

Museum & Relevance: Community Engagement, Benefits, Active Citizenship

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Introduction

In the early 21st century, technological development and globalization have brought profound changes to society. Museums have entered a time of change and redefined their role in society in this era. Museum is not a new idea or an issue. The first museum was opened in the University of Alexandria, Egypt in the 3rd century B.C. At that time, museum was a private institution and general people are not to reach them. The traditional role of museum is to collect objects and material of cultural, religious and historical importance, preserve and research into them and present them to the public for the purpose of education and enjoyment. Now the idea of museum has changed and it has transformed into a public institution. According to ICOM latest definition (2007), it is stated that “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development open to the public, which acquires conserves, researches, communities and exhibit the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and the environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment”. In the past, museum function was set up in a static motion but today museums are mobilizing and changing their planning. In the present scenario, museum concepts have totally changed and new thoughts and ideas are adopted which are more challenging to fulfill their development. In this context, research focused on museum relevance are much more important today. Now a days, museum is directly related to the subject of content and it develops a new interactive for public engagement, increased online exhibit for non-visitors community etc.

Is museum relevant today?

In the past decade enormous change has taken place in museum and galleries across the world. The thrust of the shift is clear and museums are changing from being static storehouses for artifacts into active learning environment for people. This change in function means radical reorganization of the whole culture of the museum and staff, structures, attitudes and work patterns must all mutate new ideas and new approaches. The museum exhibits are more informative and relevant to the widest possible audiences e.g. scholars, browsers and students, first time visitors and returning visitors, foreigners, non-native and native speakers, visitors from diverse ethnic and other social backgrounds, children, teenagers and adults etc.

The challenge for museums to remain relevant in society is an ongoing process of assessment that has occupied many museum leaders for years. The process is both external and internal. What this is means is that given the external environment, contemporary issues and internal process of museum capabilities and available resources, the role the museum should

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assume or the services the museum can offer will satisfy the needs in the competitive marketplace. It is more complicated because of a range of elements for each museum such as the evolving interests and needs of the public as well as community, the institution’s history of undertaking change, the mission of the museums, its leaders past, present and future. The interplay of these elements is a part of what determines the vitality of a museum and relevance to its community. Now a days, museum reinvented various things that are modernist and new concepts like,

- inclusive shared vision, leaderships ,public accountability and social responsibility
- visitor’s orientation and needs
- marketing
- learning
- communication.

Long term Strategy adopted by museums

At this time, museums also compete the market. So, they also adopt new strategies which are most effective for museum development. These are,

- Museum is a private institutional development and they build up their community ownership
- Museum focuses on developing relationships and increasing partnerships
- They are collaborations with various community groups as well as diversity groups
- Museums also help their other organizations and they identify how existing museum service provides more relevance
- Museums also involve all stakeholders including staff and volunteers
- Museum communication is based on exchange of knowledge between the community groups and museum staff
- Museum identity, goals and priorities could be transformed into community development
- These goals are needed to be results in community input and ideas substantially increasing reputation, public service, value and standing in the community

Community Engagement

In the last few years, museums particularly plan for the way in which community involves with their museum and what they want. Education is one of the major sections which develops of their museum. They produce lifelong learning agenda for visitors as well as target groups because museum education is informal and not an academic session. Museum worked for communities and they engaged them in various programs in their vision and idea. Museums are built to be effective, positive and to have a proactive relationship with local people and their communities. Effective community engagement increases awareness and appreciation of museum and what they offer and their understanding and ability to respond to needs and expectations. Community engagement necessities involve new and existing audiences as much as possible in the development and delivery of museum activities.. There are several levels of community

