CREATING AN EQUITABLE VISITOR EXPERIENCE: HOW MUSEUMS FOSTER & RESPOND TO CHANGE

Sue Goodwin, Jody Green, & Andrew Schoeneman
Who We Are

Sue Goodwin

Jody Green

Andrew Schoeneman
Introduction

Summary

Museums, in addition to serving as guardians of the past, have the opportunity to be the interpreters of history. In order to remain relevant, museums need to adapt to a new social consciousness and to foster more equitable understandings of culture, history and art.

This presentation will focus on how museums are adapting to and/or helping foster new social consciousness around important issues and remaining relevant to the new or newly aware audiences and visitors that come with that transformation.

Our Approach

Utilizing a multi paradigmatic community practice framework, the presenters will address visitor services, community outreach, volunteer management, exhibiting strategies, and presenting difficult topics. An experiential component will allow participants to assess progress in their own place of employment in this regard.
Background

History

Historically museums were established primarily by and for white elites.

According to one study, “Until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, most artifacts now in museums were in the hands of private collectors, invisible to the public. The main purpose of early museums was to collect and preserve, not necessarily to educate. They decided what was important and what was unworthy of preservation (Rosenberg, Tracy Jean, 2011, pp 117).”
Background

History

An example of this would be the British Museum, founded by Sir Hans Sloane in 1750, with a collection of specimens and objects acquired during his travels in the West Indian Colonies. The museum was dedicated to the glory and power of the British Empire (Rondolini, n.d.), not to the history and culture of the countries where the items originated. The Louvre, established in 1793 is another example of the “museum as temple,” providing a space to worship, not to participate.

This means that minorities and women have historically been excluded from the narrative and canon of the museum--from its staff, art on the walls, and audiences--until recently.
Problem

Museums must move outside of their old modes of operation in order to adapt to the needs of the 21st century and remain relevant. Otherwise, they risk long-term sustainability.

Museums in the 21st Century must address and respond to the below in order to remain relevant:

- An aging and homogenous philanthropic pool and less philanthropy from government entities
- Younger, millennial audiences who value experience over all else

And, most especially the focus of our presentation:

- Changing demographics and consciousness of the American populace and therefore who the museum’s audience is and how they can be best served
Significance

Implications for Museums

Most museums tout enhancing, serving, educating, or improving their communities in their mission statements.

By excluding some members of society, museums are less inclusive, do not relate to many members of their communities--in effect defining “community” narrowly--and do not increase community benefit overall.
Why Museums Should Address This Problem

It’s the Right Thing to Do and Field Thought Leaders Agree:

Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole states in her keynote address at 2015 AAM conference “museums can and must be of social value by not only inspiring but creating change around one of the most critical issues of our time – the issue of diversity. For us in the world of museums that means inspiring and creating far greater diversity in our work forces, our exhibitions, our educational programs, and among our visitors.”
Why Museums Should Address This Problem

It’s the Right Thing to Do and Field Thought Leaders Agree:

Laura Raicovich, former President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum has noted, “...Museums are important spaces because they’re spaces where we tell our stories. That’s about who we are as people, as a society. That’s why it’s even that much more important to make them more inclusive and better for more people, spaces that tell amazing stories as well as speak on many different registers to a variety of folks...we have to start talking about the way that the institutions that bear that art or tell those stories also reflect the inequities of the world in which we live.”
Why Museums Should Address This Problem

It’s the Smart Thing to Do for Long-Term Sustainability and Field Thought

Leaders Agree:

Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation, states in his *New York Times* Op Ed, “I believe that museums have the responsibility to hold a mirror up to society. As the country becomes younger and more diverse, and as its immigrant population grows, museums must shift. This is not about ‘political correctness’; it’s about how these institutions can achieve excellence, now and in the future.”
Why Museums Should Address This Problem

It’s the Smart Thing to Do for Long-Term Sustainability and Field Thought Leaders Agree:

Natanya Khashan, Subject Matter Expert on Diversity and Inclusion at the consulting firm Cook Ross asserts, “Government funding for museums has not kept pace with inflation, requiring museums to rely more heavily on earned income. This presents a Catch-22...museums will have to expand their current audience base and reach out to a wider population than they have in the past...Rapidly shifting demographics have threatened museum relevancy in profound ways because as the demographic of the U.S. continue to change, the traditional visitor profile remains the same...museums must begin to pay more attention to the audiences not coming in through their doors.”
Field Response/Mode of Engagement

Professional organizations related to the museum field are engaging with this problem. Below are two examples:

