

Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration.* Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, eds. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 290 pp.

Reviewed by C. Kurt Dewhurst

This volume of essays has developed out of a conference hosted by the Horniman Museum in London and the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester that was held in November of 2009. The conference presentations and the eventual essays included in this collection provide keen insights into the current state of museum theory and practice. A most welcomed contribution it is, as it expands upon and challenges some of the working perceptions around the very nature curatorial practice, the work of museum engagement with communities, and the growing focus on creating visitor-centered museum programs and exhibitions.

What is especially appealing about this book is the broad involvement of international scholars with deep experience and their presentation of compelling case studies to make their points. The editors set out to not only represent contemporary developments in museums but to move beyond the current polemic that presents false choices between the power and presence of “the curator” versus community needs and perspectives. The editors make a compelling case that scholarly knowledge and community practice can result in new models for practice when working *with* communities. A thoughtfully presented book that builds effectively on the earlier work of leading museum studies scholars, it offers museum staff members, scholars, and museum studies students a rich array of essays that demonstrate the shift in museums from places of general education to places of real “learning”—and the way museums are becoming more audience-centered during the current age of multi-sensory entertainment.

The book is divided into three sections: “Community Matters,” “Sharing Authority,” and “Audience and Diversity.” The editors stress that museums need to move beyond “mere consultation and inclusion.” They believe that museums must seek to re-examine their institutions in light of growing community expectations as they build their collections to represent their communities and shape ever more responsive community programming. The case studies selected for this volume provide insights into how many museums are now moving to the center of civic life in many communities and they are taking risks to address major societal issues related to equality, human rights, and social justice.

In recent years, one of the more contentious debates within the professional museum field has been the evolution of the position of museum curator. At one time the curator in most museums was clearly the unquestioned leading intellectual force at the museum. The curator in this setting held a position of high status in the museum structure. However, over the past decades, the role of curator has come to require a new set of skills that enable the curator to collaborate effectively with museum colleagues in museum work teams as well as to engage with the communities they serve in new ways. There has been considerable push-back by some conventional curators to this shifting paradigm but this book does not take on this reaction, rather, the editors and contributors build the case that curatorial work today is perhaps even more essential to the success of

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museums as the curator needs to share authority, re-imagine museum and vision, and manage much more complex relationships—along with their mastery of subject matter content of their museum collections. Among the most important question posed in this book is, “How, if at all, can community perspectives and diverse new voices be integrated into curatorial practice in substantive ways, thus facilitating more democratic curatorial practices?” (2). One comes away after reading the case studies with the conclusion that a new curatorial presence does indeed exist at many museums across the globe and that museums are now realizing an ever greater impact on their communities.

There are a total of 16 chapters/articles grouped in the three sections in this volume. While there is not a weak link in this collection, there are some especially compelling articles. Here are three examples. Bradley L. Taylor’s article, “Negotiating the Power of Art: Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project and Its Communities,” is especially noteworthy as it presents Guyton as artist/curator who has to negotiate a complex landscape of audiences, government, and identity. It stretches the very idea of curator and makes the case for a new way to consider art/creativity as curation. Serena Iervolino’s article, “Museums, Migrant Communities, and Intercultural Dialogue in Italy” examines the European Union supported initiative to foster the role of museums as contributors to cross-cultural understanding. Focusing on migrant communities in Italy, she profiles museum efforts to create a “sharing space” for audiences to renegotiate cultural and national identities. And finally, Elizabeth Wood’s article, “Museums and Civic Engagement: Children Making a Difference,” assesses The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis’s exhibition, “The Power of Children: Making a Difference” as an opportunity to explore racism and intolerance through children’s stories.

Many of the case studies will be of great value to the museum field as they not only describe the initial vision and development of the community engagement involved in the exhibition or program, they provide reflective scholarly analysis of what worked and what was learned. Such analysis is often absent in museum publications where the emphasis is more often only on the new innovative approach or the unconventional design or installation. This audience-centered approach takes into account the critical role of evaluation and then it is conveyed in a case study format makes this volume of greater value to the museum studies field.

It should be noted that there is an afterward entitled: “A View from the Bridge in Conversation” with Susan Pearce, Kirstin James, Petrina Foti, and the editors. It is a thoughtful way to conclude this volume as it seeks to explore the “borderlands between divides: the mind/body, thought/feeling, subject disciplines” related to theoretical museum practice. It explores what it means for the visitor to experience the museum physically, socially, and emotionally—as a way to explore one’s own humanity. And finally, there are 37 color plates that illustrate the articles as well as an index.

Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaborations is truly a significant contribution to the growing scholarship on museum theory and practice. It only builds the case for deeper community-engaged work by museums with communities. The book is both inspiring and practical as it challenges museums to play a greater transformative role in their communities in the years ahead.

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