CHAPTER 6
Sharing Authority: Creating Content and Experiences
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Founded in 1969, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) was conceived as a “Museum for the People,” a cultural hub for the extraordinary diversity of Oakland. Since its founding, OMCA has been committed to being accessible to multiple ethnic communities and to reflecting diverse cultural traditions. But, what does it mean to be “The Museum for the People” in the 21st century? The response from our community members is that it means being a creative partner with the diverse communities that reflect a changing California.

History of OMCA’s founding:
What is currently known as the Oakland Museum of California came together in the 1960s, when the City of Oakland passed a $7 million bond measure, in order to bring together 3 long-standing institutions: the Oakland Public Museum, (founded in 1910), the Snow Museum of Natural History (founded in 1916) and the Oakland Art Gallery (founded in 1922).

At that point, the focus of the Museum shifted to California as proposed by Paul Mills, the Director of the Oakland Art Gallery and founding Chief Curator of Art, to distinguish the new Museum from the institutions in San Francisco. The architect for the new building, Kevin Roche, along with other museum designers, envisioned the Oakland Museum as a community museum for the people.

The Museum at that point was overseen by a City Commission, most likely made-up of Caucasians, as was all of the Oakland City leadership at that time. In fact, there were protests against the Museum prior to its opening for not representing the Oakland community in its staffing and leadership. In support of the community-focused vision, the originating director of the Museum, JS Holliday, created an advisory council to represent community interests and was fired for insubordination by the City Commission 6 weeks before the Museum opened. His Director of Education, Julia Hare, an African American woman, resigned in protest.
Two temporary exhibition projects of different scales from OMCA explore 21st century community engagement practices in a variety of ways. *Pacific Worlds*, a large-scale exhibition, interpreted collections through partnerships with diasporic community members and *Oakland, I want you to know*… a smaller scale exhibition, experimented with a new model driven by a lead artist and community members as co-creators with the museum. Both models utilized community engagement practices based on a system that scales participation—contribution, collaboration, and co-creation (the three Cs).

**The Spectrum of Community Engagement Practices**

This system was originally adapted, from the Public Participation in Scientific Research (PPSR) project developed by Rick Bonney and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, by Kathleen McLean as part of a 2008 National Science Foundation proposal for the new Gallery of Natural Sciences at OMCA. In 2009, McLean elaborated and customized this system for the Natural Sciences Gallery exhibit development team, that included Christine Lashaw and Evelyn Orantes, community engagement specialists. Since then Lashaw, Orantes, and other staff have evolved the three Cs at OMCA to be defined as a spectrum of activity that moves from less to more community involvement and sharing of authority. There is not a formula that prescribes how categories are attributed. Each exhibition project is different and has different needs.

**Contribution:**

Visitors and community members “contribute” by advising, loaning something, writing a response, attending a single meeting/convening or answering interview questions. The internal team conceives of and drives the vision and goals for the project. Community voice may or may not be incorporated.

**Collaboration:**

Community members and museum staff work together as a team, to develop ideas and share some decision-making. Community voice is visible in key moments of the project/exhibition.

**Co-creation:**

Community members or artists are part of the key decision making. This could be creative direction, designing elements for the project/exhibition, creating an artwork, adding interpretation, producing a media experience, or designing a whole section—
determining the “how” an exhibit experience is implemented. Co-creators play a role throughout the whole project/exhibition. Community voice is a key piece of the narrative and is visible throughout the whole project/exhibition.

These two exhibitions occurred at a time when the OMCA found itself grappling with balancing the financial pressures currently facing many museums and engaging communities through various strategies to entice new audiences and reflect the demographic makeup of their surrounding communities. *Pacific Worlds* was located in a primary exhibition space and was charged with ambitious audience goals that were difficult to meet although it was well received by the community and won many awards. *Oakland, I want you to know…* was presented in a smaller experimental space with low visitation expectations and delivered a slightly above average attendance for that exhibition space. It was also well received by visitors and engaged over 700 participants in the creation of the space.

It is important to note that other exhibitions hosted in the primary exhibition space utilizing minimal resources for community engagement and featuring renowned artworks or collection objects also had difficulty meeting projected audience goals. However, the same measures of success tend to apply to both community driven exhibitions as collection driven exhibitions. What are the markers of success for community driven exhibitions and how do those markers reflect the balance between sustainability and engagement?

