

REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Community-informed design: Blending community engagement and museum design approaches for sustainable experience development

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Abstract

The museum field currently and historically has centered on the needs of White, educated, privileged, and affluent people, and changing that reality requires new ways of conceptualizing, organizing, and assessing our core practices. Practice-based models—including specific stories of how museums and communities work together—are still needed in our field, both as guidance for structuring future projects and as inspiration for what is possible. We share a case study of a 10-year makerspace design process and identify key features for sustaining community–museum relationships over an extended period of work, which we call community-informed design. We describe five key aspects that promote sustainability in terms of community–museum relationships and the creation of high-quality experiences: naming values and assumptions, emergent planning, flexible and distributed staffing, organization-to-organization relationships, and layered data.

KEYWORDS

community engagement, diversity, exhibition design, partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Museums view themselves as resources for and in relationship with many communities, working to both respond to and anticipate community needs. Yet museums are also exclusionary environments, serving the more White, affluent, and well-educated subset of the local population (Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies [COVES], 2019; Dawson, 2019).

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Community engagement initiatives, through which museum staff and historically marginalized community members work together to transform museums, are a popular approach for addressing current and historical exclusion (MASS Action, 2017; Morse, 2018). Often, community engagement happens in a burst of energy, perhaps because funding is pushed toward a given effort or specific community, and upon conclusion, engagement slows or stops, which can result in frustration by community members, among museum staff, or even from project funders.

In this article, we share a case study of community–museum collaboration to develop a makerspace when the timeline is a decade instead of a year; when significant turnover happens on both the museum and the community side; when funding comes from multiple sources; and when goals shift as work continues. Looking back at 10 years of developing experiences focused on hands-on making and engineering in collaboration with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-centered community organizations, we identify five key practices that, in retrospect, supported the long-term sustainability of collaborative work: (1) naming our values/assumptions; (2) emergent planning; (3) flexible and inclusive staffing; (4) organization-to-organization relationships; and (5) layered data. While this vision of long-term community engagement for museum design is a form of collaboration, it does not fit cleanly into the existing terminology of community engagement literature, so we adopt the phrase community-informed design (CID).

In sharing our story and recommendations, we add to the numerous models and stories already in existence concerning how to engage community voices in museum design (Dixon et al., 2023; Kadoyama, 2018; Kroning, 2017; MASS Action, 2017; McCarthy & Herring, 2015; Simon, 2010; Toonen, 2021). Changing museum cultures and experiences—particularly for equity and inclusion aims—requires a significant departure from existing museum norms of practice, from hiring to leadership to settings and collections to authority over stories told (Anila, 2017; Ash, 2022; Doering, 2020; Duclos-Orsello, 2013). The CID model prioritized longevity and sustainability of work over rapid transformation, meaning some aspects of this model fall short of calls in the field, specifically in terms of power sharing. We believe it is still an important story to share, as it may serve as generative ground for museum professionals looking for many visions of community-engaged work.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

We situate this story in two existing literatures: (1) the intersection of exclusionary practices in museums and maker education and (2) community engagement work in museums.

Exclusion in museum and maker education

For many people, museums are “not for me” in a variety of ways. A museum is designed to collect particular items (Gardner & Merritt, 2004; Wintle, 2016), display particular knowledge and narratives (Bourdieu et al., 1991; Sentance, 2018), and ultimately end up attracting particular audiences (Dilenschneider, 2016; Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010; Reich et al., 2010). Looking at science centers and museums, Dawson's (2019) ethnographic study with 59 individuals from the United Kingdom's ethnic minority communities revealed how museums exclude in terms of infrastructure access, literacies, and community acceptance. The final idea is worth unpacking here: a collective imagination exists concerning who is a museum visitor and if that existing museum community will accept and embrace newcomers and their contributions, which Dawson calls community acceptance. When museums act in ways that prioritize majority

groups' comfort over solidarity with and responsiveness to the needs of marginalized groups, exclusion continues (Chevalier et al., 2023; Doering, 2020). While a review of data across museums reflects significant exclusionary gaps for groups who experience systemic oppression, many BIPOC individuals and families do visit museums and feel comfortable and welcome. Museums can be places for all people, when an intentional effort is made to understand and meet the needs of those currently excluded.

