

Beyond Depiction: Engaging with Homeless Adults

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Abstract

Homelessness is an enduring issue that has received increased attention over the last few years. Indeed, the recent financial crisis left many people homeless for the first time and made it harder for those already homeless to find stable housing or work. In the U.S., a handful of museums have responded to homelessness both prior to and following the financial crisis. An exploration into these examples reveals that museums have primarily addressed homelessness as a *topic* to be exhibited, but not as a group of people to engage with. This approach may be problematic, as treating any group as a topic is depersonalizing, does little to increase museums' relevancy among the group being depicted, and does not ensure the group's access to museums' resources.

The goal of this research was to better understand how museums can best engage *with* and make their resources available to adults who experience homelessness. A focus group-type method and one-on-one interviews with individuals holding expertise and experience on the topic of homelessness yielded concrete ideas for museums to consider when engaging with homeless adults.

At the core of this research's findings is the importance for museums to build relationships both with organizations and individuals who serve homeless adults but also, just as importantly, directly with adults who experience homelessness. Because developing and maintaining such relationships requires considerable time, effort, and intention, this research suggests an ongoing, long-term approach to engagement. Overall, this research contributes scaffolding and building blocks for museums' interested in moving beyond treating homelessness as a topic to be exhibited to engaging *with* and making their resources available to homeless adults.

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“New initiatives can begin through exploratory conversations” Silverman (2010, p. 149)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Homelessness has been a social reality for much of human history (Levinson, 2004). In the U.S., it has recently received increased attention, as the financial crisis left many homeless for the first time and made it harder for those already homeless to find stable housing or work (Bosman, 2010; Eckholm, 2009; Miller, 2009; Mitaru, 2009). The effects of homelessness are serious, placing a heavy financial burden on our communities and creating a traumatic situation in which those experiencing this reality are often stigmatized, excluded, and pushed to the margins of our society where access to resources is greatly diminished (Guarino, 2010; National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.; Williams, 2011).

As institutions “grounded in the tradition of public service” (American Association of Museums, 2000, p. 4), holding collections in trust “for the benefit of society and its development” (ICOM, 2007, p. 3), and with a desire to be relevant to their communities, many museums experiment with serving diverse populations and addressing current social issues. In the U.S., a handful of museums have responded to homelessness both prior to and following the financial crisis. An exploration into these examples reveals that museums have primarily addressed homelessness as a *topic*, through short-term, photographic, or mixed media art exhibits, but not as a group of people to engage with. This approach may be problematic, as treating any group as a topic is depersonalizing, does little to increase museums’ relevancy among the group being depicted, and does not ensure the group’s access to museums’ resources. Therefore, there appears to be an opportunity for museums to start thinking about and

experimenting with serving and making their resources available to their homeless community members.

To many museums, moving beyond regarding homelessness as a topic to be exhibited to treating it as a diverse group of people who could benefit from their resources might appear like a daunting proposition. Specifically, as museums do not have a history of working with homeless adults, museum staff members, lacking subject-expertise, might simply not know where to begin in engaging with this population.

Goal

The goal of this research is to better understand how museums can best engage *with* and make their resources available to adults who experience homelessness.

Based in the philosophy that museums have a responsibility to involve potential stakeholders when considering ways to engage them, and in order to move beyond the field's lack of specific knowledge on the topic of homelessness, this research initiated conversations through a focus group and one-on-one, post focus group interviews with individuals who are experts in this domain. For these discussions to be open and most accurately reflect the participants' perspectives, a specific definition of homelessness, information pertaining to museum type, and guidelines for the nature of museums' engagement with homeless adults were purposefully omitted.

Significance

There is significant evidence demonstrating that museums and general participation in the arts have positive effects for both individuals and communities (Group for Large Local Authority

Museums, 2000; Lowery, 2009; Matarasso, 1997). Based on such evidence, intentionally engaging homeless adults within our museums may *contribute* to partially alleviating the burden this reality places on both the community and the individual. However, the literature suggests a number of barriers preventing museums from engaging with disadvantaged groups, such as homeless adults. These barriers include museum staff's lack of subject expertise necessary to engage with these marginalized groups.

By understanding museums' public mandate as inclusive of all groups in society, this research proposes a method to address museum staff's lack of subject expertise on the topic of homelessness. Additionally, this work seeks to contribute building blocks for museums interested in moving beyond treating homelessness as a topic to engaging homeless adults as an audience that can benefit from museums' resources.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

New Museum Theory

The idea of museums acting as vehicles for social inclusion has its roots in what is called New Museum Theory, also referred to as Critical Museum Theory or New Museology. First coined by French museologist André Devallées in 1980, the New Museology emerged as a critique of the ways in which museums had been carrying out their social and cultural purposes. Specifically, Vergo (1989) defined the New Museology as “a widespread dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ museology” which “is too much about museum *methods*, and too little about the purposes of museums” (p. 3). He pressed museums to undergo a “radical re-examination” of their role within society lest they become “living fossils” (p. 3-4).

These claims sparked a debate within the museum field and have led many museologists to build upon Vergo’s critique. These new theories center on a few main ideas constituting points of departure from the “old” museology. First of all, the inherent meaning of museum objects is called into question and seen rather as situational and contextual (American Association of Museums., 2008; Macdonald, 2011; Stam, 1993). Second, there is a recognition that visitors may perceive exhibitions differently from one another and create their own personal meaning out of these assemblages of objects (ibid). Third, the political nature of representation and collecting along with “the implicit economic and political biases of the museums” (Stam, p. 281) are recognized and problematized. As Macdonald explains, “what was researched, how and why, and, just as significantly, what was ignored or taken for granted and not questioned, came to be seen as matters to be interrogated and answered (...)” (p. 3). Fourth, in re-designing museums’ social purpose, new museum theories also focused on prioritizing the educational role of

museums. This can be exemplified by the publication *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, which urges museums to clearly articulate their educational and public service roles. According to this report, these roles should be made visible in museums' missions and activities, and extended to a broader and more diverse audience (American Association of Museums, 2008). Finally, as Mason (2011) argues, the common thread running through all these major shifts is the importance of the visitor and ensuring that he/she has a meaningful museum experience. In his opinion, "the politicization of museums and the reorientation of their function (...) form arguably the key paradigm shift of recent years" (p. 22).

While the degree to which museums incorporate these significant shifts into their daily work varies between institutions, many have reconceptualized the ways in which they produce and disseminate knowledge and view their visitors. For instance, many museums have responded to the need to provide increased "flexibility in interpretation" (Stam, p. 281), "allow populations to exert control over the way they are represented in museums, expand understanding of non-Western and minority domestic populations, and devise ways of exhibiting multiple perspectives" (Ibid, p. 277). The impact of these shifts can also be linked to the adoption of social exclusion and inclusion discourses within the museum field.

Social Inclusion/Exclusion

Silver (2008) traces the contemporary exclusion discourse back to the 1960's when it was used in France to refer to people who experienced poverty. According to her analysis, the term entered the political realm about a decade later when it came to refer to those who fell outside of France's protective social insurance. Now, the term social exclusion is understood more broadly and commonly used as a conceptual framework to consider the complex and numerous factors

that contribute to disadvantage and inequality. For example, Sandell (1998) argues that social exclusion can be understood as a multi-dimensional and interrelated process through which “groups in society become disenfranchised and marginalized” by being “shut out, fully or partially, from any social, economic, political, and cultural systems” (p. 401, 405). This understanding of social exclusion has gained recognition over the last two decades and entered into many countries’ political and academic discourses, replacing previously dominant concepts of poverty and marginalization (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Sandell, 1998, 2003).

This multi-dimensional perspective of social exclusion, along with principles of new museum theory, can be used to demonstrate how museums, situated within the aforementioned “cultural system,” may be enmeshed in and contribute to the process of exclusion. For example, Sandell (1998, 2002) cites the ways in which museums often promote and affirm dominant values and beliefs as factors contributing to an institutionalized form of social exclusion. This form of exclusion is problematic as it not only reflects an individual or group’s pre-existing exclusion from the political, economical, and social realms of society, but also perpetuates it. Thus, in many cases, museums may exacerbate an individual or group’s “position of exclusion by broadcasting an exclusive image reinforcing the prejudices and discriminatory practices of museum users and the wider society” (Sandell, 1998, p. 408).