**Case Study: Pacific Worlds, Oakland Museum of California**


By Christine Lashaw, Experience Developer, Oakland Museum of California

*Internal Core Team (No OMCA staff on the project team was Pacific Islander, which is why a Task Force was put together)*: Experience Developer, Associate Curator of History and Contemporary Trends, Designer, Project Manager

*Internal Extended team*: Curatorial Assistant, Public Program Developer, Community Partnership Manager, Media Developer, Registrars, Conservators, Preparators, Evaluator
Community Collaborators: Over 100 Pacific Islanders from the Bay Area and beyond participated through multiple modes of engagement, from interviewee to project task force member.

Project Description

Pacific Worlds, an 8,000 sq. ft. temporary exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), highlighted the historic and contemporary connections between the Pacific Islands (Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia) and California, inviting diverse communities to get to know their Pacific Island neighbors. OMCA’s Pacific objects were collected before the museum’s focus was solely about California. Since 1969, they have sat in storage awaiting a California connection. Recent scholarship re-positions California as the Eastern edge of the Pacific, rather than the Western edge of the United States. This re-interpretation opened up the obvious connection between California and the Pacific Islands releasing these powerful objects and stories from storage. The Pacific Worlds exhibition provided a new way forward for museums to reinterpret collections in collaboration with diasporic communities.

Pacific Worlds was developed about, with, and for Pacific Islanders in California. It aimed to reach a broad audience and connect them with the experiences of Pacific Islanders in California. It was the first exhibit on the US mainland to highlight the people in this growing minority group, which is largely invisible in public discourse. It illuminated Pacific Islander experiences in historical context, in their own words. The exhibition brought to the forefront contemporary Pacific Island living culture in California through 236 outstanding objects in OMCA’s collection. It privileged stories told from Pacific Islanders’ perspectives over the museum perspective—thus sharing interpretive authority.

Community Engagement Practices

External and internal collaborations were the key to success.

External Collaborations

Over 100 Pacific Island community members were engaged in various roles to create this exhibition. OMCA worked alongside Pacific Islanders in four categories of participation.

1. A Thought Convening

OMCA curatorial staff identified Pacific Island scholars from around the country to convene for a two-day meeting to provide feedback and guidance on the exhibit’s conceptual development. The Community Partnership Manager, Public Program
Developer, and Experience Developer advocated for four local community member activists to also join the conversation. These four people eventually became Task Force members.

2. Project Task Force
The museum convened a group of 11 cultural advocates from diverse Pacific Islander communities who worked with the exhibition team. Additionally, Pacific Island community members asked for a Native Californian voice on the taskforce. The team met monthly over the course of a year. Guided by the Museum, the Taskforce helped to surface the rich stories their cultural objects hold, identified themes, brainstormed experiences, contributed visitor goals, weighed in on some decisions—particularly the direct handling of the interpretation of collection objects. They encouraged the museum to emphasize that indigenous peoples of the Pacific are part of living cultures in California and have been for a long time. All members were compensated for their time and expertise per attendance at each meeting.

3. Exhibition Component Development
Community participation at this level took many forms and ranged in activity from contributive to co-creative. For each project, participants were compensated in accordance with their level of participation.

Contributive: First-person interpretation was a major strategy; artifact cases featured quotes of Pacific Islanders in California and the Pacific Islands talking about what historic objects in the collection mean to them. OMCA conducted interviews with 20 indigenous individuals from the Bay Area and Pacific Islands.

Collaborative: OMCA commissioned two new Pacific Island objects to be created for the exhibit. An Oakland Tongan seamstress, Langilangi Mavae, made a contemporary tapa (barkcloth) and outfit. To complement these, Samoan artist Jean Melesaine produced a video portrait of the tapamaker reflecting on what it means to be Tongan in Oakland today. Additionally, a Modesto Native Hawaiian feather artist, Rick San Nicolas, was commissioned to teach students from an Oakland halau (cultural school) how to make two kāhili (feather standards used for monarchy), helping to pass on traditional knowledge while he created the exhibit object.
Co-Creative:
The primary co-creative effort on this project was through the work of the Task Force—they decided which cultural practices to focus on and who should be highlighted to represent them. These cultural practices were prominently visible through a portrait and profile series produced in partnership between Samoan-American artist and task force member Jean Melesaine and the OMCA Experience Developer. Melesaine’s large-scale black and white photographic portraits were paired with excerpts of interviews that profiled 12 Pacific Islanders who are living their cultures in the Bay Area. These portrait profiles were placed alongside the historic collection objects used with the associated cultural practices.

