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## Moving Toward Modern--How the Steel Plant Museum of Western New York is Embracing the Paradigm Shift of Museums in the 21st Century

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Over the past few decades, Museum Studies has both grown and matured into a thriving professional and educational field which aims to improve the efficiency and overall performance of museums. In order to achieve these goals of and remain relevant in a changing world, museums have to constantly shift and re-think how they display objects, interpret information, and educate and welcome their visitors. These changes are often collectively referred to as an overall *paradigm shift* in museums—one that addresses the use of modern technology, places emphasis on visitor experience and services, and views the museum as a center for lifelong learning. More and more museums and historical societies understand that such a transformation is necessary for their survival as institutions.

One such institution is the Steel Plant Museum of Western New York (SPM). The Buffalo-based museum is largely volunteer-run and depends on the efforts and dedication of those willing to donate their time to keep the museum alive. The museum had a period of struggle preceding recent growth, and the museum's leadership has not ignored recent trends in considering what it should do to ensure its viability. The SPM has taken great strides in the right direction in terms of following the paradigm shift and laying out goals necessary for a small, low-budget museum to survive and grow in the current economic environment. This paper aims to briefly explore the paradigm shift in museums and the changes that the SPM has undergone to join the shift and become a modern, 21<sup>st</sup>-century history institution.

The essence of small museums like the SPM is accurately captured by Christine Finn, a contributing author to *Archaeology*. In her article titled "In Praise of Small Museums", she writes

about "...the joy of the small museum..." and tries to explain what makes these places so endearing.<sup>1</sup> The SPM definitely falls into her description of these organizations:

...run by volunteers, often on shoestring budgets, with maybe a few postcards and pencils to sell, and a big jar for donations...The type of place where the person behind the counter will show you around with a passion, telling you curious tales about oddball acquisitions.<sup>2</sup>

Finn's description of small museums is spot-on, and certainly describes the character of the SPM. However, small museums often fall victim to settling into old habits and mismanagement, seriously threatening any charm they have. The SPM is taking steps to avoid that pitfall and transition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by following several key concepts that have evolved as part of the overall paradigm shift discussed in museum studies.

Gail Anderson, museum consultant and editor of *Reinventing the Museum*, writes that "The realities of issues, global interdependence, economic volatility...the explosion of social media, and demographic shifts have impacted institutions in previously unimagined ways." giving evidence that museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suddenly have far-reaching difficulties and issues to address and conquer.<sup>3</sup> Adapting to the immense changes in technology and using new techniques to attract new audiences is key for museums, as is understanding what these audiences desire and expect to see and experience in museums. Also changing is the way people learn and how they absorb information, presenting another hurdle for museums. The best way to take on these difficulties and overcome them is to employ techniques that challenge the status

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Finn, "In Praise of Small Museums", *Archaeology*, Nov/Dec 2001, Vol. 54, issue 6, page 80. Accessed through EBSCOhost, October 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum* (New York: Altamira Press, 2012), 191.

quo of the museum world, those “...existing beliefs and philosophies.”<sup>4</sup> Anderson adds that the challenging of those philosophies is “...essential to being able to begin the process of reenvisioning, redefining, and reinventing the museum for future survival in a way that is relevant to an evolving environment...” in these turbulent “times of change.”<sup>5</sup>

Necessity for change in the way museums function is not a novel concept. Professionals in the field dating back as early as the 1900s realized that then-current the state of museums was not in the best interest of the museum nor the public. Academics and educators in the early twentieth century started thinking differently about what museums were as institutions, who they served, their goals, and how they would achieve such goals. Many museums were primarily founded as clubs, where elite socialites used their wealth to collect and preserve artifacts and history that they deemed relevant and interesting. One of the first transformations of museum theory was the re-definition of defining who a museum ought to serve—which identified the public as the primary beneficiary of the museum’s resources and services.

*Museum Origins* (ed. Hugh Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei) presents a documentation of the early stages of this paradigm shift in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Genoways and Andrei are both museum professionals—Genoways served as chairman for the Museum Studies program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Andrei is a professor at the University of Virginia who has degrees in history and museum studies.<sup>6</sup> The selections in *Museum Origins* cover a variety of topics of museum studies thought from an early point of view including the new, emerging philosophy in museums.

