

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN MUSEUMS

Sharing Vision, Creation and Development

David B. Allison



Engaging Communities in Museums

Engaging Communities in Museums is designed for museum professionals who are hungry for information about how to design experiences in partnership with their communities. Providing an overview of the many ways that museums around the world have begun to listen more attentively to their audience, the book highlights the importance of listening to community and discusses the idea of relationship-building as an entry point to relevancy.

Drawing on interviews and discussions with museum professionals around the world, as well as tangible, real-world examples, Allison showcases the many ways that museums, both large and small, are actively working with their communities and also provides a roadmap that demonstrates how museum professionals can listen more effectively to their audiences as they craft new experiences. The book also explores the fascinating nexus of community engagement and exhibit and experience development, thus taking museum professionals on a journey of discovery around community responsiveness and attention to audience.

Engaging Communities in Museums provides a thorough comparison of development models from disparate venues, making the book a must-read for museum professionals who are looking for purpose and common-sense techniques that can guide their work with the communities that they serve. Students in museum studies courses will also find the text useful as a primer on community engagement in museums.

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This is written with love to my family and, as always, my wife Molly.

Introduction

Community, museums, and society

It is easy to become troubled and jaded by the emerging signs of societal decay. Worldwide, newly emboldened nationalists promote violence and spew hatred, while inequalities and deeply felt cultural and racial grievances rive us into localized factions. Impending environmental collapse and a growing moral bankruptcy exacerbate our already-fraught politics. Caught in the wake of these movements and pressures, museums can get lost in a morass of competing concerns and demoralized defeatism.

But there is hope. The strength and clarity that emerge from relationships and unity—museums working hand-in-hand with community—places us right where we need to be to positively impact society. The “wicked problems” of today require solutions from everyone, everywhere, working in partnership together. Museums must not exempt themselves from this struggle. Rather, we must redouble our efforts to connect with community and then to use those partnerships to deeply participate in extracting ourselves from the sticky issues that plague our world.

Community engagement is the best way for museums to plunge into the deep ocean of societal distress and to start to make a difference. Co-visioning—finding out what really matters to individuals and community—is the best way to begin relationships of trust between museums and those with whom we wish to partner. Co-creation—working together with individuals and community to design a course of action that springs from a shared vision—is the most effective way for museums to draw from a deep well of creativity and ideas to propel new solutions to effect change. Co-development—the design and implementation of products and

programs that provide pathways to enlightenment, learning, and joy—is the technique that draws together community and museums in the harmonious creation of experiences and in problem-solving. This is the challenge and opportunity of museums today.

Why co-vision, co-create, and co-develop?

On my commute back home from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, there is a sharp, curving on-ramp from Colorado Boulevard onto Interstate 70 westbound. I typically take this route, so I rarely think about what is outside the windows as I sit in backed-up rush hour traffic. My mind wanders as I listen to podcasts or news on the radio. Sometimes I groove to music, bopping in my seat to my preferred styles of old-school soul and funk. The end of a day at work is not my preferred time for reflection—my mind is at its most acute first thing in the morning. But on a recent afternoon I had an epiphany as I eased my car into the familiar arcing curve of this ramp.

For the first time in the five or so years that I’d been taking this route, I spotted a pedestrian cutting through the middle of the grassy circle. It is rare to see anyone walking along this section of road, and this man knew exactly where he was going. Without pause, he bounded down the slope from Colorado Boulevard into the middle of the circle. I noticed a well-worn path neatly bisecting the circle and leading to an office park on the other side of the ramp. The designers and builders of the interstate clearly had not planned on creating a walking path. The danger of stumbling on the steep slope, the even greater danger of crossing a ramp in which cars could careen around the curve at speeds as high as 30 miles per hour, and the desire to keep cars and pedestrians as separate as possible resulted in a design bereft of walking paths.

