

## **Abstract**

Museums are and have been engaged in a paradigm shift. Much has been written about the social roles of museums and many in the field have sought to define museums, taking a position on why the museum exists, who it is for, and why it continues. Is the museum a temple or a forum? I wondered why it could not be both— and more—more inclusionary, more participatory, and more reflective of community. Could this be the museum of the future? This project explores how a museum transforms both physically and theoretically by applying an educational mission onto a hypothetical museum: Second Nature Prairie Community Museum. I used the educational approach gaining popularity in the K-12 system called place- and community-based education as the basis of the museum's mission which directed the design and became the scaffolding for the museum plan. I created a name for the museum, the logo, and the branding. By adaptively reusing an abandoned big box structure, I designed the physical interior space of the museum employing a preliminary interior design process to schematically arrive at public and private spaces that maximized learning opportunities. Collections, exhibits, and programs were developed including the reclamation of a natural ecosystem: tallgrass prairie, the largest exhibit and teaching tool. The project is process oriented and the face of the traditional museum changed as I explored aspects of museum planning that resulted in theoretical museum design concepts and positioned Second Nature as a future direction for museums.

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Second Nature:  
An Exploration in Planning and Design for a  
Place- and Community-based Museum Process

A Thesis Project in  
Museum Studies

by

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The prairie is a community. It is not just a landscape or the name of an area on a map, but a dynamic alliance of living plants, animals, birds, insects, reptiles, and microorganisms, all depending upon each other. When too few of them remain, their community loses its vitality and they perish together. The prairie teaches us that our strength is in our neighbors. The way to destroy a prairie is to cut it up into tiny pieces, spaced so that they have no communication.

-Paul Gruchow (cited in Lewicki, 1998, p. 10).

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2009, I started my museum studies graduate work after a blend of personal and professional circumstances culminated in bringing me to Buffalo, New York from Madison, Wisconsin in summer 2008. Throughout my coursework, I have enjoyed most delving into critical issues and special topics concerning visitor experience and education. With an academic background in fine art painting, art history and interior design, I previously blended all of that knowledge together as I worked professionally designing history and art exhibits for a small design firm in Colorado. I continued to work after arriving in Buffalo as a freelance designer, designing two exhibits at the Buffalo History Museum.

This diverse background has consistently informed my learning and directed my curiosity in museum studies. Through my many professional and academic experiences, I have learned much about the functioning of museums, specifically in regard to museum planning and design focused on improving visitor experience and education. However, after completing my graduate

coursework, I realized that I just have generated more questions than answers, as is the nature of research and exploration, about what is possible for the future of museums.

As an artist and designer, it is very difficult for me to do work linearly. With a few exceptions, almost all of my creative endeavors are project-based and abstract in nature. I am always fully engaged, sometimes more consciously than other times, in the creative process that consumes me. Typically at the conception of a project, I am awash with the random flow of broad ideas that show up when my curiosity starts asking questions. Such is the nature of curiosity—ask a question, you’ll get an answer. That answer, sometimes clear, sometimes fuzzy, sometimes wrapped in another question, will show up through various channels that in my case have been unpredictable.

I ask the type of questions an artist is trained to ask—broad and vague, big-picture wondering, and creatively inspired. This master’s project has been no exception. Once I started the process of exploration, I did not feel entirely steady and organizing my thoughts and ideas was messy while I was wondering, imagining, thinking, and developing new realizations as the process flowed. So, this project is entirely about a creative process and the resulting design and planning concepts that were produced. May it serve as a starting point for reorienting thoughts about what a museum can be, furthering ideas of how a museum experience can be more validating, and/or planning a heart-centered museum in your community. I see this project as just one answer to a question I have been wondering about: What could the museum of the future look like?

When conceiving of this master’s project, I was excited by the prospect of exploring curiosities that had developed over the span of my museum studies coursework. Generated by

the question above, many more broad-based questions, as listed below and on supplemental graphic **slide 2**, also emerged that I thought would be relevant to the task of a masters project in museum planning and paramount to leading the direction of planning and design. I have wondered if a more broadly defined museum concept might attract a broader audience, potentially becoming more relevant and accessible to those who do not consider themselves museum-goers. This general question generated the following specific questions. Could a museum become more relevant to a wider audience regardless of geography, educational attainment or income? Could more people find the knowledge exhibited there accessible and interesting at the same time? What cultural resource could be offered to be accessible, educational, and participatory?

As a parallel to the notion that a broader museum mission might affect the face of a museum, I was also curious as to what might be the physical result of a blending of all or some characteristics of different types of museums. I went on to wonder, how could qualities used in nature interpretation benefit art historical interpretation in an art museum? How could hands-on interactive qualities of a children's museum benefit a historic house museum? How could intangible collections such as oral history or a dance performance benefit tangible data-based exhibits in a science museum or a historic site?

As all of these general questions emerged, I searched for a short answer, and I found one: start with the mission. So for me, the purpose of this museum studies master's thesis project became about exploring all these questions through an organic process of museum planning. By starting with the values and a vision that a future-oriented museum could encompass, I realized

that planning a participatory community-centered museum with learning at its core was indeed where I was going.

