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THE POWER OF SELF-INTERPRETATION: IDEAS ON STARTING A COMMUNITY MUSEUM

SINCE 1985, BOTH AUTHORS OF THIS ESSAY have been actively supporting rural indigenous communities of the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico, in the creation and development of community museums.¹ Throughout the years, fourteen museums in Mixteco, Zapoteco, Chocholteco, and Mestizo communities have opened their doors to the public. The state association of community museums, Unión de Museos Comunitarios de Oaxaca, has developed a training center, a cooperative for community tourism, and a dynamic exchange program with other community museums throughout Mexico and tribal museums in Arizona. The association has also worked in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where communities are creating and strengthening their museums.²

Throughout this process, both of us have very much enjoyed the opportunity to meet with a wide variety of community representatives from different countries, with whom we have discussed the importance of community museums and the processes by which they are developed. This article sums up some of the general considerations at work in initiating a community museum and some methods to make this process easier.

First, a working definition of a community museum—especially how it differs from a traditional, mainstream museum—can be understood as a museum that develops around a collection of objects, a team of experts, a building, and its public.³ In contrast, the birth of a community museum is a community initiative; it responds to local needs and demands, is directed by a community organization, and is created and developed with the direct involvement of the local population. The community is the owner of the

museum, whose work strengthens community organization and action beyond its walls.⁴

To appreciate the potential of the community museum, consider the challenges local communities, especially disadvantaged ones, face today. The effects of globalization include persistent poverty, loss of cultural identity, accelerated migration, and disintegration of the bonds of unity and solidarity within local communities.⁵ In this context, the community museum is not a luxury, and its value is not simply decorative: it is a necessity that allows communities to repossess their heritage, both physically and symbolically. It is a tool for rethinking the future, for facing rapid transformations with the strength born of a core identity rooted in the past. It is a concrete image of the values that bind a people together, and a vehicle to project and legitimize these values. It is an opportunity to remember the vital experiences that should not be forgotten, but should be preserved to educate the generations who will inherit them.

As a repository for the stories a community tells to recreate its way of life, the community museum is a process of self-interpretation. In the museum, community members participate collectively in selecting themes for exhibitions, in choosing and collecting objects, in researching and analyzing their history and culture, in representing their stories, and in creating drawings, murals, photographs, scale models, and life-size installations. In this process, all participants are dynamically engaged, strengthening and developing direct personal bonds to their collective identity. They also have the opportunity to share a learning experience, to step back and collectively analyze the elements of community unity and conflict through creative interpretation.

These museums are also centers for cultural organization and action that mobilize a community and provoke it to develop new initiatives. They generate programs to strengthen the cultural identity of children, train adults in a variety of skills, promote and support local artists and artisans, and develop community tourism. Community museums are a window on the world, offering multiple possibilities for cultural exchange as well as serving as a vehicle for networking with other communities. These networks between communities allow local initiatives to expand and become regional in scope, affecting cultural policies by making the voice of communities heard.

The first steps taken to create a museum with these characteristics can



Community assembly electing a new museum committee, Cerro Marín, April 2004. Photograph by Cuauhtémoc Camarena.

vary greatly from case to case, but a common thread is the initial establishment of community ownership of the project. The beginning of the museum is rooted within the community to develop an inclusive decision-making process and build the vision and organization that will allow the community to be in charge of the project. The first actions carried out in this direction will be vital if local involvement is to continue growing.

For this first initiative to be born, some individuals within the community must launch and promote the idea. Sometimes they are local authorities, community leaders, teachers, or common citizens. Gradually, these initiators help generate enthusiasm and begin to establish a working group. In some cases, they constitute a group within the community that is already recognized as legitimately representing local concerns. In other instances, they comprise a newly established, informal group of volunteers.

In communities where there is a broadly recognized decision-making body that sanctions all important community projects, such as the village assembly, the community meeting, or the tribal council, the next step is to pres-



Group activity during a meeting of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, San José el Mogote, 1993. Photograph by Cuauhtémoc Camarena.

ent the proposal of the museum project for community approval. The requirements the initiators must fulfill in order to gain this approval vary greatly from case to case. This step could entail clarifying the idea of the museum, convincing local authorities to present the proposal for consideration, and disseminating the proposal widely among the local population. When such decision-making processes are clearly in place, the task of generating consensus community approval is made much easier.

