ENGAGE: THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS
interim findings from roundtable discussions on audience engagement and the role of the museum in the community
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Museums have the power to excite, educate, and enlighten. How this power should be used — and shared — is very much at issue in our increasingly pluralist society.

Museums today face both overt and subtle challenges: institutional missions must be negotiated with shifting demographics, evolving visitor expectations, funding realignment, and ever-escalating technologies. Ideally, this leads to a richer and more memorable visitor experience, and encourages visitors to become museum advocates.

The traditional model of the museum experience as passive observation is decisively shifting to active, interpretive engagement. Exhibits are no longer framed by expert appreciation; instead, they acknowledge the subjectivity of multiple perspectives. This emerging mode is particularly evident in the popularity of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborations.

Museums are rethinking and reworking their spaces to promote deeper understanding of their collections and missions, greater interactivity, a fuller range of activities, and increased revenue stability.

OVERVIEW
In April 2014, Gensler launched a yearlong study of relationships between museums and their constituencies, with a focus on strategies to build and reinforce audiences. Roundtable discussions with influential museum leaders in Chicago, Houston, New York, London, Los Angeles, and Costa Rica explored how innovations in audience engagement are creating greater excitement, relevance and sustainability, and how these changes are rescripting the roles of museums in their communities. The roundtables provided an opportunity consider the current state and future of museum design.

What follows is a summary of primary issues and trends emerging from roundtable discussions hosted in late 2014 and early 2015.
EMERGENT THEMES
AUDIENCES

Museums are uniquely positioned to blend education and recreation in ways that can both challenge and catalyze communities.

Museums stimulate curiosity and create educational experiences by providing access to collections and fostering a range of interpretations. Audience engagement is an important aspect of the museum’s value as a repository for knowledge.

Many roundtable participants proposed that museums should be in a position to take risks with content to further their institutional mission, and that presenting content in newly considered, thought-provoking ways is key to relevance and audience engagement. Participants stressed that museums must not dumb down their efforts in order to address the “least common denominator”. Rather, museums should believe in the capacity of audiences to engage meaningfully.

Beyond quantifiable educational experiences, wonder, awe and meaningful personal connections are seen as encouraging return visitors.
As lifestyle and retail activities increasingly vie for visitors’ attention, museums must strengthen their community presence to attract and engage audiences.

There were varied, and sometimes conflicting, ideas about how audiences expect to engage with cultural institutions. Discussions revealed the importance of clearly defined target audiences and strategic programs to attract them. Target audiences are not necessarily new ones; it is important to generate excitement among existing constituencies.

Many participants shared a sense that their regional set of cultural attractions has a finite audience and they are concerned about cultivating this audience while reaching out to the next generation.

Some museums have banded together to increase visibility and power. Presenting more impactful stories about what museums do and building stronger connections with surrounding communities are seen as the primary means to reinforce public presence.
Institutional mission is at the core of museum identity, and should inform philanthropic expectations, success metrics, and audience engagement strategies.

Philanthropic donors increasingly expect quantifiable results for their investments in cultural institutions. Participants were concerned that such expectations often lead to unproductive metrics (raw attendance, constant acquisition, unsustainable growth), and emphasized that metrics must reflect institutional missions.

Mission-aligned metrics may be qualitative as much as quantitative. For instance, a smaller but enthusiastically engaged audience likely indicate more success than a high volume of visitors drawn by mission-tangential offerings. There was additional concern that reliance on misaligned metrics constrains spontaneity and complicates quick, ad hoc responses to audience reactions.

Discussion often included questioning the social role of museums. Many museums struggle to reconcile the potential to act as community advocates with their stated institutional missions. Overambitious and/or inappropriate initiatives dilute core missions and disappoint intended beneficiaries. Museums must be able to deliver on promised community support, and should make sure the initiatives they pursue raise their stature with constituencies.
Rather than count on continual growth, museums should look inward to under-used assets and permanent collections.

Funding is, as expected, a core concern. Some participants proposed that current legal and funding models for nonprofits are outmoded and in need of complete restructuring to align with current economic realities.

