

NMAI EDITIONS



LIVING HOMES
FOR CULTURAL EXPRESSION

North American Native Perspectives on Creating Community Museums

NATIONAL
MUSEUM
OF THE
AMERICAN
INDIAN

National Museum of the American Indian
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C., and New York



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KAREN COODY COOPER & NICOLASA I. SANDOVAL

Editors

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The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian works in collaboration with the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere and Hawai'i to protect and foster indigenous cultures, reaffirm traditions and beliefs, encourage contemporary artistic expression, and provide a forum for Native voices. Through its publishing program, NMAI's Publications Office seeks to augment awareness of Native American beliefs and lifeways and to educate the public about the history and significance of Native cultures. NMAI's Community Services Department is a cornerstone of the museum's commitment to outreach, providing a vital link between our staff and collections and Native communities.

For information about the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, visit the NMAI website at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu. To support the museum by becoming a member, call 1-800-242-NMAI (6624) or click on "Support" on our website.

Title Page: Roberta Kirk (Warm Springs) and Irvine Scalplock (Siksika Nation) examine a basket during a 1996 training workshop at the Museum at Warm Springs, Oregon. Photograph by Karen Coody Cooper.

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NICOLASA I. SANDOVAL

FOREWORD



THIS ASSEMBLY OF STORIES—from an Alutiiq community on Alaska’s Kodiak Island to Hopi people in Arizona—speaks to the concerns and aspirations that unite indigenous peoples in the lands known now as the Americas. The wealth of knowledge brimming from these accounts informs and inspires those who have chosen a journey of great challenges and greater rewards—that of creating a tribal museum. The path of life knows

no finite borders or clear maps. There are only moments in time throughout the journey where we find safe places to be who we are and to define ourselves in our own terms. The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) continues to play a vital role as both a haven and hub for many beautifully radiant forms of expression. The hemispheric scope of perspectives presented at the NMAI affirms its commitment to education and public service, which transcends boundaries and narrows distances between people.

Community-based museums and cultural centers strengthen the bonds that connect generations. We remember ourselves in these places and dream about who we want to be. At their best, these places are homes for cultural expression, dialogue, learning, and understanding. They serve the communities and people who initiated them, as well as wider audiences, by stimulating cultural activism and continuity that endures for the sake of all our children. While listening to stories of individuals who have assumed significant roles in the development of a museum or cultural center, we may recognize the familiar. In her piece on volunteerism and its role in maintaining museums, Marilyn C. Hudson recalls the generosity of Helen Gough, an Arikara member of the Three Affiliated Tribes, whose bequest initiated a heritage center for the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people more than forty years ago. As in many other communities, the essence of giving and commitment to subsequent generations continues to light our path.

The voices in this compendium speak of the celebration and struggle that emerge from sustaining and expanding community-based museums and cultural centers. In her description of public programs development at the Alutiiq Museum, Amy F. Steffian recounts the deliberate, but difficult, choice to invite external partnership. Given the systemic wresting of cultures, languages, and lives from Native peoples that followed for centuries after Contact, it is understood that, for indigenous people, decisions to include agencies and institutions as collaborators do not come without careful consideration and willingness to believe that a new history may begin to unfold. Community-based museums and cultural centers are places where we may bear witness to this transformation.

The spirit of generosity unfolds in these pages. Each of the writers freely shares the wealth of his or her unique experiences. They are the mothers and fathers who have borne and nurtured these places known as tribal museums, raising them for the benefit of their respective communities and for all of us who are invited to learn the wisdom imbued in their stories.

KAREN COODY COOPER

PREFACE

IF TWO WORDS WERE TO DESCRIBE THE MISSION of the National Museum of the American Indian, they would be “cultural continuance.” What makes our efforts unique throughout mainstream museum work is that our exhibitions and programs are grounded in the authority of the Native perspective. Part of our ongoing outreach efforts—and the one that we hope this book will address—is assisting Native communities as they interpret, collect, and care for their own collections, thereby making Native voices heard by the museum community at large.

