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DEMOCRACY, MUSEUMS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY:  
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS AS PUBLIC SPACES

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## ABSTRACT

Political rhetoric and popular discussions of the day would lead one to believe that many citizens are losing faith in the prowess of American democracy. When thinking about how one might begin to grapple with the challenges associated with issues facing American democracy, the need for innovative community development strategies is evident. The focus of this research is based on a number of compelling ideas surrounding dialogue, democracy, place, and the use of art as a mechanism for community development and capacity building.

Drawing inspiration from examples of arts and community development, this research looks at the places that play a role in creating healthy democratic societies. The objectives of this research are to explore whether museums can be public spaces that are effective “free” spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies; whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning; and whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

Based on insights collected from a sample of twelve museum professionals and scholars, the findings of this research point toward many questions for further inquiry. While many interviewees express that they see potential for museums to be public spaces, even “free” spaces, they also recognize a number of complex barriers that keep museums from meeting this potential. This work concludes with a discussion that aims to encourage museums leaders to think even more deeply about the role of museums in fostering democracy.

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## PREFACE

We don't teach democracy in schools anymore.

If you had asked me four years ago if I would be interested in writing an honors thesis on democracy, or even studying democracy, I would have said, "No thanks, not for me."

To my younger self, the idea of democracy sounded drab. This sentiment surely reflects my privilege as an individual born into a nation in which, on paper, all of the inalienable rights were endowed to me, especially as a wealthy, white, and able-bodied person from a two-headed household and family of degreed professionals. This sentiment, perhaps more notably, also reflects my introduction to democracy. Despite my first-rate public education that was graced by wonderful educators, democracy seemed to be a thing of textbooks and something that was solidified during the Revolutionary War. Democracy did not feel alive, and like many Americans, I wrongly equated democracy with politics and government.

I grew up in a liberal family during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. From an early age, I learned that our Union was not perfect and that some people were disadvantaged disproportionately to others. My parents educated me about parts of our nation's history that were not discussed in school, and I had teachers who were willing to push curricular boundaries in that regard. My family watched BBC news in the morning and ABC news in the evening, and we listened to NPR on the weekends. After a few courses in history, I learned that our government was complex. I learned about Citizens United (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 2010), and I learned that there were a lot of policies in place that I

disapproved of and even opposed. I knew that there were problematic pieces of American history, and that many issues still abounded.

I also knew that people like my grandparents were involved with politics. My grandparents organized state and national campaign events in their community, and they worked as leaders in their town to identify needs, establish citizen-run organizations, and work with and for others to create the kind of community in which they wanted to live. Despite this exposure to engaged citizenship, I still felt that being an active citizen in the American democracy was for adults only. After all, you can't vote until you're 18 years old, anyway.

It was not until I came to college and took a course called "Community, Local Knowledge, and Democracy" that democracy came alive to me. It was in this course, alongside peers and a professor who created a democratizing learning environment, that I learned that I could actually be very passionate about democracy and that I could even want to work towards achieving a more democratic society that serves all of our nation's people and visitors.

Though American democracy for the past twenty-odd years could be characterized by increasing divisions along social, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and political lines, the past two years of my life stand out to me. In an almost serendipitous way, my coming of age and coming of awareness is occurring in an unprecedented moment of democratic tumult.

Today and every day, I wear a bracelet that says "radical." I wear this not because I am a political or religious radical in the modern, McCarthyian sense of the word, but because it reminds me of my nation's democratic roots. In *A Revolution of the Mind*, Jonathan Israel (2010) writes that although the genesis of democracy is unclear, what is clear is that at the time when Enlightenment thinkers were philosophizing, the notion of democracy was quite radical. At the



time, the idea of giving the power to the people to govern themselves and to express themselves freely was dangerously radical. Perhaps it still is today.

In many ways, self-love is a very radical act. When I consider the settings in which I became a more confident and more engaged individual, I think back to the arts spaces of my youth. In these spaces, I certainly grew as an artist and as an individual, and I also learned what it meant to be an active and engaged member of a community. I formed bonds with people who I might not have encountered otherwise, I had discussions about important social issues, and I learned about what it meant to be an active participant in shaping my future. Upon reading Harry Boyte's *Everyday Politics* (2004) and having discussions with peers and professors, I realized that these early arts experiences were about much more than the art that I was creating. These experiences provided a setting in which I was enabled to engage with myself, with others, and with the world around me. These spaces were examples of the type of public spaces, free spaces, and enabling settings that so many community leaders, activists, individuals, scholars, including the likes of Boyte, Evans, along with Paulo Friere, Myles Horton, and Ray Oldenberg, and I argue are essential to creating and sustaining strong and healthy democracies.

In reading *Everyday Politics*, I was also reminded of Jane Addams, the Hull House, and the Settlement House movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Compelled by Boyte's illustration of Addams and the social philosophy that informed her work at the Hull House, I began to research Addams' work in greater depth. I quickly discovered that although Addams initially set out to advance the wellbeing of the urban poor and new immigrant population residing in Chicago's West Side by introducing to them American arts and culture, Addams' work grew to expand far beyond the scope of arts and top-down education, wherein students are passive recipients of expert instruction.

In the Hull House, a settlement house in which members of the educated elite class intentionally lived and learned alongside the less-fortunate city dwellers, Addams sought to create a public space in which people with diverse “views, skills, and life histories” were not simply valued, but where their participation in the co-creation of reality and of democracy was encouraged (Boyte, 2004). Addams saw much of her work with the urban poor and new immigrants as working to “free [the] powers” for people to contribute, and she held the belief that ordinary people had talents and ideas to contribute to public conversation (Boyte, 2004). In my assessment, the Hull House was clearly focused on much more than the arts and other activities that took place there. The Hull House appeared to me to be a remarkable example of the kind of public space that fosters the public interaction, dialogue, and deliberation that are the civic skills essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies.

Curious as to whether or not Jane Addams’ work and philosophy had any remarkable modern counterparts, I continued my research I discovered that today, Addams’ theory and practice, including work with the Hull House and with various social justice movements, lives on in the modern work of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum. The more I learned about the Museum, the clearer it became to me that museums of all types could too serve as the type of spaces that could catalyze public interaction and dialogue, enable greater social and political change, and foster the individual and collective learning that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies. This insight serves as inspiration for this thesis, which will explore and examine role of museums as such public spaces. This work concludes with a discussion that aims to encourage museums leaders to think even more deeply about the role of museums in fostering democracy.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As this study drew to a close, The New York Times released a special section on Museums on March 16, 2017. The by-line to the title of the section, “New Frontiers for the Arts,” read: “In a tumultuous era, some museums rush to embrace the political, while others deliberately retreat” (Bowley, 2017). The special section consisted of a series of articles and advertisements highlighting new exhibits, technologies, and partnerships that already were or would soon be coming to the museum world. In the cover article Bowley writes that, “Times of political change and social upheaval raise questions about what a museum is for,” and asks: “Should a museum change with the events around it, or should it stand true, like an immovable rock, as political storms come and go? Is a museum’s job to explain the historical past, or is its presentation of the past really about understanding the present, even the future?” (para. 4-6). He concludes that the answers to these questions vary across the broad scope of American museums, with some museums choosing to “react to the maelstrom of recent political events,” (para. 7) while others maintain that the role of the museum is to “stay neutral and provide careful, fact-based information and education” (para. 37).

Bowley’s questions about the role of museums in a tumultuous political moment are timely, and he certainly is not the only one asking this question. The question of one’s role in American democracy is aligned with a number of questions that many institutions and individuals are asking themselves, such as: What do I value? What kind of future do I want for myself and for others? Will I act? How can I influence the world around me? What can we do in the face of social, political, and economic uncertainty? Bowley’s article is also an unapologetic acknowledgement that in 2017, there is considerable unrest that affects all facets of American life.

## Democracy

Political rhetoric and popular discussions of the day would lead one to believe that many citizens are losing faith in the prowess of American democracy (Harwood, 2012; Blyth, 2016). Issues such as racial and gender inequity, income inequality, many forms of discrimination, ongoing class conflicts, partisan politics, the effects of climate change, unemployment, and perceived and real economic concerns abound. These, and many more, are examples of issues *in* a democracy (Mathews, 2009). Issues running the lines of race, class, gender, citizenship status, and ethnicity create a divided populous. Divisions, moral disagreements, polarization, and alienation represent issues *of* democracy (2009). Issues *of* democracy undergird issues *in* democracy. When thinking about how one might begin to grapple with the challenges associated with issues *of* democracy, the need for innovative community development strategies is evident.

This thesis aims to look beyond such issues that occur within a democracy, and instead looks at issues of American democracy. In doing so, this thesis aims to explore the idea that museums, conceptualized as public spaces, have an active and vital role to play in American democracy.

The focus of this research is based on a number of compelling ideas surrounding dialogue, democracy, place, learning, and the creation of certain types of space that facilitate community development and capacity building. Core to this framework is the understanding that democracy operates at two distinct levels (Mathews, 2014a). The most visible is the level of politics, or the institution, which consists of elections, lawmaking, and other formalized services. Another level of democracy consists of the informal gatherings of everyday life, or of what Mathews refers to as the wetlands of democracy. Mathews argues that like the wetlands of the natural environment, these informal gatherings can often be overlooked and undervalued.

However, there is reason to argue that these informal gatherings form the basis for political networks and civic organizations that sustain healthy communities as well as healthy democracies (Mathews, 2014a; Fine, 2009; Oldenburg, 1999).

This research also looks to museums and asks the same question that Bowley asks in his March 2017 New York Times article: *What is the role of museums in American society?*

## **Museums**

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), a major organizing body of museums in the United States, describes museums as being “educational resources, economic engines, social service providers, protectors of cultural memory, and builders of communities everywhere” (AmericanMuseums, 2014). The Alliance includes museums of all types in their conceptualization of the museum: aquarium, anthropology, arboretum/botanic garden, art, children’s, culturally specific, hall-of-fame, historic house, historic site, history, historical society, military/battlefield, nature center, natural history, planetarium, presidential library, science/technology, specialized, transportation, visitor center, and zoo (AAMa, 2013). This thesis looks broadly across these types of museums from the perspectives of democratic political and community development theories when exploring the role of museums in society.

Given this diversity, it is no surprise that literature from the field of museum studies seems to point towards Bowley’s conclusion that individual museums see their roles differently. It is also unsurprising that museums have changed shape and intention over time.

### *A Very Brief Foray into the History of Museums*

The dominating narrative on the genesis and evolution of museums points towards a history rooted in elitism, exclusivity, and exploitation. Originally designed to hold private or royal collections, museums served the elite almost exclusively. Early museums were thought of as cabinets of curiosities, or personal collections of objects often consisting of collected and pillaged art and artifacts open to only specific audiences from certain subsets of society (The British Library Board, n.d.). Even The British Museum, which claims to be the first public museum, opening its doors to the public in 1759, has roots as a private collection and has a history of excavating artifacts from abroad (Trustees of the British Museum, n.d.). Though Britain claims historical precedent over the first cost-free and open-to-the-public museums, many question the true function and intended purpose of such museums in light of Bennett's analysis elaborated in *The Birth of the Museum* (Bennett, 1995). In this work, Bennett framed the role of museums as one of creating compliant citizens, or to "discipline and educate its citizens" on matters of culture and proper behavior (Bennett, 1995; Barrett, 2011, p. 58). Other accounts of early public museums, such as those which point to origins in the French Revolution, suggest that not all museums developed in the same way and that these museums faced similar issues related to intended purposes and definitions of the public, which will be addressed later in this piece (Barrett, 2011). In 1917, John Cotton Dana, another early museum thinker, advocated for a new kind of museum, one that was open and useful to its communities (1917).

In *Making Museums Matter*, Stephen Weil (2002) writes that by the end of World War II, the American Museum "took its basic tasks to gather, preserve, and study the record of human and natural history" (p. 28). He continues, suggesting that at that time, museums saw any other service, such as providing the public with access to the collections, to simply be a plus, but not a

central activity. For much of museum history, traditional activities included preservation, interpretation, and scholarly inquiry.

Writing in 1995, Kenneth Hudson notes an observed shift in museums that had occurred from the 1940s to the 1990s. He notes that while the “old-style museum” felt no obligation to serve the public, modern museums seemed to share an “almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public” (Hudson, 1995, para. 5; Weil, 2002). Weil writes that in the AAM’s 1984 publication, *Museums for a New Century*, education is identified as the primary role of museums (Weil, 2002; AAM & CMNC, 1984). The 1992 publication, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, also reinforced the ideas that the role of museums was to serve the public and that education was central to meeting that charge (AAM & Hirzy).

In the early 2000s, another wave of noteworthy ideological change that came to museums was again captured by the AAM in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (AAMb, 2002). Acknowledging that publications such as *Excellence and Equity* “provided both theoretical and practical thought and advice about the wider roles museums can play in better serving the communities of which they are a part,” authors of the preface, Frida Nicholson and W. Richard West, argue that the present work “moves the discussion a critical step forward into the future of the museum field and of the country” (AAMb, 2002, p. xi). This critical step forward is characterized by a shift from simply aiming to make museums “assets of information, collections, and expert human resources more broadly accessible to increasingly diverse publics,” towards efforts of “making what previously has been essentially a unilateral relationship fundamentally bilateral in nature” (p. xii). In other words, the AAM was proposing a shift away from presentation of information towards engagement. Ellen Hirzy writes that:

Civic engagement occurs when museum and community intersect – in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing business. The museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collaborative problem solving. It is an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change. These are among the possibilities inherent in each museum’s own definition and expression of community. (AAMb, 2002, p. 9)

A key phrase in Hirzy’s definition is “the possibilities.” Indeed, there were a number of possibilities for the direction that museums could take, and there were a number of different responses to the AAM’s 2002 charge: some had always been engaging their communities, some made changes to increase engagement, and some reconceptualized the role of museums entirely. In more recent years, museum scholars and practitioners have responded to this charge, often challenging museums to think even more critically about their role in society.

Elaine Heumann Gurian, a museum consultant and advisor, identifies a core idea that transcends all of her works: “museums should welcome all because they house the collective memory of all” (2006). Gurian believes all humans have histories and that they should have access to those histories. As such, she understands museums to be “institutions of memory,” or institutions that house histories. She also argues that societies cannot remain civil unless there are places, or civic places, where strangers can associate with one another. Gurian refers to these spaces as “congregant spaces,” and explains that museums can be examples of such civic places. However, Gurian notes that “most museums are not as inclusive as they could be, and almost none of them have comprehensively readjusted their systems in order to become so. While diversity is often advocated, it is only sporadically evident” (p. 3). Gurian also expresses disappointment that “many museums, in the face of political opposition, real or imagined, become tentative and cautious,” retreating from the opportunity to be inclusive and powerful spaces (p. 3).