### **Literature Review**

Because of my background in the designing of interior spaces, specifically commercial museum spaces, my area of interest always seems to come back to the visitor. Whether I am creating exhibits or designing spaces conducive to learning, I have been trained to put the end-user at the front of my design process. I am interested in museum research that will improve my ability to design for the visitor in museums. However, I do not want simply to stop at the design of physical spaces, but would also like to develop my visitor-centered philosophy through researching current theories and techniques that improve the museum experience.

As I began researching the museum studies literature, specifically regarding museum planning, I was excited to delve into museum planning manuals (Lord & Lord , 2012), toolkits (Catlin-Legutko & Klinger, 2012), and reference guides (Weaver, 2007) looking for the directions that would lead the design of my hypothetical museum planning project. Although they were extremely helpful step by step instructions for planning a functional museum of today, that literature only partially addressed my overarching questions about planning a museum for the future: a museum designed for people. I personally felt that the planning process I wanted to explore needed to place people at the center and that the role of community in the planning process could be taken further.

What is a museum? Who is it for? What role does it play in people's lives? Cameron Duncan examined the social function of the museum and posited that historically the museum has served as a temple for its visitors. In addition, he posed that society is in desperate need of a

forum: a space to communicate and explore without censor, but he was not convinced that the museum was the best environment for a forum to occur. However, Cameron states that a reform of the notion of museum as solely a temple is “necessary to the democratization of culture, or to, ...the creation of an equality of cultural opportunity” (Cameron, 2004, p. 67). In the past, the museum has sought to be either a temple or a forum, but not both and has suffered from the duality. Cameron settles on the notion that a museum should create a safe space for communal voices to speak and be heard. He concludes by stating that “From the chaos and conflict of today’s forum the museum must build the collections that will tell us tomorrow who we are and how we got there” (Cameron, 2004, p. 73). In 2013, I wondered how a museum could blend the best of both metaphors to best serve the current-day needs of a community.

I was interested to follow the trajectory of how introducing an educational mandate has gradually led to the participation of community and transformed museum practice. Although the history of museums has been a fairly steady evolution, it wasn’t until the 1980s that museums more democratically expanded their missions to include or emphasize educational responsibilities to the visitor. A historical perspective of the evolving relationship between museums and community is outlined by Ellen Hirzy wherein she cites that the 1984 American Association of Museums (AAM) report, *Museums for a New Century* “represented AAM’s first formal effort to include people from outside museums in the conversation.” By recommending museums “seek greater impact as educational institutions, stronger collaboration among themselves and with other organizations, and heightened public understanding” (Hirzy, 2002, p. 12) the AAM not only sparked a deeper interest into offering educational opportunities to visitors but created a focus on more formalized research of the topic.

Within the next decade, education departments were formed in many museums, and the formal progress in the 1990s is mentioned by the AAM Committee on Education (EdCom) in *Museum Education Principles and Standards* introduction:

In 1990 when the Committee on Education (EdCom) first published its *Statement on Professional Standards for Museum Education* it was at the forefront of reexamining issues critical to museum education. The following decade would witness the transformation of the public dimension of museums. AAM's Museum Education Task Force published *Excellence and Equity* in 1992; AAM revised its accreditation criteria and Museum Assessment Program to evaluate individual institutions' interaction with their audiences; and the Institute of Museum and Library Services grant applications required museums to detail education services and the processes in place for assessing learning (AAM, 2002, p. 1).

The AAM facilitated a change in how museums related to the visitor through mandating an educational focus; however perceptions and attitudes were not rapidly changing. Although education was being embraced, the notion of community engagement was still out on the horizon.

By the end of the 1990s however, Stephen Weil explored the success of a museum by establishing criteria for what museums may look like in the future based on where they have been in the past. Weil generally described the museum transformation “*from being about something to being for somebody*” (1999). Different types of museum classifications are discussed, but in his article he emphasizes the impact of the community visitor-centered museum as the museum of the day. It stands as an example of how a museum can adapt to changing

times, provide relevant educational programming that is impactful and accessible, but most importantly, be developed by the very people it is for. At the close of the 20th century he has called this the “emerging museum:”

In the emerging museum, responsiveness to the community—not an indiscriminant responsiveness, certainly, but a responsiveness consistent with the museum’s public-service obligations and with the professional standards of its field—must be understood not as a surrender but, quite literally, as a fulfillment (Weil, 1999, p. 229).

Philosopher Hilde Hein spoke about the museum visitor experience and “transcending the object” in 2000. She reiterated the continuing shift from a collections-based museum purpose to education-based by describing how “museums now advance themselves as public institutions with a primary responsibility to people and their values rather than to the value of objects ... The techniques of collecting objects have therefore given way to the technologies of experience production” (Hein, 2000, p. 67). She asserted that humans are looking for a universal experience and although museums might be manufacturing experiences at this point, the notion that this universal experience could come solely through material goods is insufficient. Hein continued by acknowledging that “heartfelt experience is somehow more honest and universally more accessible than culturally weighted objects and meanings” (Hein, 2000, p. 68). As the first decade of the 21st century progresses, the further realization that the people who make up a community are integral to the development of museums in the future became even more appreciated.