Maker education suffers from similar exclusion challenges as museums. Making is defined as “a broad category of activity that involves people ideating, designing, and producing physical or virtual objects in the world” (Bevan, 2017). The modern “maker movement” in the US began in the mid-2000s with a focus on celebrating hands-on creation and exploration, specifically technology-heavy making (Brahms & Crowley, 2016). Many scholars have critiqued the maker movement for its lack of diversity in terms of gender, socioeconomic, race and ethnicity, and ability (Buechley, 2013; Vossoughi et al., 2016). In particular, capitalist valuing of some making endeavors and identities above others risks bolstering and reproducing inequities and exclusion already at play in society (Blikstein & Worsley, 2016; Chachra, 2015; Kafai et al., 2014). Maker programs that focus on historically marginalized groups have revealed important best practices, including widening definitions of making (Martin et al., 2018), linking making to individual and social histories (Calabrese Barton et al., 2017; Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2018), and decentering the focus of making away from being a technology-required endeavor (Svarovsky et al., 2017). When museums set out to design maker programs and makerspaces, they need to address the dual and intersecting exclusionary practices of museum and maker education.

Community engagement in museum design

Community engagement refers to the wide range of methods museums employ to invite, engage, and respond to the needs and priorities of people who are not formally employed by the museum. Community engagement efforts tend to focus on people historically and currently marginalized in museum spaces, meaning that “community” and “community engagement” can sometimes act as code words for diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) efforts in museums (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017; Morse, 2018). In this article, we use “community” as an umbrella term for people who share an identity—geographic, social, or otherwise. For example, a museum may engage communities from a particular neighborhood (geographic) or who all work as teachers (social), but these efforts would not necessarily be DEAI oriented. When engagement efforts focus on relationships with historically and currently marginalized groups, that community engagement can be considered DEAI work.

Visions of community engagement cover a wide range of actual activities, each reflecting a different level of power sharing and visible change within the museum (Allison, 2021; Duclos-Orsello, 2013; Garibay & Olson, 2020; Kroning, 2017; MASS Action, 2017; Simon, 2010; Yerkovich, 2016). One form of community engagement is invitation, explicit and focused encouragement for community members to come to the museum—sometimes paired with free admission (Dawson, 2019; Schwartzman & Knowles, 2022)—or the museum bringing exhibits to community spaces (West, 2013); this form of community engagement leaves power primarily in institutional hands and does not inherently require the museum to change any public experiences. A step further is requesting a contribution—for example, presenting at a community-specific special event or adding to an online archive (Adair et al., 2011)—which again retains institutional power, but museum public experiences do change, at least temporarily. Requests for consultation—such as hosting community listening sessions or ongoing feedback groups to share commentary on how a museum can improve (Igoe & Roosa, 2002;

McMullen, 2008)—move more power into the hands of the community, but the museum ultimately bounds what if any suggested changes they adopt. Collaboration and co-creation represent more deliberate power sharing. When museums collaborate with communities, there is a commitment to changing museum practices based on the collaborative work (Burroughs & Sitzer, 2022; Pegno & Brindza, 2021), but while the goal may be equal power among partners, the exact distribution of decision-making and resources may still result in work that is museum centered. With co-creation, power sharing is intended to lean toward community members, with the museum institution following the lead of community voices (Barnes & McPherson, 2019; Kroning, 2017; Theriault & Jones, 2018). Co-creation projects result in changes to the museum experience, particularly through the development of something new that would not be imagined without community leadership.

While co-creation is the gold standard for community engagement work, each form of community engagement plays a role in the development of authentic and mutually beneficial community–museum relationships (Barnes & McPherson, 2019). For example, invitation and contribution serve to establish relationships and build familiarity. Consultation work opens the museum for critique and, when acted upon, demonstrates commitment to change. Collaboration and co-creation work build on established trusting relationships to actively transform the museum. Further, the boundaries between community engagement forms can be porous; as projects unfold over time, the exact contours of community–museum relationships and how work is done change to meet the lived needs of individuals involved (Toonen, 2021) and sometimes fall short of expectations (Lynch, 2011; Theriault & Jones, 2018). Forms of community engagement can thus be thought of as a spectrum of power sharing that community–museum partnerships move along, ideally moving forward in intertwined activities of relationship building and meaningful change.

