Community Collaboration: A New Conversation

Can Museums Build Our Communities?

Paul Born

Abstract: Community organizations are changing. Increasingly, they are looking to work more comprehensively on community and city issues. Museums, as keepers of community history, values, innovation, and provocative ideas are extremely important institutions in many cities.

Often overlooked by community groups as dusty, unapproachable tourist destinations, museums can become important partners in social change campaigns. They can bring important ideas, assets, and resources to the table and can act as catalysts for community conversation.

When a museum accepts an offer of partnership or reaches out to their community to develop a relationship, it does so to achieve mutually beneficial goals. While the issues that prompt these new relationships to evolve can vary, the results do not. They help to form a better community, create more social capital, and more effective and sustainable solutions to community problems.

Can museums build our communities?

I was surprised to get a call from the Ontario Museum Association asking me to present a workshop on community building and engagement at their upcoming conference.

Though the Tamarack Institute has been asked by organizations from across Canada and the U.S., and countries as far flung as New Zealand, Brazil, and the United Kingdom working on crime prevention, poverty reduction, environmental restoration, community education, place-based philanthropy, and the like to help them with community engagement issues we had never received a call from a museum.

My surprise also came from the fact that in twenty-five years working as a community builder I have never partnered, or even thought of partnering, with a museum, art gallery, or zoo. How could I say yes to this request? I would have nothing to say!

My personal experience in a museum is most often associated with travel. As a tourist I love visiting museums, art galleries, and zoos and would venture to say that I have never been on a vacation without stopping into one in every city or town I have visited. (My wife is a social historian and so my kids and I have been immersed in learning about place, history, and culture. Museums are a large part of our lives. We simply love them and would never consider going on a vacation without going to one.)

And so, with a very surprising, almost jarring phone call, my journey to understand the possibility museums can play in building community began.

I spent a dozen years building an organization called the Community Opportunities Development Association (CODA), which, during my tenure, helped more than 5,500 people get back to work and nearly 1,200 unemployed people to start small businesses. I would often make community presentations with the city's business commissioner. He would start

his presentation throwing golf balls into the audience and say his job was to sell municipal land to attract new business into the area. He would then introduce me, saying, "This is Cambridge's other economic development department." He would explain that CODA existed to help the twenty percent of our community's residents who had the lowest income. I always thought this was a good way to describe what we did.

CODA became one of Canada's largest and most successful community economic development organizations with a staff of 80 people and massive community support in a vibrant progressive city. Yet, as good as we were, we could not make a dent on poverty. As in most jurisdictions across North America, poverty in our community was on the rise.

In response to this growing poverty CODA started several new community building programs. In one of these, Opportunities Planning, we hired residents living in our nineteen low-income neighborhoods and trained them to help their neighbors to find jobs. This work grew into a millennium campaign that rallied our community toward a formidable goal of reducing poverty in our region to the lowest in Canada. Two years later the United Nations as well as other provincial and national awards recognized these programs with several awards.

Despite the recognition, and the relative success of the programs, I remained perplexed by the poverty situation in our community. No matter how many people we helped, or how good we got at helping them, the statistics never seemed to change – poverty was still an issue in our community. What if we worked in a different way? We began to talk about community building rather than helping the unemployed. We worked to build our community rather than to find jobs for those who needed them. That was when we began to make the kind of difference for which we had long hoped.

Today, our city, and indeed the entire region, is a vibrant community that enjoys one of the lowest, if not the lowest, poverty rate in the country and has eliminated concentrated or neighborhood based poverty. Our organization did not take credit for this remarkable achievement. We reached this milestone as a community, by working together and by thinking differently about how we help those in need.

What is community building?

Community building is entering a new era. It is widely recognized that the system to address social issues such as homelessness, immigrant settlement, youth pregnancy, illiteracy, and unemployment is fractured. Individuals who suddenly find themselves without a job face a difficult maze of services to navigate. One organization provides job search counseling, another job training, while income support is at an agency across town and the social security office is at the other end of town. Food and clothing are often provided by separate agencies. The system of support for vulnerable people has become specialized, and, as a result, has created fractured solutions. The system has focused on the symptom (e.g. issuing food vouchers) and seldom addresses the root cause (e.g. sustainable employment).

