Scaling up

What I want to talk about today

is some of the work we've been doing here

at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History.

To give you a very quick reference,

this is a small, regional

art and history museum,

sort of like a city museum

in a city of about 62,000 people

here in Santa Cruz, California.

And what we're dealing with, I think

is something that all of us are dealing with,

which is the idea that a participatory museum

is one that does not have this kind of problem.

There have been protests recently

at the Guggenheim Museum in New York

calling it the 1% Museum.

When Piotr and I were talking

before this session, he said,

"One thing you don't need

to talk about with these folks

is why we approach working with our

communities in a more participatory way."

And I'm thrilled to not talk about that

because I think what's much more

interesting is how we do it.

I think we're all already comfortable that

we're not having this kind of problem.

But the problem that we're having

and the problem I'm really thinking

a lot about these days is how can we think about

this participatory and inclusive work,

not just as being something we do

with a small group or with one project

but how can it really be something that is

throughout our organisations

and throughout our communities?

And so many of the projects that we do in Santa Cruz

are very different than the kinds

of participatory projects I've done in the past.

I think many of us for years have been

doing participatory projects

where we work with a very focused group.

Maybe you're designing and co-creating an exhibition

with a group of refugees from a particular area

or you're working with teenagers very closely

on leadership in the community in some way.

We do that kind of work and I've done

a lot of that kind of work and I love it.

But I also see how that kind of work

can very easily get marginalised

to be just, oh, those 15 people

over there in that room or that gallery or that programme.

And so a lot of the work we've been

doing in Santa Cruz is about scale

and how do we think about participation

scaling up to our whole institution?

And so for us that means many different

ways that we invite people to participate.

Whether that's when you walk in right away

being asked, "How can we make the museum better?"

Giving their comments on a wall.

Whether it's collaborating with us on events.

In a town of 62,000, we collaborate

with about 2,000 people every year to co-produce events.

Artists like this print-maker,

people who are contributing

their own work to exhibits

and then people just sharing intimate

moments in the exhibitions

designing our exhibitions in a way

that really invite people

to connect with each other

and to tell their own stories

and have their own participatory

experience on the spot.

A lot of our programming invites people

to share their own stories and their own selves

and so beyond those 2,000 collaborators,

we have about 50,000 visitors

who are engaging in this way that really

invites them to be active participants.

And this can be through the context of an event,

it can be through the context of

something like a teen program

and it can also involve

some pretty wild approaches

like our annual Holy Festival

and Indian Paint Throwing Festival

or Glow which is a fire and light festival

that we hold at the end of the year.

And again, kind of coming back to this question

one of the kind of analogies

we use here for our participatory work

are romantic analogies and what we realised is,

here in Santa Cruz we don't do a lot of

monogamous participation

we do a lot of one-night stands

and we host a lot of orgies.

and that our approach is really about

inviting people to participate no matter where they're at

and maybe sometimes in a very surface-level way.

Thinking about how we ignite

that opportunity to participate

as well as how we provide

those deeper opportunities for it.

So what I wanted to share today

are just a few of the lessons

that I've been learning doing this work

over the last few years here in Santa Cruz

and before that around the world.

And really, it comes down for us,

to three big approaches:

The first is about participation

that we believe art and history

are something you do

not just something you learn about.

The second is about social bridging

and this idea that the museum is deliberately unhip.

That it is a place where people

of lots of different backgrounds

connect with each other across

our differences and our communities.

Whether that's collaborators,

this is a knitter and a graffiti artist

who became collaborators through an event

where they were both co-participating.

Or whether it's visitors,

these are two separate groups of visitors

who met and got to know each other

through an experience in the museum.

And then our third approach is really about experimentation.

That we believe that to be a successful museum,

to be able to thrive in this time,

we have to be always trying something new.

And for us, these three approaches;

participation, social bridging

and experimentation have really

transformed our museum.

Okay, second note, and this really speaks to the

'participation for everyone'.

We really think about how everybody,

at every step of our participation

of our community can be involved

meaningfully in what we do.

And so, that can be as simple as this,

this is a very, very basic example:

We send out an email newsletter

once a week as I'm sure many of you do

and we have this thing called the 'wish list'

and so we ask people for things

that we need for upcoming events.

So in this case, we were saying,

"We need cardboard boxes

to build a giant cardboard castle

for a family festival in January,

please just drop off your cardboard boxes."

And there was a guy, and we found this online,

who wrote a blog post himself

about how he loaded up his bike trailer

with all of these cardboard boxes

that his wife had been nagging him forever

to get out of the garage and he brought

them down to the museum to give to us.

He got to be a participant

just by getting rid of his junk

and giving it to the museum.

