

**Dialogic Museum Exhibits and the
Process of Community Collaboration**

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Exploring Dialogic Museum Exhibits

Half a century ago, a museum might have neatly explained its functions in six phrases: collecting, collections management, objects preservation, scholarship, exhibition and interpretation. A recent statement by The Institute for Museum and Library Services shows how museum mission statements have shifted over the years to view all functions within the newly important lens of public service:

The cornerstone of many museum mission statements is educating the public. This is done through exhibits and programs about the collections that the museum holds. Collections care activities ultimately expand public access by providing more information about objects and allowing objects to be preserved for future interpretation.¹

The importance given to topics like diversity, accessibility, outreach, repatriation, and institutional collaboration in the past twenty years speaks to this major shift in purpose from museums as essentially collection-focused to museums as essentially public-service institutions with accountability to their communities. I would argue that we can identify an even more drastic shift underway over the last ten years, as professional dialogue has begun within the museum community on ways of involving the community in more direct collaboration.

Curatorial collaboration on exhibits in museums is a relatively new phenomenon of the last five to ten years, and models of this development have been presented in journals and at professional meetings of the museum field. These exhibits do not deny the primacy of the museum's collections or objects in general in conveying their subject; but they do use community advisors in a more substantial way than museums have traditionally done—not

¹ "Detailed information on the Learning Opportunities Grant Program," Institute of Museum and Library Services. [Web site] Accessed 14 December 2003.

merely as consultants or reviewers, or in focus groups, but in the actual curatorial processes of research, collecting, exhibit development, and exhibit design.

Although professional organizations within the museum field like the AAM have pioneered initiatives to connect museums with their communities, they have not officially addressed the complications, benefits or logistics of collaborative exhibit projects specifically. AAM, over the years, has released publications about museum collaboration with schools and consultants that address the role each partner should play in the collaborative effort. No article, white paper, or publication from the AAM or from any other organization has, thus far, addressed the “to-ing and fro-ing” (as Ruth Phillips terms it), the actual negotiation and organization, involved in collaborative exhibit projects. Using examples from two sessions at AAM annual meetings in 1994 and 1995, as well as an in-depth interview with the curator of a current collaborative exhibit underway at the Madison Children’s Museum, I would like to examine the process of creating a collaborative exhibit with a community advisory group. Is there a role for a professional organization to step in and create a set of standards to guide museum and community partnerships on exhibits?

Museums and Communities

During the last twenty years, museums have increasingly been challenged as public institutions to confront problems in the traditional relationship between their institutions and the public. This shift in focus for the museum field can be traced to the mid-twentieth century. Kenneth Hudson identifies several major causes of this shift over the past half-century: the incredible growth and scope of museums after 1945, the professionalization of the museum field,

and the changing sources for museum funding.² Museums of the “old-style” did not conceive of museums as partners with their communities. Their role was preserving and displaying collections in ways consistent with their academic training with little regard for their audience’s prior knowledge, values or approach. In the past twenty years, public concern over the relationship between museums and the communities they serve has prompted many museums to rethink their traditional ways of operating in order to incorporate more diverse voices into their operations. AAM’s 1992 benchmark report *Excellence and Equity* addressed the need to reevaluate and expand the “public dimension” of American museums—their educational mission, their outreach programming, the internal diversity of staff and board members—to allow diverse community voices to be heard. The basic tenets of *Excellence and Equity*’s proposed method for community involvement for museums were diversity of museum leadership and increased community involvement/outreach in order to enhance the ability of museums to fulfill their educational missions.³ More than a decade after the publication of *Excellence and Equity*, museums still feel the need to justify their value and trustworthiness for funding and for the support of their communities. However, most noticeably in the past ten years, many scholars, community activists, and museum professionals now suggest that a further, more fundamental reorganization of the relationship between museums and communities is necessary for museums to remain relevant, trustworthy institutions.

The birth of the American Association of Museums’ “Museums and Community” initiative in 1996 and the recent report on the initiative, *Mastering Civic Engagement* (2002), is a marker of this reevaluation within the museum community. Over the past six years, AAM’s

² Kenneth Hudson, “The Museum Refuses to Stand Still,” *Museum International* 197 (1998): 43. as paraphrased in Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution), 2002.

³ *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. (American Association of Museums: Washington, D.C., 1992)

initiative has put conversations in motion in many cities around the United States between the local audience (or potential audience) of museums, museum professionals, and leaders of community institutions. What resulted is a resounding and almost unison set of comments from the communities surveyed on the great value and boundless potential of museums as community institutions in future years. Great and boundless, that is, *if* museums are willing to reconsider many of their long-held ideas about museum authority and involve the community and other community institutions in a “shared authority” collaborative situation. The essays in *Mastering Civic Engagement* conclude that solving the “diversity question” put forth by *Excellence and Equity* as a solution to the problem of community representation is simply not enough. Current museum efforts to create program-based relationships with other institutions and audience development efforts to reach underserved audiences are not enough, Ellen Hirzy writes, because, while they may be “community-oriented, they are not necessarily civic-minded.”⁴ True civic engagement occurs, she writes, occurs

when museum and community intersect—in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing business. The museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change.⁵

This idea sounds nice enough, but becoming a center of community life requires museums to face a difficult question: how is their museum useful to the visitor, and how can it be made more useful? As exhibits are the reason most people go to museums, this reorientation requires a new approach to exhibition planning and development, one that to some degree, considers or addresses the visitor’s perspective, prior knowledge and preconceptions, interests and values.

