

# THE PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM

A B O O K B Y N I N A S I M O N

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## Preface: Why Participate?

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At the end of 2009, the National Endowment for the Arts released a sobering report on the state of arts attendance in the United States. The authors didn't mince words; in the preface, they wrote, "The 2008 survey results are, at a glance, disappointing."<sup>[1]</sup> Over the last twenty years, audiences for museums, galleries, and performing arts institutions have decreased, and the audiences that remain are older and whiter than the overall population. Cultural institutions argue that their programs provide unique cultural and civic value, but increasingly people have turned to other sources for entertainment, learning, and dialogue. They share their artwork, music, and stories with each other on the Web. They participate in politics and volunteer in record numbers. They even read more. But they don't attend museum exhibits and performances like they used to.

How can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life? I believe they can do this by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers. As more people enjoy and become accustomed to participatory learning and entertainment experiences, they want to do more than just "attend" cultural events and institutions. The social Web has ushered in a dizzying set of tools and design patterns that make participation more accessible than ever. Visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives. They expect the ability to respond and be taken seriously. They expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life.

This book presents techniques for cultural institutions to invite visitor participation while promoting institutional goals. Community engagement is especially relevant in a world of increasing participatory opportunities on the social Web, but it is not new. Arguments for audience participation in cultural institutions trace back at least a hundred years. There are three fundamental theories underpinning this book:

1. The idea of the *audience-centered* institution that is as relevant, useful, and accessible as a shopping mall or train station (with thanks to John Cotton Dana, Elaine Heumann Gurian, and Stephen Weil).
2. The idea that visitors *construct their own meaning* from cultural experiences (with thanks to George Hein, John Falk, and Lynn Dierking).
3. The idea that *users' voices can inform and invigorate* both project design and public-facing programs (with thanks to Kathy McLean, Wendy Pollock, and the design firm IDEO).

I wrote this book not to update or stake claim to these ideas, but to present specific techniques and case studies to make them actionable in contemporary institutions. This doesn't require flashy theaters or blockbuster exhibits. It requires institutions that have genuine respect for and interest in the experiences, stories, and abilities of visitors.

I define a participatory cultural institution as a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content. *Create* means that visitors contribute their own ideas, objects, and creative expression to the institution and to each other. *Share* means that people discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they see and what they make during their visit. *Connect* means that visitors socialize with other people—staff and visitors—who share their particular

interests. *Around content* means that visitors' conversations and creations focus on the evidence, objects, and ideas most important to the institution in question.

The goal of participatory techniques is both to meet visitors' expectations for active engagement and to do so in a way that furthers the mission and core values of the institution. Rather than delivering the same content to everyone, a participatory institution collects and shares diverse, personalized, and changing content co-produced with visitors. It invites visitors to respond and add to cultural artifacts, scientific evidence, and historical records on display. It showcases the diverse creations and opinions of non-experts. People use the institution as meeting grounds for dialogue around the content presented. Instead of being "about" something or "for" someone, participatory institutions are created and managed "with" visitors.

Why would a cultural institution want to invite visitors to participate? Like all design techniques, participation is a strategy that addresses specific problems. I see participatory strategies as practical ways to enhance, not replace, traditional cultural institutions.

There are five commonly-expressed forms of public dissatisfaction that participatory techniques address:

1. *Cultural institutions are irrelevant to my life.* By actively soliciting and responding to visitors' ideas, stories, and creative work, cultural institutions can help audiences become personally invested in both the content and the health of the organization.
2. *The institution never changes – I've visited once and I have no reason to return.* By developing platforms in which visitors can share ideas and connect with each other in real-time, cultural institutions can offer changing experiences without incurring heavy ongoing content production costs.
3. *The authoritative voice of the institution doesn't include my view or give me context for understanding what's presented.* By presenting multiple stories and voices, cultural institutions can help audiences prioritize and understand their own view in the context of diverse perspectives.
4. *The institution is not a creative place where I can express myself and contribute to history, science, and art.* By inviting visitors to participate, institutions can support the interests of those who prefer to make and do rather than just watch.
5. *The institution is not a comfortable social place for me to talk about ideas with friends and strangers.* By designing explicit opportunities for interpersonal dialogue, cultural institutions can distinguish themselves as desirable real-world venues for discussion about important issues related to the content presented.

These five challenges are all reasons to pursue participation, whether on the scale of a single educational program or the entire visitor experience. The challenge—and the focus of this book—is how to do it. By pursuing participatory techniques that align with institutional core values, it is possible to make your institution more relevant and essential to your communities than ever before.

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This book is organized into two parts. The first part, *Design for Participation*, introduces core principles of participation in cultural institutions and presents three approaches to making exhibitions, educational programs, and visitor services more participatory. The second part, *Participation in Practice*, presents four models for participatory projects and provides specific recommendations for how to develop, evaluate, manage, and sustain participation in ways that advance institutional missions.