4. Program Development
Public programs were catalyzed by the project Task Force and actualized through community connections. The goal was to cultivate community engagement within museum walls via performance, storytelling, traditional and contemporary art practices, film screenings, and discussions that highlighted the Pacific Islander experience in California.

The public programs team was very conscious to create events that not only placed a spotlight on traditional cultural practices but also heightened the profile of Pacific performers who were innovating cultural traditions. This tactic attempted to lift a stereotype which froze Pacific Islanders in a colonial past. Perhaps the best example of this was the Community Welcome event. Attended by more than 300 visitors, this program performed an opening ritual that emphasized the diversity within the Pacific, both in ritual and artistic practices. It placed local California Pacific Islander communities first and foremost within the opening of the exhibition as it reflected the vitality and unique contributions they bring to California culture in an immensely inspiring manner. The program included performances of Hawaiian hula, Maori powhiri, and contemporary Samoan song. Finally, a community procession led by Samoan conch blowers in war regalia ceremoniously welcomed the group into the exhibition space.
Internal Collaborations

Working with external community members takes more internal staff time and requires new ways of approaching the work, which can challenge teams. Clearly articulating roles and responsibilities and engaging in some difficult conversations helped to support each other in forging new internal relationships and methods of working. The following are some examples.

The internal team that worked with the Task Force was cross-functional. It included the Community Partnerships Manager, Public Program Developer, Experience Developer, and Associate Curator of History and Contemporary Trends. Team members supported one another from logistics to navigating difficult conversations. The result was a very positive experience. Respect for each person’s unique expertise and contribution to the group allowed staff to form a unique bond with one another and the Task Force that continues to this day.

Collections access for Task Force members required some new ways of working with registrars. Museum artifacts can hold sacred meaning and significance for communities. In order to reveal the stories of our Pacific Island collections, task force members requested they be able to touch and hold collections objects. Registrars and conservators were very open to negotiating a process for these members to handle objects. The result was a powerful experience for both Task Force members and collections staff. This strengthened relationships between curatorial and collections staff who struggle with tensions between access and conservation.

Some internal team members were new to working with community members and *Pacific Worlds* was a good learning experience for them and provided experienced staff the chance to build capacity in others. For example, the media developer and designer were accustomed to a particular aesthetic and method of working that was different from that of community stakeholders.

The Experience Developer, who held many years of experience developing exhibitions with community members, played a critical role in articulating roles and responsibilities that fundamentally shifted decision making and how the internal team defined quality and success. Within this framework, the internal team worked together to establish technical parameters for the community artist that allowed her creative freedom while also delivering a strong experience for the visitor. The result was a positive experience for all involved and thus increased the number of staff members who have worked on community engagement exhibitions.
Lessons Learned

Audience and Impact

Pacific Worlds met three OMCA strategic plan goals:

1. Created relevant experiences that diverse audiences value.
2. Connected with diverse partners to respond to community needs—to highlight Pacific Island culture as a living culture in local neighborhoods.
3. Utilized collections to share the stories of California’s past, present, and future communities

Pacific Islander attendance was several percentage points higher than the typical attendance from the year before. The summative evaluation showed that 10% of those interviewed identified themselves as Pacific Islander, whereas typically 1% of total OMCA attendance identifies as such. Family attendance was also high at 72%.

The evaluation indicated that many visitors gave the exhibition a high rating because they learned about Pacific Island cultures—an underrepresented group of people. They also liked the balance of history and cultural interactions. Some visitors commented on the connection between California and Pacific Islands while other visitors found the large scale, strikingly beautiful, or familiar types of objects most memorable.