⁴ Hirzy, Ellen, “Introduction,” in *Mastering Civic Engagement*, p. 16.

⁵ *ibid*, p. 9.

The phenomenon of community-collaborative exhibitions has emerged in the past decade as a way for many types of museums to answer their museum's unique problematic relationships with their communities. For anthropological museums, in which the traditional museum relationship with communities is one where the community is marginalized and exoticized by the museum, collaboration in the museum on ethnographic exhibits represents a fundamental reversal in the traditional power relationship between the scholar and the studied. Therefore, collaborative projects in anthropological museums can be incredibly powerful political expressions for museums seeking to express their reorientation to source communities, where "both community and museum partners are simultaneously 'teachers' and 'grassroots', experienced in their own worlds and inexperienced in each other's."⁶ In history museums, collaborative oral history projects introduce a "shared authority" over the interpretation of historical events that challenges the "officially sanctioned versions of history" normally put forth by museums, but also opens the door for more personal and nuanced stories to convey history to museum visitors.⁷ For art museums, collaborative exhibits may overhaul traditional ways of approaching a culture's artwork based on the structures and importance given to artwork in the artist's native culture. In all of these types of museums, collaboration with communities represents an extraordinary asset for the museum staff and also a huge leap of faith. Ruth Phillips suggests that collaborative museum exhibits have the capacity to actually produce "new knowledge" that has the capacity to benefit the other functions of museums—collections and preservation, outreach, and scholarship. She cites five case studies of anthropological museums that have undertaken collaborative work. In each case, she explains, the results produced new

⁶ Ruth Phillips, "Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: Introduction" in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*. Ed. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 163.

⁷ for a thoughtful and comprehensive look at the philosophy and logistics of "shared authority" in oral and public history projects, see Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority*. (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1990.

critical understandings of the objects already in the museum's collection, and in some cases, leads on locations and significance of new objects to be acquired by the museum.⁸

The literature on collaborative exhibits with communities is sparse.⁹ However, examining dialogue within the professional community during the past decade through *Museum News*, the professional journal of the AAM, and through conference sessions at AAM's annual meeting, the topic of collaborative exhibits is a frequent topic of discussion, most specifically with regard to exhibits created about cultural communities. Two sessions presented at AAM conferences, one from 1994 and one from 1995, center on whole museums or initiatives within museums that are predicated on equal museum-community curatorial control. The case studies of exhibits presented at these two sessions illustrate well the issues museum curators face when working collaboratively with communities on exhibits and exactly how the process of content development works when sharing authority with multiple partners. Using the diverse examples presented in these two sessions, I would like to examine first how community advisory groups are recruited and how they function in the creation of the exhibit, and second, whether there are common issues that occur when control over exhibit content is shared. Comparing these examples from widely varied institutions—historical societies, children's museums, botanical gardens, neighborhood cultural centers, and on—to a more in-depth look at one museum's exhibit development process in the next section, I would like to eventually suggest a conclusion

⁸ Phillips, p. 162.

⁹ Many articles and publications that appear to discuss collaborative community exhibits actually address how museums can best *represent* community histories, which I consider somewhat different. Although most of these sources acknowledge a substantial role for community advisory groups, they do not advocate explicitly the idea of "shared authority" behind their projects. For example, the Canadian Museums Association's *Standard Practices Handbook* (2001, 2nd edition) has a sizable section on exhibit development and the "team approach," but identifies the team as members of the museum's staff. In addition, though community advisory groups are mentioned, they are described as "advisors [who] can represent cultural groups that have a vested interest in the objects and interpretation presented in the exhibit." In contrast to this definition of the community advisory group's role, as I mention later in the paper, I use the idea of the "community advisory group" to indicate all of each project's advisors, often actually a very wide circle of contacts rather than one or two community advisors, as the Canadian Museum Association explanation seems to indicate.

about whether there is a place for a guiding set of principles or standards for community exhibit collaborations.