In his 2009 book entitled *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?*, Robert Janes (2009), a Canadian museologist, writes that:

In short, the discussion of museums as true agents of the civil society must be deepened, in a manner which transcends vanity architecture, attendance and consumption. Museums have the opportunity to honour the trust and respect that the public affords them, in part by engaging the interest and aspirations of their communities – irrespective of how seemingly remote these issues may now appear to museums. (p. 22)

Janes does not mince words, nor is he idealistic. He asserts that most museums carry on using existing models, drifting into the “shoals of unthinking imitation, repetition, and excess” (p. 18).

While Janes expresses concern for museums in an era of “hyper-capitalism, globalism and branding” (2009, p. 23), he argues that “At their very best, museums present the richness of diversity of life, and keeping reflection and dialogue alive for their visitors. Governments are not equipped to do this, business is committed to homogenization and efficiency in the name of profit, and most universities are still grappling with their real and perceived separation from their communities” (p. 18). Despite his discontent about the focus of most museums, Janes’ concern comes from a place intended to encourage critical thinking on the part of museum leaders. He continues, arguing that “This leaves museums with the obligation to probe our humanness and, in assuming this responsibility, museums are unique and valuable social institutions that have no suitable replacement” (p. 18).

The history of museums is characterized by one of evolution and reinvention. At each iteration and paradigm shift, museums change shape and new models are proposed. Writers like Gurian and Janes, along with the thinkers such as Nina Simon (Simon, 2010), who advocates for museums to be truly participatory spaces that share authority with visitors, Gretchen Jennings (Jennings, 2017), who writes on inclusion and empathy in museums, and many others, simultaneously identify shortcomings of many museums of today, point towards examples of

innovative and radical museum work, and suggest pathways forward. As the nation enters into another period of unnerving uncertainty, Bowley's question of the role of museums in 2017 becomes even more relevant to consider.

### **Exploring the Role of Museums in Democratic Society**

Situated in the context of this larger and emerging movement that views arts and humanities as vehicles for social change, and building on the body of literature surrounding public spaces, democratic political theory, and critical pedagogy, the purpose of this thesis is to explore and examine the idea that museums can serve as “free” spaces that foster the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies. The objectives of this research are to understand whether museums can be public spaces that are effective “free” spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies; whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning; and whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

The next section of this thesis provides an introduction to the theoretical concepts that underpin and guide this research. Following this review of the literature is a section that details the methods used to conduct this research. Then, there is an extensive presentation and analysis of the findings of this research. This work concludes with a discussion that aims to encourage museums leaders to think even more deeply about the role of museums in fostering democracy.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Democracy**

The hallmark of American democracy is that the “supreme power is vested in the people” (Democracy [Def 2], n.d.). At its core, governance ‘by the people, for the people’ is what democracy is, or at least what it was intended to be. Today, as American democracy has evolved to its current form, understanding democracy is often equated to understating the American government and political system – the electoral process, the three branches of government, the systems and rules in place within each branch, and the power that each piece of government has in relation to the others. The mainstream conceptualization of American democracy typically focuses on the minutia of politics and governmental operations, but often fails to address democracy as a philosophical and theoretical concept. For many Americans, understanding democracy falls short, and is confused with understanding politics.

However, if one looks to the core of the definition of democracy, as is outlined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, as noted above, it is clear that having a democracy means that the supreme power lies with the people. Scholars of democratic political theory concern themselves with thinking critically about the definition, meaning, value, and efficacy of democracy.

Theorists of this epistemological mindset understand democracy to be an ever-evolving process,

as opposed to an outcome or end state. They ask fundamental questions about the role of citizens and the location of power. Understanding these ideas provides insights into the power and sociopolitical significance of public spaces. Contemporary scholars of democracy, Harry Boyte, David Mathews, and Peter Levine, hold this understanding of democracy at the center of their work.

The works of these thinkers point towards a different kind of politics. Their works invite their audiences to imagine a type of politics that reaches beyond the confines of partisan and electoral politics, beyond the notion of governmental politics altogether. Embedded within these discussions is the idea that there are different notions of democracy, particularly with regards to the conceptualization of the citizen (Mathews, 2009). Instead of discussing democracy as an accepted and unchanging phenomenon, they pose the question: “What *kind* of democracy?” (p. 12), and maintain that democracy is a living phenomenon and an ongoing process.

Mathews’ discussion of democratic politics begins with addressing the idea of a citizenry. He argues that people have increasingly become seen as the recipients of services, and that this perception diminishes the idea that people have the ability to be producers and active agents (Mathews, 2014a; Boyte & Kari, 1996). When citizens are understood to be consumers, they are reduced to objects that are subject to the actions of others, rather than being actors and decision-makers themselves. Mathews challenges this framing of citizens, noting that when enabled, individuals have the capacity to be actors and agents in their own lives and in their communities. He maintains that citizens have important roles to play in shaping democracy, despite the fact that their work is oftentimes less visible than the work of electoral and governmental politics. Mathews explains this visibility as a function of a multilayered political environment.

According to Mathews, the most visible expression of politics occurs at the level of formal politics, which consists of elections, lawmaking, and other governmental activities. A second level of politics consists of the informal gatherings of everyday life, or of what Mathews refers to as the wetlands of democracy, or the civic wetlands. Mathews argues that like the wetlands of the natural environment, these informal gatherings and the everyday actions of people can often be overlooked and undervalued. However, there is reason to argue that these informal gatherings form the basis for political networks and civic organizations that sustain healthy communities and healthy democracies (Mathews, 2014a; Fine, 2009; Oldenburg, 1999; Evans & Boyte, 1986).

In his article “Who Are the Citizens We Serve?”, Mathews explains that in “the civic wetlands, people practice a politics that is quite different from institutional politics—different in objectives, organization, and methods” (2014b, p. 88). According to Mathews, citizens are defined by their relationship with other citizens, and such “organic” political relationships emerge when individuals coalesce to address a common issue. Citizens find empowerment in identifying and naming the issues that face them. Citizens find solutions to address issues by working with and talking to one another (Mathews, 2009). Similarly, in discussing citizen-centered politics and work that he was involved with at the Humphrey Institute, Boyte defines citizen politics as “ordinary people of different views and interests working together to define and solve problems” (2004, p. xiii). Both definitions point towards citizens as actors, and both view their action as necessary to democracy.

In the Community, Environment, and Development course “Community, Local Knowledge, and Democracy” (CED 375H) taught by Dr. Theodore Alter, the notion of a multilayered political environment is discussed in analogous terms. The students and professor

identify the professional political work of the government to be “big ‘P’ politics” (CED 375H, Fall 2016). Contrastingly, the idea of “little ‘p’ politics” is used to describe the nonprofessional politics of the people. Despite the description of the people’s politics as being small, there is no suggestion that “little ‘p’ politics” are less powerful, or rather, less essential. In a similar vein, Boyte proposes in *Everyday Politics* the notion of public work, or “everyday non-professional politics,” to suppose that politics and citizenship can be, and should be, tied to one’s work (2004, p. 6). This idea is founded on the notion that citizens can use their everyday work to create a quality of life and sense of community that they so desire. In this way, Boyte articulates that politics and citizenship should be part of one’s everyday life, as a way of living in that citizenship is integrated into everyday life, as opposed to being seen as separate, or something that one can do as a volunteer or in one’s free time. According to Boyte, “Public work is central to the idea of productive, everyday politics” (p. 5).

For both Mathews and Boyte, the centering of citizen is by no means a triviality; rather, it is both intentional and essential. The kind of politics and the kind of democracy that they advocate for draws on the Greek understanding of politics. Boyte explains:

Politics, from the Greek, *politikos*, meaning of the citizen, in its original meanings is the activity of amateurs, not specialists. As Aristotle argued in *Politics*, politics involves the negotiations of a pluralist world, people of different views, interests, and backgrounds interacting in order to accomplish some task. Politics is the opposite of relations based on similarity. (2004, p. xi)

Mathews and Boyte argue that politics is, or should be, the activity of ordinary citizens. For Boyte, this conviction is rooted in a profound “respect for the capacities of ordinary people” (2004, p. xiii). However, these thinkers have no illusions to say that citizen-centered politics is an “easy” endeavor; they know that with people and with politics, there will be disagreements and conflicts. Mathews acknowledges the fact that when citizens come together, issues can and

do arise, and that deliberation can be contentious at times. However, he argues that this is not an inherently bad thing; rather, deliberation is understood to be a key activity of healthy democracies. It illuminates the morals and values of community members. Even when deliberation does not lead to complete agreement, it can still serve to help people to see where others stand, thus enabling citizens to work more effectively together to address shared issues (Lewicki et al., 2003; Mathews, 2009).

In articulating his own definition of citizenship, or of what it means to be a citizen, Peter Levine (2013) stipulates that “good citizens” deliberate, or talk and listen to one another; collaborate, or work together to make things of public value; and form civic relationships (p. 1). Levine describes civic relationships as being marked by loyalty, trust, and hope, and recognizes that these relationships are a source of energy and power. Levine argues that through organizing and mobilizing engaged and active citizens, changes can be made to address some of the most wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1972) of our democracy.

Mathews also observes that political power can be derived from such “seemingly trivial activities” as simply engaging one another, participating in deliberation and coming together to address a common issue. These activities appear to “[give] people a sense of how they can become effective political actors, not just on election day, but every day” (Mathews, 2014a, p.13). Mathew’s decision to describe the wetlands of democracy as occurring in the informal gatherings of everyday life suggest an interesting jumping off point for a discussion on democracy.

The theories of Mathews, Boyte, and Levine suggest that in order for people to feel engaged in “little ‘p’ politics” and to participate in the grassroots of American democracy, there need to be places in which these activities can occur. In other words, there need to be spaces for

people to gather freely to engage with one another and to participate in the everyday work of democratic citizenship.

## **Public Space**

Across time and space, public spaces have been an essential element of spirited civic life. Ancient civilizations, such as Greece and Rome, famously featured centrally-located gathering spaces designated for political, social, religious, and economic activities (Pinkerton, 2014). By regularly drawing citizens to participate in these common spaces, a sense of community and commitment to one another is said to have emerged (Balfour et al., 2016). The frequent interaction and discourse that occurred in these places enabled the creation and strengthening of social networks and collective action, forming the basis of healthy, democratic societies.

Though the public spaces of the Greeks and Romans provided an important democratic space for citizens, it is important to note that at that time, women, slaves, and foreigners were not considered to be citizens, and were thus barred from participation in the activities that occurred in these “public” spaces. It is also important to acknowledge, for the purposes of this thesis, that the very definition of the public is muddled with considerable and important debate regarding who is included and who is excluded. Though scholars like John Dewey (1927), Hannah Arendt (1958), Jürgen Habermas (1989), and many others have contributed profound comments on the subject, there is no universally accepted definition of public.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) discusses two realms, the public and the private realms, which are based on Greek conceptions of public and private (Barrett, 2011). She argues that action occurs in the public realm, while tasks related to the household and “biological



necessity” take place in the private realm. Arendt maintains that until biological needs, or basic human functions, are met, one cannot participate in the public realm. Arendt’s classifications are recognized today as being imperfect and they have been critiqued by many, including Habermas.

For Habermas (1989), the public sphere, as he refers to it, is located in the abstract between the government and the private home. In the public sphere, people come to talk about and influence societal issues. As with most widely known theories, Habermas’ work has received many critiques on his work. One to note is Nancy Fraser’s (1990) feminist critique, that points out that Habermas’ conceptualization of who makes up the public is inherently exclusionary towards women and other historically marginalized groups. Another nuanced observation worth noting is the idea that Habermas’ public sphere is “a universal, abstract realm in which democracy occurs,” and that “Public space, meanwhile, is material. It constitutes an actual site, a place, a ground on which political activity flows” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 117, as cited in Barrett, 2011).

While paying attention to the nuance associated with dissecting the concept of the public, this thesis recognizes the complexity, and operates under the notion that there are, in any given situation, many publics, and that one must always pause to consider who is included and who is excluded (Lunsford et al., 2009; Eberly, 2000). This thesis also looks specifically at public spaces, taking cue from Mitchell’s delineation between public sphere and public space.

Broadly writ, and as defined for the purposes of this research, public spaces are physical places in which people of diverse ethnic, religious, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds come together and engage in dialogue with one another. These spaces represent informal gathering settings that are found between the private home and the institutional spaces of the office building or government facility.

The present discussion on the concept of public spaces is shaped by a patchwork of various perspectives on the subject. To begin, there is an analysis of Sociologist Ray Oldenburg's idea of the third place. He describes this type of space as an informal gathering place where people come "to spend pleasurable hours with one another for no specific or obvious purpose" (Oldenburg, 1999). Next, an examination of Sara Evans and Harry Boyte's work functions to expand upon Oldenburg's conception of the third place to discuss the sociopolitical phenomena that occur in such spaces, thus introducing the concept of the "free" space (1986). From there, Jeffrey Bridger and Theodore Alter's discussion on community theory provides insights into the centrality of community and its component relationships, thus suggesting that free spaces effectively serve as enabling settings that are essential to healthy communities and democracies (2008).

### **Selected Perspectives on Public Spaces**

Building on the work of these democratic political theorists and philosophers, this section introduces selected, modern conceptualizations of public spaces. In this section, public spaces are understood to be "third places," "free spaces," and "enabling settings." These three concepts, though unique in their own ways, are all examples of types public spaces.

#### ***Public Spaces as Third Places***

In his work, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Oldenburg outlines a model of a public

spaces, which he refers to as “third places” (1999). Simply stated, third places serve as the heart of the community, and the grassroots of democracy.

In order for a space to be considered a true third place, specific characteristics must be present. First and foremost, Oldenburg determines that third places must exist on neutral ground, which he describes as “places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable” (p. 22). The place must also be inclusive, meaning that the place must be accessible to the general public and that membership is not required. Oldenburg notes that with these characteristics established, third places function to expand the possibilities and people who gather there, whereas places organized around formal associations lead to selection with regards to the type of people who gather. It is in this sense that Oldenburg’s third places are public.

In Oldenburg’s conception of public spaces, the main and sustaining activity is conversation. In third places, people talk with and listen to one another. Third places must be accessible in the sense that it is easy for people to encounter them in their daily lives, which is both a matter of time of operation and proximate location. Oldenburg stipulates that third places must be open for many hours of the day, but that time spent in third places is rightly unscheduled and unorganized. In addition to these conditions of time and location, third places must also be full of familiar faces; at almost any time of the day, one can be assured that one will encounter acquaintances at a third place.

