

Empowering Voices: Community Advisory Councils at the Oakland Museum of California



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The peoples' museum: it has a powerful, democratic ring to it. The Oakland Museum of California was founded in 1969, at the time when the blockbuster exhibition was beginning to make an explosive appearance on the museum scene. Although many institutions were looking for audiences to pack these popular exhibitions-as-attractions and boost museum visitation, they weren't necessarily seeking to empower them with a sense of ownership. And yet, the Oakland Museum was doing this right from the start, in a surprising and innovative way.

With the years that passed, the Oakland Museum lost its original name, but it hasn't strayed from its initial concept as a museum conceived for and belonging to its public. It has succeeded in keeping foundational goals alive through the extensive implementation of community-based co-development and co-creative approaches. Community Advisory Councils in particular have provided a constant source of guidance that informs everything from museum programming to everyday activities. A renovation project, initiated in 2005 and with a projected completion date of 2012 has permitted the Oakland community to assume an active role in the process of updating the Gallery of California History of the Oakland Museum, reopened to the public in 2010.

Advisory Councils: More than just a tool

Although essentially a tool that provides an institution with the means to realize its goals, an advisory council is much more than just a means to an end. For the Oakland Museum, Community Advisory Councils have become an integral part of the conversation that began over 40 years ago, with the foundation of the museum. The roots of the tradition were formed with the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild in 1970. The Guild was founded by a group of African-American community members who saw the need for an increase in cultural representation and awareness. During its ten years in operation, the Guild's focus expanded to include the African American, Native American, Mexican American, Latin American, Japanese American, and Chinese American communities.

Over the years, Community Advisory Councils have provided not only the keys to reviving visitation, which had slumped at the Museum during the 1990s, but also to the construction of a hub of community engagement. Community outreach can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but for the Oakland Museum, the implementation of Advisory Councils was both an organic and

Empowering Voices: Community Advisory Councils at the Oakland Museum of California

well-adapted way to reach out to the surrounding community. Since Oakland is a markedly multicultural city, with large African-American and Latino populations, Museum management began to wonder why its attendance didn't reflect the diversity encountered on the city streets. Attracting these community members soon became a priority, taking on a more important role than mere numbers. It became evident that in order to attract a more diverse audience, members of the very community in which the museum is located would need to be involved. These members, who by their very role as elements of the targeted communities, have a proverbial finger on the pulse of the city, and can as a result lead the way to interesting and relevant content.

The Oakland Museum currently works with six Community Advisory Councils. Each group, which may include professionals, arts activists and others, meets on a regular basis to discuss specific projects and issues that impact the corresponding communities. Advisory Councils have provided counsel and feedback regarding exhibitions, collections, educational programs, events and audience and member development. Of the six groups, four Advisory Councils have recently taken on an added measure of importance during the Museum's renovation process by informing and aiding museum staff during the reinstallation process and, in one case, choosing objects for the Gallery of California History.

How conflict can provide opportunities for change

A tattooed, mustachioed young man stands in an unmistakably laid-back posture, crowned by a bandana, sunglasses on, beer in hand. It's a familiar figure to some, a threatening one to others, but nonetheless one you might see on a street corner in any *barrio* in one of the numerous Latino communities across the United States. Nonetheless, to a group of Oakland city employees, this figure was one that was difficult to accept and one that ultimately incited change at the Oakland Museum.

In 1992, community representatives including members of City of Oakland *Amigos* —a group of Latino city employees— objected to the display of a work of art, *Cholo* by Richard Rios, in the Oakland Museum of Art Gallery. *Cholo* is the sculpture of the young man described above, whose provocative figure, detractors believed, required more explanation and accompaniment than was being provided by the museum. As a result of the community members' critique and a series of discussions with museum staff, *Cholo* was removed from the gallery, to be restored to its place at a later date, when the artwork could be presented in a more didactic context.

Cholo's removal provided an opportunity for the Oakland Museum in the sense that staff members were confronted with a multilayered problem which had remained undetected until that point. Ostensibly, audience members lacked both context and familiarity needed to

Empowering Voices: Community Advisory Councils at the Oakland Museum of California

understand certain cultural cues and triggers present in Rios' discourse. But the *Cholo* debacle also pointed to a larger underlying issue —Latino audiences in the Oakland area were not being served. When a community is excluded from a dialogue, when institutions with a large Latino demographic neglects to address Latino history, culture and issues, a disconnect is bound to occur once audiences are confronted with related content. It would seem that the baby steps taken by the Oakland Museum toward providing its community with socially relevant content were bound to encounter resistance. Rather than become discouraged, however, the museum decided to take action.

Museum staff took this opportunity to ask what could be done to address the deficit that had made itself evident through *Cholo*. A series of meetings were arranged between community members and museum staff, who envisioned a solution in the form of three exhibitions: *Carmen Lomas Garza*, *Saltillo Sarape*, and *People of the Border*. With these three shows, which addressed subjects ranging from Latino culture to immigration policies in the United States, the museum hoped to empower visitors with the tools necessary for greater understanding and, ultimately, interpretation.