But people are always going to forge a path where none may have been anticipated, because we find the routes we need and then go in that direction, whether or not anyone planned for it. That path through the circle is how our work with communities

often ends up. Museums have a plan in mind for what our audiences will be interested in that aligns with our collections or a pre-existing story or content point that we want to share. We build our teams and our internal structures so that we can have a clean circle onto the interstate of exhibits, programs, and experiences. Then, when the work is nearly complete or well down the road to coming to life, we share out what we've done with a focus group or a community panel. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our community doesn't want to go to that interstate with us. Instead, they choose to set out across the circle to a different destination entirely.

How can we plan for the path instead of finding ourselves "out of step" with our audience? This book aims to throw a few ideas toward how we can ensure that we don't find ourselves estranged from our community. It's not enough to be responsive—we must be intertwined with and dependent upon the reciprocity and deep participation of everyone with whom we come into contact.

Writing has always been my way to work out cognitive challenges. Fingers to keyboard or pen to paper spools out the daily experiences I have and collates them into stories that make sense. I think about the ink spilled and terabytes of storage and data that have piled up about any topic, and I wonder why anyone would want this addition to the dialogue. But I hold out hope that this will, in fact, hold some use for you. Let's start with the questions you may have.

Why are museums around the world suddenly so interested in connecting with community? Muddled messages from board rooms and the stress of trying to be all things to all people has created a crisis of identity for museums. What role do we play and how do we adapt to a rapidly changing world? A short list of museum "reasons for being" illustrates the quandary that we face.

- Museums are trusted educational resources.
- Museums are bastions of cultural hegemony and patriotism.
- Museums are wonderlands of entertainment and joy.
- Museums are repositories of knowledge and the collected "stuff" of the past.
- Museums are community hubs and gathering places.
- Museums are change agents for building a better society.

How might we wade into this quagmire and emerge on the other side with a purpose? For most museums, we can claim a least a couple of the purposes above. If we're lucky, we have honed in on the ones that best resonate with our audience and have been able to use these purposes to carve out a niche for ourselves in our community.

However, it is clear that large swaths of the 55,000 museums worldwide (31,500 in the United States alone)—have not adequately stated (or even thought through) why they exist.¹ Even today, many museums have mission statements that can be filled in quite easily MAD Lib-style. Invariably, these museums say that they are all about “collecting and preserving _____ to educate the citizens of _____ about _____.” If you can complete this fun MAD Lib with your museum's mission, perhaps it is time to reconsider why you do what you do.²

In addition, museums have a long legacy to overcome as we seek to connect with underserved and diverse populations. Jason Farago wrote on July 11, 2018, in the *New York Times*,

A 21st-century universal museum has to unsettle the very labels that the age of imperialism bequeathed to us: nations and races, East and West, art and craft. It's not enough just to call for “decolonization,” . . . the whole fiction of cultural purity has to go, too. Any serious museum can only be a museum of our entangled past and present. The game is to not to tear down the walls, but to narrate those entanglements so that a new, global audience recognizes itself within them.³

Shucking aside these legacies and crafting new narratives is hard and important work. Moreover, society seems to be spiraling dangerously around us, as newly emboldened nationalists trumpet hate and as increasingly balkanized politics threaten to sever the last remaining strands of cultural civility. But how will another book about museums and community make this any better? What more can be said about a topic that has become wearily repetitive to countless museum professionals? The inertia of long days spent in conversations with the people we hope to get ideas from or to court to come to our museums pulls us

into quagmires of ennui and empty fields of quasi-philosophical blather about the importance of listening and engagement and relevance. The buzzwords pile up until the cacophony of trite phrases echoes in our ears.

Despite these objections to the topic of community and museums, it is clear that the topic isn't going away in conference sessions, articles and blog posts any time soon. At its core, the desire to engage with "community" revolves around a desire to connect. Sometimes talking about community veers into an othering of groups of people who are not like the traditional white, privileged members of the board and leadership of our organization. Community becomes code for black and brown people or for the elusive millennials who eschew our museums for trendier diversions. We must not let this "othering" become how we think about community. I propose a fuller definition.