With that in mind, Oldenburg stipulates that it is primarily the people who fill the place, as opposed to the management or the space itself, that makes third places so ‘great.’ “The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars,” Oldenburg says (p. 33). Though the idea of “regulars” can sound exclusive or

alienating, Oldenburg also acknowledges that every regular was once a newcomer. A key characteristic of third places, then, is that the established “membership takes as much delight in admitting unlikely members as exclusive places do in making certain that newcomers meet proper and narrow qualifications” (p. 36). Another important trait of third places, according to Oldenburg, is that the physical structure is typically plain or homely. He articulates that this appearance often results from a process by which those seeking a place to gather in good company often commandeer a place for such purposes, and that this appearance functions to discourage pretention of those who gather there, as well as to not attract high volumes of tourists or one-time visitors. Despite the outwardly dim appearance of Oldenburg’s third places, the mood is playful, and the third place often becomes a home away from home. Oldenburg notes that these places “serve community best to the extent that they are *inclusive* and *local*” (p. xvii).

Looking beyond the tangible characteristics of third places, Oldenburg pays specific attention to the community-building functions that such spaces perform. He makes the case that third places serve as an environment in which members of a neighborhood mix and come into contact with one another. Oldenburg acknowledges that it is unlikely that everyone in a community will *like* everyone else, but he argues that it is important for people to know their neighbors, to know how each person can contribute in the face of adversity, and to be at ease with others in the neighborhood. By serving as a place for meeting and assembling, third places enable long-term residents and newcomers alike have the opportunity to form bonds that can lead to future initiatives or further associations.

When people congregate in third places and get to know other members of the community, Oldenburg suggests that people are enabled to form bonds and connections, thus encouraging members of the community to care for the neighborhood, as a place, as well as for

one another. Third places that are inclusive of all ages and genders can also bring youth and adults together. Oldenburg argues that such intergenerational mixing benefits the young and old alike and is important to the vitality of the community. For example, community members can help one another to raise children, and elderly members of the community can feel included, purposeful, and acknowledged.

In addition to serving as places where people can mix with one another, third places draw people together because of the shared desire to enjoy the company of one another. In third places, people of all ages come to entertain and to be entertained. Oldenburg notes that the people themselves provide the entertainment. Third places serve as spaces in which friends can visit with one another. In third places, people can organize to discuss politics and to learn from one another informally. According to Oldenburg, these activities and interactions, though seemingly peripheral to the duties of the home and of the workplace, are the heart of healthy communities.

Though Oldenburg's conception of public spaces may seem limiting in terms of the number of criterion he suggests that a space must meet, he maintains that these places have emerged throughout time and place, and that these spaces are essential to sustaining healthy communities and fostering democracy. In his work, Oldenburg identifies coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, and bars as examples of potential third places. He states that "the most important of the purposes or functions served by informal public gathering places cannot be supplied by any other agencies in the society" (p. ix). In their absence, he continues, "the grass roots of our democracy are correspondingly weaker, ... and our individual lives are not as rich" (p. x).

In his work, *The Great Good Place* (1999), Oldenburg provides many examples of historical third places, as well as a discussion of their contemporary counterparts. For example, while he notes that many equate the American tavern with third places, he argues that the true third place tavern is on decline. Providing historical context, he writes that in the colonial era of early America, the tavern was the focal point of communities. In this context, taverns served as a democratic venue, providing people with a place to gather, discuss, organize, and, eventually, mobilize. In many ways, it was early American taverns that enabled the American Revolution to occur (p. 165). As Americans expanded westward, taverns were often first structure to be built in frontier towns. These taverns served as a forum, community center, and as a first entry point for newcomers. Later, as cities began to grow, taverns served as melting pots for ethnically diverse populations. For immigrants and working class people of the cities, taverns functioned as social clubs, places that fostered fellowship and camaraderie that was a comforting departure from the cold atmosphere of factories.

Oldenburg notes a marked shift towards the decline of third places following World War II, both as people began to tend towards retreating into their homes and as urban renewal led to the redevelopment of cities and towns (p. 284). Around this time, the number of taverns also decreased, and the rate of private drinking increased. No longer were people gathering to meet, socialize, organize, or mobilize with one another in that the way that they once did.

With the loss of third places, Oldenburg argues, comes a loss in all of the informal, yet socially binding and individually transformative, processes and experiences that third places facilitated. *The Great Good Place* serves to make the case for the value of third places. In summary, Oldenburg argues that there is great purpose to such informal association, concluding that these spaces enable people to get to know one another, to find and create shared interests,

and to realize collective abilities essential to building and sustaining community and to fostering democracy (p. xiv). In identifying a number of unique functions of such public spaces, and in commending on what is lost in their absence, Oldenburg also makes the case that there is significant political importance of such informal gathering spaces, citing the work of Evans and Boyte (Oldenburg, 1999).

### ***Public Spaces as Free Spaces***

While Oldenburg's conception of public space suggests that places must meet a set of specific criteria, Evans and Boyte write conceptually about the nature of such spaces. In their work, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*, Evans and Boyte seek to understand the settings in which "ordinary people become participants in the complex, ambiguous, engaging conversation about democracy" (Evans & Boyte, 1986, p. viii).

The concept of the "free space" emerged from the authors' study of various social and political movements. Evans and Boyte seek to understand how radical transformations in value and culture are made possible, especially when those fighting for change often endure great and systemic barriers. To answer this question, Evans and Boyte look at the sociopolitical environments associated with these movements.

While the idea of a public space can be interpreted to refer primarily to the physicality and characteristics of those spaces, much in the way that Oldenburg's conception of the "third place" pays close attention to specific attributes, the idea of the free space refers to the socio-political phenomenon that emerges in such spaces. Evans and Boyte recognize and accept that free spaces come in various shapes and sizes, so to speak. Nonetheless, free spaces can be

defined, across apparent differences, “by their roots in community, the dense rich networks of daily life; by their autonomy; by their public or quasi-public character as participatory environments which nurture values associated with citizenship and a vision of the common good” (p. 20).

In introducing, defining, and exemplifying the concept of free spaces, the authors make a nuanced distinction between public and free spaces. In the introduction to the second edition of the work, Evans and Boyte comment on the notion of the public, stating that free spaces, a type of public space, are distinguished from the classical location of the public, which they identify as being located in the realm of formalized politics or with the government. In alignment with how Oldenburg describes third places as occurring between the private home and society at large, Evans and Boyte articulate that “free space is found in settings which combine strong community ties with larger public relationships and aspects” (p. ix). They contend that free spaces connect participants to the norms and practices of larger society, while also drawing on localized and specific interests. In this way, Evans and Boyte stipulate that free spaces create a mix of community and public, of specificity and generality.

While Evans and Boyte state that free spaces have ties to community, this does not imply that free spaces should be homogenous in makeup. On the contrary, a key element of the free space is that it does contain what Evans and Boyte refer to as the “public dimension,” which includes a variety of “people and perspectives beyond one’s immediate personal ties, and also entails norms of egalitarian exchange, debate, dissent, openness” (p. ix). By providing people with the opportunity to interact with diverse ideas and peoples, participants are enabled to individually and collectively learn “self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (p. 17).



Another key defining factor of a public space that is a free space is that it has been claimed by the people who go there to participate and to organize on their own (Boyte, 2014). Free spaces necessarily emerge organically from the communities in which they exist. These communal roots, as Evans and Boyte call them, are essential (Evans & Boyte, 1986). So, too, then is it essential that these spaces are owned and controlled by those who participate within them.

Providing examples, Evans and Boyte explain that oftentimes, free spaces are “voluntary forms of association with a relatively open and participatory character – many religious organizations, clubs, self-help and mutual aid societies, reform groups, neighborhood, civic, and ethnic groups, and a host of other associations grounded in the fabric of community life” (p. 18). Not only, however, is it important that are these spaces communal, but that in such spaces, people can learn public skills and values, thus enabling them to be active over time. As Evans and Boyte look to these spaces to better understand how “ordinary people might engage in the process of public creation and decision making” (p. viii), their work is fundamentally both a study of place and phenomenon.

Evans and Boyte acknowledge that there are no pure free spaces. They state: “In the real world, they are always complex, shifting, and dynamic – partial in their freedom and democratic participation, marked by parochialism of class, gender, race, and other biases of the groups which maintain them” (p. 19). Nonetheless, the theoretical and real expressions of free spaces, with all of the limitations of reality and situation, stand as invaluable places in which individuals learn to play an active role in the governance of their daily lives, as opposed to sitting back as spectators, complainers, victims, or accomplices (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Boyte & Kari, 1996). Free spaces are effectively schools for democracy, and they are essential for strong democracies.

In his subsequent work, *Everyday Politics*, Boyte (2004) provides an in-depth analysis of a modern example of a school of democracy and free space, the Jane Addams School for Democracy. At the turn of the 20th century, social reformer and suffragist, Jane Addams, lived and worked in the West Side of Chicago where a large population of the city's immigrant and working class population had settled. Inspired by the work of Addams and her fellow settlement house reformers, the Jane Addams School for Democracy worked with immigrants located in St. Paul, Minnesota from 1996-2006. The School for Democracy, according to Boyte, "reflects an approach unlike that of those who saw immigrants as threats, but also different from those who call for tolerance, pity, or solicitude. It is a learning and public work network that works, in significant measure, because it involves a different pattern of interaction" (p. 97).

Although the School for Democracy serves as a place where immigrants can come to study, to prepare for the naturalization tests, and to learn about American public life and politics, it is much more dynamic. At the School for Democracy, everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a learner, implying that learning is multidirectional, and that all involved learn from one another, regardless of the roles that they fit into in larger society. This unique approach leads to a change in the power dynamic from one where immigrants are seen as deficient and in need of service, to one where each person's talents, contributions, identities, and struggles are acknowledged and valued. Through discussion, public interaction, and working together, students and mentors together learn civic skills, engagement tactics, and about what it means to be a citizen. At the School for Democracy, the criteria for what it means to be a citizen is constantly evaluated and challenged, as are participants' understandings of themselves.

The Jane Addams School for Democracy is an example of the type of free space that Evans and Boyte describe in that it is based in the community, pulls on and involves a number of

stakeholders, and is open to people of diverse backgrounds and interests. In providing this specific example, Boyte introduces another important element of a public space that is a free space. At the School for Democracy, participants learn not only about the content needed to pass the citizenship test, but they also learn about themselves as individuals and about society. At the School for Democracy, participants learn that they have something to contribute to society.

Boyte (2004) writes that Jane Addams, co-founder of the Hull House settlement house and inspiration for the School for Democracy, “sought to create public space where people of diverse views, skills, and life histories were not simply valued but could contribute to democracy” (p. 100). This description speaks to the core of what it means for a place to be a free space. Free spaces are fundamentally places from which power and potential are created, realized, unlocked, and unleashed.

### ***Free Spaces as Enabling Settings***

Free spaces can also be thought of as enabling settings (Bridger & Alter, 2006; Korten, 1984). This interpretation draws attention to the transformative power of public spaces to help citizens to realize their individual and collective agency to be actors in their own reality.

Both Oldenburg and Boyte discuss the importance and centrality of community, arguing that healthy communal relations are essential to a strong democracy. Drawing on various theories of community, Bridger and Alter’s piece on community engagement and university relationships, “The Engaged University, Community Development, and Public Scholarship,” provides insights into the significance of social interaction in communities (2006). Taking an interactional perspective on community development, which views patterns of interaction as a core

component of a community (Bridger & Luloff, 1999), they argue that “when interaction is suppressed, community is limited. When community is limited, conditions are not optimal for the realization of individual or social well-being” (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 170; Wilkinson, 1991; Dewey, 1954).

From this perspective, a broad range of community interactions is needed to foster both individual and collective well-being. Viewing the development of communities as a process that occurs as “local residents interact with one another on projects and issues – especially those that build linkages across groups and interest lines,” Bridger and Alter argue that a key to strengthening communities is focusing on the development of relationships and lines of communication across interest groups (2006, p. 170). They continue that “By creating these linkages, a generalized structure emerges—one that can be mobilized to address shared problems and concerns” (p. 171). In this way, the development of the community begins with the development of the relationships and capacity for community members to work independently and collectively.

In order for these processes occur, there presumably need to be places where people can interact. Drawing on the work of David Korten (1984), Bridger and Alter explain that rather than creating new organizations or physical spaces to meet this need, a comprehensive approach to sustainable community development necessitates the creation of “enabling settings within which people can be more effective in meeting those needs themselves” (Korten, 1984, p. 302, as referenced in Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 171).

Korten’s use of the term “setting” is clarifying as he is not advocating for the construction of new physical spaces. Rather, the enabling environment that he describes is something more phenomenological. In the same way that the free spaces described by Evans and

Boyte refer to the type and style of activities that occur within them, the notion of enabling settings, as discussed by Korten and by Bridger and Alter, is not confined to the physicality of spaces. While enabling settings or free spaces occur in a physical locale, these two conceptualizations of public spaces speak to the sociopolitical phenomena that occur in, around, and as a result of their existence and openness to the populous. Such settings also emerge as a result of intentional design.

### **The Significance of Public Spaces**

In her work, *On Revolution*, political theorist Hannah Arendt articulates that a key component of the “revolutionary spirit” involves “the experience of being free,” which she describes as “an exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning” (Arendt, 1965, p. 223, as quoted in Boyte, 2014). Arendt argues that when there is not ample space for people to come together to engage, debate, and deliberate, this type of freedom is never truly realized (Boyte, 2014).

Public spaces that function as free and enabling settings effectively facilitate the formation of relationships and the realization of individual and collective agency, all leading towards the freedom that Arendt describes. Boyte (2004) explains that Jane Addams “saw immigrant education as about ‘freeing the powers’ of people for contribution” (Addams, 1902, p. 40, as referenced in Boyte, 2004, p. 100). To the extent that public spaces effectively enable individuals to contribute, they have the capability to be freeing spaces.

### *Free Spaces and Democratic Political Theory*

This body of scholarly work points to free spaces as being sites that can facilitate the empowerment of individuals and communities, ultimately leading to the co-creation of a stronger, better civil society that benefits all citizens (Oldenburg, 1999; Boyte, 2004). The notion of free spaces is grounded in democratic political theory and a theory of learning that enables individuals and groups of individuals to realize and to feel as though they have the ability to shape their own reality. In such settings, people are enabled to take agency in their own lives and to act as active, engaged citizens.