Collaborative Exhibits: Pioneering Projects and Professional Discussion

Two sessions at separate AAM meetings contribute to this discussion; both address, using examples from widely varying types of museums, the practical as well as the philosophical considerations of organizing a community exhibit partnership. “The Dialogic Museum,” a session presented at the 1994 meeting, presents four perspectives on the development of museums solely devoted to presenting the histories of particular American ethnic minority groups.¹⁰ These case studies of historical societies mesh nicely with case studies presented at a subsequent AAM session in 1995, titled “Exhibitions, Research, and Real Life Voices: A Delicate Balance,” detailing museum-community collaborations involving institutions not primarily devoted to the cultural history of ethnic minority groups. The museums involved in this group of collaborative projects represent several kinds of museums—botanical gardens, state and citywide historical societies, and children’s museums. The insights from these museums’ experiences broaden the range of examples of museums undergoing collaborative projects, and emphasize that collaboration is a model for use in all kinds of museum settings.¹¹

Rather than analyzing each case study individually, I would like to examine some common themes that emerged from the case studies around the recruitment of and dialogue with community advisory groups. Broadly, these themes are Project Beginnings, Recruitment and Networking, and Content Development. Looking at these themes across the different projects

¹⁰ All examples from this conference session come from: Claudine Brown, et. al, “The Dialogic Museum: Models for Collaboration with Community,” [sound recording], in *Proceedings: Annual Meeting, American Association of Museums* (Seattle, WA: Chesapeake Audio/Video Communications, Inc.), April 24-28, 1994.

¹¹ All examples from this conference session come from: Nanette Acker Clark, et. al., “Exhibitions, Research, and Real Life Voices: A Delicate Balance,” [sound recording], in *Proceedings: Annual Meeting, American Association of Museums* (Philadelphia, PA: : Chesapeake Audio/Video Communications, Inc.), May 22-25, 1995.

represented, I would like to determine whether there are common issues that arise in the collaborative process regardless of the type of project undertaken.

Project Beginnings

In “The Dialogic Museum,” each of the four museums represented were “dialogue-driven” or based on a “dialogic” model, as session participant John Kuo Wei Tchen terms the model. The experiences of Chinatown History Center Deputy Director Fabiana Chou and Dorothy Cordova, director of the Filipino American National Historical Society, illustrate how collaborative projects in dialogic museums begin and how networks are formed with communities. In both cases, the projects began as grassroots campaigns by a small group of community members. However, the interactions of the museum with the public in the projects’ beginnings were drastically different. The Chinatown History Center, located in the borough of Manhattan in New York City, began because a group of Chinese American community members realized the potential for a community cultural center to unite what was and still is a community quite resistant to publicity, but also the need to educate non-Chinese visitors to Chinatown about the history of the neighborhood and the culture of its residents. Public programming early in the campaign slowly brought the community around to the project, and the curators had to probe the community for the museum’s first collection objects. Slowly, through public programming efforts, museum founders convinced the community that those people who lived the experience of immigration, who grew up and lived in Chinatown, were the REAL experts.

In contrast, the founding of the Filipino American National Historical Society (still a museum in the development stages as of the AAM presentation) represented a much different process of network-building. Although the project was initiated by a group of historians and

funded by a small NEH start-up grant in 1979, the reaction of the Filipino-American community was immediate and passionate. The original start-up grant, to conduct oral interviews, resulted in not only interviews, but also a flood of photos, diaries, and objects. This large reaction from the Filipino community sparked the idea among the project coordinators for a historical society as a way to share all of the collected stories with the greater Filipino community and with non-Filipinos interested in the community's history. The network built with the oral history project facilitated the society's development into the next phase, collecting more artifacts and stories, funded by another NEH grant. Since 1987, the society has spawned chapters throughout the U.S. West, collecting more materials and oral histories and training Filipino-Americans to be their own family historians, rethinking, collecting and donating their own histories and experiences.

For existing institutions not explicitly focused on the experiences of the cultural communities with whom they worked, the projects all began as museum priorities that got a jump-start because of an opportunity—funding, publicity, or otherwise—that allowed resources within the museum to be committed to the project's planning. The directors of projects presented in the “Exhibitions, Research, and Real Life Voices” session: the Crown Heights History Project (Brooklyn, NY), the Minnesota Communities Project at the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Neighborhoods Project at the Chicago Historical Society, all express that the projects were long term goals of each of their institutions but were eventually begun because funding became available for such a project. In the case of the Crown Heights History Project, violence in the neighborhood focused media attention on the perceived conflicts between the black and Jewish communities. Neighborhood museums jumped on this concern as a reason to begin a history project of the neighborhood to explore common roots and promote cooperation between the two groups. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society received funding for

the building of a new history center, and decided to take the opportunity of a new building as a chance to try out new models for engaging communities more directly in their historical work. For the Chicago Historical Society, the impetus was a bit less direct. The society's Board, as director Tracy Mathews explained, reaffirmed its commitment to capturing all knowledge that could contribute to an understanding of Chicago-area history, and acknowledged that critical historical knowledge exists outside the walls of the museum and academia. To gather the stories and memories of all Chicagoans, the society embarked on the *Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture* initiative as an experimental process.

