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A SHARED PURPOSE: HOW COLLABORATION CAN ENABLE A WIDE- REACHING COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ETHIC

HELEN NICOLA BLACKMORE

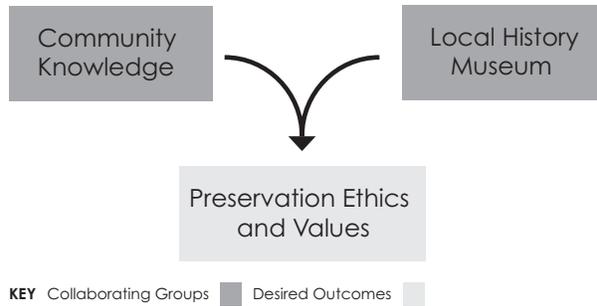
ABSTRACT—Historic preservation has the fundamental purpose of creating an enriching sense of place through the stewardship of historic resources. There is an opportunity for rebooting preservation to address this purpose through the formation of alliances with local history museums. In an effort to engage with and cultivate preservation values in the local community, new grassroots approaches to programming and audience participation are needed. Abundance thinking and co-creation can help foster collaboration between institutions with the shared goal of community engagement. Innovative examples of community engagement have occurred across the globe in Jacksonville, Oregon; Mid-Antrim, Northern Ireland; and Bendigo, Australia. Through examining these case studies and developing a framework for community engagement, historic preservation can reestablish itself within local communities and preservation values can be cultivated through new alliances with local history museums that create an avenue of public engagement regarding shared cultural heritage.

The heritage of small communities that have not traditionally been involved in the preservation movement should be given more attention. By focusing on preserving large-scale sites with national significance, preservation has marginalized local history, but there is an opportunity for preservation advocates to utilize local history museums as a resource for the cultivation of a sense of place on a local scale through public education and outreach. Local museums can connect people to their community, enabling public conversation and interest through exhibitions, tours,

and programming. This essay addresses relevancy and sustainability problems with local history museums, as well as the need for better collaborative models between communities and museums, and then presents relevant case studies as examples of how communities can connect people to place through local history.

MAKING LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUMS MORE RELEVANT AND SUSTAINABLE

Local museums hold the tangible objects, as well as the intangible stories, of community heritage, which is



*Fig. 1. Creating a Sense of Place.
(Designed and created by Helen Blackmore.)*

what makes them such a valuable resource for community heritage and preservation. Without these resources the sense of place of smaller communities would be more difficult to grasp. For instance, discussions at the 2013 Oregon Heritage Conference, held in Portland, provided ideas on how local history museums can educate the public and develop a sense of place within their communities while instilling the value of preservation through collaboratively created exhibitions to drive grassroots preservation (Figure 1). This was done through the presentation of local public engagement and education projects from across the state. These programs were the catalyst for further discussion on how to attract people to local museums and historic sites through public outreach. This in turn perpetuated the conversation allowing different organizations, societies, and groups to collaborate and consult on issues affecting the various museums that the conference attendees represented.

Local museums have found themselves struggling to be sustainable in a world that has an ever-increasing number of leisure options from which people can choose (Carpenter 2008). The reasons local museums have slipped from public focus in favor of science museums, interpretive museums, amusement parks, and aquariums are widely discussed and the causes are claimed to be numerous: lack of funds, lack of staff, administration issues, archaic institutional structuring, few resources, and no new ideas or concepts, to name but a few (Carpenter 2008). Local history museums have been suffering over the past few decades, and contemporary society can no longer adequately sustain these institutions. There has been a decline in attendance, causing funding to dwindle. These issues, while not new, are stifling museums; but they are resolvable. Importantly, these issues should be addressed given the significance of museums

within their communities as the keepers, archivists, and repositories of local history. It is therefore essential that the community agenda be included at every level of the museum; in order for this to occur museums need to revisit their mission statement, methods of practice, and community engagement (Crooke 2013).