When we seek so desperately for universality, we can miss out on the beauty of the quirky stories and culturally relevant experiences that specificity afford. David W. McMillan and David W. Chavis write, "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."⁴

Clearly, a plurality of Davids are behind this notion of a sense of community. (Does three make a plurality?) For McMillan and Chavis, sense of community is distinguished from the nebulous concept of "community" by feelings. The internal-facing work of building a sense of community cannot be processed and legislated into being. Rather, it must be the hard work of listening and of feeling—being ready to have your heart broken and to break someone's heart. This is the work of the soul rather than of the mind. It also involves action. Note that the "faith that members' needs will be met" can only be nurtured and grow when there are strong relationships of trust that is bound together by a "commitment to be together." Committing to be together even in difficult situations distinguishes a sense of community from work relationships that may grow into community through canny team-building but that start from a transactional, economic, and "professional" place.

What communities do we value most highly? A community is only as valued as the value that it creates. Communities can consist of people who are self-serving. I get together with a group of guys every few months to play euchre and watch movies. We could be labeled a community, but we are certainly not providing value beyond some fun diversion and conversations for the men who gather. Communities elevate and become truly useful when they strengthen and enable those around them and move beyond self-service and into true service and sacrifice.

Humans have always banded together. With the exception of lonely monks cloistered far from civilization and the intentional hermits of far-flung islands, humans prefer to be in the company of other humans. We rely on each other for the smarts and skills we ourselves don't possess. And it's not merely because it is evolutionarily convenient to do so. Rather, it is because we find joy and meaning when we make connections to other people. We get energy and ideas from those who have had different experiences, and we are challenged and pushed to try new things when we are with other people.

The vagaries of the human spirit and psychology mean that within communities, individual members can shape and morph the group to their own perspectives. As we—in our own idiosyncratic way—intersect our lives with someone else, we bring our experiences and skills to the interaction and in the exchange, we both leave richer for having crossed paths.

I am privileged, cisgender, white, and male. Due to structural racism, a long history of chauvinism and the grinding force of generational poverty, I have had opportunities that others have not. Although I am well-intentioned, I can't escape the layers of societal injustices that create the culture and political structure within which I function. And my identities invariably influence how I am perceived by others. I can strive to seem innocuous, non-racist, and as an ally to individuals who are different from me, but I can never fully know what it is like to walk in their shoes or to see with their eyes.

Therefore, I have a responsibility and obligation to empathetically listen. I must subsume myself in their stories and fears. Humility and a recognition that I will always have more to learn

and that all people have realms of experience and expertise that I don't have and will never have help me to shrink the footprint I have in this world. More practically, I can also hire and promote people who are different from me so that they can bring nuance and alternative ideas to the table.

I realize at this point that a fuller explanation of both why I am interested in the intersection of community and museums as well as how I have been influenced by projects I have been involved with through my employer, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS) will be useful. Throughout this book you will bump up against examples from this museum, so a bit of background context will likely be beneficial for you.

The Denver Museum of Nature & Science's advent in 1900 was as a natural history museum featuring taxidermy specimens staged into dioramas. Expanding over the years to include space science content, prehistoric collections and exhibits, and human health content, and hosting numerous world-class temporary exhibits spanning a range of topics and experiential approaches, DMNS is one of the top museums in the United States.⁵ In 2016, the Museum started a new initiative focused on getting people connected to the natural world. As part of the project team, I was excited to really engage with the important work of developing a new experience that would show people why they needed to be in closer communion with nature. Over the course of a year or so of discussions, our team ended up intractably stuck. We thought that we knew what our community needed, but our solutions and ideas were not received with the kind of welcome and enthusiasm that we had anticipated. Instead, after numerous intensive community sessions and after listening intently to our audience, we found that people already felt connected to nature, and so by trying to come up with ways to connect people, we had badly missed the mark. Instead of preordaining what our community needed and then supplying them with it—whether they wanted it or not—we began to ask how we could help our community deepen their connections with nature as a bridge to science concepts and scientific thinking.