Recruitment and Networking

For the projects presented in “Exhibitions, Research and Real Life Voices,” where the impetus for projects came from museum staff and leadership rather than directly from the community, important early connections with the community had to be made to gain community trust and to establish networks within communities where the museum, often, had little experience. The process of recruiting community advisory groups and networking was somewhat different in all three case studies, but in each case, the curators stressed the amount of time that such an effort takes and the importance of the curators' personalities and approach. All three institutions' curators had to wear two hats—one as a curator, and one as a folklorist. To gain the community's trust and blessing for the project, some museums recruited curators or project staff with the ethnic background of the community partner in order to facilitate conversation. This approach has mixed results, according to project directors Jill Vexler and Craig Steven Wilder of the Crown Heights History Project. While it is important to increase the diversity of curatorial staff and leadership at museums when working on projects surrounding

cultural communities, it should not be assumed that curators who are black or Filipino can automatically gain entrée to the community. In the case of this particular exhibit, the curators discovered by hiring one black and one Jewish curator, that the divisions in the community were much more complex. In fact, the Crown Heights area has the most diverse black population of anywhere in the country, with separate and often competing communities of Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and African immigrant populations. The Jewish community in Crown Heights is predominantly Lubavitch Jewish, and this distinction made Vexler's Jewish background only marginally useful as she sought to make contacts in the community.

All of the curators stressed the importance of “hanging-out time,” particularly in the early stages of the project's development to build community trust and network. Minnesota Historical Society curator Celeste Rossini was involved closely with all six communities to be included in the project over several years, attending community functions, picnics, heritage festivals, and more. Finally, when introducing their projects to communities, curators of all three projects introduced their intentions upfront—to be a “facilitator” or “ghostwriter” of the community's story. In the case of the Minnesota communities exhibit, the communities ranged from cultural communities to communities linked by other common experiences—the deaf community, and the Vietnam Veterans community. These groups in particular, Rossini explained, were eager to explain to others the nature of their unique “community.” The museums' interest and commitment to their communities, shown by their presence at community events and long-term relationship-building slowly engendered community trust in the project and resulted in a wide network of community contacts.

All of these examples illustrate how the project beginnings for collaborative projects are widely divergent, and depend on the nature of the museum, the politics within the cultural

community groups and the personalities and backgrounds of the curators. Similarly, looking at the exhibit development processes of these widely divergent community-museum collaborative exhibits shows how dependent the dialogue is on each museum's context and the exact nature of their relationship with the community.

Content Development

The process of exhibit development in the session, "The Dialogic Museum" was most clearly articulated by one presenter, Akemi Kikumura, of the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), located in "Little Tokyo," Los Angeles, California. Like the other museums of the session, the JANM's philosophy is founded on collaboration with the community, and exhibits are deeply rooted in oral history documentation and focused on personal experiences of Japanese Americans. JANM's mission, Kikumura explained, is to make known that the history and culture of Japanese Americans are an integral part of our nation's larger history. As a national museum, the museum regularly funds exhibits and projects outside of the Los Angeles area. Kikumura's presentation centered on the production of one such exhibit, "In This Great Land of Freedom: Japanese Pioneers of Oregon," which was created in Oregon by a team of Japanese American community curators, some of whom were local historical society curators, and JANM museum staff. The impetus for the project was from the local historical society, and JANM curators saw their role as very loose "facilitators of the project, an "umbrella" providing professional direction and fiscal support. Community leaders in Oregon undertook key roles in the development of the exhibit: they researched and collected, organized school programs and trained tour guides, and raised funds for the exhibit's production. In addition, project organizers from both JANM and the community advisory group felt that it was important to involve a

Japanese American exhibit firm to build the exhibit. They hired a Japanese-American designer whose experience was largely in landscape and ornamental horticulture. As a result, Kikumura explained, the exhibit had unexpected and delightful design elements—landscape materials like slate and gravel, and many plants were used to convey the sense of being *issei*, first generation immigrants, in a new land.

The relationship between the JANM curatorial staff and the Oregon community curators, who took “ownership” of the exhibit, produced a situation of constant, though not negative, negotiation about the exhibit’s content. Community curators reviewed the scripts produced by the museum staff and suggested new themes or objects for the exhibit. The collaboration prompted questions of whether community members could be at once audience members, funders and collaborators. If the community, in large part, funds an exhibit on their own culture, intends the exhibit to effect change for their community within the larger community, and volunteers their own time, shouldn’t the exhibit directly reflect what they want to be told about their story? One conflict arose when museum curators discovered an artifact for use in the exhibit that they thought would be particularly resonant for local audiences. The artifact was a news article written by the local chapter of the American Legion and printed in a newspaper in the nearby town of Hood River, that read, “Japs are Not Wanted in Hood River.” The community curators worried that local funding would be reevaluated if this direct example of local discrimination were included. After much negotiation, museum curators and community members arrived at the decision to keep the object in the exhibit. Although the exhibit did not want to dwell on hardship and discrimination, both parties agreed that the object would convey many messages about local complicity in discrimination in important ways for local audiences.

And, Kikumura noted, as a twist to the end of the story, the American Legion in Hood River eventually signed up to host the traveling exhibit in its space during its tour.

