

Content is King: Planning Museum Projects

Carolynne Harris, Vice President

Cultural facility planning is a complex process – for performing arts facilities, mixed-use spaces, and museums. Following “Are You Ready for a Cultural Facility Project?” by ACG Senior Advisor Willem Brans (2015), this edition of *Arts Insights* will distinguish the process and particular concerns for planning museum projects.

Key Factors

A key factor in museum planning is the experience you are striving to achieve for visitors, students, and communities that the museum intends to serve. The museum experience is based on content that is interstitial, not only presented on panels, with artifacts, in films, and through audio-visual components but also embedded in the physical structure and architecture of a building, the visitor engagement and educational programs, and the organizational culture. Content and visitor experience are at the core of all museum planning, not just within the exhibits. This type of planning is driven by mission and vision which, in turn, drives operational and institutional planning.

Critical to analyzing the feasibility of all cultural facilities is the process of stakeholder cultivation and listening to potential attendees, groups who may be interested in strategic partnerships, and all-important funders. Market analysis and understanding how the facility will engage with and become part of the fabric of a community are important steps in feasibility studies, an integral component to the earliest stages of the planning process. For museums to effectively perform these tasks and to test the feasibility of a project, the content must be developed to the point where the key experience takeaways are defined.

First Things First

The preliminary museum plan begins with understanding and articulating the visitor experience, the key content messages, the intrinsic and real value of that experience, and the museum’s capacity to operate. Having a good theme, and perhaps a great collection, gets you halfway there. But developing a plan that fleshes out the deep vertical content, defining the demographics of intended visitors, and determining how to best engage those visitors, are critical in the first steps. From a business planning perspective, there is no way to truly perform competitive and gap analysis or devise a budget for implementation or operations without this definition. Complex audio-visual experiences have different costs and management requirements than art-intensive or artifact-driven experiences. Can you effectively engage your audience in 10,000 square feet or will you need 30,000 square feet? How are you telling a story or sharing important art? Is it in a new way that fills a gap in cultural offerings regionally or nationally?

Developing the visitor takeaways and their impact on operations carries all the way through the planning process. Understanding the breadth and depth of information and visitor engagement that will be successful for your experience is a lengthy and sometimes messy process. It can take more than two years to articulate the content details of verbiage, graphics, physical exhibitry, artifacts/art, films, and interactives. And, this does not account for the architecture development and construction integration which can often be much faster with other types of cultural facility projects. During content development, simultaneous fundraising and financial planning, marketing, and branding dovetails and proceeds in lock step. Executing the museum’s vision is not always a linear path. Community input and iterative testing of the concepts, along with implementation strategies needed to engage potential visitors, is critical throughout the museum planning process. It can ensure the messages are correctly understood, and can reveal both positive and negative perceptions that will inform museum leadership in how to execute the vision.

Plan for a Complex Team

Looking at the planning team needed to develop, renovate, or expand a museum reveals some of the key distinctions of museums as a particular type of cultural facility planning project. In addition to an architect, technical specialist, cost consultant, and general contractor, who all play key roles in other cultural facilities, the team for museum planning also includes interpretive planners, exhibit designers, media producers, artifact and content experts, writers, and concept evaluators, among others.

Often museum organizers will start with an exhibit designer or architect based on initial themes and aspirations, wanting to determine the physical shape around the initial concept. However, the marriage of content and operational realities from the outset is crucial to ensuring long-term sustainability. Museum planners can help formulate an institutional master plan that articulates the key content experiences, incorporates necessary elements or artifacts, begins to cultivate stakeholders and thematic experts, and identifies the back-of-house needs for the new or revitalized cultural destination. It is at this point that the museum planner works alongside an architect, an exhibit designer, and, likely, a media developer to determine basic space needs. Rather than starting with design and backfilling the key experience and financial drivers, the information provided by these individuals further drives capital and operating cost estimates that are not only influenced by the desired visitor impacts but also are based in organizational reality. Ultimately, the exhibition, program, storage, administrative, and ancillary activities within the physical building will determine its appropriate size, scale, and scope of operations.

Making Your Vision Sustainable

Concurrently, realistic operation plans and financial models that are tested within the existing and projected economic environment must be developed. Because content is king, visitation projections cannot be based solely on geographic and demographic data, but rather should take into account key motivators of visitors in the context of the museum's intended experience for those visitors. How interested is the community in contemporary art? Is there a demand for a children's museum and, if so, what location best serves young families? Do the cultural history key themes have meaning to the broader community? Will the museum provide an experience that resonates to visitors in a much broader region and fill a gap in cultural education or entertainment? Will it become a destination due to amenities not found nearby? These are the kinds of questions that must be answered. They will impact how the content is further developed, the scope and scale of the facility, funding needs and capacity to raise them, staff size, operational budgets, and institutional requirements of the leadership and board.

Content also impacts earned revenue opportunities that are part of the financial models. Event planning, food service, retail, educational programs, and even rental income are most successful when they are mission-based, content-based, and incorporated into the overall visitor experience.

Creating a new museum, going through a major renovation, or expanding a facility is a grueling process full of challenges and many moving parts that are influenced by major moments of inspiration and gratification. Creating enriching content and innovative, exciting experiences is a special kind of capital project. Content development starts at the initial institutional master planning and after the doors open, the content evolves with new programs and temporary exhibits as the museum continues to refine the visitor experience and community engagement.

Opening the doors is just a first milestone. Creating a sustainable institution or big new exhibit that meets all of the goals set out at the beginning is a challenge that is not always met. A museum planning professional can counsel museum leadership, help manage the entire process, engage museum specialists, advise on the visitor perspective, keep the project on track, streamline communication, cultivate board members, and inspire new donor prospects. Objective professionals will have an eye towards understanding local competition with benchmarks to the broader museum industry. They can frame discussions in terms of both curatorial vision and realistic financial requirements. This level of expertise can guide museum leadership towards creating a visitor experience and cultural destination that is right-sized to meet revenue, expense, and attendance projections. Serving both the mission and the vision of the museum, effective planning will inspire thoughtful and thought-provoking content experiences that will have visitors return as members, patrons, and ambassadors that spread the word about your museum and its impact on their lives.



Vice President Carolynne Harris is a museum planner and industry specialist with more than 25 years of experience in the field. She joined ACG in 2016 as to lead the firm's new Museum Planning practice and enhance its Denver presence. Throughout her career Ms. Harris has planned, executed, and implemented a vast array of museum initiatives including renovations and expansions, and she has excelled in developing rich content for deeply engaging visitor experiences. Prior to joining ACG, Ms. Harris founded and led Carolynne Harris Museum Consulting, which focused on providing strategic, creative, technical, operational, and three-dimensional communication expertise to cultural experiences in all stages of development, resulting in more than \$100 million of built visitor experiences. Ms. Harris began her career at the Smithsonian Institution. Serving as the Assistant Director for Exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and as Exhibits Manager at Fernbank Museum of Natural History in Atlanta, she developed more than 40 exhibitions, managed staff, and streamlined processes to meet budgetary and programmatic objectives. Ms. Harris has been published in *Curator*, organized and presented sessions at national conferences of the American Alliance of Museums, and reviewed grants for the Institute of Museum and Library Services. She is a member of the American Alliance of Museums and the National Association for Museum Exhibition. Ms. Harris has also served on the board of directors for the Pennsylvania Museum Association. Ms. Harris holds a bachelor of arts in anthropology from the University of Virginia and a master of arts in interdisciplinary liberal arts from Emory University.

Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your museum or cultural facility plan new construction, renovations, or expansions.

(888) 234.4236
info@ArtsConsulting.com
ArtsConsulting.com