation as 'an emptying of the old so that the new may enter'. Gardner (1991) considers transformative ways of transmitting knowledge as opportunities for individuals to invent knowledge, transform what they have encountered in the past, and perhaps eventually contribute to new ideas and concepts. For Miller (e.g. 1996, 55), transformative experience starts with the assumption that all human activity is interconnected and interdependent – 'a change introduced in one area can have effects in other areas'. Transformational experience for Mezirow (2000, 7–8) 'refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action'.¹

In the museum field, Sachatello-Sawyer et al. (2002, 17) describe how museum program participants can gain 'a greater worldview or a new set of connections and

correlations between various dimensions of museum experiences', and articulate 'an awakening to new ideas' or 'transformations of perspective'. Lord (2007, 19) discusses museum visits as 'transformative experience in which we develop new attitudes, interests, appreciation, beliefs, or values in an informal, voluntary context focused on museum objects'. Interpretive text, hands-on activities, and interactive information technologies may be aids to this type of change process. Hooper-Greenhill (2007, 35/37) explains how museums involve 'the use of what we already know, or half-know, in new combinations or relationships or in new situations'. She argues that experience and 'performance, in the sense of action and behaviour' are 'of vital importance to museums'. Individuals can create and transform their museum experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses.

Gurian (2007, 22) identifies characteristics of what she calls the 'essential museum' and how, in this museum, her interest is 'in transforming how users think of museum visits – from an "occasional day-out" to a "drop-in service"'. Gurian speculates that an outcome for visitors would be that the museum becomes a place for 'personal validation (recognition and memory)' in which staff share knowledge and transfer authority to the visitor. Vallance (2007, 40–1) describes situational change when visitors to the Continental Sculpture Hall in Kansas come to value the charm of a worn-out building in the middle of the Kansas prairie, and the 'wonderful and courageous creation' of stone carvings by a single old woman. Visitors come 'to respect the eccentricity of this isolated and unusual sculptor and appreciate her for what she demonstrated of the human spirit'.

Technological tools also are helping to transform experiences that museums offer far beyond the museum's physical infrastructure. In-print and electronic publications are describing creative ways in which Web teams are incorporating communication media and social networking into on-site and online museum visits.² As technologies and museum websites extended on-site museum experiences, I began researching meaningful and engaging online experiences for users of museum websites.³ I have wanted to know what connections individuals make during a visit to a physical museum that they may want to explore further online, and if they do visit the museum's website, where do they click and what content do they browse? How can a cycle of on-site and online museum visits contribute to Dewey's (1938, 79) sense of experience as 'a continuous spiral' where new facts and ideas 'become the ground for further experiences' and, perhaps, personal change? What are the 'hooks' that initially arouse individuals' curiosity and interest, and motivate them to change their thinking after they have encountered seemingly complex information during a museum visit (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995)? Samis (2007, 59) describes how interpretation can change individuals by giving 'cognitive hooks to the hookless'. If 'these hooks are sufficiently varied' they can 'successfully land in the mental fabric of a broad array of visitors. Once visitors have a framework, all kinds of sensory impressions, emotions and reflections can weave themselves into the fabric of perception'.

Triggers for transformational museum experiences

In order to explore museum experiences that profoundly change individuals' attitudes, interests, appreciation, beliefs, or values, I asked students in a Museum Studies course I teach at the University of Toronto about their transformational

Table 1. Triggers for transformational experiences (in alphabetical order)

