

THEORY & PRACTICE

MUSEUM FUTURES: Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Justice

A Publication from the National Emerging Museum
Professional Network and The Museum Scholar

Volume 2, 2019



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Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal

www.TheMuseumScholar.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.rogerspublishing.org

Cover photo: Antonio Molinari

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The National Emerging Museum Professionals Network

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Why Not Museums? The Social Potential of Museums

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Keywords Museums; Community Engagement; Social Justice; Social Work; Immigration

Abstract In an age of reduced government funding for cultural institutions and increased cultural diversity and economic struggle, museums must find solutions that allow them to thrive in conjunction with their communities. One of the ways that museums can accomplish this is by looking at the resources and advocacy an institution can muster to bring needed services to the area. This paper examines a number of efforts undertaken by museums and related organizations to create programs that provide support for and build relationships with the surrounding community. Concrete examples of successful programs are explored, including English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship classes at the New-York Historical Society, ESL and citizenship classes and relevant history programming for children of Caribbean immigrants at the House of the Seven Gables, tours and programming in languages spoken by local communities, and daycare and Head Start programs hosted at the Children's Museum of East End. Museums have found ways to support their local communities through political activism as well. Other public institutions, such as the Oakland Public Library have implemented poverty alleviation programs that museums should consider implementing. Museums should proactively look for ways to engage in these practices in order to facilitate stronger ties to the local community.

About the Author Danielle Bennett is a recent graduate of the History and Museum Studies Master's program at Tufts University. Her research interests are in American social and labor history from a feminist and queer perspective and the construction of presentations of history. She recently completed a thesis about obstacles to LGBTQ+ interpretations in historic houses. She has previously worked in Visitors Services for the Alice Austen House in New York and as a researcher for the New-York Historical Society. Danielle lives in New York City.

This article was published on July 8, 2019 at www.themuseumscholar.org

*"Museums should grow out of life experiences and be used to reflect back on life."
-George Hein*

John Dewey's model school in *The School and Society* (1899) is a complex organization that incorporates elementary education experience in broad topics that provide a basis for more formalized study in the upper school.¹ A library and museum are included as ways to facilitate experiences that will enhance research and reinforce learning.² However, that is not where the innovations end. A kitchen and dining room are part of the lower school's educational foundation, indicating learning by doing, but also the importance of nourishment in the educational process.³ The kitchen is linked to gardens or trips to the country, emphasizing the importance of engaging with the natural world, and the entire structure is linked to business and the home, recognizing that a school is not merely an institution to house young people, but a dynamic and integral part of a healthy society, and as such, has interactions with the

community/ies it exists within.⁴ The interactions of institutions and communities are often recognized, but rarely to the extent that Dewey has contextualized them. Schooling, family, dining, work, and leisure shape modern life and a museum can be an integral part of that, if well-integrated into its community. For many people and museums, unfortunately, there is a gap between the services provided by a museum and the services needed by the potential audience. Bridging that gap requires thinking more broadly about what a museum can and should provide.

In “Museum Education,” George Hein begins an overview of the history and theory of the field by reminding the reader of a question posed by Lawrence Vail Coleman almost a century earlier: “It seems the time has come for museum trustees to face a familiar question. Are museums primarily educational, or are they for only such educational work as can be carried on without limiting the curatorial function?”⁵ Though in many places museums are still tackling that question, the time has come to ask a new question as well: Are museums community spaces, or are they only for such community work as can be carried on without limiting the curatorial and educational functions? Ideally, the answer to this question is, “Yes, they are community spaces, let’s plan how to provide the best programming for the community” but frequently the response is a more limited, “Yes, but how?” or possibly just, “Why?” In an age of reduced government funding for cultural institutions and increased cultural diversity and economic struggle, solutions must be found that allow museums to thrive in conjunction with their communities. One of the ways that museums can accomplish this is by providing services to benefit recent immigrants to the area. There are a number of historic and modern examples of this work that demonstrate that facilitating the welfare of both the institution and the people results in stronger communities.

The House of the Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts, is a historic house museum founded by Caroline Emmerton in 1908.⁶ She also founded The House of the Seven Gables Settlement Association, an organization supported by the profits of the museum to bring services to the new, poor, and ethnically diverse community then living in the middle of a previously white community with a strong upper middle-class contingent.⁷ Part of a trend at the time, settlement houses provided new immigrants with language and domestic skills instruction, educational and social programs, and training in etiquette and other middle-class American community customs.⁸ Emmerton’s Association eventually comprised of a campus of historic buildings that provided services for immigrants and supported those activities with the admission fees and food and lodging dollars of visitors to the House.⁹