Museums must contend with a belief that cultural activities should be free, and their responses vary. While there is general agreement that admission costs should never be a barrier, many participants proposed that it is important and productive to assign value to museum entry, and pointed out that museum admission is largely in line with that of movies, clubs, and similar recreational activities.

Digitized collection imagery has greatly expanded museums’ online presence and created new means to experience and research collections. The availability of this imagery has also increased loan opportunities among institutions. However, larger institutions question loaning significant works since visitors come specifically to see those works.

Museums are looking at reformulating permanent displays for a number of reasons: enhanced clarity, shifting historical perspectives, more comprehensive presentations, inclusion of multiple viewpoints.

Most cultural institutions close at the end of the work day, making it difficult for working adults to visit. Museums that have late-night openings have found them to be overwhelmingly popular.
EXPERIENCE

Making museums more inviting and accessible is essential to cultivating audiences.

There is a strong trend toward accessibility — both attracting visitors and making their experience more intuitive. A visitor’s first impression is critical to the museum experience. Participants are rethinking wayfinding, placement of rest moments, opportunities to teach through exhibition and permanent collection curation, and points of contact with staff. This extends to websites/digital media, and many participants emphasized that digital and in-person experiences should be consistent.

There was a strongly-expressed consensus that over-emphasis on technology in wayfinding and exhibits is displacing human interaction to the detriment of visitor experience. A personal welcome is often more important than the “wow” factor.

Participants were very interested in figuring out how to grow initial contacts with constituencies to lead into deeper participation in museum offerings. There was discussion of how to capitalize on big events: getting attendees for popular but mission-tangential events to come back for mission-aligned offerings. Again, personal connections were felt to be key. These vary as age-appropriate, and include demonstrations, discussions, role playing, hands-on activity, and listening to and engaging visitors on site.

Museums recognize that passively waiting for visitors does not work. They must reach out in active, strategic ways. Participants cited taking exhibits outside the museum to reach new constituencies, non-traditional programming such as scavenger hunts, focused advertising campaigns, encouraging visitors to highlight their experience in social media, partnering with nearby amenities, hosting exhibit-related events, and reaching out to student and teacher populations.

Participants largely agreed that offering a greater mix of programming and experiences (if supported by the institution’s size and mission) draws more visitors.
The youngest generation is challenging the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of museum offerings.

Technology-savvy school-age constituencies need compelling reasons to go to a museum instead of being satisfied with online material. Participants suggested two main strategies: first, emphasizing that most collections are much better experienced in person and, second, programming meaningful shared experiences tailored to the tendency of younger visitors to travel in groups.

Modes of learning are evolving and museums see a need to incorporate these modes to better meet the needs of young audiences. Young visitors are more likely than older visitors to seek instant gratification, and are less likely to wait for a tour or use visit-pacing audio guides. Youthful tastes for pacing and ways of absorbing information are informing museum programs and exhibit design.

Many participants were interested in engaging families as a whole, for reasons ranging from revenue to cultivating future audiences. One proposed strategy is enriching K-12 programs and offering associated family activities. There was general agreement that children should experience museums as stimulating, not intimidating, and return with their families. Ideally, this would support a lifelong appreciation of museums.
The design of a museum is always an opportunity to enhance the transformative visitor experience. Architecture frames the visitor's path and exhibitions, and as such should participate organically in institutional missions.

Overall, participants emphasized that new museums should not unquestioningly repeat existing layouts and expressions. Instead, architects and institutions should closely consider what best serves collections, missions, staff, and constituencies — even if this leads in non-traditional directions. Architects should also maintain a big picture view of history and culture to support these investigations.

Participants noted that, given space limitations and changing exhibits, many spaces should accommodate a variety of activities and uses. Designers should balance active and quiet modes, creative and receptive curatorial approaches involving visitors, community and personal experiences, guidance and choice in visitor path, and familiar and unfamiliar content.