DMNS's changed approach to working with our community—based in an acknowledgment that our job was to listen first and then respond—transformed my own perspective on my role as a

museum professional. Instead of supplying answers, I needed to ask questions. Instead of creating experiences, I needed to co-create. Instead of developing programs, I needed to develop relationships. Understanding our community's values and motivations became central to our organization's success as well as to my own. This book emerged from my reflections on the trajectory of museums vis-à-vis community and my own experience with the power of true partnership grounded in authentic relationships.

Museums and community in context

When I was a newly minted homeowner,⁶ I attempted to eradicate a mold problem in our tiled shower. I attacked the offending tiles with a rabid alacrity. Swinging my pry-bar like a medieval mace, I crushed and pulled tiles until they mounded around my feet in large, dusty piles. Satisfied that the mold was conquered, I jauntily told my wife that I had fixed the problem and that I'd have the shower back to hosting our dirty bodies in no time.

I quickly discovered that my profound ignorance of even the most basic of home repair techniques rendered my initial bravura into a melancholy realization that I had neither the right tools nor the right expertise to complete the task. My decided lack of handy skills and paucity of the proper tools for tiling meant that the shower stayed unusable until we could hire someone to fix it for us. The shower languished in partially destroyed uselessness as we decamped from our master bathroom to the guest bathroom for our daily ablutions. I learned that if I were to attempt a job of this magnitude in the future, I should be sure that I had the proper equipment and skills to carry it through to the end. The joy of quickly dispatching moldy tiles gave way to the reality of the long, difficult—and pricey—process ahead.

This story allegorically illustrates some of the challenges that come with making connections in the community. It is easier to tear down and destroy than to build and repair. Without the proper tools and expertise for the job, the process can curdle quickly and become untenable. Quick solutions that have not been properly thought through are liable to derail when met with obstacles.

Similarly, working with community to attempt to heal and reconcile with the past is rarely simple. Feeble, half-baked solutions do

not result in sustained success. Effective community work requires the right tools deployed at the right time to get the job done. As community leaders and museum workers, our voices matter and can engage with the discourse of our times.⁷ Here we will explore not only *why* we must prepare ourselves to engage with our community, but also will explore *how* we might start to do this work.

Community engagement as an imperative for museums

Understanding museum origins and how museums initially framed themselves in relation to the public is helpful for us as we seek to discover the role of community in museums today. Early European museums were guardians of “Western” culture and as temples to Enlightenment knowledge. With this heritage, many museums still maintain a high culture-low culture dichotomy. In addition, wealthy collectors gathered their artifacts in exclusive galleries meant exclusively for the eyes of other rich people.

Collections set aside for the privileged morphed into what we call museums. These museums became fixtures in European cultural centers and presented a sanitized vision of an orderly world. Eighteenth-century scientists were obsessed with organizing and categorizing the human, plant, and animal inhabitants of the globe and sought to reinforce their belief in the perfectibility of a humanity that could remake the natural world in their image.⁸ Natural history museums became the most trademarked reflection of this perspective, as they built large cases and “curated” objects by size, importance, or taxonomic grouping.

Another strand of museum origins traces back to Cabinets of Curiosity and zoos, which initially sought merely to entertain and titillate—a thin vein of specious science and dubious historical artifacts provided a cover for a greedy money-grab. The distance between lowbrow entertainment—circus menageries and hucksters—and highbrow cultural transmission and guardianship—the cavernous, marbled halls of the Louvre—seems wide.⁹ However, a closer examination shows that both strands of museums had the same view of their patrons. The people who come to these museums were to be spectators and consumers, not active participants. The public needed to be educated and entertained and



Figure 0.1 Fourth-grade children view a native behind glass at a museum. This sort of “othering” of native peoples was characteristic of most natural history museums around the turn of the 20th century.