Despite their progressive politics, settlement houses historically performed good deeds with a motive of assimilation.¹⁰ It is important to separate the values of the reformers of the time from those of modern day cultural and social workers. The services these organizations provided certainly had life-changing effects for the recipients. Yet, however altruistic their intentions to provide good food, shelter, health care, and education to newly arrived Americans were, founders often frequently harbored anxieties about these new immigrants, fearful that they would change the culture and landscape of the country, or that they would bring disease or become a burden on society. In the words of a native resident of Salem in the Salem Evening News at the time, “if [immigrants] are not given the hand of fellowship and assimilated and inspired with respect for American ideals and American institutions, they will get absorbed and go to swell the columns of socialism, militant laborism, and other isms.”¹¹

Native-born white Americans clearly anticipated the forces of change in front of them and sought to mitigate disruption to their way of life. Therefore, teaching English or cooking skills ensured that new arrivals integrated properly into society, and that they would be able to find jobs and homes and care for their children in ways that were acceptable to white American culture. That many new immigrants also required assistance in acclimating to their new country was somewhat incidental. The House of the Seven Gables was no different in this regard, and the work of the settlement house was supported and reinforced by the tours given in the early days of the house, which presented the idea of being an “American” that was exclusively white, upper middle class, and devoid of old world customs and traditions.¹² It is important that any museum today that engages in settlement work does so without assimilationist goals in mind.

Salem is still home to a vibrant new immigrant community, now comprised of mainly Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latinx people.¹³ The House of the Seven Gables is still committed to its origins as a settlement association, but with a mission that reflects a modern understanding of immigration and cultural diversity. Today, the House provides English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship classes for adults that reflect the needs of the students taking the classes. Instructors are recruited from within the local immigrant community, classes are promoted within the school system, and outreach workers do intensive work to ensure that classes are completed.¹⁴ The House also segments the program so that it can be done in chunks when students have time.¹⁵ They also celebrate the achievements of the students by holding naturalization ceremonies at the House.¹⁶ Caribbean Connections is a summer enrichment program that strives to connect the history of Salem to the history of the Caribbean countries the students hail from, using a dual language model so students can practice English and Spanish.¹⁷ To engage the larger community, and build bonds between the native and immigrant populations of Salem, a well-attended speaker series called Community Conversations provides moderated forums to tackle tough topics such as, “Will there ever be a clear path to citizenship?” and “Why can’t these immigrants be more like us?”¹⁸ In addressing difficult topics that are rarely discussed in “mixed” company and celebrating the heritage of immigrant youth while teaching valuable language skills and helping parents know their children are safe while they are at work, The House of the Seven Gables has reimagined settlement work with the needs of the immigrant community in mind.

The House of the Seven Gables is only one of a number of museums looking to provide additional services to immigrant communities. Indeed, demand for citizenship programming is such that the US Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security includes helpful information on their website for museums wondering how they can assist immigrant communities.¹⁹ New York City, a center of immigration for centuries, supports several programs, often in conjunction with City University of New York’s Citizenship NOW! program, which works with the New-York Historical Society (NYHS) on an innovative project for citizenship classes called The Citizenship Project.²⁰ This class uses art at NYHS to teach prospective citizens about American History and Civics through art in the collection.²¹ The course does not shy away from informing the students about the darker aspects of American History, including Native American removal, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the Civil War.²²

Citizenship NOW! also provides free legal services to immigrants in multiple languages at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.²³ Additionally, the Tenement Museum provides tours and workshops specifically designed for ESL and ELL (English Language Learners) students of all ages.²⁴ In Queens, the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement does a similar project, bringing ESL speakers from the most diverse community in the country to the Noguchi Museum for art instruction that facilitates English learning.²⁵ Also in Queens, the New New Yorkers project at the Queens Museum goes beyond English classes to offer instruction in art and technology topics in conjunction with the Queens Library.²⁶ Similarly, at the *Oh Canada* exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, another city with a significant immigrant population, tours of Canadian Art are offered in Arabic for recent Syrian refugees.²⁷ In these programs, museums have taken a step beyond the traditional and asked themselves, besides English, what do immigrants need? The answer, of course, is everything English speakers do, therefore art tours in Arabic and classes in video editing, web design, and painting, among others, are offered in languages ranging from Tibetan to Croatian to Bengali.²⁸ In particular, immigrants in Queens do not have to wait until they've learned English to work on their professional or hobby goals or to engage in leisure activities outside the home, they can seek multiple methods of personal fulfillment right now.