The process of content development allowed for a large number of Pacific Islanders to participate, including some who lived on the islands. The community engagement practices used contributed to the positive impact on visitors and the local Pacific Island community, particularly those that participated in the exhibition or program development. During an exhibit debrief, partners reported that the Pacific Islander community felt valued and had a sense of ownership over this project. Their personal experiences were reflected in the museum, and they developed new feelings about OMCA—a place they felt welcomed.

Task Force member Carolyn Kuali‘i expresses:

Museum staff respected and allowed for community knowledge to help guide the content and design. It was truly was fueled by community voice. Task Force members were allowed to contribute resources and networks. As a result the community's voice was strongly represented, showing the public that we are alive and contributing members of the larger community. The beauty of our cultures were displayed with care and respect. Powerful storytelling was used to tie the past with the present. OMCA staff also shared the award with Task Force members—they gave us credit!
Pacific Worlds leveraged historic collections and contemporary community collaborations to create an exhibition that serves as a model for community engagement in the field. It was recognized as such with four awards including the Excellence in Exhibitions Award from the American Alliance of Museums and awards from the American Association for State and Local History, the Western History Association, and the Western Museums Association. The OMCA team had additional AAM trophies produced to give to taskforce members, acknowledging their essential role in the exhibition development process.

Clearly the Pacific Islander community felt connected to the exhibition in a deep way, but the impact was not necessarily as deep for non-Pacific Islanders. In the future how could a project about specific cultural groups reach a broader audience in a personally meaningful way? Would it mean engaging non-Pacific Islanders in the exhibition development process?

Evaluating Success

Pacific Worlds was located in one of OMCA’s primary changing exhibition spaces (8000 ft. sq.) for which the museum has ambitious audience goals. This exhibition did not meet attendance goals. That said, the exhibit won major awards based on a methodology that demonstrated the potential of museums to engage new and diverse communities through shared authority and voice in programming. This suggests that a future model for this level of community engagement and investment may be better suited for a space that doesn’t have expectations to draw high attendance. In today’s climate, museums will continue to struggle with the ongoing challenge of balancing the goals of financial sustainability and impact. How do we take both into account as we measure exhibition success?

Grassroots Marketing

Many conversations took place between the exhibit development team and the Marketing team to strategize ways to cultivate the local Pacific Islander audience. It was identified that this effort fell into the category of Grassroots Marketing—using methods that are aimed at targeting a specific group. This required new ways of working, and as such, it was not clear whose responsibility this work should fall to—Marketing staff or the Community Partnership Manager. It also wasn’t clear who had capacity for outreach. Complicating the situation further, the Community Partnership Manager left OMCA partway through development of the show. As a result we weren’t able to be as ambitious as we hoped in reaching Pacific Islander communities. This is not an uncommon problem in museums. How can we develop
different strategies, which are also sustainable, for cultivating audiences who fall outside traditional markets and require different methods of outreach?

**Existing External Conflicts**

The Task Force itself was challenged with tensions between cultural groups. For example, who is considered a Pacific Islander can be disputed. Part-way through the exhibit development process, one task force member raised this as an issue, challenging the inclusion of one cultural group in the exhibition. This provoked a series of difficult conversations and decisions for OMCA which threatened to derail the task force collaboration. The Experience Developer was able to navigate and resolve this situation having built strong relationships through the process, but upon reflection more thought was needed up front to avoid this tension.

**Building Relationships**

Building relationships and trust are at the core of successful community engaged projects. This requires conversations based on reciprocity and mutual respect among all participants. The Community Task Force was put together specifically for the *Pacific Worlds* exhibition and program development because OMCA has a strong practice of working with community experts alongside museum experts. OMCA staff built valuable relationships with the Pacific Islander community through the exhibition content development.

Post *Pacific Worlds*, the institution has been challenged to find ways for Pacific Island collaborators to continue to be involved with OMCA. We know that it isn’t sustainable to maintain the intensity and intimacy required during a project run, but we also want these stakeholders to continue to feel part of the OMCA family. What kind of habits and systems does the institution need to develop for this to happen? One example currently being explored is the creation of a database, that includes all collaborators, to provide regular communications about what is happening at OMCA—on-going invitations to attend. Another strategy for long-term engagement is the incorporation of Pacific Islander faces and stories (assets produced for *Pacific Worlds*) into the core Gallery of California History, further demonstrating that Pacific Islander stories are always part of California history—not just during a temporary exhibition run.