In communities where such grassroots decision-making bodies do not exist, the initiators of the project must seek to generate community ownership by establishing links to a wide variety of local organizations, groups, and individuals. In this process, the working group usually needs to become more formal and structured, and often must acquire legal status as an association or nongovernmental organization. The most successful associations

of this kind are able to expand to include representatives of important community organizations and groups. Although they are not required to go through a formal process to achieve community approval, they face a greater challenge: to find their own way to build community consensus, creatively inventing and promoting a wide variety of activities and programs.⁶ In the cases where a community has approved the museum project through its main decision-making body, it is advantageous for this same body to elect or appoint a committee to coordinate the effort. In some communities, this is the normal procedure after project approval. In this way, the committee or working team, as a legitimate group of community representatives, has an excellent degree of public recognition and moral authority to begin to promote the museum project.

In both cases, what was an incipient idea must turn into a shared community concern, and what started out as a few interested people must turn into a structured working team. The museum project will become a shared concern when enough people in the community feel that they have been consulted, listened to, and involved in concrete activities. They need to feel that their opinion has weight, through their participation in large community meetings, through discussions in local associations and organizations (schools, youth groups, organizations of artists and artisans, neighborhood associations, etc.), through surveys, and through door-to-door consultations. They also need to be invited to participate in various contests, donation campaigns, interviews, workshops, lectures, community festivals, and small temporary exhibits, to name a few activities. The working team, on the other hand, must develop its capacity to plan, coordinate, and carry out these activities.

After collective discussion of the proposal and the decision to create the museum, several basic issues emerge that offer excellent opportunities to continue community consultations. What should the museum speak of? What stories should it tell? What parts of its history, culture, and present situation does the community want to represent, research, and learn about? Often the first initiators of the museum have specific ideas of what the museum should address, but the voice of the rest of the community should be heard if it is to become a collective project.

Where should the museum be located? This is another decision that involves allocating certain community resources in terms of its public areas

and infrastructure. Community members will appreciate having a say as to how this aspect of the project can be resolved, instead of being informed after the decision has been made.

Once the community has expressed its support of the museum project, spoken out about what issues the museum should address, and given its opinion about where the museum should be built, the museum committee or association has a strong foundation to continue the process of community engagement. At this point, there are several tasks that must be addressed almost simultaneously. These include the ongoing process of training and promotion among community members, the creation of the exhibitions and collections, the planning and installation of the building, and the development of support networks with other museums, organizations, and communities. Thus, the museum committee must develop a work plan that takes these different aspects into account.⁷

As this stage begins, planners need to recognize two important focal points of community training: the museum committee and the community workshops. The museum committee must continue to clarify its vision of the community museum and to complete a planning process to develop the different phases of the project in a fashion that continuously enhances community ownership. Workshops must develop participatory techniques that will allow the community to express its concerns in the exhibitions to be created.

The process of creating the exhibition involves conceptualization, research, and documentation; development of the collection, script, and design; and production and installation. Each one of these phases offers opportunities to organize workshops and involve community members. It is particularly significant to achieve community participation in the conceptualization and research phases, where the basic ideas and orientation of the exhibition will be defined. Oral history workshops are an excellent tool for inviting community members to interview and record the experience of other community members, to share and preserve significant stories.⁸

Planning the building and the exhibitions to be installed is a task the museum committee must develop in collaboration with the local authorities, usually seeking advice from professional experts according to the particularities of each situation. It involves the use of local resources, as we mentioned earlier, and the implementation of a fundraising strategy. With a



Workshop discussion organized by the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, held in Cacaopera, El Salvador, July 2001. Photograph courtesy of Cuauhtémoc Camarena.

community museum, it is always a priority to develop local participation. In some cases, such as the indigenous communities of Oaxaca, the local population will contribute days of free communal labor to work on the building. In other communities, it is possible to invite the local population to volunteer in a variety of tasks, from creating a garden to installing a wooden panel.

