



*From One Hand to Another: Native American Treasures from the Children's Museum became a major partnership between two Indianapolis institutions, the Eiteljorg Museum and The Children's Museum, and their communities. Native American resident artist Frank Ettawageshik showed his pottery skills to the next generation, and inter-generational storytellers shared traditions as part of this interdisciplinary collaboration.*

## Readiness to Collaborate

As those who attended the Museum Loan Network “think tanks” said frequently, collaboration has been around a long time, and good models abound. The last century’s WPA (Works Progress Administration) is one such model, noted participants in the third “think tank:” it was inclusive and interdisciplinary, offering employment to all kinds of artists; it added to the culture—“the social or public good”—in recording artifacts that otherwise might have been lost; and it managed well any potential controversy. Resources were substantial, they were quick to point out—an ingredient not to be underestimated. But even good models like the WPA are hard to replicate or transfer, they said, and new ones are even harder to launch without a certain “readiness,” and obstacles to such “readiness” also abound.

By its very nature, for example, interdisciplinary collaboration challenges one’s sense of site, one’s sense of object, and one’s ideas about the purpose of art. It therefore tests the ability to let go of turf, to sublimate ego, to suspend judgment, and to listen well and deeply—all predictable psychological hurdles.

Organizationally, collaboration presents equivalent challenges: institutions are loath to relinquish traditional orientations and authority. Participants in the first convening noted that art museums, especially, are only now gradually giving way to acknowledge the implicit “voice” of their visitors or potential visitors. History and science museums tend to be “way ahead.” Still, they faulted almost all cultural institutions for not availing themselves of new scholarship on the subject—or acknowledging the changing nature of that scholarship (a new generation of

scholars was said to be interested in careers that have more of a public service dimension, for instance).

The spectrum of collaborations is a wide one, however, and experience with almost any type offers lessons in overcoming these obstacles. Those attending the first meeting felt that while “business deals” and “gigs” do not constitute true collaboration, for instance, they could nevertheless form the basis for such a later relationship. One participant reported that her university-based art museum would be moving off-campus to a downtown building chiefly to assist the local history museum. Though not a choice her museum would have made for itself, she hopes the proximity brought about by this “business deal” will nevertheless stimulate a good cross-pollination of ideas. Her colleagues described other forms as well: intra-institutional collaboration, which is

By creating “liquidity” our new digital technology makes a breath-taking array of things possible, says **Ben Howell Davis**, who has spent 25 years making connections in the fields of information technology, communications, and education.

A curator of American art in Nebraska can browse through the collection of an historic site in Florida looking for ideas in connection with an up-coming show—without ever leaving home. (The Museum Loan Network’s own directory of some 6000 images was developed to promote this “search capability,” he points out; it functions as a kind of “digital brokerage.”) If something looks promising, this same technology can help speed communications about a possible loan, facilitate planning and implementation details, and once the exhibit is up, make interaction with visitors possible as well—both on and off-site.

In other words, “the dynamic transactional nature of digital technology *facilitates thinking*,” says Davis. “You can mock up an exhibit and shop an idea around—even globally. And because my collection plus yours, plus the data and information we can provide to each other makes for something far more interesting

than we would have alone, the value is many times greater.” Ultimately, he thinks, we will build exhibitions online—virtual shows that have no physical counterpart—that can be downloaded anywhere on cell phones or other mobile devices.

Making collections “liquid” also creates “liquid capital,” which can be used to *facilitate economic advantages*. For one thing, he suggests, “you can enhance your collection without having to collect” by way of an alternative or “barter economy” of in-kind trading. For another, liquidity creates the potential for new revenue streams. He offers an example: the Art Gallery of Ontario created “smart cards”—“readable,” plastic, credit-style cards—for \$10, \$20, and \$30, that could be used for entry fees, or to buy books and other items in the museum shop, and businesses and corporate sponsors bought large numbers of them for employee and client gifts.

“Once you put together an exhibit, it’s time to think about product,” says Davis, “and the more you make things liquid, the more opportunities you create.” For example, educational materials can be sold or subscribed to, and as we say of the Internet, they “drive traffic” back toward the museum. “People could col-

lect images the way the kids have collected music through Napster,” he muses; “they now go to museums and buy reproductions so there’s a market.”

