Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* London and New York: Routledge 2009, 208 pages.

Robert R. Janes is a provocative former museum director, museum journal editor and scholar. He has previously authored two books *Museums and the Paradox of Change: A Case Study in Urgent Adaptation* (1997), and *Preserving Diversity: Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives on Culture Change in the Western Canadian Subarctic* (1991). In 1986, he co-authored the book *Thule Pioneers* (with E. Bielawski and Carolyn Kobelka). His books also include edited volumes such as *Museum Management And Marketing* (with Richard Sandell, 2007) and *Looking Reality In The Eye: Museums And Social Responsibility* (with Gerald T. Conaty, 2005). In these publications, Janes has been an ardent spokesperson for museums to be responsive to change, and in his new book he continues to provoke the museum field with interesting questions that include: Are museums' practices outmoded? What is it that museums, in terms of their management and practices, can learn from indigenous cultures? And what can museums learn from the discussion of environmental issues in terms of articulating their agenda and make them relevant for their success? And he continues: "If museums are one of society's principal repositories of collective knowledge and wisdom, as they claim to be, how can they continue to downplay or ignore their role in addressing the grim litany of cultural and environmental destruction?" (p. 51). Difficult questions, indeed, but not impossible to address.

In the first chapter of *Museums in a Troubled World*, Janes states a provocative argu-

ment for contemporary museums of all kinds, by which he means art museums, ethnographic and cultural museums, and natural history museums. He argues that museums need to transcend as "... the majority of museums, as social institutions, have largely eschewed, on both moral and practical grounds, a broader commitment to the world in which they operate. Instead, they have allowed themselves to be held increasingly captive by the economic imperatives of the marketplace and their own internally-driven agendas. [...] It is time for museums to examine their core assumptions" (p. 13). If museums do not examine their assumptions and practices, he argues, they will inevitably become irrelevant and eventually collapse as social institutions. In the remaining seven chapters of the book, Janes explores this argument from different angles and makes suggestions about how museums can undertake renewal from within, and at the same time make a commitment to broader societal issues.

According to Janes, the world is facing a global predicament that threatens public resources, and museums need to react. The predicament is best described by interrelated stress factors that have been identified as threats to human and ecological existence. These elements of stress include population growth, increasing scarcity of energy sources, environmental damage and pollution, climate change and economic instability. The role of museums to react is to raise awareness about these issues and exercise stewardship or care for things that does not belong to them! Interestingly, the request for stewardship lies at the heart of the idea of the public museum and reveals its potential as an institution thinking towards the future. Janes states that there have already been significant steps taken in this di-

150 rection in the past. He cites the works of museum workers in the USA in the early 1970s who published their views in *Museums and the Environment: A Handbook for Education* and more recent publications like *Sustainability and Museums*, published by the Museum Association in the UK, and the proceedings from the Buffon International Symposium in 2007 called *Natural History Museums and Institutions in the 21st Century: Impact on our common future*. The last two publications are available online. At the same time as these publications are intended to make the public aware about environmental problems, the same cannot be said about some national museums in Canada. But according to Janes, museums like the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada, the Canada Science and Technology Museum and even the Canadian Museum of Nature do not radically commit to the environment or “articulate their role in the bigger scheme of things, beyond the confines of conventional museum activities” (p. 36). Why that is, is a matter of many analytical observations that Janes makes, based on both his experience in the field as an editor-in-chief of a professional journal and as a museum practitioner for many years in Canada. Such reflexive strategies are valuable for providing insights into an otherwise understudied area within museology. As a former practicing museum professional, I recognize many of the examples that he takes from museum practices. For instance, the example about the “lone museum director” is brilliant in the way it reveals the ideology behind the hierarchical tradition of museum management and shows how destructive such arrangements can be for museums that want to exercise critical thinking and stewardship. The argument for museums rene-

wal is pressing, as many museum leaders seem to take pride in ambitions to do “more of the same”, meaning good professional practices, rather than addressing challenges around them. For Janes, such an approach is destructive and he offers a number of solutions to explore, many of them deriving from his own experience as a museum director.

One solution that Janes explores is to apply the Buddhist concept of “mindfulness” as a vital step for museums to become aware of what they are doing but also paying attention to things they ordinarily ignore. In order to achieve this, Janes suggests that museums should practice what he terms “orthogonal thinking” or rotation in consciousness. Through different strategies to enhance such thinking – like creating study circles within the museum, exercise strategic thinking and get engaged on the Internet – Janes argues that museums can expand their consciousness and become aware of what is happening around them and open up different possibilities for renewal. One suggestion that he has to achieve this is to “debunk the marketplace” but Janes argues that global neo-liberal economics, which have increased the level of the elements of stress mentioned above, have heavily affected museum practices worldwide. In fact, neo-liberalism has changed the priorities of museums from functioning as “mindful institutions” to serving economic market interests. Janes rightly points out that although some aspects of museums function well within market-driven values, like restaurants, shops and product development, the portfolio of museum practices is, however, too diverse to sign up to such values in full. For example, community engagement and the care of museums’ collections operate on values that can never be subject to values that derive from corporatist interests.

This is a provocative and a thoughtful book that leaves no one unaffected, whether museum practitioners or museologists. It gives a valuable insight into ways in which we can derive concepts from our environment and superimpose them onto ways we think about museums. And if you would like to see Robert R. Janes in person, talking about his ideas in the book, you can go online and find him on Youtube.com (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSdvEtOxavs). I recommend both versions.

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