But then he got to see how we made

this giant castle out of his cardboard

and how it became the backdrop

for this community opera

that happened at this family festival.

For us, the wish list started in this very simple way.

We need stuff to do our programmes.

Help us get that stuff.

And it was only later that we realised

that even this kind of action,

inviting people to participate

where they are, with what they have

really can be an empowering experience

for them to feel part of something greater.

We see therefore some comments like this,

this is one of my favourite comments I've ever seen.

How can we make the museum better?

'Just do what you are doing more.

All-ways for all of us. Thank you for trusting us.'

And I think that the more we invite people

to take meaningful action, to collaborate on events,

to co-curate exhibitions,

to give us their cardboard boxes,

we're showing them that we trust them

and that we want them to be participants in making

this museum for everyone.

The last thing I'm going to say

before we go to just talking

is about how we keep this work going.

I think we all know that this kind of work

is tiring, it can be hard

and that's not just true in museums,

any kind of community organising involves

constant outlays of energy.

And so for us, we've really fallen onto

a management strategy

for all of this work and for each other

that comes down to just these two words

'Make Space'

and here's what I mean by that:

I was inspired in this by

a woman named Beck Trench.

She was at the Museum of Life

and Science in North Carolina.

Very brilliant person and she was hired by her museum

explicitly to take risks.

She was told, "Your job in this museum is to take risks."

And at first she thought, wow, this is amazing

and then immediately she became very nervous

about how she was going to do this

and she realised as time went on

that to be a successful risk-taker

she needed a space-maker.

She needed her boss to be somebody

who would give her the resources

but also the cover politically, the time and the ability,

the confidence to be able to take those risks.

And as she was able to do this

more and more she realised that

to be a successful risk-taker

and to bring more and more

risk-taking to her museum

it was not enough for her to be

taking one risk after another.

She realised the best way for her to be a risk-taker

was actually to become a space-maker

for others to be able to take risks themselves.

And we've really taken this approach

to thinking about how we manage.

Both how we manage staff but also

how we manage collaborators, volunteers,

all the participants we work with.

That our job and my job as the executive

director, ultimately, is to make space

for people to thrive and to bring forward

the strongest work they can

to make our museum better.

One of my favourite examples of this

and the last story I'll leave you with

is at a place called Evergreen Cemetery.

My museum runs a historic site

about a mile north of the museum.

It's a cemetery, one of the oldest

public cemeteries in California.

Amazing history is there and you know in California,

history starts at about 1850 (laughs)

but, in terms of this cemetery,

but still, the whole beginnings

of our town are there in this cemetery.

But when I came to this

museum three years ago this cemetery had the history

but it was buried under mountains of brush

and it was also a very dangerous place.

A really great place to buy and use heroin

a place for illegal camping and various kinds of crime.

And so we started a partnership

with the homeless services centre

which is just about two blocks

away from the cemetery.

This started with one conversation between myself

and somebody at the homeless service centre

where we said, gosh, wouldn't it be great

if we could find a way to involve

homeless people in the museum.

And we were talking about this and he said,

"You know, one of the things we really like doing

is having some of our participants,

our homeless people who are working with us

to volunteer in places that are seen

as blighted by homelessness.

Where we can make a positive

difference where we're seen

as making a negative impact."

And so we set up some history buffs,

volunteers at the museum

with some volunteers at

the homeless services centre

and brought together this really amazing

group of homeless adults,

history buffs and docents, church groups,

different kinds of volunteers

working together to improve the cemetery.

And this group is literally uncovering history.

They find new gravestones almost every week.

They're also doing incredible landscaping.

They've been working out there

for two and a half years now

and it really transformed the cemetery

into a beautiful and powerful

outdoor history site such that we now

have a lot of school groups that want to go on tours there

instead of feeling like it's a dangerous and unsafe place.

But at the same time, the social bridging that's happening there

the connections that are happening between people

from very different walks of life are extraordinary.

And I have had 75-year-old ladies,

history docents, who have said to me,

"You know, until I worked

out at Evergreen, this was the first time

I had a human interaction

with a homeless person and it has changed the way

I see this issue in our community."

And that kind of work, that kind of bridging

is not happening because of a staff-intensive programme

where we're going out every week

with just a small cohort of people.

It's happening because we made space

for volunteers to do that,

for volunteers to create and support something intensive.

And for us therefore to be able to scale this to make space

for lots of Evergreen Cemeteries,

lots of projects like this happening

beyond our ability on our staff and on our team.

I want to leave you before we go to

discussion with one of my favourite quotes.

This is a quote from Dick Hamming.

He's a computer scientist who's dead now

and in 1986 he gave this really

interesting talk about how it is

that some people do Nobel Prize-worthy

work and some people don't.

