

MUSEUMS AS CATALYSTS FOR *Change*

How do museums become centers for change? Examples from the Children's Museum in Southeastern Connecticut, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, and the New England Aquarium show how museums are able to be the catalysts for change.

By *Laura B. Roberts*,
Principal, Roberts Consulting

The American museum community has been striving towards the goal of “community engagement” since 1998, when AAM initiated its “Museums & Community” discussions around the country. After many years of trying to figure out what that means, I don’t think we are much closer to that goal. Deep, sustained engagement does not come from creating more advisory committees or hosting more community open houses. It doesn’t even come from new collecting initiatives or diversifying the board of directors, although those steps are necessary. I am convinced that engagement only takes root when a museum is raising important questions and helping members of the community think about answers or solutions, when a museum finds a role that is relevant and valued.

At a museum conference last fall, the executive director of a state historical society noted that the society serves its community by bringing people with divergent views to the table in an atmosphere of safety and trust. She described the museum as a neutral, agenda-free “Switzerland”

and her colleagues murmured their appreciation. But I viewed it another way. Leaving aside the complicated political theory question of whether Switzerland is, in fact, neutral, I think our museums should uphold and act on a set of values and attitudes. What would our field look like if we did not settle for simply being venues for difficult conversations, but catalysts of social change?

To initiate this conversation with my colleagues in NEMA, I invited three gifted and courageous museum leaders to participate in a session at the annual conference. Christine Hammond of Children’s Museum Southeastern Connecticut, Katherine Kane of Harriet Beecher Stowe Center and William Spitzer from New England Aquarium addressed the question: “Can Museums be Effective Advocates?” This article will draw on their experience and the work of others.

First, a note about language. When I sat down to do the powerpoint introduction for the session, I unconsciously changed the noun from “advocate” to “activists.” I am still not sure of the right terminology, but I think “catalyst” may be closer to the mark. I am arguing that museums

should not shy away from embracing a point of view or position on appropriate critical social or cultural issues and that they should work towards social change consistent with those positions. But for me, "advocacy" and "activism" imply particular activities and I have observed that a wide range of activities can be effective.

For some museums, addressing issues of public policy are the norm. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums requires that member organizations include messages on conservation of animals and habitat in their interpretation and exhibitions. New England Aquarium has reoriented the entire institution around its Live Blue Initiative, from changing exhibit labels and creating downloadable exhibit tours to renaming its member magazine and creating a separate web portal (liveblueinitiative.org), continuing the campaign outside the aquarium's halls. As Billy Spitzer explained at the conference, the campaign was a strategic response to the aquarium's financial challenges as well as a response to what they perceive as a threat to the health of the planet. The board and staff reasoned that sustainability would come not from being a more popular public attraction but by being more relevant. Not only has attendance and philanthropic giving increased, but "Live Blue" logo merchandise outsells generic products in the aquarium store.

The Aquarium is now seen as a leading voice in the discussion of the impacts of climate change on the oceans. While not advocating for a particular set of solutions or policies, it has brought scientists, experts and public policy leaders together with the mandate: this is a serious issue which demands serious attention and constructive

solutions. And they have taken their concerns to the general public. For example, the aquarium's president, Bud Ris, was interviewed on WBUR, one of Boston's NPR stations, talking about the dramatic impact of rising sea levels on the harbor and the city, saying "we don't have a lot of time to spare." Listen to the interview here, www.wbur.org/2010/08/26/harbor-future#audio.

Even without a mandate from a professional association, every museum can examine its values and expertise to understand which social issues might be relevant to its mission. For example, the mission of the Children's Museum of Southeastern Connecticut is "to encourage learning and spark imagination by engaging children and all families through creative

...every museum can examine its values and expertise to understand which social issues might be relevant to its mission.

and hands-on play in a safe and accessible community environment." As Christy Hammond and the staff and board thought about that mission, they came to understand that creating a "safe and accessible" museum was not enough. They know that the hours children spend watching television leave little time for "creative and hands-on play" after school. The museum took the lead in organizing a community-wide TV Turnoff Week. They coordinated alternative programming throughout the community and supported and recognized families who took the pledge.

With a cash budget of \$5,000 and far more in contributions of time, facilities, and services, the museum provoked local families to rethink how children should spend their time and what constitutes healthy intellectual and social development. It's not that the museum's stand was controversial (after all, few would argue that children should spend more time watching television), but it did represent a broader, more activist interpretation of their mission.