The Queens Museum also engages in other methods of immigrant support, namely advocacy and activism. Laura Raicovich, the former President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum, was a vocal advocate for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients during her tenure, taking to Twitter to call for permanent legislation to be passed.²⁹ The museum also runs a storefront space in Corona, Queens called Immigrant Movement International that offers free education, health, and legal services.³⁰ Additionally, Raicovich facilitated engagement with undocumented immigrants in the community by hosting museum events in private homes after museum attendance dropped following the 2016 presidential election.³¹ The Queens Museum stands as an example for other institutions to look to for inspiration in this regard. An art museum imbued with special consciousness by dint of location, they are advancing a new vision of what it means to be a museum that provides services to its community in the future. Their collaborative relationships with other institutions, such as the Queens Library, are a model for other organizations who wonder how they can find the space, the money, the staff, and the time to expand programming that fosters a thriving community.³²

There are, of course, more conventional ways to get started on the path to community service. It can be difficult for some art museums, for example, to take actions that diverge too far from their mission to present art to the community. For them, manipulations of the collection can be a useful way to show solidarity with their immigrant community. Many institutions, including the Queens Museum, participated in an "Art Strike," which was essentially a blackout of cultural institutions on Inauguration Day 2017, in a show of solidarity with immigrants and against xenophobia.³³ In the wake of President Trump's executive order banning travel and rescinding visas for citizens of seven majority Muslim countries, the Museum of Modern Art reinstalled its permanent collection to highlight artists from those countries.³⁴ The Davis Museum at Wellesley College took an opposite tactic for a similar effect, in *Art-Less*, the museum shrouded art by artists from countries affected by travel ban in early 2017.³⁵

Other museums, with different collections and missions, are able to engage communities more directly. At the Hammer Museum, the UCLA art museum with a mission that specifically aims to “build a more just world,” workshops offering assistance and advice to DACA recipients were offered after the travel ban was implemented.³⁶ More broadly, the New Americans Museum in San Diego actively collects oral and visual narratives of immigrants and adds them to their permanent collection, a phenomenal example of an institution that centers the immigrant experience as its core mission.³⁷

While some institutions might be more naturally inclined than others to engage in work that supports immigrant communities, it is not impossible for any institution to think creatively and find an avenue to work in. The Children’s Museum of East End (CMEE) examined itself and its community relationships in a process that led to them offering up precious space in their institution first to provide daycare for the children of domestic violence survivors taking job training classes, and then to host a Head Start preschool.³⁸ Working with Head Start led to hosting additional community meetings and workshops serving the local Spanish speaking population and the translation of the CMEE website into Spanish.³⁹ In turn, these community collaborations have grown CMEE’s bonds with the non-profit community and opened them up to new funding streams.⁴⁰ These programs are not only beneficial to the museums, there are significant benefits all around. Indeed, the Office of Child Care, an Office of the Administration for Children and Families at the US Department of Health and Human Services, has issued a memorandum encouraging collaboration between Head Starts and libraries, which is facilitated by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.⁴¹ If libraries, why not museums?

Attempts to combat the effects of poverty often end up assisting immigrant families. It is well known by now that diet and nutrition can adversely affect children’s ability to learn.⁴² Free lunch programs at schools do much to alleviate the issue of hunger during the school year, but there are entire weekends, school vacations, and summer breaks where food insecurity plagues families. In the summertime, the Oakland Public Library, like many other libraries in the country, and probably some museums, functions as an ad hoc daycare for many poor children.⁴³ Children frequently asked the staff for food or money, giving librarians a very clear understanding of an unmet need in the community.⁴⁴ A pilot program to feed children was conceived in partnership with the Alameda Food Bank, the City of Oakland, and the USDA that has expanded year after year with great success, and now incorporates literacy activities as well.⁴⁵ Oakland Public Library branch manager Pete Villaseñor summarized the issue: “Libraries are evolving with the times. We need to be more than a place to check out books and use the computers—we need to offer the services that the community needs.”⁴⁶ Again, if libraries, why not museums? The IMLS agrees. In the “Serving New Americans” section of their website, where they announce expanding their Memorandum of Understanding with the USCIS to include museums, they note:

More than 55 percent of new Americans use the public library at least once a week. There, they find a trusted environment, resources and community connections that can ease the way to full participation in American society. For many people new to the United States, libraries serve as a gateway to citizenship, offering English language learning, training materials and resources on immigration and

*citizenship. Likewise, museums also address the needs of new arrivals with cross cultural programming and inclusive community outreach. Museum exhibitions and events help deepen understanding of diverse cultures and strengthen community connections.*⁴⁷

Museums that aspire to be community pillars, providing support, education, and entertainment as needed and in turn receiving support, interest, and funding should find engagement projects such as these indispensable. What other services can a museum conceivably provide? At the Fitchburg Art Museum in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, working with the local Spanish-speaking community caused the museum to offer all exhibit information in Spanish and English, as well as actively work to create exhibits relevant to the Latinx community in and around Fitchburg.⁴⁸ The success of projects like this has encouraged them to work on bolder projects that broaden their mission. They are currently engaged in a project to build affordable live/work space for artists struggling with gentrification.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Association of Children's Museums launched a campaign in 2017 to encourage research and outreach to immigrant and refugee families to ensure that local families understood that their area children's museum was there specifically to support immigrant parents and their children.⁵⁰