While some participants criticized overly demonstrative architectural design, most agreed that the museum building plays a major part in establishing institutional identity and should be seen, in commercial terms, as an integral part of the brand. The museum building is critical to perception of the institution in its community. Among participants, there was a consensus that a museum building should convey as clear a sense as possible about the museum's contents and offerings. While an iconic or historical building may draw visitors, participants noted that such buildings could be intimidating or uninviting. Participants stressed the importance of developing a strong connection with the audience through programming, events and visitor experience, as well as online, so that the draw to the institution overrides any feeling of intimidation.

An intuitive and appealing approach through the site and into the building was widely cited as critical to welcoming visitors. The entry and lobby should be particularly clear and easy to navigate, although there were various opinions on whether and how reception areas should incorporate exhibits, objects, and/or installations. A friendly, visible, and well-staffed reception/admissions point of contact was cited as absolutely essential. Participants debated how straightforward exhibit area layouts should be, and there was significant concern about designing out the potential for accidental discoveries and multiple narratives.

Space needs change, and an existing building can work for or against the evolving demands. Many participants actively evaluate visitor experience to determine areas for improvement; solutions range from simply revising wayfinding to extensive renovations or expansions. A clear understanding of space utilization goals is also important.
As exhibits and programs expand outside museum walls and the public realm infiltrates the museum, new potentials for meaningful audience engagement are revealed.

Participants are interested in how museums can create a sense of place. However, participants recognized that museums alone are not enough to create a destination. There is a call for a comprehensive approach to the visitor experience that includes district parking, parks, restaurants, other synergistic amenities, good signage and wayfinding, and connectivity via public transportation. Collaborating to create events that draw and circulate visitors among the district museums also helps create an enduring sense of place, particularly when those events repeat.

Many participants expressed a strong interest in how audiences respond to museum-initiated events in new and unexpected environments. Temporary offsite exhibits programs can support a higher level of experimentation and require less operating budget than in-house efforts.

Visitors who live on the fringes of cities may still visit a central museum for unique and compelling offerings, but participants are interested to see how branch and pop-up museums in outlying areas will impact visits to established museums nearby as well as parent institutions. The need and potential for branches or pop-ups to reach a broader geographical community are being closely scrutinized.

The need for greater consideration of the outdoor spaces around museums was cited. Participants noted both the quality of design itself and the potential to connect to nearby amenities. Creating pleasant, walkable and transit-connected spaces enhances accessibility of museums.

Growing beyond the notion of the Third Place, museums are increasingly serving as de facto public realms, accommodating community events and cultural programs. Some participants are rethinking how museums operate as part of the urban and community fabric, with the aim of creating continuity of vibrant public experience from the outside world to the inside of the museum.
Like their counterparts across the states, Chicago institutions are facing similar concerns of bringing in visitors and making their museums more approachable. To reach the shared goal of deepening audience engagement, Chicago institutions are stretching beyond their usual approaches to both marketing and the production of content by partnering with outside groups and offering mixed or unexpected programming.

Partnering with like-minded groups or institutions to advertise events as well as generate content seems to be a well-used, yet carefully executed strategy. Smaller and mid-size museums will team up with appropriate partners to advertise a program or exhibition to reach a shared audience, often providing a level of comfort to that group, simply by association. Larger institutions, often with more resources and autonomy, will partner with the city or sponsors to both exhibit in very public locations and procure support for the most cutting edge shows.

Bringing in local artists or experts to develop content has been a strategy in many museums, but we’re finding the relationships to be very expansive. Particularly of interest at academic museums and galleries, the community gathered around these exhibitions not only contribute to the content of an exhibition, but also to programming, books, special performances, and side projects. These groups can deepen the work that is shown and ultimately generate buzz in the city.

In addition to partnering to leverage shared audiences, museums expand their audiences by devising ways to reach groups that don’t typically go to museums, in some cases by bringing together a variety of program types around a theme. For example, a year-long exploration about technology and art could tie together seemingly disparate events like in-depth computer programming workshops, dance performances, and puppetry shows thereby reaching a wide variety of potential visitors. Access to unique experiences and niche subjects that go beyond the curator tour or stand-alone lecture is key.