The discrete “assets” of “digital capital”—the potential for personalized connection, transaction (reaction and feedback), publication and distribution—make market research, collaboration with wide-ranging audiences, and many forms of membership and support possible. To tap them, museums should invite technology companies to become partners and collaborators, advises Davis. “‘Tech’ should be brought into the conversation as exhibits are planned. Everyone benefits by getting out of the box they’re in, and interaction with art helps business.”

“Social capital, cultural capital—when they’re digital they’re transformable, transactional, monetizable, liquid,” he concludes. “And digital liquidity means new opportunity for leveraging collections, exhibitions, ideas, and possibilities for engagement—even for leveraging trust. Any tool that does all of this is one that helps sustain institutions—because the models are refreshed. So technology also challenges us, raising the bar on the meaning and use of museums.”

often found within universities and colleges; inter-institutional collaboration, which can feature individuals as well as organizations working together; and complementary programming organized around a shared theme or services, where a central office or created entity coordinates personnel, programs, and media events.

Participants in the third “think tank” actually offered some tips for “letting go,” for moving to a receptive state of mind where true collaboration is possible:

- Allow yourself to be curious about, even immersed in others’ work. As one conferee phrased it, “falling in love with your collaborator’s work as much as you can” may help you set aside your own agenda.
- Don’t deny: begin and work with what you’re given. Another pointed out that this is the first lesson of improvisation. If you “dead-end,” you dead-end together, and that will be a new starting place.
- Pre-plan to diminish initial awkwardness, then work to identify and shape a common goal so that everyone can see that something of value is taking shape. Passivity can’t be condoned, suggested another participant. “Extending” ones’ self is what makes it happen.
- Locate true intersections of interest, and leave behind what is simply not “doable.” Elimination is crucial, yet another pointed out; otherwise momentum can atrophy.

To generate real interest in collaborating and comfort with the process, those involved in one of the final convenings breakout sessions said, museums will have to confront the museum model itself and structures within it that create inefficiency and impede creativity. As in any collaboration, the question will be, “How much loss of control can everyone sustain?” The task will be difficult, they acknowledged, but collaboration might be just what museums need to change old ways of doing business. Current museum culture is often negatively perceived, they noted, because in preserving the sanctity of the object, that culture enforces the notion that nothing should be touched. Not everyone feels welcome either.

Collaborating with artists, they proposed, might be a way to make museums seem more inviting, and their collections more accessible—as any number of examples they discussed had pointed out. To be sure, there are downsides: while artists can lure people in, visitors may still



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“I’ve always believed museums shouldn’t just play a conserving role,” says **Howard Taylor**. “They should move beyond their walls.” He explains: “If art has wonderful values, those values shouldn’t stop when you leave a museum; you shouldn’t see something else outside. After all, art is—should be—in our lives, not just on walls.” For Taylor, that adds up to a “radical” idea: that “community is the greatest work of art.” When he became the first (and to date the only) director of the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts (SAMFA) and Children’s Art Museum in Texas in 1985, he decided to see how far that idea could take him and his institution. A long, long way, it turns out.

“A new building can help a community look better, but it’s still passive,” Taylor begins, describing the almost 17-year process that has placed his museum at the center both of San Angelo life and a nexus of spoke-like streets that literally lead back into the community in all directions. He therefore decided to “do some pro-active things.” Foremost among them: a series of exhibitions titled “Visions and Choices” that invited San Angelo citizens to express “what I see for my community.” The “best ideas come from the grass roots,” he believes.

“We had to offer people an unbelievable amount of support to make

be unable to “read” paintings and objects. Moreover, the presence and vitality of the live artist in the foreground can relegate the object and the original artist to the background. And artists and museum people have their own “cultural barriers” and differences in language to reconcile.

Overcoming these barriers isn’t easy either. Nonetheless, the more museums involve artists, and through them, greater numbers of people from their communities, said those in the breakout group, the more energized and anchored museums will be. Inviting visitors to collaborate by bringing objects into the museum—or even buying objects for the museum—is another idea gaining a foothold. Inviting the public in

this happen,” Taylor acknowledges. “We told them they could write or sketch something, or just put ideas in a suggestion box. We had crayons, markers, and drawing boards available—we even provided artists to help. But they created their own visions.” Roughly 150 entries were displayed—everything anyone submitted, Taylor says; there was no selection process. “I suppose if we’d gotten something disgusting we may have had to leave it out,” he muses, “but we didn’t. The only messiness in this was immature ideas.”

