

Rigorous methodology

As you all probably know, you can take
some knocks doing this kind of work
and as you can imagine,
for us there are some people
who really contest the idea that this is serious.
They just think what's going on
down at the museum
is some crazy kind of community circus.
So it's really important for us to be rigorous
about how we approach this work
and be able to say, "No, there is a method behind this,
there is a reason and a rationale behind it."
And so for us, that means first of all,
being consistent in how we invite action,
inviting people to participate in everything.
This is from a workshop we did
when we were working
on a capital project with kids helping share their ideas
of what should happen to the museum.
We have a lot of pictures that look like this
and any of you who have done
community organising
know that all community organising
photographs are basically boring photos
of people sitting in rooms talking to each other.
But this is the work we have to do to really be in dialogue

about what we are trying to do

together as a community.

From kind of a tools perspective,

one of our favourite tools we use

is this honeycomb diagram.

The way we approach our project development is this:

We start in the centre by defining communities

and we do so very specifically.

We don't like using communities

like teenagers or Latino people.

We like using communities like

'people who live in the Beach Flats neighbourhood'

or 'skateboarders downtown'

or any group that is sufficiently coherent enough

so we can really work with them,

identify them, talk with them.

Then what we do once we've defined

that community of interest

is we look at what are the needs

and assets of that community.

What are the things they're looking for?

But also, what are the things

that they have to contribute?

Then from those needs or assets

we develop projects or collaborations

that don't start from the idea

of 'we have something to give you',

but from the idea that 'let's build on something
that's already desired or is already happening
and that could be even celebrated in a stronger way'.

So another way to look at that model is this:

Go from the Community to the Assets and Needs
to the Projects and Collaborators.

So, often when we start a project,

or when we get interested

in working with a new community,

we don't start with a programme at all.

We start by going to folks in that community,

leaders in that community, and asking them,

"How can we work with you?

How can we learn from you?

What are your big events?

How can we volunteer?"

And getting to know what's going on in that community

so that we can build up together some trust

and some idea of what assets

and needs we can create projects out of.

Similarly, on a macro level,

we use the theory of change

to talk about how we do our work.

This diagram up here is what I think of

as kind of the sloppy theory of change

that, unfortunately, many

non-profit organisations have.

It starts with this idea,
'we make programmes, therefore
our mission is achieved, therefore, world peace.'
You know, 'this exhibit happened and we're done.'
And what we find is that this
is not nearly enough rigour
to demonstrate to funders what we're doing.
But it's also not enough rigour
for us to really share with our staff and our community
what we're trying to achieve.
So our theory of change is too small to see
but it basically has two threads:
The top is about bridging
and the bottom is about empowering.
Ultimately, the impact that we care about
is this idea of our community
growing stronger and more connected.
That that has to happen, has to be
the ultimate impact that we care about.
So for us, our theory of change
is not about how we design
exhibits or programmes,
it's about how we bring people together and bridge
and how we empower individuals
through art and history
so that we build a stronger community.
Hi again, Nina.

I'm thinking about the ladder of participation
and you've given us some incredible examples
of where people can participate in a small way.

They can bring their boxes or you can create space for them to feel
really empowered and act on their own
right at the top of the ladder.

There is a kind of rung there,
isn't there, where it gets icky
and it's difficult when you're trying
to make decisions together.

Perhaps you've invited people
to be part of reflecting
on the strategic direction of the museum.

Do you think you could share with us
one of those more difficult collaborations?

Sure, well with anything where you
have lots of relationships,
obviously, there are break-ups
and there are hurt feelings
and misunderstandings.

I think that we've always been
kind of careful about setting
everybody up for success and making sure
that when we invite participation
it's in a context and with a framework
that's very structured so you know, it's funny,
while we feel like our ability to be collaborative

is supported by us being as clear
and as structured as possible.

And so, we will really sit down
with people and say,

"Here are our goals, and here
are some things we can imagine.

Here are some limits for us.

What are your goals?

What are you dreaming of, etc.?"

So when we reach out to people about collaborating
we try to give them a lot of information.

How much time will this take?

What are we expecting?

What are the opportunities here?

And we try to be pretty honest,
both of us getting our thoughts on the table.

I think the challenges,
the stickier things we've had
are with over-enthusiasm.

So people who collaborate with us
a couple times, and they just want
to collaborate with us all the time,
and we've had to say to some people,
"We just need to see you a little less right now."

And that kind of thing, and I think
that one of the things
that's helped us is because we have

such a scale focused model.

Is people understand when we say to them,
"We'd like to create opportunities for more people,
more bands to play, more people
to be involved in these processes,
so we need to rotate to somebody else now."

People may want that for themselves,
but they understand it.

We had a beautiful moment like that recently
with the graduation of these teens
and this conversation with all these teens who were saying,
"But we all want to do this programme again next year."

And finally this 14 year old stood up and said, you know,
"This has been so special, it would be a shame
if we didn't allow and invite
other kids to get to do this too."

I think that again, that whole
approach around space making
and really being open about that
helps us to communicate where
some of those opportunities are
and where they aren't.

I will say one of our biggest
complexities right now
is around our community advisory group
and how that's structured and we're trying
something new this year.

We were inspired in how we created it
by this programme in Dublin
at the science gallery,
which is run by Michael John Gorman.
He runs this group
called the "Leonardo Group",
which is 75 people who just meet
a few times a year.

It's just intensive brainstorming.

So we ran a group like that
for a couple of years
and it was good, but we found
that people were fading away
if they weren't interested in the topic
of what the meeting would be about
and so, what we're trying this year
is actually restructuring that group
as a community leadership group
around using creative practices
to solve community problems.

And that the museum will just be
one of several potential beneficiaries
of the advice generated there.

So it's more like
a professional development network,
more like a leadership group
than it is like an advisory group for us.

Again, that's an example
where we're creating a framework
where we can be honest
about what we'll be able to take from it
but we hope it's also generating
more value for others as well.