Elaine Heumann Gurian later described a further evolving community type of museum that she referred to as the “essential museum” (2007) by repositioning its purpose to the potential visitor. She believed that small community museums could be most successful as a go-to resource during a person’s average day, likened to the “drop-in” experience of a library. She proposed that if a museum could change its position from inaccessible to accessible that it would become essential. Gurian cites that the essential museum begins with four assumptions:

- 1.) All people have questions, curiosity, and insights about a variety of matters large and small.
- 2.) Satisfaction of internalized questions is linked to more than fact acquisition and can include aesthetic pleasure, social interaction, and personal validation (recognition and memory).
- 3.) A museum could be a useful place to explore these.
- 4.) Visitors can turn their interest into satisfied discovery if the appropriate tools are present and easy to use. (Gurian, 2007, p. 22).

Notably, the “essential museum” assumes that the community is more than an abstract concept outside the doors of the museum construct. It acknowledges that community is made up of individuals with personal learning agendas and preferences and embraces that the essential museum “will grow with the input of its users” (p. 23). Gurian’s model stressed the importance of increasing accessibility to collections by maximizing viewable storage and described generally how not only museum design transforms, but also internal roles. Staff descriptions become broader; for example, the curator becomes less of an authority as community voice is more heavily factored and the exchange becomes collaborative.

By 2012, Candace Tangorra Matelic pushed the notion of how museums engaged the community and underscored the degree to which geography played an important role. Her definition of community expanded to include geographical location and introduced how the place that the community exists contributed to the functioning of a museum in that community:

“I am defining community as the people who live in the geographic area of your museum ... This geographic definition of community is important because the place where your organization does business is your foundation ... Your geographic community provides resources for your organization, such as supplies, equipment, marketing, knowledge, and expertise. As your organization becomes a more active contributor to community life, these resources grow. Also, every geographic community has a distinguishing character and spirit that emerges over time from its people and history. This means that community engagement and service are different in every community (Matelic, 2012, p. 144).

Matelic addressed the important change that occurred resulting in the integral intersection of community, and a museum’s approach to engaging that community.

Her list of defining characteristics of current community engagement encompassed the notion that to begin, a museum should identify what the community really cares about and engage in problem-solving instead of searching for what the community can do for the museum. Secondly, engaging the community involves relevant activities that really matter to the community, not superficial or token programs or exhibits. Thirdly, long-term relationships and

partnerships should be sought and fostered, rather than occasional meetings or superfluous surveys. A fourth characteristic of community engagement is identified as working and sharing control with the community as opposed to maintaining sole control of activities while expecting other organizations to participate or donate. Finally, community engagement means getting involved in the community outside of the museum, and not expecting the community to owe your museum for it (p. 144). Matelic suggested that engaging the community in meaningful ways leads to more relevant and sustainable museums.

Views are different and museums have changed vastly since the 1980s. The museum studies literature demonstrates how shifting attitudes toward education changed opinions about visitors and opened museums to include community. The notion of community engagement was developed and increased community involvement, and ultimately factored in the concept of place. However, I still wondered how the concepts of place and community could be pushed further in the museum context and I looked outside of the museum studies literature.

I found an ideological parallel between an educational approach gaining popularity in the K-12 system called Place- and Community-based Education (Smith & Sobel, 2010). These concepts began to be explored in the late 1960s onward and have been more formalized in the last decade. Place- and community-based learning fundamentally assumes that the learner brings their own information to the exchange, and that personal knowledge is worth something. David Sobel describes the approach as quoted on **slide 3** as “Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences” that “increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens” (Sobel, 2004). This educational

approach is heart-centered, fosters stewardship of place through time and participatory investment, and validates the lived experience of those involved in learning this way.

In his article, “Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are,” Gregory Smith outlines five thematic patterns found in this educational approach, which are also listed on **slide 3**. The first theme of *Cultural Studies* prompts investigations into local culture and history and by doing so, validates the stories and experiences of the particular community (2002 p. 587-8). In a museum context, exhibits could be created from photographs, stories could be told through oral history, and events could be interpreted through dance, for example.

Theme two, *Nature Studies*, promotes investigation of the local environment—good, bad, or otherwise (p. 588-9). The notion that “You are here!” mirrors the goals of a historic site or nature center, and nature studies brings the focus back to the place where we are in the world. Accepting current circumstances or “learning to be where we are” (p. 584) begins the reclamation process. This theme requires an honest look at the local environment. If the local environment is a sea of weed covered asphalt punctuated by big box buildings that is the reality of the place and will become the starting point. Moving forward to reclaim a natural environment can be a powerful interpretive tool, as observed in the field of nature interpretation. Valuing cultural studies and nature studies leads to unearthing community assets. That valuing changes perceptions on what is worthy of being told about it, and who might tell that story.

The third theme of place- and community-based education is *Real-World Problem Solving*, which works to identify community issues to be addressed or solved by engaged learners (p. 589-90). This theme mirrors the goal of civic engagement in a museum. Some examples are community members organizing events and exhibits in the museum around

community problems, meeting to discuss and research solutions to problems through looking at the past, or creating a community museum as a solution to a community problem of cultural heritage being lost or forgotten.