### **Free Spaces and Informal Learning**

The models of free spaces and enabling settings examined in this work are grounded in a theory of learning that uplifts and facilitates the empowerment of those who gather and participate in these spaces. Not only is it important to focus on the types of activities that occur in free spaces, but also the manner in which these activities occur. The power of free spaces lies in their capacity to facilitate learning and the realization of agency, and it is important to note that none of these phenomena happen by accident. For as casual and home-like as free spaces may feel to those who gather there, the experience one has in a free space is the result of intentional design.

## Learning with Others

A key feature of free spaces worth underscoring is that they are fundamentally places where people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, skills, stories, and perspectives can gather and interact. In describing the concept of free spaces, Evans and Boyte (1986) argue that the purpose of creating spaces where people can gather to engage with one another and to participate in the politics of everyday life is not to achieve consensus or homogeneity. On the contrary, the purpose is to learn with one another and to embrace the different experiences, strengths, and weaknesses that each individual brings with them. In his work *Everyday Politics*, Boyte quotes Dudley Cocks, Director of Roadside Theatre at Appalshop: “When a diverse mix of people really engage each other, you can see everyone in the room getting smarter” (2004, p. 98). The value of free spaces is not that they are places where individuals feel comforted and reaffirmed in their beliefs by others who participate in those spaces, but that these spaces provide a setting in which the processual activities and work of democratic citizenship can occur.

Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, argues that it is precisely at the intersection of difference that meaningful innovation occurs. Simply stated, he argues that “When you step into an intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures, you can combine existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary new ideas” (2006, p. 2). He also concludes that ideas that emerge from the intersection of difference are more creative as a result of the diverse groups that imagine them, and that those ideas are more likely to be viable or insightful. According to Johansson, finding intersections of difference is vital as it can lead to innovative solutions that are needed to address the complex and interdisciplinary problems of our world.

Johansson (2006) refers to the phenomenon that occurs at the intersection of difference as the Medici Effect. This name plays homage to the fifteenth-century Italian family whose patronage of artists, scientists, philosophers, and financiers laid the groundwork for the Renaissance. Johansson writes that as the family's patrons, thinkers, and creators, converged in Florence, they were able to interact with one another, learn from one another, and break down disciplinary and cultural barriers thus allowing for collaboration.

What occurs in bringing individuals with diverse skills and perspectives together goes beyond the phenomenon of generating new, creative, and viable ideas. Engaging at the intersection of difference also provides individuals with the opportunity to understand the perspectives of others. Understanding others' perspectives does not necessarily equate to accepting these perspectives, but it is an important part of working productively with others (Oldenburg, 1999). Additionally, simply being exposed to others' perspectives and ideas can influence the way that one thinks. Creating changes in the way that people think is often a first step in changing society. As Enlightenment scholar Jonathan Israel (2010) reflects on the history and legacy of the Enlightenment, exposure to new ideas is indeed a starting point for a revolution of the mind.

Thinkers who study human behavior echo the notion that social change processes begin in the mind, and often occur through a social learning process. Psychologist Albert Bandura's social learning theory presents the argument that learning and its cognitive process occur in a social context (1971). Further, Bandura explains that learning in social contexts can occur through the observation of others' behavior and the resultant consequences, as well as through direct experience. Behavioral economist A. Allan Schmid (2004) similarly captures the dynamic nature of this interaction, noting that: "Human cognition is a cultural and social process. We are



not just affected by culture, we are part of a system and process of shaping culture and being shaped” (p. 61). Not only do individuals learn from social interactions, but they also shape the society and nature of relationships in return. As individuals learn through experiences with and observations about society, and as individuals interact with others, they also learn of the complexities and intractability of working with others.

In discussing the Jane Addams School for Democracy, Boyte (2004) recognizes that a key strength of free spaces is that they provide a space for individuals with differing perspectives to interact. However, Boyte and Mathews are not naïve to think that bringing people of diverse perspectives together will be easy nor that it will go smoothly. Instead, they acknowledge the tension, and embrace the idea that working through problems together is a central activity of democracy.

In many instances, bringing diverse groups together sets the stage for intractable conflicts to emerge (Lewicki et al., 2003). Often, individuals or groups simply cannot seem to find common ground. When this happens, not only is it impossible for groups to imagine innovative solutions, but it can also lead to a dangerous deterioration in the trust and respect that people have for one another. In other cases, it can even be inconceivable to bring those of opposing views together in the first place.

It is important to recognize that conflict is ubiquitous and that it is inherent in the notion of multiple publics. It is thus nonsensical to think that bringing individuals or groups of diverse perspectives together will always end in unanimity or agreement. However, democracy is not about finding agreement or consensus. Instead, democratic work depends on recognizing intersections of difference and finding ways to work together to address issues. Managing conflict and learning to cooperate despite differences is also part of social learning.

Through learning in social contexts, individuals become aware of intractable situations, as well opportunities for collaboration and empathy. Laura Black, a scholar of group communication, argues that “personal storytelling can be a bridge between dialogue and discussion by inviting group members to experience dialogic moments in the midst of deliberative conversation” (2008, p. 93). Black notes that deliberation is a more structured form of communication that is conceptually based on principles such as equality, fairness, focus on the public good, and rational decision making. Contrastingly, dialogue is typically characterized by emphasizing multiple voices, ambiguity, human connection, and co-creation of meaning. Black maintains that dialogue can complement the more structured nature of deliberation, arguing that storytelling can serve as a link between the two forms of interaction. Black explains that storytelling both enables individuals to understand their identities and relations to others, and to take and appreciate each other’s perspectives. She notes that “storytelling enables a kind of perspective taking that is fruitful for deliberation because it allows participants to understand the reasonableness of another’s perspective, even during a disagreement” (p.96). Black contends that this perspective taking within a deliberation occurs through what Cissna and Anderson (1998, 2002) refer to as dialogic moments. Dialogic moments allow individuals to be mutually present with one another, thus enabling individuals to see the other completely and respectfully. To the extent that storytelling and dialogue can promote perspective taking and mutual respect, empathy can be developed, even when consensus cannot be achieved.

As free spaces are not intended to be places of homogeneity, but rather as places that enable democratic work, it is essential that free spaces are able to facilitate the kind of productive dialogue, empathy formation, and learning that Black discusses in the context of storytelling. The power of free spaces lies in their ability to encourage the hard work of conflict management and

collaboration that is at the core of democracy. Thinkers like Boyte, Evans, and Mathews maintain that free spaces are essential to the functioning of healthy democracies.

### **The Power of Learning**

In *Everyday Politics*, Boyte also explores the idea that free public spaces are inherently transformative in that they democratize structures of knowledge and power. In free spaces, power is not merely fought for, but also created. Drawing on the example of the Jane Addams School for Democracy, Boyte explains that “power dynamics change from expert-dominated interactions (which treat immigrants as clients or customers) to public interactions where people learn and work together, and in the process create power” (2004, p. 98).

According to Boyte, a key characteristic of free spaces is precisely that “everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner” (2004, p. 97). In free spaces, participants learn from one another. Describing the Jane Addams School for Democracy, an example of a free space, Boyte also argues that in a free space, “people’s talents and contributions are valued and developed” (p. 98). Boyte (2004) and Paulo Freire (1993), a Brazilian educator, philosopher, and activist, contend that there is a profound impact on individuals when they feel as though they matter. Confidence and self-esteem rise, and people are encouraged to participate more. Through these processes, people realize their “rights and responsibilities to participate in governing, and not simply to be governed” in a visceral way (Giroux, 2010, para. 2).

Henry Giroux (2010), a thinker aligned with the likes of Freire, explains that it should be the goal of educators to enable people to think and act independently. In this way, the focus shifts from being concerned with content mastery towards the goal of educating the whole

person. This idea is discussed thoroughly in *We Make the Road by Walking*, a book that captures a conversation between Freire and Myles Horton, a kindred educator who worked with citizenship schools in the American south (Horton et al., 1990). Freire and Horton agree that developing individuals, in the long run, makes a larger contribution to the wellbeing of a community than do other seemingly essential activities such as organizing in order to meet a particular, focused goal. Freire notes that “the more the people become themselves, the better the democracy” (p. 145).

Power is created when people feel empowered to take agency to create the kinds of communities and societies that they wish to see. As such, the purpose of free spaces is to facilitate dialogue and meaningful interaction amongst individuals with differing opinions, to democratize learning, and to share and co-create power, thus to enable this realization of agency.

### **Informal learning as a core activity of democracy**

The kind of learning proposed by Freire, Giroux, and Boyte need not, and often does not, occur within a traditional classroom setting. Though Boyte (2004), exemplifies the idea of the free space in the Jane Addams School for Democracy, free spaces do not need to be linked with the realm of formal education. Scholars, such as Edmund Gordon and John Dewey (see Lee, 2011), argue that the suggestion that education ends with schooling is detrimentally shortsighted in the sense that it ignores and undervalues the organic, social, and experiential learning that occurs outside of the classroom. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Myles Horton and Freire discuss the transformative power of social learning and citizen-led education (Horton et al., 1990). Learning does not have to happen in schools, and scholars seem to agree that the

collaborative and iterative learning that occurs outside of school, in the realm of the community and its public spaces, including spaces such as museums, enriches and empowers individuals and communities.

### **The Rhetorical Significance of Museums as Free, Enabling Settings**

Insights from rhetorical studies bolster the present discussion on free spaces and enabling settings, adding depth to the understanding of what exactly it is that such spaces have to offer to a public. This section explores the notion that free spaces can serve not only as places of individual, collective, informal, and co-created learning, but also as places of reasoning, communication, deliberation, and ultimately, of action.

In the second edition of *The Elements of Reasoning*, Edward Corbett and Rosa Eberly (2000) introduce the rhetorical concept of *topoi*, an ancient Greek word, as places from which to start reasoning. Specifically, Eberly defines *topoi* as “bioregions of discourse – that is, places where discourse can be planted and where reasoning may grow” (p. 23). The authors continue in their explanation, noting that “*topoi* are aids to remembering the roads you have traveled in your reasoning, and *topoi* are places to stop a while and catch your breath during the process of reasoning” (p. 24).

Eberly provides examples of *topoi* generated during a discussion with one of her classes. The list of *topos* includes objects, subjects, feelings, and emotions, such as violence, video games, music, media, and pain. Notably, each of these examples is rhetorically figurative – one cannot physically go to or be in objects such as video games or feelings such as pain.

Nonetheless, these ‘places’ serve as points from which reasoning and discussions can begin. These topoi exemplify another function that this rhetorical tool can serve, which is that of “memory aids as well as inventional prompts,” or things that jog the memory and provoke thought (p. 24).

Though the aforementioned topoi are figurative, or ‘imagined,’ topoi can also be literal, physical, and ‘real’ (R. Eberly, personal communication, March 8, 2017). In her teaching at Penn State University, Eberly walks students through an exercise to help illustrate this delineation. For context, Old Main is the building that houses the University’s administrative offices. In Eberly’s classroom, students discuss that the colloquial phrase “Old Main” is often used as a figure of speech to refer to Penn State’s administration. For example, when talking about an announcement from the University, one might state that the announcement will be coming from Old Main. After establishing Old Main as synecdoche, or a part that represents the whole of the University, Eberly walks with her students from their classroom to the physical Old Main building. The exercise aims to show students that “where we stood literally changed our thinking and our reasoning” (R. Eberly, personal communication, March 17, 2017). Being in front of the physical building served to inspire different kinds of reasoning than students would engage with in their classroom. Consistent with her writing in *The Elements of Reasoning*, topoi “are literal places that generate physical places” from which reasoning, thinking, communication, and reflection can begin (R. Eberly, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

The paring of rhetorical concepts such as topoi with this discussion on public spaces is meant to suggest that free spaces can provide the kind of enabling setting that not only facilitates interaction and dialogue, but also enables the identification of topos and catalyzes the beginning

of reasoning. To the extent that free spaces can aid in remembrance and provoke reflection, thought, and reasoning, free spaces then constitute a kind of literal topoi.

In the context of this research, the question then comes to revolve around the idea that museums, conceptualized as free spaces and enabling settings, could too serve as a literal, physical topoi and place of reasoning. Along this line of thinking, museums can be seen as unique places where rhetorical and public memory are stored, created, and recalled.

In their discussion on the relationship between rhetoric, public memory, and places of public memory, Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott (2010) contend that the notion of public memory, or an assumption that memory takes place in groups, or publics, and that beliefs about the past are shared amongst different publics, is typically thought of in six different ways. Three of these positions are particularly relevant to the idea that museums can serve as places of public memory and as rhetorical topoi. First, there is the position that “memory relies on material and/or symbolic supports” (p. 6). By their very nature, museums, which typically hold some sort of collection of physical objects, have a lot to offer to visitors in providing them with the real and rhetorical experience of connecting with material and symbolic supports. In this way, the materials and experiences held in museums can effectively elicit public memory and figurative rhetorical places. The authors explain that another position on public memory is the idea that “memory narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging” (p. 6). As Boyte (2004) and Black (2008) might argue, visitors who are enabled to participate in dialogue and interaction in free spaces also have the power to create experiences and thus generate shared memory. In addition to constructing new topoi and public memory, interactions with people in the museum can also enable one to remember a shared history. A final and related rhetorical position on public memory that is particularly relevant to the idea of museums as topoi is the

notion that “memory is activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties” (p. 6). Museums can be seen as activating because of the public memory and rhetoric that is stored, created, and recalled in these settings. Perhaps it is for these characteristics that people come to museums to engage in reasoning in the first place. Reciprocally, museums are activating because of the public memory and rhetoric that they hold.

Though museums are not the only physical places in which public memory can be created, stored, and recalled, museums are unique in their ability to be places where reasoning can begin. Museums artifacts, stories, and ability to facilitate individual and shared experiences of all types both as effective topoi, and as rhetorically important spaces in society.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter is to frame this study, which looks at the role of museums in democratic society, within a uniquely positioned nexus of interdisciplinary theoretical concepts. The notion of museums as public spaces, understood from this point onward in this thesis to refer to the kinds of public spaces that are free spaces and enabling settings, emerged as a result of considering theoretical concepts from: democratic political theory, community development theory, museum studies, rhetorical and memory studies, and public space studies. Consistent with the organization of this section, perspectives on democracy are first introduced to help to solidify the importance of spaces in which people can interact and perform the everyday activities of democratic citizenship. Community development theories rooted in a critical pedagogy further support the essentiality of such spaces, and provide insight into the types of dialogic and informal kinds of learning and engagement that can occur in such public spaces that



are also free spaces. In inquiring to understand whether museums can be public spaces, this study looks specifically to understand whether museums can perform the functions of free spaces and enabling setting, as described by Boyte and Evans and by Bridger, Alter, and Korten, respectively.

