The geopolitical turning-points that have characterized the second half of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first – the Holocaust and WWII, the Cold War, and more recently, acts of global terrorism (Falk 2004, 33) – have undeniably influenced the museological landscape. By the nature of their collections and exhibitions, museums are integral sites in the representation of past abuses, and they are becoming increasingly responsive to human rights violations in their programming. There are now important museums dedicated to genocide and the Holocaust, slavery, torture and political or social oppression. Many of these are national museums, relating narratives that are geographically and time specific, such as the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, Lithuania, established in 1992 in a former KGB headquarters and prison for human rights activists, and the Museo de la memoria y los derechos humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) that opened in Santiago, Chile, in 2010, which document the human rights abuses experienced by Lithuanians and Chileans under repressive regimes. With the establishment of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg,
Canada, in 2008 and projected to open in 2012, we have a museum more broadly dedicated to the subject of human rights in Canada and beyond (Canada 1990; CMHR 2010). These examples of museums directing their work to human rights issues demonstrate that this is not only an emergent trend in museology, it is a global phenomena, and one in which the subject of human rights is taken up in profoundly different ways, and, as we will discuss, to different ends.

This new generation of human rights museums has called into question the social purpose of public museums, and this in response to observations that the institution has “unrealized potential” as an essential social institution and a key agent in civil society (Janes 2009, 18). This shift in purpose is demonstrated by museums that go beyond the representation of human experiences to take a campaignist approach, advocating for progressive change (Fleming 2010). Similarly, museum scholars Sandell and Dodd seek an “activist practice” recognizing that “cultural representations are constitutive as well as reflective of ways of seeing, thinking and talking” about issues (Sandell and Dodd; 2010, 3). Finally, Ott speaks of how museums can, through the process she calls “modelling inclusion” – demonstrate by example the manner in which to bring about social change, dwelling, as they do, “on the boundary between advocacy and scholarship” (Ott: 2010, 270). The call from both scholars and practitioners for museums to enact profound social change underscores the tremendous potential for these institutions to rethink their relationship with the publics they serve, their approaches to collecting, exhibiting and programming, their sustainability efforts and, perhaps most significantly, the social purpose or mission they embrace (Abram 2005; Janes 2009; Sandell 2002; Silverman 2010).
Yet in a way, museums have always had the concept of “right” at their core: in the manner they have disseminated knowledge through purposeful collecting and display strategies, museums have supported, and in some instances, advocated for, in the language of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a right to “participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (Art. 27). Furthermore, museums have buttressed cultural participation as a key part of the formation of a national citizenry. We are thinking specifically of the role that museums played in the late 18th century during the French Revolution, when some of the world’s first public museums were quite deliberately used to construct and to project specific notions of identity and citizenship in a newly formulated public sphere. The alliance between citizens having the right to culture and the notion of how culture has been taken up politically, is historically contingent. What we are witnessing now, and what has evolved over the past decade, is a different approach to thinking about the role of museums in citizenship formation, and, we would argue, a different understanding of the museum’s role in relationship to “rights.” This is both a result of how the institution has evolved historically (e.g. the new museology movements of the 1980s and calls for the intensified social and political roles of the museum), as well as how the institution has evolved in relation to broader societal forces.

Our research differentiates between human rights museums – that is, museums that explicitly take up the subject of human rights as central to their mission – and human rights museology. Human rights museums proclaim themselves to be about human rights whereas human rights museology is about a form of practice: one that proclaims the social vocation of the museum and incorporates practices other than those traditional to
the museum: ie. teaching about citizenship practices and methods of activism. For our own purposes, we have come to define human rights museology as an evolving body of theory and professional practices underlying the global phenomenon of museums dedicated to the subject of social injustices, one that is fundamentally changing the form, and nature, of museum work. Human rights museology acknowledges the potential for museums to engage in campaigns against human rights violations, at the local, national and international levels.