However, a growing body of research suggests that museums have the potential and responsibility to act as agents of social inclusion, positively impacting individuals, communities, and society (Dodd & Sandell; Group for Large Local Authority Museums, 2000; Sandell, 1998, 2002a, 2003; Scott, 2005; Silverman, 2010). Primarily based on research conducted by the University of Leicester’s Research Center for Museums and Galleries, Sandell (2003) argues that:

At an individual or personal level, engagement with museums can deliver positive outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem, confidence, and creativity. At a community level, museums can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination and develop the confidence and skills to take greater control over their lives and the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Lastly, museums, through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays, have the potential to promote tolerance, inter-community respect, and to challenge stereotypes (p. 45).

These findings on the benefits museums can yield to individuals, communities, and society complement research exploring the effects of participation in the arts. For instance, Matarasso's extensive study on the impacts of participation in the arts suggests positive outcomes in six main realms including personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health and well-being. Additionally, research conducted to shed light on the benefits disadvantaged individuals can derive from participating in the arts points to similar outcomes. For instance, evaluation of five arts programs designed for homeless adults in Los Angeles, California found that by the end of each program, participants had greater self-esteem, self-care, personal empowerment, and increased self-determination (Lowery).

Although further audience research is necessary to more thoroughly understand how museums positively impact individuals, communities, and society, recent publications including "Museums, Society, and Inequality" (2002) and "Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change" (2009) as well as the organizing of conferences such as "From the Margins to the Core" (2010) demonstrate an increasing international shift and openness toward socially inclusive work.

As many museologists have pointed out, deciding to engage with traditionally excluded groups and individuals can be a difficult step for museums to take (Dodd & Sandell; Group for Large Local Authority Museums; Gurian, 2006; Sandell, 1998, 2002b, 2003; Scott; Silverman). For instance, some critics have argued that social workers and therapists, not museum staff,

should carry out socially inclusive projects. Others have questioned the efficacy and impact of such efforts, claimed that these initiatives detract museums from their primary role of collecting, preserving, and interpreting, or argued that social inclusion would necessitate institutions to “dumb down” their content (Dodd & Sandell; O’Neill, 2002; Sandell, 2003; Silverman). Additionally, socially inclusive initiatives might not be an internal priority or interest, staff members might feel inadequate for this type of work, or factors such as fear, prejudice, and stereotypes harbored by staff members might create barriers to such efforts (Dodd & Sandell; Group for Large Local Authority Museums; Silverman; Tlili, 2008).

Despite these numerous barriers recent research has identified a number of best practices for museums engaging in socially inclusive efforts. For example, the Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM) Report on museums and social inclusion identified eight principles of best practice, which include:

1. Governmental and institutional policy framework that establishes clear terminology about the topic of social inclusion
2. Leadership that promotes social inclusion
3. Readiness to take risks
4. Networking and partnering with other organization working toward similar, socially inclusive goals
5. Adopting responsive and flexible approaches to socially inclusive initiatives
6. Community consultation, involvement, and empowerment
7. Evaluation and accountability
8. Advocacy through sharing and disseminating the outcomes of socially inclusive projects (p. 45-7).

Further research has confirmed and expanded upon many of these points. For example, Dodd & Sandell and Silverman emphasize the effectiveness of collaborating with various partners from the social sector, Sandell (2003) reinforces the importance of committed leadership, advocacy, flexible working practices, and community involvement (democratization), and both Sandell (ibid) and Silverman stress the value of evaluation for successful socially inclusive initiatives.

Understanding Homelessness

Homelessness has been a social reality for much of human history (Levinson). This complex reality, along with the ways in which communities around the world have responded to and defined it, has changed over time. For this reason, the body of literature focused on this topic is incredibly rich. Thus, this section will exclusively focus on material that can provide a broad overview and understanding of homelessness on a national and contemporary level.

Today, in the U.S., the Federal government in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act defines the term “homeless” as someone who:

Lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and (...) who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1994)

In addition to the above definition, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), also states that:

Persons may also be considered homeless if they are living in transitional or supportive housing for homeless persons but originally came from streets or emergency shelters; ordinarily sleep in transitional or supportive housing for homeless persons but are spending a short time (30 consecutive days or less) in a hospital or other institution, are being evicted within a week from private dwelling units and no subsequent residences have been identified and they lack resources and supportive networks needed to obtain access to housing; or are being discharged within a week from institutions in which they have been residents for more than 30 consecutive days and no subsequent residences have been identified and they lack the resources and support networks needed to obtain access to housing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.).

While the first definition has been criticized for being too narrow in scope (Burt, 2004), the second begins to shed light on some of the diverse and varying situations that might be considered as constituting homelessness. Taken together, these definitions resemble more closely the way in which many researchers and advocates view homelessness; as a “continuum of

housing that runs from the stably housed to the literally homeless, with many people falling between these two extremes” (Toro & Janisse, 2004). However, these two definitions centered on the living arrangements of those considered homeless do not provide information on the extent of the situation or address questions about *who* these individuals are and *why* they are homeless.

Enumerating the homeless population is a complex task that will vary depending on the definition of homelessness adopted and the methodology employed (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009; Wasserman & Clair, 2010). Contrasting numbers produced both by HUD and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, an advocacy group, can exemplify this issue of definition and methodology. In HUD’s 2009 *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*, 643,067 people were counted as homeless on a single night in January 2009 with 63% of individuals sleeping in shelters (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009). Wasserman and Clair emphasize two problematic considerations with this method, called “point in time count.” First, they argue that the number produced through this count risks producing an inaccurate estimate of the actual amount of people experiencing homelessness, as it likely underestimates “the avoidance factor of those living on the streets” (p. 50). Secondly, Wasserman and Clair stipulate that a one night count conducted in January might also produce lower numbers of individuals living on the streets, as the inclement weather “might easily inspire someone to commit most or all of their money to a hotel or to call on friends for favors” (p. 51).

The National Coalition for the Homeless emphasizes that, because homelessness is often a temporary condition, a more accurate method for enumerating the homeless population would be to focus on the number of people who experience homelessness over time. For this reason, another methodology called “period prevalence count” tends to shine greater light on the

magnitude of homelessness. For example, research conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty determined that as many as 3 million people, including 1.3 million children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, n.d.). Nonetheless, regardless of the methodology employed, many individuals who, for example, live in their vehicle, with family members, or couch surf will likely be omitted from the count (National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d.).

Similarly, detailed demographic information is hard to encapsulate. For example, race and ethnic makeup of the homeless population is likely to vary depending on region (Wasserman & Clair). However, a number of demographic trends are recurrent through the literature. For instance, homeless individuals appear more likely to be single, male, African-American adults with a mean age of 36.5. (Falk, 2001; Rossi, 1990; Sermons & Witte, 2011; Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Toro & Janisse; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

In addition to demographic-based data, it is important to consider the many and diverse factors that might lead people to experience homelessness. For instance, the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) points out that main contributing factors such as lack of affordable housing and increases in poverty due to shrinking employment opportunities are often exacerbated by issues including foreclosure, lack of affordable health care, eroding work opportunities, aging out of foster care, legal problems, decline in public assistance, domestic violence, mental illness, and addiction disorders. As research on homelessness emphasizes, this social reality cannot be attributed to one distinct cause, but rather to the convergence of a broad set of complex circumstances (Falk; Koegel, 2004; Toro & Janisse). Specifically, as Koegel postulates, homelessness should be understood as the combination of

“structural factors, which set the context for pervasive homelessness; and individual vulnerabilities, which earmark those people at highest risk for homelessness within tight housing and job markets” (p. 57).

As Falk argues, this multifaceted consideration of homelessness runs counter to the commonly held view that homeless individuals are solely responsible for their situation. This idea of “personal failings” as the main contributing factor to homelessness is further articulated in Toro et al.’s (2007) recent comparative study of public opinion towards homelessness in the U.S. and four European countries including Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the U.K. Through this study, they found that, in comparison to their European counterparts, U.S. respondents tended to express less compassion and trust toward homeless individuals and were more likely to view these individuals as socially isolated, criminals, and drug abusers responsible for their own situation.