By involving community groups in all phases of development, the Japanese American National Museum created a historically sound exhibit that also acted as an empowering force for the community partners involved. As a result of more and more projects like these, Kikumura explains that local communities increasingly regard the museum as a potential collaborator, a source of expertise to facilitate their own community's cultural understanding.

The session "Exhibitions, Research, and Real Life Voices" presents three collaborative projects that each show the development and implementation of collaborative curatorial projects between museums (in some cases, more than one) and communities. In all three cases, more than one cultural community was included in the project, so the project involved many community partners, all with separate interests and priorities. The community advisory boards on each project were involved in all stages of development of the exhibits, from contributing oral histories and artifacts to reviewing scripts and object lists. As a result, the process of creating the exhibit was as important to the curators as was the actual exhibit itself. For the museums, community connections made during the exhibit process demonstrated the museums' respect for local communities, but also yielded far more information and a far better approach than could have been compiled from the collection alone by museum curators. All three projects began with extensive oral history gathering of community members' stories, with stories leading to the themes of the exhibit.

For all three projects, the community advisory groups assembled in the early stages of the project both opened doors to contacts for oral interviews and helped to clarify the goals of the exhibit to direct the lines of questioning. Crown Heights History Project curator Craig Steven

Wilder explained that much of the early content development with the community was centered on what the community and the museum wanted the exhibit to say about the neighborhood's diversity. Should the exhibit, he explains, be positioning Crown Heights as a unique community, different from other communities because of its unique ethnic makeup? Or, should Crown Heights be represented as a community just like any other? Discussions on these themes, Wilder explains, helped the community to take "ownership" of how their community would be represented in the exhibit. "Minnesota Communities" curator Celeste Rossini explained how working with several groups simultaneously brought out common themes in all of their experiences that museum curators could use to frame the exhibit as a whole. As parts of the exhibit developed, new parts were added out of collaboration and parts that did not prototype well with the communities or audiences were removed. Actively involved in these processes, even when the communities' preferences were not strictly followed, the communities felt as though they were participants in the conversation.

Hmong at Heart Exhibit Development, Madison Children's Museum

To gain a better picture of how a recent museum project has negotiated the space between the museum and the community in a collaborative exhibit project, I talked with John Robinson, Exhibit Development and Community Relations Manager at the Madison Children's Museum. The Madison Children's Museum has, over the past two years, been developing an exhibit with the local Hmong Community on Hmong contemporary culture and history, funded by the Freeman Foundation. I approached the interview with several aims in mind: 1) To get a picture of how a museum might begin and approach a collaborative exhibit process, 2) To understand the dynamics and logistics of working with a community group in a "shared authority" situation, and this collaboration's effects on the content and design of the resulting exhibit, 3) To explore, briefly, the nature and role of the museum curatorial position in a collaborative arrangement, and 4) To gain a curator's perspective on the future of collaborative exhibits, the need for a set of guidelines to inform collaborative projects and benefits of collaborative exhibits for the museum.

Museum History

Madison Children's Museum is a mid-sized children's museum with a budget of about \$2 million located in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. Since they opened to the public in 1981 in their first location, Madison Children's Museum has been a model of a successful children's museum, an innovator in exhibit development practices, and a partner with their community on several major projects. The museum's mission statement is:

Founded in 1980, the mission of Madison's Children's Museum is to enrich the lives of children by providing learning opportunities through constructive play. The museum's primary audience is children up to age 8 including their families, along with the school and community groups that support and influence children's growth and development.

Madison Children's Museum also reaches out beyond its walls by making a significant investment of resources in neighborhoods across the greater Madison area, particularly to children who might not otherwise have access to the museum's rich array of resources.¹²

Madison Children's Museum considers itself to be first and foremost a community institution, which is clear from their mission statement. The museum has worked closely with groups in the community—ethnic groups, school groups, and neighboring universities—on every project since the museum's conception, and this has led to an intensely collaborative environment in the present-day museum, where every department is used to the processes of community collaboration in their work. John Robinson explains that in large part, the collaborative lens through which the museum approaches all facets of its work is due to the culture and mentality of Wisconsin museums and nonprofit institutions. Building on a statewide tradition of collaboration in community work, Robinson explains, the museum has been well-equipped to take on pioneering collaborative exhibit and programming work over the years.¹³

Hmong at Heart History

Although the museum had been considering ways to work with Madison's sizeable Hmong community for several years, the impetus for beginning the *Hmong at Heart* project was a funding opportunity through the Freeman Foundation, a small family foundation granting money to organizations that promote Asian cultures among American children. The Foundation, working through the Association of Children's Museums in the selection process, provided funding for seven children's museums across the country to develop exhibits on Asian culture that, after closing at their producing museum, would travel over the next four years to other children's museums throughout the United States. The seven exhibits, presenting aspects of

¹² "Mission," Madison Children's Museum Home Page. Web site accessed December 7, 2003.

Japanese, Hmong, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean culture and history, will open at their producing museums in 2004, and begin travel in 2004 to over seventy children's museums throughout the United States.

