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Report on Museum Community-Building

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From the venerable Field Museum in Chicago to the Montshire Museum of Science in Norwich, Vermont, museums are taking on new responsibilities as "community-builders," a portmanteau term that covers an array of civic-minded activities from supplementing school programs, providing sites for town forums, and forging coalitions with other local groups concerned about their city's health. "Community building" is the topic of the decade for the non-profit world; it engages those from the most prestigious foundations and established organizations to newcomers acting on fresh ideas to improve the quality of shared living space. Museums, once thought of as hallowed repositories of precious artifacts of art and science, have found themselves acting as major generators of "community building" energy.

Three reasons explain museum involvement in new outreach and "pull-in" programs. Museums are often physically tied to inner city neighborhoods in trouble; their once taken-for-granted supporters are graying, at best; and their leadership has drunk deep of a new philanthropic ethic that foregrounds that elusive physical and moral space we call "community."

Many museums like the Brooklyn Children's Museum find themselves physically tied to deteriorating parts of old downtown areas. When BCM's location began to be viewed as unsafe and unattractive, they faced declining attendance and community support. To turn such situations around, many museum directors have grabbed the nettle of inner-city problems and have devised ways to be part of a solution. While jobs drained away from urban areas, hastening the conversion of the old steel belt into the new rust belt, museums, libraries, and zoos in such cities as Boston, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Brooklyn reassessed their physical assets and discovered in their location opportunities to revitalize their downtowns.

Even museums in the best of locations have watched as their once presumably natural constituency has grown older without leaving significant new replacements. Popular tastes have changed. Standard exhibitions and performances in music, art, history, and science that once drew in a steady crowd no longer do so. Museums have had to become more attuned to a larger, more

comprehensive audience "out there," many with tastes more popular than classical. At the same time, museums, particularly historical ones, have found themselves in the center of brouhahas over exhibits as dissimilar as the presentation of Southern plantation life, the career of Sigmund Freud, and artists' representations of the American flag. Thrown on the defensive, museums have reacted differently, but in all cases they have been forced into spontaneity.

In the absence of a consensus about what museums should preserve and display and with much of the knowledge they rely on thoroughly politicized through a succession of high-profile controversies, museum directors have had to find ways to communicate their own understanding and assumptions. In doing so, they have reconstrued their missions in ways that have broadened their "natural" constituency.

While concerns about neighborhood decline and diminishing attendance are the two major reason for museums becoming involved in community-building activities, a third, more elusive reason stems from the emerging ethic among professionals in the museum and foundation worlds that can be traced to a larger discourse about the public realm. Through the 1980s and 1990s, attentive Americans have become increasingly aware of the consequences of urban neglect, welfare dependency, working class poverty, and the faltering performance of our public schools. Although resisting the stern message of President Jimmy Carter's 1977 "malaise" speech, they have slowly turned their attention to national social problems. The steady media coverage of civic decline has produced a new philanthropic spirit evident in the leaders of public institutions. Having concrete resources at their disposal and being able to draw on the benign image of their institutions, museum directors and their staffs have added community-building to their museums' agenda.

Evidence of the new importance placed upon civic outreach in the museum world can be seen in the National Award for Museum Service, which the Institute of Museum and Library Services, based in Washington, DC, started awarding five years ago. As the 1997 citation for the Children's Museum of Indianapolis noted, CMI had a long history of dedication to the children and adults of its inner-city neighbors, going beyond traditional museum programs

"to serve as a catalyst to help our neighborhood be strong, healthy and vital." CMI has established a special department for community initiatives, working in partnership with residents and social service agencies on such developments as an intergenerational day care facility, urban landscape beautification projects, housing developments, and a master urban-planning feasibility study.

Working with a different set of possibilities for community-building, the Montshire Museum of Science in Norwich, Vermont, won the IMS award in 1995 for getting communities to look ahead at the environmental issue of solid waste disposal, gathering information and ideas before mandates came down from government. In this case, the museum helped local residents examine their situation through organizing a series of meetings with experts on the subject. Acting on the conviction that communities can't solve problems without advance planning, the museum made it possible for local residents to get a five-year headstart on a problem which would otherwise have captured their attention as a catastrophe featured on the front page of the local paper.

Charged with studying the fragmentation of existing communities and trying to imagine new forms of "community" that would be appropriate to our society's needs in the next century, the Penn National Commission's Working Group on 21st-Century Community undertook a series of interviews with museum leaders across the country to learn more about their community-building efforts. The pitfalls and strengths of these efforts, detailed after the exemplars, give a sense of how professionals are evaluating their community-building initiatives.