Community-informed design

We conceptualize CID as a form of collaborative community engagement that brings together authentic community engagement practices and design processes to iteratively design and develop more inclusive museum experiences. CID is a pragmatic response to the limited resources provided for engaging community members in design processes, addresses the need for sustainable methods of long-term, meaningful community engagement, and acknowledges the active roles museum staff from multiple departments play in the development of more inclusive museum experiences. We believe that community engagement is all our work, and CID is a way to understand this ethos and put it into practice. By reflecting on our own case study and the key factors we recommend to others, we aim to join others who have grappled with the real-world work at the intersection of community–museum engagement and DEAI organizational change (e.g., Bevan & Ramos, 2022). We do not claim that CID is superior to other forms of community engagement, just that the key practices allowed for the long-term sustainability of the work. With this case study, we work to elevate these practices and their complexity in extended collaborative community engagement.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE SCIENCE MUSEUM OF MINNESOTA?

The Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), founded in 1907 (Colleagues, 1981), has been housed in three separate locations, all within Saint Paul, Minnesota, and thus has always sat on the lands of the Dakota people. Across the 10 years comprising this story, the organization chose to shift away from high-attendance blockbuster exhibitions (2016) (Dilenschneider, 2012;

Prather, 2018), experienced an institutional President transition (2016), and experienced an international pandemic (2020–present). In Saint Paul, people identify with a variety of cultural communities and experience different levels of privilege and oppression. While stereotypically known as a site of Scandinavian and European settlement, Minnesota is the homeland of the Dakota and Anishinaabe people (Bdote Memory Map, n.d.) and a major site for the 1960s American Indian Movement (Waterman Wittstock & Salinas, n.d.). Since the 1970s, Minnesota has welcomed numerous refugee communities, resulting in the largest United States Hmong, Somali, and Karen communities (Eldred & Hirsi, 2021). Today, Saint Paul is a majority White metropolitan area that receives accolades for its education, housing, and employment opportunities, yet has some of the largest racial disparities in those same areas (Buchta & Webster, 2021; DePass, 2022). Our museum audience, staff, and board reflect these demographic inequities, meaning they are more White and affluent than Saint Paul as a whole (SMM, 2021). Recently, Saint Paul and Minnesota have been an epicenter for racial justice actions in response to the murders of Jamar Clark, Philando Castile, George Floyd, Daunte Wright, and Amir Locke, though this is a partial list of all those lost to police violence. We have experienced challenges addressing this moment and not always made the right choice in hindsight (Brown et al., 2017). In these ways, we are a museum like any other museum.

We are also different from other museums. Our commitment to supporting, collaborating, and following the leadership of local Black, Indigenous, and additional communities of color is codified in our official Equity and Inclusion statement (SMM, 2018), which was built on decades of preceding work. We are a large organization; SMM currently employs around 270 full-time equivalent positions on an annual budget of approximately \$34.9 million. We have diverse sources of funding, including fee-based revenue, members and donors, and grant funding. Additionally, we have some specialized departments and positions, including an Access and Equity department and an Evaluation and Research department, that are not common in smaller organizations. Though we note these distinctions, we hope our story will resonate with and inform any organization grappling with how to sustain community engagement work.

METHOD AND POSITIONALITY

This paper reports on 10 years of work at SMM across three project phases from 2012 to 2022. Many stories of community engagement work have a beginning, middle, and end, often with a core group of staff and community members who work together and can tell that story. For us, the individuals enacting CID have changed as staff and community members joined and departed work with the museum. While the case study written here has a beginning and end, our work continues today and is strengthened by work people did before 2012.

We, the authors of this piece, represent a small subset of people who have carried this work forward. We are three White, cisgendered authors who have worked at SMM between 6 and 16 years. Over that time, our positions and contributions to project work have shifted; while Callahan Schreiber and Bequette have current positions as director of their department, Goeke joined this work in an entry-level role. We are telling this story because we have been directly connected with the recent makerspace design work, but most of us (Callahan Schreiber and Bequette in particular) have been deeply involved with and leading SMM's inclusion work from different organizational positions for over a decade. Our recollections of how the project has changed over time form the core of this article.

To ensure recollections matched the actual actions of project leaders over time, we examined project documents created at distinct project periods (for an index of documents, see Table 1). Each document was coded inductively, for themes present across the project, and deductively, for the core themes identified by project leaders. Additionally, the draft of this article was widely shared with current and former museum staff, specifically focusing on BIPOC

TABLE 1 Resources from each project stage.