While Toro et al. mention Americans’ tendency to place a high value on self-interested individualism, Wasserman & Clair mainly attribute negative views of homelessness to the popular beliefs in concepts of meritocracy and “self-made man” prevalent in this country. They further argue that the promotion of such concepts contributes to perpetuating a dichotomy between those considered successful (the “homed”) and unsuccessful (the homeless); “us” and “them” (ibid). In turn, this dichotomy renders the homeless invisible as the “homed” and “successful” prefer to avoid these individuals or ignore their existence (Falk; Levinson; Wasserman & Clair). Levinson further articulates this idea of dichotomy and its problematic outcomes when he states:

Homelessness is one of the least understood social issues. The public image of homelessness and public perceptions of the nature and causes of homelessness have little relation to the reality of the situation. Americans have little or no contact with homeless people. Encounters on the streets are quick and awkward and immediately pushed out of one's consciousness. (...) This avoidance of the homeless has made it easy for misconceptions to develop and persist (p. xxi-xxii).

Although the impact of homelessness on communities and individuals will not be explored in depth in this literature review, it should be noted that homelessness is a traumatic situation that puts a heavy burden on society and those who experience this reality. Statistical data suggests there is a significant financial cost tied to homelessness, affecting both governments and taxpayers. Many organizations such as the US Interagency Council on Homelessness and National Alliance to End Homelessness have conducted research and compiled statistics on the issue, pointing to the increased cost homeless individuals pose on health care, education, and the penal systems as opposed to non-homeless, low-income individuals. These same organizations provide data suggesting that the cost of homelessness can be greatly reduced when individuals are housed and supported (National Alliance to End Homelessness, n.d.). On the individual level, research suggests there is considerable trauma and impact on individuals' sense of self associated with the loss of home and safety (Guarino, Williams).

Museums' Efforts to Address Homelessness

Over the last few years, a handful of museums have broached the topic of adult homelessness, primarily through photographic or mixed media exhibits. An early example comes from the Field Museum of Natural History, which in 1990 hosted *Homeless in America*, a traveling exhibit composed of black and white photographs depicting the diversity of Americans affected by homelessness. This exhibit relied on the contribution of various renown and lesser-

known national photojournalists and was the fruit of collaboration between Families For The Homeless and the National Mental Health Association (Field Museum of Natural History bulletin, 1990).

Despite the early example of *Homeless in America*, there appears to be no other documented cases of museums dealing with the topic of homelessness until nearly two decades later. In 2008, the Columbia Museum of Art organized *While I Breathe I Hope*, a collaborative project between the University of South Carolina Department of Psychology, Midlands Interfaith Homeless Action Council, the Central Carolina Community Foundation, and the Columbia Museum of Art. This exhibit displayed photographs taken by a number of homeless individuals, thus offering the audience “a way to learn about homelessness in Columbia through the eyes of people who live it daily” (Columbia Museum of Art, n.d.).

Other photographic exhibits have presented homelessness from a different angle, documenting homeless individuals’ move from homelessness to stable housing. For example, in 2009, the Levine Museum of the New South hosted *On the Edge: Homeless and Working Among Us*. In this display, photographs, select audio, and quotes collected by a professional photographer documented the life of working homeless individuals and families while transitioning into affordable housing. This exhibit emphasized the seldom known fact that many working individuals in our communities find themselves homeless due to a shortage of affordable housing (Levine Museum of the New South, n.d.). Another exhibit exploring homeless individuals’ move from homelessness to stable housing, called *Pathways to Stable Housing*, was recently organized by the Loyola University Museum of Art, bringing together photographs and written documents collected by a professional photographer and a sociologist. This exhibit focusing on the multiple challenges that homeless individuals face as they try to

secure stable housing was organized in conjunction with the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness and Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (LUMA Loyola University Museum of Art, n.d.).

In addition to these examples of photographic exhibits dealing with the topic of homelessness, a number of museums in California have recently hosted the traveling multi-media exhibit *Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses To Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present*. This exhibit, curated by artist Art Hazelwood, “features original works by artists who bring a wide range of cultural viewpoints, historical perspectives, and positions on the topic” (“Exhibitions: Hobos to Street People,” n.d.). Many host museums integrated *Hobos to Street People* into broader exhibit series dealing with themes of homelessness and displacement; thus using this traveling show as a catalyst to further explore the difficult social reality at hand. For example, when hosting the traveling exhibit between 2009-2010, the Bakersfield Museum of Art organized a series of four different painting and photographic exhibits dealing with the themes of loss and isolation associated with being displaced or homeless (Bakersfield Museum of Art, n.d.). Similarly, at the de Saisset Museum in Santa Clara where *Hobos to Street People* was recently on view, three photographic exhibits on the themes of homelessness and poverty were concurrently organized (The de Saisset Museum, n.d.).

In contrast to the various exhibits discussed thus far, the Michigan Historical Museum, in partnership with Advent House Ministries, adopted a different approach to engage with the topic of adult homelessness in 2008. Through the program *Your Story and Mine: A Community of Hope*, former or currently homeless individuals were invited to participate in a series of activities promoting self-understanding, life skills, and creativity. Specifically, participants

“used the building blocks of history- artifacts, records, oral traditions and family photos- to develop their own personal histories” (“Your Story and Mine: Building a Community of Hope,” n.d.). This program was conducted at the Michigan Historical Museum, the Library of Michigan, and Advent House Ministries and resulted in the creation of a multi-media exhibit that traveled throughout Michigan in 2009-2010. Additionally, an educational guide was produced to inform individuals or organizations interested in designing a similar program.

Finally, unlike any of the examples discussed above, the Heritage Square Museum in Los Angeles, in partnership with Preservation Arts, Harvesting Happiness for Heroes, and New Directions, Inc., provides on-the-job training to homeless veterans. Through this collaboration, the museum’s program *Preservation through Practice*, which “recruits, teaches and trains craftsman and construction novices, through hands-on preservation courses, to actively restore Los Angeles’ historic buildings” (“Heritage Square Museum Joins with Partners to Educate, Train and Aid LA’s Homeless Veterans,” n.d.) was broadened to include homeless veterans. Thanks to this program, participants are offered an opportunity to re-enter the workforce and settle in the community.

Through these various examples, museums appear to be primarily engaging the topic of adult homelessness through short-term photographic or mixed media art exhibits. In all of the cases discussed above, this engagement resulted from partnerships with artists, photographers, photojournalists, and/or local homeless organizations. In most cases, the museums involved do not appear to have been directly engaged with the homeless or previously homeless individuals exhibited in their displays.

However, three museums provide an exception to this observation. First, the Loyola Museum of Art invited the individuals photographed for *Pathways to Stable Housing* to attend

the exhibit opening. The inclusion of these individuals was promoted on the museum's website and allowed those who have and have not experienced homelessness to come into contact, increasing the likelihood of dialogue. Secondly, the Michigan Historical Museum's project *Your Story and Mine* appears to be the only documented case of a U.S. museum that has created and implemented a program for homeless adults resulting in an exhibit. This example demonstrates that museums can use their unique resources to directly involve and help give a voice to this marginalized population. Finally, the Heritage Square Museum's program for homeless veterans is a great example of how a museum can broaden an existing program to be more inclusive and provide direct job skills to a disadvantaged group.

Although many of these initiatives aimed to "shed light on homelessness" ("Photography Exhibit Sheds Light On Homelessness," 2008) or "humanize" the statistics on this issue (Levine Museum of the New South, n.d.), no evaluation has been conducted to explore whether these goals have been met. Indeed, no research has been undertaken to understand how these exhibits have impacted museum visitors. Are they leaving the museum with a better understanding of the issues surrounding homelessness? Have their perceptions of homelessness been altered and stereotypes been shattered? How likely are they to take action to help homeless individuals? Although it can easily be postulated that these exhibits have the potential to raise visitors' awareness on the issues of homeless, research has also demonstrated that it is common for museum visitors to take away different messages than those intended by the institution (Sandell, 2002b). Thus, evaluation of these initiatives is key if museums want to understand their exhibits' impact and make sure that the messages visitors are taking away are congruent with the exhibits' goals.