**Defining the purposes of a human rights museology**

A brief examination of the founding mission statements of a range of institutions dedicated to human rights is telling not only for what it reveals about the range of purposes that these museums are committed to performing, but equally for the breadth and scope of institutional intent in three key ways.

Many human rights museums embrace education, dissemination of knowledge and documentation as primary goals, while also encouraging moral reflection about civic duty and citizen behaviour. Moreover, some seek to make explicit the contemporary legacies of historic injustices while others incite social activism. These specific educational orientations are important features of human rights museums. Such institutions are dedicated not only to engaging in the memory work of historical struggles but also to addressing in constructive ways the present and the future in light of those struggles. The reformist intention of incitement to social activism must be distinguished for its explicit intent not only to change thinking and promote greater individual responsibility but also to mobilize communities into taking action. The work of the South African Holocaust and
Genocide Foundation in overseeing the Cape Town Holocaust Centre is an excellent case in point. Their mission not only commits to supporting a human rights culture, but in a more proactive way, it strives to “encourage social activism and a greater individual responsibility to building the community” (SAHF 2011).

Second, some human rights museums link the separate activities of teaching and memorialization, as is the case of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC. The memorial museum has drawn on an evolving tradition that combines commemoration with the activities of research, representation, and interpretation, demonstrating “an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts” (Williams 2007, 8). These dual functions – education and memorializing – are fundamentally different forms of practice, and their co-existence within the museum can be problematic for the manner they call upon different forms of human engagement in memory work, so it is imperative to realize these ethically. At the USHMM, the museum’s architectural program includes a memorial space that follows the dense chronological narrative of the building’s exhibitions.

Yet a third purpose of the human rights museum may well prove to be evidentiary. Human rights museums may choose to collect preserve and document material about events that can later be used by truth and reconciliation commissions or international war crimes tribunals in their fight for social justice. Museum collections of artefacts (photographs or weapons, for example) may conceivably be used as evidence toward pursuing accountability of the perpetrators of genocide and other legal transgressions. This particular intention is quite distinct from the many human rights museums that
already focus on the victims of injustice in their collecting and programming practices. In this way, museums are called upon to do what they already do well – to collect and to preserve evidence of material culture – and this material is used to help correct the past wrongs of social abuses of power. The activities of truth and reconciliation commissions around the globe have traditionally provided an excellent forum for archival work in countries where such commissions have been mandated to uncover injustices perpetrated by governments against their own people. In an ironic twist of fate, the genocide abuses committed by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, meticulously documented by the regime itself, are a strong example. The records of Khmer Rouge activities are now contained at the Tuol Sleng Museum and former S-21 Prison of the regime. These records of the regime’s use of mass torture, rape, murder, and starvation, in concert with those housed by the Documentation Center of Cambodia, have become “the primary pieces of physical evidence…in a hybrid tribunal called the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, which is jointly operated by the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia” (Caswell 2010, 26). It is not inconceivable that more human rights museums will serve this archival function and be called upon to document human rights abuses in countries with active truth and reconciliation commissions—Canada, Argentina, and South Africa among them. Museum work, for example, has been recognized by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as “[s]ymbolic reparation” for harm done to South African society (Mégret 2010, 44).

Political positioning, agency and the “issue” of human rights
Human rights shape political society, so as to shape human beings, so as to realize the possibilities of human nature, which provided the basis for these rights in the first place.

– Jack Donnelly (2003, 15–16)

We pause here to consider some of the ethical and moral implications of a museology of human rights. While the premise that a museum should champion human rights may seem not only appropriate but necessary if museums are to remain socially relevant and responsive to societal change, broader issues arise with respect to institutional concerns about relationships with funders, programmatic and representational scope and narrative voice. This leads us to question not only the purpose of the human rights museum but also how it achieves that purpose. We now increasingly confer to the museum some of the tasks that were formerly (and continue to be) performed by memorial sites, research institutes, non-profit advocacy organizations and social justice centres. For this reason, it is important to consider how the museological enterprise intervenes in issues surrounding human rights.