Stage	Resource	Type
Before	Authentic Community Engagement (Jones-Rizzi, 2010)	Internal Document
	A History of the Science Museum of Minnesota, book (Roach, 1981)	Publication
	Institutional Genealogy	Internal Document
Making Connections	Grant Proposal (funded)	Proposal
	Data Collection Plan	Internal Document
	White Privilege in Museums, article (Jennings & Jones-Rizzi, 2017)	Publication
	Practitioner Guide (Bequette et al., 2018)	White Paper
	Conference proceedings (Svarovsky et al., 2017)	Publication
Interim Years	Grant Proposal (unfunded)	Proposal
	History of Cardboard	Internal Document
	Reflections from staff	Internal Document
	Gallery staff training	Internal Document
Cardboard Engineering	Grant Proposal (funded)	Proposal
	Responses to funder questions	Proposal
	Kick off meeting slides	Internal Document
	Data Collection Plan	Internal Document
	Partner Interview Guide	Internal Document
	Community Events Plan	Internal Document

staff perspectives whenever possible, who worked with SMM's making programs for member checking and feedback.

PROGRESSION OF WORK

The cardboard project was built on SMM's long-standing DEAI change efforts and existing community engagement philosophy, referred to as Authentic Community Engagement (Jones-Rizzi, 2010). This practice centers on building trust over time with people in organizations outside the museum, recognizes and actively acknowledges power dynamics in the relationship, and requires a reciprocity based on clearly stated motivations and goals. We believe this happens most productively when the museum's neighbors, local supporters, and its staff work together collaboratively, informing and supporting each other to become more relevant and necessary to the community for its ongoing health and well-being. The story we are looking to share here is how those values and structures were leveraged in an emerging decade-long process of development.

Development of the cardboard-focused makerspace proceeded in three primary stages (see Figure 1); here we give a high-level overview of that progression. The NSF-funded *Making Connections* project (idea generated in 2012; project began in 2013) aimed to question dominant narratives of maker education, specifically the lean toward high-tech and white-dominated makerspaces. SMM collaborated with Black/African American, Hmong, Latin American, and Dakota and Anishinaabe Indigenous community members to identify existing maker practices and elevate those practices in tabletop maker activities. These tabletop activities would be integrated into the museum's ongoing maker program, run by museum maker

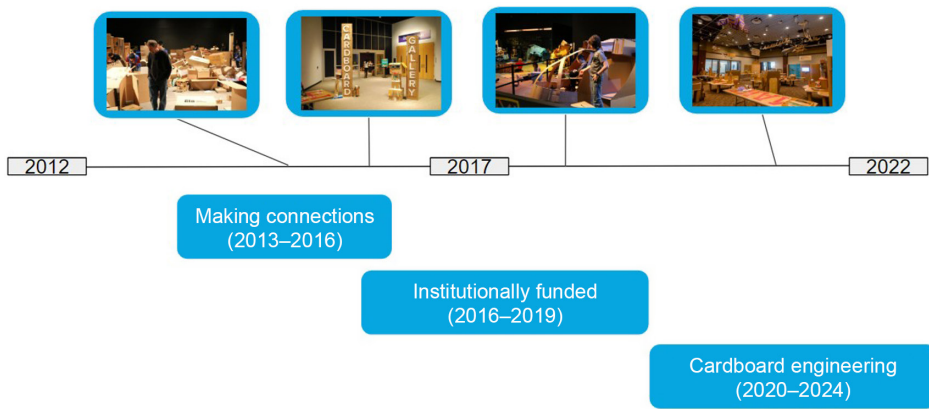


FIGURE 1 Timeline of the cardboard-focused makerspace development.

staff and volunteers. At the onset, the museum committed to three underlying assumptions to guide decision-making: “SMM can serve communities of color. SMM understands and accepts that we need to change in order to better serve Communities of Color. SMM is willing to change.” Additionally, the museum’s project staff hailed from four departments—public programs, marketing, access and equity, and research—to develop cross-institutional strategies to support inclusion. Community partners, who served a 2 year term and were deeply involved in co-design, were recruited through existing relationships either with them as individuals or their work within community organizations (school or non-profit). Community partners also recruited other community members to participate in listening sessions, activity development workshops, and events that showcased the activities.

Cardboard—along with other activities such as gardening, cooking, and fixing things (Bequette et al., 2018)—was explicitly named as a valued maker material in listening sessions. Concurrently, the museum’s programs team had been experimenting with different ways to engage visitors with cardboard. Due to the cross-departmental project structure, ideas from the programs group and the Making Connections group converged and decided to experiment by filling a temporary exhibition space with cardboard boxes. Cardboard Gallery was thus born from the relationships made through Making Connections, cross-departmental fostering of ideas, and listening done by SMM staff members.

