Participatory Design and the Future of Museums

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Imagine, for a moment, the Web as a history museum. Vast open collections storage facilities, filled to the brim with personal journals, corporate advertising, and lots and lots of porn. While the majority of the collection is open to the public 24/7, most items are rarely accessed. The museum has the most lenient accessioning policy in the world. Donors, not institutional staff, are responsible for conservation and preservation of their contributions.

Imagine being named a trustee of this museum circa 2001. You oversee more than 550 billion documents. While some items in the collection were produced by professional Web developers for a mass audience, most are personal and of interest to only a few people. The content is of variable quality, relevance, and importance. While storage is becoming cheaper, it is by no means free, and as the collection grows, you and your fellow trustees are increasingly worried about the quality of the visitor experience at the museum.

At this point, looking at your endless warehouses of collection material, what path would you take next? What would your institutional vision be for the next ten years?

Most museum trustees would quickly change the accessioning policy. You might introduce more structure, so that the institution only collects things of particular quality or on a specific theme. You might more carefully vet the sources of collected material. You might require that contributors "freeze" their donations so they won't be altered or taken down without institutional consent. And frankly, given the size and disorder of what is already in the vaults, you'd likely suspend new collections altogether until you could get a clearer sense of what you have and what the institution might do with it.

On the visitor experience side, you might try to sculpt a more coherent exhibition out of the collection already in place. You might select the best of the existing content to put on display, paring the collection down to a few key artifacts that are distinctive, important, and appealing. You might make it easier for visitors to access the collection by separating the museum into galleries for different themes or time periods or experience types. You'd likely separate the acquisitions storage facility from the public-facing facility, both for the sake of efficiency and coherence of visitor experience.

Imagine this museum ten years later, in 2011. It would likely be a pleasant place to visit, full of interesting exhibits featuring compelling content. But the democratic principles that characterized its founding would be lost. It would be a curated space. It would be governed by the institution, not the users who had contributed its collection.

The real Web, the non-museum version, took a decidedly different path from 2001 to 2011. Rather than curate and restrict the growth of content, programmers stayed true to the inclusive ethos and open protocols of the early Web. They focused on two kinds of projects:

1. creating tools that make it easier for anyone to add new content to the Web
2. refining the ways that people can search for content on the Web, including search techniques that are informed (and in some cases steered) by users themselves

This is quite shocking. Imagine sitting with your fellow Web museum trustees around the board room in 2001, arguing that instead of harnessing the vast collection, you should actually make it larger. That you should make it easier for *more* people to share pictures of their cats and their vacations. That instead of organizing things according to top-down taxonomies or highlighting important objects in exhibitions, you should allow users' behaviors and preferences to determine what to prioritize. This is called a "folksonomy"—a user-driven cataloging system that is constantly in flux.

Web 2.0 developers can be described as both generous and realistic when it comes to user participation. Generous, because they believe it is possible for people of all kinds to make compelling creative work to share. Realistic, because they know that most of what people produce is of very little interest to mass audiences. That's not to say all user-generated content is low quality (though much of it is). Most participatory content is compelling to highly specific and limited audiences. I'm only interested in pictures from your honeymoon if we're close friends or I'm planning to visit the same island paradise. Otherwise, they're just more clutter.

Participatory websites are built to harness the power of diffuse collections, not by refining what's offered, but by making it easy for people to consume exactly the content they want. For example, the photo-sharing site Flickr uses keywords and tags to build a folksonomy that helps people search through photographs easily. As a consumer on the site, I'm not required to wade through millions of photos to find the ones that interest me. The site turns many kinds of user-generated content—photo titles, tags, comments, notes—into search terms, which help people navigate its vast collection. A million people can upload photographs of their children's first haircuts, and I can find the one image of a barber in Bangalore that satisfies my interest.