Source: Johnston, F. B., photographer. *At the Museum—Fourth Grade*, 1900. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2010646536/. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

were to be totally beholden to the experts who curated exhibits—or promoted spectacle—for their benefit.

The heritage of these dual strands of museology continues to shape the perception of museums today. Researchers from IMPACTS (Intelligent Models to Predict Actionable Solutions) recently concluded that,

People don’t necessarily feel welcome or that they “fit in” at cultural organizations . . . data shows that, on average, approximately 4 out of 10 people in the US don’t feel comfortable at an art, science, or history museum—including science museums and historic sites.¹⁰

Museums continue to be alienating for much of the public, despite their attempts to break down barriers for their audience.

Significant barriers to museum participation were well entrenched and pervasive until a widespread democratization of museums in the 1970s and 1980s. Learning theory and an increased focus on evaluation showed that participatory education and shared authority were more effective ways to engage the public than didactic, static exhibits and presentations. In addition, museums increasingly sought to understand their role in communities. History museums founded as hagiographic paeans to the “great men” of the past began to tell alternative narratives from the perspectives of the people who worked for the wealthy elites. Natural history museums turned away from trumpeting the ascendancy of white civilization in favor of championing an environmental ethos of shared responsibility for the earth. Art museums sought to showcase lesser-known and minority artists to bring new stories to light.

Since the 1990s, many museums have worked to become integral parts of the day-to-day life of specific localities. These museums are storytellers that connect people to their past, rather than bastions for wealthy collectors to display the trappings of power and prestige. Robert Archibald shares this perspective: “This is not the ‘master narrative of old’ that defined insiders and outsiders, but instead a process of story-making that creates room for the diverse and multiple perspectives that exist in consequence of our individuality.”¹¹

Museums are uniquely positioned to open dialogue in their communities. Museums are trusted.¹² Numerous studies have shown that museums are viewed by the public as attractive leisure-time destinations that provide both education and entertainment.¹³ Museums are also viewed as mostly impartial and as trustworthy sources of information.¹⁴ These advantages give museums a unique and potentially influential place in society. With this influence, museums can take up the mantle as a trusted convener and as arbiter of difficult issues within a community.

In short, museums must listen to community. Museums that withdraw from the important dialogue of our times risk the slow death of irrelevance. Moreover, community is the barometer against which we can determine our value to the people who keep the doors open through their continued patronage. But how do we

know when we are successful in meeting our community where they are and providing for their needs? What are the strategies that propel us toward becoming trusted partners and reliable forums for open dialogue?

Strategies for working with community

Community is a term that can be so vague as to lose all meaning. It is laden with multifarious definitions, tends to be overused, and is rarely applied consistently. Sheila Watson in *Museums and Their Communities* (2007) attempts to fashion some solid toeholds for the term: “The essential defining factor of a community is the sense of belonging that comes to those who are part of it and that, through association with communities, individuals conceptualize identity.”¹⁵ In most contexts, this definition suffices. However, the word “community” can sometimes be used pejoratively, as one group of people define themselves in opposition to another group of people. Also, when museum professionals refer to community, a cynical view would say that they are instantaneously “othering” whomever they are talking about—these are people not like themselves who need to be reached in order to increase attendance, to drum up financial support, or to cultivate as a focus group for new initiatives.

This transactional view results in broken trust and a patronizing sensibility that reasserts the museum’s power to exert control over narratives. Rather than cultivating community as “this for that,” it must be approached from a place of humility and grace. Indeed, in the words of author Elizabeth Crooke, “Community is both a process and a product.”¹⁶ The process—how we approach relationships and build trust—is key to effecting change.