Furthermore, there appears to be no knowledge of how homeless or previously homeless individuals view these various exhibits. Even if these individuals are not active museumgoers, there appears to be a need for consultation in relation to both the exhibition design process and end product, since after all, they are the “subjects” of these exhibits. Such consultation has the potential to empower individuals who are too often excluded from the various sectors of society (Silverman, 2010). Thus, the lack of information regarding homeless individuals’ perspective of the various exhibits discussed above is problematic, as it points to a situation in which museums might exacerbate a segment of the population’s unequal access to and control over resources (Dodd & Sandell; GLLAM; Sandell, 1998, 2002b).

Finally, because most of the documented cases of museums’ involvement with adult homelessness consist of exhibitions geared toward the “housed,” it is advisable that museums explore ways to actively engage *with* adults who experience homelessness. This means that museums might have to think beyond the traditional exhibition model to find creative and appropriate ways to do so. If this idea sounds overwhelming, initiating conversations with those who hold specific expertise on the topic of homelessness can be a good starting point, as exemplified through this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To address the research question of how museums can best engage with and make their resources available to adults who experience homelessness, a focus group-type approach and individual post focus group interviews were conducted. Informal meetings with each participant before the focus group allowed us to establish a good rapport, becoming familiar and comfortable with one another, and made it possible for me to explain my research in greater detail and answer any questions.

Before undertaking this study, my research plan was reviewed and approved by the University of Washington's Human Subject Division to ensure that my research did not pose potential harm to the research participants.

Methodological Background

Based in qualitative research methods, this study used principles of participatory action research (PAR) as a conceptual framework. PAR is an effective method aimed at improving practice or producing change at the local level through a spiral of self-reflective cycles that include planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages that repeat themselves until the desired outcome is reached (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). According to Cohen et al., PAR "may be used in almost any setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution, or where some change of feature results in a more desirable outcome" (p. 226). As Kemmis & McTaggart emphasize, this desirable outcome is achieved through the ongoing participation of individuals who have specific expertise in the topic being researched and a stake in seeing change enacted. More precisely, they define PAR as

“a process of sustained *collective deliberation* [emphasis in original] coupled with sustained *collective investigation* [emphasis in original] of a topic, a problem, an issue, a concern, or a theme that allows people to explore possibilities in action” (p. 54).

Within the scope of this research project the objective was not to carry out the full process of PAR, which would have required more time. However, the relevance of PAR and its underlying principles inspired this research to experiment with at least the initial stages of this multi-stage approach. Indeed, bringing together subject experts, in this case with a stake in seeing museums better engage with homeless adults, can be considered a first and necessary step towards enacting change. The focus group and interviews, described in detail below, thus potentially open interesting avenues for future phases of investigation.

Focus Group

The decision to organize a focus group was motivated by the fact that this method, dependent on group interaction, has the ability to “stimulate participants to think beyond their own private thoughts and to articulate their opinions,” thus producing rich data not otherwise obtainable through one-on-one interviews alone (Kleiber, 2004, p. 91).

The focus group took place in the Frye Art Museum’s education studio and lasted two hours. Participants were invited to arrive before the scheduled start time in order to visit the museum or enjoy refreshments and snacks in the education studio. To create a comfortable atmosphere, these refreshments and snacks were available throughout the duration of our group discussion. Additionally, for the focus group discussion to be open and most accurately reflect the participants’ thoughts, a specific definition of homelessness, information pertaining to

museum type, and guidelines for the nature of museums' engagement with homeless adults were purposefully omitted.

a. Participants

Selected participants had to meet at least one of the following criteria: work with homeless adults, be formerly homeless, or a homeless advocate. This purposeful selection was an embodiment of my belief that if museums are going to engage with a specific population, members of this population should be included in all phases leading to engagement, including the initial planning phase.

To recruit participants, various local organizations or specific individuals working with homeless or formerly homeless adults were contacted. These initial points of contact either put me in touch with others working with adults who experience homelessness or introduced me to individuals who had experienced homelessness and might be interested in my research. Throughout this process, 10 individuals were invited to become research participants, 6 accepted, and 4 were present the day of the focus group. Together, these 4 participants held a range of experiences, which is described in table 1.

Participant A	-Has experienced homelessness -Homeless advocate -Active board member of 2 local homeless and low income organizations
Participant B	-Has experienced homelessness -Currently pursuing a masters in social work -Works at a local homeless service provider organization
Participant C	-Has not experienced homelessness -Co-founder and executive director of a local organization that provides arts-based programming to adults who have experienced homelessness
Participant D	-Has not experienced homelessness -Long time volunteer at 2 local homeless service provider organization -Retired art professor

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

b. Location

The focus group took place at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington. The location was selected so that, by entering the museum context, participants would be inspired to think more easily and specifically about how museums can engage with and make their resources available to homeless adults. Additionally, hosting the focus group at a local museum was believed to affirm and be consistent with this study's core message that museums welcome diverse populations and want to know how to better serve them.

The Frye Art Museum was selected for a few specific reasons. First of all, consistent with its founders' wishes, the Frye Art Museum does not charge an admission fee, which makes the museum more easily accessible to individuals and families with little to no income. Second, the museum engages in activities aimed to support community members not directly served by other local museums. For example, its program *here: now* offers gallery tours and art making activities to individuals living with dementia. Finally, the museum's exhibitions on view at the time of the focus group offered interesting examples of how art can be presented and interpreted. For instance, *Beloved: Pictures at an Exhibition* presented works from the museum's permanent collection, which were selected and co-curated by an elderly lady who has been visiting the museum every day for the last 10 years. This exhibition provided an intimate experience that exemplified the multiple and personal meanings art can have.

Aside from hosting the focus group, the Frye Art Museum is not associated with this study in any way.

c. Procedure

Introduction to the museum

To begin our time together, the group met in the museum lobby where I greeted everyone and explained my reasons for hosting our meeting at the Frye Art Museum. The museum's deputy director was present to welcome and introduce us to the organization. She provided a brief historical background to the museum, led us through a couple of the exhibits on view, and discussed a few key museum programs. This introduction to the museum was designed to welcome participants and expose them to a few examples of what museums in general have to offer.

Introduction to the focus group

After our introduction to the museum, the group moved to the museum's education studio where everyone was invited to refreshments and snacks. I reiterated the goals of my research, provided an agenda for our time together, and asked the participants to introduce themselves by sharing their name and their reason for being interested in this project. The goal of these introductions was to allow the participants to directly get involved, get to know each other a little better, and demonstrate that everyone who was present deeply cares about the topic at hand, creating a safe environment for sharing thoughts and ideas.

As a segment to our brainstorming activity, participants were invited to reflect on the introduction we had received of the museum. Specifically, they were asked if anything had surprised them, appeared unexpected, or stood out in what they had seen or heard.

Brainstorming

To generate ideas about how museums can best engage with and make their resources available to adults who experience homelessness, participants were handed notecards and asked to react/respond to the following prompt:

In order for museums to engage with adults who experience homelessness, what is really important that they know/include/consider?

Participants were asked to think broadly, write one idea per card, and aim for at least 5 to 10 ideas/cards. When participants were done writing down ideas, they were invited to share their thoughts with the rest of the group. This generated a lively discussion during which participants demonstrated spontaneity and an ability to listen and build upon each other's ideas.

To transition into and help with the final phase of the focus group, which involved participants imagining what could be ideal examples of how museums could engage with adults who experience homelessness, I had planned for the group to prioritize their ideas using a ranking activity called Diamond 9. This activity allows individuals to work together in a short amount of time in view of prioritizing ideas and coming up with a shared vision (Horne, n.d.; Rockett & Percival, 2002). Participants were invited to work together and physically move their ideas around, arranging them in a diamond shape with the most important priority placed at the diamond's apex and the least important one positioned at the bottom of the diamond (see fig. 1).

