VIEWING CORPORATE MUSEUMS THROUGH THE PARADIGMATIC LENS OF ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY: THE POLITICS OF THE EXHIBITION

Nick Nissley
The University of St. Thomas
Minneapolis, Minnesota USA

Andrea Casey
The George Washington University
Washington, DC USA

Abstract

This paper explores corporate museums as little understood sites of organizational memory and proposes that corporate museums, as a form of organizational memory, are used strategically by organizations in the development of the firm's identity and image. More critically, the authors examine the politics of the exhibition of organizational memory or what Sturken (1997:7) refers to as "organized forgetting" or "strategic forgetting." The authors propose that organizations through these museums choose what is recalled (the politics of remembering) as well as how what is not remembered (the politics of forgetting). Four propositions are suggested to guide future research on corporate museums with the purpose of furthering our understanding of these museums as a form of organizational memory and the relationship between this memory and organizational actions, past, present and future.

Corresponding Author: Nick Nissley, The University of St. Thomas, 1000 LaSalle Avenue, MOH #217, Minneapolis, MN 55403-2009 USA, 651-962-4983, fax 651-962-4169, nnissley@stthomas.edu

INTRODUCTION

Corporate museums have been studied looking through the paradigmatic lens of the museum studies scholar (Danilov, 1991, 1992) and, in the broader context, scholars have explored memorials and cultural memory (Sturken, 1997), museums and memory (Katriel, 1994), as well as archives, libraries, and national memory (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). Despite this interest in museums in other disciplines, corporate museums as organizational memory receive little attention in the organizational studies literature (Kinni, 1999). In this paper, a corporate museum is defined as a "corporate facility with tangible objects and/or exhibits, displayed in a museum-like setting, that communicates the history, operations, and/or interests of a company to employees, guests, customers, and/or the public" (Danilov, 1992: 4). However, based on the literature, this paper suggests Danilov's (1992) definition of a corporate museum as a passive collection of organizational artifacts may be expanded.

The paper begins by framing and defining corporate museums as little understood sites of organizational memory and then identifies ways that corporate museums are used as strategic assets in shaping the organizational identity and image. "The politics of the exhibition of organizational memory" are then examined -- the processes of how organizations choose what is exhibited in the corporate museum (the politics of remembering) as well as how they choose what is not exhibited in the corporate museum (the politics of forgetting). Sturken (1997: 7) refers to this phenomenon as "organized forgetting" or "strategic forgetting." Four propositions are developed to guide future research on corporate museums and their relationship to organizational actions, past, present and future.

CORPORATE MUSEUMS

1 Defining and Describing Corporate Museums

Corporate museums are the most frequently overlooked areas of the museum world. They may be identified as museums and also as exhibit halls, visitor centers, and information centers (Danilov, 1991, 1992), as well as factory tours (Axelrod & Brumberg, 1997). In general they are exhibit-based facilities that are owned and operated by publicly traded or privately held companies, often serving roles such as public relations and marketing.

1.2 The History of Corporate Museums
Danilov (1992) notes, that in the United States, the corporate museum can be traced to the early 1900s, as companies began saving their records, examples of their products, memorabilia, and other materials pertaining to their work and industry. At about the same time that the American corporate museum was created, Danilov (1992) notes that the first corporate museums began to appear in other countries, such as Great Britain (1906, the Wedgwood Museum) and Germany (circa 1911, the Daimler Motor Company). The oldest

corporate museums in operation in the United States were founded in the 1920s. The Union Pacific Museum, established by the Union Pacific Railroad Company in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1921, has the distinction of having the longest continuous service. By 1943, when Laurence Vail Coleman (1943), president of the American Association of Museums, published *Company Museums*, 83 corporate museums had been established in the United States. Today, only 17 of those 83 are still in operation.

