

By Lisa Hurley

Museum Pieces

Tips on staging special events in cultural institutions

Just as special event planners are looking for more distinctive venues, many cultural institutions—including art, natural history and science museums along with zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens—are eager to build their event business.

“What’s fueling this is a need to raise funds,” explains consultant Arthur Manask, head of Burbank, Calif.-based Arthur M. Manask & Associates. “As funding from grants begins to shrink, cultural institutions have begun aggressively marketing their sites for special events.” Many are adding staff specifically to market their institutions as premier local special event venues.

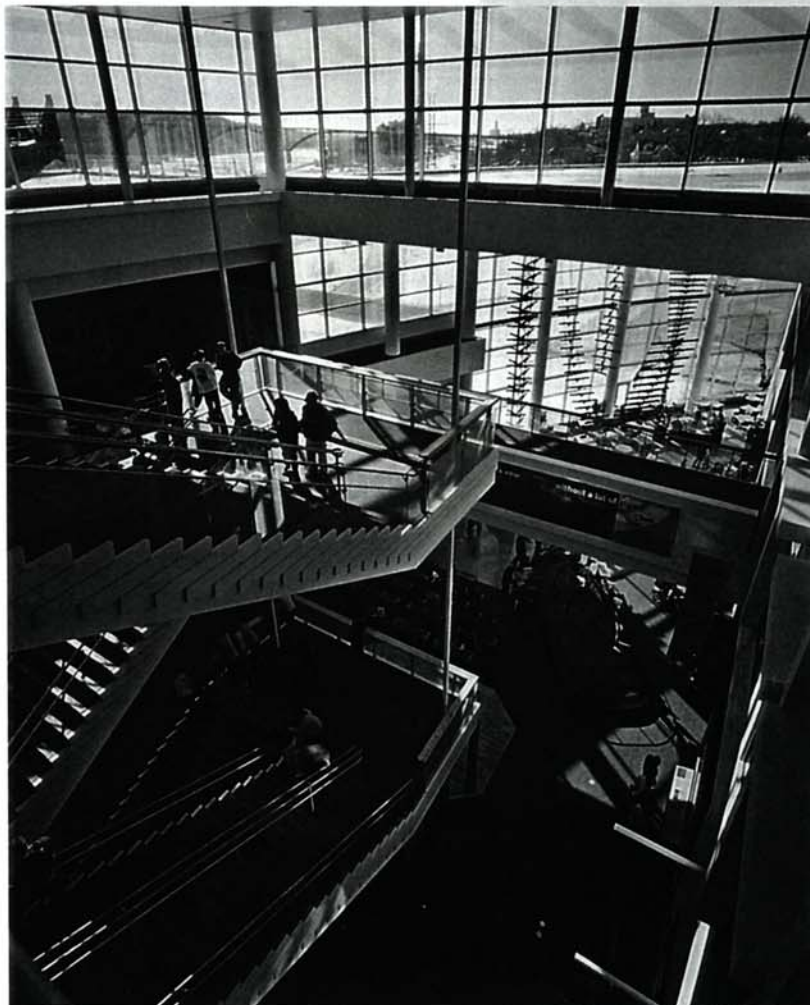
Armed with experience in restaurant and catering management for cultural institutions, Manask assists clients including the Field Museum in Chicago, the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, Calif., and the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul in developing catering programs and marketing plans.

Before event planners start imagining their big client with a Tintoretto or a Tyrannosaurus rex, it’s important to remember that cultural institutions aren’t as flexible as the traditional banquet room.

Make sure that your event and the institution are a good match.

Cultural institutions “don’t want anything with the potential to be rowdy, loud or dangerous to their collection, whether the collection is fine art or animals,” Manask notes.

That said, some institutions are more flexible than others. “Science museums tend to have more interactive exhibits, so you are more likely to



COURTESY SCIENCE MUSEUM OF MINNESOTA

be able to stage your event throughout the museum, as opposed to restricted areas,” he explains. Some fine art museums might permit guests to wander but limit food and beverage service to certain areas.

Some institutions rule out certain events entirely, such as political fundraisers and certain social events including school reunions. “But other institutions, such as the History Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, are big wedding venues,” Manask says.

Event ready: Unlike institutions that are more than 30 years old, new museums—such as the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul—are built to accommodate special events, with dedicated catering facilities and sufficient power.

“Generally, cultural institutions don’t like to have outside groups stage events that are contrary to their mission and purpose,” he explains. Don’t assume your event can go into any institution; be sure to check its policies carefully first.

Plan around the event hierarchy.