*Internships and Entrepreneurial Opportunities* are the elements of the fourth theme of place- and community-based education. This theme addresses investment that the community might have in terms of viable economic opportunity (p. 590-1) and mirrors the notion of volunteering and interning at a museum. Interpreting this theme in a museum context could breed a new type of volunteer, an ambassador, and reorient how museum staff utilizes volunteers cross-functionally for work tasks. Lines between how and when visitors see themselves in the role of visitor, volunteer, or community ambassador blur, furthering the idea that invested people usually keep investing if validated in the process.

Lastly, the fifth theme of place- and community-based education is *Introduction to Community Processes*. This theme is comprehensive and extends the fourth theme of investment in community economics into contributing to community decision-making processes. It results in a deeper investment by showing members of the community that they are an important piece to a larger puzzle socially (p. 591-93). Within the museum, this theme could affect how the very museum is administered. In addition, the museum would take a larger role in the community out of which it was created. The museum would be a center for educational resources, but also a center for dialogue. Meeting areas become as important as gallery space, and intangible communication and happenings become as important as tangible items in a collection.

Because place- and community-based education is created around children's learning, it embraces a transformational agenda as highlighted in **slide 4**. I felt confident that there could be

beneficial parallels to applying this approach to learning across the lifespan, as is the ideal of a museum. If you look to learners to direct their own educational opportunities, you don't have to run them through the data mill, try reading their minds, and predict behaviors. They will tell you or ask you for what they desire. If that is idealistically achieved, a staff of museum generalists can therefore facilitate the daily museum operations, whatever might be created out of the place and by the community!

The place- and community-based approach's tenets are similar to that of a museum's commitment to public service and education mirroring foundational values that current museums strive to achieve through best practices. The newly renamed American Alliance of Museums (AAM) cite a total of seven categories containing 38 broad characteristics as the core "characteristics of excellence for U. S. museums" (AAM, 2008) and many parallel the goals of place- and community-based education. Specifically regarding the category of Public Trust and Accountability, the AAM believes that the museum "is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust" and "identifies the communities it serves," in addition "to be inclusive and offer opportunities for diverse participation" (para. 2).

Regarding the category of Education and Interpretation, the museum "understands that characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation," and "presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences" (para. 6). Finally, regarding the category of Mission and Planning, the AAM states that the museum "has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts" (para. 3). It is apparent that the AAM strongly encourages the participation of place and community as ideals of a current-day museum. In the literature

there are examples where place- and community-based education and museum studies intersect, but rather only in adopting the approach singularly by education departments, not as the whole mission of the museum.

Museums come in many different shapes, sizes, and colors but at the beginning of the 21st century, almost all of them have the same set of overarching problems: How to raise money after funding sources have diminished? How to stay relevant among competing entertainment options with an audience that is technologically driven? How to engage more with the community the museum serves? How to increase visitor numbers and membership? Each one of these problems could be transmuted into growth opportunities by using creative thinking and re-envisioning a museum's purpose or mission.

I continued to wonder how a museum could transform if place-and community-based education was at the mission, not just an approach used in museum educational programming. The notion of a solely educational mission could change what a museum could become in the future. As illustrated in the Venn diagram on **slide 5**, I explored how a museum can be created from within the heart of the community through participatory involvement in creating collections, developing exhibits, and conducting place-and community-based learning. The diagram shows how the traditional silos found in museums begin to overlap more heavily with place and community at the core, thusly creating a more collaborative environment. By giving place and community representation in the museum in addition to education, exhibits, and collection, museum operations change dramatically as each area intersects more deeply.

As place and community intersects with collections, the result is a change in the way a museum collects. The community is actively creating the collections, tangible or intangible as

the museum functions. For example, a program to build an environment for insects to be studied more closely attracts those in the community who want to participate, they engage in research, even solicit funding for a project they feel is important. Participants volunteer to actively produce the habitat in a series of work days. At the conclusion of the project, the museum has a community created an exhibit called the “Insect Condo” and participants involved in the creation would become the best docents or ambassadors for the exhibit in the future. Documentation of the process through story or video also becomes an item in the collection and the entire process is offered as a program series.

Where place and community overlaps with education the result is participatory knowledge production. The community is creating the knowledge represented at the museum and education and exhibits become more participatory and experiential. In regards to collections and exhibits overlapping, participatory research and interpretation become the result. Community members become invested in topics that are relevant to them and drive the research and development of exhibits.

As the literature shows, today it is no longer being debated whether a museum is or isn't an educational institution. As clearly outlined by the AAM, a museum mandate is educational in addition to collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and serving the public:

A mission statement is the beating heart of a museum. It articulates the museum's educational focus and purpose and its role and responsibility to the public and its collections. Some museums choose to also develop vision and value statements as a way of extending the concepts expressed in the mission statement. These are different but

related guiding documents for the museum: mission is purpose; vision is future; and values are beliefs (2012, para. 2).