Leisure options have not only grown and changed, but the ways that people want to be engaged have shifted (Carpenter 2008). Visitors want to be involved and participate; they are no longer willing to be passive in their entertainment activities (Carson 2008). Given these shifts, local museums need to address the problem of becoming irrelevant in a modern world. Cultural heritage is being lost due to globalization, creating a society that is no longer culturally sustainable. Identity has become layered, and in the process cultures have been diluted (Worts 2010). For fear of the neutralization of culture, we have to start at a local level in order to reach the largest possible audience.

THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

Collaboration would enable the sustainability of institutions by sharing resources, information, and values in an effort to sustain history-based institutions in the contemporary world. This collaboration would include any institution that has a stake in the representation of local, state, or national history. The three key stakeholders are local history museums; the communities they serve; and advocates for historic preservation, who desire grassroots preservation efforts. It is important to distinguish between collaboration and partnership for purpose of clarity. Partnership implies a business transaction within an overarching organizational structure, whereas collaboration is an alliance between institutions based on teamwork, to share not just resources and information, but the acknowledgment of values and the ability to listen and help one another. Mary Hutchinson (2013), working in Canberra, Australia, has identified ways in which collaboration can occur through “embedding shared authority” in the exhibition process, and creating and sustaining an “evolving process” in order to most successfully allow for decision-making equality across all participants. Moreover, Bryony Onciul (2013) proposes the use of an “engagement zone,” in which museums and the community can maximize the potential from the “contact zone” work, such as exhibition planning, and can lead to an adaptation of curatorial practice, policy/advisory boards, exhibitions, programs, and

community guides, as part of the public engagement outcomes in the curatorial process, a.k.a. the larger engagement zone. Hutchinson (2013) and specifically Onciul (2013, 84) discuss the importance of collaboration as a “temporary, movable, flexible, living sphere” in which engagement occurs. Therefore it is important that “power ebbs and flows, continually being claimed, negotiated and exchanged,” and located within the context of egalitarian-based interactions (Onciul 2013, 84). Institutions need to “share power, take on community concerns, and adapt” in order for public engagement to have validity and integrity (Onciul 2013 93) Further, there needs to be “shared authority” between the scholar’s authority and the authority of the community (Hutchinson 2013).

Before collaboration can be considered, a shift from the contemporary scarcity thinking approach to one of abundance thinking needs to occur (Ackerson 2011). The current use of scarcity thinking, which has the benefits of cutting costs and encouraging resourcefulness, limits museum staff to looking at what they have rather than seeking and embracing new opportunities and new approaches (Ackerson 2011). Abundance thinking helps refocus resources toward audience service and collaboration with other institutions, forming a cycle of cooperation. Museums can develop abundance thinking through audience-based relevance and enabling visitors to respond to collections on a personal level (Ackerson 2011). Through utilizing all possible resources co-creation can occur, museums can create community-relevant programs, and a sense of preservation can flourish.

Co-creation not only occurs between the public and the museum but also requires the inclusion of the preservation community. Co-creation can be a difficult and daunting process, in which the participants need to be open to new ideas and ways of approaching problems (Figure 2). Nina Simon (2010) challenges the current method of museum-designed programming that calls for outside engagement after the initial planning is completed, and argues for community involvement from the beginning of the exhibition process. Co-creative programs are fundamental to voicing community ideas and creating a forum for the community to be responsive to local issues, as well as helping to support skill development within the community and allowing members to take on tasks as part of a team (Simon 2010). This approach to programming is labor intensive, and museums need to be flexible with ideas. Ultimately the programming is most successful when there is an institutional

willingness to relinquish control of the program to the community members as the program processes.

These notions are not commonplace in museums today, but without them, co-creative projects will not be as successful and as fruitful as they could be. Preservation organizations acting as intermediaries and facilitators can enable museums to embrace co-creation, and the same is true in reverse. The issue is not just with local history museums but also the field of preservation. The issue of relevancy can also be addressed through a collaboratively formed, superstory narrative encompassing multiple institutions. This is an area that many preservation institutions overlook, as they focus on a single aspect of a historical narrative or theme.