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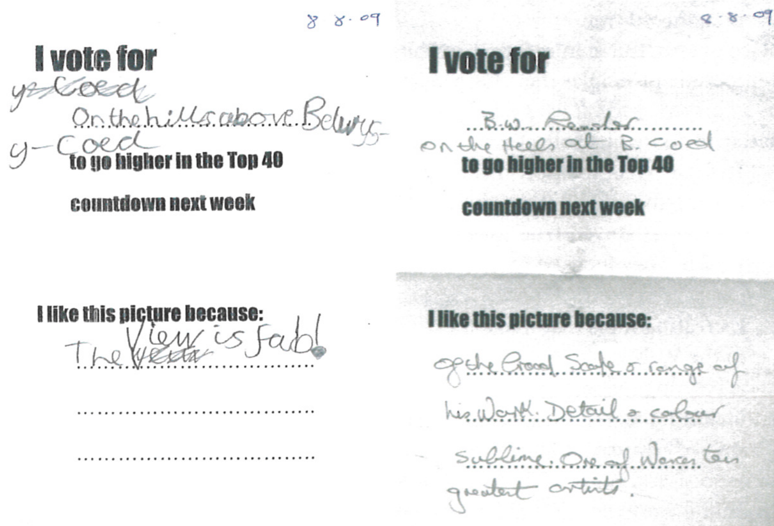

This approach isn't just about egalitarianism; it's also an economic model for success. As Ian Rogers, former VP of Video and Media Applications for Yahoo! famously said in 2007, "Losers wish for scarcity. Winners leverage scale."[1] He and other Web 2.0 leaders have argued that the money invested in gatekeeping and protecting content—whether copyrighted music, films, or images—is wasted. Instead, institutions that control media content should be looking for ways to get that content out into as many environments as possible, to be shared, remixed, and discussed. Experiencing content in a social context helps people define their preferences, express their self-identities, and form new relationships with ideas and objects—which then may lead to deeper engagement in terms of time, money, and intellect.

And this is where museums come in. In their public role, museums are places that provide an interpretative experience around objects. Traditionally, those experiences were constrained to the information and sensory elements designers and curators chose to provide around artifacts and exhibits. But we've all become familiar with copious research demonstrating that visitors bring their own contexts, expectations, and personal experiences to their museum visits. How can we reconcile the data about visitors' self-generated contexts with the rigid form of the stories and experiences traditionally offered in a history museum?

One simple answer is to invite visitors to participate in the construction of the interpretation alongside professionals. At a basic level, this is the power of visitor participation: it leverages the knowledge, experience, and passions of everyone who walks through the museum doors to provide a diverse set of interpretations for each exhibit, object, or story presented. The benefit is not just for the participants. It's for all visitors, who may benefit from perspectives that are more personal, diverse, and flexible than the traditional curated path.

The goal of participatory techniques is both to meet visitors' expectations for active engagement and to do so in a way that furthers the mission and core values of the institution. Rather than delivering the same content to everyone, a participatory institution collects and shares diverse, personalized, and changing content coproduced with visitors. It invites visitors to respond and add to information about cultural artifacts, scientific evidence, and historical records on display. It showcases the diverse creations and opinions of non-experts. People use the institution as meeting grounds for dialogue around the content presented. Instead of being "about" something or "for" someone, participatory institutions are created and managed "with" visitors.

Why would a cultural institution want to invite visitors to participate? Like all design techniques, participation is a strategy that addresses specific problems. I see participatory strategies as practical ways to enhance, not replace, traditional cultural institutions.

Participatory techniques are particularly useful when institutions are trying to connect with members of the public who are not frequent museum-goers, people who might feel alienated, dissatisfied, or uninspired by museum experiences. Participatory techniques address these commonly expressed forms of dissatisfaction with cultural institutions:

1. *Cultural institutions are irrelevant to my life.* By actively soliciting and responding to visitors' ideas, stories, and creative work, cultural institutions can help audiences become personally invested in both the content and the health of the organization.

2. *The institution never changes—I've visited once and I have no reason to return.* By developing platforms in which visitors can share ideas and connect with each other in real time, cultural institutions can offer changing experiences without incurring heavy ongoing content production costs.