The following chapter details the specific methods used to explore the overarching research goal of this study, which is to understand perspectives on the role of museums in democratic society. Specifically, this study also seeks to understand whether museums can be public spaces that are effective “free” spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies; whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning; and whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

To address the objectives of this study and to learn more about the evolving role of museums in today's society, this study relies on data collected from key informant interviews. It is important to note upfront that this research is inherently exploratory in nature. Beyond addressing the specific objectives of the study, an overarching goal of this research is simply to understand more about the role of museums in society. As such, this research discusses the perspectives of a limited number of participants and makes no claims of larger generalizability. Given this broad framework, the focus of this chapter pertains to the specific methods used to complete this study.

### **Methods**

Given this methodological approach, the following methods were used to complete this study. This section includes a discussion of the methods used in this study, as well as a brief assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. This section is further divided into the following sub-sections:

1. Narrative Inquiry and Analysis
2. Analysis of Documentary Evidence and Literature
3. Sampling and Recruitment
4. Interviews and Protocols
5. Limitations

## Narrative Inquiry and Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this research, semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with an emergent sample of 12 individuals identified by the researcher as being museum professionals and/or museum scholars who were connected with progressive museum thought and practice. Interviewees were asked to share their perspectives as they related to broad, open-ended questions about the role of museums in society, about the meaning and significance of museums, and about the capacity for museums to serve as public spaces. Participants were asked about the possibility of museums being “public” spaces, as opposed to museums as “free” spaces, so as to not prime or constrain their responses by providing a specific definition of free spaces. Participants were also asked to define “public space” within the context of museum work to establish a shared definition between the researcher and the interviewee. Participants were asked to share stories and were encouraged to speak freely throughout the course of the interview.

After the interviews were conducted and the audio-recordings were transcribed, the researcher analyzed the textual data to understand how the stories and responses that interviewees provided were related to the objectives of understanding:

- whether museums can be public spaces that are effective “free” spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies
- whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning
- whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

In this way, the researcher was able to analyze data around these specific questions to pull out themes that pertained to these points of inquiry, as well as to recognize and analyze additional and unexpected themes that emerged throughout the larger set of data.

The purpose of choosing to conduct this research using methods of narrative inquiry is grounded in the belief that rich and relevant data can be gathered in the form of stories that people share (Trahar, 2009; Clandinin, 2006). Stories reveal meaning and significance and can evidence one's personal philosophy in ways that straightforward, or non-narrative, responses cannot (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By asking interviewees to share stories, or narrative data, throughout the course of each interview, the researcher was able to collect not only direct response to specific questions, but also to learn more about the role of museums in society as a whole. Stories provided by interviewees also helped to illustrate a more holistic picture of the various perspectives on the role that museums can play in society, thus broadening the findings beyond simply responding to the three objectives of the research.

### **Analysis of Documentary Evidence and Literature**

In order to develop a theoretical framework for this thesis, to generate research objectives and interview questions, and to identify potential study participants, the researcher conducted an extensive review of the literature on democratic political theory, public space studies, community development theory, rhetorical and memory studies, and museum studies. The researcher also conducted exploratory Internet searches to check the pulse for trends in museum activity by reading and analyzing various forms of documentary evidence, such as online publications, exhibition advertisements, museum descriptions, professional statements and biographies, and so

forth. This secondary data also informs both the theoretical portions of this work, as well as the discussion and conclusion of the piece.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

Informants were selected based on their professional or academic experiences in the field of museum work or museology. In this study, museum professionals and scholars were interviewed. Some interviewees fit the criterion of being both museum professionals and museum scholars. For the purposes of this study, museum professionals include individuals who work as directors or staff at museums in the United States, as well as individuals who work at museum-related organizations, such as consultancy firms. Museum scholars include individuals who research and write on museum issues, as well as individuals who teach in or direct museum studies programs in the United States.

The sample for this study is an emergent sample, meaning that the sample was identified throughout the course of information and data gathering (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Participants were identified by the researcher as individuals who seemed to be interested or involved with museums that see their role as contributing productively to society, who evidenced a critical consciousness surrounding their work with museums, and who may have an interest in the idea of museums as public spaces. Potential participants were identified based on information available via the Internet, such as professional biographies, curriculum vitae, professional blog articles, published academic articles, and popular news articles. In addition to potential subjects identified by the researcher, four interviewees were identified based on snowball sampling. Limitations of this sample strategy are discussed below.

A total of 20 individuals were invited to participate in this study. Of this set, 12 individuals were able to be interviewed within the timeframe of the study. Of the eight who were invited to participate but did not participate, one individual felt as though they did not fit sample criterion, three individuals expressed interest but were unable to participate during the timeframe of the study, and four individuals did not respond to either the first or the second recruitment invitation. The individual who felt that they did not meet the sample criterion declined to be interviewed, but sent a list of potential study participants to the researcher. Four study participants were identified and selected through snowball sampling in which study informants were asked to suggest additional potential study participants. Of the 12 individuals who agreed to be interviewed:

- All 12 have experience working in a museum at some capacity
- Three actively teach university-level courses on museum studies
- Six actively work at a museum
- Three actively write and consult on museum philosophy and practice

Participants were invited to participate in the study via email. One initial email invitation was sent to each participant. The email transcript, located in Appendix A, invited each individual to participate in a research study that would be completed as part of the researcher's undergraduate honors thesis. The initial recruitment interview explains that the purpose of this study is to learn more about the role that museums play in society, particularly with regards to museums' promise in facilitating citizen interaction and dialogue that the researcher hypothesizes is essential to creating strong communities. Potential participants were informed that interviews would last for around one hour, and that they would be asked to share a bit about their experiences related museum work.

If potential participants did not respond to the initial recruitment email, one reminder email was sent one and one half weeks after the initial recruitment email was sent. This reminder email reiterated the purpose of the study and indicated that the researcher would like to include the individual's perspective in the study. If participants did not respond to the reminder email, no further inquiries were sent to that participant.

After potential participants agreed to participate in the study, the researcher corresponded with each participant to find a mutually agreeable time to conduct the interview. Recruitment began at the beginning of January 2017. Interviews were conducted from late January 2017 through the middle of March 2017.

### **Interviews and Protocol**

Participants were asked a series of questions surrounding the role of museums in society. Questions were structured around three broad topics, in addition to introductory and concluding remarks. First, interviewees were asked to share information about their professional backgrounds and how they came to work with museums. Next, interviewees were asked to share their perspectives on the role of museums in society, as well as to share any stories that they felt captured the essence of the modern museum. Participants were then asked to explain their viewpoints on the significance of the work of museums in modern times. Subsequently, participants were asked to discuss their perspectives on the role of museums as public spaces. In this set of questions, participants were also asked to define public space in the context of museum work and to share a story of when they felt an attempt was made for museums to serve as public spaces. Finally, participants were asked if they had any additional thoughts they wanted

to share and if there was anyone else that the researcher should talk to about this subject.

Throughout the course of the interview, participants were invited to share stories and examples of their experience with museums that embody a certain characteristics or exemplify the potential of that museums can be.

One interview was conducted in person, and eleven were conducted via telephone. Two of the twelve interviewees requested to see the interview protocol prior to the interview. In order to control for a uniform experience with the interview experience across all participants, the researcher sent these two participants a document that contained a listing of topics they would be asked to talk about and a few basic versions of the interview protocol. Each interview lasted for around 30 to 60 minutes.

Prior to conducting any research or communicating with any potential interviewees, the researcher received approval of the study methods and procedures from the Penn State Office for Research Protection's Institutional Review Board in August of 2016 (STUDY00005457). Before conducting each interview, each participant provided consent to be interviewed and for their interview to be recorded. Choosing to keep all identities of participants confidential, the researcher assured participants that their recording files and transcripts would be treated confidentially and that there was no risk to participating.

### **Limitations**

Though the key informant data collection method enables researchers to learn from the perspectives of interviewed individuals, it is important to note that results from this study cannot be generalized across a larger population of museum scholars and museum professionals.



Further, to the researcher's knowledge, there is no centralized database listing all museums, museum directors, museum staff, or museum scholars from which to randomly select potential participants. As such, the sample is a result of information collected by the researcher.

Given these limitations, participants interviewed in this sample are not representative of all museum professionals or museum scholars. Given that the participants were purposively selected, rather than randomly selected, there is considerable selection bias introduced by the researcher. Because of the non-representative and non-random sample, the data collected in this study is not generalizable to a larger subset of museum scholars and museum professionals.

Of the 12 participants interviewed, three identify as people of color. At 30%, the percentage of study participants of color is roughly on par with the percentage of museum staff positions that are held by people of color in the United States (Schonfeld et al., 2015). It is also important to note that of the 12 participants interviewed, only two participants are known to be male-identifying. This gender imbalance amongst participants is likely both a result of the gender imbalance in the museum field, as more females work in museums, as well as a result of the implicit biases of the researcher and participants who identified potential study participants. This bias represents a limitation of the emergent sampling strategy.

A final limitation in this study comes from the narrative inquiry analysis methods used to assess the data. As with all qualitative data, the research introduces implicit bias when identifying themes, patterns, and even when looking for findings beyond the mean.

## Summary

The next chapter presents the findings of this research that were collected using the methods detailed above. Data from this study was analyzed to glean insights that related to each of the study's specific objectives, as well as to detect any additional and unexpected themes or one-off comments that were evidenced in interviewee's narrative interview response. Generally, the findings are organized around the specific objectives of this research, but also around other themes that emerged in the process of data analysis. The overarching goal of this study is to gain insight into perspectives on the role of museums in democratic society, and to explore whether museums can be public spaces that are effective "free" spaces for fostering the public dialogue and interaction that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies; whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning; and whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

## Chapter 4

### Research Findings

The overarching purpose of this study is to explore the role of museums in society. Specifically, this study aims to understand museums' role as and capacity to be public spaces that facilitate activities essential to creating and sustaining healthy, democratic societies. The objectives of this research are designed to provide insight into:

- whether museums can be effective free spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies.
- whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning.
- whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

This chapter presents findings collected through key informant interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked to share their perspectives on the role of museums in society. The semi-structured nature of the interview was designed to elicit interviewees' reflections, and to create a context in which interviewees could potentially speak to elements of the objectives of this research in a conversational way. The first section of findings presented in this chapter pertain to the broad purpose of this research. Subsequently, findings are organized around key themes that emerged within and across the study's objectives.

## Reflections on the Role of Museums in Democratic Society

As the overarching question of this research asks about the role of museums in society, it is fitting to begin a discussion of findings by presenting various perspectives on this topic. Throughout the course of the interview, each participant was asked to share their thoughts regarding the role of the modern museum.

Interviewees' responses evidenced that there are multiple interpretations of a museum's role and that the role is fundamentally dynamic. When prompted by this question, one interviewee paused and stated: "I think it's always evolving, actually. I think more recently with the current [presidential] administration it's possibly even taking on new dimensions." Another interviewee commented: "I think the role of museums has been very different over time. I think that the role that they should play has really been contested." Other participants echoed this idea that the role is changing, both on a day-to-day basis as the world spins on, and across time and space.

Interviewees shared that not only has the role of museums been interpreted differently throughout history, but also that different museums see their respective roles differently. One participant shared that, "It's really hard to generalize about what the modern museum is. I think museums across the United States have really disparate ways of viewing their role in their communities."

One interviewee who saw museums as having an important role to play in the fight for social justice commented:

*I would say that there are some museums that have always been doing this work and there are some museums that will always fight this work, probably for their entire life. And, you know, I would probably say that there's definitely a movement within the museum community and within museum professionals, and within museum visitors, to*

*push museums to be more democratic in how they operate and work and how they respond to their communities.*

In addition to echoing the idea that various museums identify as having different roles, this quote also exemplifies two additional themes that emerged when interviewees discussed the role of the modern museum. The first is the idea that “within the last ten years” there has been a shift in museums towards democratizing their practice and towards creating more meaningful engagement. Many participants recognized such a shift in the philosophy and approach of museums in recent history.

A second theme exemplified in the above excerpt is the idea that museums can respond to their communities. One interviewee specifically stated that she felt that museums were becoming “more attuned to their communities,” thus enabling them to better serve those communities. All interviewees shared the view that museums were meant to serve or to interact with their communities, though they shared various opinions on how museums could do so, and noted that many museums still do not do so in a meaningful or impactful way.

Two interviewees referenced the image of an anchor to describe the role that museums can play in the communities in which they are located. One participant described museums as “anchor institutions,” while the other noted that museums can “act as community anchors.” One interviewee expanded on this idea, explaining that museums as anchors could be “places where people see their own histories reflected, but also to be safe spaces for dialogue - so a place where we can have an honest conversation about topics that may be heavily polarized or avoided all together.”

Echoing this idea, another interviewee expressed that:

*[Museums were] originally founded and created... to be communal spaces. They're created to be and preserve spaces where people can come together to experience artifacts, and exhibits, and history. And so if we are not building upon that original function, in order to help communities, help visitors, help stakeholders learn collectively, not only learn about themselves, but learn about we as a society collectively, we are not doing all that we are intended to do.*

Another interviewee explained the idea this way: “I would see museums as having a role in their communities – that they not only collect and display and interpret and have programs around whatever their collection is, but they somehow are part of the civic infrastructure of the communities that they exist in.”

### **Museums’ Unique Position**

When discussing this study’s overarching question about the role of the museum in democratic society, many interviewees expressed the belief that museums are uniquely positioned to serve their communities in a variety of ways precisely because they are museums. Thinking about the format of museums, one participant explained that “There's something about the exhibit form - like the pairing of text and images and three-dimensional elements, pulling all of those things together, I think that the exhibition form is kind of a language that museums use that is really wonderful.”

Others interpreted this uniqueness to be related to a museum’s story or content, with one interviewee musing that “We have this museum site that allows us to engage with this particular history.” He continued, explaining that not only did the museum have the opportunity to share the history that they preserve and interpret with their community, but that in certain moments, the museum has been able to serve “a community that needed a place to come to talk about these

issues, ... in a way that not only served their need to talk about it and commiserate about these challenges, but also to connect it to a history where that was happening.”

Others agreed that museum’s topic matter helped to create a platform for engaging their audiences on particular issues. For example, one interviewee noted that many museums have attempted open dialogues about issues in the community through photography or history exhibitions.