Issues facing communities and those who are at risk (e.g. the unemployed, disabled, single parents and seniors) are complex. Yet the system that serves those in need was set up to deliver simple single-issue solutions (e.g. counseling, income support, housing, etc.).

Community groups are looking for a better way. Funding cuts or changing government priorities have often driven the search, but it has also been spurred by community leaders who seek better, more effective solutions. Community leaders are increasingly recognizing

that transactional services, while important, cannot solve the complex problems facing our communities and their most vulnerable residents. People at risk often face a multitude of issues, some of them are personal while others, such as the quality of their neighborhood, the economic situation in the community, and community attitudes such as racism or indifference, are situational.

The drive towards better, more comprehensive solutions to a community's complex issues is epitomized in Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs). CCIs work across sectoral boundaries because they recognize that complex issues such as racism and poverty can only be addressed if problems and solutions are aligned. CCIs "seek improved outcomes for individuals and families as well as improvements in community conditions by working comprehensively across social, economic, and physical sectors. CCIs operate on the principle that community building — that is strengthening institutional capacity at the community level, enhancing social capital and personal networks, and developing leadership—is a necessary aspect of the process of transforming" issues facing a community.[1]

When a community begins to work comprehensively it naturally attempts to harness all of its assets. Assets take different forms and can come from surprising places. Schools, museums, community centers, parks, and other public spaces can provide resources, ideas, and support. The business community can bring new ideas, talents, and financial resources to the issue and different levels of government can be encouraged to work together in new ways.

Museums and Community Building

Community organizations are changing and many are looking to work more comprehensively on community and city issues. Museums, as keepers of community history, values, innovation, and provocative ideas are extremely important institutions in many cities.

Often overlooked by community groups as dusty, unapproachable tourist destinations, museums can become important partners in social change campaigns. They can bring important ideas, assets, and resources to the table and can act as catalysts for community conversation.

A museum is an important community asset. Museums animate community values and memory and are important public spaces. Schools and educational institutes would be the first to agree that museums are extremely important places of learning.

When a museum accepts an offer of partnership or reaches out to their community to develop a relationship, it does so to achieve common goals that are mutually beneficial. While the issues that prompt this relationship to evolve can vary, the results do not. These new relationships help to form a better community, more social capital, and more effective and sustainable solutions to community problems.

The basic benefit to a new focus on community is obvious: a better community provides a better place to do business. A safer neighborhood ensures visitors will attend an evening function, wealthier communities will provide larger donations, and a better-informed community will provide greater opportunity to develop larger and more provocative exhibits.

Aside from a strengthened community, there are additional benefits to community building for a museum. The first is tapping into a greater diversity of skills, knowledge, and

resources. By reaching out, especially to an organized collaborative, a museum taps into a rich bank of ideas, talent, and money resulting in expanded networks. Plugging into community wisdom can help ensure that exhibits are consistently relevant.

Developing stronger relationships within the community also increases support for an institution — a critical variable when considering financial and political sustainability. Many museums receive significant local, state, and federal funding. Today's museums also face increasing competition for government funds. Community involvement can build greater public credit and profile in the eyes of politicians and citizens. This public credit is critical as institutions are increasingly asked to justify their existence, to answer not only if things are being done right, but if the right things are being done. This is not a statement on creative license and independence but rather a statement of relevance — with so much "good" going on in a community, the perception of an institution's community value becomes critically important.

Becoming involved in ideas and causes not traditionally supported by the museum, opens the institution up to new and more diverse participants and supporters. An exhibit that explores immigrant settlement issues, for example, could encourage newcomers to visit the museum for the first time.

For me though, the most compelling benefits that come from increased community involvement include the opportunity to carry out extremely creative and meaningful work, to reenergize staff, to work with the community rather than for them, to include the "unusual suspects" in animating the issues facing a community, to bring artists, curators, archivists and everyday citizens into a creative space and create something that will shape the future of the community.