The Experience Developer, Curator, and Program Developer have continued to maintain some relationships, particularly with task force members, through sporadic gatherings and in some cases calling upon individuals to make recommendations with new collaborators. If a core institutional goal is to transform partnerships into visitorship, then what other systems can be put in place to cultivate long-term relationships?
Outcomes

The objectives met through community engagement:

1. Raised the profile of Pacific Island living cultures within California.
2. Honored and encouraged Californians to learn about Pacific Island living cultures in California.
3. Developed programs that centered Pacific Island historical and social issues, values, and creativity.
4. Brought to life the stories of objects in OMCA’s collections from the perspectives of Pacific Islanders.

There were both missed opportunities and extremely positive outcomes. The invitation for diverse Californians to get to know their Pacific Island neighbors fell short of expectations, reflected in the number of visitors overall. However to balance that out, the local Pacific Islander community was recognized and visible in a museum like never before because of what Pacific Worlds represented for them. Task Force members comment:

“The Pacific Islander community overall was proud of this exhibit...it represented them in a real way.” —Carolyn Kuali‘i, Hawaiian

“We have strengthened the networks among ourselves, but also have a recognized and established voice in the OMCA family for future outreach and collaborations.” —Angela Carrier, Chamorro (Guam)

“It was empowering and helped amplify the voices of a community that is rapidly increasing in California and across the nation. It helped break down stereotypes of Pacific Islanders and more importantly it celebrated the diversity, resilience and how we continue to sustain our culture, our visibility in the U.S.” —Ella Wolfgramm, Tongan

An outcome goal for the exhibition that Task Force members contributed was that new generations of Pacific Islanders would learn about their own heritage. The success of this outcome is evident in an excerpt from a letter of support made by one community member writing about the opening event:

“....Children standing in rapt attention listening to stories from grandma or an uncle...I heard our beautiful Pacific languages. One young boy, looking at the tapa display said, ‘wow. This is all us.’ It struck me that many of these younger generations have never
had the opportunity to visit their ancestral homelands—and in this way, the exhibit became a homecoming.”—China Ching, Native Hawaiian, Program Officer Indigenous Rights and Representation, The Christensen Fund

This strong impact had lasting results. Two years after *Pacific Worlds* closed, participants still have positive feelings about OMCA. These two individuals were included as part of the portrait series in the exhibition:

“This project was a HUGE accomplishment not only for me PERSONALLY but also for my heritage. It meant so much to see our story being told. Thanks for giving us a platform to share our culture & teach others about our jewels in life. Our ancestors are PROUD & continue to urge us to PRESERVE our practices in America and the world now.”—Larina Kulu, Tongan Kava practitioner

“Participating in this exhibit was an honor for myself and my family, as well as my dance troupe as we were able to share our culture through picture and performance. I think it is vital that we take every opportunity to share our culture so that others may understand that the things that make us different are truly the things that unite us as a human race.”—Whitney Skillman, Maori Dancer

In other words, Pacific Island cultures were authentically represented at OMCA through *Pacific Worlds*. The exhibition was centered around stories told by Pacific Island people who are practicing their living cultures, rather than scholarly interpretations, and through the amazing objects which hold their histories. Personal experiences were reflected and cultural stories were visible in the museum for the first time. Pacific Island community members who participated continue to feel valued and deeply connected to OMCA as a result of *Pacific Worlds*. 
Case Study: Oakland I want you to know... Oakland Museum of California

On view July 23–October 30, 2016

By: Evelyn Orantes, Independent Curator and Community Engagement Consultant
Formerly Curator of Public Practice for the Oakland Museum of California

Team:
Internal Core Team: Lead Artist, Curator of Public Practice, Project Manager, and Exhibition Designer

Internal Extended Team: Public Program Developer, Learning Initiatives Developer, Community Engagement Manager, Community Engagement Coordinator, Registrars, Conservators, Preparators, Evaluator

Collaborators: Over 700 participants contributed to the creation of the exhibition including 7 local artists, 6 community organizations and 19 schools.