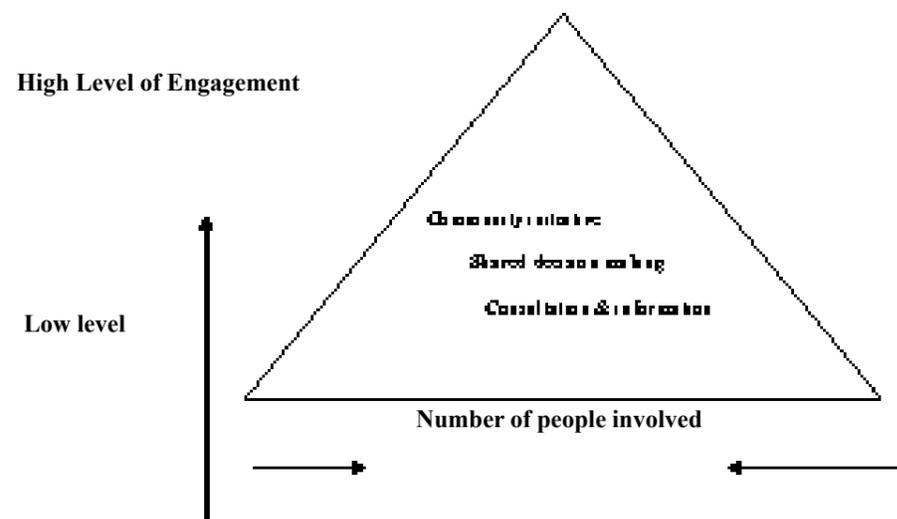
engagement that take place:

- Information- telling a community about their programs. E.g. marketing
- Consultation-asking community what they think about their program and suggestion e.g. focus group ,questionnaires
- Shared decision making and action- setting up projects or working with groups with members of the community to develop programs. e.g. community action plan
- Supporting independent community initiatives- museum responds to ideas and initiatives brought forward by the community and helps to support them e.g. Chau dance for tribal people.



Photo taken from District Science Centre, Baran (1) & State Industrial & Technological Museum, Kolkata (2)

All of these levels of communication engagements are valid and appropriate at certain times and after a project it will involve several levels e.g. an in depth working group may help to create an appropriate information leaflet.



This approach allows a very wide range of people to be involved in proportion of who can be involved at a high level of engagement. It also enables the museum to develop relationships

with certain community groups and partners into deeper and deeper levels of engagement overtime.

Museum and community represents local history & culture

In this context, generally all the time we discuss about the impact of museum. Today museum always tries to find out the local history and their culture. Museum promotes local history as well as their involvement and reflects the full diversity of society in their representation of art, history and culture. This involves representing the experience, history and artistic practice of a wide range of people and communities. This should encompass socio-economic background, disability, age, ethnic background, religious belief, gender and sexuality. It should apply to all activities including collections, permanent displays, interpretation, learning resources, exhibitions and events. Diverse representation has three benefits –attracting the history of community, new target audiences, proving personal relevance for visitors and a positive reinforcement of identity and promoting cross cultural understanding and community cohesion. Both work for each other and develop a new environment in museums. 3rd and 4th no. pictures given below show this situation.



fig.3,4 Community Development program conducted in Ananda Niketan Kirtisala, Bagnan at Hawrah

Social Impact

Museum acts as a catalyst for social changes, contributing to the quality of people's lives and the well-being of local communities. They involve playing an active role in art, history and cultural initiatives that aid and promote sustainable communities, social inclusion, community cohesion and regeneration. It encompasses work that helps to address the issues faced by disadvantaged communities and other relations to employment, education, health etc. It also looks at their role in encouraging understanding between communities. Museum will provide designated spaces for activities with community groups.

Museum continues to be a hegemonic institution that reinforces the value of a powerful sector of society. A museum influences their audiences as follows:

- Museum builds social capital
- Museum develops communities
- Museum contributes to social change and public awareness
- Museum builds human capital
- Museum makes economic benefits

Conclusion

At the end of the session, today's museum work is remarkable and fabulous in their field. This is one of the exact places where we see our community as well as their local history, culture displayed in the gallery. At any time we eagerly want to collect information and knowledge available virtually online. The other reason which is equally important is that museum produces informal education known as 'informal learning center'. In future we will hope that museum learning process will spread over the society intensively. Then museum will significantly be transformed into a community center, contributing to the development of society.

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