Through creating the mission statement, and from that working toward a schematic design, I have created a hypothetical museum that embodies the values and vision of place and community. Because a mission drives every aspect of a museum, I felt it was essential to place participatory educational concepts as illustrated on **slides 5 and 6** into the mission of my project museum: **Second Nature Prairie Community Museum**. After developing the qualities I wanted the museum to embody, I arrived at my mission statement: **to engage and give voice to the community which it represents and to validate the place in which it exists by collecting, preserving, and exhibiting the knowledge of the community via partnership, participation, and problem-solving.**

### **The Project**

My training as an interior designer has helped form my ideas and interests in the visitor's experience in a museum setting. The fundamental philosophy of interior design is that the practice is for people by people, grounded in society, and connected by relationships, communication, time, and space. In her chapter "Evolution of the Profession" in the book *Interior Design Practice*, Cindy Coleman articulates that "the real subject of interior design is enclosed space—that is, the settings within buildings that house human activity. First and foremost, interior designers are concerned with how people experience these settings and how design supports their different activities. These concerns form the core of the interior design profession's specialized knowledge" (Coleman, 2010, p. 20).

Therefore, it is a basic tenant that all interior design is entirely human-centered, and that what most humans do in environments, especially in museums, is experiential. Some will communicate their positive experience simply: “I feel welcome or at home.” Some may share their negative experiences: “I won’t go to that theater.” For me personally, my interest in interior design naturally flows into an interest in visitor experience. The root of creating a positive visitor experience is very simple: plan for people by using human-centered design.

There are basics tenets that should be at the foundation of an interior designers intent when beginning a project: designing for the needs of diverse audiences, ergonomics, sustainability, accessibility, and universal design. Coleman also states that “Interior design professionals understand that design fuels organizational change, regardless of the scale of its application” (Colman, 2010, p. 21). This project fueled my certainty that physical changes can transition museum interior design from static to dynamic, from top-down to participatory, and from linear to circular by creating space that is conducive to all of the values and visions of the museum: learning, collaboration, participation, and creative expression.

The framework of this project is constructed around the notion of reclaiming and redeveloping abandoned “big box” retail real estate into regional museums. As large retailers either abandon property to build larger stores, or because they have gone out of business, empty cinder block architecture is dotting the urban, suburban, and rural American landscape. This project explores whether these structures are viable and/or ideal to be transformed into museums, thusly creating a community resource that may not otherwise exist. My exploration centers conceptually around a type of museum that could be considered a hybrid art, nature, and children’s museum.

The name of the museum, Second Nature, is a nod to the regenerative qualities of the museum: regenerating a new use for a building, regenerating a teachable tallgrass prairie habitat, and regenerating a respect for others and nature. Originally the Latin term *secundum naturum* meant “according to nature” (The Free Dictionary, 2013) and is defined in **slide 7**. The logo designs and tagline: “art, nature, expression,” incorporate animals from the prairie habitat, showcasing a butterfly silhouette as the main identifying symbol of the prairie and the museum.

Though a prairie ecosystem is formed largely by a variety of grasses, it’s from prairie wildflowers that graphic color palette was derived. Choosing a basic palette of colors to be repeated throughout the identity of the museum creates continuity in the brand. Presented on **slide 8**, these colors inform the logo design, the environmental design of the building exterior, and even paint colors potentially used inside the museum. An orange accent color is pulled from the deep yellow and orange center of the purple coneflower, a species of *Echinacea*. The compass plant inspires the use of a bold yellow found in the soft petals of what can grow the be the tallest of all prairie wildflowers. As also seen in the compass plant photo, a sky blue is incorporated into the palette as representative of the bold sky above the prairie landscape. A soft purple is pulled from the bell-shaped petals of the lead plant, and lastly, a gentle pale green is derived from the hard pods of the rattlesnake master wildflower.

When applying the mission, values and vision of the museum concept to the physical building concept, an answer to a pervasive civic problem emerged. One of the thematic patterns of place- and community-based approaches is real-world problem solving, which can be applied to the serious problem that has emerged since the 1990s—land use in small town America. I wondered how successful a museum could be at reclaiming a big box structure, and what impact,

positive or negative, could it have on an American community. In researching adaptive-reuse of abandoned big box real estate, I discovered the controversial issues of land use.

The concept of land use has fairly recently been brought to the public's attention after it has become an undeniable problem visible by the blight of vacant stores and seas of weed-filled parking lots. During the 90s, Walmart grew with seemingly unbounded restriction, enabling the corporation to amass one of the largest real estate holdings in the country. Lured by hopes for economic growth and more easily attainable goods, small towns welcomed Walmart to buy land, build a big box store, and open the doors. Walmart, for example, as opposed to K-Mart, specifically had a growth plan with a rural American focus, creating a unique situation for small-town America. The resulting conundrum is discussed by Julia Christensen in her book *Big Box Reuse* (2008) and outlined on **slide 9**.

Twenty years later, Walmart began expanding into its "superstore" model, leaving the original big box vacant only to rebuild another big box structure a short distance away. The original big box will remain vacant due to leasing restrictions placed on the structure because the owner, Walmart, is not interested in leasing a big box to another retailer due to competition. It is apparent that a non-profit organization could be a feasible option, and it is with this justification that Second Nature Prairie Community Museum is planned around the adaptive re-use of an abandoned big box retail store. The building is one-level constructed of cinder block with a metal roof supported by columns spaced at 30 foot intervals. The area of the structure is 55,000 square feet, one story, sitting atop a concrete pad foundation, as rendered on **slide 10**.