Though the exhibits were not funded to be community history exhibits, a requirement of the exhibits, as stated by the Freeman Foundation, is to collaborate with local and/or national agencies or groups representing the chosen Asian culture. For some of the participating museums, this involvement is at the national level or with large collecting institutions, with the Asia Society. For others, it has resulted in international institutional partnerships; the Austin Children's Museum's exhibit on Korea is a result of collaboration with the Samsung Children's Museum in Seoul. Finally, for many of the exhibits, the local community is involved, through advisory and focus groups, and through community liaisons on staff at the museum. Madison Children's Museum's efforts in this area, however, are unique among the seven exhibits in development. Madison Children's Museum was the only children's museum to state as an initial goal of the project to create a directly collaborative project with their local community, resulting in a long-term relationship. In addition, Madison Children's Museum's proposal included a secondary goal of establishing a model for future museums' (both children's and traditional museums) work with communities.

Exhibit developers at Madison Children's Museum in the early stages envisioned a fully collaborative project with the local Hmong community, not unlike other projects the museum had undertaken. The exhibit would be ultimately a celebration of the Hmong culture and a reflection of the values of the local Hmong population. Unlike the other community exhibits discussed earlier in this study, however, *Hmong at Heart* would be an exhibit on Hmong culture

¹³ If not otherwise cited, all information about Madison Children's Museum, the *Hmong at Heart* exhibit development (continued from previous pg.)

and history overall, not only a reflection of the Madison Hmong community. The exhibit would focus on the culture and history of Hmong and Hmong-American communities and would link history and contemporary culture by focusing on the resilience of the Hmong over time: as deeply spiritual and peaceful people, as persecuted minorities and refugees, and today, as members of a close-knit worldwide Hmong diaspora, preserving and adapting cultural traditions to contemporary American life.

If this narrative seems complex for adults, the complexity of the exhibit's narrative and theme is made even more daunting when one considers that this exhibit would be aimed at children under the age of twelve. Complicating matters even further, *Hmong at Heart* would have a dual audience—the “stakeholder” audience of the local and national Hmong population, but also the museum visitor audience, primarily non-Hmong children and their families. Focus groups and front-end studies for the exhibit showed that while non-Hmong schoolchildren in Madison might be able to identify one or two Hmong-American classmates, they had no idea what it meant to be a refugee or where Laos or Thailand is on a globe. Although the exhibit, Robinson explained, was not intended to teach the history of the Hmong people but rather to convey a “cultural trajectory,” a more general sense of the history behind contemporary Hmong culture. To do this, however, the museum staff determined that it would be necessary to address some historical concepts within the exhibit. With all of these pieces in mind, the museum had their work cut out for them, and the resulting exhibit development process, Robinson recounts, has been the most ambitious and complex but also rewarding and comprehensive, of which he has ever been a part.

Exhibit Development and “Shared Authority”

The exhibit staff approached the exhibit development of *Hmong at Heart* in the same way that they had approached other non-cultural exhibits that the museum has created. The first step in this process was to recruit a large and diverse group of advisors. When reaching in to a cultural group for advisory support, Robinson stressed, it is particularly important to reach not only the official leaders of the group—in this case, the elders and political leaders—but also everyday people, the “practitioners” of Hmong-American culture. When creating the exhibit grant proposal for *Hmong at Heart*, Robinson says he knew “maybe one” Hmong person well, a member of the local school board of Hmong descent. Robinson was able to hire this contact through the museum for the planning stages, and this initial community advisor was instrumental in framing the way that the museum should approach the community. In addition, this initial contact provided access to a valuable voice in the project—a local Hmong-American who was also on the board of Hmong National Development, the national group of Hmong immigrants and Hmong-Americans. Her influence, both nationally and within the community, Robinson reports was critical, as she represented a “gatekeeper” to the community—one who was well connected but was also a power figure whose trust would be necessary to continue the project with the community’s blessing. Robinson estimates that the network-building component of the exhibit development process was the most time-consuming. Building trust required that they immerse themselves in the community gradually, position themselves as humble learners and maintain an air of genuine openness about the museum’s intentions. It was absolutely critical, Robinson explained, that during the initial contacts, often door-to-door meetings, that the Hmong community saw the project as one where they would have “real, genuine power and control” over the content.

At the same time, the Madison Children's Museum's institutional commitment from all departments and levels of the museum was critical to early stages of the exhibit development process and community buy-in to the project. When the exhibit development planning began, exhibit development staff felt strongly that the Hmong community should be involved in the leadership of the museum on a very high level. When the local contact mentioned earlier, who also served on the board of Hmong National Development, was recruited as a key contact, she was immediately voted on as a member of the museum's board of directors. This fast action by the museum leadership ensured that the museum put its support behind the mission of the exhibit, and that the Hmong voice would be represented in a long-term way in the museum's future operations.