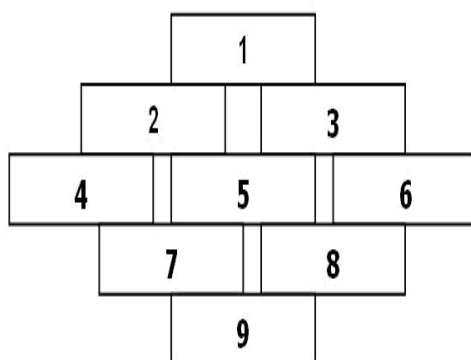


Figure 1. Diamond 9

However, after introducing the activity, a participant presented an idea that she had forgotten to mention during our brainstorming and discussion period. This launched a new and compelling conversation in which everyone participated. Because flexibility is an important trait for a focus group, I decided to allow the participants space to further explore the newly introduced idea, putting my plans for the diamond 9 ranking activity on hold.

Team work: Imagining potential

For the final phase of the focus group, the group split into two pairs, group A and B. Each sub-group was handed a large sheet of paper, colored markers, and the following prompt:

I would like for each group to come up with what could be an ideal example for museums to engage with homeless adults. It could be a project, program, or a set of outreach strategies.

How do you as a group imagine museums engaging with homeless adults?

What might be pitfalls or barriers? How could we anticipate and address them?

Please draw from your personal insight and the ideas you brainstormed earlier.

Participants were encouraged to think broadly and to express their group's idea in anyway that felt most comfortable to them (e.g. drawing, mind map, bullet points, etc.).

This activity aimed at imagining potential was inspired by the concept of the *future workshop*, and more specifically, its fantasy and implementation phase. Future workshops are

used as a tool to generate ideas and strategies for a more desirable future and are primarily employed by “local groups to deal with local problems” and, more recently, in the workplace as “a method applicable in the design of new systems, processes and artifacts” (Vidal, 2006, p. 3). A classic future workshop is composed of five phases: preparation, critique, fantasy, implementation, and follow up. In the fantasy phase participants are encouraged to develop a utopic view of the future that is assessed for its practicability in the implementation phase (Heino, 2004; Vidal). Thus, in the case at hand, participants were asked to use the ideas they had brainstormed to come up with what could be an ideal example for museums to engage with homeless adults (fantasy) and to consider potential pitfalls and barriers along with a way to counter them (implementation).

Presentation

When the two sub-groups were ready, each of them presented their idea to the larger group. A detailed account of both ideas can be found in appendix A. After each presentation, participants were invited to react, comment, or ask questions to the presenters.

Conclusion

When we arrived at the end of our time together, participants were warmly thanked and invited to stick around for coffee or to further explore the galleries.

Post Focus Group Interviews

Throughout the month following the focus group, I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant. This allowed participants to reflect on and describe

their personal experience of the focus group and share any new ideas that emerged after our group meeting. The questions were as followed:

1. What are three words that, for you, best describe the focus group? Why?
2. What idea(s) do you remember most? Why?
3. Have you had any new thoughts pertaining to our group discussion, if so describe them?

In addition to these questions that were asked to each participants, I was also able to further probe into specific comments made by individual participants. For example, during the focus group, one of the participants commented on the range of responses she had received from museums when trying to get them interested in working more closely with her organization that serves formerly homeless adults. Since this specific experience is of great interest to this study, the interview allowed me to follow up on her comment and learn more about the range of responses she had previously mentioned.

Analysis

Focus Group

All audio recordings of the focus group were transcribed and read through several times to uncover key words and themes. Four main interacting themes that emerged were:

1. Individual-centered considerations
2. Group-centered considerations
3. Relationship building considerations
4. Logistical considerations.

Next, I went back to the transcripts and looked for specific examples and quotes that supported these major themes. These examples and quotes were further expanded into subthemes providing a richer understanding of each pattern.

Post Focus Group Interviews

All audio recordings of the follow up interviews were transcribed. The data produced through these interviews was analyzed in two different manners. On the one hand, data pertaining specifically to the participants' experience of the focus group meeting was analyzed separately to understand how they had perceived it. This was accomplished by going through the transcripts and picking up experience-specific references. These were then compiled into two themes: enthusiasm and creativity. On the other hand, non-experience-specific data was treated as an extension of the focus group discussion and coded for themes and subthemes in the exact same manner as the focus group transcripts. In this case, data from these two sources are not differentiated and presented as one below.

Chapter 4: Findings

Focus Group and Post Focus Group Interviews: Themes and Subthemes

Through the transcript analysis of the focus group discussion and the post focus group interviews, four main themes emerged, each comprised of several subthemes (see table 2).

Themes	Subthemes
Individual-Centered Considerations	Normalizing experiences, safety, communication/creative expression
Group-Centered Considerations	Community building, inclusiveness, cross-class groups
Relationship-Building Considerations	Build relationship with social service providers and target population
Logistical Considerations	Timing, transportation, and cost

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes

Although the data were broken down into these main themes for the purpose of analysis, in reality, all themes overlap, are interdependent, and cannot be separated. As the themes' descriptions will demonstrate below, some subthemes are active components of multiple categories of consideration. For example, "safety" was both identified as an individual-centered consideration and a key contributing factor to building positive relationships with the target population (relationship-building consideration). In other words, all four themes interact dynamically with one another and, if taken as a whole, will increase the likelihood of successful engagements. A helpful way to conceptualize this interaction can be found below (figure 2).

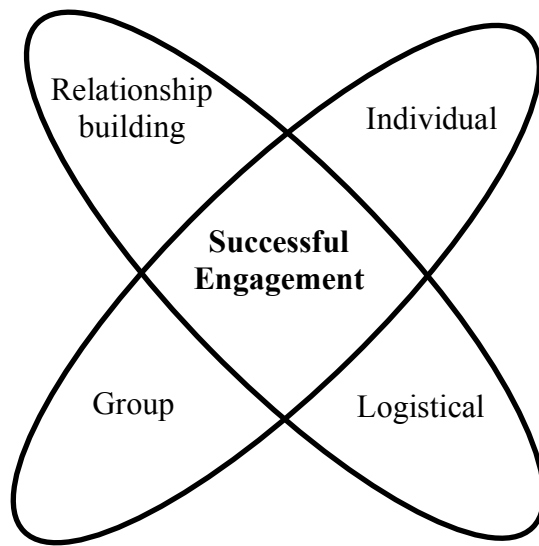


Figure 2. Successful Engagement Model

1. Individual-Centered Considerations

This major theme encompasses ideas touching on personal needs and individual-centered considerations and includes three subthemes: normalizing experience, safety, and communication/creative expression.

Normalizing Experience

This subtheme was characterized by the importance of treating adults who experience homelessness as “real” people. In the words of a focus group participant: “it is so important...so emotionally important” to be treated like “real” people. Based on the group discussion and interviews, specific ways in which museums can treat homeless adults like “real” people include providing them with access to activities that they do not usually have the opportunity to partake in, such as going on tours and enjoying snacks and refreshments in the museum café, and integrating them alongside non-homeless individuals in programs and events. This last point was

exemplified by a participant's mention of the benefits of intentional cross-class organizing, which later became the basis of Group B's main idea development (see appendix A).

Three other elements were identified as contributing to homeless individuals treatment as "real" people. First of all, the data suggests a strong desire for homeless individuals to feel respected, which includes not being patronized and followed around the galleries "like a suspect." As a participant stated: "you know, for people who are homeless, they get followed around enough!" Second, there appears to be a need for museum staff to be mindful of power differentials. This includes being considerate of clothing, as being dressed "too fancy will make people feel uncomfortable" and participating alongside homeless individuals in whatever activity they engage in while at the museum. Finally, homeless adults should be consulted prior to a museum visit in order to secure a time that works best for all interested parties and help determine the visit's content. As a participant noted: "homeless people also do have lives, they do have appointments and meetings and other activities scheduled...so don't just schedule something and then invite them."