In addition to reclaiming the big box structure, Second Nature Prairie Community Museum reclaims the natural area surrounding it. **Slide 11** touches upon hypothetical

circumstances used as a framework for the creation of the museum and site. The unpaved or built areas on the site were restored into an interpretive tallgrass prairie habitat to be used as a living exhibit specifically for teaching about the local ecosystem. Trails connect interpretive opportunities, and oak savannah tree species line one edge of the site. Existing parking lots were shaded by the addition of trees, and solar panels were mounted to the roof of the building. Parking lots were designated with disabled and family spaces, and wide pedestrian access is given from the parking space to the museum door.

To begin the multi-step process of determining what spaces would be necessary, how they could relate, and how much area they might require, I started at the very beginning with brainstorming how the spaces would be different if the mission was now to provide space for place and community to be central, to have a seat at the table, so to speak. I brainstormed the mandatory spaces that a museum of any type would require: galleries, collections storage, restrooms, coat check, lockers, facilities, etc. Next, I dug deeper and generated spaces that would be necessary if staff were to collaborate more with other staff and the community. I represent these estimations with a conventional tool used in the interior design discipline called space bubbles. Space bubbles are a quick and easy way to convey preliminary space estimations and relationships visually, as rendered in **slide 12**.

Meeting spaces increased in number and size, and a variety of different types of work zones emerged. Collections storage remained similar to a traditional museum layout. However, in the spirit of accessibility, I conceived of an exterior envelope of viewable storage lining the collections storage, so objects could be accessed for study or interpretation without compromising their protection. Considering that the community would now be generating the

collections, specifically tangible and intangible artifacts, performance space grew in size and access. Flexible interactive performance areas changed in scope, and the function of areas morphed from spaces needing security to places of open sharing and collaboration. Thusly, the entry and orientation space became more interpretive, the collections storage became more accessible, the exhibit galleries became more fluid, and the workspaces became more collaborative.

My space allotment and planning process of fitting areas into the physical reality of a 55,000 square foot big box building continues in **slide 13** where I literally took the place- and community-based mission Venn diagram illustrated previously on **slide 5**, placed it over the outline representing the physical structure, and laid in the spaces I previously brainstormed. As the design continued to develop, I was able to determine a more real estimation of what could fit where, double-checking against my original design intent. I infused education into the orientation area and placed the exhibits to the right, capitalizing on the fact that windows would be undesirable, as that side of the building would have a view of the parking lot.

At the center, I planned for the collections storage since collections, tangible, intangible or otherwise, form the backbone of a museum. The concept of accessible collections is of paramount importance, so I earmarked the space by plotting long bubbles to represent the fact that the storage area will essentially be lined with display cases, opening from within the climate-controlled storage, but safely viewable to visitors, researchers, educators, students, staff, etc. I also planned for a library, accessible with the aid of a staff member. The library is in relation to the orientation zone that blends into the left side of the building. Representing the community

and place quadrant in the Venn diagram, the physical spaces generated include the conceptual spaces of a performance area, a community learning studio, and the community offices.

The museum is collaborative in nature, and the effect that participatory research and interpretation would have on workspaces is transformative. Community members would require office or meeting space that should be parallel to staff office space, as shown in the upper left corner of **slide 13**, to further collaborative work on creating exhibits, creating collections, researching and interpreting collections, developing tours, and training volunteers. The entire notion of volunteers at Second Nature transforms into a role better described as ambassadors through voluntary investment in the endeavor. Because the story of the community is being told throughout the museum, those interested in telling their story would also naturally be invested in celebrating the community driven collections, exhibits, and interpretation as a whole. Regarding physical space, volunteers now would be relating to the museum in a more invested and staff-like way, thus deserving a grounded touch down zone, as previously allotted for as a space bubble shown in **slide 12**.

The overlapping roles at Second Nature Prairie Community Museum create new challenges within the concept of public and private areas. The rendering on **Slide 14** illustrates the next step in the design process by exploring circulation routes that will help show what needs to stay private or public and where to eventually put a secure door. This circulation overlay is only an estimation of what a visitor might do, but in keeping with the theme of accessibility, the visitor can choose at the point of entry to go right to the galleries or go left to the community performing area, though not into the collections storage or private offices.

Finally, shown on **slide 15**, a scalable floor plan was generated for Second Nature after an educated estimation was complete. As one can see, the mission is not imposed after the fact, it is the foundation upon which the interior design space-plan was built. To begin at the entry, an orientation zone is the first physical area for visitor experiences. The zone is filled with immediate amenities for the visitor: bathrooms to the left, eating and seating next to a coffee and snack cart, and retail offerings behind a reception desk. The entry is low-pressure with way-finding kiosks for visitors to orient themselves, if they so choose. To the right is an open zone large enough for school groups to gather and count heads.

