

Tisdale Rainey,

*independent curator,
adjunct, Tufts University*

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THIS TIME IT'S PERSONAL: CITY MUSEUMS AND CONTEMPORARY URBAN LIFE*

The CAMOC conference that took place in Berlin in 2011, with its theme "Participative Strategies in Capturing the Changing Urban World," is part of a larger discussion that museums in general—and city museums in particular—have been having recently about our collections and whether they are serving our current needs. We have been assessing our collections—what we own versus what we wish we owned—and we are noticing a disconnect. Most of our collections were formed at the turn of the twentieth century, and we're having a lot of trouble making them fit the stories we want to tell about our cities here in the twenty-first century. So, we're experimenting with contemporary collecting, and participatory collecting, in an attempt to make our collections more inclusive and more representative. This is important work and we need to do more of it.

Key words: *city museums, urbanism, local history, emotion history*

Many of us would say the reason for contemporary – and participatory—collecting is to allow more people to see something of themselves, something they can relate to, when they visit the museum. We want to meet our visitors where they are coming from to draw them into history, instead of throwing them in head-first, without any reference points, to stories with which they feel little connection.

So if we take as a given that for city museums our most important audience is the residents of our city, what would it mean to truly meet this audience where they are at? For residents, the city is not some abstract museum concept; it's real life and it's personal. Because of their personal connection to the city, these residents have a different relationship with, and a different set of expectations for, the city museum than they do for the local art or science museum. Can city museums go farther than simply building a more representative collection and also frame that collection in a different way, a more personal way?

To probe this question more deeply, I will present three scenarios for reframing our collections, in the hopes that these scenarios will generate further discussion about what exactly we are collecting and how we are organizing our collections for access by the public. These scenarios are based on ways the current "Information Revolution" is potentially changing our work. And each presents a different strategy for being more responsive to personal experiences of the city.

Personal History and the Long Tail

First, can you imagine a collection focused and organized around the concept of delivering personal history to every city resident? I couldn't have imagined it ten years ago, but I can imagine it now. There is an interesting American study that I think about all the time in my work; it is chronicled in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (Rosenzweig & Thelen 2000). This detailed phone survey of 1,500 Americans found that people have a lot of trouble connecting to the big-picture history they learn in school, but they will spend hours and hours connecting with history that is personal to them – family history, the history of their house, the history of their specific profession. The personal matters. And again, city museums are in a particularly good place to make personal connections because cities are so personal – it's the place where we live and work, where we are rooted.

Meanwhile, there has been a lot of discussion in the past five years about “the Long Tail” of twenty-first-century culture, a concept popularized in a book by Chris Anderson by the same name (2006). Anderson explains that the Internet makes available specialized information and goods that previously were hard to access, and therefore individuals are now able to customize and self-select based on very specific interests. In business this means that niche markets are now just as important as the “lowest common denominator” products that appeal to a vast number of people. In the museum field, this means that the model of the blockbuster exhibition may give way to a more flexible, diffuse system of access to objects and ideas that attract small segments of our public audience.

Within this shifting landscape, are city museums taking advantage of the Long Tail? Are they designing visitor experiences that increase the chances each person will encounter something relevant to their personal history? Imagine that I walk into my local city museum, answer a few questions about myself via a kiosk or mobile device, and receive a customized plan for my visit that looks something like this:

“Welcome to the museum, Rainey Tisdale. In our learning resource center on the first floor we have information on all the Tisdales who have ever lived in Boston, as well as every person who has ever lived on Amherst Street. Your interests list says you're a foodie. You might enjoy the artifacts from the Marliave Restaurant in Gallery 12 on the second floor. And you live in a triple decker? Check out our temporary exhibition on Boston's vernacular housing to learn more about them”.

In order to enable such a visitor experience, city museums would have to adjust their collecting strategies toward a specific goal of brokering personal explorations. It would mean assessing the potential connections to people when we decide which objects to acquire—not just who made or owned an object, but every possible personal entry point. It would mean “tagging” our collections based on demographics when cataloging. It would mean drawing from many different databases that house related information—census records, property records. And it would mean redesigning our search engines and their user interfaces to extract these personal connections and push them out to our visitors. Right now, a great deal of information with the potential to be personal

is already available, provided an individual city resident meets two requirements: she knows what to look for and she knows where to look for it. The key would be to redesign our interactions with members of the public so that people no longer need to meet these requirements in order to have a personal experience.

I want to caution that we shouldn't only deliver personalised history, because it's important for us to also have a collective history where we all meet in the middle. In order to ensure a bright future for our cities, city museums have a duty to encourage tolerance and civic engagement, and to discourage tribalism and narrow-mindedness. But we can certainly use personalised history as a powerful hook to draw people into the broader work we are doing. I would be interested to see a city museum experiment with this "personalised" approach and then share the results with all of us.