At the inaugural conference of FIHRM in 2010, members probed necessary questions that touched upon institutional values of human rights museums. To what extent should museums actively campaign on behalf of issues rather than facilitate the dissemination of these issues through more traditional models of information representation? And, acknowledging that sensitive subject matter can be difficult subject matter, what pedagogical models exist to best work with human rights histories? More fundamental, however, is the basic question that we must ask ourselves as museums and cultural heritage sites increasingly take up the work of human rights. What ethical and moral issues do human rights museums encounter as they refashion themselves as
institutions of social change, and – equally important – how do museums define human rights and violations thereof?

Museums play a unique role as an intermediary between governments on the one hand and individuals and civil society organizations\(^1\) on the other. The middle space the museum occupies can be valuable if used for certain issues such as the promotion of human rights. Museums can provide a means by which powerful institutions such as state agencies can exchange information and interact with individuals and civil society organizations through programmed forums. However, when it presents exhibitions and programs on human rights, the museum provides its own interpretation of the historical events and current standards of the rights in question. It is important, therefore, to deconstruct the museum’s task of representing and advocating for human rights. In preparing an exhibit or program regarding human rights, perhaps the most obvious first step for a museum professional is to determine what rights are at issue. For example, does the exhibit concern the right not to be enslaved or the right to free speech? While in common parlance the term human rights is frequently used by our media, schools, employers, and religious and social institutions, its definition is continually debated by jurists in both domestic and international legal systems.

Three main hurdles confront museum professionals as they develop exhibits to represent the substance of human rights. First, there is no single agreed-upon definition or even conception of human rights. While the United Nations promotes a universalist conception of human rights, that position is constantly challenged by those who see religion or culture as the “true” foundation for rights, as well as by the positivists who deny that there are any rights other than those that are legally enforceable. Second,
despite these challenges, the international community has endeavoured to set legally binding norms for a wide range of human rights. The process of creating and defining enforceable human rights standards is complex; at times this has led to vague legal language that is interpreted differently by various judicial and government bodies and civil society groups across the globe. Third, museum workers must be aware that their chosen representations of human rights have the potential to contribute to interpretations that could influence the legal status of a right in the future. Museums not only reflect historical and current human rights but are also participating in the prospective shaping of those rights.

For example, if the CMHR were to advocate for the right of indigenous peoples to the highest attainable standard of health by developing a program and exhibit showing the present poor health conditions of indigenous peoples, it might affect the public’s view of what is acceptable practice in Canada and abroad. It would not be unreasonable to expect that a dialogue between civil society and governments would ensue. The museum’s advocacy might cause a ripple effect that could lead to a change in citizen and then state behaviour.

On the other hand, if the museum were to create an exhibit taking the position that Native Canadians’ rights have made incredible progress in the past half-century, its visitors might not consider taking action to address current rights violations. Both the progress in aboriginal rights and the poor standards of health on reserves might be factually accurate, but the museum’s approach could create vastly different effects on Canadian society. In the first case, the exhibit could lead to people’s questioning government policy and demanding improved standards, perhaps through domestic
legislation and international treaties. In the second case, the exhibit might lead visitors to find the status quo acceptable and, even more, an achievement to be commended.

**Museum practice must live up to its new responsibilities**

The purpose of this discussion is to show that there is a complexity in the museum’s involvement in human rights work both in method and potential effect. A museum’s work can affect the public opinion of one locale, which may then have the ripple effect of affecting its government’s domestic laws and perhaps foreign policy. If several states are involved then we may see a shift toward a new international legal custom, or perhaps a call for the formation of a new treaty. We should be inspired by the opportunity the museum has to create positive social change. However, there are grave consequences of “getting it wrong.” If we see the relationship between human rights and politics as dialectical (Donnelly 2003, 15), it follows that museums that actively engage in political society are in turn shaping the very basis for human rights.