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<sup>4</sup> Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum* (New York: Altamira Press, 2012),191.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei, *Museum Origins*, ed. Genoways & Andrei, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 11.

One such passage is a speech by Frederic Lucas, Director of the Brooklyn Museum in the early 1900s. At a meeting of the Staten Island Association of Art and Sciences in 1907, Lucas spoke on the “Purposes and Aims of Modern Museums.”<sup>7</sup> He discussed these aims by stating that

...this museum of today is a great deal more than just a place where objects are merely preserved, it is an educational institution on a large scale, whose language may be understood by all, an ever open book whose pages appeal not only to the scholar but even to the man who cannot read.<sup>8</sup>

By saying this, Lucas stated outright that museums are meant to serve the public regardless of education level—a novel concept that was just beginning to root itself in the field. Lucas was just one of many academics who believed that the best use of museums included engaging the wider public and primarily existing to benefit them.

Another entry in *Museum Origins*, “On the Ideal Relations of Public Libraries, Museums, and Art Gallery”, author Oliver Farrington wrote a report concerning the operation of public institutions in Chicago, Illinois.<sup>9</sup> He wrote that one of the reasons he believed the public should be the primary beneficiaries of cultural institutions was because the public, through taxes and fundraising, are the primary benefactors of these organizations. Farrington wrote that “...the people of the city [should] derive the greatest possible benefit from these institutions, their right to this benefit being based on the financial and other support which they give them.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>7</sup> Frederic Lucas, “Purposes and Aims of Modern Museums” in *Museum Origins*, ed. Hugh Genoways & Many Anne Andrei.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Farrington, “On the Ideal Relations of Public Libraries, Museums, and Art Gallery to the City”, in *Museum Origins*, ed. Hugh Genoways & Many Anne Andrei, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Farrington, in *Museum Origins*, 79.

as museums collected and used public funds to operate, it was only right that museums existed to benefit the public.

Despite academics insisting that museums should benefit the public, that very public began to shift away from museums as the decades wore on. An article in *Museum Origins* entitled “The Dulness (sic) of Museums” by John George Wood takes humorous aim at why the public started to become disinterested in museums. “Oh! The dulness of museums!”, he writes.<sup>11</sup> Speaking “on behalf of the General Public”, Wood claims that “... a museum, of whatever nature, is most intolerably dull...”, and cites an example of a display of blue china that may be fascinating to “experts”, but holds no interest to a wider audience.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that this was written in 1887, years before Farrington or Lucas gave their speeches, but Wood’s writing expresses the frustrations that visitors were having with museums even before the philosophies started to change.<sup>13</sup>

The SPM was founded in 1984, at nearly the same time that the museum studies field of study began to organize and gather momentum.<sup>14</sup> At its founding, the SPM was a small, fledgling organization that heavily relied on volunteers to operate and construct the museum’s exhibits. It coexisted with the Open Hearth Café, a small snack bar located in the basement of the Lackawanna Public Library in Lackawanna, New York. An interview with Mike Malyak, the museum’s current director and longtime volunteer, offered some insight on the early days of the SPM. Lackawanna is best known in the Buffalo area for being home to a massive steel plant belonging to the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, and it was former employees who founded the

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<sup>11</sup> John George Wood, “The Dulness of Museums”, in *Museum Origins*, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Home page”, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, [www.steelplantmuseumwny.org](http://www.steelplantmuseumwny.org), accessed November 2012.

SPM. Malyak started volunteering at the SPM in the early 1990s, and witnessed firsthand the growth the museum experienced until its move out of the Lackawanna Public Library in 2011.<sup>15</sup>

The volunteers that run the SPM possess no shortage of enthusiasm or passion for the history that they are trying to preserve for future generations. The majority of those involved have some connection to the steel industry and its former presence in Western New York (WNY). Most people connected with steel in WNY have ties to Bethlehem Steel—having worked for Bethlehem, or perhaps having a family member that did. For many, the history of the steel industry in WNY is not just a story of heavy manufacturing and a basic industry that fueled the American economy for decades. To them, the story of Bethlehem Steel and the steel industry is highly personal: it is the story of themselves, their families, and their own pasts.