- **Mellon Foundation, AAMD, AAM and Ithaka S & R** study to explore museum DEAI initiatives in relation to:
  - Collections, Programs, Community Engagement, Partnerships, and Board development

- **Ford and Walton Family Foundation Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative** (continuing the work of the Mellon Foundation) focus on career development options for diverse professionals:
  - Fellowships, Mentorships, and Internships
Organizational Response/Mode of Engagement

Museums are taking a variety of approaches to engage with this problem. We will present several case studies that illustrate just some of the internal and external approaches listed below:

- **Internal:** Address staff and board diversity, examine volunteer management practices, adapt job positions, and expand mission

- **External:** Enhance community outreach, expand Program Partnerships, develop audience engagement and visitor experience strategies
Literature Review

Information Forthcoming
Intersection of Community and Museums

(Thomas, O'Connor, & Netting, 2011)
Three Questions Posed

1. What is community and how do we define it?

2. How do we understand truth and narrative?

3. Do we seek to maintain the status quo, to foster incremental change, or to bring about radical change?
1. What is Community?

Analysis of a museum’s interactions with community is premised on a clear understanding of how this community, or these communities, are defined.

Is the community one of ...geography or location? neighborhood, city, state, region
...identity or demographics? latinx, wealthy, queer, (dis)abled
...affinity or interest? history, art, justice, ideology
...affiliation or membership? profession, organization, association

Has your museum done an analysis of its current, and aspirational, stakeholder communities?
2. How is truth (narrative) understood and determined?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is reality and truth context dependent?</td>
<td>Is there one Truth regardless of context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are various perspectives and truths valued?</td>
<td>Is one Truth and perspective dominant and valued above others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the narrative developed and presented inclusively?</td>
<td>Is the narrative established <em>a priori</em> and without meaningful input from various stakeholders?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What is the orientation to status quo and change?

Does your museum believe that...

- fundamental, structural change is necessary
- the current state of affairs is unacceptable
- conflict is part of transforming society and must be embraced

Or, does your museum believe that...

- incremental change is sufficient or preferred
- we should focus on helping people adapt and thrive in the current social order
Traditional Community Practice

- Reality is external and fixed
- Status quo should be maintained and worked within
- Incremental change is the goal
- Planning is linear and hierarchical
- Desired program outcomes are consistent with the goal of preserving a functional and stable community
- Power is concentrated at the top of the org chart
- Political approach is a politics of control
- Evaluation is geared toward the product and outcomes, not the process
Collaborative Community Practice

- Reality is a product of the mind and is context dependent
- Status quo should be understood from as many perspectives as possible to inform action
- Incremental change is typically the focus
- Planning is iterative and circular
- Desired program outcomes are consistent with the goal of fostering an inclusive community
- Process and outcomes are fused
- Power is distributed throughout the org chart
- Political approach is a politics of collaboration
- Evaluation is geared toward the process, not the product, and how participants make meaning of that process

(Thomas, O’Connor, & Netting, 2011)
Radical Community Practice

- Reality is contested, but one version of Truth tends to dominate
- Status quo should be fundamentally transformed to address structural injustices
- Consciousness raising and structural change is the goal
- Planning is participatory and rational
- Desired program outcomes are consistent with the goal of fostering a new reality
- Power resides in oppressive structures and also in collectives of marginalized people
- Political approach is a politics of contest and threat
- Evaluation is geared toward the end result as well as the consciousness raising that occurs among participants
**Andy Warhol Museum**

**Mission:** Located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the place of Andy Warhol’s birth, The Andy Warhol Museum holds the largest collection of Warhol’s artworks and archival materials. We are one of the most comprehensive single-artist museums in the world and the largest in North America. The mission sets out “To engage and inspire through Warhol’s life, art and legacy.”

**Type:** Fine Arts Institution

**Response analyzed:** In response to an ad campaign for an upcoming exhibition gone wrong, the Warhol Museum’s former director sat down with D.S. Kinsel a community stakeholder, African American artist, and activist for a conversation to better understand each other’s narratives and the community. As a result, a now multi-year program titled “Activist Print” was developed, starting with a mural project on vacant properties in Pittsburgh. These murals addressed police brutality. A forum with the chief of police, the museum’s director, and Kinsel was also held to address the topic.
Andy Warhol Museum

**Power:** While power at the Warhol Museum is top down, engaging with community stakeholders indicates that there is room for a multitude of voices through collaboration.

**Change:** Collaborative process, verging on radical.

**Truth:** More subjective than some of the traditional modes that museums are used to.
**Baltimore Museum of Art**

**Mission:** The BMA seeks innovation and excellence in an artistic program that focuses on art of the modern era, from the 19th century to the present. The Museum is committed to creating an environment that inspires creativity, encourages learning, and fosters human understanding in a place where everyone feels welcome.