## Notes

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[1] Download the 2008 NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts report [PDF].

## 9 Trackbacks

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<http://www.participatorymuseum.org/preface/tra>

By **07. Museums, Libraries, and Archives in the Digital Age | History 9808** on October 21, 2010 at 8:39 pm

[...] You can read the whole book online. If you're just going to skim it, you might start with the Preface and Chapter [...]

By **GLAM WIKI 2010 | Jo Healy's Blog** on December 6, 2010 at 3:13 am

[...] The Participatory Museum – Nina Simon Encouraging Digital Access to Culture, a report. Jon Droro for DCMS March 10 Content: selected essays on technology, Cory Doctrow [...]

By **Hakkame pihta! | Museoloogia lugemisrühm** on February 2, 2011 at 2:16 am

[...] korral arutame raamatu The Participatory Museum eessõna ning 1. ja 2. peatüki üle. Hakkame koos käima paari-kolme nädala tagant külakorda eri [...]

By **Esimene lugemine | Museoloogia lugemisrühm** on February 21, 2011 at 12:25 pm

[...] et on veel palju uusi kaasamis- ja osalemisvõimalusi, mis tuleb alles avastada ja tööle panna. Eessõnas võtab Simon need hirmud kokku kujuteldava külastaja suu läbi ning annab ühtlasi lootust, et [...]

By **Die Partizipation als Praxis im musealen Kontext – Chancen und Möglichkeiten für neue Projekte im Stadtmuseum «partizipatives Museum** on March 14, 2011 at 10:09 am

[...] Simon, Nina. The Participatory Museum. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010. URL: <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/preface/> (9.1.2011, [...])

By **Nina Simon og det brugerinddragende museum | Martins Museumsblog** on June 11, 2011 at 12:19 am

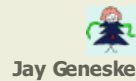
[...] (The Participatory Museum, preface) [...]

By **Incubate Innovation » Blog Archive » Read: The Participatory Museum by Nina Simon** on July 27, 2011 at 5:26 am

[...] text above is a statement from the preface of The Participatory Museum: a book/guide to working with community members and visitors for cultural institutions. All the [...]

By **Cardboard Cities « Oonagh Murphy** on March 26, 2012 at 5:10 am

[...] design scaffolding (a concept that Nina Simon has talked frequently about in her blog, and book). Children like a bit of guidance, a bit of structure in their daily routine but also when it comes [...]



Jay Geneske

## 4 Comments

I appreciate the thinking in the five commonly expressed dissatisfactions. I'm a frequent museum visitor, and I work for cultural orgs. I agree that an "unchanging" museum can sometimes feel irrelevant. In fact, you'll find many people rotate their memberships (one year at the natural history, one at the art museum, one at the zoo). In addition to special programming, exhibits, etc. to create a sense of the new, I'd love for museums to showcase new ways of the embracing the old. For example, I visited American Natural History Museum last week. Amongst the old/familiar, I began to notice how the museum signage—when taken out of context—produced witty, sometimes even profound "statements." In fact, their perspective affected my point of view on the collection in an interesting way. Here are photos of a few of the signs: <http://bit.ly/9WJcSy>. So, I stumbled upon an experience that reversed the thinking in points 1-4, maybe even 5.

Posted July 15, 2010 at 8:49 am | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

Dear Nina Simon,

I just want you to know that your book has inspired me to created a participatory temporary exhibition in Indonesia, and it worked really well! The exhibition is about Batik, Indonesian traditional textile, and visitors were able to experience the batik making within the exhibition. They loved it so much!

Thanks very much!

Posted October 9, 2010 at 2:14 am | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

I've been enjoying and getting inspired by the Museum 2.0 website for a couple of months and just started reading the hardcopy today. A small suggest for future versions ... please align the Table of Contents with the summary provided in the preface. The preface states that "This book is organized into two parts. The first part, ... presents three approaches .... The second part .... presents four models ...."

For my notes I wanted to quickly note what the 3 approaches and 4 models were before I continued reading but they were not directly stated in the table of contents. It's a small thing but could help with ease of study. Looking forward to new learning, practicing, and creating.

Posted October 11, 2010 at 1:57 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

**@Gwendolyn Kelly:** This is a great point. There's a lot to clear up in the preface, but I hadn't thought of this. Thank you!

Posted October 11, 2010 at 1:58 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)



Ajeng Arainikasih



Gwendolyn Kelly



Nina Simon

By **Il Museo Partecipativo** « **Oprova** on June 13, 2012 at 6:16 am

[...] The institution is not a comfortable social place for me to talk about ideas with friends and strangers. By designing explicit opportunities for interpersonal dialogue, cultural institutions can distinguish themselves as desirable real-world venues for discussion about important issues related to the content presented. (citato da: <

<http://www.participatorymuseum.org/preface/&gt;> 😊  
[...]

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The Participatory Museum (RSS) + Sator-ii theme by Felipe Lavín