However, corporate museums experienced their greatest growth in the United States and abroad during the second half of the 19th century when many existing corporate museums were renovated and many new museums were opened. More than half of the corporate museums existing today were founded in the 1970s and 1980s. Even during the 1990s the creation of corporate museums continued, including the founding of: Motorola's Museum of Electronics, Binney and Smith's Crayola Hall of Fame, and the Coca-Cola Company's The World of Coca-Cola. Presently, corporate museums can be found in nearly every business field and throughout the world. And, today, nearly 100 years after their initial founding, corporate museums have found a growing interest in the hearts of Americans, as they are attracting growing crowds, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article (Quintanilla, 1998).

1.3 The Function of Corporate Museums

Danilov (1992: 5) identifies four primary objectives for corporate museums:
- To preserve and convey the company's history
- To develop employee pride and identification with the company
- To inform guests and customers about the company about its product line and/or services, and
- To influence public opinion about the company and/or controversial issues

The early corporate museums were mostly historical in nature, tracing the history of the company, pointing out the contributions of the founder and other key individuals, and displaying documents, photographs, and products of the past. More recently, Danilov (1992) notes, the emphasis has shifted, with the thrust being more public relations and marketing-oriented, or what Rhees (1993: 68) calls "educational advertising." This shifting emphasis is projected to be the redefinition of the museum from that of a passive collection of organizational artifacts to an extension of the organization's public relations and marketing efforts (a more strategic focus) (Danilov, 1992). Kinni (1999: 1) is among the first to identify the corporate museum as a form of organizational memory, suggesting that in addition to archives and formal written histories, "Corporate museums are also coming into their own as a repository for corporate memory."

CORPORATE MUSEUMS AS ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY

In order to better understand corporate museums as a form of organizational memory, the literature on museums as memory is reviewed as well as relevant literature on organizational memory. This literature stems from four disciplines: sociology, psychology, history, museum studies and organizational studies.

Definitions of organizational memory range from those that consider organizational memory to be a static repository (Huber, 1991; Huber, Davenport & King, 1998; Walsh & Ungson, 1991) to those that consider organizational memory as a more dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon, or as a process (Casey, 1997). In addition, the organizational studies literature is filled with terms such as institutional memory (El Sawy, Gomes, & Gonzales, 1986), corporate history (Smith & Steadman, 1981) and collective memory (Casey, 1997), which offer differing perspectives of the organizational memory phenomenon.

2 Organizational Memory as a Static Repository

The most frequent image of organization memory is that of a repository (Huber, 1991; Huber et al., 1998; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Huber et al. (1998: 3) define organizational memory as a "set of repositories of information and knowledge that the organization has acquired and retains." In a similar fashion, Moorman and Miner (1998) refer to organizational memory as "stored knowledge." Other related conceptual work on organizational memory emphasizes storage in computers, files, roles and policies (El Sawy et al., 1986; Walsh & Ungson, 1991), with research primarily focusing on structure and storage (Stein, 1995; Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994).

In a detailed conceptualization of organizational memory, Walsh and Ungson (1991: 61) defined organizational memory as "stored information from an organization's history" and addressed how this memory might be structured, stored and used in the information acquisition process. They proposed that organizational memory is structured in five internal bins (individual, culture, transformation, structure, ecology) and one external bin. Again the emphasis in this definition is on content, structure, and storage of memory, and to a lesser extent the processes of retention, retrieval and recollection and the factors that influence these processes.

Defining the corporate museum as a static structure that simply houses historical artifacts is probably the most traditional depiction of corporate museums. Similar to models of organizational memory, corporate museums have been seen as warehouses of history that could be accessed and viewed with little attention paid to how they were formed or the factors involved in this process. Danilov (1992, pp. 81, 130-132, 137-139) provides examples of such artifact-based historical collections, including: Campbell Soup Company's Campbell Museum in Camden, New Jersey (tureens, bowls, and utensils made for food service); Bell Canada's Telephone Historical Collection (early telephone equipment); Avery Historical Museum in England (evolution of weighing machines); and Hitachi Ltd.'s Odaira Commemorative Museum in Japan (early electronics products).

Proposition #1: Corporate museums function as a form of organizational memory.