Project Description

Cultural diversity, the defining characteristic for the city of Oakland, California is a huge point of pride for its residents. However, like many cities throughout the United States, an evolving economy and the pressures of gentrification are changing the city’s social fabric. Oakland, I want you to know… (OIWYK) explored the accelerating social, economic, and demographic changes in Oakland as seen through the eyes of its community. The exhibition featured artworks co-created by artists and Oakland residents and contributory elements that invited Museum visitors to share their thoughts about what’s happening in Oakland right now. Over 700 artists, school children, community groups, and Oakland residents participated in the making of the exhibition.

Oakland I want you to know... was part of a three-year grant (2013–2016) from the James Irvine Foundation to build institutional capacity in community engagement knowledge and practices, to respond to important community needs, as well as inspire residents of the Museum’s surrounding neighborhoods and the broader community to connect to their personal creativity and express their cultural identity. Exhibitions related to this grant were approached as experiments that aimed to establish a model that reflected a depth of community involvement with timeliness (shortened time frame) in exploring current and at times urgent community issues. A lead artist worked with community members and played a pivotal role in determining the focus of the subject matter, content and exhibition development and design. Participants created site specific, multimedia art installations in exhibitions and in the core art gallery.
Teamwork and Team Players

To develop and implement a project that was artist and community driven, it was necessary to shift the power dynamics in the project team. In this model the lead artist’s expertise and community content are valued on more equal footing with that of scholarship and museum expertise, weighing significantly in the overall vision of the project and decision-making processes. Team members worked with the lead artist and co-creators as thought partners, offering their expertise and knowledge when necessary and taking cues from collaborators on content, aesthetics, design, and collaboratively prioritized resources as ideas evolved.

Not surprisingly, the biggest challenges that surfaced during the staff debrief for the project were related to the shortened project timeline, and the discomfort and tensions that come from sharing authority with external team members who have not been trained in museum practices or indoctrinated to museum culture. In order to move past those challenges, we all strove to find a level of comfort within the discomfort and ambiguity that comes from not having all the details in the way we had become accustomed to when working with an internal team. Some of the details were worked out at the tail end of the project, which meant that the team had to operate with a different set of expectations for the implementation and production phase of the project. The final phase required all hands on deck, improvisation and creative problem solving with external collaborators as final projects trickled in and unforeseen challenges came up. The expertise and contributions of the museum preparator were particularly crucial in this phase.

Consistently working this way on several projects helped the museum explore an exhibition model where staff members collaborate closely with community to co-create installations, while strengthening organizational capacity by building staff understanding of and commitment to community engagement practices. *Oakland, I want you to know...* also helped us to build capacity by broadening the circle of staff members that had worked in community engagement exhibitions and allowed us to experiment with the idea of being timely and responsive.

The Curator of Public Practice

Another factor in the shift of team dynamics was the introduction of the Curator of Public Practice as a key member of the core team. Community engagement in museums has traditionally been the role of education or public programming staff members. The culminating projects that result from these efforts most often take the shape of programs and rarely occupy gallery space. Gallery spaces and collections have been the purview of the curator, but as
museums grapple with being relevant and responsive to demographic shifts, among other pressures new expectations and needs are surfacing in the role of curator. The 21st century curator will be expected, “not only to select and organize arts programs, but to diagnose needs in their communities, seek out new and unusual settings for their work, forge partnerships with a wide array of disparate stakeholders, and, in some cases, cede a certain amount of artistic control in order to gain broader impact.”

The role of the curator of public practice on these projects deliberately blurred the borders between curator and educator. In this role the curator identified and recruited external collaborators, was the primary co-creator with the lead artist, facilitated the collaboration between internal and external participants, augmented artistic social practices with museum community engagement practices, and worked with content experts and scholars to create historical context.

**Lead Artist**

Selecting the right artist was key to the success of this exhibition. It was established early in the process that we needed to showcase the work of an artist who incorporated the participation of community into their art-making process in addressing social issues. We also needed an artist that had established a range of collaborators in the local community. This was particularly important due to the short time frame for the development and implementation of this project.

Artist Chris Treggiari, a past collaborator, was selected as the lead artist for this project because his projects demonstrated a practice that connected a wide range of community collaborators. Using a range of artistic approaches including a mobile art platform, his work turns the passive viewer into an active art maker. His past projects highlight community identities as well as shared and personal stories.