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art, President Andrea Rich reached out to eight smaller museums in the area to form a consortium, the Arts Education Initiative. The participating museums—the California African American Museum; the Pacific Asia Museum; the Japanese American National Museum; the Latino Museum of History, Art and Culture; the Skirball Museum; Plaza de la Raza; and the Southwest Museum—raised over $3 million to get the project started. One foundation donated $1 million after member museums demonstrated their cooperation by agreeing individually

not to approach the foundation for a three-year period. While the initiative is designed to fill the void of art education created by cut-backs in school funding, the means of their coalition may be as important as the goal, for they are strengthening inter-community relations in a mutually enriching fashion. As the largest museum, LACMA has much to offer in the form of advice on developing membership and training docents. The other museums, however, represent ardent constituencies in Los Angeles's complex ethnic population. If the museums can attract members and visitors from each other's normal constituency, the larger community will be encouraged to explore its cultural differences at the same time that the city's base of support for the arts with the cultivation of new appreciators is broadened.

Rallying his fellow high school teachers to the cause of introducing school children to performances and exhibitions of Mexican art, Carlos Tortolero founded the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago in 1982. Because MFACM demonstrated its capacity to mount shows that would educate the local community of Mexican-Americans about their heritage as well as disseminate an appreciation of Mexican art, artifacts, and artistic performances to a larger audience, the city's parks department found a site for the museum in an unused building. Demonstrating the importance of having sites for community building, the center museum has also provided space for political debates and bought a radio station with a 6-mile radius to disseminate art news and programming. Fundamentally committed to art education, the MFACM's leadership has been animated by the conviction that the best way to teach is through "hands-on" experience which museums can provide best. Tortolero believes in "equity in art," which means challenging two assumptions: that only those of high social status appreciate art and that only those with special talents enjoy it.

At Chicago's Field Museum, President John McCarter has found that working with the city's United Neighborhood Organizations has plunged the museum into the center of public festivals, swearing-in ceremonies for new citizens, and parent-children activities. The Field also works with nine museums in an after-school program for the city's children. This program allows modeling enthusiasts to visit museums where they can see the authentic prototypes on

which their models were based. Noting that the Field Museum has 72 staff members with Ph.D.s, McCarter stressed the power of his museum to contribute to teacher training and afterschool programming. At the same time, the Field is doubling its volunteer force in order to strengthen the personal infrastructure for its many outreach programs.

One of the leading institutions in community-building efforts, the Brooklyn Children's Museum will celebrate its 100th birthday next year. It has developed what it calls the Museum Team for 1,400 young people ages 7 to 18, an ambitious program that welcomes children to the museum unaccompanied by adults. Sometimes coming six days a week, these young people can literally grow up in the museum, which has become their "safe haven." According to Executive Director Carol Enseki, science, culture, and arts education programs are offered to the Museum Team, along with sessions in leadership and career planning. The involved children progress through tiers, taking training for volunteer work, serving as volunteers, and finally getting paid internships. Like most other museums, the Brooklyn Children's Museum collaborates with many other organizations and social service agencies. They also run community discussion forums for families, using their attractive, centrally-located space to encourage discourse about public issues. The Museum has websites, but Enseki was quick to point out the weak link within communities in the "inequitable access to resources," because many do not have computers at home.

Another national leader, Executive Director Robert Archibald of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, is transforming his history museum into what might be called a community center with a memory. He's been director for more than ten years, so people are now used to his nontraditional approach, but he concedes that in the beginning he had trouble convincing others that "history is not a set of facts. History is a process of conversations among the living. Conversations about what we've done poorly and what we've done well." This approach has helped him place the historical society at the center of community life in St. Louis, where he and his staff are active as leaders and decision-makers in groups concerned with the city charter, mass transit, and school reform. Not incidentally, he points out, this philosophy also helps

him make a key fundraising point: "Investment in history is investment in the long-term health of a community." While his museum has a number of community-oriented programs, he emphasizes that programming alone is not enough: "The institution has to watch all of the signals it sends about ownership: who you hire, who's on your Board, how you spend money. Business practices, Board membership, and hiring are all of a piece. They send powerful signals—at least as powerful as programming. We must be absolutely consistent in being the first to adhere to the message we're carrying to the community. Inconsistency will be perceived immediately."