While visitor engagement appeared positive, the initial Cardboard Gallery (2015) quickly faced logistical challenges. First, sourcing, managing, and disposing of large amounts of cardboard required extra labor from facilities staff and long periods of cardboard donation. Second, facilitating the makerspace took a toll on staff, both physically and emotionally. Keeping this space usable was challenging; tools were buried under creations, and collaborative forts blocked fire and wheelchair routes. Additionally, when a visitor created something particularly interesting, staff found it emotionally draining to see another visitor “remix” or substantially change the creation. Some staff ultimately refused to work in the space. Acknowledging both these logistical challenges and the exciting success of visitor engagement, SMM committed to iterating on the cardboard makerspace to learn how to run this type of space effectively.

Successive cardboard makerspace iterations (2016 and 2018) were internally funded and focused on finding solutions to logistical challenges. Because our focal questions of practice shifted, we needed to shift which community expertise to center (Chicago Beyond, 2018). Specifically, we temporarily shifted the focus of community engagement from BIPOC individuals as community members to our visitor-facing staff as community members in recognition of their expertise in the day-to-day operation of a museum space. Insights were generated from intentional staff reflection and the museum’s existing visitor exit survey. Once core

logistical challenges were mediated via changes to the makerspace design, staff training, and cross-departmental systems for maintaining the space, the museum was ready to return community engagement focus to further developing the space to work best for BIPOC families. Additionally, the museum overall had continued DEAI work during these years, parallel projects that informed the equity goals of the next phase of work.

In 2019, the NSF-funded *Cardboard Engineering* project began with the dual aims of refining the makerspace design—specifically locating design changes to support more families in making—and supporting more museums in creating similar spaces. Museum staff reaffirmed the core assumptions from the *Making Connections* project and added commitments to hands-on exploration as a learning process, making as related to engineering thinking, and actively acknowledging both museums and makerspaces as places that perpetuate inequities without intentional intervention. The museum team expanded to include exhibition designers, development staff, and educators. To understand how the makerspace was working and how to improve it, the museum contacted community organizations that had an existing relationship with the museum to see if they would be interested in partnering. While the organizations themselves supported creating family events to experience the makerspace, individuals and families were invited to share their thoughts through either a written survey or participating in deeper video research. Community member insights informed a fifth iteration of the cardboard makerspace as a pop-up that was brought to locations away from the museum.

Of course, the conclusion of any project leads to emerging new questions and future ideas. *Making Connections* ultimately informed five different iterations of the cardboard-focused makerspace. With each iteration, the space has improved in serving BIPOC families, as evidenced by the increasing percentage of BIPOC visitors reporting entering the makerspace iteration over iteration, documented via our visitor exit survey. However, we recognize that changing one museum experience does not change the entire institution; we must keep pushing to make inclusive museum experiences. As *Cardboard Engineering* comes to a close, new collaborative work moves forward (such as our new project, EXPANSE [NSF #2215592]), but for the sake of telling a coherent story here, we are ending with 2022, after 10 years of cardboard making.

FINDINGS

Across the years of community engagement and design work, we identify five core practices that seem, in retrospect, crucial to our success: naming our values/assumptions, emergent planning, flexible and inclusive staffing, organization-to-organization relationships, and layered data. These practices are what we term CID.

Naming our values/assumptions

Values and assumptions are the core, slow-to-change beliefs behind large-scale work. Just as organizations develop mission statements to guide decision-making, establishing shared values and assumptions creates a center for shared work. Committing those values and assumptions into writing and consistently practicing them is a key step that allows for sharing, reflection, and critique as new staff and partners join the work. In the short term, project teams can turn to values to support decision-making as they provide boundaries around what is and is not appropriate work for a particular project or initiative, but values and assumptions should not be treated as entirely final. While slow to change, intentional opportunities for reflection and updating of values and assumptions statements recognize and support organizational change.

Both the first and third phases included the intentional naming of values and assumptions at the project onset. At the beginning of *Making Connections*, three core assumptions were

written into the project's Theory of Change and shared with staff across the museum as well as community partners. This set a tone that the project was about the museum changing, preemptively counteracting the potential for deficit narratives about BIPOC community members, or “people who don't visit.” Having these values helped museum staff to keep themselves on track, with a focus on changing the museum, not changing possible visitors. Similarly, Cardboard Engineering was framed around the mantra of “More Families, More Museums: how do we effectively structure and facilitate open-ended making experiences for visitors that expand the number and kinds of museums and families who can engage in these activities?” Changes between the two phases reflect the organizational learning SMM went through during Making Connections and Interim Years; the core assumptions were still valid, but the project now had a more specific focus.