Trigger	Description	Examples of transformational experience
Attitudinal	Shift in perspective	When people move through the 'Canadian Experience' permanent collection exhibitions at the Canadian War Museum, the intention is to put people on edge and create a feeling of agitation through angular walls, graphics, sound and lighting effects, and cacophony of text. The spaces evoke the atmosphere of war, physically situate visitors in the trenches and battle grounds, and overwhelm. (http://www.civilisations.ca/cwm/).
Authentic	Seeing the authentic object	At the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, now a museum, a visitor felt completely immersed in the history because of the reality of the building, and the authenticity of the objects and the mosaics. The experience was a culmination of everything she had learned and seen related to this masterpiece of Byzantine architecture. (http://static.monolithic.com/thedome/hagiasophia/index.html).
Behavioral	A referent that explains coming to know	A visit to <i>A Question of Truth</i> at the Ontario Science Centre helps a visitor see truth in science in a different light. For one visitor, the exhibition reinforced an accumulation of past 'aha' experiences about alternative views on science and helped her reach a new level of knowing. (http://www.ontariosciencecentre.ca/tour/default.asp?exhibitionid=11).
Being witness	Survivors' personal objects	A section of a film on the 9/11 memorial exhibit in a New York City museum showed how rescuers recovered a birthday gift in the trunk of a car belonging to a man killed in the 9/11 bombings. September 11th was the birthday of his wife. The rescuers returned to her the birthday gift her husband had purchased. For a person who watched this, the movie was on the importance of objects to people. It changed the way she viewed museums and their participatory role in remembering. The <i>No Child's Play</i> exhibit at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem tells personal stories of child victims of the Holocaust by highlighting their games and toys, diaries, works of art, and poetry. A doll belonging to a survivor, Eva Modval, a young girl who was deported from St. Gyorgy, Transylvania, to the Tolonc and Kistarcsa camps is almost a 'living' artifact as her only friend and 'witness' to better days. Eva donated her doll to Yad Vashem and attached to Gerta a farewell letter. (http://www.yadvashemusa.org/no_child_play.pdf).
Cultural	Understanding cultural changes	In the Canadian Museum of Civilization's First People's Hall, a visitor better understood physical and cultural changes in a young man through juxtaposed photos of him in traditional garb and wearing a suit after entering residential school. His personal transformation was emblematic of a larger shift. (http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpint01e.shtml).

Emotional	Powerfully emotive to the point of tears	A young woman visited an exhibit with her father called 'Mush Hole Remembered' at the former Mohawk Institute, a First Nations residential school, with artwork by a former resident. His images showed how devastating and monstrous his life was. She sobbed while reading handwritten messages in the comment book by visitors who had personal experience with residential schools. The experience helped her understand how she deals with suffering and painful moments in history. (http://www.woodland-centre.on.ca/index.php).
Motivational	'Crystallizing' experience	A 16-year-old who visited Colonial Williamsburg found it a place to literally walk into the middle of history and feel a part of the history. During the visit a costumed interpreter who found him 'smart-mouthed' called him historical names in the context of Colonial America, and invited him to sit on a jury at a trial to see how law breakers were dealt with. The outcome was a realization that through studying history and museum studies it was possible to re-create for teens the experience at Colonial Williamsburg. (http://www.history.org/).
Sublime/the idea of infinity	An esthetic experience involving imagination, reason, vast magnitude	Within the Keo Project, a space shuttle time capsule, the exhibition brought a visitor into contact with an extremity of time, people, and space, but she rarely had 'contact' with them. The feeling was 'sublime' in that it was both pleasurable and frightening to comprehend (cf. Kant's <i>The Critique of Judgement, 1790</i>). (http://www.keo.org/).
Traumatic	Horrors in history	At the House of Terror in Budapest, Hungary, a visit into the basement where they kept the prisoners in a small area with 'standing cells' created a feeling of claustrophobia and having a hard time breathing. The 'aura' was very powerful in conveying a horrific history. (http://www.budapest.com/TerrorHouseBudapest.htm).
Unexpected	A shocking and expected surprise	In what looked to be an unimpressive African slave ship confinement box in <i>A Question of Truth</i> , a visitor felt a momentary panic, closed in, had to leave the booth, and was shocked at her emotional response. A tour guide had visually impaired students grasp the size of a Lancaster Bomber at the Canada Aviation Museum by walking with them underneath the massive plane from one end of the bomb bay to the other. The muffled sound of voices while talking about the release of bombs, and sensing the machine as an intimidating beast made these students aware of the huge, powerful, frightening machine. (http://www.aviation.technomuses.ca/collections/).

museum experiences. We categorized their stories, which were rich and often poignant, into 10 ‘triggers for transformational experiences’ (see Table 1).⁴

Some of these transformational experiences were the result of a heightened reaction due to physical unease or exhibit content that individuals could identify with and found very moving. One person described how this type of experience transformed her ‘by displacing me, and bringing me far outside of myself’, and another felt the experience is ‘something that stays with us afterward, moving us beyond just the visual’. A third person felt an experience is transformational ‘in a profound sense’ when the person does not expect it, but it is so impactful the individual can ‘call it to mind instantly’ during a conversation. The experience may fade with time, but later experiences might build off the original experience and subsequently make more impact. Many of the experiences described became ‘crystallizing experiences’ (Walters and Gardner 1986) or ‘hooks’ that motivated each person to specialize in museums as a graduate area of study (Czikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995, 67).