**Community Engagement Practices**

A mixture of community engagement practices that range in depth and scale were used in this exhibition to create a robust infrastructure for community participation. Each element was unique and evolved in its own way based on the goals, form and collaborators. In this model the community engagement efforts were facilitated by both the lead artist using social art practices and museum staff using museum community engagement practices.

182 Brown, Alan, and Steven Tepper, Ph.D. “Placing the Arts at the Heart of the Creative Campus.” White Paper commissioned by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, December 2012
As aforementioned, the spectrum for community participation in the exhibition development process ranges in scale that moves from less involvement at the contributory level to sharing of authority in a deeper way at the co-creation level. Although it is helpful to categorize these efforts for the purposes of planning, managing of expectations, and dialogue among colleagues, it is important to note that these categories have blurry boundaries.

These practices were built on a legacy and commitment of many OMCA educators and staff members whose dedication and advocacy for community voice and accessibility breached into exhibition development practices. This foundation was necessary in order to execute an exhibition that incorporated over 700 participants.

**Community voice as starting point**

The inception of an exhibition tends to be an insular process. To explore a different beginning process for this exhibition we started with the Neighborhood Identity Report. This report was commissioned by OMCA in the fall of 2013 and aimed to understand the needs and values of the Oakland neighborhoods surrounding the museum, with the goal of strengthening ties between these communities and the Museum. The lead artist was asked to propose an overall vision and theme for the exhibition based on the report. Additionally, the lead artist was responsible for proposing a generative framework for community participation and an aesthetic vision of the exhibition informed by community input.

**Co-creation**

The primary co-creator in this exhibition was the lead artist who was involved in every phase of the project from the conception to the implementation of the project. Additional co-creators worked on a variety of components ranging in form and scale. These included director and film-maker Alex Ghassan who created three films that incorporated over forty interviews reflecting key content topics for the project. In addition to working with the exhibition project team to determine the focus of the films Alex also collaborated with the marketing and communications team to identify and prioritize subjects for the interviews and to share contacts.

Other co-creation elements included an installation by Youth Radio, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland. OMCA already had a strong relationship with this organization and had collaborated on other programs and exhibitions. This allowed us to progress quickly with the participants even though we were dealing with a delicate and controversial issue because a level of trust had already been established. In this installation, youth worked with the lead artist and the curator of public practice to translate an online project about gentrification in
Oakland into an immersive environment. Lastly, Oakland resident and musician Fantastic Negrito co-designed the re-creation of his personal creative space for the exhibition.

**Collaboration**

Several participating organizations including Town Park, Acta Non-Verba, City Slicker Farms and individual artists Angie Wilson, Michael Wertz, Querido Galdo, and Julie Placensia created specific elements in the exhibition. Collaborators were invited to respond to the theme and reflect their aesthetic preferences within a specific pre-determined form like a wheat paste wall or billboard. The form was determined by the lead artist and curator of public practice in conversation with the exhibition designer.

**Contribution**

Over 600 handmade books were created by local school children for the exhibition to create a community library made up of unique and individual stories. Photographer and teaching artist Julie Placensia was invited to create a book template that was further developed by a museum educator in collaboration with the curator of public practice. Museum educators led the effort of recruiting participating teachers and the distribution of book kits provided by the museum to be used to create the books in the classrooms.

Additionally, several in-gallery participatory elements were developed in the exhibition to invite visitors to contribute to the content of the exhibition as part of their experience. Activities included a poster-making activity where visitors could contribute their voice to the exhibition using stencils and colored pencils to complete a poster with an artist designed border. Two additional opportunities invited visitors to share their personal thoughts by responding to two content-related questions. Contributory elements were developed and designed by lead artist and curator of public practice in collaboration with the graphic designer.

**Off-Site Programs**

The Oakland Rover an interactive electric mobile museum, is one of the many tools that OMCA Connect, the community engagement team of the museum, used during this time to engage Oakland Residents outside the museum walls. The main charge of OMCA Connect was to bring together community members, professional artists, community-based organizations, and Museum staff to create participatory arts projects in community spaces and surrounding neighborhoods.
In collaboration with the lead artist and the curator of public practice, OMCA Connect developed a series of art activities facilitated throughout the city that complimented OIWYK content. For several months OMCA Connect bloggers attended several of the events and asked community members for their honest opinions about the changes happening in their neighborhoods and what makes Oakland great. Their words were compiled into zines that included original photography, artwork, and illustrations. The zines were a take away for visitors and were incorporated into one of the installations of the exhibition.