Director and President Lou Casagrande of the Children's Museum in Boston considers community-building an essential part of everything that the institution does, from exhibition development to its early childhood programs. Founded by Boston school teachers to work with Irish and Italian children, Casagrande sees "multiculturalism" as but a contemporary variant of an old fact about American nationhood that has always challenged the Boston museum. Speaking of himself and his staff as "anti-authoritarian, renegade educator entrepreneurs," Casagrande envisions a variety of educational roles for the museum with advisory groups, collaborative grants, community-based efforts in exhibit development, a teacher center for educational reform, and early childhood development contributing to the effort.

At Seattle's Wing Luke Asian Museum, Executive Director Ron Chew also emphasizes the importance of community connections. His rapidly growing museum is a located in the city's International District, a multi-ethnic, poor neighborhood with a rich mix of Chinese-, Japanese-, Filipino-, and African-American residents. Unlike many community museums that focus on only one community, his specializes in programs that are "bridge-builders" between communities. Some are pan-Asian and some cut across racial barriers, such as a recent program in which Japanese-American and African-American soldiers from World War II shared their experiences. Another program highlighted the Japanese-American liberators of Dachau, who shared their experiences with the Jewish community. A former journalist whose family has lived in the neighborhood since 1911, Chew feels it is critical for museum people involved in community programming to have deep roots. Successful

community organizations, according to Chew, require the involvement of locals—and a few outsiders who bring a different perspective. But most of all, he says, the community museum needs local credibility, which is accomplished by residency and by hiring from the community.

The community-building efforts at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, as detailed by Director Edward J. Maruska, involve eight inner-city schools in a program bringing third graders to the zoo to follow a structured curriculum in environmental education. This comprehensive educational initiative integrates this curriculum into the Ohio science proficiency tests. The zoo lends animals to classrooms, hosts overnights, trains teachers, and works with the parents and teachers of the third graders. All students keep a journal. At the level of higher education, the zoo provides distance learning in partnership with several local universities.

Like many other museums, the Cincinnati Zoo has found that community-building efforts have drawn them into larger civic activities, such as providing space for the discussion of urban policies and projects. A staff person regularly attends their neighborhood's Community Council, one of fifteen officially recognized community councils advising the Cincinnati City Council on such things as budgets and development. The city awards to each neighborhood council $10,000 a year for newsletters and volunteer recruitment. Without such forums, according to the zoo's representative, local residents often hear about what is happening in their community at the last minute, often creating an adversarial atmosphere. The Cincinnati Zoo helped found and facilitates the uptown coalition of community council presidents, staff, police, and senior people from local universities and hospitals.

Museum directors spoke frankly about the pitfalls for the kind of programs they were championing, and these ranged from intellectual resistance to unreasonable expectations. The biggest challenge for not-for-profit organizations, one said, is to cultivate talent, particularly among minority groups, as there are an abundance of aging male white museum people trying to hold onto their values, and very few Asian-American or African-American museum directors. "I don't see the next generation of leaders," he said, noting that, except for the directors, salaries did not come close to matching academic ones.

Others emphasized the difficulty of getting and sustaining funding. Many museums have had to accept cutbacks from their governmental sponsors and have found it difficult to make good the short-fall from other funders. Many foundations, we were told, have unrealistic expectations of what can be done in community building. Directors spoke too of the changes that have come with the creation of new wealth that is divorced from the community, including new wealth-holders who are suspicious of the kinds of investments they are asked to make. Some directors, however, found that good community programming made fundraising easier because many donors preferred supporting "community programs" as opposed to "culture," which is often perceived as a frill.

Raising funds means cultivating CEOs of the neighboring corporations, but these commitments are often compromised by the merger and acquisition mania of the past decades. The globalization of the American economy, one museum director felt, had undermined the civic leadership in corporations. Others drew attention to the changing character of corporate leadership. Where once it came from an elite that took support of the arts for granted, today that sense of responsibility must be engendered.

On the brighter side, some corporations are taking a leading role in new programs for civic improvement and social change. In Los Angeles, an active group, Business for Social Responsibility, has mobilized the talents of top management in Rhino Records, Pep Boys, Creative Artists Agency, Time Warner, and Elephas Entertainment; the national BSR association, with headquarters in San Francisco, includes among its 800 members Mattel, Ben & Jerry's, Edison International, Taco Bell, Sony, Amgen, Reebok, Levi-Strauss, and Target Stores.

