After years of consolidation among forces for science and history in southern Ohio, the Cincinnati Museum Center for Natural and Cultural History Science emerged as the facility occupying a renovated Art Deco train station near downtown. It is, like Pittsburgh's new center, part of a trend toward large museums which put history on par with art and science in America's cities.
History's New Direction

No longer "a lot of ancestral portraits and talk about great white men and ... a couple of stuffed buffaloes." — Ian Stewart, Minnesota Historical Society

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The opening of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center is not only the culmination of a decade of local strategic planning, it is also the latest in a handful of similar metropolitan facilities to appear across the nation in recent years. These "history centers," and the combination of forces which drive their creation, are as unique to their respective cities and regions as is the history they chronicle. Despite the expected differences among serious efforts to explore urban, regional or state identities, there are a number of forces — or opportunities, perhaps — that provide some points of departure in a discussion of history centers.

The first is what may be called institutional influences. Many historical societies, especially here in the East, began as libraries and archives, organized and managed by passionate but non-professional advocates of local history. Over time, as the staff composition of these societies became more professional, the institutions' missions and ambitions extended to include collecting, housing and showcasing material culture. The same process can be seen at work among the boards of directors of these institutions; they have evolved along with their institutions. In addition, there is often an absence of other cultural institutions in the community able to deal with artifacts of a strictly historical nature, so the task falls to the historical society by default.

Next is inclusiveness. Over the past decade, the desire, if not the intent, of our institutions has been to ensure that our outreach, collections and interpretation include everyone's experiences.

The third force is tourism. Historical societies, especially those located in urban centers, have realized that they can play a role in the tourism agenda of their cities and regions. A 1995 USA Today poll on leisure-time activities showed that 42 percent of American families travel to historic venues, leading many institutions to conclude that city-centered museums can attract an audience as well as the rural and "living history" sites.

What becomes clear when we consider these three forces, or opportunities, is that, for most of us, the buildings that have housed the traditional functions of publishing, research libraries, and membership activities are no longer appropriate in size or character. They lack the sheer dimensions needed to expand collections, provide space for exhibits and accommodate large numbers of the visiting public. And space is not the only problem. Often the very architecture of society headquarters buildings shout "Elitism!"

One additional thought to ponder: the traditional historical society constituencies are very narrowly focused on certain functions, e.g. the library and archives, or the publishing of a quarterly journal or book series, or educational programs. Perhaps the best example is the genealogical constituency — those who see the historical society simply as a source for genealogical information and have little or no interest in interpretive programming and exhibits. In any event, the term history center may be preferable to history museum in that it provides alternative cover for the old multi-headed beast called historical society and implies other functions in addition to the museum function. The new moniker has the distinction of creating a destination — a problem for the old term "historical society," which, after all, began as a membership association or organization.

A number of associations, such as the Minnesota Historical Society, have clearly become destinations. It was founded in 1849, the year Minnesota became a U.S. territory. According to Ian Stewart, Deputy Director of Interpretive Programs: "Minnesotans have this amazing sense of pride, and I think they had a sense they were about to embark on something special and they were darn well going to create an institution that could help chronicle that special history." The society fulfilled that mission so effectively that, in 1968, the state government elected not to create a state agency for running historic sites, and chose instead to fund the work through the private MHS. A year later, when federal legisla-
New Minnesota Historical Society building in the state capital.
tion required that all states create historic preservation offices for watching over landmarks, Stewart says, the reasoning was the same. “Why put this in a state agency? These people seem to know what they’re doing.” They did this with the state archives, with the state archeology department, etc., and began this wonderful tradition. We think it’s wonderful, annually transferring large sums of money to a private organization because it seems to make sense!” In fact, of its current $22 million annual budget, MHS raises only 20 percent. The rest is state money.

In addition to managing the state’s landmarks and historic sites, the society had maintained a large reference library and the Minnesota Historical Society Press, with about 220 titles in print. The organization had acquired a large number of collections to be cared for and stored, and operated a modest museum component. “For us, the drive was really for centralization,” explains Stewart. “We had all of these programs which were pretty strong and of high quality, but they were spread in five separate locations … and our collections were in two or three warehouses. For us, the basic requirement was to get a major new facility that would finally put under one roof a lot of already existing distinguished programs.” Stewart admits that the one area in which the MHS had not done very well was to have a single state history museum. The exhibit galleries occupied a mere 6,000 square feet on the third floor of an old Beaux-Arts building near the capitol, visited by very few people and woefully underbudgeted.