3. *The authoritative voice of the institution doesn't include my view or give me context for understanding what's presented.* By presenting multiple stories and voices, cultural institutions can help audiences prioritize and understand their own view in the context of diverse perspectives.

4. *The institution is not a creative place where I can express myself and contribute to history, science, and art.* By inviting visitors to participate, institutions can support the interests of those who prefer to make and do rather than just watch.

5. The institution is not a comfortable social place for me to talk about ideas with friends and strangers. By designing explicit opportunities for interpersonal dialogue, cultural institutions can distinguish themselves as desirable real-world venues for discussion about important issues related to the content presented.

These five challenges are all arguments for pursuing participation, whether on the scale of a single educational program or the entire visitor experience. The challenge is how to do this well. Not every visitor has a powerful personal story to recount or dizzying expertise to share. Some projects initiated in the hopes of creating a dynamic space end up producing noise or dead air. To succeed with visitor participation, museum professionals need to think like Web 2.0 developers—finding generous yet realistic ways to solicit, sort, and present visitor-generated content and commentary.

HOW DOES THE PARTICIPATORY WEB WORK?

Web 2.0, or the participatory Web, was born in the mid-2000s to extend the Web's creative power to a broad audience of non-technical people. One of the simplest definitions of Web 2.0 is "software that gets better the more people use it."[2] This definition implies two things:

1. Users do something that generates information (they upload content, rate things, comment, buy things, or click search results).
2. The system adapts responsively to those participatory actions, providing customized experiences based on user behavior.

Museum professionals often focus overly on the first point and not enough on the second. Sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, and Facebook have promoted the idea that anyone can participate in knowledge creation, cultural production, and online socializing. But all of these participatory activities are only meaningful when combined with a system that will *respond* to users' actions. All those uploaded photos and videos and ratings and status updates would be useless if the websites that house them did not share them, showcase them, and use them to affect the visitor experience. As leading technical publisher Tim O'Reilly put it in 2006: "Google gets smarter every time someone makes a link on the Web. Google gets smarter every time someone makes a search. It gets smarter every time someone clicks on an ad. And it immediately acts on that information to improve the experience for everyone else."[3]

As an example, consider the online movie rental service called Netflix. Netflix provides movie recommendations based on users' ratings. When users sign in, Netflix can recommend specific "Movies You'll Love," which are based both on the films they have rated and how other users have rated those and other movies. Each new rating by a user can affect which movies will be recommend to everyone. The ratings provide more than just a personalized user experience; they also provide community value.

Congratulations on art exhibition

SIR – I would like to congratulate Worcester Museum and Art Gallery on its recent exhibition of paintings from its archive. I was half expecting that the most popular paintings chosen by the public would just be the more representational works or just the "pretty pictures" and the more modern ones would be completely neglected. But, what a pleasant surprise. I got to see such a variety of styles in the top 10, including an abstract by Ayres.

Maybe Worcester Art Gallery could do this sort of thing again – or even an annual open exhibition, such as the Royal Academy does, and again, allow the public to vote.

SHANE PHELPS,
Worcester.

Like any good participatory platform, the *Top 40* exhibition spurred community dialogue and debate beyond the museum's walls. Image courtesy of Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum, UK.

Think about the alternative. Imagine if Netflix encouraged users to rate movies but did not provide better recommendations based on their ratings. Or if YouTube allowed people to upload videos but gave them no information about when those videos would be available for viewing. Or if Wikipedia allowed people to submit improvements to articles with no transparency about whether those suggestions would be integrated. Such participatory activities would be seen as a waste of time. Why go to the trouble of creating content if nothing is going to happen because of it?

This sounds ridiculous, and yet it's the way many museums approach participatory projects. Institutions provide ways for visitors to contribute, but they don't always provide clear feedback mechanisms so that visitors understand how and where their contributions will affect the institution overall. Visitors make their contribution, drop it into the slot, and hope for the best. In some institutions, visitors' contributions can languish for years. In others, the moderation of visitor-created content becomes such a chore that staff members review contributions rarely or haphazardly. In many cases, staff members don't even bother to go through visitors' contributions. They erroneously assume that visitors want to participate "for the fun of it" and that the visitors don't care how or if their work will be used.