A number of participants felt so strongly about the unique capacity of museums that they argued that museums are able to do things that other similar institutions, such as parks, libraries, churches, and schools, cannot provide in the same way.

*I think museums have kind of unique assets that no other kind of institution have. And it's different for different museums. .... But then in terms of actual service provision, I think it's figuring out what your particular assets are, whether it's your collection or whether you have a really amazing building with a really amazing historical story, or whatever those kind of things that you have that no one else can offer, and then finding out what's fundamentally important about that for people.*

When discussing the idea that museums are uniquely able to facilitate conversations on difficult issues, one participant asked: “Where else will that happen? If museums cease to exist and cease to push that envelope, where are people going to be talking about race and class?”

## **Summary**

This section introduced a number of perspectives on the roles that museums can play in society and in their communities. The remainder of this chapter presents more findings from the study that provide deeper insight into the roles that museums can play in society as public spaces. The next few sections are organized roughly around themes that emerged throughout

interviews: museums' ability to enable engagement, to enable agency and learning, and to enable and inspire action and social change. This chapter then presents interviewees' perspectives on museums as public spaces, as well as insight into what enables and inhibits museums from being public spaces.

### **Museums Foster Dialogue and Interaction**

This section presents findings that pertain to the first objective of this study, which is to understand whether museums can foster the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies. When asked about the significance of museums, one interviewee responded that “their significance is not only related to their content or the things they keep in their space, but their significance is in their ability to be communal spaces, spaces where people can gather and dialogue and discuss the things that they're really grappling with today.” She commented further, suggesting that museums can use their spaces “to foster dialogue around contemporary social issues.”

One interviewee lamented that “there are not a lot of safe spaces for people to talk nowadays.” However, he contended that in museums, “it's a time for people to connect through these objects and through art or media, whatever it is.” He noted that as a museum educator and tour leader, what he tries to do in his practice is to “allow time for people to say their ideas on what we're looking at, or what they see in these stories, you know, blended into their personal life.”

This interviewee facilitates a kind of dialogic interaction by setting the tone at the outset of each tour by saying “this isn't going to be a lecture – it's a dialogue, it's a time for us to dive



into these issues... this is as space where all of our opinions are valued... there's no right or wrong answer, and you can feel free to say as much or as little as you like." He says of this approach that it works to get people talking with one another, for the most part.

Another interviewee shared a story of a different museum that aims to facilitate a similar type of dialogue in their space following a tour of the museum. She notes that while she believes it to be "the most direct attempt" of encouraging dialogue in a museum space, this museum was nonetheless met with challenges. For example, she identified the "stranger problem," and explained that there will inevitably be limitations to the quality of the dialogue amongst strangers who will spend about an hour of their time together on one occasion.

Noting the challenges of encouraging dialogue to happen amongst a group of strangers, she suggested that:

*Maybe it's not dialogue that you get to, maybe it's something dialogic in that when people come to your museum, they understand that there is a conversation around these issues and that you present multiple perspectives and that they realize that there isn't a single truth and that there is a dialogue that goes on even if you aren't expecting that they participate in that dialogue.*

She also offered the idea that museums can be thought of as "places where dialogue happens." To elaborate, she shared a story of one museum that invites established groups from the community, such as a group of police officers, to go through the museum together. She explains that in this model, museums have "provided ... a platform of information that [groups] can use to have a discussion about something that is important to them at the time. So you're giving them shared knowledge, shared information, a platform for them to have a discussion." In sharing another model, this interviewee discussed how museums also offer their spaces to

groups, letting groups from the community use the museum as a space for that group to do its own civic work.

Across all twelve interviewees, most considered dialogue to be possibility or an example of the kinds of activities that take place in museums. However, interviewees also pointed out that while encouraging and enabling dialogue can be a goal, realizing the potential for museums to be places of dialogue is not so simple, nor is it the only goal worth striving towards.

One participant explained the complexity this way:

*...[M]ost museums are facilitating dialogue and interaction all the time. ... So it's a question of access. Who knows about them? Who's interested? Who has time to go to a noon talk on Wednesday? Museums are open 10:00am to 6:00pm, or 10:00am to 5:00pm. Most people work during those hours. ... So of course museums can facilitate interaction and dialogue, but it's like: With whom? For whom? What's the focus? To what ends? And that's where I think things get a little trickier.*

In contrast to the previously mentioned example of dialogic tours shared by one participant, another interviewee argued that many museums are “rarely dialogic.” She explained: “I think part of the problem is that museums tend to be so monologic. You know, you go there and there's a docent, and the docent takes you on a tour, and the docent tells you the content. So [museums have] still kind of bought into that top-down learning model.” Many participants noted that while many museums strive to facilitate dialogue, many more museums seem to create a ‘monologic’ environment. The idea of “top-down learning” will be addressed later in this section. Nonetheless, it is important to mention this opinion in this section to document the variety of perspectives about dialogue in museum spaces.

## Kinds of Engagement

In discussing museums as potential places of dialogue, interviewees also recognized that dialogue is not the only kind of engagement that can or should happen in museums. One interviewee explained the idea by saying:

*I think there has been a long trend about seeing museums as sites for civic engagement and dialogue, and I think that's really important, but I also think that there's different kinds of engagement that might lead to productive social change that we've yet to uncover.*

She then provided an example of a program run by the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum. For five years, the Museum ran a soup kitchen in their space. She noted that the main emphasis of the program was not dialogue, “but it was about actually nurturing people and providing healthy food to eat, and so there are different forms of engagement with our communities and stakeholders.” Musing on this example, she also shared a call to action of sorts, stating “I think we need to listen, explore, and unleash our radical imaginations about what's possible in museums.”

In this example, feeding people became a mechanism that enabled interaction, and potentially even dialogue. Other participants suggested that museums could be places of empathy, or places that demonstrate and inspire empathy for those who visit their sites. One participant entertained the idea of:

*museums as places where people can come and understand others' experiences, so that when they are out participating in the world, whether that's as voters or people in a community group, or people making demands on their neighborhood association, they understand that their position is not the only position - that people are differently positioned and have a lot of different experiences that lead them to different places.*

While this interviewee was not entirely positive that museums can inspire empathy, the repeated incidence of this theme indicates that perhaps museum professionals and museum scholars are working to unleash their “radical imaginations” to envision forms of engagement that can facilitate empathy. Perhaps some already do.

In addition to facilitating dialogue and interaction, museums can also be places of teaching and learning. The next section of this chapter presents interviewees’ perspectives as they relate to the idea that museums might enable individual and collective learning.

### **Museums Enable Learning and the Realization of Agency**

With regards to this study’s second research objective, which is to understand whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning, the vast majority of interviewees explicitly described museums as places of learning. This section details the variety of ideas that were expressed that pertain to the idea of museums as places of learning, beginning with an acknowledgement that hierarchies of knowledge can be present in museums.

#### **Hierarchies of Knowledge**

Throughout the course of interviews, several participants explained that museums have a “public education role.” All interviewees seemed to share the conviction that it was the role of museums to share their story and content with the public. One interviewee positioned this education role as central, noting that “the meaning of the museums is about recognizing that there is a wealth to be learned... that we as a contemporary society can learn from histories that have been preserved in these places.”

As mentioned in the previous sub-section, numerous interviewees contended that much education that occurs in most museums can be “monologic” and conveyed in a “top-down” manner. According to interviewees, this means that information is presented or taught to museum attendees with little to no precedent for a mutual exchange of ideas. In the words of one participant, the issue is that “the narratives are so often given to us instead of emanating from us.”

With this traditional and “top-down” model in mind, one participant shared the belief that many museums see their role primarily as being “purveyors of knowledge.” She perceived this stance to be a result of museum history and momentous status quo:

*I think that for a long time, historians and curators have existed in a role of 'We know something, we studied something, we have learned content that others don't,' and that these institutions are places of education that people can come to learn those things and partake of that knowledge.*

While acknowledging this reality, others, including the participant who provided the above insight, also recognized that such “hierarchies of knowledge” can begin to be deconstructed when museums listen and share authority with their visitors. Unprompted, another interviewee explained:

*One thing that I think is really important in all museum work, you know whether it's physical or digital, is making sure that you're not just talking at people and telling people your story, but that you're actually listening to people. ... I think it's so much more important, honestly, than whatever the museum's content may be. I think the most important thing is hearing from other people what inspires them and what they connect with.*

Several other interviewees shared this particular sentiment, arguing in many ways for the importance of listening to and respecting visitors. Speaking of the academic approach to museum engagement, one interviewee commented:

*And what that model sometimes fails to acknowledge is that there is a myriad of other ways that people learn about the world. Right, so through lived experience, through personal interaction, through things that their grandfather has always told them. Right? And the more that we create spaces that continue to recognize the value of the knowledge that we have as museum staff, but also recognize the myriad of ways that our visitors learn about the world and know about the world, is the way that we can best become true public, collective spaces.*

### **Informal Learning**

The above statement not only provides insights into how museums can and do respect their visitors, but it also highlights another theme that emerged in many interviews, which is the idea that “museums are actually an incredible site of informal education.” This interviewee shared the following story:

*I am part of the generation that when I went to school, I never learned about Native American genocide, or I never asked questions about the Chinese Exclusion Act. That wasn't part of my schoolbook learning, you know? And so museums have helped me to be a more critical person, and look at history more critically, and ask more interesting questions about the sort of truths that are given so I can actually uncover different truths and tell different stories.*

This story illustrates the potential for museums to be places that enable visitors to engage with content in exploratory ways that are uncommon in similar educational settings, such as schools. Referring again to the theme of knowledge hierarchies, one participant suggested that

the way to enable this kind of informal learning is for museums to be transparent and upfront in their presentation of themselves:

*All public spaces need to acknowledge hierarchies. Not meaning to eliminate them, but to actually acknowledge them... So when you're giving a tour, you know, the person giving the tour is actually the expert. But they should also have a way of making the people who show up to that experience become experts in their own ways, right?*

### **Empowerment and Agency**

In the vein of thinking about museums as places of learning, participants recognized that this idea of having museum visitors become “experts in the own ways” is an important and empowering experience that museums can help to facilitate. One interviewee shared a story about a program that her museum is currently delivering and developing. Educators from her museum work with schools in the community to create a science curriculum that brings the museum into the classroom. Of this experience she said that she has seen short-term increases in confidence in students. Though she contended that in order to see the true impact of this type of programming, long-term investment in and evaluation of the program and of the students involved is needed, she believes that these types of initiatives are important. She explained that it’s not “just about content, but about leadership, confidence,” and that “these are the things that museums can also give to youth or people in their communities.”

This interviewee also shared a story about a museum working with a school in its community to have kids develop art to show at a gallery in the museum. She reflected:

*For the kids, this has a huge impact to be able to see their art on display in an important public space, to have their families there supporting them, and seeing their accomplishment.*

Echoing her reflections on the limitations to seeing the impact of the science programming, she also acknowledged that with community events, it is important that whenever possible, museums take a “relationship building, long-term perspective” on developing programming to avoid the “tokenistic” feeling that one-off events can create for the communities involved.

Other participants provided examples of how museums can introduce these kinds of empowering experiences independent of specific programming through their content, through tour, or simply through the atmosphere of their space. One interviewee passionately expressed that given what she recognized to be a “capitalist, commodified world,” people are generally treated primarily like consumers. She reflected that:

*[For] me, the most powerful part of a museum is that each person comes in there and they're addressed as subjects. ... And in order to be a sentient human being, you need to be addressed as like a feeling, thinking, and empathetic person. And that's the potential of museums, that you can go into a space for one moment, it's not like you're treated as a consumer, but you're actually addressed like a global citizen and human being, ya know?"*

For another interviewee, museums similarly hold both personal and professional significance in her own story. When asked to share a bit about what was most meaningful about her experience with museums, she answered:

*Museums were actually the place where I got probably my most important higher education, in a sense, even before I went back to graduate school. And that's because that's where I learned that I could actually do things like write and do research. I learned that in museums. I didn't learn that in school."*



She continued to explain that she felt that schools did not “match” her, indicating that she did not perform well in a traditional academic setting. However, in her first museum job, she found herself excelling in many of the tasks that she had sought to avoid in primary and secondary education, such as conducting science-related research and writing. She also felt strongly that her empowering experience in a museum need to be unique; others can and should have similar moments of realized agency.

One interviewee described how through the personal stories shared in the museum where he works, visitors recognize commonalities between their own reality and the realities of those in their position in the past. He says that for a lot of people who come to the museum, the significance has to do with empowerment:

*Again, empowerment. Seeing that no matter what limitation you personally may have, so did the men and women who were in this space, and they again pushed through it. They let their work really be their passion and drive them to continue on no matter what anybody said about them.*

This quote points towards museums as plus of unique power. Given their historical and narrative assets, many participants describe museums as having emotional significance to them as well was to visitors.

## **Summary**

This section introduced the idea of museums as informal learning settings and the notion that museums can use their assets and spaces to enable the empowerment of visitors. Throughout this section, the themes of hierarchy, power, and privilege emerged once more as they also did in the first section. These subjects will be more fully addressed later in this chapter, as the rate at

which participants mentioned these topics constitutes a substantial presentation and discussion. Before tackling these themes, the next section presents findings that relate to the ways in which museums are uniquely positioned to be places of public memory, and that as such, museums can actually inspire greater social and political change.

### **Museums as Places of Memory**

A previous section detailed interviewees' convictions that museums are uniquely positioned to open people to dialogue, to various forms of interaction, and even to mutual understanding in ways that other spaces are not. Beyond these functions, participants also described museums' potential to store and elicit memory for individuals and for groups of individuals. The idea of museums as places of memory emerged not only in the review of the literature on museums, but also across many interviews. This discovery provides a segue between discussing the second and third objectives of this thesis, which deal with museums as places of learning and places of sociopolitical change, respectively.

One interviewee shared a unique and explicit example of a museum serving as a place of memory. She described a museum in Australia that used its "amazing collection" of local artifacts to help elders in the community remember "reminiscences." Through seeing and interacting with the museum's collection, community elders were able to recall memories from the past, or reminisce.