Transformational experiences have intrigued me, since observing how two-week summer institutes at the Royal Ontario Museum deeply affected individuals over a three-year period from 1995 to 1998. Over a decade later, I continue to try to understand the qualities that made these programs so powerful for participants and leaders. In retrospect, several of the triggers for transformational experiences apply to personal changes that participants reported.

Case study 1: Transformative experiences for teachers and artists at the Royal Ontario Museum

Interconnected and transformative experiencing was at the core of the Ontario Arts Education Institute programs, *Teaching and Learning in the Arts*. The Ontario Arts Education Institute, initiated in 1995, focused on the elementary teacher as the client, on arts-based integration as the mandate, and on working with museum objects, arts performances, and artists as the process. During two special weeks in August, we had full access to the galleries, atria, classrooms, and theatres at the Royal Ontario Museum as our educational milieu. Objects in the museum’s galleries provided inspiration for hands-on, experiential workshops in dance, drama, music, and visual arts, and took on new meaning for the artists and teachers in programs that I coordinated over three years. Throughout the fall and winter, Ontario Arts Education Institute leaders planned workshops in collaboration with local dance, opera, symphony, and theater companies, as well as with art galleries. These workshops provided opportunities to prepare for a performance or exhibition that we attended and to consider how participants could build these kinds of experiences into the classroom context in meaningful ways.

From 1995 to 1998, I developed a research and evaluation strategy to determine the longer-term personal and professional impacts of summer institute programs (Soren 1997/98, 1998). Specifically, I looked at:

- Museum experiences that have the potential to transform or significantly change individuals.
- How to document and analyze people’s perceptions of their personal and professional growth related to their arts and museum experiences.

- The longer-term effects of powerful museum experiences on individuals' lives and practice.

I examined personal growth and *transformation*, which was a theme of the program, through participant observation, photo and video documentation, individual and focus group interviews, pre- and post-program written questionnaires, participants' process-folios, action research project reflective journals, and observation and documentation of classroom activities and events included in action research reports. Findings indicated that participants acquired skills in making, creating, and presenting works of art, as well as looking at, responding to, and talking about the arts. They also discovered common ways in which the arts develop essential lifelong skills, such as risk taking, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Individuals developed a better understanding of how teachers could use artists and arts organizations in the curriculum-planning process, both within the arts and across subject areas.

Triggers for transformation resulted from one particularly powerful experience during the inaugural season at the end of the first week of the summer institute. Participants experienced the authenticity of objects and developed what became an unexpectedly, emotional performance. A drama group had been working amidst vases and sculptures in the Ancient Greek gallery in the morning, role-playing as citizens of a conquered Greek city to feel how belief in a community can be a source of positive support for its citizens. In the role-play, a messenger of the Roman Consul brought a scroll and proclaimed:

By order of the Governor of this province and by the order of the High Consul of Rome, you are directed from this day forth to cease the practice of the veneration of the dead. Therefore, ALL heathen images will be destroyed. In keeping with the new order, your community is required to eliminate all gravestones from your burial areas. The rubble from these stones will become the foundation for the new road through your city.

At the same time, a visual arts group worked with haiku poems and collage in the Bishop White Temple, a serene and contemplative space. One person commented on her feelings in her reflective journal after this activity:

The religious frescoes of ancient China and the wood carvings of Buddhas create a contemplative atmosphere for personal reflections. This experience is like a retreat, there is the support from the community (group) and yet enough personal space to explore and reflect upon many thoughts.

