

An Uneven March Across Bumpy Terrain: Gallery Reinstallation as Organizational Change

By Lori Fogarty

When I joined the Oakland Museum of California as Executive Director a little over four years ago, I was drawn by the extraordinary opportunity to be part of the reinvention of an institution. I have worked on two other major capital projects and campaigns in my museum career, and I knew how invigorating this kind of institutional transformation can be. I also believed that no institution anywhere was so poised to do something truly different and amazing than the Oakland Museum of California, with its strong history of community engagement, multidisciplinary collections focused on California, and location in the heart of one of the country's most diverse cities.

And yet, what began as essentially a building renovation project and gallery reinstallation has evolved in ways that I could have never imagined at the outset. While our new Galleries of California Art and History recently reopened (see the companion piece by Chief Curator of Education Barbara Henry on the visitor-centered interpretive and technology approaches in the art gallery), we are still very much in the thick of not just a physical change but an institutional culture change as well.

As I step back from the undertakings of the past four years, I am at times struck by how much effort some seemingly obvious and straightforward changes required. After all, isn't it a no-brainer that a museum with collections of science, history, and art should maximize those connections to creatively express the full story of the state? Or that a collaborative design approach among people with different types of expertise would yield a much more complex and interesting experience of the collections for our visitors? And yet, these approaches weren't the norm at OMCA — nor are they at most museums, I've discovered. Indeed, making significant changes to our galleries was far from an even march across a level field. So, what did we try, and what did we learn in this quest?

First, we constructed new types of teams for the reinstallation of our galleries, altering the traditional hierarchies within a department and between departments. Many museum exhibitions begin with a singular curatorial vision, supported by education staff helping to provide some level of access and interpretation for the "everyday visitor," followed by a designer developing the layout, lighting, and graphics. Instead, with our gallery reinstallation project, we created "core teams" with curators, educators, and designers working in real collaboration — or striving to do so. Real collaboration means that the teams have to truly share the same goals, and that content and expertise, interpretation and access, and visitor experience and comfort need to vie for attention, resources, emphasis, and balance. This is not easy, particularly for staff who are used to working in very different ways. The teams have expanded, contracted, streamlined, and morphed over the multiyear process as we navigated the tensions between inclusivity of perspectives and clarity of decision-making. Teams constantly asked the questions: "Who has the final say?" "Why are we revisiting that decision?" "When will we be done — when do we say 'pencils down'?" This challenge of living with ambiguity has been especially tested by our second significant change in approach — the inclusion of visitor perspectives and voices.

Our overarching goal in the reinstallation project has been to make our collections and galleries more welcoming, accessible, and engaging to the Museum’s potentially very diverse audience, which includes people who have never been to a museum before as well as sophisticated audiences with a long-time attachment to our institution. This sounds like a goal that everyone can embrace. But to truly be accessible and engaging to the public means we actually have to listen to that public. We have to understand something about that public. And we have to bring in voices and perspectives that are different from our own.

This was another major change in process that the Museum has undergone. As described by Barbara Henry in her essay, we involved more than 3,300 visitors and community members in various ways in providing feedback, prototyping and testing, and participating in creative brainstorming sessions about the Gallery of California Art. The history and natural sciences galleries have had similar processes of community feedback and participation. Listening to and truly acting upon this feedback requires a “radical trust” that visitors and community members actually have something important to say, that they have strong — and informed — opinions about museums, and that we will make changes based on this input. These changes could be something as simple as having comfortable seating and colorful walls, or something as complex as telling the story of Native Californians entirely in the first-person voice, as we’ve done in the section, “Before the Other People Came,” in the history gallery.

Finally, beyond the new types of teams and the inclusion of visitor and community perspectives, we had to learn about and understand as much as possible the dramatically changing society and times in which we live. Over the past few years, we have had many conversations at the Museum about California’s changing demographics, and the new uses of technology, new means of communication and participation, and alternative ways of spending leisure time. These conversations have informed our galleries in ways large and small. For example, we’ve built “loaded lounges” so that our visitors themselves participate — whether as artist, citizen scientist, or history-maker — in telling the story of California. We’ve also included signage and interpretive materials in three languages, not just for the people who may only speak Spanish or Chinese, but because we want to signal to *all* visitors that we are a place that welcomes them and recognizes their traditions and histories as well.

Beyond the broader societal changes, however, I believe our transformation is motivated by a deep sense of civic pride and responsibility for many of us on the staff, on the Board, and among our volunteers and elected officials. We are located in Oakland — a city that is challenged in fundamental and profound ways by poverty, violence, limitations in the educational system, and racial tension. At the same time, we are in a place of tremendous beauty, with vibrant diversity, a proud history, and incredible artistic creativity. In light of these factors, we have not only the opportunity but also the duty to become a place within our community where people of all different backgrounds can come together in dialogue, celebration, reflection, inspiration, and stewardship. This may mean an uneven march on often rough terrain, but we know that we are making forward progress and the scenery along the way — most of the time — is spectacular.