Imagine…

A mentor once inspired me with the oft-used quote, "if you can imagine it you can do it." After hanging up the phone with the representative from the Ontario Museum Association I asked myself, "What would a museum or art gallery engaged in community building look like?"

Scenario One:
A community forms a collaboration to tackle regional poverty. The city, non-profit organizations, business, the media, and many associated groups have joined together to focus on the reduction, rather than simply the alleviation, of poverty. The collaborative works across sectors, identifying key strategies to create better jobs, better income supports, and increase awareness of the need. They approach a local art gallery to host an exhibit called *The Starving Artists* featuring art by poor and homeless individuals. The gallery hosts the exhibit that traces the roots of poverty and its history in the community and displays the work of talented but impoverished people. The process of organizing the exhibit brings community groups and low-income artists together to workshop ideas for original pieces. Thousands of citizens come to see the exhibit, the media promote it, and the mayor speaks at a launch. The gallery reserves space for all visitors to reflect on potential solutions.

Scenario Two:
A series of gang shootings in the downtown core throws a community into fear. Citizens and community groups form a collaboration to address violence. The local museum considers how it might become involved and agrees to create an exhibit on guns and violence to foster a conversation that might lead to a policy shift on the use of handguns. They provide

a room for community conversations that quickly becomes the central focus point for meetings, seminars, and community conversations about violence in the community.

Scenario Three:
A group of Aboriginal leaders work together to address urban Aboriginal issues. A downtown zoo is located where many Aboriginal people live and asks how it might heighten awareness. Aboriginal leaders and zoo representatives recognize that many animals in the zoo have Aboriginal stories associated with them that teach traditional values. The zoo works with the community leaders to establish an Aboriginal exhibit and invites schools and local residents to come and learn about the history and values of their neighbors. Displays, seminars, and cultural events are held at the zoo and the gift shop sells Aboriginal crafts and art. Thousands of people are thus encouraged to explore Aboriginal culture and consider the issues urban Aboriginals face.

I realized that I had seen exhibits like the ones I envisioned: an art gallery featuring massive change seminars and art work, a museum tackling the issue of racism, and the zoo consider the impact of environmental change. As can often occur when one begins to imagine, I realized that the work I hope for is already happening.

Let's start talking!

I opened this article with the confession that I have never partnered with a museum, art gallery, or zoo in a community building partnership. And while I know that such partnerships do exist, I also know that to strengthen the relationship and to work toward a mutual benefit requires a new conversation to build awareness and to seek common ground.

From my perspective, museums, like social agencies and business, work to enhance citizen understanding and quality of life. The fundamental value that unifies each of us is to create a place in which we can live fulfilling and productive lives, a safe place of belonging, a creative place that raises our hopes and passion.

But when we work in organizations we often forget that we are working towards the same purpose as others. We create boundaries and divisions by focusing on our own particular piece of work, rather than looking at the bigger picture. The only way to break down those boundaries is through conversation — a conversation that begins with a desire to understand each other, a conversation that is fuelled by a commitment to create a better community and a better world.

Shortly after leading the workshop at the Museum Association conference, I received a request from an art gallery to help them develop a more intentional response to the issue of poverty.

The conversation begins.

Notes

[1] The Aspen Institute, "Roundtable on Community Change," www.aspeninstitute.org/site/c.huLWJeMRKpH/b.612045/k.4BA8/Roundtable_on_Community_Change.htm.

About the Author

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Paul Born is the President of Tamarack and has over twenty years of experience and training in community building. This includes twelve years as executive director of the Communities Opportunities Development Association (now Lutherwood), one of Canada's most successful community economic development organizations.

Paul has founded and led innovative local and national organizations that have been recognized with national (Imagine) and international awards (United Nations top 40) in community development, including Vibrant Communities, Opportunities 2000, the Foundation for Rural Living, and the Canadian Community Economic Development Network. Paul has a Masters degree in leadership from Royal Roads University in British Columbia.

Paul is well known for the many entertaining and inspirational talks and seminars he provides to groups throughout Canada. He can be reached at Tamarack at paul@tamarackcommunity. Visit the Tamarack website at www.tamarackcommunity.ca for more resources and stories of community building and community engagement.

Additional References for Resource Section of JME

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