2.1 Episodic Memory Versus Semantic Memory

Definitions of organizational memory have also been proposed that begin to move beyond the repository definitions (Huber, 1991; Huber et al., 1998; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Two of these definitions, episodic and semantic memory, have their roots in

psychology and begin to blur the lines between organizational memory as a retention facility and organizational memory as a socially constructed process.

Stein and Zwass (1995: 89) propose that organizational memory "appears to contain both semantic (general) and episodic (context-specific) information." Semantic memory is the memory contained in handbooks or policies and procedures and episodic memory is knowledge of "contextually situated decisions and their outcomes." Similarly, Casey (1997) proposed organizational memory was structured by episodic and semantic memory with the latter being shared recollections and interpretations of significant events that were not personally experienced as compared to episodic memory which were shared interpretations of personally experienced events. In this study, both types of memory were socially constructed as the stories of these events are told and retold and framed within organizational schemata.

Corporate museums can also be viewed as a form of episodic memory, using elements of both of the above definitions of episodic memory. The corporate museum may tell a story of how the organization was founded and how it grew. It frequently is the composite episodic memory of people who experienced the events over time. It is also a memory of "contextually situated decisions and their outcomes" whether displayed in cases as documents or as artifacts depicting the invention of manufacturing processes. How that story is told through artifacts or the narrative that describes it throughout the displays reflects past organizational strategies and at times future directions.

More recently in exhibition centers, the collection "comes alive," and creates a memory of events that are personally experienced. As an example, Hershey Foods Corporation's "Chocolate World" is a simulated tour of the company's chocolate making process. Hershey Foods chose to engage both semantic memory -- the memory that is stored in artifacts (e.g., chocolate making machinery, etc.) as well as create episodic memory. While the museum-goer can not personally experience the chocolate making experience (without being employed as a chocolate factory worker), through simulation the museum "comes alive" and creates the vicarious experience, or personal accessing of episodic memory.

2.2 Memory Versus History

This distinction between semantic and episodic memory is similar to the distinction between history and cultural memory as proposed by Katriel (1994). Memory is linked to social processes and is in "permanent evolution …vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (Nora as cited in Katriel, 1994: 2), whereas history is closer to a "representation of the past" (Katriel, 1994: 2). Museums are one example of *lieux de memorire* or sites of memories and are "deliberate constructions, and an externally imposed duty to remember…" (Katriel, 1994: 3). Museums are an example of how history and memory are linked through their combination of displayed artifacts, the written narration attached to each display, as well as the oral story told by a tour guide. Katriel (1994: 3) speculates that collections such as heritage museums can provide "social contexts [that] bring out the meaning and the texture of memory" and "become an exploration in the uses of history and the reclamation of memory as part of a complex and persistent contemporary process of cultural invention."

Similarly, Sturken (1997) proposes that museums are a form of cultural memory that exists and is prompted by artifacts. Sturken (1997: 1) suggests that "memory establishes life's continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of our identity." Thus, Sturken suggests that cultural memory seeks to create meaning about what is important from the past. Cultural memory is a social process of negotiation about what is important and the meaning associated with events, whereas history "can be thought of as a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises" (1997: 4).

On a societal level, Sturken (1997: 9) describes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt as examples of what she refers to as "technologies of memory." In Sturken's (1997: 9) words, "Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning." Similarly corporate museums can be thought of as a form of cultural memory. Through their displays and accompanying narration, the past, present and future of the organization are given meaning.

2.3 Memory as a Social Process

Similar to definitions of episodic memory, collective memory takes context into account and is defined as a social process of constructing memories that are collectively shared. This definition is grounded in the work of Durkheim's (1938/85) and his student, Halbwachs (1950/80). Halbwachs depicts collective memory as a process where the substance of a story is remembered by those who experienced it, but not necessarily the verbatim account. Collective memory has been researched extensively in sociology, most recently with the collective memory of historical figures such as Lincoln and Washington (Schwartz, 1991a, 1991b). Schwartz outlined two theoretical approaches to collective memory. The first approach, representative of Mead (1938) and Halbwachs (1950/80), proposes that the images of historical figures are reconfigured within the concerns of the present. Halbwachs (1941: 7) maintained that "collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past [that] adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (cited in Schwartz, 1991b: 111). Schwartz (1991b) proposed the alternative approach. It is grounded in Durkheim's (1938/85) view of the significance of commemoration or the need to reproduce the past through generations.