Why does this happen? It's easy to undervalue the importance of responsiveness. Many people look at participatory websites and see the user-generated content on the surface without noting the underlying website architecture that responds to user actions. Consider the activity of rating videos on YouTube. Why does YouTube allow users to rate videos? It's not simply because it's fun to rate things. YouTube invites users to rate videos because those ratings can then be used to prioritize which videos are judged as better than others. The ratings provide valuable information about the relative value of videos, and the system architecture then uses that information to sort and present videos to subsequent consumers. YouTube's programmers recognize that different content appeals to different users, and so the system gives people recommendations based on their unique preferences rather than solely on aggregate ratings. The ratings are useless without the architecture to support them.

From YouTube's perspective, it's as important that users rate videos as it is that they make them. YouTube, like the Web itself, is glutted with content of

limited value. When users rate videos, they improve the YouTube ecosystem by sorting content by value. The more content there is, the more content there is. In contrast, the more interpretation, prioritization, and discussion there is around the content, the more people can access the videos (and the conversations) that are most valuable to them. Rating videos isn't just a fun diversion for users. It's a core support mechanism that helps YouTube function.

This concept can easily be extended to participatory museum projects. Consider video kiosks in history museums that allow visitors to comment on exhibitions or share their own stories related to the content on display. These kiosks are frequently designed to make contribution as easy as possible. They are rarely designed, however, to "get better the more people use them." From the contributor perspective, such kiosks would get better if contributors were informed of when their videos would be reviewed and how their work might be displayed to subsequent visitors. And for the vast majority of museum visitors who don't make videos (like the vast majority of YouTube users), these kiosks should offer other participatory experiences. There is no participatory opportunity to rate other visitors' videos, to sort them by topic or tone, or to comment on them. There is no way for a visitor to sit down and watch videos based on his particular interests. There is no way for a visitor to flag an inappropriate or empty video. And there is no way for contributors to see how others have rated, commented on, and enjoyed their work.

The result is a broken feedback loop. Exhibition video kiosks are degraded to playthings for people who like to see themselves on camera. Occasionally, a visitor will record something truly special, but the review and display systems are rarely set up to highlight those gems, and they certainly aren't set up to do so based on visitor feedback.

If museums are serious about inviting visitors to participate, they need to design structures for participation that embrace the full spectrum of participatory behavior and provide responsive value to those who engage. It's already hard enough to ask a visitor to make a video or craft a sculpture or write a label in the course of her visit. These endeavors are considerably more successful when visitors understand how their participation will impact not just their own experience but the experience of subsequent visitors and of staff members. A participatory museum isn't just open to visitors' contributions. It is a responsive institution that acts on those contributions and adapts to better support them.

Consider, for example, the Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum in Worcester, UK. In the summer of 2009, this small institution decided to develop a short-term exhibition that would tap into the popularity of reality television shows like *Britain's Got Talent*, in which viewers influence the fate of on-screen competitors by voting for their favorites.

The museum launched *Top 40: Countdown of Worcester's Favorite Pictures*. The exhibition featured forty paintings from the institution's collection, hung in a gallery with minimal interpretive labels. In the middle of the gallery, there

were voting stations, where visitors could use paper ballots to vote for a favorite painting and explain their reasoning. The staff tallied the votes weekly, and they hung large labels by each painting indicating its position in the rankings. The local evening paper also published the chart each week.

The *Top 40* exhibition was a hit. As collections manager Philippa Tinsley explained: "Spontaneous discussions broke out in the gallery on the relative merits of different pictures; visitors of all ages came back again and again to see where their favourite was in the chart that week and to cast another vote—at times they were queuing outside before we opened. As well as our existing audience, new visitors came just because they wanted to be part of it. I was particularly pleased to see young children persuading their parents and grandparents to participate."[4]

While some visitors to *Top 40* advocated for paintings based on personal preference (i.e., "it's pretty"), others made art historical arguments for the significance of their favorite pieces. One visitor, Shane Phelps, wrote a letter to the local newspaper congratulating the museum on the project, and noting his appreciation for the "variety of styles in the top 10" including both abstract and representational works. While everyone could make selections for their own reasons, every vote contributed to a broader community conversation about the paintings and the relative value of art.