The society took its case to its primary patron, the state of Minnesota, which in 1988 made a grant of $50 million and offered to match $5 million more. MHS raised the $5 million, and another $16 million more, for a project which totaled $70 million. The decision to create a new central facility compelled the organization to transform itself and its message. Stewart recalls, “We became consciously very much an ‘other-directed’ institution and were no longer internally directed. We did a lot of soul-searching about how one attracts new audiences, how you market yourself … and how to begin to talk about history in a way that will appeal to individuals in a broad sense — that history is a part of their lives, and that history and memory may be intimately connected. How do you bring average people into your building and give them an experience which is meaningful, and not simply show them the image they had of an historical society — a lot of ancestral portraits and talk about great white men — and show them a couple of stuffed buffaloes and talk about the frontier?”

Attendance at the Minnesota Historical Society jumped from about 60,000 annually to 400,000 in the first year of operation at its new facility. Ian Stewart draws parallels between the dramatic external changes and the inevitable internal restructuring that ensued. “When we began to talk about turning outward, bringing new people in, talking about history in a different fashion — all of this wrought enormous internal debate and cultural change. Some people had a difficult time with the change. They were asked to do things differently and to deal with different people, and a few found that the level of change that was going to be asked of them was more than they wanted to bear.”

Down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh in Cincinnati, a less direct route has guided the fortunes of the Cincinnati Historical Society. It is one of the nation’s oldest, founded in 1831 in the state capitol of Columbus, before moving in 1849 to Cincinnati, a thriving city undergoing tremendous industrial growth and possessing a more varied cultural life than its inland counterpart. The Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, as it was known until 1964, was situated in the basement of the University of Cincinnati. When it moved to a new wing in the Art Museum, it became the Cincinnati Historical Society, remaining essentially a research library with manuscript collections and publishing a quarterly journal. Over the next 15 years, the CHS membership grew from about 1,000 to 1,500. Its collections grew much more rapidly, and by the time Gale Peterson arrived in 1978 to become the executive director, the facility’s 26,000 square feet were clearly insufficient for the task. In many ways similar to HSWP’s situation 10 years ago, the society in Cincinnati lacked the financial and membership base to support a new facility. The prospects for the Cincinnati Historical Society seemed bleak indeed, until opportunity knocked in the early 1980s.

“When Cincinnati celebrated its centennial in 1988,” says Peterson, “they had one whale of a party, but there had been nothing left to show for it. They determined that history would not repeat itself the second time. The need of the historical society for a new space and the opportunity to perhaps create a new museum for the city which has a great pride in itself … was a popular idea.” Peterson adds that some years prior to this juncture, in about 1980, the society had approached the equally space-starved Museum of Natural History to suggest collaborating on a new building. “They could not understand why this little organization … was asking a major organization with a great big public following about a collaboration. The invitation usually goes from the stronger to the weaker partner and not the other way around. The worm turned,” he recalls, “as the centennial approached and there was going to be a lot of public money and public interest in the building project. The bicentennial was a major force in making it possible to talk about a new building and it looked as if the historical society might be able to move forward alone on this.”

The Museum of Natural History decided it was interested after all. The two organizations moved quickly to share a site-selection survey and once again, what Peterson calls an “accident in time” occurred. “Union Terminal was again on hard times. The
trains had left in 1972 and an unsuccessful shopping mall had occupied the space briefly. But it was a terrific building — some of the most superb Art Deco architecture in the country, a treasure the people of Cincinnati had great affection for.” When it became clear CHS could not raise the kind of money that it would take to do a major museum project privately, public opinion surveys were done to see if a bond levy might pass. The issue was put to the voters of Hamilton County in 1986 and passed with a nail-biting 50.2 percent majority. Gale Peterson holds no illusions as to what sold the voters. “They had really never heard of the Cincinnati Historical Society in any numbers, but they knew and loved this wonderful architectural white elephant sitting on the edge of the downtown area.”

Thus began a marriage of convenience between the CHS and the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History. The facility opened in 1992 and was called the Cincinnati Museum Center. A Museum Center Foundation was formed to address issues common to both occupants — hiring guards, building maintenance, etc. A fourth entity, an Omnimax theater, was built in to help increase attendance and bring in revenues to sustain the total operation. Raising the additional money (the bond levy provided $42 million of a $70 million budget) required an exhaustive campaign which succeeded despite the lack of an infrastructure of donors or on-going public support. A consequence of the absence of a major donor base in the first few years has been continual operating losses and an uneasy rapprochement between the two museums. In the interest of becoming a more plausible fundraiser and operating more cost-effectively as a single entity, a long-term planning effort was undertaken. In late 1994, a mutual decision to reorganize the facility under one director merged the two museums into the Museum Center Foundation and gave it a new name: The Cincinnati Museum Center for Natural and Cultural History Science.