Safety

This subtheme is comprised of ideas related to the importance for homeless adults to feel safe within the museum space. The data suggests three specific factors contributing to feeling safe. First of all, it appears that safety can be enhanced by fitting the museum visit within a broader set of activities related to the museum's exhibits, thus *contextualizing the visit* and allowing homeless adults to feel prepared for it. For instance, a participant stated the importance of having "workshops where you get together and study some artists or art or whatever so that when you go to the museum, you don't not know anything; you can go to the museum already

knowing something about what you're going to see and it makes it less intimidating." Second, while it is important to try to *integrate homeless adults alongside non-homeless individuals* in museum programs and events, a balance must be achieved in which homeless adults do not feel outnumbered and pushed aside. Thus, ensuring that there are enough homeless adults simultaneously taking part in a museum related activity was considered to increase individual homeless adults' feeling of comfort and safety. Thirdly, being *treated respectfully* also appears to increase individuals' sense of safety. For example, ensuring that homeless adults feel welcomed to the museum and are not being talked down to or followed around the galleries like a suspect contribute to creating a safe environment. These ideas were all given significant weight throughout the focus group discussion and interviews, because, as a participant expressed, "for a lot of homeless people, just the idea of anything new, of being outside of your territory at all..." can be very intimidating.

Communication/Creative Expression

Throughout the focus group discussion and subsequent interviews, the value of communicating and creating was brought up several times. Concrete examples cited by the participants include inviting homeless adults to talk and share their impressions of their visit and providing them with opportunities to create something after looking at art in the galleries. Based in a belief that "creativity is at the heart of what it means to be human," a participant stated, "I think the best response to something somebody else has created is to go create something yourself."

2. Group-Centered Considerations

This theme is comprised of ideas related to individuals' social needs and considerations. It includes three specific subthemes: community building, inclusiveness, and cross-class groups.

Community Building

Museums can contribute to and facilitate community building amongst adults who experience homelessness. Specific examples cited throughout the group discussion and interviews include providing opportunities for people to 'hang out,' relax, talk, enjoy snacks and refreshments, and create *together*. The idea of togetherness was central and appeared to be supported by the various examples mentioned above.

Inclusiveness

A running joke that emerged throughout the focus group discussion was that means testing of income should not be administered to determine who can or cannot participate in the museum-related activities.¹ Aside from this joke, data points to the importance of museum-related activities targeted towards homeless adults to be open to anyone who might be interested, ranging from those living outside and in shelters, to those living in transitional housing or recently housed. As a participant explained,

¹ The Cambridge Dictionaries Online define means-testing as "the official process of measuring how much income a person has in order to decide whether they should receive money from the government" ("means-testing," 2011, para. 1)

“you should involve both homeless and formerly homeless people with low income, because for one thing, it makes more of a community and for another thing, people who are newly housed tend to be isolated. (...) And having that interaction between people who have made it out and people who haven’t yet is just really important and inspiring...it helps.”

Cross-Class Groups

As mentioned above when discussing the need for homeless adults to feel safe within the museum space, the way in which cross-class group activities, programs, or events are organized appears very important. The same data previously mentioned is applicable under this main pattern concerned with social/group-centered considerations.

3. Relationship-Building Considerations

This next theme is concerned with the importance of museums establishing relationships and partnerships with both service provider organizations and the target population.

Relationship with service provider organizations

Our discussions suggest that museums would benefit from establishing relationships and partnerships with organizations that already serve homeless adults, including service providers. Reasons to do so include the fact that these organizations already have a relationship with homeless adults and have access to resources such as space where workshops could be held and, in some cases, transportation that could be used to get people to the museum and back.

Relationship with target population

This research suggests that establishing relationships with adults who experience homelessness is an important step for museums to take, as relying on relationships with organizations that serve homeless adults is not enough. Per the focus group discussion and interviews, there appears to be a few concrete steps museums can take in that direction. First of all, even before being in contact with homeless adults, museum staff members can learn about this population and its struggles and receive sensitivity training. For example, the participants foresaw museum staff learning to “expect talent” within the homeless population, that “this population is extremely diverse,” and needs to be offered flexibility. This type of learning supplemented by sensitivity training will help staff members be more readily and appropriately able to engage with this population. Second, encouraging museum staff members to participate in museum-related activities alongside homeless adults can foster relationship building. As a participant noted, “you’re doing it *with* people, not for people.” Thirdly, the act of asking and consulting with interested parties prior to organizing and scheduling activities was also considered conducive to establishing a positive relationship with the targeted population. Fourthly, our discussions suggest that building a relationship with homeless adults would be more successful if ongoing in nature. It was suggested that this could be achieved through continuous outreach and providing ongoing access to museum programs, events, and activities (i.e. rather than simply a one-off, stand-alone project). Additionally, outreach was seen as highly desirable, as it would require museums to “go outside of their own comfort zone in order to make other people feel more comfortable about going out of their comfort zone.” Finally, and in direct relation to the last point, a successful relationship appeared synonymous with familiarity. For instance, it seems that homeless adults could benefit from learning about the museum prior to

visiting, as it would allow them to become familiar with the museum and increase their likeliness to go. Additionally, having the same staff member conducting outreach and greeting people at the museum was believed to be another way in which museums can foster relationship building through creating familiarity and trust.

4. Logistical Considerations

The last theme that emerged during the transcript analysis is centered on considerations of a logistical nature and includes three subthemes: timing, transportation, and cost.

Timing

Based on the data, the specific time during which activities are scheduled is a very important consideration. For instance, museums should take into account factors such as mealtime and shelter admittance time when working with homeless adults, because activities conflicting with these important, daily events will simply not be attended. It was suggested that, if an activity was scheduled during mealtime, food should be provided. Conversely, it appears that activities scheduled on Sundays would be well attended. In the words of a participant: “if you could schedule activities on Sunday, that would be great, because nothing else...hardly anything else is going on Sundays.”

Transportation

Transportation also emerged as an important logistical consideration. Without access to a vehicle, money for the bus, or a bus pass, activities taking place beyond reasonable walking distance would be sparsely attended. This consideration further supports the benefit of

establishing a relationship with service providers that might have access to vehicles or buss tickets.

Cost

This final key subtheme may seem obvious, but the participants brought it up as a primordial logistical consideration. Activities, events, programs, or simply visiting the museum will not be accessible to homeless adults if there is an entrance fee.

Post Focus Group Interviews: Participants' Reflections

The post focus group interviews were analyzed in two different ways. Non-experience-specific data was treated as an extension of the focus group and included in the above discussion. Data pertaining specifically to the participants' experience of the focus group meeting was analyzed separately to understand how they perceived of our group meeting. Based on this analysis two main experience-related themes emerged.

1. Enthusiasm

Each participant expressed enthusiasm towards their focus group experience and the group discussion. Examples of participants voicing their enthusiasm include quotes such as "I love group work like that," "I actually really like the idea we came up with," "I've been bubbling with ideas ever since," "Fun!," "I really liked it a lot and I liked the group that was there," and "it was satisfying."

2. Creativity

Throughout the interviews, all participants either expressed having felt creative, having participated in a creative process, or demonstrated having been inspired to continue thinking about ways to turn the ideas discussed during the focus group into action. For example, two out of the four participants chose “creative” as one of their three words to describe the focus group. Additionally, to the question “have you had any new thoughts pertaining to our group discussion?” three out of the four participants had thought of specific ways to turn the various ideas discussed during the focus group meeting into action. For example, two participants reflected on the benefits of starting small and pilot testing some of the group’s ideas as a way to get them off the ground; all the while discussing specific ways to get started. All these suggestions to turn the ideas discussed during the focus group meeting into action point to the fact that the focus group discussion sparked the participants’ creativity beyond the meeting and installed in them a desire for action.

In addition to these two main themes, the table below (table 3) provides a more detailed understanding of each participant’s experience of the focus group.² All participants appear to have had a positive and comfortable experience.

² The order of the letter coding identifying the four participants’ profiles in Table 1 and the order of the number coding distinguishing their individual reflections during the post focus group interview in Table 3 have been purposefully mixed. This is to reflect my epistemological stance regarding each individual participant as an “expert” with equal voice, as well as to ensure anonymity.