Passion, a sound collection, and dedicated staff are three things that any history museum needs to function properly and serve a true purpose. However, those three things are not enough by themselves. Museums also need to ensure their vitality for years to come—and for small museums like the SPM, that means doing all it can to attract visitors. Fortunately, the SPM has volunteers and staff that are perceptive to the trends that the museum industry is demanding, and in 2010, the SPM hired its first museum professional.<sup>16</sup>

Spencer Morgan, hired in 2010, is a graduate of SUNY Buffalo State with an M.A. in History, concentrating in Museum Studies. He was hired by the SPM as its Curator in hopes that his presence would achieve several goals that Malyak outlined in his interview for this paper. Malyak had mentioned that he saw the “great amount of success” that the SPM had inviting interns and younger volunteers, as well as the positive effects that other museums were having in

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Mike Malyak, director of the Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, November 6, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

hiring at least one professional. He believed that hiring Morgan would help “...put a professional handle on the organization.”, and add a degree of progress to the SPM.<sup>17</sup> The hiring of a museum professional was a move toward modernity for the SPM, and after Morgan’s hiring, the museum started to take real steps in leaving the cramped confines of the Lackawanna Public Library and started to become a more official and legitimate museum.

The SPM experienced growth and increased involvement from interested volunteers since its founding in 1984 and in 2005 it was decided that the organization should start looking for a new space to move into.<sup>18</sup> After considering several options and locations, the Steel Plant Museum settled on occupying space at the Heritage Discovery Center (HDC) in Buffalo’s First Ward, just south of downtown and near the Buffalo River. The SPM had contacts with the Western New York Railway Historical Society (WNYRHS), who owns the HDC. The HDC is on Lee Street in a building that once housed the Buffalo Color Corporation, on the grounds of the former Schoellkopf Aniline and Chemical Company.<sup>19</sup>

The move to the HDC was positive for several reasons, especially in terms of forward-thinking strategy for the SPM. The HDC itself (although owned by the WNYRHS) is a collaborative environment primarily between two historical organizations that present subject matter that is related to the history of heavy industry in WNY. The HDC is located in a section of Buffalo that has historically been its heart of industry. The aged brick buildings, rolling railroad cars and smokestacks that poke at the sky offer a backdrop that is fitting for a museum dealing with such subject matter.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mike Malyak.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



Spencer Morgan mentioned accessibility as another reason to move. With a sizeable portion of the museum's patronage being senior citizens potentially with mobility issues, Morgan stated that the HDC, with

"...handicapped-accessible entrances, wider hallways...makes us much more ADA-compliant."<sup>20</sup> The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) ensures that public spaces, like the



museum's exhibit hall, allow for the accessibility for those with disabilities and mobility issues (Figure 1). The HDC also offers ample parking and event space for the SPM.

Figure 1

These improved conditions of the SPM indeed address one of the core concepts of the paradigm shift in twenty-first century museums: the need for an improved visitor experience and the provision of amenities to make visits enjoyable and comfortable. Modern museums must provide good visitor experience—after all, if someone goes to a museum and does not feel comfortable and/or enjoy their experience there, why would he or she desire to return?

*The Engaging Museum* discusses visitor experience and what museums can do to ensure their visitors are comfortable and prepared to enjoy their visit. Author Graham Black is a lecturer at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom, a museum professional, and consultant for museum interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Within a chapter titled "Traditional Museum Audiences", the sub-

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Spencer Morgan, curator, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, October 23, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum*, Graham Black (New York: Routledge, 2010), i.

topic “*Visitor needs*” includes a list called “The Visitors’ Bill of Rights”, which outlines eleven conditions that visitors would like to be met when visiting a museum:<sup>22</sup>

1. “Comfort: Meet my basic needs.”
2. “Orientation: Make it easy for me to find my way around.”
3. “Welcome/belonging: Make me feel welcome.”
4. “Enjoyment: I want to have fun.”
5. “Socializing: I came to spend time with my family and friends.”
6. “Respect: Accept me for what I am and what I know.”
7. “Communication: Help me understand and let me talk too.”
8. “Learning: I want to learn something new.”
9. “Choice and control: Let me choose, give me some control.”
10. “Challenge and confidence: Give me a challenge I know I can handle.”
11. “Revitalization: Help me leave refreshed, restored.”<sup>23</sup>

This list was published by the USA Visitor Services Association in 2001 and serves as a guideline to meeting the needs and expectations of visitors.<sup>24</sup> The move to the HDC helped the SPM better address conditions one, two, three, four, and eleven. The recent installation of benches in the main exhibit room directly ties in to condition one. Occupying a building with the WNYRHS creates the interesting opportunity for collaborative efforts and presents a chance to develop programming that would satisfy conditions eight and nine in the above list.