While often dispiriting in the short-run, the fund-raising efforts of museums have had the unintended effect of nurturing American philanthropy. Agreeing with this proposition, several museum people noted that part of their difficulty in raising money can be ascribed to the fact that they haven't been doing it for very long. Lou Casagrande spoke of the interesting concept of "virtuous capital," which refers to finding more thoughtful ways to strengthen institutions beyond project-driven funding. Others agreed that the

museums' infrastructural support was being eroded when funders showed a willingness to pay only for outreach educational projects, while ignoring the cost of maintaining the institution or mounting the exhibits that can serve an educational purpose. The Boston Children's Museum, Casagrande believes, is in a position to offer a good case study of virtuous capital by showing how support yields the community building that, along with educational and literacy reform, have become the major concerns of prospective donors.

There is also in the museum world a perceived difficulty in meeting a complex set of demands: a museum must simultaneously be an entertainment facility, an educational institution, and a research unit. Juggling those roles makes unusual demands on the museums' staff. Attendance plays a large part in the museums' mission as well as their budget, its importance sometimes fostering the view that community-building is a distraction.

The rapid pace of change has made it harder for museums to sustain their conventional efforts as well as their fresh initiatives. On the bright side, museums have become forums for conversations because of drastic shifts in policy or demographic transformations. Most museum people want to use their space to connect their constituencies with history, with art, with themselves, while also helping them explore different heritages. As people have become more mobile and suburbanized, they want to have a sense of stability and connection, one director commented, adding, "we've responded to that with exhibitions and programs that provide a sense of place."

Another pitfall described by a museum director was getting the attention of prospective volunteers. "Ours is a changing society with people with less time; and yet mobile communities need more, not fewer, conversations." The challenge, she said, was getting the community to respond to their initiatives that help people cope with change. She continued by noting that there is a widesperead "feeling of insecurity with constant change. We talk to people about the feeling of instability."

Volunteers come and go. They burn out, or move out, as tougher demands are placed on them, sometimes with insufficient psychic rewards. If people felt involved and valued, they would give more time, one museum director

commented. The plurality of social and cultural groups with different agendas and aspirations has weakened community ties, many feel. The American dream is seen as having once held us together, but now those old ties appear frayed. On the move, many families fail to connect with the larger sense of community or even humanity. Someone who cares, one person claimed, has to stay put long enough to know who to bring together and to mediate among the participants necessary to address the problems that plague them. This is a part of the ongoing professionalization of what were once voluntary and informal initiatives. As another leader explained, "in the years that we've been working on the community, there has been a real change in that when we started there was a clear leader or spokesperson in each of the towns in our cluster, and if you could get to that person you could make things work." Not only is that no longer true, according to this museum director, but leaders were not being replaced, and there was more divisiveness at the political level.

A number of directors cited community members' lack of trust of the museum as a major problem encountered as their institutions began to work more actively with their communities. Besides broader social issues of racial, class, and value differences, many museums have a history of past abuses—or at least negligence—toward their communities that they must overcome before they can build the solid partnerships necessary for sound community relationships.

Other museum people have worked directly on the problem of creating a sense of community identity. At the Albany Institute of History and Art, Christine Miles discussed the work of their director of education, Ted Lind, and their curator of history, Wes Balla. They have been working on an oral history of neighborhoods in Albany. creating a community album to document past and contemporary developments. The larger goal of this project is to show residents how to develop a deeper sense of caring about and belonging to their town.

Museum staffers said repeatedly that it takes someone or a group to do the listening and convening, providing the place and the lunch and the forum through which people can come together and keep things moving, someone

who knows who needs to be in on the conversation and be sure that they are there. Without an active agent, momentum slows. Facilitators, others said, had to know the dynamics of the community, a knowledge base that can take years to form.

Through our many interviews and readings, we heard a consensus forming around the proposition that constructing a community infrastructure, particularly in neighborhoods with serious problems, required a longer commitment of time than now given, because it demands organizing coalitions among like-minded groups, effecting greater communication among interested parties, and, above all, nurturing leadership at the local level.

Sustainability has become a new goal in the community-building of museums. There is a sense that social change comes slowly, that there is ample evidence of failure after the infusion of money into a community when some well-publicized event, often a disaster, has attracted attention. We heard again and again that people with experience need to be frank about the need for longer term projects, speak honestly to funders, accept stricter oversight, and develop livelier connections between institutional leaders and the people they seek to help. “Do we really have the infrastructure to continue to reach out?,” one director asked. A related question is whether metropolitan areas can keep the support of people in distant suburbs and the new edge cities, as is the museums' capacity to show their neighborhoods in a different light than that presented on the ten o'clock news. Slow to wake up to the diverse communities they serve and need, museum directors are an unlikely set of front-line workers in community building, but that's where you'll find the most progressive and imaginative of them these days.