Later that day, people who had worked with the drama exercise in the morning joined forces in one of the atria of the museum with the visual arts group. Using water, tape, and pre-glued paper, groups created a dramatic and visual art form that would address 'hiding the gravestones'. Unexpectedly, the presentations attracted a large and appreciative audience of visitors watching from all three levels of the museum. Participants were so emotionally involved in this process and production that some were in tears, and many talked about their 'lived' experiences at the end of the day. Comments documented immediately after this activity indicated that after one week of working in previously unfamiliar arts disciplines and being creative in the museum's public spaces, these two groups of about 30 participants had developed a strong sense of community and trust. This activity came up over and over again in

reflective journals and on questionnaires over the eight months of the program as one of the truly transformative high points of the museum experience. The integrated activity also became the centerpiece of the promotional video that we compiled from 12 hours of video documentation of summer institute activities.

One of the outcomes of this project was the development of a matrix to identify and predict the interactions between arts experiences and teacher transformation in collaboration with Upitis and Smithrim, arts educators at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario (Upitis, Smithrim, and Soren, 1999).

Matrix to identify and predict the interactions between arts experiences and teacher transformation

- The first level of the matrix identifies conditions that are necessary for transformation but not sufficient to sustain transformation, such as a feeling of community, taking personal risks, and connections with prior experiences (attitudinal shifts as triggers for transformation).
- The second level identifies potential for sustained transformation with enhanced images of artists, changing views of the arts, and a greater understanding of self and community (increased awareness of the value of culture as triggers for transformation).
- The third and final level identifies ways in which individuals operationalize profound changes and longer-term transformation, including a sustained pursuit of new art forms and altered life practices with increased participation in community arts events (motivational triggers for transformation that resulted in behavioral changes).

In the Ontario Arts Education Institute intensive two-week program (during three annual summer institutes), teachers and artists took personal risks, and were able to make connections with prior experiences (level one of the matrix the researchers developed as an indicator of transformation). Teachers who participated had enhanced images of artists, changing views of the arts, and a greater understanding of themselves and belonging to a community, which monthly full-day workshops throughout the next nine months helped to reinforce (level two of the matrix indicating transformation). Some teachers, who became active alumni of the program and returned for programs the next two years, continue to demonstrate profound changes and longer-term transformation (level three of the matrix). These teachers and artists sought out new art forms, increased their participation in community arts events, and found new ways of thinking about everyday experiences and the way they taught young people about, in, and through the arts.

Can we realistically expect that a single visit to a physical museum that may last two hours, and/or very brief browsing of a museum website, will 'transform' people in the sense that the intensive Ontario Arts Education Institute nine-month program changed the way some teachers and artists taught and lived? Carr (e.g. 2003) has helped me reflect on museum visitors' questions by explaining why an individual's 'good questions' are important. He proposes that 'Human beings craft their lives through questions; for all of our lives, questions lead our steps. Questions confirm our alliances. Questions frame our trusts. Questions lead our thoughts' (2003, 96). In

an exhibition focused on Canada's role in international development developed by Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC), visitor question cards evoked opinions on the topics of the display. Visitors' questions also were integral to evaluation instruments, which determined how individual visitors changed who spent time in the exhibition and helped to identify triggers for transformational experiences. Carr believes that an expanded repertoire of questions – more of them, deeper ones, less easily answered, and more personal, rather than academic or historical questions – are solid indicators of 'transformation'.⁵

Case Study 2: *Bridges that Unite* – changing understanding about Canada's role in international development, AKFC

AKFC, a non-profit international agency, supports social development programs in Asia and Africa. *Bridges that Unite* is a traveling exhibition developed by the Foundation which explores Canada's role in international development. When the Foundation invited me to be the evaluator for this project, one of the reasons why it appealed to me was the intention to 'transform lives around the world' through the on-site and online exhibition. As described on the exhibition website (bridgesthatunite.ca/press-releases):

Bridges that Unite is an interactive travelling exhibition that invites visitors to consider Canada's role in the world through the lens of a remarkable 25-year partnership with the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Built on a set of common values, such as pluralism, democracy and peace, this unique partnership is transforming lives around the world.

Bridges that Unite explores the idea that 'a hand up is more helpful than a hand out'. The Foundation hoped to inspire visitors to the exhibition by illustrating the manner in which Canada, in partnership with the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), has been innovative and bold in its search for solutions to some of the world's most critical issues.