Without placing local narratives into a larger scheme of history, communities are unable to identify why they are important, and without importance the community in which they are located may not see a need for preservation of their shared cultural heritage, and therefore a sense of place will be lost. A superstory incorporating multiple museums within one continuous narrative illuminates historical redundancies and facilitates local preservation of multiple sites through the validation and relevance of that specific narrative (Carson 2008). It is important that while museums locate their community within a larger history that they retain their identity and why they matter, so they do not become redundant within the larger network of sites and museums.

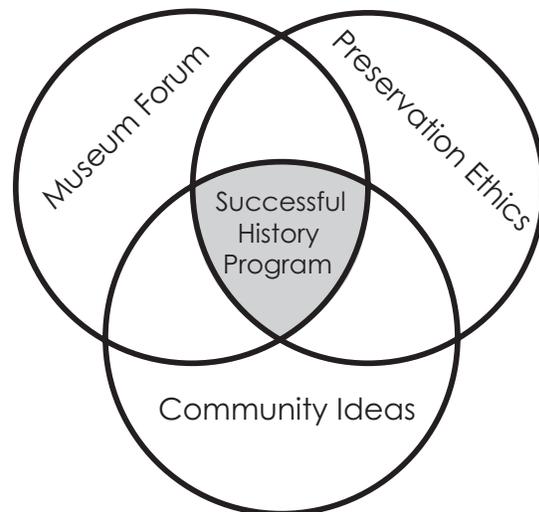


Fig. 2. Programming Co-Creation.
(Based on the scholarship of Nina Simon, adapted and created by Helen Blackmore.)

Historic preservation combines sociocultural and ethnographic approaches that can facilitate successful partnerships for local museums, schools, and other organizations and societies. Thematic, community-desired programs are reached through open discussion to understand the social implications of both the museum exhibition on the audience as well as the audience on the creation of a museum exhibition. Forums can help brainstorm new ways of programming themes for exhibitions, and it is important not to neglect the importance of quirky, idiosyncratic history. Everyone loves to tell unusual stories, and when told these stories instill a sense of community pride. Preservation values will inevitably follow.

HISTORY: MADE BY YOU: AN EXAMPLE OF LINKING COMMUNITY, PLACE, AND HISTORY THROUGH A LOCAL MUSEUM

The 2013 Oregon Heritage Conference is an example of how discussion, pooling of knowledge, and problem solving by museum staff and volunteers on exhibit programming and audience attendance can get us one step closer to reaching small communities across the country (Oregon Heritage Conference 2013). The conference highlighted the Southern Oregon Historical Society (SOHS), based in Medford, Oregon, which is working to enliven their community's preservation ethic through the display of shared cultural heritage that successfully brought community and place together through its innovative program, *History: Made By You*.

History: Made By You is an interactive outreach program that enables community members to research and develop traveling exhibitions based on community themes. The exhibitions rotate through four prominent places within the community within a period of four months. The program is led and facilitated by Amy Drake, the curator of special projects, and to date, the program has created seven exhibitions: "Pedaling History: The Roll of Bicycles in Jackson County," held in Jacksonville; "Icons of Agriculture: Central Point's Community Roots," exhibited in Central Point; "Stories of Home," shown in Medford; "Wire by Wire: How the Telephone, Fencing, and Electricity Came to Lake Creek," displayed in Lake Creek; "Rhythm of the Rails: The Golden Age of Railroading in Jackson County, 1890-1926," held in Medford; "Lov's Labor's Found: A Celebration of Volunteerism at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival," exhibited in Ashland; and "History: Made by You—Butte Falls," exhibited in Butte Falls. Through a

facilitated community forum, a topic that represents the community is chosen.