However, not all necessary values and assumptions can be anticipated at the onset, so project teams need to be willing to pause and reflect when a tension around values or assumptions arises. When we have been less explicit about our values and assumptions, we have run into tensions concerning why decisions are made from both museum staff and community partners. In general, we recommend naming values and assumptions around the key decision-making areas for a project. If a team realizes there are unnamed values and assumptions guiding their work, taking the time to stop, reflect, and articulate those ideas can allow team members—museum staff and community members alike—to productively move forward.

Emergent planning

While our values change slowly, the actual “what” we are doing changes as needs within the community become evident, data is investigated, or—as learned in 2020—the world suddenly changes. Having flexible planning allows projects to be responsive, working toward mutual benefit or reciprocity for all partners. In CID, named values and assumptions and emergent planning go hand-in-hand. Project teams need to continually reflect if their current plans are aligned with the achievement of the values and assumptions; essentially, teams need to keep long-term vision central and let more immediate planning shift as new information and opportunities surface. Many times, emergent planning looks like the simple question of “what do we need to do next to move towards our overall values?”, but unexpected events such as surprising data findings or new requests from community partners are opportunities to look at plans again.

Emergent planning within CID resulted in us intentionally pulled back from more outward-facing community engagement work to not unnecessarily burden community partners. When asking for community input, museums are requesting labor from individuals, and those asks need to be aligned with areas where community input is more influential. For example, after the Cardboard Days experiment in *Making Connections*, most of our internal questions focused on major logistical challenges: How do we keep a space of this size clean? How do we source sufficient cardboard? How do we minimize the toll on staff? While finding answers to these logistical questions would ultimately create a better visitor experience for community partners and BIPOC families, visitor-facing staff were in the best position and had the meaningful expertise to address them, hence the shift in community engagement focus. Further, collecting insights from community members when we were not in a place to implement them could have further perpetuated over-studying of marginalized groups (Chicago Beyond, 2018). In other words, we needed to turn our community engagement work inward, focusing on listening to and taking action within our staff community, to answer the questions at hand. During this period, we maintained communications and museum connections with our community partners through our various museum access points and programs and internally (operationally) funded several makerspace iterations. While on its face it might appear to be a counterintuitive decision, active

reflection on named values and an openness to new plans allowed the museum to make confident and thoughtfully inclusive next steps.

Emergent planning also allows for responsiveness to partner needs. In 2022, during the Cardboard Engineering phase, one community partner wanted to focus on girls in STEM, a priority outside the scope of the project's research questions. As this priority remained aligned with existing project priorities, museum staff quickly answered yes and shifted the event plan to reflect the new community partner need. Allowing for emergent planning thus creates opportunities for shared authority and moves projects closer to a reciprocal relationship. However, we note that the theme of emergent planning came from reflection on situations where new needs did not conflict with existing values or priorities. As with the practice of naming values and assumptions, moments of conflicting priorities require work to pause, reflect, and find compromise to move forward. Shutting down a new priority or need from a community partner because it does not meet the existing plan would be a rejection of power sharing within the partnership.

Flexible & distributed staffing

All organizations experience staff turnover, and with each departure and new hire, institutional knowledge is lost (Krantz & Downey, 2021), while new ideas and perspectives are gained. Additionally, community engagement and equity work can require emotional burden, particularly when goals center on changing institutional norms (Haupt et al., 2022; Taylor, 2021). To ensure the sustainability of long-term CID work, staffing needs to be distributed across the institution, with support for flexibility to address the reality of turnover. At larger institutions, CID cannot be the passion project of a single museum individual; if so, this individual would bear the brunt of emotional burden, increase the potential for burnout, and the work likely ends when that particular employee leaves the institution. We found it important to engage many departments across the museum, including operations departments such as marketing, membership or development, IT, and visitor-facing staff. As project work shifts, these different professional viewpoints can give insights on and access to new ideas that may “break” existing systems. Because overall project staff share the named values and assumptions, the group can collectively decide if this “break” is a critical organizational change opportunity or if a different systemic approach can be used to pursue the CID goals. At smaller organizations, CID may need to be a collaborative project with all staff to distribute responsibility, a practice that may already happen without being explicitly named.