What made *Top 40* a success? It wasn't just the opportunity for visitors to vote. It was the fact that the institution was responsive to their votes. Each week, the physical labels for the paintings changed based on the participation. The paper reported the evolution of public opinion. People understood that their participation mattered to the outcome, which motivated them not only to vote but to discuss the paintings and return to the museum again and again. Their participation, while simple, was meaningful. And that made all the difference.

WHAT IS A PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM?

Top 40 is just one example of a cultural institution operating like a Web 2.0 system. But take a mental step back. Imagine a museum that encourages visitors to participate and then provides responsive value based on their actions.

What might that look like? Such an institution might:

- Display objects created by visitors
- Generate maps of most popular or provocative exhibits based on visitors' comments
- Help visitors find other people (staff or visitors) with shared interests with whom to engage in content-specific activities or discussions
- Provide a public forum for visitors and staff members to ask and answer each other's questions

When thinking about what it means to "provide responsive value" in a cultural institution, it's important to move beyond the worlds of the Web and reality TV. In those commercial venues, responsive value is based on one thing: salability. The more you like something, the more likely you are to purchase it. For online retailers like Amazon or a movie subscription service like Netflix, it's in the company's best interest to serve people more of the things they like, so they'll be more likely to buy. The same is true of ad-supported websites that don't sell anything directly to consumers. The more videos you enjoy on YouTube, the longer you spend looking at the ads that support the service. The more you use Google as a search engine, the more exposure you have to the ads that pop up with the results. And the more responsive those ads are to your specific interests, the more likely you are to click on them.

This form of responsiveness is called a "proximate" model, meaning the system is optimized to respond with items that are most similar to the things you've already selected or marked. If you are trying to sell things, a proximate model makes sense. If a customer always buys romance novels, you take a risk by recommending a mystery or business book.

But museums are not trying to sell things. They are trying to engage people, to excite and enlighten and educate them. The proximate model makes many museum professionals uncomfortable, because it suggests that visitors will only be exposed to the narrow window of things similar to those they already like and will not have "off path" experiences that might surprise, provoke, or challenge their preconceptions.

Fortunately, the proximate model is not the only option available. There are some responsive systems that work very differently. For example, Librarything, a Web 2.0 site for people to catalog and share their books, provides a service called the Unsuggester. The Unsuggester recommends books that are *least* likely to be found in your LibraryThing collection or the collections of other users who also have your books. The Unsuggester doesn't so much give you books you'll hate as books that you'd never otherwise encounter.

While the Unsuggester is silly, it's also a valuable set of responsive content. It's a window into a distant and somewhat unknowable world. And users have reacted positively. When Librarything programmer Tim Spaulding suggested that few people were likely to actually read books on the Unsuggester list, an anonymous user responded: "You underestimate Thingamabrarians. Some of us are just looking for new ways to branch out from our old ruts ... and something flagged as 'opposite' to our normal reading might just be what we're all looking for."[5]

After noting the patterns of opposition between philosophy and chick lit, programming manuals and literature, Spaulding wrote: "These disconnects sadden me. Of course readers have tastes, and nearly everyone has books they'd never read. But, as serious readers, books make our world. A shared book is a sort of shared space between two people. As far as I'm concerned, the more of these the better. So, in the spirit of unity and understanding, why not enter your favorite book, then read its opposite?"[6]

Visitors take a closer look at one of the community-generated exhibits produced for the Denver Community Museum's *Bottled Up* exhibition. Image courtesy of Jaime Kopke.