Over a period of four months, SOHS staff guides community volunteers through the research of a topic, the choosing and collection of artifacts, the selection of photographs, and the display of the exhibit. The exhibition is housed in a modular exhibition system specifically designed by Michael Golino in collaboration with Design-Journey and the Southern Oregon Historical Society for the program.

History: Made by You enables co-creation from the start of the project, and facilitates access for all those within the community who want to be involved, which empowers community members to become active participants in the process. The co-creative approach is highly beneficial to all involved: the SOHS has a method of exhibiting its objects; the community members gain hands-on, participatory experience in researching and displaying their heritage; the rest of the community has access to learn about parts of their history; the heritage community at large gains public awareness in small communities; and a preservation ethic is instilled. This innovative program not only engages with the community in a new and exciting way, but it also creates a sense of place and pride within the communities it represents. Sense of place is important for any community as it enlivens cultural heritage, which can spark the preservation of not only the local architecture and buildings, but also of the story. Local history museums and programs such as *History: Made By You* place the community's history within a tangible, local theme.

As demonstrated by the SOHS, developing sense of place within local communities is one way in which the values and importance of preservation can be more readily cultivated at a local, grassroots level. Without pride of place and ownership of shared cultural heritage, a preservation ethic cannot develop in a community. Even though local museums are fundamental to the sustaining of shared community heritage and sense of place, they are often overlooked and as a result they have found themselves in a world of dwindling financial resources, with few options. In order for preservation itself to be sustained, communities have to be addressed on a local level.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF MUSEUMS LINKING COMMUNITY, PLACE, AND HISTORY

There have been other efforts demonstrating innovative public programs in both the United Kingdom and Aus-

tralia. The majority of these programs are implemented to bring disparate communities together. For example, The Community History Programme at Mid-Antrim Museum Services (December 2006-8) was administered by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), with the aim of cross-border communications between people and organizations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Crooke 2013). These historically combative communities are facilitated through museum outreach services to focus on the understanding and exploration of histories associated with the division of Northern Ireland (Crooke 2013). The twenty community-based groups choose their direction and content to consider their shared history with the aim of effecting positive cultural and attitudinal change within the communities. The museum team worked with the groups to understand diverse interpretations of histories, places, and collections. Community groups were a mix of national and religious groups, senior citizens, ex-prisoners, women, and young people, all of whom participated in the workshops, reminiscences, and field trips and collaboratively produced an exhibition that was displayed in local centers and later at the Braid Museum, Ballymena. The groups wrote the text panels and chose the exhibition items, many of which were donated; further video-testimonials were included, in which participants discussed their roles and the impact that the program had on them.

Through the public displays of local histories in museums, a new set of values was introduced to the participating groups (Crooke 2013). Local experiences were connected with national stories that added significance to both (Crooke 2013). In an external program evaluation participants stated that the program was responsible for “reawakening civic pride,” led to “positive promotion of a community that had previously suffered from negative images,” and had made a “positive contribution to community cohesion” (Crooke 2013, 31). It is these values that are needed throughout the United States in small local communities. While the goals differ slightly, the desired outcome is the same: development of shared cultural heritage and pride of place.

A similar program developed in Australia in 2007, with a heritage engagement program called for by the Bendigo community (Perkin 2013). The program sought to garner support for local heritage, and initiate growth in the community status and accessibility by developing collaborative relationships between the local disparate groups (Perkin 2013). The creation of a representative

heritage group that met regularly enabled the organization of exhibitions and programming. The group also sought its own funding for a centrally located heritage gallery space. The City of Greater Bendigo has further developed its public engagement since the project’s initial inception through the founding of the Bendigo Heritage Advisory Committee and completion of the “Community Engagement: Guidelines and Toolkit” in 2011 by Project Officer Lindy Wilson. The Bendigo tactic encourages a participatory approach that values the contributions of knowledge and perspectives of local people and integrates these into professional museum practices (Perkin 2013). Termed “appropriate museology” this approach calls for the adaptation of current museum practices and strategies for cultural heritage preservation to specific local contexts and conditions (Perkin 2013). Through appropriate museology local history museums can enable their communities to develop shared cultural heritage in a professional museum setting, with the aim of invoking civic pride, which could in turn enable preservation values.