"Cultural institutions host two types of events, internal and external," Manask says. "Internal events—those sponsored and paid for by the institution—range from small meetings to major black-tie fund-raisers. The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, for example, does about 900 events a year.

"Internal events always take priority over external events. Event planners need to recognize that they are competing with internal events for dates. So if you want a hot institution, start planning as early as possible."

Tailor your operations to the institution's purpose and mission.

Just as internal events take precedence over external, visitors to the institution take precedence over special event guests.

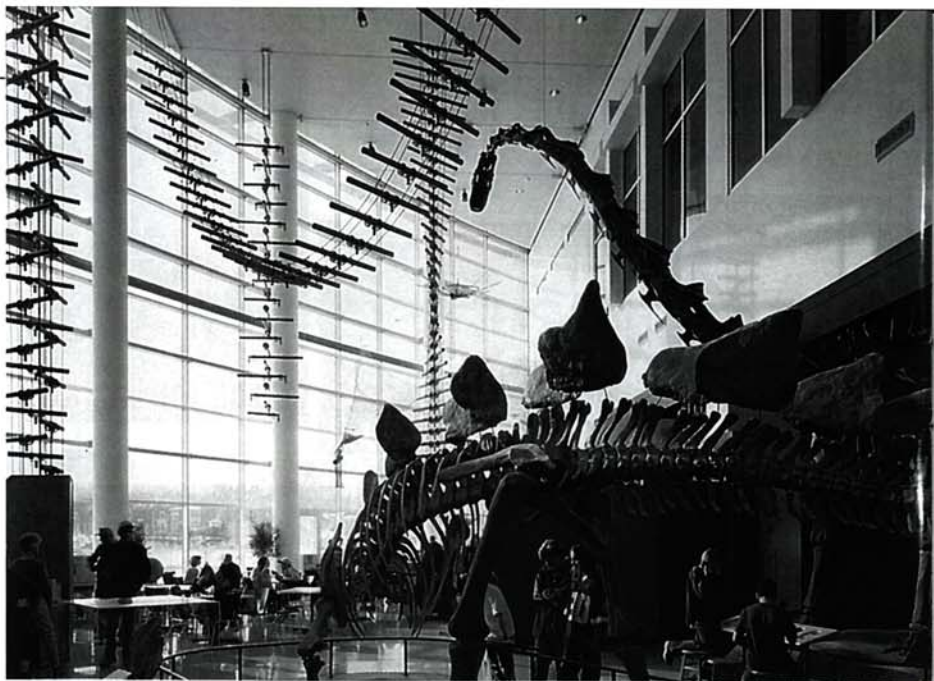
For example, institutions are unlikely to change their operating hours. "If the museum closes to the public at 5 p.m. and your event starts at 6, you have only one hour to set up," Manask says. Often this means adding staff to meet the deadline.

For security reasons, the institution will put tight controls over event staff. "The contract may spell out requirements for a check-in table for staff, specific doors for sign-in and -out, where staff can change clothing, the right to search staff backpacks and more," he adds.

Capitalize on the museum's mission.

"The more that the event planner is pushing the theme of the museum and its exhibitions, then the more interested and cooperative the institution will likely be," Manask says.

Planners should try to work the museum's exhibitions into their event theme, menu and decor. And it doesn't hurt to buy items from the institution's gift shop for guest gifts; the institution will likely give the planner a discount. "Any way you can spend money to make your event more of an institu-



Educational events (above): Cultural institutions such as the Science Museum of Minnesota can enrich guests intellectually. Beyond the banquet hall (left): Even escalators become event venues at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago.

tion experience rather than creating a themed event that has nothing to do with the institution puts you ahead," Manask says.

Get clear on costs.

Most institutions supply standard tables and chairs for special events, but the price to use them might not be included in the facility rental fee. "It's important to ask what equipment the institution supplies and at what price," Manask says. "Also, does the institution set it up and tear it down, or is the caterer expected to do that?"

"On top of the facility rental, fees are often charged for security and other items," he adds. "Many institutions are starting to roll everything

into one price, but it's important for the planner to know what is and isn't included."

Check catering rules.

Cultural institutions have varying arrangements with caterers. They might work exclusively with one caterer for both food and alcohol; they might work with an approved list of caterers while controlling alcohol service; they might allow the approved list of caterers to serve alcohol; or they might permit any caterer to step in.

While an exclusive relationship brings the most control to the institution, permitting more caterers opens the field to more event clients. Caterers today often pay a percentage of their event food and beverage revenues to the institution, Manask says.

"Start now to become an expert on cultural institutions as event venues," Manask says. "Then when a client calls for an event, you will be ready."

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