There are about 200 Native community museums in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. It is important to note that the terms “Native community museum” or “tribal museum” used in this book do not simply refer to museums with a collection of Native American materials. We have looked, rather, to the type of authority that governs these museums as a way to more accurately define them. Museums that retain Native authority through direct tribal ownership or majority presence, or that are located on tribally controlled lands, or that have a Native director or board members are the institutions that meet our criteria.

Tribal museums are a relatively new museum category. Three tribal museums were founded before 1940, and two more opened in the decade that followed. In the 1950s, six opened; in the 1960s, fifteen; and in the 1970s, the forty-five that opened more than doubled the total number of Native-managed museums in the Western Hemisphere. In the 1980s, another thirty-



Karen Coody Cooper (front row, second from right) and NMAI curator Emil Her Many Horses (far left) with Sicangu Heritage Center staff on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in Mission, South Dakota. Photograph by Jill Norwood.

five museums opened, and the 1990s saw at least forty more. In the coming years, hundreds of new community-based museums could potentially open their doors.

Eager to tell their stories, Native communities are no longer entrusting non-Native institutions to define who they are. As a result, Native community museums have encouraged self-awareness within the larger museum field—evaluating relations with their respective audiences as well as reconsidering their conditioned approach to handling material culture. In fact, many tribal cultural institutions refuse to use the term “museum,” reinforcing the message that for some Native people the word carries negative connotations and strong associations with the egregious treatment Native communities received (and, in some instances, still receive) at the hands of museums.

We anticipate that this book marks the beginning of a long-term collaboration between the National Museum of the American Indian and Native communities. If you wish to contribute comments or additional information about this important topic, please contact me at cooperk@si.edu.



Albuquerque's Indian Pueblo Cultural Center represents nineteen Pueblo tribes of New Mexico with museum, performance, and meeting spaces; sales outlets; and a restaurant. Photograph by Karen Coody Cooper.

KAREN COODY COOPER

STARTING A NATIVE MUSEUM OR CULTURAL CENTER

SOME NATIVE COMMUNITIES ASPIRE TO START THEIR OWN MUSEUMS or cultural centers, or to refocus their existing facilities. Some communities want to attract tourists. Other communities primarily want a place to preserve and present their history and culture to their own community. And some want to serve both audiences. This essay has been divided into key elements to consider if you are building a center for your community, and issues of importance to those focused on creating a center to attract outside public.

The first step in developing a cultural center or museum should be canvassing members of your community to see what they prefer and what priorities exist. Is there enough interest to support a museum effort? Should the museum be for tourists or strictly for community use? For instance, does your community want to encourage the continuation of traditional arts through sales (tourists might be good), or is language preservation a priority (a community center might be best)? Listen to people's concerns. Consider how those concerns might best be met. Select a cause in which you can succeed. One success can then lead to another.

Starting a Community Museum or Cultural Center

- Call a meeting of local people interested in the project and find out in what ways they are willing to help and what their interests and abilities are. Then use their volunteer efforts as you continue. Encourage them to tap into personal connections they might have with talented or influential people.
- Keep the community informed about your progress through mailings, posted bulletins, radio, newspapers/newsletters, meetings, and events. Developing an annual event is one way to start the project before you have a home for it and to garner attention, as well as a means of tracking progress.
- Ascertain the practical scope of the project. Should it be kept small and grow gradually, or should you plan big and seek extensive external funding? “Small” means “grass roots,” and can often serve community needs responsibly without overburdening community resources. A large facility is expensive to build and maintain and may not seem welcoming to many in the community.
- Develop a planning process. Don’t be too rigid or too lax. Take time to plan the use of space carefully. A museum/center usually requires space for a lobby or entrance; exhibitions and hands-on activities; rooms for receiving and storing collections, public and staff meetings, and lectures and crafts demonstrations; a museum store (and more storage); bathrooms, kitchenette, and adequate offices for staff (and storage for office and building supplies); and a support library and archives. Is there a building locally that can be used, or is a new building required?

- Decide how governance will be organized. Will your community government control the museum, or will it be controlled by an independent board of interested individuals, probably from the community, plus experts from outside? Who will pay the salaries of employees? Occasionally hybrid situations arise, such as a government budget paying for a core number of employees while an independent board sees to the management of the museum with a director it selects.
- Visit existing museums and cultural centers to learn what you need to know about the field. Make appointments to speak to curators, educators, and directors. Learn about museum organizations, museum literature, and museum policies and practices.
- Obtain sample museum/cultural center policies and forms. Build up a small reference library of museum literature.
- Develop your policies and plans and formally organize your group. Establish a budget and begin fundraising. You're on your way!