Corporate museums also represent collective memory in the stories that are present in the verbal and written narration of exhibits. These stories are formed through the telling and retelling of the history of the organization and captured in the verbal and written narration of exhibits.

Proposition Two: Corporate museums are forms of socially constructed semantic (history) and episodic (cultural) collective memory.

2.4 Summary

By examining corporate museums through the lenses of organizational studies, sociology, psychology, and history, we are able to more clearly make sense of the corporate museum as a form of organizational memory. Traditionally corporate museums are characterized by the "static repository" understanding of organizational memory, where the museum is primarily viewed as a repository of organizational artifacts. This literature review suggests, corporate museums can also be understood as strategic assets that influence organizational actions. These museums are a combination of displayed artifacts, the written narration (the official narrative history) attached to each display, the oral story told by a tour guide, *and* the socially constructed story created by the museum-goer and others.

Through this review of the literature, we construct a typology of organizational memory (Appendix A), allowing us a comparative understanding of the *traditional corporate museum model* (passive collection of organizational artifacts) versus the *strategic corporate museum model* (organizational memory as a strategic asset). Both images of corporate museums (i.e. as traditional structures and as strategic assets) are physical structures that house the corporate history, a history or narrative that has been sanctioned by the corporation. Later we will problematize this "official narrative" that has been "sanctioned" by the corporation when we discuss the "politics of the exhibition." Similarly, we assert that both the traditional and strategic corporate museums may be thought of as a form of cultural memory (see Appendix A), given that the memory is prompted by the exhibited artifacts and seeks to create meaning about what is important from the past, similar to Katriel's (1994: 3) reference to heritage museums as "houses of memory."

CORPORATE MUSEUMS AS STRATEGIC ASSETS

Organizational memory has been linked with organizational learning as well as strategy, decision-making, sensemaking, organizational effectiveness, image and identity development, and, more recently, improvisation (Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1991; Simon, 1991; Weick, 1995; Moorman & Miner, 1998). The process of creating organizational identity and image is directly linked to the common objectives of a corporate museum as previously mentioned: organizational identity ("to develop employee pride and identification with the company"), and organizational image ("to inform guests and customers about the company about its product line and/or services").

While researchers such as El Sawy et al. (1986: 118) state that "organizational history is a valuable asset and should be managed as such," Kransdorff and Williams (2000) propose that a company's management of its organizational memory is a "competitive imperative." Kinni (1999) is one of the first to assert that the corporate museum may function as a form of organizational memory and should be managed strategically.

3 Organizational Identity and Image

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Kinni (1999) identifies that companies such as Coca-Cola, Ford, Motorola, and Hershey have created corporate museums that not only support historical objectives, but also function strategically as employee training facilities and serve the company's public relations (image) and employee relations (identity) strategies. Similarly, while Rhees' (1993: 70) study of the Dupont company's popular exhibits, does not directly deal with corporate museums, but rather with corporate support of museums of science and industry, he explicitly asserts a strategic relationship between the corporate exhibits and organizational identity and image development.

Additionally, Griffiths (1999: 37), the curator of the Alfred Dunhill Museum and Archive, proposes the museum as the "soul of the company reflecting our feeling for craftsmanship and heritage." The organization perpetuates this identity by using the corporate museum as a location for orienting new employees and training staff. It represents who they are by displaying who they have been.

