Introduction

Panarchy and the Museum

BACKGROUND

In 2002, the Canadian ecologist and scholar C. S. Holling led an international group of ecologists, economists, social scientists, and mathematicians through a five-year collaboration that led to the development of a theoretical framework for the better understanding of transformation within natural systems. This group developed what they termed the life loop and the adaptive cycle as principal touchpoints for the interplay, in nature, between "change and persistence, between the predictable and unpredictable."[1] Holling and Lance H. Gunderson went on to create an overarching, cross-scale, interdisciplinary, dynamic theory that they named Panarchy. Although Holling and Gunderson originated their theory to allow for a better understanding of nature and its systems, it has gone on to inspire scholars in a multitude of disciplines to see their fields through a fresh lens. From the beginning, Holling and Gunderson described Panarchy as a metaphor, and grasped that it would have wide applications.[2] And so, while the life loop and its adaptive cycle were developed with respect to studies of ecosystems, the metaphor from the beginning had relevance and found application for social and socio-environmental systems.[3]

1. Crawford S. Holling, Lance H. Gunderson, and Garry D. Peterson, "Sustainability and Panarchies," in *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (Washington, DC, and London: Island Press, 2002), 69.

2. Telephone conversation between Lance Gunderson and Selma Holo, March 30, 2014.

3. Crawford S. Holling, Lance H. Gunderson, and Garry D. Peterson, "Sustainability and Panarchies," 69.

But, museums are not exactly parallel to the world of nature. Looking at the Americas, the hemisphere where we are locating our conversations, we need to underline that museums do not exist in a great interlocking system, and it would be a grave mistake to assume that they did. However, each single museum does exist within its own system, its own museum space, and it is useful to try to identify where any single museum can be positioned in its own life cycle by comparing it to others of all types and sizes. The comparisons made possible by this book are refreshingly stimulating because they bring us out of our comfort zones and give equal weight to museums outside of our gridded networks, encouraging us to find possible affinities in unlikely places.

We too have seen the possibilities of applying this theoretical metaphor to museums. These cultural, human-made institutions also live their lives by traveling through life cycles, each one in its own manner and at its own rate.[4] Reading the texts in *Remix* as if they were a set of conversations organized by life-cycle phases can enhance our ability to spot certain situations that surface in a particular phase of the life cycle of any museum. The conversations around phases can heighten our awareness that what might appear to be a state of permanent crisis is actually part of a condition of constant change and opportunity. That is, these conversations can give us some sense of what the life-cycle loop looks like and can help us think more tranquilly, clearly, and creatively about the next steps we might take that could enable us get us out of a crisis we are presently enduring. These conversations, arranged as they are, make us aware of how our colleagues throughout the Americas have managed similar crises attendant to that particular phase in the loop, and how they have creatively moved on to the next phase of the life-cycle loop. Oddly, reading the essays in a given phase can help reduce the frustration we, our staffs, our "bosses," and our stakeholders feel when a museum we thought we had

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4. For example, Glenn Sutter, curator of human ecology at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (Canada) and the Canadian museologist Douglas Worts have been looking at Holling's work and the role museums can play in environmental sustainability. For further info see G. C. Sutter and D. Worts, "Negotiating a Sustainable Path: Museums and Societal Therapy" (2005), in *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*, ed. R. R. Janes and G. Conaty (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press); K. D. Arbuthnott, G. C. Sutter, and C. T. Heidt, "Natural History Museums, Parks, and Connection with Nature" (2014), in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, DOI: 10.1080/09647775.2014.888818; and R. Logan and G. C. Sutter, "Sustainability and Museum Education: What Future Are We Educating For?," *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 4 (2012): 11–26.

"fixed" only a few years ago appears, once again, to be in grave need of strategic attention. The loop is always on the move.

THE ADAPTIVE CYCLE AND MUSEUMS

No museum can or should be static throughout its existence. Times will change and new needs will emerge at different times, at different rates, and (at large museums) within different departments. Any museum that does not adapt and creatively evolve to meet those changing times and their needs will not develop the resilience required to be sustainable over generations. Happily, most museums do adapt. But because our conversations are usually limited to museums of our own scale, prestige, and discipline, we often disregard viable alternatives that exist outside our own circles.