Interpretation and activity blend right into the gallery zone. A puppet performance area is found in the corner of the orientation zone for use as an introductory orienting device about the by using puppets representing animals found in the habitat, such as a woodchuck, raccoon, red fox, and deer mouse, to introduce the visitor to the prairie museum. A mural of life in the prairie ecosystem, developed, designed, and painted by the community curves the visitor's attention into the open community gallery, the first of six flexible gallery spaces (two of which are adjoined to viewable storage directly inside the collections storage.) Items could remain in storage while supplementing an exhibit in a gallery. A small activity gallery leads back into the orientation zone and serves as an area that could also supplement exhibits with educational activities or demonstrations.

The curved wall creates a pivotal community centered space that also adjoining the community gallery, named the Community Commons Gathering Circle. This space at Second Nature replaces the notion of the board room. Any group from the community can sign up and use this space for meetings, performance, working, or sharing. The round wall creates a space

that fosters equity by encouraging participants who use the space, for example, to discuss a community problem or disagreement. Sitting in a circle eliminates the notion of hierarchy as suggested by the late Jens Jensen, a conservationist and landscape designer in the Midwest. Participants in this space are interacting face to face and as Jensen originally wrote in 1939

“In this friendly circle, around the fire, man becomes himself. Here there is no social caste. All are on the same level, looking each other in the face. A ring speaks of strength and friendship and is one of the great symbols of mankind. The fire in the center portrays the beginning of civilization, and it was around the fire our forefathers gathered when they first placed foot on this continent” (1990, p. 66).

Crossing through the orientation zone, visitors can travel to the other side of the museum to participate in performance, research, or interpretation. Visitors do have access to the non-circulating library that is staffed by a museum librarian. This zone is a hybrid of public and private. Collections storage areas are accessible only by museum staff through locked doors. The community should have access to research zones that are located at the entry of the library, monitored from the librarian’s station. This zone is important to facilitate access but also to protect the library collections.

Directly from the library, there is an internal door into what is called the community research lab. This area is for community members doing long-term research, for example contributing to exhibit planning for a future exhibit going on view in a year’s time. Written interpretation and intentional groupings within cabinet or larger exhibit galleries could also be

used as “calling up areas” where visitors would be able to request objects to view. This room also leads into the learning collections study area. This zone is for staff or ambassadors needing to access collections in a monitored way, similar to library access protocols. By request, someone may want to see an object donated to the museum (e.g., crocheted lace from their grandmother,) and this space makes such opportunities possible.

Exiting the community research lab back into the lounge/activity zone, the visitor has the space to reflect. This side of the building has windows that look out onto the prairie habitat for resting, relaxation, wildlife viewing, or an activity such as drawing in the winter. An open expanse, the lounge blends into the community engagement studio where an open workstation is placed. This is a zone where community members working at the museum can access a computer or do group work. This area is directly outside of the private office zone for staff members.

Second Nature Prairie Community Museum’s staffing requirements become less specialized and are facilitated by a core of museum generalists relying on community contributions to shape and lead the direction for the museum on any given day. Because of this, the work space though still private, takes the shape of an open plan with work pods to foster collaboration and transparency. There will always be a need for private work and meeting space, so to the side, smaller focused work space rooms are available as huddle rooms for quick or impromptu meetings. These could also be used as volunteer touch down spaces, so volunteers working with staff or relaxing after giving tours in the prairie have a place to call their own.

Closed private offices and enclaves are available for positions involving privacy and monetary concerns. That office area leads into the collections storage area through locked doors.

The collections storage area is large, open, and flexible with room to grow as the collections grow. There is a delivery dock at the rear of the building capable of supporting two semi-trailers, along with a dedicated holding area for crates being loaded or unloaded. The facilities and maintenance area is at the far right corner of the building located next to the delivery area. Access to the galleries is available through gallery 6, and restrooms are also available at that corner of the building as well. It should be noted that all plumbing was kept to exterior walls, as to remain as far from collections storage as possible.

Nature inspires art. Art expresses thoughts. Second Nature Prairie Community Museum fosters a safe creative space to be inspired by investigating the world around you through educational programming like drawing and painting wildlife, nature journaling, or landscape photography, as illustrated on **slide 16**. Interdisciplinary programs lead to expression through investigation. For example, a day-long program for adults and children could include catch-and-release insect collection, drawing an abstracted impression of the qualities of that insect, listening to the noises that the insect makes, mimicking the noises with other participants creating an insect symphony, and staging a performance of the symphony at the end of the day.

Community-created programming blurs the lines between programming, collections, and exhibits. A program like the Toronto Public Library's "Human Library" where patrons "check-out" individuals for a time from a group that might include war veterans, fire fighters, or journalists could be adapted to a community museum setting (2013). Enabling the community to learn from other community members, Second Nature's Community Story Tours allows a visitor to choose from a pool of community members volunteering to tell their story or share knowledge on an hour-long story tour in the environment or with objects. The tour would be recorded and

become an item in the collection. So for example, if one community member wanted to learn how to harvest wildflowers and make handmade paper, he could go on a Story Tour with the community member who had that knowledge, and together the community members would create their own learning opportunities.

