Radical changes are currently taking place in heritage institutions, defined broadly. These changes are affecting not only traditional museums but also interpretation centres, planetariums/astronomical observatories, science centres, historical monuments, nature parks and ecomuseums. Many heritage institutions, whether architecturally distinctive or not, are key attractions that play a role in reinforcing the image of a city or in promoting a region. Often, they must balance several different objectives, some of which go beyond the function of a museum—namely, the conservation of and research on collections for the education and enjoyment of the public.

New technologies that stimulate the visitor’s senses make it possible to “recreate” the content of a cultural message, leading to its rediscovery. This applies in the case of both education and entertainment and can also be understood from the perspective of experiential marketing. In this case, the aim of the institution is to enhance the visitor’s experience by making it a unique and memorable event.

The trend described above has led to a hybridization of museum offerings characterized by growing porosity between the cultural and entertainment spheres and even between museums and amusement parks. Indeed, more and more museums are turning to innovative, lively environments that include...
recreational elements in order to mediate content that is perceived as serious. Conversely, amusement parks are seeking to enhance the recreational experiences of their visitors by including content that is more culturally rich.

This dual trend raises a number of issues. In their eagerness to boost attendance, museums, like many other tourist attractions, risk falling into the trap of “Disneyification” or “McDonaldization”. This issue is all the more urgent considering that edutainment, an approach combining education and entertainment, appears to be a current trend in the museum landscape. There appears to be consensus on the inevitability of this trend in a globalized world that prioritizes entertainment and the experiential. Once again, while some managers expressed grudging acceptance of this new reality, others had adopted a more positive and spontaneous attitude. In the view of the latter group, there is nothing inherently reprehensible about developing a happy, pleasant and sensory relationship between the audience and the works on display.

On the other hand, all of the museum managers voiced extreme caution regarding the dangers of edutainment initiatives. Their wariness can be linked to a concern that an emphasis on the spectacular or the ephemeral will result in the works having only a passing effect on visitors and that the use of technique and artifice will overshadow the artistic approach. They agreed unanimously that every effort must be made to ensure harmony with the main focus — that is, the work, its discourse and its inception. The setting and design (including any interactive devices) must not be allowed to obstruct the discovery of and access to the work.

Content, in this context, takes precedence over form, which is viewed simply as a facilitator. The respondents believed that this constitutes the main strength of a museum; while the visit may incorporate elements of entertainment and leisure, the focus must be on the conservation and enhancement of the works on display. Given this imperative, the establishment of closer ties with the world of amusement parks is still a long way off, and even highly uncertain in some cases. Whereas amusement parks are perceived as places to have fun, museums are conceived as places for learning and cultural development.

While a clear dichotomy continues to exist between these two worlds, the museum managers did not appear to feel threatened by the potential Disneyification of their activities and were even cautiously optimistic. At the same time, however, there was consensus on the need to guard against the commodification of culture and to avoid excessive spectacularization, especially where the sole aim is to boost attendance.

In a number of cases, the vision of the museum experience and potential sources of re-enchantment seemed to be well developed. This suggests that museum curators are receptive to the influences of edutainment, in keeping with the inescapable logic of the blockbuster shows that has taken root in our society.

The very concept of the museum and the definitions of the roles and responsibilities of those who work in them are called into question by the seemingly unstoppable edutainment trend. In spite of these
limitations, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the results. First, while museum managers did not always agree on the appropriateness or potential risks of edutainment, they did not seem to harbour any strong or direct hostility towards it. Their attitude usually depended on the conditions as well as on the different forms of the new edutainment tools, including whether commercial brands were being promoted. We are now seeing the emergence of an interstitial space between the museum in the traditional sense and the amusement park with its vocation of pure entertainment.

This new intermediate space forms a continuum along which our respondents can be positioned based on the specific characteristics of each situation. It is clear that the attitude of managers depends, globally, on the nature of the museum, its history, its strategic direction and the type of collections or exhibitions it presents. All indications are that this continuum will inform the broad trend that museums can be expected to follow in the future.

Some institutions that are more ambiguous in status opt for a “third way.” They reject the image of the museum as boring while remaining faithful to their educational role. At the same time, they borrow recreational elements associated with the amusement park in order to offer their visitors cultural leisure experiences. Two examples from France will serve to illustrate. In its press kit, the Nausicaa Sea Center in Boulogne-sur-Mer is touted as “neither a museum nor an aquarium.” On its Web site, it is described as “a place to learn and to dream. . . . Powerful, emotive experiences at Nausicaa give you unique insights about the world’s seas and oceans”. The other example, Paléosite in Saint-Cézaire, is promoted as a “new, interactive, thematic concept devoted to prehistory and combining education and fun, without the static collections typical of museums”.

Several criteria appear to influence how a museum positions itself on the museum–amusement park continuum: a credible scientific posture as opposed to a purely entertainment approach based on an inclusive, mainstream orientation; a heritage mission, whether explicit or implicit; the display of objects according to a predetermined arrangement, or, conversely, openness to combinations based on an interactive approach; the natural topography of the venue, or an artificial or even hyperreal topography; the presence or absence of spectacular and immersive displays; and the popularity of the region as a tourist destination. While these criteria alone do not allow us to establish a clear typology of edutainment, they can nonetheless help us to better understand the world of edutainment institutions.