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<sup>22</sup> Black, *The Engaging Museum*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Condition one may be the most important in terms of ensuring visitors enjoy their museum visit and encourage their return. Comfort can be interpreted in many ways. It can mean physical comfort or emotional/psychological comfort. Physical comfort concerns the provision of ample space to move around in and traverse among the exhibits and displays. “Restroom provision”, “catering facilities” (Are refreshments available?), and “climate” (Turn up the heat or air conditioning? Is the room comfortable?), are also all cited by Graham Black as being important things to consider when caring for the needs museum visitors.<sup>25</sup> Something as simple as benches (Figure 2) can greatly add to a visitors’ comfort.



Figure 2

Comfort can also be interpreted as being emotionally and socially comfortable in a museum environment. Presentation of collections and exhibits are important, but Black mentions “...it is the visitor engagement with these that creates the individual user experience.”, and just as, if not more important, are the volunteers and staff that stimulate that engagement with the collection.<sup>26</sup> If the paradigm shift into the twenty-first century were to focus itself on two main concepts, the provision of excellent visitor service would be one (with the other being development of engaging exhibits to give museums a reason to provide visitor services).

If someone is treated well, they will be more inclined to make a return visit. It is a primary focus of the twenty-first century museum to strive to become that place through

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<sup>25</sup> Black, *The Engaging Museum*. 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

“...transform[ing] our museums [and] making them audience centred...”<sup>27</sup> A museum could be infinitely interesting but without providing a desirable experience people will not visit and the museum will fail in this goal.

The best way to ensure a positive visitor experience is to focus on providing appropriate training for the museum docents, staff, and volunteers while encouraging a friendly disposition and welcoming attitude among them. Black writes that the majority of staff in this field possess “...innate visitor-friendly abilities...”, but does not fail to mention that “...the encounter between visitor and staff member can make or break a visit...” and describes it as a “moment of truth.”<sup>28</sup> If a visitor feels at ease in the museum, it boosts their likelihood of enjoying the museum’s collection and what exhibits have been created for them.

Conditions eight and ten in the list from the USA Visitor Services Association concern the exhibits, programming, displays, and most of all, the collection of the museum. Any museum professional will attest to the fact that any museum is only as good as its collection. It is the very heart of the institution. In order to make the best use of its collection, a museum must have an efficient and standardized collection management system. The SPM, prior to hiring their curator, had a less-than-perfect way of cataloging. Malyak recalls that when he started volunteering, most of this was done by placing a Post-It note on the inside cover or simply writing down when the object was received.

*Museum Collections Management: a Handbook* states that “At the most basic level, any museum must maintain the following information on the objects it holds: what the object is,

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<sup>27</sup> Black, *The Engaging Museum*, 97.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 100, 99.

where it came from, [and] how it should be cared for...”<sup>29</sup> This is something that the SPM did not consistently have in its Lackawanna Public Library days, and in terms of museum management it is a basic need for any institution. Museums should be able to, upon command, furnish the records and location of any artifact in its collection. Freda Matassa, the author of *Museum Collections Management*, writes that “Documentation proves that a museum is fulfilling the requirements of collection care, contributes to its credibility and public accountability and provides for proof of title.”<sup>30</sup> If the SPM is to be serious about becoming a more legitimate institution, it must have a sufficient system of collection documentation.