Marketing, and creating an image are also key roles for many corporate museums. Since the price may be high for developing and maintaining museums, one way they pay for themselves is by marketing what a company is and what they can do. The Bass Museum in the UK is known as Britain's "national brewing museum" and has won many awards. By keeping the name of the company in the public eye, it identifies Bass as the nation's brewer (Griffiths, 1999). Similarly, Danilov (1992) documents the development of a specific type of corporate museum – the visitor and information facility, such as Coors Brewing Company, Jack Daniel's Distillery, and Hershey Foods Corporation. Danilov notes that corporate visitor centers tell a story about the company (usually its operations and products) and "seek to project a favorable image of the company" (p. 57).

Thus, we propose that there is a strategic relationship between the corporate museum and the organization's identity and image development. At the most obvious level corporate museums are archives of the organization's past and present. They may tell the official founding story and the progress of the organization through time. The purpose behind the exhibit may be to show how well established the organization is, the obstacles they needed to overcome, who they are today, and what the future holds (Griffiths, 1999) and in doing so, strategically shape the organization's identity and image.

> Proposition #3: Corporate museums are not passive collections of organizational artifacts but are a type of organizational memory that is used strategically by the firm – for identity and image development.

THE POLITICIZATION OF STRATEGY

In Ames (1980) study of the parlor organ of Victorian America, he examined the material object's (parlor organ) role as a device for maintaining social order. Ames (1980: 619) suggested: "Seen from this vantage point, objects like parlor organs are not passive cultural products but tools for social purposes; they become significant elements within what might be called social strategies." Similarly, when corporate museums are examined through the paradigmatic lens of organizational memory, they may also be understood not merely as a passive collection of organizational artifacts, but as what Ames (1980) refers to as a tool for social purpose – a social strategy within an organization. This is a significant

assertion, because most people probably perceive corporate museums as they do the parlor organ. Yet as proposed in this paper, corporate museums may act as a tool for social purpose, capable of functioning as a form of organizational memory. A model for the politics of the exhibition of organizational memory is described in the next section.

4 Politics of Memory

Scholars have undertaken exploration of the politics of memory in relationship to: memorials and cultural memory (e.g., Sturken, 1997), museums and memory (e.g., Katriel, 1994), and archives, libraries, museums and national memory (e.g., Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). However, while Kinni (1999) is among the first to identify the corporate museum as a form of organizational memory, he does not explicitly view the corporate museum through the political lens. And, while Rhees (1993: 67) studies the "corporate politics behind the Dupont company's popular exhibits," his study does not directly deal with corporate museums, but rather corporate support of museums of science and industry.

More critically, this paper proposes the "the politics of the exhibition of organizational memory." In other words, the purposefulness of how organizations choose what's exhibited in the corporate museum (the politics of remembering) as well as how they choose what's not exhibited in the corporate museum (the politics of forgetting), or what Sturken (1997: 7) refers to as "organized forgetting" or "strategic forgetting." Similarly, Williams (1973: 9) refers to "selective traditions," when he says, "from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, [while] certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded."

The politics of remembering as well as the politics of forgetting are situated on the continuum of past-present-future (El Sawy et al., 1986) – somewhere in the past-present area. We also posit that a "politics of imagining," situated somewhere along the future-end of the continuum may also exist. Brown and Davis-Brown (1998: 17) assert that museums play a role in developing "imagined communities." Thus, we posit that a "politics of imagining" may exist, similar to the politics of remembering and the politics of forgetting.

These are significant assertions because they suggest that corporate museums, as a form of organizational memory are not politically neutral and, are influenced by the "politics of the exhibition." As decisions are made, regarding what is exhibited and what is not, decisions are also being made, either consciously or unconsciously, regarding what the organization will remember, forget, and/or imagine.

"Politics of the exhibition of organizational memory" is similar to Katriel's (1994: 6) critical discussion of the cultural politics of heritage museums:
> Throughout the museum tour, emphasis is placed on the fragmented re-creation of the "facts of the past" rather than on the cultivation of a historical understanding of the unfolding of past events … All this allows the museum to sustain the fiction that the past is told "like it really was," and ignore questions of point-of-view and ideological inflection in narrative constructions of the past, which would point to the possibility of alternative or oppositional readings of it. Controlling the representation of the past in the museum context is therefore a matter of unacknowledged cultural politics.