Other children's museums have taken on children's health (including the crisis of childhood obesity), the value of unstructured play in children's standardized-test-oriented life, and responsible stewardship of natural resources. The Discovery Museums in Acton, Massachusetts, for example, received a MetLife Foundation and Association of Children's Museums 2010 Promising Practice Award for its Water Resource Project, a series of 11 hands-on programs for families that focus on water resources, quality, and environmental protection.

Sometimes, the link between social change and museum mission is clear. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center is acutely conscious of the legacy of Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin, the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. The Center "promotes vibrant discussion of her life and work, and inspires commitment to social justice and positive change." To achieve this mission, Katherine Kane and her staff have initiated a series of Salons at Stowe, "21st-century parlor conversation designed to inspire you to move from dialogue and debate to action on current social justice issues... a forum for lively discussion on important contemporary topics that concerned

continued on page 17

Museums as Catalysts for Change continued from page 9

Harriet Beecher Stowe. A key element of each Salon is the creation of an 'Inspiration to Action' agenda - a list of specific actions that can be taken to address the issue at hand." Recent salons have discussed stereotyping and name-calling, animal rights, re-abolishing slavery, and banning books. To read more about the program click here, www.harrietbeecherstowe-center.org/worxcms_published/programs.items_page104.shtml.

Few history museums have the explicit tie to a social agenda that the Stowe Center embraces. Nevertheless, many of their missions or plans speak of the value of a historical perspective in understanding contemporary issues and challenges. But when a town looks at the challenges it is facing - the protection of open space, the revitalization of a business district, the assimilation of new faces - where is the historical museum or society and its historical perspective? The staff and board, as historically-minded citizens, may walk out of a community meeting shaking their heads at the lack of historical context in contemporary debate, but at the same time have not looked for a way for the history museum or society to contribute that perspective and be part of the search for solutions.

Art museums seem to find it even more difficult to find an appropriate role in public discourse. One valuable resource on this work is the Animating Democracy Project of Americans for the Arts. Most of the projects have been undertaken by performing arts groups, but the project website (www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/reading_room/case_studies/visual_arts.asp#tawm) includes four moving case studies of projects in muse-

ums. The link between public art projects and activism is perhaps more comfortable. The project database includes documentation of The Manhole Cover Project, on gun violence, and the Hartford Grandmothers' Project, addressing the fear of city streets experienced by elderly women, both undertaken by Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and The State Hospital: In Memoriam sponsored by Historic Northampton (Massachusetts) to promote civic dialogue about the mental health system in America.

As I thought about this topic, I began to look around at other parts of the community or our culture to see who else was embracing the challenge of acting on their values and priorities. I found some surprises. The National Football League is promoting "Play 60," encouraging kids to get 60 minutes of exercise a day. (www.nflrush.com/play60) MTV promotes engagement with the political process around issues of importance to young people in their "Rock the Vote" campaign. (www.rockthevote.org/about/history-rock-the-vote) The Concord, Massachusetts, town meeting has banned bottled water, encouraging residents to use reusable bottles and drink tap water. Richard M. Daley, the outgoing mayor of Chicago, had an aggressive "green" agenda, going far beyond the specifics of his job description to change public policies and government practice, but also promote and encourage private action.

This leads me to wonder about the impediments to change. Admittedly, we do not have the power or influence of the NFL or MTV, but within our communities we are often prominent and trusted

resources. Some may worry that people are looking for enjoyable diversion in museums, not serious discourse. Perhaps paradoxically, the sectors of our field that are more enthusiastic about engaging with issues - science museums, zoos and aquariums, and children's museums - are also those most heavily dependent on admissions and related earned income. Like the New England Aquarium, I suspect many find that relevancy is actually good for the bottom line.

I also have talked with board and staff who fear that controversy will alienate participants, donors, public funders, or other key stakeholders. A few think that nonprofits are barred from entering into public debates, which is not true. (They cannot use their resources to campaign for candidates or specific legislation.) I know of at least one community where the historical society was so worried about engaging in the highly-charged discussions around preservation, that they encouraged members to create a second, more activist preservation organization.

To those organizations, I ask this simple question: *Which is worse, offending a few people or being seen as irrelevant by many?* I know which I would choose.