One of the main goals that the SPM established for a curator was the creation of a reliable system of collection documentation. One of the most popular ways to do this is to use a computer program—such as Past Perfect, which Morgan has been using at the SPM since his first internship there in 2009.<sup>31</sup> The program allows the museum to record accessions, assign accession numbers to objects, and hold photographs of objects. Past Perfect also allows the SPM to electronically manage its volunteers and membership. In addition to using Past Perfect, Morgan laughingly admits to “...playing I.T. as well as curator.”<sup>32</sup> He has also helped the museum’s volunteers understand and use the new computers as well as help install a wireless internet network in the museum, including a wireless printer.

One of the integral parts of bringing a museum truly into the twenty-first century is the application of social media to engage and attract audiences. This is important for many reasons, the first being that a museum ought to be actively marketing itself to younger visitors and potential volunteers and staff. Younger volunteers and staff will eventually be carrying on the

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<sup>29</sup> Freda Matassa, *Museum Collections Management: A Handbook* (London: Facet Publishing, 2011), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Spencer Morgan, curator, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, October 23, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

museum's mission and purpose, making them vital to the museum's survival. Social media is also one of the best marketing tools that modern museums have at their disposal. Most social media sites are free and have the ability to reach large amounts of people, both of which are incredibly useful when small museums are in direct competition with larger organizations with bigger budgets.

Peter Van Allen, contributor to the *Philadelphia Business Journal*, wrote in an article (2011) that "...the fortunes of small museums often rely on more aggressive marketing to be noticed amid larger institutions..."<sup>33</sup> He also mentions that using social media is inexpensive, noting that "...social media are a way to 'stretch' marketing dollars..."<sup>34</sup> The SPM utilizes social media outlets Twitter (@SPMofWNY) and Facebook, updating the Facebook page several times a week with museum news. This allows the SPM to alert members, visitors, and volunteers about what is going on and changing at the museum, in addition to the museum's newsletter, *The I-Beam*.

Figure 3

Just as important is the museum's online presence outside of the use of social media in the form of the institution's webpage (Figure 3).

Part of the updating of the museum's

virtual presence was an overhaul of its site, [steelplantmuseumwny.org](http://steelplantmuseumwny.org). The site was created by the Monroe Fordham Regional History Center, located within the History Department of SUNY



<sup>33</sup> Peter Van Allen, "Interest in small special-focused museums is growing", *Philadelphia Business Journal*, December 9, 2011, <http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/print-edition/2011/12/09/interest-in-small-special-focused.html?page=all>, accessed November 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Buffalo State.<sup>35</sup> The museum's website provides the information necessary to prepare guests for a visit, including the SPM's location, hours, and mission statement on the home page. Linked pages labeled "Education", "A Chronology of Bethlehem Steel", "The Lackawanna Steel Company", and "Western New York Steelmakers and Manufacturers" all provide additional information.<sup>36</sup> The information available not only prepares visitors for what they can expect at the museum, but offers them the chance to gain some background knowledge about WNY's steel industry before they arrive.

The use of social media and internet-based resources as marketing techniques—and engaging in marketing practices in general—are crucial to the success of a museum. Some of the largest obstacles facing museums in the twenty-first century are the alternative ways that visitors can spend their leisure time and money, instead of at museums. This means that museums have to not only provide intellectual stimulation and learning opportunities, but they must directly compete with tourist attractions and market themselves as such. According to Graham Black, there are "...four basic characteristics of a tourism experience that are equally applicable to museums":

1. "the experience is intangible"
2. "the experience consists of activities rather than things"
3. "the experience is produced and consumed simultaneously"
4. "the customer has to be present and participate in the production process"<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Home page", Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, [www.steelplantmuseumwny.org](http://www.steelplantmuseumwny.org), accessed November 2012.

<sup>36</sup> "Educational", Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, [www.steelplantmuseumwny.org/educational.php](http://www.steelplantmuseumwny.org/educational.php), accessed November 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum*, 96.

The four above characteristics liken the museum experience to something that people may experience while participating in the activities that are more common than visiting historic places (14% of “USA residents and overseas visitors, 2001”)—shopping (34%) and outdoor recreation (17%).<sup>38</sup> This means that visitors are primarily seeking enjoyable experiences, not routine activities and certainly not the simple task of just looking at an object.