The politics of remembering. An example of the politics of remembering can be found in Kinni's (1999) description of one of the Corning's Museum of Glass showcases that houses one of the company's notable failures i.e. the first casting of a 20-ton, 200-inch mirror blank made for the Palomar Observatory in the 1930s. There is a huge chunk missing from the casting, and Corning has it on permanent display. The mirror in the museum, Kinni (1999) suggests, is a reflection of Corning's commitment to innovation and that the mirror is more than merely an artifact, but is also a symbol of the organization's tolerance for risk-taking and their commitment to innovation. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Corning is remembering this notable failure and thus, the mirror serves as a repository of organizational memory and is also shaping firm's future.

The politics of forgetting. The popular business literature is filled with titles such as *Forget for Success* (Harvey & Ventura, 1997) and *Corporate Amnesia* (Kransdorff, 1998) that speak to the growing awareness of the strategic nature of forgetting. Similarly, building on Freud's work, Sturken (1997: 7) asserts that forgetting is a necessary part of remembering and that "forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized and strategic" and is an active process. Similar to the concept of strategic forgetting asserted by Sturken, the authors assert that organizations similarly choose not to exhibit certain artifacts in their corporate museums, thus consciously or unconsciously forgetting their history. Some possible examples of the politics of forgetting may include an organization's choice to not exhibit artifacts related to the organization's history, *vis a vis*: environmental management, community relations, product recalls, employee relations, and labor strikes. There is an irony, that by forgetting or choosing not to remember, these organizations may be prone to repeating history, and forced to remember at least once more.

> Proposition #4: Within corporate museums there exists a "politics of the exhibition of organizational memory." In other words, there exists a "politics of remembering" (how organizations chose what is exhibited in the corporate museum) as well as a "politics of forgetting" (how organizations choose what is not exhibited in the corporate museum).

SUMMARY

Through the lens of organizational studies, this paper provides a window on corporate museums as a form of organizational memory. The authors explore a borderland (between corporate museums and organizational identity/image) that has not been previously entered by the organizational studies scholar – exploring corporate museums as little understood sites of organizational memory.

Four propositions were suggested to guide future research on corporate museums with the purpose of furthering our understanding of these museums as a form of organizational memory and the relationship between this memory and organizational actions, past, present and future. The propositions are:
- corporate museums function as a form of organizational memory,

- corporate museums are forms of socially constructed semantic (history) and episodic (cultural) collective memory,
- corporate museums are not passive collections of organizational artifacts but are a type of organizational memory that is used strategically by the firm, and
- within corporate museums there exists a "politics of the exhibition of organizational memory." In other words, there exists a "politics of remembering" (how organizations chose what's exhibited in the corporate museum) as well as a "politics of forgetting" (how organizations choose what's not exhibited in the corporate museum).

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A Comparative Understanding of the Corporate Museum:
A Typology of Organizational Memory

Typology of Organizational Memory	*Traditional* Corporate Museum	*Strategic* Corporate Museum
Repository (e.g., Huber, 1991; Huber, Dave... 1998; Walsh & ...) *Repository ... and knowledge that the organization has acquired.*		
Collect... ory (e.g., Halbwach... 980; Casey, Socially constructed shared interpretation of the past.		
Semantic Memory (e.g., Stein and Zwass (1995: 89; Casey, 1997) Knowledge that is transmitted, but not personally experienced.		
Episodic Memory (e.g., Stein and Zwass (1995: 89; Casey, 1997) Knowledge of events that were personally experienced.		X
Cultural Memory (e.g., Sturken, 1997) Memory that is prompted by artifacts, but socially negotiated.	X	X
History (e.g., Sturken, 1997) Narrative that has been sanctioned by institutional frameworks.	X	X
Characterization	*-- passive collection of organizational artifacts --*	*-- organizational memory as a strategic asset --*