And he said that, "The average scientist,

so far as he could make out

spends all of his time working on problems

that he believes will not be important

and he also doesn't believe they

will lead to important problems."

I think all of us in this room, in this room where I sit

and this room where you sit are working on some

really important problems.

Trying to bring together communities across difference,

trying to create opportunities

to give voice for people who don't usually have a voice,

to make our museums and our

communities and our spaces

more relevant and more open to everyone.

And I think that we have to find the way

to spend as much time as we can

working on those important problems

empowering people who

work with us to do so as well.

So that it's not just about 'How are we

going to get this exhibit up?'

or 'How are we going to market this programme?'

But so we can really focus on how are we

going to change our communities.

How we are going to make them better

and how our museums can be part of that.

So I'm going to end it there.

Thank you for listening

and I'm going to switch over now

to the video so that we can talk.

Hi Nina, I'm Beth.

I'm from the National Museum of Wales.

Just thought we'd let you know that you're

the inspiration behind our plans

for a participatory national history museum.

Wow!

(laughs) Yeah,

and I was interested in what you

were saying about your analogy

your romantic analogies, really.

Yeah.

In that, in our experience

trying to develop participatory galleries,

the monogamous relationships are easier

to handle than coming up with ideas

for drop-in participation.

So I just wondered how you go about

coming up with ideas for one-night stands

that provide satisfaction for all parties involved. (laughter)

Thank you.

Thank you for asking that.

Well, you know, the best first dates

make you want more, right?

So we're not trying to fulfil everything

on their first time here.

We really look at the interaction

and participation in the gallery

on a contributory model.

So it's not collaborative, it's not co-creative,

it's really inviting people to participate

in a very constrained way,

to contribute something, whether that's

an object, a story, an idea,

that can be shared right away.

And so that can be anything from

comment walls, to story sharing,

to helping create something.

We do really find that 'make and share'

is more appealing than 'make and take.'

So we try and avoid little interactive

things where you make something

kind of small and then it ends up

on your refrigerator at home

or it gets in a bin or whatever it is.

What we really find is that people love

being part of something bigger than themselves.

So we often have projects like,

one of my favourites was the 'memory jar' project.

So we filled this room floor to ceiling with these jars

and then we just got a bunch of junk really, and craft materials

and invited people to bottle up a memory

that was important to them.

The idea was we were creating

a collection of our community

and we had over 700 people make these jars.

It was a beautiful example

of an opportunity for people

to participate in a way that was meaningful for them,

that they could do on the spot

and to be part of something bigger.

And we actually had some

questions when we did this

about whether people would want

to take their jar home

and whether they would be happy

with the fact that their jar

was going to be on display forever.

And what we found was that people loved

having their jar on display.

At the end of the time we invited people

to come back and take their jars.

About a quarter of the jars got taken home.

But for most people it was about

creating something in this museum context

and sharing it that was important.

I would also say we do a lot with comment walls

in different ways here at the museum

and we always, always try and make sure

that we're asking a question

where we genuinely care about the answer.

Where the answers are going to be

diverse, funny, sad, smart,

whatever they are, but not repetitive.

And so we do a lot of question testing

and it's very, very easy to do.

So, for example, when we did

this exhibition on love and we knew we were going to do

some kind of comment board around

the idea of broken relationships

and we just sat around, our group,

and we just wrote down questions

and we then all tried to answer each other's questions

and saw what was interesting,

and we ended up with the prompt:

'After the break-up, I ..."

And the stories we got were all over the map.

They were wonderful.

And many of our tester questions were not interesting.

And it's very easy with a very small group of people

to determine whether the answers are interesting or not

and you know, just be ruthless

about finding those questions that generate stories,

that go for those interesting answers

and invite people to really

share something special

that can contribute to the exhibit.

Do you get better at creating

these questions as you do more of them?

Oh, yeah, we do.

Ummm, but we still always test them

because it's so easy to do,

and I think that, umm... yeah, we do.

We also are very comfortable changing the questions.

Often, after an exhibit will open,

if we find that something is kind of dead,

we actually are deliberate about making sure

that whatever the labels are for how we ask questions

that those are ones that are easy to swap out.

I could think about one where...

we've done some testing too

around questions and played with different

ways to have people answer them

and really the only criteria that

we use around testing them

is whether people write on-topic things or not.

We find that the more scribbles

there are or the more 'Hi Jason',

or whatever it is that that probably means

that the question was not sufficiently compelling

and it's pretty easy to count those up

and to see a very big difference.

So we actually test ourselves

in our exhibits at the end of them to see;

okay, how good were those questions

for generating the kinds of results that mean

people actually cared to answer?