Even if a small museum is effectively using marketing techniques and social media, the exhibits and events at the museum must be interesting enough to attract audiences. Generally speaking, museum visitors are no longer intrigued by didactic learning—simply reading words on a panel and being expected to learn and retain that information. Visitors are not interested in labels that are excessively long or use a vocabulary level that they do not understand. Most visitors in museums want to learn and discover new information, but they do not want to have to struggle in order to achieve such learning.<sup>39</sup>

So how do museums develop and re-tool themselves to address the changing attitudes of visitors in terms of how they receive information and learn? George E. Hein, author of “The Constructivist Museum”, claims that in order to properly address how visitors are going to learn, museums should first address what *kind* of learning is occurring in their institution. He describes the idea of constructivist thinking which, in a nutshell, theorizes that people “...construct knowledge as they learn; they don’t simply add facts to what is known, but constantly reorganise and create both understanding and the ability to learn as they interact with the world.”<sup>40</sup> According to Hein, people re-structure what they already know when presented with new knowledge, and fuse the two together into a new understanding.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>40</sup> George E. Hein, “The Constructivist Museum”, in *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson (New York: Altamira Press, 2012), 126.



Hein's article also refers to constructivist learning as "discovery learning", and states that "...in order to learn, students need to have experience; they need to do and see rather than be told."<sup>41</sup> Allowing visitors to participate in history is nothing new to the museums of today, but in the early twentieth century it would have been regarded as something radical and undesirable. Advances in both understanding learning as a process and the museum studies field has led museum professionals to understand that visitors want to participate and engage with history and artifacts in tactile ways. Hein also mentions that "...the focus needs to be on the learner, not on the subject to be learned."<sup>42</sup> This lends further legitimacy to the idea that a positive visitor-centered museum experience is necessary for a twenty-first century institution.

The development of interactive exhibits and the use of modern technology is a daunting task for small museums, the SPM included. It is advisable for museums to provide fresh, new content several times a year, to avoid topics from getting stale and to continually attract visitors. However, consistent change of exhibit material and installing up-to-date technology is expensive, and small museums like the SPM often run on tight budgets that offer little extra space for keeping up with constantly-changing trends in the museum field. As a result, many small museums are unable to offer the same comparable experiences that large museums can. Mike Malyak has a vision for one example of an interactive kiosk at the SPM, a database of steel workers in WNY who were employed by Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, or any of the other large steel plants that used to populate the area.

"We'd like to create a registry," Malyak said in his interview, "something dealing with the genealogy and history, employee records and what positions they held at the steel plant."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> George E. Hein, "The Constructivist Museum", in *Reinventing the Museum*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Mike Malyak, director, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, November 6, 2012.

He mentioned collaborating with a museum in Delaware that houses many of Bethlehem Steel's old records, donated to it once the company finally collapsed in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup> The desired end result, according to Malyak, is that visitors to the Steel Plant Museum could search for relatives who once worked in the steel mills and make a personal connection not only to the history of the steel industry in WNY, but to their own history. The SPM and its collection could potentially take on a whole new meaning to someone who recently discovered that they have relatives who once sweated in the steel mills or operated machinery in the plant. That is the hope for the interactive steel worker registry—to enable visitors to make a lasting, personal connection with the steel industry in WNY and directly engage those visitors in the history that they are seeing.

Another way that the SPM can get more people personally involved in its mission and its history is the development and utilization of educational outreach programs. Graham Black quotes another source in his book *The Engaging Museum* as saying “Of all the institutions in the United States that are not schools—and are not paid to be—few try harder than museums to educate the young.”<sup>45</sup> Museums can be invaluable tools to schools and their curriculum if used properly. Creating structured, relevant programs and collaboration among all the involved parties can benefit students by providing “...a unique learning experience...[and] direct engagement with remarkable collections.”<sup>46</sup> This type of tactile interaction with real historical artifacts is something that is rarely seen inside classrooms and truly affords the students an incredible opportunity to literally hold history in their hands or see it in person.

However, schools will not be interested in a museum program if it does not fit their needs, especially in the difficulty of the current economic climate. Therefore, programs that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 159.

museums propose to educators and school administrators absolutely *must* be a product of “...co-operation with teachers...[which means] museums need to respect and build on the expertise of experienced teachers...”<sup>47</sup> Collaboration on the creation of an acceptable program consulting the curriculum (such as those established by New York State) is the best way to ensure a positive relationship amongst schools, educators, museums, and administrators and achieve the goal of providing students with a unique historical experience.

