

Communities and Museums: Building Lasting Relationships

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In my last article, I discussed how the working models explored by participants in the Cultural Diversity and Museums II and Canadian Image projects will shed some light on our profession's ability to work with cultural communities. Our colleagues' work has focused on the gifts and challenges of two models in particular.

Employing outside professionals

How does the museum establish an enduring relationship with a community when it uses the professional services of historians, anthropologists or graduate students? In most cases, professional researchers are involved for the duration of a specific project, then move on. The community in which the project takes place—whether it be research and documentation, short-term exhibitions or educational projects—provides materials and sometimes a representative voice, but this method does not necessarily build an enduring working relationship between the community and the institution. If we want our museums to be an integral part of the community, we must rethink the relationship between specialists engaged for specific projects, the committed museum staff and the communities we are all part of and serve.

Hosting interest groups

Another model of a working relationship turns the museum into a host facility. In this case, a community or interest group approaches the museum and arranges to mount a project of its own making. A number of museums across the country are inclined to go for this type of relationship since it requires little on their part. The museum provides space, some modest assistance (e.g. in the mounting of the exhibition) and promotes the project, while others may provide commercial services. We are slowly coming to appreciate that many community organizations can marshal the skills necessary for first-rate projects, such as the capacity to do professional design or serious research (although that is still very rarely done either inside the museum, where we often discourage anything but the most minimal treatment of information, or by a interest host group). Most often, it is our community-based colleagues that gather the artifacts and graphic materials and provide the interpretive text or labels.

There is a curious similarity between these two working models. In both cases, the museum is a faceless host. The danger lies in there being little or no legacy left from the projects. Little is added to the public sources of knowledge. Neither the depth of knowledge nor the friendship and commitment of the staff will grow through structuring projects solely in the described terms.

We need to explore ways to make our working relationships deepen our commitments if we want museums to be part of their community, to play their singular role as public institutions in the new society of pluralism and to find their larger sense of purpose. The studies that will be published as a result of the CDMII and Canadian Image projects will allow us to see how museums apprentice their staff to the tasks, initiate them to the full range of communities they are called to serve, deepen their participation in the life of the community and broaden the museum's public role.