Imagine an Unsuggester for museum visits. Visitors might be intrigued to learn that "if you always visit the mummies, you may never have explored the fish tanks." Visitors might appreciate the invitation to comment on the objects that challenged or repelled them instead of the ones they found most enjoyable. A responsive system doesn't have to deliver content that people are most likely to enjoy; it just has to deliver content that is in some way personalized to individuals' actions.

When we think about responsiveness broadly, it's possible to imagine all kinds of participatory structures that can reflect institutional values and educational goals. One of the most powerful examples is the Human Library project, an international program that gets strangers talking openly and directly with each other about prejudice.[7] While it's not a museum-initiated project, the Human Library demonstrates how a cultural institution might use participatory techniques to incorporate new, challenging ideas—a goal for many museums.

The Human Library was conceived in Denmark in 2000 as a way to engage youth in dialogue about ending violence by encouraging people to meet their prejudices and fears in a safe, fun, facilitated environment. Since then, Human Libraries have been produced all over the world at festivals, in libraries, in museums, and in workplaces. Visitors sign up with a staff member, look through a catalog of stereotypes, pick one of interest, and enter into a forty-five-minute conversation with a real person who embodies that stereotype. As its organizers put it:

> The Human Library works exactly like a normal library—readers come and borrow a 'book' for a limited period of time. There is only one difference: the Books in the Human Library are human beings, and the Books and readers enter into a personal dialogue. The Books in the Human Library are people representing groups frequently confronted with prejudices and stereotypes, and who are often victims of discrimination or social exclusion. The 'reader' of the library can be anybody who is ready to talk with his or her own prejudice and stereotype and wants to spend an hour of time

on this experience. In the Human Library, Books cannot only speak, but they are able to reply to the readers' questions, and the Books can even ask questions and learn themselves.[8]

While they started as one-off events, Human Libraries have increasingly been included in the regular slate of programming at major libraries and educational facilities. Some institutions have expanded their scope beyond the initial focus on prejudice to provide a peer network for learning. For example, the University of Arkansas's fall 2009 Human Library catalog included books like "Meditation 101" and "Learning about Table Tennis" alongside more traditional volumes like "Christian Female Soldier," and "I am an Atheist."[9]

Where evaluated, Human Libraries have been incredibly successful. In an evaluation of a Human Library in Istanbul featuring 21 books, 481 out of 484 readers said they would recommend that others try the reading experience.[10] Several readers praised the authentic nature of the encounters as "exciting" and "educational." One reader said: "I could find common grounds with the advocate of an opinion that I do not agree with 😀." Another Turkish reader commented: "I've never had a gay friend. It was unbelievably exciting to find myself facing him with his body, opinions and identity. It seems he was not very different from me and especially he was not an alien. From now on, I will not disrupt my communication with the gays, I will enhance it."

Unlike most online responsive systems, the Human Library does not function on a proximate model. It doesn't give readers books that are most "like them" or related to their lived experience. Instead, it challenges readers to connect with something foreign and unfamiliar. The value system that underlies the Human Library network is one focused on confronting long-held beliefs and moving outside your comfort zone.

In this way, the Human Library reinforces a key value that many museums espouse: the power of being introduced to ideas and stories that directly challenge visitors' preconceived notions about the world. Like libraries, museums are safe spaces for encountering new ideas. The Human Library extends that concept into a responsive program that powerfully connects people to each other. The Human Library is a project that extends the core value of a cultural institution to a new setting and social experience. But it is also possible—and powerful—to create responsive participatory environments for traditional museum artifacts and functions.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has been experimenting with participatory history research with the *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project, which invites people all over the world to help track the paths of several thousand Polish children affected by the Holocaust. Participation is decidedly not creative; users run searches for various spellings of individuals' names in a series of Holocaust-related databases, hunting down information about their whereabouts over time. The participatory task is a glorified form of data entry. But it's also important; participants understand that they are contributing to

The Children of the Lodz Ghetto project transformed this beautiful album from a private research holding into a public source of inspiration and data. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.

real museum research about the lives of real people during the Holocaust.