The SPM has collaborated with nearby schools for programs involving the museum’s content and collections. Most notably and appropriately, they have run programs with the Lackawanna schools, in the city that Bethlehem Steel called home for its duration in WNY. Working with the Lackawanna schools presents the students who live there with a history that still defines the city in which they live. Even though Bethlehem Steel left WNY decades ago, Lackawanna still hangs on to its reputation as a steel town—and collaboration between Lackawanna schools and museums helps pass on that steel town heritage to younger generations.

Museum learning does not just end with grade school or high school, however. There are many university-level and graduate-level students that are studying in the fields of History, Public History, Museum Studies, Conservation, and other related fields that all have personal stakes in successful relationships between academic institutions and museums. For the Steel Plant Museum, Malyak stressed the importance of cooperation with Museum Studies students taking courses at SUNY Buffalo State. This would mutually benefit both parties for several reasons. It supplies the SPM with young, aspiring museum professionals willing to volunteer to gain experience in the field—and provides that practical experience for students.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 161.

It also exposes the SPM to emerging trends and theory in the Museum Studies fields by gleaning knowledge from the students who are learning these concepts in the classroom. “I’d love to keep on working with students from Buffalo State,” Malyak said.<sup>48</sup> When asked about older and younger generations working together in a historical environment (where ideologies sometimes clash), Malyak replied with “I have no qualms working with modern personnel or up-to-date ideas. It’s something that has to happen. I look forward to working with young people who know what the field is calling for.”<sup>49</sup> It is a safe assumption that continued partnership with SUNY Buffalo State and students in WNY will be mutually beneficial for the SPM and the students they enlist to help.

This paper sought to look at the SPM and assess the steps that it has taken, as an organization, to embrace the paradigm shift of museums in the twenty-first century. In the interview with Spencer Morgan, Morgan drew an interesting parallel between three major players in the maturation of the SPM: the organization itself, the paradigm shift of modern museums, and the city of Buffalo, saying “It’s amazing what we’ve been able to accomplish in a year and a half.”<sup>50</sup> He stated that the SPM itself is a reflection on both Buffalo and the Museum Studies field, both re-defining themselves to move boldly into the twenty-first century to ensure their long-term survival.

Buffalo is going through a “deindustrialization”, or a “...shift in attitudes and values, much like we’re doing here. The Steel Plant Museum is an embodiment of the renaissance that Buffalo is going through.”, Morgan said.<sup>51</sup> He emphasized that change is difficult but necessary for survival—like Buffalo emerging from a heavily industrial past, the SPM is transforming itself

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Mike Malyak, director, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, November 6, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Spencer Morgan, curator, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, October 23, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

into a more professional and efficiently run history organization. The SPM is doing this by subscribing to several concepts that the Museum Studies field has been developing for years.

As part of this transformation, the SPM must also play to its strengths as a small museum. Mark Sinclair, a museum director and contributing writer for the Association of Science-Technology Centers, authored an article entitled “Economies of Scale: Lessons from Successful Small Museums”, in which he lists several advantages that small museums have over larger ones. The best analogy Sinclair gives in his article concerns the fact that small museums have “...fewer staff and shorter lines of communication...[which] makes them both flexible and entrepreneurial—the sports cars of the field, rather than the stretch limos.”<sup>52</sup> His advice also includes “stay connected to the needs of the community”, “make frequent changes”, and “collaborate whenever possible”, all concepts that have been addressed earlier in this paper.<sup>53</sup>

Sinclair’s advice, “stay connected to the needs of the community”, plays into another large shift in museum attitudes that are reflective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Museums that are connected to their public can act as learning centers for their communities and places where debate and continuing education can take place. This topic is addressed by a familiar source, Graham Black, in his article “Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums”, appearing in *Reinventing the Museum*. Black writes that museums have the opportunity to “...encourage and support engagement within the wider civil society...”, meaning that museums have the power to raise issues using historical context and can push their visitors to either question the current state of