Hyper-Local History and Geo-Tagging

Second, can you imagine a city museum collection that provides meaning not at the neighborhood-by-neighborhood level, but at the block-by-block level? A decade ago it would have seemed impossible for city museums to provide that kind of detail, but not any more. In the past five years we have seen an explosion of mapping projects—every facet of life has become Google-mappable. Meanwhile, as we've embraced the Internet to explore around the globe, we've also realized that we still need to be rooted in the very local—local businesses, local news, local neighbours, locavores.

I've been following projects like HistoryPin.com that place historic photographs on the Google map and then send you out with your smart phone to pull up these photos as you walk around the city. I share the HistoryPin mobile app with a lot of people I meet, and when they see it for the first time they always start by looking for photos from their street. Not only are people drawn to personal history; they are also drawn to personal location, and the closer to home the better. But for now at least, these hyperlocal searches often lead to frustration: in most cases the content you see on HistoryPin and other sites is from the downtown city centre and not the neighbourhoods.

I experienced a similar frustration the last time I visited the city museum in the North Carolina city where I grew up. An interactive kiosk in the permanent exhibition, developed in response to audience research that determined residents had a strong interest in neighbourhood history, provided information about the city's neighbourhoods – history, demographics, landmarks. But the exhibition team limited the scope of the project to only 12 areas of the city, and my own neighbourhood was not included. Moreover, the information that was available for the 12 selected neighbourhoods was fairly broad. I found myself in the shoes of a discouraged visitor, wanting better representation and more detail. While many city museums have started making neighborhoods a collecting priority, we may not have realized just how far people want to zoom in, or just how important it is to push this location-based information out to our core audience of city residents in ways that satisfy their desire for hyper-local connections.

How might these issues affect our collecting plans? Could we collect with the goal of representing every block in the city? Could we assign geographical coordinates to every object in our collection, and all the information in our databases? (The Museum of London has added a new feature called My London to its online collections search page; a selection of artifacts are mapped by borough. I clicked on Hammersmith/Fulham, where I stay with family friends when I visit London, and got 87 results, a step in the right direction).

I once worked with a woman at Boston's historical society whose goal was to research every house on her block so that eventually she could present each of her neighbours (all of them working- and middle-class, not wealthy) with a bound report about the history of their home. In our participatory collecting, should we recruit volunteer block captains like my former co-worker? Would such projects help members of the public build deeper connections to place? Would they build local community? I would like to find out.

Emotion/Sense History and Psychogeography

And third, can you imagine a collection that includes not just objects and images, but also emotions? Our core audience of urban residents develops understanding of the city based on many small and personal, everyday experiences that build up over the course of weeks and months and years. The kind of major historical events we often focus on in our city museum exhibitions affect these residents every now and then, but by and large, for them city change happens more at the scale of flowers blooming on the corner, a new restaurant, or a fight with a neighbour. Meanwhile, as our Information Revolution continues to evolve, the idea of what kind of information is interesting and useful to us is also changing. If a city museum exists to truly serve its residents, who's to say these daily experiences, and the emotions they engender, aren't just as important a part of the public record as the legacies of the city fathers or the fires, floods, and wars?

Recently I have been exploring psychogeography as a tool for city museums. Loosely defined, psychogeography is the process of documenting and mapping things that we don't normally think of as belonging on maps, things that are very personal: emotions, memories, and sensory experiences of the city. To give you an idea of what I mean, I'll point you to the work of Christian Nold. Among other interesting projects, he once attached biosensors to ordinary people in San Francisco and asked them to walk around, noting what they observed and did along the way. Then he mapped this data to create a collective emotional urban snapshot, revealing the places where multiple people's heart rates spiked (2007). Another example is Jason Logan's scent map of New York City, featured in the New York Times (2009). Logan spent a summer weekend exploring Manhattan from end to end and documenting what his nose encountered. The resulting hand-drawn map organizes these delightfully varied smells by neighbourhood. When city museums collect oral histories, we're already dipping a toe into the world of psychogeography, because oral histories reveal so much memory, emotion, and personal connection. But could we adapt our collecting goals to take it a lot further?

Can you imagine creating urban smell banks so that in 100 years we can revisit, for example, the smell of Berlin's doner kebab shops? Recently developed odor-sensing technology might soon make such a smell bank possible. Should we be recording ambient sounds of the city on a regular basis? Should we be mining Twitter's place-based tweets as a form of vernacular urban poetry? What would it mean to have a collection of thousands of mental maps made by residents, to supplement our traditional collections of the city's formal, official maps – what could we learn about the city from these mental maps that we might otherwise be missing? Indeed, what exactly would an emotional history of a city look like? Could it help build a bridge between the lives of everyday residents and the kind of history with a capital H that we are used to presenting in our museums? I would like to find out.

These are just three possibilities for how we might re-frame our collections in order to build more personal connections between the city museum and its core audience. Each one requires not just committing to participatory collecting, but also setting a goal for where we want that collecting to take us. Moreover, these scenarios are based on an assumption that city museums exist not simply to collect and preserve the city's history but also to serve the needs and interests of city residents. I wonder if you are thinking about other possibilities of your own. If so, I'd love to hear about them.

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