A second motivator for evaluating this exhibition was the opportunity to become part of a thoughtful and highly creative exhibition development team.⁶ One of the indicators of success for this 2008–9 traveling exhibition will be exposing a broader Canadian public to the role Canada plays in international development. As more Canadians visit the exhibition, its special events, and the exhibition's website, the expectation is that more people across the country will become aware, proactive, and supportive of AKFC and other Canadian organizations' work in international development. Simultaneously, through strategies for stimulating use of the exhibition's website, bridgesthatunite.ca, visitors have opportunities to continue the conversation initiated during a physical visit to the exhibition.

Bridges that Unite includes powerful stories and images, evocative soundscapes, and multi-media components. Exposing visitors to 'Canada's rich experience in fostering life-changing initiatives in the developing world' (<http://www.bridgesthatunite.ca/faq/>) offers visitors the possibility of several triggers for transformation. Individuals have opportunities for shifts in attitudes about international development work today as well as changes in awareness of the impact of grass roots development work on diverse cultural communities. They may have emotional responses to stories of people living in developing countries and interns working in communities abroad. Visitors interact with volunteer guides who are knowledgeable

about the Foundation's international development work, and in some cases have visited areas featured in displays. The exhibition seeks to promote informed dialogue that challenges typical assumptions about the potential for social change in the developing world. As a motivational trigger for transformation, *Bridges that Unite* 'invites Canadians to join a conversation about what we as a nation and as individuals can continue to contribute to a more pluralistic, tolerant and equitable world' (<http://www.bridgesthatunite.ca/faq/>).

During 2008, multiple methods determined the ways in which a visit to the exhibition changed individuals, how they may have constructed new meaning from their experience, and if they felt compelled to act in different ways after their visit.⁷ Primary on-site and online evaluation strategies included:

- Observation of visitors by trained audience researchers through tracking and timing of individuals and groups in modules of the exhibition.
- Visitors' responses to their on-site experience through an exit Visitor Survey, 'Continuing the Conversation' comment cards inviting individuals' questions in response to visiting the exhibition, and Guide feedback forms for a sense of questions visitors asked in each module of the exhibition.
- Web traffic reports.

Observing changed values

Audience researchers' observations indicated that, across the exhibition venues, visitors spent most time in modules about Cultural projects, Education, and Rural Development (5 to 11 minutes). For example, in the Culture module, large and unexpectedly beautiful photographs of the lush garden in Baghe Babur highlighted



Figure 1. The garden in Baghe Babur. bridgesthatunite.ca/culture1/.

cultural change as a trigger for transformation (see Figure 1). Visitors spent considerable time looking, talking with others, sitting on poufs, and listening to quiet music from the region in this reflective space. As described on the website (bridgesthatunite.ca/culture1/), when fighting broke out in Kabul in 1992, warring factions cut down the garden's trees, set fire to its buildings, and left behind mines and unexploded ordinance.

A decade later, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture initiated a garden restoration, which offered jobs and training opportunities to local Afghans involved in the reconstruction, and restored hope that Afghanistan could rebuild with dignity. Some visitors connected emotionally with the photographs in the Culture module. For instance, a visitor who was born in Zanzibar talked about his experience going back to see the restoration in Stone Town (the name of the capital of Zanzibar) when he saw images of Zanzibar. Questions and comments related to the builders and architects of Babur Gardens in Kabul and Al Azhar Park in Cairo, wondering about the look of the garden before and after the reconstruction, and a sense that the 'place looks tough' – it would be 'hard living there'.

In the Education projects section of the exhibition, large photos, interpretive panels and videos about two universities intrigued many visitors (bridgesthatunite.ca/education1/). For the past two decades, programs at the Aga Khan University in Karachi, Pakistan, have raised the status of women and expanded opportunities for the female professionals who constitute an overwhelming majority of teachers and nurses in the region. The University of Central Asia, created in 2000, links one of the world's most isolated areas with the global community and creates intellectual spaces and resources for the wider region's 22 million inhabitants. A new awareness of the cultural impact of academic institutions in these isolated areas, and shifts in attitudes about the value of higher education for the communities served, provided triggers for transformation. Visitors' questions indicated curiosity and wanting to know more: 'Where do they get the teachers from for UCA (University of Central Asia)?'; 'Where are the resources coming from?'; 'Do students have to stay in [the] country after [they are] educated?'; 'What are they going to do with [the] education?'; 'Why build in rural areas and not cities?'; and 'What is the first class of graduates graduating from?'