Four Museum Phases: Origins, Conserving, Uncertainty, Renewal

Origins, conserving, uncertainty, and renewal are the four phases that we have broadly identified in the life-cycle loop that every museum passes (or should pass) through if it is to have a long, multigenerational life. Collecting institutions, even *Kunsthallen*, all have, in the beginning, their celebratory origins, followed by a period of increasing realism and maturity when they must take into account responsibilities, challenges, and contradictions associated with conserving—both the conservation of things and questions around the conserving or revisiting of original philosophies and missions. Later on, uncertainties become more pronounced and reforms are floated and attempted—some succeeding and some failing. Next up there will inevitably be a period of renewal, once again summoning up the expenditure of great energy, along with a unique kind of tough critical thinking and the ability and courage to reexamine. But be forewarned: there is no end to this cycle. Think Möbius strip.

With that perspective in mind, In chapter 1 we celebrate beginnings of museums, and even look at the potential for new kinds of museums in the future. We mark that phase as one where the best leadership is in high gear: energetic, charismatic, strategic, and politically strong, greeting new opportunities and resources with the most positive of attitudes. It is in the origins phase that a quick rate of overall growth and accumulation characterizes the mood of the institution as a whole. At these early stages, there is often great fluidity, as regulation and systematization of the museum can be weak, precisely so that it can still respond flexibly to experimentation and accumulation.

In chapter 2, we open up conversations around conserving. Conserving is, for the museum life cycle, that time when a museum is expected to take itself seriously as an institution, one of society's models. In its maturity, a museum must look inquiringly at challenges that derive from the infinitive *to conserve*. We thus begin with several essays around the topic of the conservation (and, logically, stewardship) of collections, and entertain some conventional and some iconoclastic points of view. This phase, accompanying the growing maturity of the museum, signals the growing requirement to consider what conserving means: its positive and negative implications. A healthy conservatism helps to regulate a museum's internal state, yet at the same time, this is the moment when there is the danger of a less healthy conservatism: a hardening of internal and external connections, a loss of supple inquiry and flexibility.

Chapter 3 is about the phase that is rife with uncertainty. Threats of all kinds begin to be apprehended on the close horizon, and there is often confusion. In response to growing uncertainty, reforms are often begun. Some are successful, some not. It is a time of danger for any museum, even as it offers a space for creativity and new opportunity. Our essayists represent various manifestations of this phase.

Chapter 4 addresses renewal, the phase that, if a museum is to thrive, follows on the heels of uncertainty. In this phase there is room for a myriad of new possibilities: another identity might be forged, or new supporters targeted. A mission might be tweaked or even totally revised, and whole departments might be created or eliminated. This renewal is the future, but only for now, as the whole life loop of a museum, as the looping of a Möbius strip, will repeat itself dynamically over the decades as the museum continues to adapt and experience the adaptive life cycle.

A PANARCHY OF CONVERSATIONS: A NEW WAY OF COMMUNICATING

Panarchy: Neither Hierarchy nor Anarchy

Panarchy is a way of apprehending the natural world that lies in direct opposition to both hierarchy and anarchy. It is a conceptual framework for looking at the ways people, nature, and their civilizations are organized. In Panarchy, influence is not predominantly "held by larger-scale, top-down processes, but

can also come from small scale or bottom-up processes."[5] The conversations we are proposing here are to be considered as among equals and are, by design, cross-scale and cross-disciplinary.

In adapting the theory of Panarchy and its life-cycle loop as a metaphor for this life cycle of museums, we invited forty-three authors from across the Americas to relate the histories of their museums. We devised a way of fitting each of those stories into the life-cycle loop, in the hopes that the loop could be seen as adaptable to any museum. Ultimately, it should become clear that all museums are essentially living in a theater of dynamic change and movement—a mirror of the interplay of creative energy, stability, resilience, and change—and that there are more ways than we could imagine, in our separate museum typologies, to grow, adapt, change, and increase resiliency and sustainable development at every phase. The challenge, as in nature, "is to conserve the ability to adapt to change, to be able to respond in a flexible way to uncertainty and surprises. And even to create the kind of surprises that open opportunity. It is this capacity that a view of an evolving nature should be all about: i.e., maintaining options in order to buffer disturbance and to create novelty. A living system cannot be kept within some desirable state or on some desirable trajectory if adaptive capacity is continuously lost."[6]

Panarchy as a Mode of Communication

Panarchy is not only a way of understanding the life cycle of museums, but also a way museum professionals can think and communicate about museums with one another. We have, we hope, devised a way of encouraging a set of remixed conversations that are neither top-down nor bottom-up. We are representing developments in the museum field in the Americas panarchically—as raw material for yet more conversation and dialogue. Thus, part of Panarchy is based on disrupting how we look at our museum world, how we measure authority, and how we assign relevance to those outside of our traditional networks.