Participant	Words to Describe Focus Group	Explanations	Most Memorable Idea
Participant 1 (P.1)	Interested	All participants were interested in finding solutions	The importance of including stakeholders in the decision-making process
	Eager/Willing	All participants were eager and willing to share ideas	
	Novel	Not too many people are thinking about this topic	
Participant 2 (P. 2)	Inspiring	“I’ve been bubbling with ideas ever since”	The feasibility of carrying out the ideas discussed during the focus group
	Heartening	Touched that people care about this topic	
	Fun	N/A	
Participant 3 (P. 3)	Creative	All participants were thinking outside the box/generating new ideas	Group B’s Access Art Pass idea and the importance of providing creative space
	Fluid	All participants were willing to go with others’ ideas	
	Organic/Natural	The process seemed organic/natural	
Participant 4 (P. 4)	Creative	Creative way to problem solve	Participants’ different personalities
	Challenging	Changing the status-quo is difficult	
	N/A		

Table 3. Participants’ Focus Group Reflections

Chapter 5: Discussion

A specific definition of homelessness, information pertaining to museum type, and guidelines for the nature of museums' engagement with homeless adults were purposefully omitted in view of more accurately reflecting participants' perspectives and thoughts. Interestingly, the participants outwardly agreed upon a nuanced view of homelessness more closely related to many researchers and advocates' conceptualization of this reality than to the official, narrower in scope, federal definition of homelessness. Through this conceptualization, homelessness tends to be viewed as a "continuum of housing that runs from the stably housed to the literally homeless, with many people falling between these two extremes" (Toro & Janiss). Throughout our group discussion, demographic specifications within the homeless adult population were not discussed. The nature of museums' engagement that emerged through the focus group and interviews varied from organizing programs for homeless adults to intentionally inviting them to take part in museum events and activities. In most examples of engagement, participants suggested working with a voluntary group of homeless adults interested in accessing museums and their resources. Finally, our conversation evolved to focus solely on art museums. This might have been influenced by the fact that the focus group meeting took place in an art museum and three out of four participants were either artists or involved in arts organizations. Despite this focus on art museums, findings from this research are believed to be applicable to any museum type.

Engaging with Homeless Adults

The data discussed in detail above, provides key considerations and examples for museums interested in engaging with homeless adults. While some of these findings are specific to engaging with this population, many overlap with and confirm what museums already know about engaging with their visitors and working towards social inclusion. For instance, research has demonstrated that, among other things, museum visitors need to be able to easily access the museum, feel prepared for their visit, welcomed, comfortable, respected, and safe (Black, 2005; Rand, 2004; Weaver, 2007). As Black explains, these needs might be even more important for groups who usually do not visit the museum. He states: “the single most significant barrier to inclusion is the visitor feeling unwelcome and being embarrassed because they do not know where to go, what to expect or what is expected of them. If visitors do not feel ‘comfortable,’ if they feel watched and considered inadequate, they will vote with their feet and leave” (p. 34-5). The data discussed above reflects Black’s argument. Indeed, individual-centered considerations related to preparedness, safety, respect, and welcome carried considerable weight throughout the group discussion and interviews.

In addition to visitor needs, past research has demonstrated the benefits and efficacy of museums partnering with other organizations in view of carrying out their missions. For example, social inclusion has been proven likelier and more successful when carried out in partnership with organizations already serving the target population (American Association of Museums; Dodd & Sandell; GLLAM; Silverman, 1998, 2010). Furthermore, the benefits of working directly with the target population in view of extending museum resources to them have also been reported on. Among many examples, Black states

“regular consultation (...) and direct participation in the development of exhibitions and activities will all enhance intellectual access” (p. 60). Silverman (2010) encourages a similar approach, explaining that “as growing evidence demonstrates, [social] service initiatives that involve clients as collaborative partners can be particularly empowering for them, informative for [museums and social service] practitioners, and key to service delivery” (p. 148).

Although the data discussed above overlaps with elements of what museums already know about their visitors and social inclusion, considerations more unique to engaging with homeless adults should not be overlooked. For instance, the importance of safety reoccurred several times throughout the focus group discussion and interviews. Safety was identified as dependent on several factors including preparedness, the nature of the space (e.g. welcoming), who is present within that space, along with relationships and interactions with museum professionals. Additionally, the strong need to be treated with respect (i.e. as a “real” person) might be felt more intensely by homeless adults. These ordinary needs expressed with extraordinary intensity are to be expected when dealing with a population that has suffered considerable trauma and stigmatization. Research conducted in the realm of health care confirms such findings. For instance, Wen et al. (2007) found that homeless adults’ past experience with discrimination and disrespect heightened their sensitivity to feeling welcomed, respected, and valued as a person by health care providers. Furthermore, this populations’ use of health care was dependent on the occurrence of these factors. Thus, the importance for museums to intentionally and carefully create a safe and welcoming space for homeless adults appears to be primordial.

Focus Group Experience

Based on participants' self-reported experience of the focus group meeting, this mode of inquiry appears to have been a successful tool to generate ideas and tap into the group's expertise and creativity. Additionally, the fact that most participants had thought of concrete ways to turn the ideas discussed during the focus group into action points to the participants having experienced inspiration and a desire to see change take place. Kleiber reflects this observation when she states: "the impact of focus groups on the participants, when they are discussing issues of importance to them, suggests that it may be more than a method of inquiry; it may in fact have the effect of an intervention" (p. 96). Finally, each participant's positive recollection of the focus group meeting is not uncommon of this type of process. As Kleiber explains, "because the tendency of our society is to be too busy and isolated to find opportunities to discuss important issues, participants usually enjoy the novelty of the focus group process" (p. 97).

Limitations

Because this project was exclusively reliant on the four focus group participants, findings reflect their perspectives and conceptualization of homelessness, museum type, and the nature of museums' engagement. Details of this research's findings would likely vary if multiple focus groups with different sets of participants had been organized to gather data. As Kleiber states, "one focus group does not constitute a "study" under any circumstances, and two is usually not enough. In most cases, a set of three focus groups will be required to collect data on the research question" (p. 98). However, subsequent focus groups would most likely yield overlapping and similar data, as many of the findings described above are reflected in previous research on homelessness.

Additionally, as this data reflects a broad conceptualization of adult homelessness, it does

not include considerations that would be unique to certain demographics such as single mothers or those living with mental disabilities. Although some of the considerations identified in this research would most likely apply to these groups, further research is required if museums want to engage with a specific demographic within the adult homeless population.

Finally, while this research addresses the barrier of museum staff's lack of specific expertise on the topic of homeless, it does not address barriers such as lack of resources and conflicting internal priorities. Though this paper made a case for museums to think of their public mandate broadly and presented evidence of the benefits museums can impart to individuals, communities, and society, this research does not provide strategies for museum staff to receive institutional support or secure adequate funds for engaging with homeless adults.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The idea of museums engaging *with* and making their resources available to adults who experience homelessness is neither an impossible nor absurd one. Including and relying on individuals' expertise on the topic of homelessness, this research suggests a number of key considerations for museums interested in engaging with homeless adults. As this research makes apparent, many of these considerations overlap with what museums already know about their visitors' needs, although there is evidence that homeless adults might experience some of these needs with a heightened sensitivity.

At the core of this research's findings is the importance of museums building relationships both with organizations and individuals who serve homeless adults but also, just as importantly, directly with adults who experience homelessness. Because developing and maintaining such relationships requires considerable time, effort, and intention, this research suggests that an ongoing, long-term approach to engagement will be most successful, as it will allow for the growth of familiarity and trust.

As the literature suggests, museums have an important social role and responsibility since they can either exacerbate pre-existing factors contributing to social exclusion or act as agents of social inclusion. In the face of homelessness, museums have the potential to engage with and include individuals who are usually stigmatized, excluded, and pushed to the margins of our society where access to resources is greatly diminished. This research contributes scaffolding and building blocks for museums' interested in moving beyond treating homelessness as a topic to be exhibited to engaging *with* and making their resources available to homeless adults.

Afterward: Suggestions for Museums

Engaging with Homeless Adults

Based on my experience with this work and its findings, I offer the following actionable suggestions for museums interested in engaging with and making their resources available to homeless adults:

1. Preparation for Engagement

- Consider what you know: recognize that you might lack expertise on the topic of homelessness and must address this insufficient knowledge prior to organizing and launching an initiative aimed towards homeless adults.
- Do your research: learn about homelessness through online or print sources. The two following websites have useful introductory information:
 - The National Coalition for the Homeless (<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>)
 - The National Alliance to End Homelessness (<http://www.endhomelessness.org/>)
- Engage in conversation: talk with individuals who serve homeless adults *and* those who either have or currently experience homelessness.
 - Identify what they care about and how you could serve them.
 - Ask questions and listen.
- Get involved: volunteer at organizations that serve homeless adults. This will further your knowledge on the topic, contribute to relationship building, and impute you with credibility.