Starting a Tourist Museum

- Consider whether tourists can and will come. Is there highway access? Are you on the way to successful tourist sites? Are there gas stations, restaurants, and hotels nearby? Is there too much competition or none at all? If none at all, will you provide enough activities to warrant an excursion to your museum?
- Consider what an influx of tourists might be like in your community. Will they be welcomed? The museum might best be located outside the community on a busy highway, in a larger neighboring community, or by

a historical or natural site of interest. If located in your community, consider how best to protect the privacy of homes in the area, control litter, and address issues of parking, erosion, etc.

- Consider the resources at your disposal. A successful tourist museum requires well-designed brochures, advertisements, a website, and publicity to compete with other activities. Exhibits must be professional and attractive. Operating hours must be extensive, especially on weekends. Amenities such as food and beverages might be required, especially if your location is isolated. Staffing needs to be adequate for service, safety, and security.
- Develop realistic economic expectations. Tourism can generate income, but it is affected by outside factors such as gasoline prices, economic turns, and how safe or practical people feel it is to travel. Contingency funds need to be in place to carry you through low visitation periods.
- Make it easy to find your museum. Arrange for highway signs, and put up a good sign on your own property. Develop an easy-to-read map for your brochures, and put it on your website as well.
- Make sure your building has adequate space for busloads of people. Receptions, parties, and events might also be held there. Such a building, when air-conditioned, usually requires entrance doors that provide an air-lock, meaning two sets of doors before the entrance to the lobby. A loading dock will be needed for traveling exhibits and borrowed collections. Security systems are recommended. Roadways and parking must be in good condition. Outdoor lighting and picnic facilities should be considered. Bathrooms must accommodate large numbers of visitors.
- Start attending national or regional museum association annual meetings and enrolling in museum staff development workshops. Obtain copies of museum job descriptions in preparation for hiring additional people.

- Be prepared for large-scale planning. Funding will usually need to come from many sources. Proposals will need to be well-written, and planning documents will need to be polished. If you don't hire a fundraiser, your committee will need to request examples of successful proposals from funding sources and from other similar projects to begin gathering and compiling your proposal information.

Every community and every museum is unique. There is no exact formula to follow because there is no other community exactly like yours. Additionally, things change through time. What worked a decade ago may not work now. Laws and practices change. Once you have opened your museum, remember that change is inevitable. Don't expect to operate the same way ten years from now. Constantly assess and prepare for the future, and remember that your museum is helping to shape the future as well.

RESOURCES

Erikson, Patricia Pierce. *Voices of a Thousand People: The Makah Cultural and Research Center*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Guyette, Susan. *Planning for Balanced Development: A Guide for Native American and Rural Communities*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996.

Stapp, Darby C., and Michael S. Burney. *Tribal Cultural Resource Management: The Full Circle to Stewardship*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2002.

Also refer to the museum book catalogs of the American Association of Museums (AAM) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH).



Rick Hill guiding museum interpreters in the *Pathways of Tradition* exhibition at the NMAI's George Gustav Heye Center, New York, 1992. Photograph by NMAI Photo Services staff.

RICHARD W. HILL SR.

ROAD MAP FOR NATIVE MUSEUM EXHIBITION PLANNING

IF YOU ONLY HAD THIRTY MINUTES to tell someone about the most important aspects of your community—its culture and arts, its history, and its people—what would you say? That is the dilemma you create for yourself when you decide to build a museum, visitor center, or cultural center. The real challenge behind exhibition planning is to tell “stories” through which visitors can imagine what others’ lives are like.

As a form of storytelling, an exhibition is a communicative act that must be animated and memorable, just like the storytelling of the past. The stories you decide to tell, however, will most likely differ from the ones you would tell if time permitted. It’s best to consider strategies for more effective narrative and visitor experience.