Creating a comprehensive approach to partnering and cross-breeding programming should align with the mission of the museum and its role in the community. Participants felt there was opportunity in expanding beyond the confines of the institution.
Historically cultural institutions in Costa Rica have struggled to get attention, always downplayed by the country’s natural beauty but through a series of innovative initiatives these institutions are working to position themselves as an important component of the country’s identity.

Due to limited funding, cultural institutions understand that they need to generate a cohesive regional platform to leverage efforts in order to make progress. Amongst some of their initiatives is an annual country-wide congress. This congress brings the country’s cultural institutions together to brainstorm and discuss ways to tackle their issues while working to better position and embed the cultural component in Costa Rican society. A main focus of their agenda is to nurture ties and create a sense of belonging for their respective communities.

Museums in Costa Rica are aware that they need to reinvent their infrastructure in order to achieve a more dynamic image and ultimately attract more people. They believe that their infrastructure needs to be flexible and dynamic and serve the population with holistic experiences. Parallel to this, each museum needs to have a community specific agenda of events, and the proper PR team to promote these.

Finally, and most importantly there is a country-wide initiative in which the government wants to establish San Jose as the civic center through an urban project. The intention is to achieve this through an interconnecting pedestrian way between the cultural institutions in hopes of reviving the capital as the cultural center of Costa Rica. Currently there is a very fertile atmosphere for cultural institutions, with a government that believes in the importance that these museums have to enrich the country’s identity. There is a strong momentum of change and innovation that promises many industry opportunities, everyone needs to help keep this momentum going and build on it for the well-being of all the countries museums.
The Houston region has become increasingly multicultural, absorbing an immense influx of new residents and visitors with a booming economy. An expanding Latino population is a demographic definer for the region. Rebounding after 9/11 and economic recession, international tourism is vibrant once again. Houston area museums are evolving to reflect and appeal to these diverse audiences. Removing barriers to access, real and perceived, so that all members of the public feel welcomed, was a unifying interest among roundtable participants. As one participant noted, “We try to take people from a multicultural aspect to a cross-cultural place to an intercultural place.” Area museums are also offering culture-responsive programs and content in more languages. Regional heritage museums have traditionally generated passionate support among residents who directly identify with the history portrayed at those museums. New and old residents who do not see themselves reflected in the stories told by regional heritage museums may be less inclined to visit and invest in those museums. Museums are thinking more strategically about whose stories and how history is told to appeal to wider audiences while remaining true to mission. Community-reflective perspectives among museum staff that create audience programs have helped area museums connect more effectively with desired audiences. Staff diversity has traditionally been a challenge, as academic profession programs leading to museum professions have traditionally not attracted students from diverse backgrounds. Scholarships sponsored by the Getty and the MFAH-Houston are now in place to encourage students of color to fund their entry into the museum profession. Grant-making foundations are demanding a reflection of the community’s diversity on staff and boards of the museums they fund. The traditional requirement of financial contribution to join boards of trustees has often been an obstacle to creating broadly diverse board leadership. However, participants have succeeded in creating advisory boards that benefit from alternate means of contributing to museum leadership.
Host to a vast variety of historically established and newly created cultural institutions that engage with a wide range of audiences, London is at a unique point in this discussion. Many of London’s institutions are historically bound to their location and existing buildings, which also means restrictions on expansion and development. Through our roundtable discussions we found that this can bring both positives and negatives in terms of audience engagement, space and experience.

A key discussion point was how cultural institutions engage with their audiences, where they should be located, and issues around accessibility – both physical and social. For many audiences, the draw of the larger, historical institutions is their iconic and established buildings and their role in contributing to the identity of the city. However, these buildings can also be intimidating and uninviting for others who feel that these places are “not for them.” One response to this is the increasing proliferation of “pop up” experiences, which take place outside an institution and often attract very different audiences. For many, their relationship with the more iconic institutions, either positive or negative, was established from an early age. This raised the question of how cultural institutions engage with younger and broader communities, and how educational programs are integrated into museum programming.