In the Rural Development module, visitors encounter chairs in a circle, flipchart paper, and tape recordings that give them a feeling of how Canada has invested in a promising development experiment in the isolated valleys of northern Pakistan (bridgesthatunite.ca/rural-development1/). The roots of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program are in a simple but potent idea: social mobilization. In thousands of remote villages in Asia and Africa, local communities meet in a ring of chairs with a flip chart (see Figure 2). They discuss the issues that most affect them, and set priorities for what must be done to improve their lives. In measuring the impact of its success, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program discovered that these community organizations were the key to lasting improvements in quality of life. Visitors' comments indicated that triggers for transformation were a better understanding of grass roots cultural change and changes in attitudes about how effective rural development work can be when there is a 'bottom up rather than a top down approach' for helping people, as one visitor commented. Visitors had the unexpected realization that 'Everyone can speak here in the circle'; 'It gives them hope'; It is 'good to see everyone working together'; There is a 'feeling of self-reliance and ownership'.



Figure 2. Aga Khan Rural Support Program. bridgesthatunite.ca/rural-development1/.

Visitor questions

Gathering visitors' thoughts, questions, and stories has become one of the key strategies for evaluating the impact of visiting the exhibition and measuring its success. Visitors are able to leave behind a comment card with their most burning questions related to Canada's role in international development for the Twenty-First Century. There also is an invitation to visit the website to 'continue the conversation' online at bridgesthatunite.ca. Comment cards and the website ask visitors to reflect on the following questions:

- What is Canada's role in a world where poverty and hopelessness thrive?
- Where difference is seen as a threat, not an asset?
- Where progress means rejecting the past?
- What do YOU think is the most important question of the Twenty-First Century?

These comment or question cards were part of the exhibition, and intended to evoke individuals' opinions on the topics displayed, rather than evaluate their experience during a visit. By asking visitors to use their own language to write down and express their response to the exhibition, they also were indicators of transformative experiences'.

The evaluation team analyzed 185 comment card questions from the Victoria exhibition, 96 from Calgary, and 93 from Vancouver. Themes across comments and questions have been quite consistent, and, in some cases, indicate personal change as a result of visiting the exhibition as well as actions that individuals may take after visiting the exhibition. Some of the themes that have emerged across questions relate

to a sense of behavioral changes needed to sustain and grow Canada's role in international development:

- Sustainability and reducing poverty
[e.g. 'The most important question in my opinion is if the leadership today is investing enough in the youth to make sure they become leaders and sustain Aga Khan Development Network projects in the future'? (Male, 25–34, Bachelors degree)]
- Diversity, pluralism, and tolerance
[e.g. 'How can we break down the barriers that create "differences" among people, when we are all basically the same'? (Male, 55–64, Bachelors/ Professional degree)]
- Violence, security, conflict, and war
[e.g. 'Disaster relief in under developed countries. Is it possible for developing/ developed countries to form a home organized effect team to assist more efficiently and quickly when disaster strikes, as in Burma and China'? (Male, 45–54, College degree)]

Often these questions seemed to be first attempts at expressing a constructive response to the exhibition. Part of 'continuing the conversation' after a visit to the exhibition could be a forum with guidance and dialogue on 'good' questions that will help to promote Canada's role in a world where poverty and hopelessness thrive.

As visitors leave the exhibition, some complete a Visitor Survey. Through an interview-questionnaire, we asked people for a brief summary statement about their experience in the exhibition, images of international development prior to their visit, changed images after their visit as well as questions or comments they still had about Canada's role in international development. Visitors' changed images reflected attitudinal changes, such as becoming more aware of the 'grass roots' work, helping people in need, and feeling inspired by personal stories of positive change. Individuals also mentioned concrete consumer-driven projects, such as community-based programs for women in Central Asia and microfinance programs. Some of the visitors who wrote summaries of their experiences had changed, or enhanced images, of international development. Questions they asked provided evidence of the motivational value of the exhibition for individuals who visited *Bridges that Unite* – both as a trigger for transformation and as a catalyst for advancing the possibility of change. Table 2 provides examples of how two young professionals described changes in their attitudes about international development. The exhibition experience motivated the first person to question how she could become a volunteer or intern, and the second to continue to engage in dialogue about international development.