In connection with museums' identified communal or public role, a few interviewees also discuss how some memories associated with museum spaces have public character. One

interviewee articulated this by stating that “[Museums and historic sites] have the information, the stories, the artifacts that all people who visit that space can see as shared content. They've all had that common experience together.” Another interviewee enthusiastically shared an example from an experience at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum:

*If you want to think about immigration today, it's such a productive way to get to it by walking into a space that was inhabited by immigrants in 1875 and having a conversation with people who happen to be in your small group of people who arrived at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum at the same time, and to have conversation with somebody, in a space that's real, with a person who is informed, leading your discussion.*

For this interviewee, the shared content and facilitated tour that the Museum provided helped to inspire conversation about immigration. Another element to her description is the idea that being in the “space that was inhabited by immigrants” helped to facilitate the meaningful experience. Other interviewees have pointed to the idea that being in a place where history happened as being powerful:

*Being in the places where real things happen, being amongst the artifacts and the collections, that can teach us about who we once were and about who we can be moving forward, there is a power to that, that frees people to have conversations and learn in ways that they can't necessarily do somewhere else.*

Another interviewee described the power of museums as places of memory by putting it this way:

*These places are uniquely powerful, and the easiest way to think about that is to think about your experience, or my experience, at these places. Right, so, when you are at the Civil Rights Museum and you are standing three feet from where Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated, there is a power to that space and to that memory. The word spiritual can be so off-putting, but there is something to that. Right, these are spaces that we connect with intellectually, as well as emotionally, spiritually, and being in and around these spaces opens audiences and community members up to engaging with their whole selves. Not with that defensive, debate-laden ‘Well I know this to be true because it’s what I saw*

*on the BBC,' but more so with every part of themselves and how they have learned about the world. Right, being in the prison where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated. Being in on site at Little Rock Central High School and thinking about the Little Rock Nine moving through those hallways, what they experienced. There's something about those spaces that opens people up in ways that other institutions really struggle to do."*

In addition to the participant who shared the above story, two other participants used the words “spiritual,” “transcendent,” “moving,” and “inspiring” to describe their experience with memory in museum spaces. For example, one interviewee reflected on an experience that she had at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum:

*I was on the first floor of this beautiful space, in Chicago, and the first floor in many ways is sort of traditional in that there are exhibits about Hull House and the work that was done there. ... I walk up the stairs and I turn the corner into [Jane Addams'] bedroom and I was kind of overwhelmed, overcome with a different experience. The experience on the first floor had been kind of intellectual, and then I come up into her bedroom, and I had done a lot of reading on Jane Addams and she's somebody I'm fascinated with, and I knew that this portrait that I referred to earlier of Mary Rozet Smith, who had been her partner for many decades. I knew it was there and so when I rounded the corner and saw it, and was in that space that Jane Addams, that initiate space that Jane Addams lived in, I had this vastly different experience that was not an intellectual experience. It was an emotional experience and very evocative and immersive, in a way. ... I got chills when I walked into that room. You know you don't get chills very often, sometimes you do, when you read a book.*

One interviewee remarked that not only does coming into such museum spaces have a profoundly and uniquely powerful effect on visitors, but that is also “such a driving force” for visitors as well. He explained that:

*[W]e've had people who say they want to go and help out at other spaces or organizations, or people who are just viewing the museum on their own who come out crying because they're so moved by what they were doing, and you know the action of that space is something they want to make present in their everyday life.*

This last reflection suggests that not only are museums sites that preserve and interpret history, or sites that store and elicit memories, but they can also be sites of activation as well.

This next section highlights a selection of responses from interviewees that detail this function of museums more fully.

### **Museums Enable and Inspire Social and Political Change**

A final objective of this research is to understand whether museums can enable and inspire greater social and political change. Thus far in this chapter, participants' responses have suggested that social and political change can happen in museums in the way that they foster dialogue and other forms of interaction that enable individuals to understand the stories, opinions, and viewpoints of others. Other responses indicated that perhaps social and political change can occur through the empowerment and agency that comes along with informal learning. In the last section, interviewees' responses propounded that museums that function as places of memory can inspire social and political change by providing experiences that impart emotional, spiritual, or transcendent feelings to museum visitors. Based on responses provided by this sample of interviewees, all of these possibilities are seen as plausible ways in which museums enable and inspire social and political change.

In response to the interview questions that asked about the role of museums in society, one interviewee answered by saying, "[A] museum has never, ever been just one thing written in stone. It has always been a site of contestation and struggle, and that's why I think they're such powerful forces for change in society."

Similarly, the vast majority of interviewees responded that museums have an important role to play in creating social change. One interviewee who works as a consultant explained that the museums she works with feel strongly that:

*It's no longer enough for museums and historic sites to be centered in preserving or interpreting the past. Those are very useful functions, but what we're working to do is to say 'And then what? Preserve the past to what end? Interpret the past to what end?'*

*And what I think is true is that we as a field have known the answer to that all along. Right? We all pretty readily accept that what comes after 'Preserve for what end?'; 'Interpret for what end?,' is to make the world better. There really is no point in preserving history if we don't learn from it and change our actions accordingly.*

While most interviewees felt strongly that it is the role of museums to enable and inspire social and political change and action, participants indicate that museums themselves are also involved in social and political change. As previously noted, participants identified a shift in museums' philosophy and approach that has been in progress for the last ten years or so. When discussing the role of museums as agents of change, many participants indicated that within a similar time period, more museums have become comfortable with embracing the role of activist, or taking on a "social justice perspective."

One interviewee provided two powerful anecdotes that illustrate ways that museums can be sites of social change. The first pertains to aquariums:

*I like to give an example... Aquariums! For a long time, aquariums simply thought that their job was to protect and interpret and house sea creatures. Right? Then they finally sort of realized, over a decade ago, that in order to actually effectively do this work, they had to actually stop the spread of global warming, they had to be voices and advocates against pollution of our seas, because if they didn't do that, there would be no sea creatures for them to actually protect. Right? So part of the work of aquariums now has been to be one of the greatest voices and educators to the public about global warming.*

It is of note that according to the majority of interviewees, museums' embrace of the activist role has not happened in the absence of challenge and resistance. On the contrary, many museums do not see it in their role to be "political." The issue of being a political or neutral space was identified as problematic by over half of the participants, and it will be discussed extensively in a subsequent section. Even in the case of aquariums, the interviewee explained that:

*Now at some point people thought, 'Oh wow, that's so political and they shouldn't do that,' but the reality is that you can't actually really preserve and protect fish unless you actually are advocates for global warming.*

Later in the interview, this participant also explained that "the same could be said about Holocaust museums." She explains that like aquariums, Holocaust memorials and museums have "realized that part of their mission is actually to stop genocide around the world whenever it should happen, and to use the Holocaust as a springboard for talking about the continuing racism that we all face every day in our lives."

After telling these stories, she concluded that "each of our museums, depending on what you do, will have your own particular kind of mission and contribution to social change." These examples highlight the idea that not only do museums enable and inspire change, but that many museums are undergoing a change in how they see their role as it relates to the social and political realm.

When asked if this shift in museums' role was a new trend, one interviewee responded by reframing the question, asking instead: "To what extent is this a movement?" She continued, pointing out that:

*people are actually recognizing that injustice within museums can't be tolerated, just as injustice in society can't be tolerated. So museums were never special in how racist or*

*sexist or homophobic they were. They were as racist and sexist and homophobic as our society. And so the question is: 'Are you gonna actually be dragged out kicking and screaming into the 21st century, or is there a possibility that museums could actually lead? and actually be paragons for social justice, and of these democratizing spaces?'*

## **Museums' Responsibility**

Will museums be dragged out kicking and screaming, or will they lead the charge?

According to one participant, whose sentiment was shared by many, it is the responsibility of museum "to try to make a difference in the world." She continued:

*And [museums] are positioned to do that because people trust us, because we have these amazing collections that show all sorts of things: what the world was like, the complexity of the world that gets reduced in a lot of media to pabulum, to nostalgia, to simplicity. I mean anyone who can say "Make America Great Again" has absolutely no concept of what America was like in this other time that he is referring to. So museums have that stuff, and it's in material form, and it's evidence, and so the significance is to not just be a place that people think of as quaint and for a rainy day when you don't want to truly be engaged. The significance is to make museums relevant and to use its resources and their status to matter in the world.*

Thus far in this presentation of research findings, interviewee's perspectives on the role of museums in society has been the primary focus. Interspersed throughout are notes of practicality, which stand as a reminder that theory and practice do not always align. The next section presents interviewee's perspectives on whether or not museums have the capacity to be public spaces, thus circling back to the overarching question of this research.



## Museums as Public Spaces

Beyond inquiring about the role of museums in society, this thesis looks particularly at the capacity of museums to be public spaces. After spending time in each interview asking participants to share their perspectives on the role of the modern museum, interviewees were asked whether they thought that museums had the capacity to serve as public spaces. As previously noted in Chapter Three, participants were asked to talk about museums as public spaces, as opposed to describing them as free spaces. This thesis articulates the difference between “public” spaces and “free” spaces, and recognizes that free space refers to a unique and particular type of public space. To avoid constraining participants’ responses, interviewees were invited to speak broadly about “public” spaces, which could or could not include “free” spaces.

To establish a shared definition in each interview, participants were also asked to explain how they would define a public space within the context of museums. Generally, definitions were similar across the board, though individuals used different language in their responses. Themes from this discussion include the notion that public spaces are: open to anybody; places of participation; places where people can talk and act freely without fear of persecution; not owned by only one individual, nor owned by the state; accessible with no or low barriers to entry, including handicap-friendly access and entrance fees; and places where everyone generally feels welcome. Though none of the interviewees’ used the free space terminology, many of the interviewees’ described the kind of activities that Boyte and Evans recognize as happening in a “free space.”

The overwhelming and unanimous response to the question of whether museums have the capacity to be public spaces can be summarized as: “Yes... but....”

In other words, each interviewee found that museums did have the capacity to be public spaces, but could think of many qualifications on their initial positive response. Many answered confidently that quite a few museums were already serving as public spaces. While praising the capacity of museums to be public spaces, interviewees also acknowledged that not all, and perhaps not even most museums, currently fulfilled that potential.

For example, to this question one interviewee responded: “Definitely, yeah. Do I think that they always are? No.” Another interviewee said: “Yes, I think they have the capacity to do that. They could definitely do that more than most of them do currently.” Another participant shared:

*In a kind of ethereal way, that capacity is there. Because the well-meaning nature of museums is that they want to do that. They would want to do that if provided with guidance, instruction, whatever.*

Across all participants, narrative examples of experiences in museums functioning as public spaces differed from one museum to the next. One participant described an example in which the Brooklyn Children’s Museum opened its space for children to use afterschool. She explained that the museum acting as an afterschool center came as a direct “response to the needs of the public in their local surrounds.” Another participant described a family day that took place at her former institution. She explained that on family day, anyone could walk into the space as the gate was open all day. On family day, no one was collecting tickets or keeping track of who was entering and exiting.

Several participants suggested that libraries were more truly public in character. Another interviewee spoke passionately of parks as the best example of public spaces. One participant

humbly stated that “I guess if I’m using my own personal definition of public space, they I don’t know if I’ve really truly experienced [an example of] a museum serving as public space.”

Given the mixed nature of each individual’s response, interviewees were asked to explain what barriers are in place that keep museums from meeting the “unaddressed potential” of serving as public spaces, as well as what enables it in cases of success. The following sections address these factors.

### **What Inhibits Museums from Being Public Spaces?**

When discussing the capacity for museums to be public spaces, participants also identified the following themes related to barriers that keep museums from being public spaces that are effective “free” spaces: museums reinforce power and privilege, museums are often non-representative and/or non-inclusive, museums cling to an illusion of neutrality, museums and their visitors are affected by budget constraints, and museum leaders may be fearful of taking the steps necessary to become public space.

#### ***Museums are Places that Reinforce Power and Privilege***

When reflecting on the role of museums in society, one interviewee responded confidently:

*I always say that museums, like institutions of higher learning, have always been the places that power and privilege have actually used to re-inscribe their power and privilege.*

Another participant maintained:

*Museums are, you know, essentially elitist institutions. And they're seen as such. So there's a lot of people out there who don't feel like museums are for them.*

All interviewees in this sample recognized that museums have historically not been open and inviting to all. They also contended that despite being labeled as public, many museums still fail to be truly open to diverse publics. One interviewee explained that “a lot of [museums] have histories of oppression or white privilege in some shape or form.” She continued:

*It might be in their collections or how their organizations conducted their membership, which might have not been very inclusive, and the aftereffects of that just really linger there for a long time and send these very subtle signals to people that may make them feel unwelcome.*

Interviewees contended that for those who feel as though they have less power and fewer privileges, museums are unwelcoming symbols of oppression. Interviewees explained that power and privilege is evidenced in everything from details such as which artifacts are highlighted, which stories and histories are told in museums, who gets to tell the story, who works in museums, and who directs museums. Those with power and privilege often set these rules, thus maintaining the status quo until interrupted.

### ***Issues of Representation and Inclusivity***

Because museums are often seen as elitist, many people do not feel represented in museums. One interviewee explains that people of color don't see “our faces in a lot of... not just like artwork or history, but I would say in the faces of the museum workers, unless they're security guards. And that's a problem, too.”

Another interviewee reflected on a conversation that she recently had with students of color. She shared that “[the students] felt quite uncomfortable in museums. They felt followed, surveilled, they felt unwelcome in a number of ways.”

These two quotes illuminate the complexity of this matter – not only can visitors feel underrepresented in the museum staff, but they can also feel as though their faces and stories are not valued as they are not included in museums’ collections. Participants indicate that when visitors fail to see themselves reflected in museums, they feel less welcome to enter into spaces, even when they are technically open to the public.

Interviewees also identify representation within the museums staff as an important feature that can inhibit or enable a museum to be a public space. For example, one interviewee argued:

*If museums are continually staffed by the same people, then we engage in similar networks, which re-embeds and reengages and perpetuates the same inequalities.... and the people who are in museums bring the same interpretations over and over again to the same issues.*

Another interviewee echoed this concern, noting that “what exhibits include and what they don’t include... is a direct result of who works in those institutions.” When museum staffs are not representative or inclusive, as is often the case because museum leadership and staff, and “all the positions that relate to shaping the content of exhibits,” are predominantly white, museums are limited in their creativity and in their ability to be open to diverse publics.

### *Myth of Neutrality*

Another factor that the majority of interviewees recognized as a barrier to having museums serve as public spaces was identified by one participant as the “myth of neutrality.”