A more serious concern about the unique position of the museum is whether the human rights–based museum is actually situated to promote human rights, with its doors open to the public, but its walls supported by the state. Is the state-funded museum able to freely criticize state actions and policies, including those of its present-day government? And if it does not, is it in effect producing propaganda that entrenches power in a government that violates human rights? The issue of museum governance is particularly important when dealing with human rights. Human rights museums must address the complexity of their mandate and their funding in order to ascertain whether they can truly speak for those who are entrenched in battle against oppressive governments.
Contentious terrain: The work of human rights museology

The manner in which museums select, frame and address human rights can conceivably have an afterlife in human rights legislation and shape future government policy. Therefore the current generation of museum professionals, stakeholders and patrons must cope with potentially contentious terrain, carefully considering the array of ethical and moral implications that this worthy pursuit will undoubtedly bring to the fore. Museums are no longer primarily representational institutions, if ever they were. They are, through an altered institutional ethos and mission, engaging in new modes of practice and the work of social change in civil society.

We may view human rights museology as part of a broader societal shift in which museums perform with an attention to and an expanded sense of social responsibility greater than ever embraced before. However, we may also understand it as an opportunity for partnership between two historically distinct disciplines: museology and human rights. Where Duffy describes an actual practice for museums as custodians – if not activists – of a “human rights culture” (2004, 122), perhaps it is more accurate to call for a museology of human rights. In fact, international human rights law professor Jack Donnelly refers to human nature as a “social project” and to human rights more specifically as a “social practice,” one that “aims to realize a particular vision of human dignity and potential by institutionalizing basic rights” (1989, 18). Donnelly’s insistence on the practice and aims of human rights reminds us of what we should be aspiring to achieve, but what in contemporary society sadly eludes us on a global scale. This is the work of human rights, in other words, the work that remains to be done. “Human rights,”
he writes, “point beyond actual conditions of existence; they are less about the way that people are, in the sense of what has already been realized, than about how people *might* live, a possibility that is viewed as a deeper moral reality.” (1998, 18). What lessons, then, can museum professionals draw from the models and successes of human rights practices, and what is the appropriate work of museums as they continue to engage in the arena of human rights museology?

As museums work to advance human rights, they may draw on the tough lessons previously learned by human rights advocates and scholars. As with all cultures and discourses, human rights are continually evolving, and human rights history has shown us that there is no room for complacency. As Koskenniemi wrote, “As soon as we are safely installed in a social order that promises to guarantee our rights, that order starts to appear oppressively totalitarian. We need new rights, or new interpretations of old rights.” (Koskenniemi: 2002, 79). Human rights museology, as human rights activism, will require a constant re-evaluation of who the museum is representing, what interpretation of rights is supported, and how those rights are going to be advanced. And once you think you have success, think again. As Mark Twain so aptly commented on the dangers of power, “As soon as you find yourself on the side of the majority, it’s time to pause and reflect.”

The unending cycle of human rights advocacy presents a unique opportunity to the museum. It allows us to return to the founding educational roles of museums and to think pedagogy widely. In other words, we must be sensitive to the different pedagogical forms and practices that learning can take – particularly within an environment taking up difficult and unsettling subject matter – and develop a number of strategies by which
people might engage with this subject matter, especially in what is evolving as the activist museum. George Steiner writes that “Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, and it is presumably the much larger part, is silence.” When thought in this context, we return to the notion that the museum is a productive space for thinking, and not only “acting.” This important difference opens up the space for different critical approaches for human rights museums. We might think of these forms as the distinction between didactic, cognitive, affective, and associative forms of learning. There is the sense that when any one activity dominates in the museum, it can become problematic. When we recognize that memorial and reflective spaces enable different forms of learning from didactic or informational ones, the need for incorporating a multiplicity of presentation styles becomes evident.

A human rights museology has the opportunity to provide the intellectual space to ground human rights activism in a never-ending reflection on the advances and set-backs of our work. This self-evaluation is critical if we are to realize human rights in a progressive and meaningful way. This, we argue, is the work of the museum.

Notes

1. Civil society is another term with contested meanings. Perhaps the definition with the broadest acceptance is “the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a
wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (World Bank 2011).

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