Perhaps the most fruitful and concrete result of the *Cholo* debacle was the ensuing collaboration between community representatives and the museum, whom together went on to organize various programs, a symposium, reception and festival. The formation of the Latino Advisory Council marked the beginning of an increase in co-creative efforts the Oakland Museum has continued to prioritize until now.

How cultural practices can become universal

In 1999, Oakland's Latino Advisory Council branched out to include a project which had begun five years prior, *Días de los Muertos*, or Days of the Dead. Sharing many of the same aims as the Latin American Council, the Days of the Dead Advisory Council was conceived specifically to oversee the initial exhibition and celebration, which subsequently evolved to include a curriculum, exhibit guide program, and other related programs.

As with the Latino Advisory Council, the Days of the Dead Committee was formed to better serve its community, after it was determined that while many area Latinos were familiar with the tradition, and some were already celebrating and practicing, many were unfamiliar with the history and spiritual significance. Council members felt that by focusing on Days of the Dead as a living Mexican and Mexican-American tradition with Mesoamerican origins, Latino audiences would feel more comfortable approaching the institution.

Beyond simply familiarizing audiences with Days of the Dead, the Council also aimed to provide

Empowering Voices: Community Advisory Councils at the Oakland Museum of California

the community with the necessary tools to reclaim the tradition by making it fun and accessible to all audiences. Now in its 17th year, the Days of the Dead program has expanded to serve 15,000 museum visitors with activities that range from gatherings organized to honor ancestors and contribute to the healing process, to the fabrication of *ofrendas*, or altars. In addition to being an extremely successful yearly program, Days of the Dead's echo can be heard in *Forces of Change*, one of the newly-installed exhibitions within the California History Gallery whose co-creative installations have taken the form of altars. Universal themes such as death and remembrance of lost loved ones played a large part in the overwhelmingly positive reception at Oakland Museum's Days of the Dead.

Community members join forces

Although Oakland Museum focuses on three disciplines in its collections and galleries—art, history and natural sciences—the renovation process has been geared toward encouraging permeability between the galleries. An overarching theme serves to tie the different sections together, “Coming to California”. The gallery begins with *Before the Other People Came*, an exhibition devoted to Native American History, and ends with *Forces of Change*, a section co-developed with four of the Advisory Councils that focuses on California from 1960 to 1975. A post 1975 section is currently being co-created using feedback from the public.

The 740 ft² *Forces of Change* exhibition was installed in 2010 through a cooperative effort between museum staff and the African American, Asian Pacific, Latino and Native American Advisory Councils. Through a system of checks and balances, all four councils helped the Museum achieve a result that was representative of the diversity in the state of California during the tumultuous period in history covered by the exhibition. This approach implicated Council involvement at several stages in the project, but especially in the initial shaping of the exhibition.

During the planning stages, the Museum had envisioned a spotlight on key moments of social change of a fifteen year period through a number of individual objects from the permanent collection. Not surprisingly, the idea was rejected by the Councils, who felt that the time period was far too complex and disparate for the focus to be only on single objects. The critique sent museum staff back to the brainstorming stage, which resulted in the idea of 24 niches or boxes, inspired by Days of the Dead, created by people all over the state of California. Each niche would represent the creator during the 1960s and 1970s, and communicate political involvement, tastes and interests through the use of both personal objects and pieces from the collection.

The niches were approved by the Councils, who felt that the multi-layered individual niches were a fitting presentation for a dynamic time period, where shifting identities and ideals often meant that one person could be involved in multiple social movements. To aid in the selection

Empowering Voices: Community Advisory Councils at the Oakland Museum of California

of participants, the Museum asked Council members for leads, ideas and personal contacts. Meetings were then held with each of the Councils to pinpoint which elements were considered important by each section of the community. Some felt it was important, for example, to include the Black Panthers, while others felt it was necessary to evoke the Brown Berets. Overall, the Councils agreed that it was imperative that audiences be given the means to connect with the content in *Forces of Change*, and recognize themselves in the discourse, whether that be through the music, images or texts included in the niches.

With the conclusion of the exhibition installation came the Council's final contribution to the process of installing the *Forces of Change* exhibition. At this stage Council members were taken on a tour of the galleries to provide feedback and offer suggestions. Future plans for *Forces of Change* include a rotating program where several of the participant niches would be changed out, to vary the exhibition and offer a genuine polyphony of voices.

Advisory councils are a concrete way to co-creation-based programming and museum-wide changes. The use of advisory councils at the Oakland Museum privileges the voice of the community over the museum voice, and has helped to make the institution truly a museum for the people.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Los Angeles native, Cynthia G. Valdez is currently on the way to Switzerland to complete a Master's in Museum Studies at the University of Neuchâtel. Prior to this, she spent two years in



Mexico working with the Collections and Exhibitions of the Museo Amparo. In Mexico and while completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Paris, Cynthia wrote for various art publications in France and abroad, including ArtSlant, The Paris Times, The Mag L.A. and Whitehot Magazine for Contemporary Art. When not accumulating stamps in her passport, she enjoys knitting, gardening, experimental music and answering emails at yomemoi@gmail.com.