“You can’t be everything to everyone” is how one attendee described the challenge of meeting an increasingly wide-ranging audience. As institutions in London compete to draw in the visitor numbers, they are widening their audience range and sometimes struggling to understand and meet the differing demands. Restrictions on late opening hours due to operating costs and generating funding through private events means that audience engagement is sometimes restricted. Offerings such as cafes, shops, and restaurants are one way for institutions to generate revenue. At the same time, they also identified the retail and lifestyle sectors as some of their main threats. It seems like London’s cultural institutions need to understand how to take advantage of the opportunities these could offer, in order to remain competitive.
Los Angeles’ status as the epicenter of global entertainment media inevitably overshadows the city’s rich but diffuse complement of museums and cultural programs. The LA roundtable was particularly focused on the challenges smaller institutions face when considering their constituencies and spaces, especially in an environment where they must fight for visibility.

Many of the ideas that emerged in discussion can be boiled down to the proposition that initial decisions about uses and arrangements are more open to question (and offer more opportunities) than architects may perceive. Participants emphasized that space programming of museums should review public, exhibit, and support areas as an organic whole. Further, the scope of this consideration should expand to the institution’s context – physical, institutional, neighborhood, and social – to the greatest appropriate degree.

Participants adopted the concept of “layering” as a flexible strategy that would allow sharp programmatic divisions to be rethought as gentler, graded transitions. Specific possibilities created by layering include: creating a “flow” of visitors into museum spaces by overlapping exterior and entry zones, and productive transitions between exhibit, program, and education experiences.

There was also substantial interest in layering to bring back-of-house functions to presence, as most of the collection and the work of the museum is invisible to visitors. Some participants emphasized that the visibility should be selective to avoid disrupting security and staff concentration. There was general agreement that back-of-house work must be framed as an organic part of the institutional mission, not as spectacle or curiosity.

Finally, discussion brought out a consensus that museums should not design out the potential for accident and the unexpected in the drive to provide lucid visitor access. Transparency and inclusiveness are about breaking down barriers, not rejecting complexity. Exhibitions and spaces should acknowledge the value of open interpretation.
New York City is among the world’s most significant and innovative cultural centers and the influence of its cultural institutions is felt worldwide. Much of this innovation lies in its museums creatively thinking of new ways to engage their current and future audiences while invigorating the visitor experience.

In a city with ever-evolving neighborhoods and extensive tourism, one of the challenges faced by many New York institutions is identifying their community and how best to engage with it. There was much conversation in the New York visioning session about the need for programming tailored to their local community as well as tourist visitors. Deciding how much to program and who to program for, was a key part of the discussion: how should museums connect with their community while maintaining the integrity of their mission? Many of the institutions we talked to are challenged with mission creep, especially in the community realm. What happens when you reach out and make promises but then can’t deliver?

Beyond identifying and connecting to audiences through programming, museums cited design of better visitor experiences as central to their missions. Many of the institutions we talked to saw great value in the creation of ground floor public spaces that connect their building to the street and create a noteworthy first stop on their audience’s experience. The lobby was considered to be the most important, but also the most architecturally challenging space. It is where you get your first and last impression of an institution and everyone agreed that the entry experience was as important as the leaving experience for their visitors. Having a personal presence as part of the initial visitor experience was also considered to be essential. Making people feel welcome may sound obvious but was not always achievable within the spaces these museums occupy.

Another key component of the visitor’s experience, wayfinding, was a subject of frustration for every institution we talked to, everyone agreed that they were just not getting it right. This was equally as challenging for museums operating in older architecture as for those whose buildings were recently designed to meet the current understanding of their mission.

As New York’s museums and institutions continue to push the boundary of visitor experience and engagement, architects should consider audience flow as an intrinsic part of the visit. Developing moments of rest, engagement, wonder, contemplation and discovery are key to the sublime museum experience our participants want to create.
THANK YOU TO OUR PARTICIPATING INSITUTIONS

CHICAGO
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- STOREFRONT FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE
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