In addition, in September 2002, when exhibit research was in its early stages, the museum hired Peng Her as a part-time community liaison. As a translator of both language and culture, Peng's involvement was critical in the dialogue between the museum and the Hmong community. Although not from a museum background, Peng was brought on the exhibit team because of his open and genuine demeanor and his candor and flexibility in representing both the museum and his own cultural community. He could answer questions and concerns from Hmong elders, for example, "with a different kind of legitimacy" and in their language. He could also help the museum staff to anticipate concerns that might arise about content areas or exhibit components.

Armed with a wide network of contacts, the museum began formally involving the Hmong community and larger local community through several different methods. First, they held regular advisory meetings at the museum and at Kajsia House, the gathering place for Hmong elders in the Madison area, to discuss potential themes and objects, to prototype exhibit

components, and to gather expertise and stories. Robinson explained that during the meetings, the museum set the agenda and asked for input where needed. Providing “parameters of development,” Robinson suggests, is the best way for the museum to represent the needs of its audience while still involving the community’s voice in a major way. During the first community meeting, Robinson and Brenda Baker, Director of Exhibits, began the meeting by establishing that the exhibit would tell the community’s story, but also laid out the way that they had conceived of the exhibit as a starting point. Beginning in this way, Robinson says, the museum asserted its role as a “facilitator” with a parallel agenda and set up an understanding about the museum’s role. As a result, the community input was more focused.

Through the initial meetings with the community, the basic narrative for the exhibit was set. By emphasizing the cultural over the historical, the museum staff felt it was possible to integrate some of the painful elements of Hmong history to show how the Hmong people have sustained their culture even in the face of adversity. Formal meetings and informal conversations with the Hmong community confirmed that they would like the story of their history told, and accepted that the exhibit would have to be simplified somewhat for the museum’s young audiences. As the meetings progressed, they yielded more and more contacts, object ideas and a wealth of stories, photos and oral histories to be included.

The museum also involved two classes of 4th and 5th grade schoolchildren, which included several Hmong children, in the exhibit development process. Beyond testing exhibit object prototypes, the museum engaged in focused front-end evaluation with these classes about the themes of the exhibit. The children brainstormed ways to address difficult subjects in the exhibit and expressed what they would like to learn about Hmong people. In addition, the museum brought the school classes and the Hmong community together as joint advisors, by

bringing the classes of children to Hmong neighborhoods and Kajsab House on several occasions. Finally, the museum utilized a small number of university professors from the University of Wisconsin at Madison (UWM) on an ad hoc basis throughout the exhibit process, as academics and as members of the Hmong community. Through the museum's Hmong community contacts, museum exhibit developers learned that a Hmong-American linguistics professor from UWM traveling was traveling to Laos, and they sent her with a wish list of objects for the exhibit.

John Robinson estimates that if the contributions of each of the museum's advisory groups and the museum staff's contributions were put into a pie chart, the percentages would look something like:

- 50%** Hmong community and elders
- 30%** 4th and 5th Grade classes
- 10%** Museum exhibit staff
- 10%** Other experts—UWM university professors, etc.

In such an extensively collaborative situation, he explained, the process is a constant negotiation between everyone's interests and values, and some disagreement over content is inevitable. As a curator on the project, Robinson saw his role as a "steward" of the conversation between the various interest groups, including the perspective of the museum, and sought throughout the process to mitigate any problems that came up.

In some situations, the shared authority situation resulted in situations that Robinson, as a professional curator, was initially uneasy following the suggestions of the Hmong community. Most of these situations were resolved in compromise; but sometimes, Robinson admitted, "swallowing his better instincts," he went forward with the community's ideas but every time found eventually that it was "always the right move." He recounted one conflict that came from a misunderstanding of the museum's space limitations but is deeply telling about the

community's feeling of commitment to telling their own history in an accurate way. Part of the exhibit was conceived as a recreation of a Laotian-Hmong village, with a traditionally-built Hmong family home. As part of the exhibit development process, the museum helped to secure the materials to build a prototype house on the grounds of Kajsiab House. The process was ultimately very valuable to the exhibit, but was somewhat thrown off because the structure couldn't be built in a totally accurate way. Because the house had to be portable, it was impossible to sink the posts in the ground as the elders dictated, and because it had to fit within the already-small exhibit space, it had to be significantly smaller than actual size of a Laotian Hmong house. Hmong community members were initially unhappy with the prototype because they felt that the small scale of the replica house would create the impression that the Hmong lived in tiny dwellings, when in actual fact the traditional homes were quite large. Although Robinson and the museum curators explained why it had to be built small, he told me, they still got some "good natured criticism" about the house looking "like a chicken coop." The museum considered several options to deal with this potential misconception by visitors, including mounting a photo of an actual Hmong house near the replica. The exhibit development team eventually settled on conveying the size of actual Hmong houses in the text of a nearby section text panel.