As an example, when we began Making Connections, including visitor-facing staff was a major oversight in the development of the internal project team. Community partners were given museum benefits through a new type of volunteer role, and this designation as “Making Connections” volunteers was printed on their museum-issued badge. While intended to simply demarcate their special role, we failed to fully communicate what this meant with visitor-facing staff, resulting in museum store staff and ticket office staff being unsure of what benefits the community partners should receive. At times, these interactions felt like another experience of racial profiling for community partners—a moment of exclusion that involving a wider scope of staff could have prevented.

Of course, as a museum with several hundred employees, we cannot have all staff engage in the same level of collaboration. A distributed model can have levels of responsibility: core team members who hold responsibility for articulating project goals and setting relationships with community partners; secondary members who represent each major area of the museum and attend occasional (we do monthly) meetings where all project work is shared and systematic concerns can be voiced; and the wider museum, which needs to be informed of relevant work through their secondary representatives. 10 years later, this type of distributed responsibility

across staff is now our regular practice, but we pause at major junctures in project work to reflect if we have the right people “in the room” at core and secondary levels. For example, at our first Cardboard Engineering meeting in 2019, one staff member suggested bringing in someone from the development department at the secondary level, in case there might be sponsorship opportunities. This choice became critically important for the project as this staff member was able to develop relationships with local manufacturers for in-kind donation of “clean” cardboard, an unexpected additional expense brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly at the secondary level, a wider set of perspectives leads to project solutions that may have felt unattainable when work is handled by a small team or a single individual.

Organization-to-organization relationships

Undergirding all community engagement work is relationship, whether on an individual or collective level. Just as doing community engagement and equity work can cause burnout among museum staff or loss of relationships when a staff member leaves, asking an individual to speak for their community or commit to a multiyear initiative risks creating tokenizing and burdensome collaboration experiences. CID emphasizes building toward reciprocal and balanced relationships between organizations, the museum and community organizations to be specific. Organization-to-organization relationships often need years to build trust, and museums hold the responsibility to be consistent and offer different ways for community organizations to engage based on their needs, priorities, and capacity. When we have done this well, both organizations can go back to each other again and again when needs arise.

During the Making Connections period, we leaned on museum-to-individual relationships more than we would recommend today. Individual community members were asked to sign up for a multiyear commitment with the museum. We saw a waxing and waning of individual involvement, with some people needing to leave the project based on moving to a new job out-of-state or changes in personal capacity. The most impactful and longer-lasting relationships were with community members who had relational ties already built with a museum staff member and within another organizational structure (e.g., schools, non-profit organizations). When thinking about long-term sustainable CID processes, relying on individual-to-individual or organization-to-individual relationships becomes untenable, just as relying on the passion of a single museum employee is an obstacle to sustained work.

Our current practice for organization-to-organization relationships has two main features: (1) offering many consistent access points for relationship building, and (2) locating opportunities with shared goals. The Museum Access and Equity department, established in 2017, supports a wide variety of relationships with community members and community-based organizations across many levels on a continuum of community engagement: presence, invitation, contribution, consultation, collaboration, and co-creation. While the final five are commonly noted in the community engagement literature, we add presence as the act of the museum and museum representatives showing up beyond the museum walls, being present with community members to build trust and begin to identify shared goals. Relationships between museum staff and organizational contacts ebb and flow within this continuum over short and long periods of time. Community partners ultimately determine the level of relationship they desire, but the museum holds the responsibility to communicate opportunities and support all levels of relationship. We emphasize again that this type of community engagement can and should also occur within the museum staff community. Rather than framing it as organization-to-organization connections, though, we shift and call out department-to-department connections that sustain the design work.

Over the 10 years of CID, the “what” that was being collaborated on changed from broad ideas of culturally relevant making to a focused cardboard makerspace with engineering

learning outcomes. With each major stage of the project, the museum held the responsibility to return to the wide network of community organization relationships and ask, “Is this something you'd like to work on with us?” Asking this question, with the museum's values and assumptions clearly named, allowed community organizations to identify if a shared goal existed between the two organizations and if they wanted to take on a higher level of collaboration with the museum. Ideally, community organizations continue through multiple stages of work as new ideas reflect jointly developed questions.

