



Museums for All

In the Spring of 2021 we carried out a design project with six of the largest museums in Columbus to better understand how they might increase belonging in museums for people currently experiencing poverty.



THE PROBLEM

Through the national Museums for All program, those receiving food assistance (SNAP benefits) can gain free or reduced admission to more than 1,000 museums throughout the United States. As museums in Columbus were preparing to roll out a Museums for All program, they wanted to ensure that all community members felt belonging in museums and that individuals eligible for the Museums for All program would be inclined to visit.

THE APPROACH

The project was done during a week-long intensive design sprint in which The Columbus Foundation conducted 12 hours of interviews with people currently experiencing poverty or receiving government assistance. The interviews helped our team better understand how residents view museums and where people felt the greatest belonging in the city in general.

The design team was composed of community members, museum practitioners, and designers and was led by The Columbus Foundation team. Co-designers included Miles, Bessie, and Tiara. Museum staff included representatives from Center of Science and Industry (COSI), Columbus Museum of Art, the Wexner Center for the Arts, Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, Ohio History Connection, and the National Veterans Memorial and Museum. Designers included Morgan Vien and Susie Wise. The Columbus Foundation staff included Mark Lomax, II and Heather Tsavaris.

FINDINGS

Through the interviews, community members revealed they perceived clear indicators of what is “for them” and what is not, even when programs are meant to be inclusive. People cited things like the physical accessibility of spaces, outdoor tents, and the actual museum exhibitions as markers that they did not “belong” in certain places.

Residents were also very clear that free museum access alone was not enough to entice them to visit. One resident shared: “Whatever happens in the museum has to be relevant to me, opening the door isn’t enough.”

During the project, we met a woman named Mary Ann. Mary Ann described herself as low income and explained that she doesn’t always want to receive help from others—sometimes she wants to be a helper, too. “I know what it feels like when people give me charity. I don’t want that... For me I have to feel a part of it. I have to feel like an equal partner. Don’t feel sorry for me.” Mary Ann went on to say she was less likely to visit a museum if she felt like a recipient of charity. As we spoke with Mary

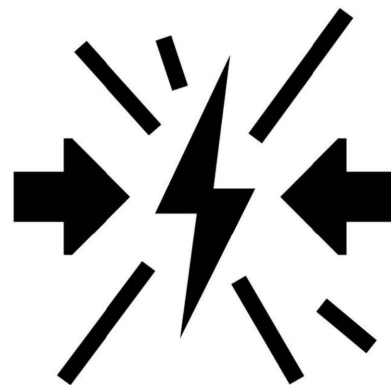
Ann it was clear how much expertise she had about others who shared her socioeconomic status. Our team wanted to be able to offer Mary Ann a way to inform museums about what she and her friends and neighbors want and need from museums. We wanted to offer Mary Ann a way to impact what was happening in museums. We wondered if it might be possible for Mary Ann to activate her knowledge of both the museums and her friends and neighbors to form a bridge between the two.

A prototype born out of our desire to support Mary Ann was a “Community Navigator” concept that involved leveraging her knowledge, expertise, and trusted relationships with neighbors to help museums better understand what residents receiving benefits might want from museums, and to share information about museum offerings with these neighbors.

Another prototype that was co-created during the project was “The Exhibit of Open Conflict” (see reference below). This prototype specifically engaged with the need for community members to feel agency and experience inclusive representation in exhibit experiences. This prototype tested the desirability of a communal space for residents to interact with those who they perceive as both in-groups and out-groups, encouraging people to claim power by speaking their truth while learning from others in constructive dialogues. Residents we interviewed about this prototype were particularly interested in it. One shared: “There is nowhere in Columbus that something like this can happen. If this was real, I could get a hundred people to show up.”

WELCOME TO THE EXHIBIT OF OPEN CONFLICT

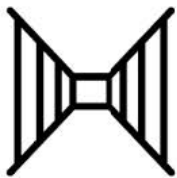
*a place for speaking your truth, saying
no, and holding multiple perspectives*



RULES OF THE FIGHT

- This exhibit is always ON and can house any argument
- This TOPIC changes with the times, and can last from 3-5 weeks
- We come to express ourselves through the provided channels on the given topic
- We come to offer our perspective and witness the views of others
- We cause no harm
- We leave through the Row of Reparations and offer healing as we go

THE HALL OF EMOTIONS



A wipeable hallway, the colors of the rainbow on the walls, where you write the emotions you are carrying aligned to the color they feel. Profanity welcome.

THE DEBATE DEBAUCLE



The debate where no one wins

No preparation, no score keeping, talking over one another is welcome. Get out as many arguments as you can.

In the end, agree to disagree and walk away.

THE NARROW PASSAGE OF NO



In this transition zone, a loud speak asks you to do things like go to work, do your chores, pay your bills. Your job is to keep walking and to say NO! all the way down the hallway.

THE RAGE ROOM



Every hour, on the hour the room is flipped, cleaned, and restocked for more things to break. The room is soundproof and protective equipment is provided. Guests enter to scream and break things for 10 minute intervals.

THE PATIO OF PROGRESS



The patio is for side-by-side problem-solving. Sit with a stranger or team to look at the topic at hand and work together to come up with solutions.

THE PARLOR OF PRIVILEGE



A dining experience that changes every two hours, where a demographic is granted privilege and gets better service and seating. Guests must enter and commit before they are told who has privilege.

i.e., Black and Trans Women get VIP, all others get common seating and service.

THE QUAD OF COUNTERARGUMENTS



This is where you write your opinion on a given topic- post-its. Others come to disagree by writing their opinions and putting their post-it on top.



THE GARDEN OF INTENT VS IMPACT

In this garden you are paired with someone across difference to discuss a scenario having to do with race, class or gender and you discuss the intent vs the impact of actions in that scenario.

THE ROW OF REPARATIONS

Leave what you also need, and name who it is for: money, food, goods, services.



It must be something of value and ready to use.

THE IMPACT

In August 2022, Ohio History Connection, in partnership with five other Columbus museums, received a \$49,340 National Leadership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to test the Community Navigator prototype. Further design work to build out that prototype is ongoing.

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