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Museums and Civic Discourse: Exploring Challenges & Opportunities for Social Action

Panelists
Robin Grenier, UConn, adult learning in museums
Clarissa Ceglio, UConn, museum history and studies
John Bell, Ballard Institute & Museum of Puppetry, Storrs, CT
Jennifer Scott, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, Chicago
Nicole Ivy, AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums, Washington, DC

Project Background

Museums & Civic Discourse: Past, Present, and its Emerging Futures
From racial injustice to climate change, from gun control to immigration, our communities confront a range of complex, divisive issues. In response, many scholars and practitioners working in public history, museums, and allied fields have renewed calls for our institutions to foster civic deliberation and constructive action. They point to model examples of such work but also to the larger number of museums wary of tackling controversial topics or ambivalent about the compatibility of “social work” or civic activism within museums’ traditional mandate to collect, preserve, and interpret. At the same time, and also from within these fields, others have revitalized the work of making museums, themselves, more equitable places. So, in asking, “What roles have—and can—museums play in developing strategies and solutions to support civic discourse,” we must also engage the institutional inequities in hiring, governance, and other operational functions that limit museums’ ability to serve as credible partners to diverse constituencies.

This research project aims to bring historical and interdisciplinary perspectives to bear on museums’ work in and understandings of this area. For while US museums’ gradual entrée into the work of supporting civic discourse and social action is largely a 20th century development, there is, however, no critical accounting of this history, no scholarly overview that can be used to contextualize and inform current deliberations over future paths that museum work devoted to civic discourse, constructive debate, and creative action might take. Also lacking is inclusion of perspectives from groups historically underrepresented within museums, funding agencies, universities, public governance, and other decision-making circuits. This research effort is being undertaken with support from the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute’s Public Discourse Project and a Research Excellence Program Award from UConn’s Office of the Vice President of Research.

You can read more about the project here: http://ncph.org/phc/ncph-working-groups/museums-civic-discourse-2016-working-group/. These essays were produced by participants in our first working group, which was held at the National Council on Public History.
Museums & Civic Discourse Project’s Online Repository
https://www.zotero.org/groups/museums__civic_discourse

Still in early development, the Zotero group library serves as the project’s online bibliography and information repository—and, we hope, will serve as a ready reference tool for colleagues who are working, writing grant proposals, or undertaking research in this area. (A tagging schema is being devised and will be implemented in the months ahead to make it easier to sort the repository’s growing contents.) We encourage you to add citations to relevant materials, from primary sources, books, and journal articles to blog posts, videos, project web sites, and so on.

For project updates, museumscivicdiscourse@gmail.com and follow #MuseumsCivicDiscourse on Twitter.

References for Further Investigation


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**Non-museum Organizations and Dialogue-based Approaches**

Everyday Democracy, [https://www.everyday-democracy.org/](https://www.everyday-democracy.org/)


The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, [http://ncdd.org/](http://ncdd.org/)