Another set of questions on the Visitor Survey indicated the impact of the exhibition on visitors in terms of feeling more informed, inspired, and wanting to find out more. Responses were remarkably similar in Calgary and Vancouver, where a comparable number of visitors completed the exit questionnaire (221 visitors in Calgary and 212 visitors in Vancouver). Most visitors who responded to these questions felt inspired by the role of Canadians in international development (91% in both venues), felt better informed about Canada's role in international development

Table 2. Summary of experiences, images of International Development before/after visit, and questions

Brief summary of experience	Image of international development after visit	Questions/comments about Canada's role in international development
<p>Changed images <i>An inspiring window into what Canadians have done and what they can still do in the developing worlds</i> (Female, 25–34, Bachelor's degree, professional/corporate employee)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She felt her image and what the exhibition portrayed were fairly accurate because of involvement in her community and its initiatives. - She became 'more aware of the importance of both cultural preservation and restoration of places of beauty'. Although these things contribute to her well-being in her country [Canada], she 'forgot even those who need basic necessities of life must also yearn for and need these aspects of life, too'. 	<p><i>There are many age limits on specific programs offered to volunteers (or to-be volunteers). I am fast reaching that age limit – are there still opportunities for me that are offered abroad, planned and focused in the same way many of these 'internships' are?</i></p>
<p>Reinforced/enhanced images <i>Innovative approaches to addressing the needs of more marginalized people, providing inspiration, hope and opportunity, and optimism towards their future</i> (Male, 25–34, College degree, healthcare management).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He was part of local community but his image was enhanced and broadened much further by the exhibition. - He was 'more inspired and proud of steps being taken'. 	<p>He would like.. <i>More dialogue on how Canadians are able to continue to engage in the development discussion for the wider public.</i></p>

(90% in both venues), and indicated that they would visit *bridgesthatunite.ca* to learn more about international development (86% in Calgary; 83% in Vancouver).

bridgesthatunite.ca

Users of the website, *bridgesthatunite.ca*, came from 39 countries across all continents during the first six months of the exhibition and visited the site in 20 languages. However, an ongoing challenge is how to increase web traffic and use the website as a motivational trigger for ongoing change – enabling people who have visited the exhibition to ‘continue the conversation’ begun in the exhibition through online discussion groups on the website. During May and June, 2008, 3336 users browsed the website, 63% were new visitors, and users were spending an average of 3:09 seconds online. Suggestions have been to:

- Encourage volunteer guides and audience researchers at each venue to continue to be an online resource for volunteers at venues across the country, and participate in online discussions.
- Have a forum that communicates the results of development, includes visitors involved in international development meetings, and invites online thoughts and questions.
- At the end of a visit to the exhibition, leave people with a ‘need’ to express their opinion – through something that might really ‘engage’ them.

Evaluation of visitors’ experiences in the AKFC’s traveling exhibition has provided evidence of personal change. Visitors’ questions and comments were very informative about the personal value of the exhibition for individuals who visited *Bridges that Unite* as well as the depth of their reflections about AKFC’s international development work. Visitors seemed impressed with how productive and long-lasting solutions can be when people, themselves, identify the problems and have help in implementing solutions. This ‘grass roots’ work and personal stories of positive change tended to be particularly memorable, and perhaps transformational, for individuals. Evidence that individual visitors used the exhibition website to find out more or ‘continue the conversation’ about their visit experience was much more difficult to gather, however. Web metrics gave a broad overview of users and their activities on the site, but little in-depth information about online experiences. More active involvement in online discussion groups may provide more evidence of ways individuals continue to change in their support of AKFC’s international development work.