The development of support networks with other museums, organizations, and communities is an effective strategy to gain access to a variety of training resources and to facilitate peer learning. The mutual support and solidarity generated in exchanges allow local communities to increase their motivation, optimism, and energy for their work. Exchanges also provide points of reference for each community to contrast and analyze their specific situations, while they clarify and enrich their vision of the museum.

The obstacles to be faced in these initial stages are many, but the most serious one is often the breakdown of traditional ways of resolving community conflicts; this breakdown often means that any initiative can be subject to attack from diverse factions and will not be able to gain significant support. Frequently the initiators of a community museum become so attached to the project that they narrow the possibilities of local participa-

tion to the point where supporters practically disappear, then they complain about apathy, which they themselves have promoted. When they assume responsibilities or intervene in decisions that belong to the community, supporting institutions are sometimes an obstacle in themselves.

The role of an external agent or institution in this process is that of a facilitator, focused on providing information and building local capacities through training and guidance. The first initiators and the museum committee or local association can benefit greatly from clarifying the concept of the community museum and learning participatory methods to involve community members. One of the most successful strategies is for committee members to visit community museums and to learn from direct experience what they are and how they operate.

The supporting institutions must avoid directing the initiative and displacing local leadership. They should always act as consultants, providing information and advice, but not intervening directly in decisions the community must make for itself or fulfilling positions of responsibility in the operation of the project. Community members must take full responsibility and strengthen their own capacities to move the project forward. The central challenge to starting a community museum is to develop a collective decision-making process to approve the project and to build widespread consensus on its importance and value. Each community will arrive at this consensus by a unique path. A well organized, determined community will be capable of defining and successfully carrying out strategies to resolve the scholarly, technical, and financial issues that will arise later. The museum will fulfill its purpose when it has cultivated the strong roots that will sustain it in the minds and hearts of the community members.

NOTES

1. The National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) has supported the project since 1985 through its office in the state of Oaxaca. From 1987 to 2000, the Inter-American Foundation provided essential support to the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, A.C. (UMCO). At present, the Rockefeller Foundation is providing for the program of community workshops of UMCO's training center. Other supporting institutions include the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, the Dirección General de Culturas Populares, the U.S.–Mexico Fund for Culture, Traditions for Tomorrow, Partners of the Americas, the Arizona Commission on the Arts, Atlatl, and UNESCO.
2. From September 29 to October 5, 2000, UMCO organized a meeting called "Creating Bonds: Ex-

change between Community Museums of the Americas." Forty representatives of communities that have established or that are in the process of establishing community museums from the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia participated. These representatives formed the coordinating committee of community museums of the Americas, and developed a project to continue international exchange and organize training events. The representation of UNESCO in Mexico provided support in 2001 to carry out a series of ten workshops, one in each participating country, to clarify the concepts of methods of the community museum and to strengthen the network.

3. René Rivard, "Opening up the Museum," Quebec City, 1984.
4. Cuauhtémoc Camarena, Teresa Morales, and Constantino Valeriano, *Pasos para crear un museo comunitario*, CONACULTA, Mexico, 1994; Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, *Fortaleciendo lo propio: ideas para la creación de un museo comunitario*, CONACULTA, Oaxaca, 1995.
5. Kevin Healy, *Llamas, Weavings, and Organic Chocolate*, South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001; Alicia M. Barabas and Miguel A. Bartolomé, *Pluralidad en peligro*, INA-INI, Mexico, 1996; Enrique Leff, *Saber ambiental: sustentabilidad, racionalidad, complejidad, poder*, Siglo XXI Editores, México, 1998.
6. In Oaxaca, and other areas where indigenous cultures persist in Mexico, community members can generate consensus through the village assembly, which carries out the approval of the community museum project, the election of the museum committee, and the selection of themes and the building. In the central and northern states of Mexico, however, *asociaciones civiles* are more common, and community museums are organized by developing links to local schools, local cultural groups, and neighborhood associations.
7. *Pasos para crear*, pp. 37–39
8. Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, *Communities Creating Exhibitions/Comunidades creando exposiciones*, Fideicomiso para la Cultura México/USA, Centro INAH Oaxaca, Oaxaca, 1999.

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