**Project Outcomes**

An internal summative evaluation was conducted for *Oakland, I want you to know*... to understand visitors’ experiences in OIWYK, to determine whether the visitor outcomes were achieved, and to examine whether visitors grasped the main idea of the exhibition. Data revealed that the project was successful in communicating the main idea and messages of the exhibition. The content experiences and design held the visitor’s attention, timing and tracking also indicated that visitors were actively involved throughout the exhibition.

Most visitors interviewed had positive feedback about their experience in the exhibition. Many of them acknowledged and praised the museum for tackling a relevant, local issue. Other visitors shared that the experience made them hopeful and reinforced the idea that people can work together for positive change. They also noted that the museum could be an important gathering space to bring people together to create a shared understanding of issues like gentrification and build a sense of community.

The exhibition was also well received by the press. Sarah Burke, from The East Bay Express wrote, "But *Oakland, I want you to know*... is not a processed reaction or a memorial; it's an exhibit unfolding in the present tense. It's a show that insists museums can do more than archive — that they can spark social change." And Jeffrey Edelatapour from KQED wrote, "That over 700 people participated in the creation of the exhibition is notable. *Oakland, I want you to know*... is a worthy example of social practice art at its best. Instead of a lone curator informing the people of West Oakland about their neighborhood, the neighborhood is educating OMCA visitors about themselves and the reasons why they’re fighting to stay in the place they call home."

Evaluation also revealed that we could have done a better job of developing and providing ways for visitors who wanted to get involved in the community. We attempted to do this through a community board and a poster that offered ways that visitors could get involved. Another area for improvement was to explore ways to make an exhibition of this scale more
visible to visitors in the museum and externally to the public. This exhibition was considered small in scale for the institution and was located in a special exhibition space in at the end of the Gallery of California Art. While there was great coverage of the exhibition, more could have been done to work with the project participants and community groups to spread the word through their networks. Many visitors on site learned about the exhibition through the front line staff who were excited about the project.

Concluding Thoughts

*Oakland, I want you to know*... demonstrated that museums can play an important role in creating dialogue and providing a place where members from the community can come together to discuss urgent community issues. As one visitor commented about the exhibition:

“I would tell them [friends] to come, and check it out for themselves. I would love to bring my friends here. Because, [this] is creating dialogue, about the things that we are talking a lot about, anyway. . . . I would definitely encourage them to come. I would want to come with them. . . . It is very current. It doesn't feel like a museum. Sometimes [at a museum], you [might be] looking at really interesting stuff, but you don't really know how it connects to you. This is so relevant, that even if you don't like art, it is still so important to you. [woman, age 18 and woman, age 18]

This work requires teamwork and an ongoing commitment to accessibility, exploring new ways of working together internally, and to experimenting with a variety of ways of working with external collaborators. Putting less pressure on this project to drive audience to the museum allowed us to focus on the community engagement project outcomes. The trade off was limited marketing resources to make this project more visible externally and programming resources to engage visitors to the museum in a deeper way with the content.

For Further Discussion

The Costs and Potential Benefits of Community Engagement

Museums are grappling with the reality of financial sustainability and are prioritizing revenue-generating opportunities and strategies. Success is being measured by drawing greater paying audiences which puts added expectations on exhibitions and projects.
What do the pressures of financial sustainability mean for the future of community engagement projects?

Will the assumption that community exhibitions cost time and money deter museums from continuing their commitment to this work?

Will community engagement projects only remain sustainable at the contributory end of the community involvement spectrum, rather than the more resource-intensive collaboration and co-creation levels?

How does committing to allocate resources to community engagement projects help entice, reflect, and provide participatory platforms for potential new audiences?

Can a commitment to these projects help museums combat skepticism that museums are an ivory tower for the 1% that is boring, sterile and unwelcoming?

How do we measure the success of community driven exhibitions?