First: You will have very little time. Most visitors will not spend more than one hour at your museum. People get tired walking around in museum spaces. They generally become disoriented in museums that are large, dark boxes with bright lights that are hard on the eyes. Finding ways to make the visit more exciting will encourage people to stay and explore more of your stories.

Second: People don’t like to read a lot in museums. Often, too much time is spent writing labels, only to find that people might look at a display case for fewer than thirty seconds. Visitors will seek out a label only if something really interests them. Too much text disrupts the mood.

Third: Stereotypes about Indians and other indigenous peoples invade the thinking of even the most enlightened museum visitor. Visitors have preconceived ideas that they want verified by your museum. You have to understand your audience if you want to educate them.

Fourth: The needs of the community and the needs of the visiting public are different. A good museum provides a substantial museum experience for both audiences. It needs to be a place of learning for all.

This essay provides you with a practical step-by-step approach to conceptualizing, planning, and designing museum exhibitions. It cannot answer all of the questions you might have, but it will give you a road map to use as you make your own way along the journey. There are no standards that will apply to all communities or all facilities. You must decide for yourself what works best.

As a member of the Mall Exhibitions Master Planning Team for the National Museum of the American Indian, I had the opportunity to visit museums, large and small, across North America. To summarize what I learned about exhibition planning, the main areas of concern are as follows:

- The exhibits are more than objects in display cases. The most effective exhibitions create an atmosphere for learning and immerse the visitor in the cultural environment of the community. The visit to the museum should be a multisensory experience that stimulates a sense of awe and wonder, so that visitors will want to learn more.
- Exhibits that work best take into account human nature and different styles of learning. Visitors must discover their own way to move through the museum. People need to connect to the story on a very human level, to find something of themselves in the exhibition. In this way, it will be easier for them to identify with themes, topics, and subjects of the exhibition, and they will remember more clearly what they learned.
- Exhibit planning takes time, and many points of view must be considered at first. The process involves selecting and editing the stories to be told from the totality of material collected.

- Exhibition plans undergo great transformations as they develop. What you end up with might be very different from what you envisioned in the beginning.

I) Steps for Exhibition Development

These are some common steps that most museums take in planning their exhibitions. You might have to adjust them to your unique situation.

- Examine the **mission statement** of your organization.
- Develop clear **goals** for the project that support the mission statement.
- Identify the **topics** for the exhibition and why they are important.
- Identify the **themes** tying those topics together that you want to share with the public.
- Identify the underlying **cultural values, beliefs, and ethics** that not only drive those themes but also explain their importance.
- Research and collect **Native oral histories and literature** on the topics, and develop background papers on each topic.
- Locate potential **objects** relating to the themes and cultural processes that might be used to illustrate the story.
- Locate potential **photographs** illustrating the topics and places of focus in the exhibition.
- Create a **flow chart** of how the topics link together, identifying the main sections of the exhibition, the educational objective(s) of each section, the Native themes of each section, and the subthemes to be presented.
- Explore various ways of presenting the story and determine the **style of interpretation** that will be most effective for each section of the exhibition.

- Write the **preliminary script**, which outlines the exhibition, briefly stating the main information, its Native perspective, and the focus of each section of the exhibition.
- Solicit **review** of and comments on the script from advisors, and make the appropriate adjustments.
- Write the **final script**, including main text panel, sub-text panels, object labels, object list, photo list, and photo captions. It may take several drafts and rewrites of the script before it meets with everyone's approval.

There may be many variations on these tasks. Every museum will have a different mix of ideas based on their particular experience. Gerard Hilferty & Associates applied a team strategy to the National Museum of the American Indian that generated the following steps in exhibition planning:

- Interpretive Goals and Objectives
- Interpretive Approach
- Catalog of Exhibition Themes
- Approach for Use of Collections
- Educational Strategies
- Interpretive Media Concepts
- Statement of Principal Exhibition Messages

II) Who Is Going To Tell This Story?

Selecting the Exhibition Development Team

Creating a good exhibition is a team effort. Team building becomes one of the first steps to give knowledgeable individuals the authority to make decisions in the exhibition development process. The exhibition team should be comprised of staff, a few board members, and contracted consultants to identify the themes that will be selected for the interpretive programs. The team