

## REGIONAL REPORTS

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#### PERNICIOUS CURATORS? A REPORT FROM THE WEST

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Do curators hurt museums by repelling visitors? Elaine Heumann Gurian answered “yes” in her keynote address, “The Essential Museum,” at the October, 2006, Western Museums Association meeting in Boise, at least as this observer heard her comments.

“How can museums become as essential as libraries and shopping malls?”, she asked. By permitting unfettered browsing – letting visitors look at any and every objects in the museum collection, without curatorial intervention. Free admission and ethnic-specific shows do not expand access much, she maintained; the intellectual control by the staff keeps many visitors out. In these days when people can post anything on blogs and YouTube without a controlling authority, the curator-directed museum could well go the way of the pundit-directed newspaper. What Gurian called “the useful museum” would be a “visual nonjudgmental repository.” All items would be equally important, and equally favored. Visitors could pursue their own interests, not those of the curators.

Discussion was spirited.

Readers may get a sense of Gurian’s approach in *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian* (2006) or in “The Essential Museum,” *Te Ara, Journal of Museums Aotearoa*, Volume 31, Issue 1, May 2006, pp. 4-12.

Other sessions too were challenging, provocative, and helpful. Boise’s Basque community made delegates especially welcome, with the Basque Museum providing several occasions to consider how to interpret historic houses.

The next WMA will be in Oakland, California, October 10-14, 2007, with side excursions to San Francisco. The title was perhaps inevitable 101 years after the Big One: “Shake it Up: Museums Activate and Innovate,” and the conference will include a full day devoted to disaster and emergency preparedness. The conference hotel bills itself as “nonsmoking” -- one hopes in both senses of the word.