- Make friends: partner with a single or multiple organizations that serve homeless adults. Carefully select partners that will view your collaboration as mutually beneficial.
- Identify homeless or formerly homeless allies: there are leaders within the homeless population who can become stakeholders and advocates for museum-related initiatives. They can garner support within the homeless population, connect museums to resources, and advise.
- Receive training: service provider organizations can train museum staff to appropriately interact with homeless adults, address fears, and offer support.
- Share authority: work with homeless adults and organizations serving homeless adults to plan and offer your program or activity.

2. Engagement

- Contextualize the museum visit: ensure that homeless adults know about the museum and what to expect from their visit. Also consider having a museum staff member meet with participants off-site before hand to encourage familiarity.
- Be friendly: make sure all museum staff interacting with homeless adults are friendly, welcoming, and respectful.
- Build community: provide time for people to socialize, relax, share their thoughts, be acknowledged, and have refreshments.
- Consider off-site offerings: your willingness to meet with homeless adults in a location familiar and safe to them will most likely build trust and increase their comfort-level at the museum.

- Be flexible: avoid reprimanding homeless adults for being late or not attending, allow for input, and be prepared to make adjustments.
- Take a long-term approach: relationships take time, intention, and effort.
- Reflect: measure your initiative's outcomes and impacts and implement necessary changes.

3. Continuing and Reporting Engagement

- Share your experience: consider blogging, publishing, and presenting at conferences.

Organizing a Focus Group

As discussed above, organizing a focus group as a starting point for exploring how museums can engage with and make their resources available to homeless adults was successful. This approach partially remediated my lack of expertise on the topic homelessness by giving a voice to individuals with expertise on the issue. The following suggestions are offered to museums interested in adopting a similar approach:

- Be intentional about who you invite
- Meet with each participant before hand
- Be welcoming
- Include a brief museum visit
- Create a relaxed atmosphere
- Provide refreshments and snacks
- Be flexible
- Listen
- Affirm participation

- Follow up with each participant within a few weeks of the focus group

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Appendix A

Summary and description of the two examples for engagement imagined by the sub-groups during the “Team work: Imagining Potential” phase of the Focus group session.

Case 1: Group A

Group A’s example of how museums could best engage with adults who experience homelessness was an ongoing program comprised of three different components:

1. Art Workshops: The first component of this three-fold, ongoing program consists of workshops where people would get together to learn about art, museums, and art on view at local museums, which would increase their comfort level when going to these museums. These workshops would take place at a service provider organization and would be lead by a museum staff member.
2. Museum Visits: Those participating in the workshops would be invited to visit local museums where they would attend a tour and have time to socialize. Group A mentioned the importance to consult with interested parties before scheduling a museum visit in order to accommodate as many as possible.
3. Art Making Workshops: Museum visits would be followed by an art-making workshop either on-site or at the partner service provider organization. These workshops would provide the participants with a creative outlet after having been inspired by the art they viewed at the museum.

This program would rely on museums and service providers partnering, as they would run this program jointly. In group A’s opinion, museums partnering with service providers would

be beneficial for two main reasons. First of all, it would make outreach easier and more effective. Second, it would ensure a space where workshops could be held. Group A recommended that this program be flexible and allow people to attend workshops or museum outings based on their availability and interest. An overly structured approach that would require people to sign up in advance for a module and not allow others to join mid-way was seen as deterring and burdensome. Additionally, group A suggested involving recurrent attendees in the running of the program, recognizing their interest and allowing them some level of responsibility and ownership.

Along with offering flexibility, group A highlighted the importance of creating welcoming and casual atmospheres where people would feel comfortable to show up as they are. For example, it was suggested that those running the activities dress casually, as clothing can create a power differential. It was also stressed that organizers be sure to treat the program participants as equals and to consider receiving sensitivity training in view of being more adequate and prepared to work with those who experience homelessness.

Throughout their description of their idea, group A emphasized the need to create spaces where both homeless and housed could interact (i.e. cross-class organizing). For example, they mentioned how the individuals running the program should participate alongside those who experienced homelessness, moving from “doing something for people to doing something *with* people.” Additionally, museum outings could be open to the general public, which would allow for this important cross-class mingling. However, group A cautioned that if homeless individuals were not in the majority, the likeliness of them feeling uncomfortable, “mobbed,” or pushed aside would increase dramatically.

Along the same lines, group A recommended that these workshops and museum outings also be open to those who are formerly homeless and have now found their way into transitional or permanent housing. Group A joked that MEANS testing should not be conducted in order to determine who could participate. Involving both homeless and formerly homeless individuals was believed to create more of a community and provide something for those recently housed with something positive to do since they tend to feel isolated. Additionally, interaction between these two groups was seen as very important, as it holds the potential to inspire those who might still be experiencing homelessness.

Other important considerations that group A mentioned are timing, childcare, and transportation. First of all, as far as timing is concerned, group A discussed how activities scheduled on Sundays would be very popular, as nothing is typically scheduled on those days. Additionally, organizers should be careful not to schedule workshops or museum outings during shelter check-in times or mealtimes. Second, because many adults who experience homelessness have children, lack of childcare was identified as a potential barrier. It was argued that providing childcare would increase attendance, making it possible for those with children to participate in the program. Finally, lack of access to free transportation was also recognized as possible obstacle. To counter this barrier, group A further stressed the importance and benefit of partnering with service provider organizations, as many have access to vehicles.

Case 2: Group B

Group B imagined a program based on the idea of cross-cultural organizing. This program would consist of a pass, called Access Art or Come As You Are Pass, that when purchased by an individual with financial resources, would generate a free pass for someone who

experiences homelessness. The passes would be distributed either directly by the purchaser to the homeless individual, which according to group B would be a great experience, or through service providers. Thanks to these passes, both housed and homeless would have access to a series of free events at various local arts organizations, such as the theater, the library, galleries, or museums. As group B explained, some of these events would already be free, such as gallery openings or library lectures. In these cases, the pass would serve as an invitation and provide a deeper sense of belonging. Accompanying the pass would be a website with a calendar of monthly events. Physical calendars would also be available at the various participating arts organizations to accommodate those with limited Internet access.

The role of museums would consist of becoming participants and “event providers,” thus agreeing to deliver Access Art events once or twice a month. According to group B, these events should be highly engaging, providing a chance for the guests’ voices and opinions to be heard or allowing them space for creative expression through hands-on activities. Group B stressed that this pass would not take the place of a museum membership, as pass holders would only have free access to select events; not ongoing access to the museum. Group B identified two ways in which museums might benefit from participating in this program. First of all, they might increase their membership sales, as some pass holders might highly enjoy their museum experiences and want to further support these organizations. Second, museums could get great P.R. out of this program and be cast as social entrepreneurs truly interested in issues of access and inclusion.

In addition to providing events, museums would join other participating arts organizations to form a consortium that would work on ensuring that events are truly accessible, developing parameters or best practices for organizing these cross-class events. Group B recognized that most arts organizations, including museums, have limited resources and

emphasized that this Access Art program would not necessitate organizations to create new activities or events, but to simply make them free to pass holders. However, group B hoped that these events would be enhanced through the dialogue around accessibility generated by the consortium.

In view of ensuring the success of this program group B brought up the need for good P.R. and advertisement and the importance of the pass being attractive. For example, group B imagined that the pass could be advertised on the King County buses through banners reading: “Got your Access Art/Come As You Are Pass?” This advertisement would allow the pass to become visible and recognizable. Additionally, to further raise awareness, the pass’ logo would be visible at the various arts organizations and could be placed alongside the typical Visa and Master Card emblems.

To fund such things as a program coordinator and advertisement campaigns, group B suggested having fun fundraisers. Specifically, they mentioned the idea of “Soup and Bread” fundraisers during which soup made by various community members would be sold and enjoyed on site. These fundraisers could take place in various neighborhoods and, according to group B, would be very popular among young adults and artists who could help organize them.