In alpha testing with university groups in 2008–9, student participants expressed high levels of engagement, skill development, and content learning through the *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project. They commented that it helped them connect to the Holocaust on a personal level, and in turn, to better understand its overall impact. As one student wrote, "As we conducted our research we saw that people would seemingly disappear—as if they had never existed. The many dead ends made our research frustrating but it also provided us with more intimate feelings toward those who had lost their lives in the Holocaust."[11]

The *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project was explicitly designed to "get better the more people used it." For example, the designers addressed the challenge of authenticating data by involving users in the vetting of each other's work. The project has many responsive mechanisms by which both staff members and users provide feedback and commentary on participants' research. These responsive mechanisms help verify the data submitted, but they also foster a sense of community effort and engagement.

The university students involved in the alpha version noted the responsive

element of the research platform as essential; as one student put it, "Much of the time, our peers [other participants performing research on the site] allowed our research to continue on without any dead ends. When we were stuck, it was comforting to know that the United States Holocaust Museum and our peers had our backs." Another noted, "By seeing how others think and conduct research, we can learn new techniques and see new things to look for in our future research."

This is not to say their research was perfect. Many of these participants were new to performing this kind of research, and alpha testing showed that only one-third of participant-generated data was validated by experts as accurate. The rest were invalid. However, despite the fact that staff researchers could have done this research more quickly and accurately on their own, the learning and social value of the project was deemed high enough to make the project worthwhile from an institutional perspective. Staff researchers engaged in ongoing discussion with participants and helped them learn how to be researchers themselves. As project director David Klevan put it: "I hesitate to refer to any data as 'bad' because each time a learner submits 'bad' data, they receive feedback about the submitted data that hopefully helps them to learn more about the history and become a better researcher."

Museum staff members are continuing to adjust the project as time goes on, and once it is opened to the public, they hope to encourage a community of self-motivated, more skilled researchers to sustain the project on their own. The staff vetting is the unscalable part of this project, and if the project gets flooded with bad data, it may not be able to grow easily. But Klevan believes that the research can improve in quality and the community can effectively self-police entries if the institution can find ways to reward participants for improving their research skills over time. Because the project was built to support and integrate peer review and active collaboration on individual research efforts, it has the potential to get better the more people use it.

Children of the Lodz Ghetto is a participatory project that was thoughtfully designed to reflect institutional values, provide participants with meaningful ways to contribute, and offer responsive value based on participants' actions. When a project can accomplish all three of these goals, it becomes valuable and appealing to both participants and staff members.

THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPATION

What does the participatory cultural institution of the future look like? I don't believe every institution is headed in this direction nor should be. But I do believe that most museums will incorporate participatory techniques into their design strategies over the next twenty years, just as they have incorporated interactive and multimedia elements to a limited degree. For traditional museums, embracing visitor participation probably means projects like *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* or *Top 40*—specific projects in which participation is clearly tied to both institutional goals and visitors' interests.

But imagine a "generous and realistic" approach to participation expanded from the scope of single projects to an entire institution. What would a museum look like that "got better the more people used it" across the board?

First, it would be a place that would be a pleasure to visit on crowded days. Rather than suggesting to friends that they come during the quiet months, staff members would enthusiastically look forward to the busy season, in which contributions would be most numerous and participation most active. Exhibits would not be optimized for individual use, with visitors waiting their turn to interact singly, but instead for social and collaborative use. Staff might draw more heavily on visitors' knowledge when giving tours or providing information about exhibits, encouraging visitors to see each other as partners in discovery. For many years, research has shown that visitors commonly report interactions with staff as the most enjoyable part of their museum experience. In a participatory museum, visitors would be just as likely to learn, play, and enjoy the content with other visitors as with staff or their own families.