Exploring the value of museums and exhibitions for individuals

Participants in the intensive Ontario Arts Education Institute programs at the Royal Ontario Museum, and the sample of visitors included in the evaluation of AKFC’s traveling exhibition in 2008 seemed to value their experiences. Individuals’ attitudes, interests, appreciation, beliefs, or values changed, resulting in new knowledge, skills, emotions, and senses. These were some of the qualities outlined in the section on the nature of transformational experiences. Visitors’ comments and questions indicated that authentic objects, unexpected and emotional experiences, and new cultural and

attitudinal understandings may have been triggers for transformational experiences. After participating in an intensive summer institute and a visit to the *Bridges that Unite* exhibition, individuals' questions and comments reflected on behavioral changes people might make, including more active participation in arts and cultural activities, and becoming more proactive in international development work.

In both case studies, transformational experiences seemed to result from discarding old ways of thinking and providing new opportunities or 'hooks' for individuals to invent knowledge and explore new ideas and concepts. The intensive program and traveling exhibition offered opportunities for individuals to transform their understandings of what they have encountered in the past, and helped them to become more inclusive, discriminating, emotionally capable of change, and reflective. Participants and visitors have had opportunities to become more aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of human activity, both in the cultural sector and in international development, and that a change introduced in one area can have effects in other areas.

Exploration of different types of transformational experiences in which visitors have, for instance, been witness to a traumatic, historical event also may provide insights into how museums can become more accessible and responsive to diverse communities and publics who do not currently visit museums.⁸ As Gijssen (2008, 46) argues:

*We need to advocate for an enhanced broader imperative for the museum – one where it is part of a larger ecosystem-embedded in its local environment;... In such an ecosystem, the museum becomes critical to the long-range health of a place; central to think tanks, planning initiatives and community **transformations** [author's bold].*

In an interview with Malcolm Gladwell, a keynote speaker at the American Association of Museums 2009 Annual Meeting, Breitkopf (2009, 57) asked, 'Is there something more that [museums] could do to transform the [visitors'] experience?' Gladwell responded 'In a museum, you've got your audience captive and committed.... I certainly think the envelope could be pushed further.... I want at least the option to have as deep an experience as I can'. Based on these two case studies, elements of a 'deep experience' may be an expanded vocabulary when talking about the topic of an exhibition, asking deeper questions about an object or experience, applying an idea or a set of ideas to the world beyond the museum, and extending and enhancing the experience through, for example, visits to related websites. Asking visitors if they have talked about their museum experience after their visit – when and in what conversational contexts – may be the best way to find out if individuals have profoundly changed. Follow-up interviews focusing on these conversations weeks and months after the experience may confirm whether a visitor's initial experience has resulted in longer-term change. Ideally, if museum boards and staff find best practice situations in which visitors have experiences that change or transform the way they think and live, it may help exhibition developers, interpretive planners, and public programmers to find innovative ways to embrace issues of personal importance to individuals as well as to their communities and society.

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Notes

1. See also Barabási (2003) and J.R. McNeill and W.H. McNeill (2003) on grasping connections and links across the world's surfaces, over its history, and into its depths.
2. For example, Caruth and Bernstein (2007), Din and Hecht (2007), Marty (2008), Samis (2007), Witschey et al. (2006), and Woods (2007). Simon (2008, 42) describes how changes in social networking tools such as citizen journalism, blogs and talkback walls are reflecting 'individual voices and stories'. A collaboration of museum professionals and others participating in the Steve Project believe that social tagging may provide profound new ways to describe and access museum collections and encourage visitor engagement with museum objects (<http://www.steve.museum/>).
3. See Soren and Lemelin (2004), research for the Canadian Heritage Information Network (Soren 2004, 2005, 2007), and a conference presentation at the American Association of Museums 2006 annual meeting by Folsom et al. (2006).
4. I am most appreciative of the thoughtful and stimulating discussion with 16 students in my 2009 Museums and their Publics course at University of Toronto in response to reading a version of this article.
5. Personal communication in response to reading a version of this article, 25 April 2009.
6. The dedicated team for Bridges that Unite included managers and content developers at AKFC, designers at BaAM Productions, and Eric Young Enterprises Inc., a social marketing agency that addresses some of the most pressing issues facing contemporary society.
7. During 2008, the exhibition traveled across venues in western Canada, including the Victoria Conference Centre, Nickle Arts Museum in Calgary, and Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre in Vancouver. During 2009, the exhibition will be in Ontario and Nova Scotia venues.
8. For example, Janes and Conaty (2005), Lang, Reeve, and Woollard (2006), and Thomas and Carey (2005).

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