Layered data

Finally, CID relies first on listening to community insights and feedback, turning those ideas into action, and listening again. As noted earlier, relying on an individual or small group to represent an entire community is tokenizing. Every individual has an individual perspective, but participating in deep collaboration efforts takes considerable labor, even when that labor is paid. To hear from many voices and not burden individuals with extensive work, we create multiple forms of feedback, generating layers of data to inform design. Just as distributed staffing has layers of engagement and community organizations are offered multiple levels of relationship, the museum recruits feedback from both deep and light data collection opportunities.¹ Deep data collection opportunities tend to require a few hours of time, be distributed across multiple days, or involve more intrusive data collection procedures, such as video recording. Light data collection opportunities tend to require a few minutes of time, be embedded in a fun experience, and involve minimally intrusive data collection, such as a 5-min feedback survey or sticky note comment board. Generally, deep data collection produces complex insights and provides a lot of nuance, but relying on deep data collection alone gives a small group of people a very loud voice. Light data collection gives a high-level sense of outcomes and feedback and serves as the counterpoint to deep data insights. Alignment of findings across light and deep data collection is a strong indicator of need and should be the primary focus on design changes. In CID, community-generated insights should always take precedence; our engagement with ongoing evaluation systems was in support of community-generated insights, not superseding them.

LIMITATIONS

This case study conveys one approach to involving community voices in long-term design work, but it is not a perfect approach. While we aimed to build mutually beneficial and equity-oriented relationships, the project became more museum-centric over the 10-year period as the core makerspace design ideas solidified. Specifically, the earliest phase of the project was loosely organized around maker education, and specific activity designs were generated by community members, but later phases coalesced around the singular idea of a cardboard-focused makerspace. While continued collaboration was framed as an endorsement of the idea as a shared goal, we recognize that we fell short in terms of power sharing around the goal of collaborative work as design progressed. Further, while we believe that the ongoing relationships between the museum and community organizations reflect a positive experience of partnership, we have not formally collected community organization perspectives regarding the structure of the partnership and outcomes of projects. Thus, we cannot say how the key practices identified impacted community members and partner organizations directly or if they would have identified similar practices as the most meaningful from their perspectives. In our future work, we plan to engage in reflective and empirical conversations with community partners in order to address these limitations.

CONCLUSION

CID is a philosophy and practices to community engagement in design work that focuses on sustainability of collaboration over long time horizons. Sustained community engagement is challenging work, adds more complexity to the design process, and results in more impactful museum experiences. This paper articulates strategies we have found successful in these efforts. For organizations interested in pursuing similar strategies, we offer some advice—advice we would have welcomed at the start of our work. We believe the CID process is achievable for many organizations, and likely has been done under other names, or at times, unnamed. Doing it requires some intentional choices about how to *plan*, how to *communicate*, and how to *act*.

- Naming values and assumptions: Our work has been most successful when we stayed “up to date” on the connection between our values and our planning efforts. It is a grounding process that supports lasting change work within an institution and long-term relationships within and beyond the museum.
- Emergent planning: While keeping aligned between our values and planning through conversation and reflection may feel like starting over again (and again and again), it is key to making long-term progress toward values-aligned goals.
- Flexible and distributed staffing: Communication across and beyond project group members, and repeated onboarding of new staff into the CID process, ensures work stays fresh with multiple perspectives on decisions and is not reliant on individual staff.
- Organization-to-organization relationships: Engaging with multiple community members from a partner organizations strengthens and distributes our partnership. Recognizing the necessary ebbs and flows of engagement is a reality of this work.
- Layered data: All this work requires data-informed action by the museum, and the data must be collected in transparent and inclusive ways.

Finally, when to act is an ongoing conundrum. Acting too slowly looks like no action at all, creating the appearance that community engagement is performative. Acting too soon and too quickly may mean the museum has not fully understood community members' feedback and priorities. We found that steady, small changes addressed this conundrum; we could undo small changes more easily if we heard we had taken the wrong track. Making changes—not just sitting in feedback—was key to ongoing success.

These CID strategies illustrate how authentic community engagement work can inform long-term changes that make our museums more inclusive places. In a period of time in which museums are pointedly being asked how they can be better community members, it is imperative that we take time to reflect on, articulate, and share our strategies. By pulling back the curtain and explaining our approaches to more inclusive, collaborative work museums can keep building trust with community members who have been historically marginalized or excluded from our institutions or even within our institutions. Reminding ourselves of the complexity of this work supports active commitments museums have to the long-term work of changing our institutions to be more inclusive and reflective of the wants and needs of the communities in which we are located.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ All data collection is paid relative to the amount of time necessary, intrusiveness of procedures, and importance of expertise. In 2022, the standard payments we used for research data collection are \$10 for an up to 10-min survey, \$25 for an hour-long interview, \$50 for video recording of museum engagement, and \$75 per hour to serve as an expert advisor.

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