Some difficult exhibit components were created on terms directly "carved out of collaboration" between groups, where each group felt their input was valuable. The museum knew early on that as a part of the history of the Hmong people, the exhibit would have to address some difficult topics. The Hmong community confirmed that this was an important part of their story to tell. However, the exhibit staff was not sure how much of this painful history to include, and how exactly to address it in a meaningful and hopeful way for children. How

should the exhibit, for example, address the period of time spent by Hmong refugees in Thai refugee camps? And, how should it explain the concept of “refugee” in the first place? Museum staff and the Hmong community feared that creating an exhibit for children with the conventions of playful make-believe would undermine the seriousness of the situation being portrayed. Input from the two school class collaborators helped to clarify the exhibit components through extensive discussion and create a section of the exhibit that conveys the “real pain and power” of that era of Hmong history. When the idea of creating a refugee camp in the exhibit was initially prototyped with the school groups, the children had many ideas about how to portray the camp and the refugee experience. Among the ideas brought out of the brainstorming session was a replica Mekong River in the exhibit that the visitors could cross to illustrate how the Hmong refugees escaped Laos for China. Although Robinson had significant concerns about this idea, he says, he withheld his reservations and let the open discussion of the children continue. Although the inclusion of a replica river was logistically and conceptually problematic and the museum staff ultimately decided to eliminate this element, by allowing the children to contribute their ideas without judgement, they felt valued and included. There is power, Robinson explained, in “just being asked.”

Although the exhibit development process encountered bumps in the road, it is clear that Robinson considers the collaborative process to be the only way to accurately and respectfully portray a living culture. In addition, community collaboration on *Hmong at Heart* has helped Madison Children’s Museum begin a long-term relationship with a sizeable local group that, prior to the beginning of the project, had not felt that the museum was “a place for them” or seen its relevance to their lives. Finally, it signals an institutional commitment to the community that

has already diversified the museum's leadership, widened its circle of professional contacts, and enriched the lives of all members of the project team.

Where are We Headed? Community Exhibits of the 21st Century

It might seem silly to ask whether Madison Children's Museum's collaborative model could work anywhere outside of Madison, Wisconsin, since we have seen through other museums' professional dialogue on community projects in Brooklyn, Minneapolis, and Chicago, that similar projects *can* happen at all sorts of museums. But, as John Robinson said, it took a very particular kind of existing community attitude, institutional commitment, staff expertise, and in many cases, luck, to create what he hopes will be a successful and meaningful exhibit experience in *Hmong at Heart*. Are models like Madison's, or Brooklyn's, or Minnesota's, really replicable? Is it necessary to re-invent the wheel for each community? The American Association of Museums has prioritized the process of "community engagement" for the nation's museums, but is there a role for a professional organization in the process of community dialogue? Should there be a set of suggested guidelines or a framework provided by such a body for approaching communities, working with them to develop content and secure objects, and creating a meaningful exhibit for both stakeholder groups and museum audiences?

I would suggest that the example of Madison Children's Museum and the case studies of other museum-community "shared authority" projects, that it is not yet the time to create a guiding set of principles for collaborative exhibits. Community curatorial advisory groups are still such a new phenomenon that it seems to me that more models are needed for this type of exhibit in all types of museums and on all types of subjects before a more generalized set of standards or principles could be developed to guide future museums' projects. All of the projects had different starting points with their communities and therefore approached their source communities differently. As evidenced by Madison and Minnesota's projects, each community's

history of collaboration affects the success of the project. Minnesota's six communities in the "Minnesota Communities" exhibit each responded differently to the idea of collaboration, the message behind their exhibit, and the role of the museum in the process. During the exhibit development process, what is included and excluded is always based on the context of the dialogue. Further, the relationship between the museum and the community and the nature of the evolving dialogue determines the role of the museum in the process. The directors of the Crown Heights History Project saw themselves as "ghostwriters" for communities, gathering information from community members and molding it into a cohesive narrative. John Robinson expressed that the curatorial authority was a give-and-take situation, and that the museum's role was as a "facilitator" to make sure that the content suggested by the community was accurate and communicated properly. The Japanese American National Museum saw itself even farther removed from the content development, as an advisor and financial support for the community's efforts. Given these variables and the need, stressed by directors of all of the projects, for flexibility in the development process, it seems unlikely at this point that any sort of standard or formula for working with communities could be developed.

However, a preliminary step in the direction of a "toolkit" for exhibit collaboration for museums who want to work with their communities might be a guide for preparing the museum institutionally for community collaboration. As John Robinson and others noted, an institutional commitment to collaboration is critical for the success, both short- and long-term, of the project. Such a document could, using models of successful projects, address the pre-conditions that need to exist to ensure the success of collaborative projects. Issues of staff diversity and qualifications, board commitment to collaboration and the museum's public-service mission, resources for the long-term funding, and other such issues need to be considered before museums

undertake collaborative projects. In Madison Children's Museum's case, the museum had established a long history of collaboration; other museums may not have this sort of institutional history. The process of community collaboration is a product in itself that is mutually valuable to both museums and their communities. The resulting exhibits convey a more nuanced and personal sense of the subject matter, and establish the museum as a community partner, not an ivory tower.

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