5. Craig R. Allen, David G. Angeler, Ahjond S. Garmestani, Lance H. Gunderson, and C. S. Holling, "Panarchy: Theory and Application," *Ecosystems* 17, no. 4 (2014): 578.

6. Crawford S. Holling and Lance H. Gunderson, "Resilience and Adaptive Cycles," in *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, 32. This is the crux of the raison d'être of the organization of *Remix*. The more we know, and the more open we are to knowing more, the more arrows we have in our quivers to face the inevitable challenges to adapt creatively and change effectively.

No doubt our traditional networks of communication do normally serve us well: they are efficient, and in their systematic, gridlike ways, they keep us connected to like-minded museum professionals and are useful for daily functioning. But, given the rapid rate of change throughout the world, these established networks also limit us because they are (even though we don't ordinarily want to recognize it) by nature exclusionary. "Networks work on a binary logic: inclusion/exclusion . . . in social and organizational networks, social actors, fostering their values and interests, and in interaction with other social actors, are at the origin of the creation and programming of networks."[7] To make space for a more panarchic community, this book aims to momentarily disrupt the generally accepted communications systems that exist in our field. At a time of specialization and separations, *Remix* argues that we could all profit by finding a space where we can communicate differently, panarchically. That is, *Remix* is a call to open ourselves up to networks of awareness outside the silos we have erected in our museum culture—to think about "other" solutions that would involve scaling up, scaling down, individualizing, adapting, collectivizing, and breaking barriers, and thereby creating a communications approach that better approximates systems of contact that already happen in nature.

If we are to accomplish this, even if only from time to time, even if only as tonic to our established mindsets, we must be aware that "a new program (a set of goal-oriented, compatible codes) needs to be installed in the network—from outside the network."[8] It is the point of view of this book that our traditional networks can and should be on occasion disrupted—from outside the networks—in the interests of experiencing the bracing condition of Panarchy.

OUR ASPIRATIONS

This book is meant to be that "safe" place we often aspire our museums to be, where visitors (all of our readers) can explore and discuss worldviews that are so far afield from their own that they would normally feel uncomfortable

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7. Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10–22.

8. See Selma Holo and Mari-Tere Álvarez, "Conclusion: Museumspace," in *Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 201.

including them in their problem-solving dialogues or strategy sessions. We envision such a provocative panarchic "space" moving beyond these pages and into the way we practice. We imagine turning to it as we determine who populates our conferences, who writes for our exhibitions, who publishes our books, who teaches our classes, who structures our projects and educational programs, and who formulates our conclusions and narratives about the nature and future of museum culture.

We don't expect the hierarchical or disciplinary or gridded ways of meeting and communicating to disappear, nor are we encouraging anarchic, unframed conversations. Still, we do wish to challenge the expectation that the largely rectilinear grids that continue to separate museums of differing types and sizes, differing scopes and levels of prestige, and different missions remain the best way to enrich the enterprise of the museum in our time. We are rooting for establishing a place for Panarchy in the museum world. We are betting that, along with social media and blogging, conversations of an entirely different nature are still of value. We hope that after reading this book, if we are stumped for a solution to an unexpected museum problem, if we have come to see that we are in a certain phase on the loop of the life cycle, there will be an inspiration to pick up the phone, email, text, or Skype a colleague of greater or smaller influence than our own, or someone one who hails from a different type of museum, even one with an entirely different mission, for advice and conversation.

Panarchy sets up four related museum conversations. It remixes partners and hopes to catalyze readers to engage in unorthodox thought. It aspires to effect unlikely contact, to change and adapt practices creatively, and to actually provide a kind of access to other values, other criteria, and other possibilities. All of that will be in the museum space where "communities, allegiances, affinities, and roots bump uncomfortably up against one another" and enrich us all.[9]

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9. Tony Judt, "Edge People," *New York Review of Books*, March 25, 2010.