The collections of Second Nature Prairie Community Museum focus not only on the place and community, but are actively being created by the place and community. Outlined on **slide 17**, tangible objects such as cultural artifacts, regional art, clothing, the prairie habitat, native seeds, and/or plant illustrations are just some examples of collections that could be used for research, interpretation, and exhibition. Intangible items also contribute heavily to the collections of the museum. Multiple performance areas facilitate interpretive dance, song, drama, storytelling, re-enactment , video, and even a puppet show.

Exhibitions at Second Nature Prairie Community Museum are created out of the collections and blends thoroughly with programming. **Slide 18** shows how exhibits are both interior and exterior on the site. Interior exhibit space is suited for multiple activities and maximum learning opportunities. Designed for rotational exhibits, and supplemented by viewable storage, exhibits can incorporate demonstrations, tours, and even yoga.

Exhibits are thematic and correlate to other areas of the museum. For example, a museum-wide thematic exhibit named Wind & Wings could include an interior exhibit of the art of a community artist who makes paintings of birds, books from the library about birds, bird nest identification in the adjacent viewable storage , and a demonstration of printmaking using feathers in the education gallery. Exterior exhibits continue the interactive learning experience at the entry corner of the building where a large nest-like sculpture is commissioned similar to the

artwork of Jayson Fann at the Big Sur Spirit Garden in California (Big Sur Spirit Garden, 2013). Inspired by natural forms, and created out of bent wood, The Nest and the approachable Insect Condo, both shown on **slide 18**, are used interpretively to describe nesting behaviors and eating habits. Finally, a walk to the Artist's Overlook Tree House provides a vantage for bird-watching and a view of the prairie habitat as the largest exhibit at the museum.

Exterior exhibits on the site provide learning opportunities through interpretation, but also foster community sharing, as shown on the site plan on **slide 19**. Inspired again by the ideas of the late Jens Jensen, the Earth Seats Council Ring provides an exterior space for gathering and sharing (Lakeshore Nature Preserve, 2012, para. 2). The Butterfly Garden provides a concentrated space to observe the butterflies of the prairie habitat in a live setting, as does the Insect Condo which provides areas for insects to thrive. The Backyard Rain Garden ties back to the story of the big box re-use. Because the building is large and with a flat roof, the rain garden provides an opportunity to capture rain water coming off the roof, as well as an interpretive opportunity to discuss how the built environment effects the natural environment around the building.

There is power in blending programs, collections, and exhibits, especially when driven and sustained by place and community. The internal leadership of a museum has the power to introduce, incorporate, and foster new creative models into a museum. Forward-thinking executive director of the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz, and author of *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon touches on the creative possibilities of seeing the opportunity of technology, participation, and engagement as she describes her vision of 21st century museums:

There are millions of creative, community-minded people who are ready to visit, contribute to, and participate with cultural institutions that support their interests. While many people explore their passions in online communities, there is enormous potential for them to come together in physical spaces organized around stories and objects that matter to them. These physical spaces may be historical societies or science cafes, art centers or libraries. They may be museums of all sizes and types (Simon, 2010, p. 351).

Inserting place and community into the fabric of a museum transforms almost every aspect of what a museum can be and provides a new way to measure museum success develops. With increased community involvement, a museum's resources increase and earned income sources become more robust and dependable. Mentioned on **slide 20**, the community becomes invested in the museum's success and community participation and partnership becomes the financial strategy.

### **Conclusion**

Circular in nature, this exploratory project forced me to realize and embrace the complex interdisciplinary nature of a museum planning process. As I alluded to earlier, I started this project with curiosities and that lead to explorations that helped me realize that I only have more curiosity and questions. Exploring something open-ended simply leads to more open-ends! Grounding experience through abstract concepts creates deeper and richer abstract concepts, confusing as they are, to keep us asking questions and seeking answers. I like broad answers. I didn't want to create a planning rulebook for a place- and community- based museum. That

would indeed be antithetical to the very notions of place- and community-based approaches! At the conclusion, however, I realize that the product of my project is an open-ended process of reflection resulting in an idea of a more heart-centered museum of the future.

Most people living today are keenly sensing the immediacy of a changing world. Whether you resist change or embrace it, time feels accelerated; so we feel an urgency to solve the large-scale problems we see emerging before us. Change, whether it be technological, environmental, or social, is spawning panic-based decision-making that is affecting museums directly. It is not surprising that institutions built largely on top down expertise and traditional hierarchies are struggling to stay relevant in a rapidly changing world. It is clearer to me now that museum planning is a unique endeavor driven by specific mission, vision and goals decided upon by those involved. It is also clear that we don't have the luxury, anymore, of defining who is involved and who isn't.

Another conclusion I have reached is that the future of museums is grounded in place and community, and that it is very possible to make a museum that validates the community in which it exists. Nina Simon writes that: "When people have safe, welcoming places in their local communities to meet new people, engage with complex ideas, and be creative, they can make significant civic and cultural impact. The cumulative effort of thousands of participatory institutions could change the world" (Simon, 2010, p. 351). By devoting the museum to the community, asking for the community to contribute, engaging the community in the administration and inner workings of the museum, and valuing the knowledge that is produced during the process, you will create the museum of the future.

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