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Sinclair, “Economies of Scale: Lessons from Successful Small Museums”, Association of Science-Technology centers, May/June 2003, <http://www.astc.org/pubs/dimensions/2003/may-jun/index.htm>, accessed November 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

their world or challenge their pre-existing viewpoints—reinforcing the theory of a constructivist museum, as discussed earlier in Hein’s article.<sup>54</sup>

Black continues by writing that museums like the SPM can “...[take] an active role in the present...” if they provide thought-provoking material and present issues that are still relevant in today’s world.<sup>55</sup> The SPM does this by presenting several topics within its historical scope, especially those of worker safety and labor rights. The museum states in its mission on its website that “Union efforts to improve working conditions are documented in grievance files and correspondence kept in the Museum's Reference Library. Their hard-won benefits are listed in contract booklets that workers studied diligently.”<sup>56</sup> By providing a history that is both relevant to those visiting the museum and to the issues of today, the SPM is taking small steps forward in becoming “...institutions for public learning”, something that Black lists as a “duty” of museums.<sup>57</sup>

Black writes that “...museums have a duty to the communities they serve, and to those who fund them.”<sup>58</sup> This echoes the opinions of Farrington and Lucas mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Farrington and Lucas started to believe this in the early 1900s, and Black (amongst others) have reinforced that duty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Museums are generally public organizations that rely on some degree on government funding, and in return for that financial support,

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<sup>54</sup> Graham Black, “Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums”, *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson, 269.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Home page, Steel Plant Museum of Western New York, [www.steelplantmuseumwny.org](http://www.steelplantmuseumwny.org), accessed November 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Black, 270-271.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

museums are responsible for “...empowering local people...” and increasing the strength of the communities in which they reside.<sup>59</sup>

What ranks as most important is whether or not the efforts that small museums put into their organizations and exhibits are sufficient enough to keep people coming in the door and visiting the museum. If museums participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century shift, employing the techniques discussed in this paper, their chances at capturing and keeping an audience are much higher than a museum that does not. Stephen E. Weil, a museum philosopher who was employed at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., also contributed an article to Anderson’s *Reinventing the Museum* anthology. His article, “Creampuffs and Hardball”, offers a no-nonsense look at how museums must critically assess themselves.

Weil writes that “...a remarkably direct phrase has emerged to describe the expectation of those responsible for providing public funds. What they expect is ‘value for money’.”<sup>60</sup> This feeling applies to every visitor, from the casual tourist to museum members to politicians in local, state, and federal government. Museums must be accountable and show their patrons that their money is well-invested and worth the dollars. Accountability is another large component of the twenty-first century paradigm shift—museums and their staff are held to higher standards and directly assume the credit or blame for a museum’s success or failure. Weil also includes a wary word of warning to museums:

That museums were once described as ‘temples of the human spirit’ is no guarantee that they will be forever considered sacred. Nor is the fact that

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<sup>59</sup> Graham Black, “Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums”, 283.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen E. Weil, “Creampuffs and Hardball”, *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson, 131.

they have been well supported in the past a guarantee that they will always be thought to have such entitlement.<sup>61</sup>

The paradigm shift of the Museum Studies field in the twenty-first century concerns many aspects of how museums are run—in reality, it concerns almost every aspect. Visitors no longer want to visit a dry, stuffy museum with simple things on display. They are searching for experiential learning and activities to do. Visitors want to hold things, touch artifacts, interact with their stories. Museum-goers will no longer settle for the standard practice of lengthy, uninteresting text on labels next to things on shelves. Museums have to be welcoming centers of learning, not just a musty collection of objects responsible for their preservation. Museums are now responsible for educating, instructing, and challenging its visitors with a historical context on issues that are still relevant in today's world.

The SPM has taken brave first steps into becoming a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century history institution. First and foremost, it hired a degree-holding young museum professional—someone with experience in the field, who has learned the most recent museum trends and is in the best possible position to help the SPM move forward. The insight that a professional can bring to a museum in transition is priceless. The move from the Lackawanna Public Library to the HDC in Buffalo allowed the SPM to expand and create new opportunities with new displays, events, and collaborations with local organizations. By being able to logistically re-organize and expand into a new setting, the SPM is on its way to becoming that dutiful community-based center of learning.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 133.



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