The phrase “museum center” is applicable to a new facility in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as well. The history of Grand Rapids and western Michigan is a source of quiet pride for its people, the most famous of which is former President Gerald Ford. The region has long been known as a hub for furniture manufacturing and, in the days of westward expansion, a place where Native American communities lived in harmony with predominantly Dutch homesteaders. In 1854, a volunteer association of citizens established the Grand Rapids Lyceum of Natural History, the forerunner of today’s museum. In 1967, a committee was formed to study the possibility of expanding the museum, and again in 1977, when a joint museum planning committee was created to assess the project’s potential, gauge public support and formulate a plan.

In contrast to Cincinnati’s bond funding, which was driven by people’s affection for a venerable landmark, a single generous donor provided the start-up money in Grand Rapids. Jay Van Andel, chairman of the board of Michigan-based Amway Corp., donated $6 million and 700 art works. Government, foundations and private donors supported the $39.5 million project, and a grassroots campaign raised 12,000 gifts, some as small as $5.

Twenty years of broad-based community planning produced the Van Andel Museum Center, the dazzling new principal facility of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids, which replaces a much smaller facility that had been a treasured centerpiece in town. The new museum’s three-story glass facade provides spectacular views of the Grand River and a tempting visual sample of the collection. Designs for the facility incorporated building materials reflecting the area’s architectural heritage. In addition to Van Andel’s extensive art collection, the Museum Center features a planetarium and a major permanent exhibit focusing on the craftsmanship and industriousness of the furniture makers and the revered history of the tribes of Chippewa, Ottawa and Potawatomi, known collectively as the Anishinabek.

We conclude our history center tour in the elegant expanse of gardens and nature trails that grace the 32 acres of the Swan House estate, home to the Atlanta History Center and its Atlanta History Museum, which opened in 1993 as the newest site operated by the Atlanta Historical Society. Founded in 1926, the society moved out of downtown to the prosperous northern suburb of Buckhead when it purchased the Swan House estate in 1966. An 1840s farmhouse was moved to the site in 1969 and in 1975, McElreath Hall was built to house the library and archives and later expanded to provide additional exhibition space. The AHS opened a satellite center in downtown Atlanta in 1988, presently located in Atlanta’s Heritage Row.

Because the AHS had developed more as a library and archives, it was not until the late ’70s that it began to acquire a traditional museum collection. The addition of the new Atlanta History Museum in 1993 tripled the exhibition space, allowing AHS to display more of its considerable collection of Civil War objects, costumes and textiles, silver and ceramics, furniture, over 1 million photographs, and much more. The museum’s contemporary classical style complements the center’s two historic homes and gardens. The atrium is reminiscent of an early railroad station, evoking Atlanta’s beginnings as a transportation center. In addition to the 30,000 square feet of exhibition space, the building houses a 118-seat theatre, classrooms, and collection storage. Six exhibits are generally on display, chronicling the people and places from “Gone With the Wind” times to the days of CNN and the 1996 Olympic Games.

The Atlanta History Center is one of the best examples of what is possible when an enthusiastic, dedicated membership is matched with a generous local corporate community. The society is blessed with a long-standing $40 million endowment, a consequence of which was an utter lack of fundraising experience when it came time to do a capital campaign for the new museum. In fact, hired consultants were pessimistic that AHS could raise even a third of what would be needed. AHS Executive Director Rick
New Atlanta History Center.
Beard credits the members for what actually happened. "Within 18 months, they had raised over $16 million, from 940 different sources, most of them being private individuals. The organization had a very strong membership base that was quite loyal and long-lived." Other gifts came from corporations and foundations, including the Woodruff Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Beard remembers, too, that the change in name to "History Center" was not exactly a smooth transition. "It was indeed not just a change in name, but a change in intent, a change in direction and a change of heart.... When the decision to change the name was made ... there were a great many members who were very put off by this. They felt they were losing something, somehow." He describes the process of linking the center's diverse elements — new museum, library and archives, 32 acres of gardens and grounds, two historic houses — as a "work in progress." He continues: "Some of my trustees want to change the name now to 'Atlanta History Center and Gardens.' I have suggested, not totally in jest, that if they want to do that, I want to add the four sheep that inhabit the farm, so it becomes 'The Atlanta History Center, Gardens and Four Sheep.'"

To me, history centers are the most exciting development in the field of local history since World War II, when historical societies launched "Junior Historian" programs, living history sites, and other educational programs such as National History Day. As effective as those programs have been, they have not had the same risk factor associated with converting long-established locations into history centers. The opportunity to share the "lessons learned" through the experience of these history centers has been critical to the success of our efforts in Pittsburgh. The support and assistance from historical societies and museums across the country, not to mention the leadership represented by these first history centers, has been invaluable to us as well.