Museums and organizations today must be careful to provide needed services without subjecting visitors to culturally negating rhetoric. A good way to approach this is to start by asking the community what it needs, instead of deciding what is best for the population. In the 1990s, the Tenement Museum, ignoring the advice of a local settlement worker, asked its local immigrant community what it needed that the museum might be able to provide.⁵¹ They discovered a major actionable complaint: untenable waitlist times for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, inspiring the museum to create their own that integrated the content of the museum.⁵² The courses they developed helped recent immigrants understand their place in a long line of immigrants to America, helping them feel more integrated into the country and their local community.⁵³ Building on that experience, Stephen Long, upon becoming Director of CMEE, met with an expansive definition of local stakeholders upon assuming the directorship of the organization, including social service workers and local immigrant advocates.⁵⁴

Zachary Stacks, writing on activist social work in small museums, agrees that community collaboration is critical to a successful program. If the program is not relevant to the lives of the audience, it will not be used, even if they are lacking in other services.⁵⁵ He suggests thinking creatively about how a service or program is defined. Having a free admission day once a month shunts those who cannot afford regular admission to a tiny window of access to the museum, but providing a special, highly discounted rate that can be taken advantage of at any time if the patron has a SNAP card keeps the window of access wide open.⁵⁶ Stacks also emphasizes the importance of setting goals for programs and identifying methods of assessment for understanding the impact and success of a program.⁵⁷ Donors and grant-making institutions want to know if projects are working before investing in them further.⁵⁸ Spending time ensuring your project's goals are reasonable and measurable will help its success.

At the core of this argument for social services provided through museums is an unspoken agreement: Museums and people, matter. Though many museums over the centuries have not considered social services to be crucial or even incidental to their existence, this attitude is one that fundamentally neglects people. Museums can no longer afford to assume that audiences that look a certain way or have estate planners will continue to appear in the lobby ready to take a tour or sign a check. Museum visitors in America will only continue to grow more diverse as the country does, or most visits will cease to exist and museums along with them. More importantly, an ethical obligation exists now more than ever before for a museum to become actively engaged in its community. America requires active citizenship from its citizens and this should extend to its institutional citizens as well. Doing this work is not simple, nor is it impossible. It does, however, require looking with new eyes at what the community means, how it looks, and what it needs. In the words of Rika Burnham, “If you don’t look, you don’t see.”

Notes

¹ George Hein, “John Dewey and Museum Education,” 418.

² Ibid, 417.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hein, “Museum Education,” 340.

⁶ Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England*, 253.

⁷ Ibid, 249.

⁸ Ibid, 253.

⁹ Ibid, 256.

¹⁰ Tami Christopher, “The House of the Seven Gables,” 68.

¹¹ Conforti, *Imagining New England*, 254.

¹² Ibid, 68.

¹³ Ana Nuncio, “Settlement Work in a New Century.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Settlement Programming,” The House of the Seven Gables.

¹⁷ Nuncio, “Settlement Work in a New Century”.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Museums,” USCIS.

²⁰ “New-York Historical Society | Citizenship Project.”

²¹ Arun Venugopal, “Immigrants + Art History = Citizenship?”

²² Ibid.

²³ “Professional Development Workshops,” The Tenement Museum.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Learning English Through the Lens of Art,” *Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement*.

²⁶ “New New Yorkers,” The Queens Museum.

²⁷ “Welcome! Bienvenue! Ahlan!” *AGO Art Matters*.

²⁸ “New New Yorkers.”

²⁹ Robin Pogrebin, “At Queens Museum.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

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- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Jason Farago, “MoMA Takes a Stand: Art from Banned Countries Comes Center Stage.”
- ³⁵ Malcolm Gay, “Davis Museum to remove artworks as Trump travel-ban protest.”
- ³⁶ “Keeping the DREAM Alive - Hammer Museum.”
- ³⁷ “Overview – New Americans Museum.”
- ³⁸ Stephen Long, “Practicing Civic Engagement,” 150-151.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 152.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, 151.
- ⁴¹ “Head Start, Child Care, and Public Libraries,” Office of Child Care.
- ⁴² Eric Jensen, “How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement.”
- ⁴³ “Pilot Project Serves Free Summer Lunch,” Institute of Museum and Library Services.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ “Serving New Americans,” Institute of Museum and Library Services.
- ⁴⁸ Nick Capasso, “Revitalizing a Tired Community Museum.”
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ “90 Days of Action,” Association of Children’s Museums.
- ⁵¹ Long, “Practicing Civic Engagement,” 147.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 148.
- ⁵⁵ “4 Steps for Successful Museum Social Work,” *The Inluseum*.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.

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