**Type:** Fine Arts Institution

**Response analyzed:** In August 2019, the BMA announced its 2020 Vision, a year of exhibitions and programs dedicated to the presentation of the achievements of female-identifying artists. The museum has also committed to exclusively purchasing works by female-identifying artists during 2020 and will explore objects across genre, style, and medium in every collecting area. The BMA has committed a budget of up to $2 million for acquisitions to implement a broader vision to address race and gender diversity gaps within the museum field, and to represent more fully and deeply the spectrum of individuals that have shaped the trajectory of art.
**Power:** Power is still top down; decision to move in this direction appears to be made by the director and board.

**Change:** More radical in that a time limit is instituted and it is meant to be accelerated.

**Truth:** Midway between objective and subjective.
de Young Museum

Mission:
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (of which the de Young is a part of) have rendered over a century of public service in the arts, and it is our mission to extend and enhance that service well into this century. Their mission also encompasses nine goals, which are not included here.

Type: Fine Arts Institution

Response analyzed: For their recent exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (ongoing through March 15, 2020), the museum is offering free admission to the community on four Saturdays as well as related programming, including a full day of live performances, food, and fun for all-ages.
Power: Power remains top down while still trying to engage with the community through outreach.

Change: Primarily regulated with the goal of slow change with time; some aspects of collaboration through partnerships.

Truth: More objective.
National Civil Rights Museum

**Mission:** Based in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis Tennessee, the Civil Rights Museum is a founding member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. It’s mission is to share the culture and lessons from the American Civil Rights Movement and explore how this significant era continues to shape equality and freedom globally.

**Type:** Historical Site

**Response analyzed:** In response to the 2018 family separation crisis at the US-Mexican border, staged a rapid response exhibition titled “I AM A CHILD”, with photos of children from the ages of 3-10 at a protest at the ICE agency in New York.
National Civil Rights Museum

**Power:** Collaborative

**Change:** Falls in the middle between radical and collaborative

**Truth:** Objective (social reform, policy activism)
Spelman College Museum of Fine Art

Mission: The Spelman College Museum of Fine Art inspires and enriches the Spelman College community and the general public, primarily through art by women of the African Diaspora.

Type: Fine Arts Institution

Response analyzed: Instead of tour guides, Spelman College has “artist guides.” According to Director of Education, Makeba Dixon-Hill, “It’s a play on a traditional tour that people get in a museum, but the leaders of these tours are black female cultural producers that are Georgia based. They are giving tours in their own style.” The tours usually incorporate the special exhibitions on display in the museum.
Spelman College Museum of Fine Art

**Power:** With a full time staff of only 4 employees, the locus of power is spread more evenly through college and community stakeholders.

**Change:** Change is midway between radical and regulated as it is still gradual.

**Truth:** Considers the individual and is therefore more subjective.
Whitney Plantation

**Mission:** Located in Wallace, Louisiana, the Whitney Plantation is a museum of slavery on the grounds of a historical sugar, rice and indigo plantation established in 1752. As a site of memory, Whitney Plantation features several memorials dedicated to the enslaved people who were forced to live and work here and throughout Louisiana.

**Type:** Historical Site

**Response analyzed:** The Whitney portrays the plantation experience purely from the perspective of the enslaved population. Deep scholarly research into the global history of slavery forms a framework for visitors to use in their interpretation of the site.
Whitney Plantation

**Power:** Traditional-locus of power is at the top of the institution (privately owned)

**Change:** Collaborative - descendants of the original enslaved population in the community lead tours

**Truth:** Objective/Radical quadrant
Conclusions

● Frameworks from other disciplines-- such as the Multiparadigmatic Community Practice Framework--may help museums to approach and consider new ways to think about fostering change and inclusivity in a rapidly evolving world.

● Within the framework, it is important to note that the functions of a museum may shift over time, meaning that the functions could shift from traditional to collaborative or even radical depending on the approach to power, change and truth.

● There are external factors that impact the operations/decisions of the museum that may be explained outside of the framework; these factors include:
  - Funding Sources
  - Stakeholders
  - Definition of Community
  - Role of the organization
Exercise/Workshop

- Break into groups

- Use an example from your institution or another institution with which you are familiar and consider it within this framework; take into account these questions:

  1. What is community and how do we define it?
  2. How do we understand truth and narrative?
  3. Do we seek to maintain the status quo, to foster incremental change, or to bring about radical change?