He admits that this “could easily have been an exhibit that went nowhere.” Instead, quite spontaneously, things began to happen. The exhibit revived interest in the historic preservation group, which had gone dormant. Several of his board members began working to bring it back to life. By no means had all of the ideas in the exhibit been immature, and Taylor was loath to “shelve” the promising ones. He set up forums and task committees to consider them further. “But ultimately,” he recalls, “we realized we had to have a rallying point, something that could coalesce everything into a plan of action.”

He had read about a program of the American Institute of Architects—something called the Regional Urban Design Assistance Team, or R/UDAT. He surmised that if he could round up

enough community support—especially a wide enough “range of buy-in”—perhaps the R/UDAT team might be persuaded to visit San Angelo for “a weekend of brainstorming that could create a plan for planning.” It took three years to find leadership outside the museum, Taylor concedes, but he did—“a rancher with a pro-active sensibility” who joined with other community leaders to bring the R/UDAT team to town. “They said it was the most successful project they ever did,” Taylor reports, “because the community had already thought deeply about itself in our exhibitions.”

San Angelo is a city split by a river—on one side, Fort Concho, where the town had its beginnings, and on the other, the downtown, which once had “predictable houses of ill repute,” says Taylor. “The R/UDAT team put together something that would unite them.” The team’s presence also broke down other barriers, he reports, including resistance from city government. Eventually it created a bond issue to continue restoring Fort Concho (the first site of the San Angelo Museum), remove “junk buildings,” restore the old railroad depot, and build a pedestrian bridge. “All in all, it was a vast program of physical improvement, linking the town’s assets,” Taylor explains.

to see objects being conserved, stored, and cared for, is too. Both are exciting new ways of operating that lay the groundwork for greater exchange and more ambitious collaboration.

Ultimately, said those in the breakout group, fostering collaboration may necessitate creating a field where “collaboration is what it is,” as one put it. “Liaison specialists” could be trained to manage collaborations and the delicate diplomacy they entail, to discern the “doable” among the imperfect situations and opportunities that present themselves as contexts for collaboration, while “master collaborators” could travel around, sparking ideas and assisting with crises. Such a field might give rise to departments of collaboration within museums, which could over-

The plan also resulted in a new home for the museum. “We didn’t set out to build a new building, but in the end we were offered a spot right at the foot of the pedestrian bridge, in the middle,” he says. The place opened two years ago, and in Taylor’s words, has “made the museum a powerful presence in San Angelo.”

That power, Taylor believes, derives from the museum’s accessibility. It is not “set off” by landscaping; the offices are close by the front entrance; and both storage and the registrar’s offices are totally open. Moreover, SAMFA has a multi-purpose room that it makes available to the city (“it’s rare not to have people pour in each night for something,” he says), and an education wing that it shares with Angelo State University and the local school district. “The museum building is designed to be transparent,” Taylor points out, “to make people feel a part of the place, and that has kept them here. It is as much a community center as a museum.” (SAMFA also makes it easy for people to belong, charging only \$10 for a membership or \$20 per family. “Obviously we’re losing money and have to market it,” he says, “but we have a wide membership.”)

What mix of ingredients prepared them to accomplish so much? “It’s the nature of preserving institutions to protect, to put up barriers,” Taylor

thinks, “so there has to be a desire to lower those barriers, to be accessible.” He personally was willing. In an earlier stint back east he had tried to gather support for a joint storage facility; at the time a number of museums were running out of space. But the effort was stymied: everyone was “too overwhelmed with what they were doing,” Taylor says, to make it a priority. He was thus “ready.” So, too, were San Angelo and his board. “It’s a small, rural community, very challenged,” Taylor explains. “In agriculture, you see, it’s always a struggle; there’s always a sense of need. But that old imperative—survival—in the region’s agricultural background means that people could work together too.”