CONCLUSION

Through preservation values, ideas, and support, local history museums can establish new connections with their communities and instill a desire to preserve and protect their cultural heritage through education, information distribution, and conservation. Through the formation of a network of historical organizations and societies, resources and information can be pooled to further themselves within their local community. A community-based collaborative approach to museum programming can be accomplished through facilitated discussion that engages all the stakeholders: the museum staff, community leaders, the mayor, schools and universities in the area, and the local heritage organizations and preservation offices. These discussions can be held as a public forum at the museum, in a community hall, or online. The method should be determined by the demographic of the community it is intended to serve. Through the forums a list of available resources can be established, enabling a support network to minimize the amount of new equipment or resources museums need to purchase. In order for these discussions to work, “everyone needs to be at the table” (Norris 2013). This occurs when museums engage with the public through public forums, meetings, volunteer participation, and other public outreach in order to facilitate and allow for co-creative program-

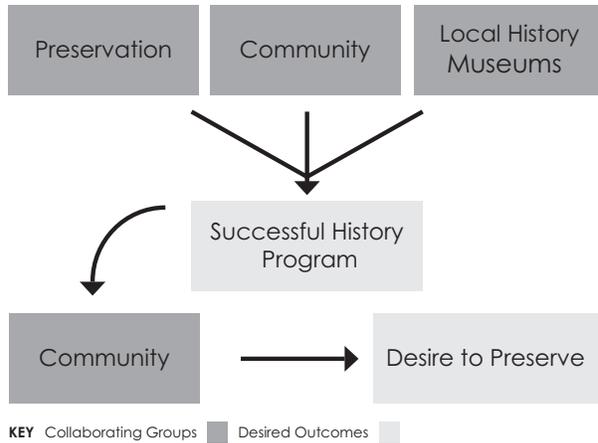


Fig. 3. *Shared Purpose—The Future of Preservation (Designed and created by Helen Blackmore.)*

ming. Local history museums can co-create community-informed programming that will enable the museums to place themselves more actively within their communities. Socially relevant exhibitions are then placed within the larger scheme of history. Collaboration is enabled through abundance thinking, a sense of place is facilitated, and preservation values are instilled.

Collaborative programming is not a new principle, but was used in the 1970s by the African American Museums Association, which functioned to link museums across the United States (Crew 1999). This model can be used to link local history museums, and preservation advocates need to see this opportunity for the dissemination of preservation values and principles to grassroots communities. Through embedding shared authority all the stakeholders can be involved in the production of cultural heritage with the aim of preserving not only cultures, but also the physical community. Without the local history museum the local heritage may well be lost; the museum often houses the artifacts of culture, and stores the narratives and the fundamental knowledge of the area's community heritage. For this to happen preservation agencies need to be proactive in enabling museums, and museums need to be proactive in engaging their communities (Figure 3). Without a healthy and engaged community, the museum will not survive in today's world.

HELEN BLACKMORE completed her master's of science, in historic preservation, at the University of Oregon in 2014, and has a bachelor of arts from the University of British Columbia, in art history and medieval studies. Through her studies at the University of Oregon she has

developed skills and a passion for architectural history and public engagement. She has created educational literature for grade school teachers to include local architectural history in the classroom, through the program *Know Your Home*. While at the University of Oregon, Helen worked as a collections assistant, receiving the Laurel Award from the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, and also interned with the Oregon Department of Transportation, completing Section 106 documentation, and historical research of sites and districts. Helen now works for Caltrans as an architectural historian, District 4. Helen presented this paper at the National Trust Conference, 2013, as well as one on the preservation of rest stops at the Historic Roads Conference, 2014.

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