Second, in a participatory institution, staff would continually seek out opportunities to improve the institution via contributions by and collaborations with visitors. When planning every new exhibition, program, or fundraising campaign, staff would ask themselves: how can visitors help? What can they provide to make this project better? The answer would not be uniform, though staff would likely develop some techniques that they deploy frequently, such as a community cocreation process for exhibit design, or a way to solicit, integrate, and respond to ongoing visitor feedback. Like the programmers behind Web 2.0 sites, participatory museum staff members would take a generous and realistic stance toward visitor participation, finding the most suitable ways to encourage and support visitor contributions. They would not give themselves excuses to exclude visitors or engage them in trivial ways. Staff would make sure that each time visitors were invited to participate in a project, it was for a real, tangible reason that provides value to the institution and the participants alike.

Finally, a truly participatory institution would be comprehensively responsive to visitors and community members. This doesn't mean turning over control to visitors, or making programmatic decisions solely on their preferences. It means finding a way to convert their contributions into action. This can mean putting visitors' objects on display. It can mean featuring a story or artifact that online visitors love to discuss. It can mean asking locals who don't attend what keeps them away, and working with them to develop programming that might support their involvement. It can mean responding to visitors' comments in a way that is accessible to everyone who walks in the door. It can mean getting back to people, saying thank you, and integrating their feedback into the work of the institution. A participatory institution adapts and changes based on the contributions of all stakeholders—staff, trustees, visitors, and community members alike.

Could such a place exist? Of course it could. It exists in institutions like the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, which develops its award-winning exhibitions in partnership with people from the neighborhoods that surround it. It exists in services like the Glasgow Open Museum, which makes objects from a broad group of collections available to community groups for their own exhibitions and educational use. It exists in temporary projects like the Denver Community Museum, which assembled each exhibition entirely from visitor-generated objects. It exists in projects like the Human Library, which encourages people to learn about prejudice by engaging in dialogue with other participants who are unlike them. And it exists in many of the projects explored in the rest of this book.

Encouraging visitor participation in museums has tangible, distinct benefits. It celebrates diverse voices. It makes the institution feel more dynamic. It provides alternative contexts for the content presented. It makes the museum feel like a creative and social place. And it introduces new opportunities for learning around cultural artifacts.

Pursuing participatory models isn't just about letting go of authority or expertise. It's about opening up the institution to the possibilities of what visitors have to offer.

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1 For Ian Rogers's complete speech, see http://www.fistfulayen.com/blog/?p=147 (accessed January 21, 2011).

2 James Governor, Duane Nickull, and Dion Hinchcliffe, *Web 2.0 Architectures* (Sebastapol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2009).

3 For O'Reilly's complete speech, see http://www.slideshare.net/GeorgeAppiah/tim-oreillys-commencement-speech-at-uc-berkeley-sims (accessed January 21, 2011).

4 See http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/11/guest-post-top-40-countdown-at.html (accessed January 21, 2011).

5 See Spaulding's November 2006 blog post "Booksuggester and Unsuggester" as well as user comments at http://www.librarything.com/blog/2006/11/booksuggester-and-unsuggester.php (accessed January 21, 2011).

6 Ibid.

7 See www.humanlibrary.org for more information about this program (accessed January 21, 2011).

8 Ronni Abergel, Antje Rothemund, Gavan Titley, and Péter Wootsch, *Don't Judge a Book by its Cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide* (Budapest: Council of Europe Publishing, 2005). Available at http://humanlibrary.org/downloads.html (accessed January 21, 2011).

9 The University of Arkansas Human Library catalogue is here: http://libinfo.uark.edu/diversity/livinglibrary/catalog.asp (accessed January 21, 2011). (Note that they use the name "Living Library" instead of "Human Library." The name was changed in 2010 by the Human Library organization in response to a copyright violation.)

10 Statistics and quotes from Turkish evaluation report produced by the Youth Studies Department at the Istanbul Bilgi University in 2007. Available at http://humanlibrary.org/downloads.html (accessed January 21, 2011).

11 Quotations provided by David Klevan, *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project director, at the 2009 American Association of Museums conference in a session entitled "Co-Creating Visitor Experiences" and chaired by Nina Simon. The project can be found at http://online.ushmm.org/lodzchildren/ (accessed January 21, 2011).