

Best. Collaboration. Ever.

By Susan Wenzlick

Is it weird or just quirky that I have a favorite collaboration?

In a recent post I wrote about inclusion in placemaking, but ended with a dense stream of rules without any good examples. So I thought this week I'd share my favorite example of inclusive collaboration.

In 2009, the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum held an exhibit called *China Design Now*. The museum wanted to create an opportunity for conversations between the museum and community, and engage a different, broader audience to exhibit *China Design Now* (a canned exhibit) with a Portland spin.

The museum retained its traditional role as curator, but invited Portland's design community, youth, Chinese-American population, entrepreneurs, artists, and local arts groups to collaborate. The museum released significant control to community participants, who were invited to create their own events and exhibits related to *China Design Now*. Museum officials described the exhibition as the center of a wheel whose spokes were events that included fashion shows, music, dance, film, and lectures and exhibits of architecture, alternative art and design, technology, and youth culture – all focused on contemporary China. Restaurants, the University of Oregon, art galleries, hotels, the public library, restaurants, retailers, and even a comic book shop (which created an exhibit of underground Chinese comics) participated. Social media were used by the museum and by collaborators to facilitate conversations outside the museum walls.

The museum found that collaboration happened on three levels. Some collaborators were hand-chosen by the museum to engage people through blogs, cultural events outside the museum, complementary off-site exhibitions, and so on; these were the **creators**. **Commentators**, the second level, responded or contributed to blogs and conversations on the museum web site, and participated in other ways, such as through the museum's educational programs. **Consumers**, the third group, attended events outside the museum's exhibition, but were less participatory than the first two groups.

Multiple venues were provided to anyone who wished to participate. A range of opportunities to interact with the exhibit were available – lectures as well as social media, exhibits in art galleries and comic book shops – so most people could feel comfortable participating at some level.

The exhibit was a great success. The museum and collaborators helped facilitate conversations, some through traditional lectures and educational programs, and some through social media. The content also created connections between people by providing a variety of ways to interact with the exhibit, other participants, and with Chinese culture.

So how does a very museum-specific collaboration translate to other community projects?

Soliciting participation through three levels of engagement is a great way to retain some control over the process, but invite others in. It also allows people to participate in ways that aren't limited by their child care needs, work schedules, comfort with speaking out in meetings, and so on.

If this was a downtown development project, the creators would be the most directly affected stakeholders – businesses, non-commercial stakeholders like the library or school, interested groups like the arts council or the council on aging, and adjacent residents. They would have the most input, the most say over the final version of the plans, and some active responsibility for the project – not just coming to meetings.

The commentators would be able to participate at a public meeting or event, through social media, or through other feedback mechanisms. They should have the opportunity to comment in pictures as well as text – for example, the facilitator could ask commentators to post a picture of a favorite city plaza on the project's Facebook page.

The consumers could see the plans and comments on line, in a downtown storefront window, or in the newspaper. I think it's important to share the comments, or at least a representative selection of them, as well as the plans. The commentators need to be acknowledged as part of the process, and the consumers may be inspired to share their own thoughts too.

A community can relatively easily provide multiple venues for participation. But there's some outreach needed too – commentators and consumers aren't hand-picked like creators, and they need to be encouraged to participate. Think about placemaking for anyone, or for everyone. Have a member of the creator team talk to the civics class at the high school as well as the Rotary; have a display at Walmart and at the church. Create a project Facebook page and ask people to share it to get broader visibility.

And think about less-obvious partners. Here in Cadillac our folk music organization, Gopherwood, holds performances downtown. So while Gopherwood isn't a business owner, it is part of downtown's culture. The organizers and people who attend performances have an interest in a downtown project that could complement the concerts, or affect parking. One of our food pantries is about a block from the center of downtown. Have a presentation there during lunch.

I work with a lot of small towns that don't have the capacity to do all this collaborating and communicating, even for a big important project. That's where the creators come in, doing more than attending planning meetings. Wouldn't facilitating the Facebook page be a great project for an enthusiastic group of high school or college media students? The music organization would be happy to say a couple of words about the project when introducing the concert, or share information with their email list and Facebook friends. The community

doesn't maintain total control, but the message gets out to a much broader audience of potential commentators and consumers through trusted partners.

The part I like best about the Portland Art Museum's approach to collaboration is there's a comfortable spot for everyone. The organizers maintain a level of control, those closest to the project have the most input, but there are multiple ways for others to have a voice or just be informed. It takes releasing some control, but at little cost for a lot of potential gain.

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