Successful museums will also take on interesting partnerships in order to advance their mission and to build their cache in the community. Relationships built on a shared language of trust and respect can yield important insights as museums seek to design and develop new experiences and programs. An empathetic, conversational approach to sharing authority with our audience is the best starting place.¹⁷

A number of my colleagues and I at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science were recently prototyping some new offsite programs at Swansea Elementary School in Denver in a fifth-grade

classroom. I happened to notice a couple of hand-written signs on the wall of the classroom that speaks to the importance of persistence in relationships. One sign read, “All relationships have bad days. . . . We might not be able to undo the harm that’s done.” The other sign finished the thought, “but together, we can problem solve and create something stronger and more beautiful.”

Developing relationships is difficult. Even the simple act of reaching out to non-traditional museum-goers can be fraught. Diversity can be described as giving someone an invitation to the party. Inclusivity means that once they are at the party, you actually ask them to dance.¹⁸ Efforts to include new voices in museums can be taken as tokenism or as insincere if we do not listen carefully and take proactive action in response to what we hear.

When it is done well, the insights we gain from deep listening can be intensely humbling as we end up in new and uncomfortable places. Must we always preserve our “authority” as experts? What do we uniquely bring to the table when we meet on equal terms with community? Addressing these questions *before* we set out on the difficult journey of relationship-building will set us up for success long into the future.

From Appreciative Inquiry to Stanford design thinking and other for-profit project management models, museums have a range of techniques from which to draw.¹⁹ Which is right for you? The community in which you find yourself should determine what tools to use and how to blend techniques for maximal impact. As has been explained, for most museums, there will not be a single silver bullet that leads to success. Rather, a combination of approaches will yield results. Once a foundation of audience responsiveness and partnership has been built, community work can proceed in a number of intriguing directions.

Working hand-in-hand with community is even more important when addressing seemingly intractable historical situations. Mistrust spawned by years of racism, systemic poverty and neighborhood neglect create adversarial relationships between government officials and citizens. Seismically divergent ways of perceiving the world places wedges between citizens, and bureaucratic gridlock grinds change initiatives into useless dust. When difficulties creep in, how can museums and leaders within communities rise above the fray?

Museum's role as leisure-time options has sometimes resulted in a milquetoast retreat from difficult topics. Thinkwell's 2017 Trend Report included a telling statement that is worth quoting in full:

[Researchers] heard from patrons that they were coming to museums as a pleasurable escape and were put off by exhibits on challenging, topical content, such as global climate change or controversial historical periods. On the other, they also heard from patrons demanding just that type of content, feeling it's the role of a museum to tackle the "tough topics" like global warming or racism. Museums voiced that they felt stuck, and were unsure if it was a case of "a few loud voices" or if, really, the chasm was widening. The data informed Thinkwell's Trend Report that overall, people are going to these places for fun, entertainment, and to engage together as a family. "Escape" also ranked high. This doesn't mean people don't *also* want a deep and resonant experience, but it does mean that it isn't as strong a driver. Museums shouldn't shy away from tackling the hard stories, but they should keep in mind that visitors are still looking for a pleasurable time.²⁰

Museums have the obligation to provide fun, entertaining diversions for the pleasure-seeking public, whilst also opening crucial conversations about the controversial topics of our day. The nuance required to maintain this sort of balance as civic passions are enflamed is substantial.

When tempers flare and passions rise, how do we mediate effectively?

Some months ago, I found myself at a town hall-style forum about a new development project in Denver. Explosive growth in metro Denver recently has meant that longtime residents—often Latino and low-income—have been marginalized and priced out of their neighborhoods by gentrification. As community members, representatives from city government, and elected officials gathered, the tension and angst became palpable, and it seemed likely that we were in for a long night of vigorous debate.

After a string of polished presentations from city officials, community members began to share their opinions. Ranging from well-reasoned and brief to rambling and interminable, participants' thin strands of patience began to fray as similar-sounding arguments and entrenched perspectives were repeated by person after person. Becoming increasingly churlish, the meeting organizers began to withdraw from the dialogue. This seeming retreat from engagement only served to raise community members' ire and to increase the surly atmosphere in the room.