“There was an openness here that helped,” Taylor says, “but I still think what was done here is applicable anywhere. Museums are about objects, but they should be about the *ideas* that are inherent in those objects too.” He pauses. “I came to Texas thinking I’d do my experiments and go back and apply them. Ha! It’s been almost 17 years, they’ve been successful, but I’m still here.” Why? He wants to see the ideas go further. For the past several years he’s been promoting a general accessibility among museums, working on “resource sharing,” especially “vertical sharing” among institutions of unequal pres-



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tige and size. “We’ve now made it a policy to share everything we have—‘no-charge loans’—and at least six museums have borrowed from us,” he says. “And we’ve gained good access, in return, to peoples’ brains, talents, and collections.”

“Collaboration is very hard work,” Taylor concludes. “For an institution it needs to be a way of life—to permeate *everything*. That’s why we have a chamber music series with the symphony, and work with the ballet, why we welcome the Hispanic Leadership Group to meet here regularly. The strategy is to create a totally collaborative environment.” As for being ready to create such a web-work of collaborations, “it’s not a science,” Taylor says. “You just have to do it. You just have to believe that good will flow from it, and come back to you.”

San Angelo is an appealing example. When his board asked him “why had I gotten so involved in so many non-museum things,” Taylor recalls, “I said, ‘it’ll pay off.’ And it did.” The largest previous capital campaign had a goal of \$1 million and did not make it, while SAMFA raised \$7.5 million—the rough equivalent of \$100 million in New York City, as Taylor points out. “There were no strangers when we needed support.”

see both internal and external work. Too often, collaborating partners simply don't have the sufficient time, staff, or skills to dedicate to the effort, they noted.

Creating a culture that honors and nourishes collaboration, they pointed out, would ultimately honor and nourish the uniqueness of each museum and its mission. Not every museum is prepared to take on social activism, for example, nor should it be. Models must be "cut to the cloth of the site," as one participant said, and collaboration would provide for that customizing of nuance.

Throughout the three MLN convenings, participants cited reasons to get involved in collaborations—to build something new, create a new outcome, learn more about one's own work or one's self, carry out shared missions more effectively, and command wider community input and investment, among them. Or because, as **Lori Gross** said, quoting a Boston principal involved in a six-way collaboration, "The ability to take risks and to work together stands for what it means to be a human being." Real "collaboration is ultimately a journey of unknown destination," as a participant noted, however, and readiness ultimately lies in accepting that. "You have to trust that it will be worthwhile."

"In a heavenly community that has everything, museums and collaborations would be superfluous," says **Stephen E. Weil**, Emeritus Senior Scholar, Smithsonian's Center for Education and Museum Studies, and Chair, Museum Loan Network Advisory Committee. But unfortunately, he suggests, we're on earth, where communities don't have everything they need, and museum collaborations can help provide some of what's missing.

"If museums focus on their communities' well-being and contentment, that is," he says. "That's the *whole point*, and therefore, the starting point. The hard fact is that museums must be of use. If a community is not better off for what museums do, they won't be supported. They need to foster interaction that changes the tone, how people are raised, how they spend their time." In other words, gone are the days Weil characterizes

as "pure indulgence, when museums could say 'let's do something together'—as if they were Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney—'and see if someone comes.'" Only what is needed will get supported, he stresses; resources are too scarce for it to be otherwise.

Public needs are actually better served when organizations collaborate, Weil believes: collaboration, he points out, "magnifies individual efforts so the end result and impact are both greater and better." Thus, honing in on "the starting point" for Weil is looking to see what interests and needs can't be met by "people flying solo," then at others who are pursuing common purposes. Though their methods and vocabularies may differ, they could be potential partners. "And if you're addressing a problem, you should list capabilities that will be necessary, then look for those who can provide them." The American Association of Museums is conduct-

ing an experiment in 12 cities along these lines—having museums list their competencies and then providing the lists to social workers, schools, agencies working with gangs, and the like. "So far the main surprise of the experiment," Weil reports, "is in the communities—their not knowing that museums could, or would care to do something."

Collaborations between institutions probably won't be about creativity, he hastens to note, but rather about "delivering many points of entry, or many resources, or many competencies." Shifts of personnel, bureaucracies, boards of trustees, and extraordinary rules to be gotten around frequently make them anything *but* creative. "Getting elephants to dance is very difficult!" he points out. What such collaborations can potentially *unleash*, however, is a different matter—i. e., creative, engaging—transforming—forces.