The gray clouds continued to choke the proceedings, until one city councilperson thanked the community members for being at the meeting and then shared their personal connection to the neighborhood and why they were excited about the project. The icy ill will that had built over the previous hours began to melt away as that individual's positivity shone through. Other community participants who had been silent were freshly emboldened to share their enthusiasm. Both city representatives and community members felt comfortable and ready to share their ideas and concerns from a place of respect. The meeting went from the clogged arteries of rancorous discord to the free-spirited gusto of true dialogue.

Crucial to this flipped situation was the bravery of one individual.²¹ In this case, this person was able to make the proceedings less about the problems in the community and more about shared goals and common purpose. Their personal story and good humor elevated everyone and gave new life to the discussion. They found common ground and showed empathy toward community members.

Museum professionals and community leaders must rely on empathy as a tool toward creating a shared understanding of how our communities might embark upon collective engagement with the past. When we perceive and share in the experiences of other people through genuinely seeking to listen to their ideas, needs, and values, we enhance our connectedness to each other.²² This connectedness, in turn, enables us to see outside of ourselves and to envision a better future.

Ultimately, empathy, compassion, and deep listening are the tools that will allow us to value restorative justice and our shared humanity over narrowly defined self-interests and blindly

followed personal peccadilloes.²³ When ignorance of history, reliance on tradition, and power politics intrude upon community engagement, museum professionals and community leaders must band together as trusted conveners to initiate respectful, open dialogue. Finding our shared humanity and common purposes will enable us to be ready not only to address the difficult issues in our community, but to do so with a grace and a willingness to change ourselves as we learn and grow with others.

How to read this book

Engaging Communities in Museums is intended to be a book that you can “drop in on” like you do with a friendly neighbor when you need some advice or need to borrow a tool to finish some yardwork. Rather than reading this straight through from this word to the final period, please find the pieces that you need and leave behind the rest. This book is structured to provide both theoretical as well as practical advice around working with community. Chapter 1, “Community Responsiveness and Understanding Audience,” provides a foundation for why partnership and work with community is valuable and necessary. Chapter 2, “Relationship-Building and Partnerships in Museums,” shows how museum professionals can start the process of getting to know the people they want to serve through the difficult, yet rewarding, process of forming relationships. Chapter 3, “Case Studies in Co-Creation,” shares the stories of museums large, small, and mid-sized, through interviews with individuals who have been intimately involved in community work. From Canada to Belgium and the United States and Australia, examples of effective community partnership can be found throughout the world. These case studies provide a small glimpse into the hugely varied ways that museums have made strides toward true engagement with community. Chapter 4, “Comparing Models of Development,” delves into the methods and techniques that museums and businesses have used to create and develop programs and to build their teams for sustained relevance and utility for their audiences. Chapter 5, “Staying Connected with Community,” shares some tangible ways that museums can maintain relationships and continue dialogue beyond the immediacy of a one-off project or program.

Transforming our practice so that we engage in long-range, strategic thinking that gathers all of our resources and relationships to the table will be essential for museums as we seek to expand our reach and influence.

The concept of risk-taking has gained prominence in museum circles recently. Catching on belatedly to trends in the business world, museums are often backwards-looking and laggards when it comes to taking on new ways of doing things. When we talk about risk, we're typically not speaking from the perspective of legal risk—although this is certainly a topic worth exploring—but rather the idea of taking risks that might jeopardize our standing in the community or might end up in a “failed” project that doesn't draw the numbers we anticipated or hew to the high standards or fidelity we desire. We sometimes try to moderate the risk-taking impulse by claiming that we are taking a calculated risk. This modifier gives us peace of mind by implying that we have some metrics or research that back up our risky move. However, the very definition of risk means that when it is done best, we look at the data and past experience and thumb our nose at it as we dive headlong into new ways of viewing the world. How might you begin to view the world differently as you connect with those around you? This is where work with community must start.