As previously noted, interviewees suggest some museums have begun to move away from seeing themselves a neutral site, but affirm that countless museums do aim to be neutral and a-political. When asked if there were many sites that still claim to be apolitical, one interviewee responded:

*Yes. I think especially in the environment we exist in today, it's very scary to identify with the concept of being political. And a lot of this dates to publications like Excellence and Equity, which came out through what is now the AAM, this idea that museums needed to be very careful about promoting any particular point of view.*

This issue of neutrality was something that captivated the attention of many other interviewees. One interviewee rejected the concept of neutrality, arguing that the museums:

*...were never objective repositories of truth and knowledge. They were always culturally and ideologically embedded in their time, and so we can't fool ourselves into thinking that we just present the truth. We have to realize that we are just as beholden and implicated and contingent with issues around power and identity and politics and ideology.*

According to one interviewee, the illusion of neutrality is seen as a barrier to museums being public spaces in that it can inhibit a museum from “embracing whatever a particular community may need.” Others contend that in an effort to appear unbiased, museums sacrifice valuable transparency:

*Political is a really charged word, right. And sometimes I fear that the reason that we shy away from that word, or the idea of being activists, advocates, as museums, is really just about the semantics of those words. Right, no one wants to do those things because it can be off-putting. Those words are almost the same as feminist has become in certain circles*

*in the united states. But if we're honest with ourselves, if our money is political, if working with our donors, even individual donors, is often political in its bent, then it's okay, you know, for museums to have a specific perspective based in what we know about the historical record. I think where it's challenging is that we owe it to our visitors to be transparent about that process, rather than pretending that we are truly neutral or apolitical."*

### **Financial Barriers**

A variety of financial barriers, both for visitors and for museums themselves, were one of the most frequently identified barriers across all participants.

Interviewees recognized the reality that steep entry fees limit who can enter museums. High museum entrance fees not only bar people who cannot afford the ticket, but it also sets a tone that not everyone is welcome. One participant commented that while free days can be good, they are also problematic because:

*You're saying 'You, the general population, can only come on these days because you can't afford it otherwise,' and I think it sends the wrong message.*

Another participant recognized that entrance fees are a kind of double-edged sword for museums. While on one hand they can be exclusionary, they are also necessary. He explained that museums need fees and funding in order for them to keep their doors open and to remain accessible in that sense.

Other interviewees addressed the centrality of funding, indicating that funding can limit the kind of activities that museums perform. Many participants indicated that museums fear that they will lose funding if they do something in their space that is seen by their funders as being "too political." One interviewee shared an example from a museum where she previously worked

in which a museum director edited an exhibit just before its opening night for fear that it could upset funders. She reflected that this experience:

*...made me think a lot about the relationship of funding to content, and who museums feel like their constituents are. It seems like the director felt that the primary constituent was the funder, not the communities.*

In a related sense, interviewees described this fear of losing funding as limiting what museum staff feel that they can or cannot do. One interviewee articulated that museum staff who are willing to push boundaries often face uphill battles that no-one is forcing museums to fight. Another interviewee addressed a threat, identified as both real and perceived, that if a staff member does something seen as irritating, they are at risk of losing their job. She explained that this limits what museum staff are willing to do with regards to making spaces more public because “people who work in museums don't have tenure... they have no kind of employment protection.”

Other participants shared that because programming is often funding dependent, funding dictates which programs stay and which end as one-off events. She explained that even when a museum develops programming that does make their space function as a public space, there is often no guarantee that it will continue until funding is secured.

When responding to the question of whether museum have the capacity to be public space, one interviewee responded:

*Capacity today has everything to do with funding. ... It doesn't matter what you do in a museum, it has a price tag. Even if we open this space up and don't provide any programming, there's a cost to that. Even if you want to just come and sit on the grass and eat lunch, it costs us to open up this building. So I think museums theoretically have the capacity, but I'm not sure that some museums that are really struggling have the financial wherewithal to build that into their programming and what they're able to do.*



Providing an example from her experience with the museum where she currently works, she explains that “Our goal would be to be that all the time. But right now we’re taking baby steps. And we’re only able to offer this campus up as a public space from 9:30-5:30. If you think about it, what good does that do the person who has a job?” She concludes, attesting that “money is real. Money is a real, real issue.”

### ***“Lack of Imagination” and Fear***

Outside of issues related to funding, fear was identified by many participants as a major ideological barrier that keeps museums from realizing their potential as public spaces. One participant stated simply, “I think in some ways it's our own fear.” Another participant echoed this:

*I think it's hard and I think it's really scary for museums. Because if you put up and exhibition or you develop a program and you deliver it, you are in complete control. If you open up space for conversation, you have no idea what's going to happen. And nobody likes that. It's risky, and people don't like that. And it's also potentially political, and as I said, it's always been political, but it feels like it could be too political. We don't want to be activists. We just want to be purveyors of truth. And so I think it's hard for museums to make the leap, but I absolutely think they can.*

When asked to share insights into what limits museums from being public spaces, one participant answered succinctly: “What prohibits it is a lack of imagination and commitment to justice.”

## What Enables Museums to Be Public Spaces?

With all of these barriers identified, participants were also asked to provide insight into what they recognize as enabling museums to be public spaces. In the same succinct fashion that she identified barriers, one participant explained, “I think what facilitates it is the desire to be a responsible global citizen.”

Other’s echoed this ideological motivation, explaining that much of what enables museums to be public space comes from a rejection of the practices that have historically kept museums from being public. For example, one interviewee responded that museums are able to be more public when their staff is more diversified, thus enabling museums to be more imaginative. Another interviewee’s responses supported this idea, sharing that:

*...diversifying the perspectives of our internal team has been highly effectual in changing the ways we look at issues, and also providing enhanced opportunities when people are engaging with us.*

One interviewee’s response summarized common themes identified by participants:

*I think one thing that's leading it a lot of really brave museum folk who are being very vocal about what they believe needs to happen. So I guess it's almost like thought leadership in a way."*

For example, she gave attribution to "a lot of wonderful museum workers of color who are really bringing out a lot of the really problematic issues of privilege and oppression that have kind of silently dogged museums for years that ignored.” She explains that the shift towards museums becoming more public is “being driven a lot by great people." Other interviewees pointed towards smaller museums as being leaders, with one participant enthusiastically stating:

*It's many of those smaller sites that are pretty fearless in being the leaders to say 'We're not going to be as scared about being allies and advocates, and speaking out explicitly*

*around contemporary issues that are happening in our communities.' Bigger institutions are doing it too, but I think if we really look towards some of those smaller organizations, there are huge lessons to be learned about how we can be better and more responsive institutions."*

Overall, interviewees seemed to agree with the sentiment of one interviewee who concluded:

*It's just a process. It gains momentum with the more people who are kind of putting the ideas out there.*

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter highlighted a number of findings that emerged from the narrative data collected in this study. First, this chapter presented perspectives on the role of museums in society. In light of the many roles that museums can play, interviewees repeatedly highlighted that museums are uniquely positioned to play an important role in democratic society because of their unique assets. With reference to one of the study's objectives, this section then presented a number of perspectives on the ability that museums have to foster dialogue and interaction. A number of participants also pointed out that museums can foster other kinds of engagement beyond dialogue. Next, with reference to a second objective of the study, findings that addressed museums' capacity to be places of learning and empowerment for individuals and groups of individuals were presented. In a similar vein, the finding that participants felt that museums were powerful places of memory was also presented. Following that reflection, findings about the capacity for museums to enable and inspire social and political change were introduced, thus addressing the study's third objective. Reconnecting to the overall purpose of the study, findings indicating whether participants felt that museums could serve as public spaces

were presented, along with an overview on participants' definitions of public space and an analysis of the factors that inhibit museums from and enable museums to serve as public spaces.

Moving beyond this presentation of somewhat disparate abstractions, the next section of this thesis opens with a narrative example from one participant that showcases the potential of museums to be public spaces. This narrative will be accompanied by a discussion of these findings.

### **A Note on Findings**

Based on the sample of interviewees, and based on the methods used to collect this narrative data, it is important to note that these results are conditional and are not generalizable. Individuals interviewed for this research are not representative of all museum professionals or museum staff. They hold views that are progressive with reference to the majority of museums in the United States, which are seen by interviewees as having more conventional philosophies and practices. These interviewees were selected to participate in this study precisely because of their viewpoints, as the purpose of this study is to understand the roles that museums can and do play in society.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Implications**

As evidenced by the previous chapter's presentation of the findings, this study unearthed a surprisingly rich array of insights into the role of museums in society. In this chapter, the discussion focuses on key themes related to the objectives of this research, to additional and unexpected themes that emerged, and to implications for future research. These ideas were selected because of their salience to the purpose of this research, which is to explore the role of museums in democracy and to understand the capacity for museums to be public spaces. The present discussion begins with a story that encapsulates many of the themes of this research, and thus provides a jumping off point for further discussion and analysis.

#### **Laying the Groundwork for a Healthy Democratic Community**

Throughout the course of the interviews, study participants were invited to share stories about their experiences with museums that saw their role as being public spaces. The example shared by one participant is particularly compelling, as it captures many of the themes that emerged from discussions and pertain to the objectives of the study. The following narrative describes contemporary programming from the Matilda Joselyn Gage Foundation at its site in New York, the Gage Center. Gage was described the interviewee as an activist for women's suffrage and for the abolition of slavery. The Foundation preserves, interprets, and makes relevant to current generations the work of Gage and her contemporaries.

The interviewee enthusiastically described programming that evolved out of the Foundation's response to discussions that were happening in their community around reproductive rights:

*They wanted to have this conversation because their community was having it. Because there wasn't a real "brave" or "safe space" for this conversation to be had. And they noticed that so many words of women suffragists are used in the reproductive rights movement.*

*So they said, 'What if we could train community members, everyone from priests, to Planned Parenthood activist, to your local barber at the barbershop, as dialogue facilitators, and not only provide that dialogic training, but also create models to have dialogue around these issues, and then actually host the dialogues within this community?'*

*And they did all of that.... and then they held a regularly occurring dialogue series where participants met at the Gage Center multiple times to be in space with people who they deeply disagreed with so that they could find areas of commonality and support, and really work to understand each other in better ways.*

*And the results were astounding. The evaluations were extremely strong and individuals who participated in the program continually reflected in their comments, both anecdotally and, you know, really specifically and quantitatively, that they themselves felt extremely changed by the experience. That they felt that they were not demonizing the other as they were beforehand. They recognized that people who felt differently about these issues had extremely valid ways and reasons for feeling that way, and that they felt far more inclined to work with others to find commonality around these issues moving forward. So it was spectacularly successful, and in some ways was a conversation that could only happen at the Gage Center because the local barber and the Planned Parenthood activist and the Catholic priest weren't getting together anywhere else.*

This story suggests that when museums see it within their role, and when they have the tools and resources necessary, museums can function as the type of public spaces discussed in this study. Though this example represents only one account and one model of a museum

fulfilling the role of public space, it provides a jumping off point for the present discussion of the findings.

## **Discussion**

Drawing on themes suggested in the story of the Gage Foundation, the following discussion highlights key findings around community engagement, learning, public memory, social and political change, and the unique position and potential of museums. These findings are analyzed using theories detailed in the literature review, and subsequently implications for future research are outlined.

### ***Museums Engage and Involve Community***

In this example, the interviewee suggests that the Gage Foundation was attuned to the needs of its community, and that it saw it within its purview to respond to these needs. The Foundation set out to create programming explicitly focused on facilitating dialogue around reproductive rights. To do so, the Foundation began to seek community “buy-in” and active participation from community members. In this way, the Foundation worked to enable community members to facilitate dialogue by training community leaders, such as the priest, the Planned Parenthood activist, and the local barber, to engage their community around this contentious topic.

That the Gage Foundation was engaged with its community is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is consistent with other interviewees’ assessments of the role of the modern museum; all respondents stated or suggested that they felt that museums should be engaging with

their communities. This also suggests that museums need to be engaged with their communities in order to fulfill the role of being an effective free space.

The Foundation also provided a physical space for these conversations to happen, thus functioning to bring together people who might not otherwise interact on a daily basis. During the dialogue series, the Foundation opened its doors to community members, inviting them both into the space and to participate in dialogue. According to the interviewee, these factors enabled the Gage Center to be a place where the rest of the community came together to engage.

To the extent that the conversations like those that took place in the Gage Center can enable the development of relationships and linkages between, community is strengthened. As noted in Bridger and Alter (2008), linkages that occur through interaction in the community create structures or networks that can be mobilized to address an array of issues in a community. As such, free spaces that facilitate interaction and dialogue are seen as essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic society.

### ***Museums Foster Learning Through Engagement***

Through engaging one another in dialogue, the interviewee indicated that community members began to learn from one another. She explains, “They recognized that people who felt differently about these issues had extremely valid ways and reasons for feeling that way.” As discussed by other study participants, the community members that this interviewee discussed were able to understand others’ viewpoints, and they learned why others who had opposing viewpoints held those opinions. While consensus was likely not reached, nor was it the goal, the Gage Foundation enabled interaction amongst loosely-affiliated community members, dialogue



between those with opposing views, and learning, which occurred as a result of the interaction and dialogue.

Literature on free spaces and informal learning posits that a key feature of free spaces is that they are places where people with diverse viewpoints can come together. True free spaces are not places where people can come to be comforted in the sense that their views will be reaffirmed or validated outright. Instead, free spaces are meant to challenge individuals and expose them to new ideas. Evans and Boyte (1986) and Johansson (2006) discuss that it is through engaging in settings that welcome diverse perspectives that meaningful innovation can occur and where the perspectives of others can be understood. The business of free spaces is to enable individuals and groups of individuals to engage as citizens in the difficult work of democracy.

Of note is that the learning that took place in the Gage Center can be characterized as informal and participatory. Instead of hosting a lecture-style talk or presentation for visitors to listen to, visitors engaged with one another and with the history of the museum. In this way, visitors were able to partake in the creation of learning. Though visitors likely did not use this language to describe their experience, the overwhelmingly positive responses that the interviewee shared suggest that those who participated in the dialogue appreciated the opportunity to share and to learn actively.

### ***Museums Serve as Places of Memory***

This story also highlights another finding discussed by interviewees, which is the idea the museums are powerful because they store and create public memory. Though not explicitly

articulated in the narrative provided by the interviewee, the idea of hosting the dialogues in the space where similar conversation historically occurred has a certain power to it is consistent with ideas expressed by several interviewees.

Furthermore, although the interviewee who provided this narrative did not share specific details about the memory of the Gage Center or participants' experiences with memory, this example does showcase museums' rhetorical power. Effectively, the Gage Center served as a literal topos, or point from which reasoning can begin (Corbett & Eberly, 2000). In other words, the Gage Center's physical space and collections all served as tools to enable community members to reason, deliberate, and, in some cases, consider taking action.

### ***Museums Enable Social and Political Change***

As described by the interviewee, the rich information that community members provided in their evaluations of the Gage Foundation's dialogue series also suggests that participants felt enabled and empowered to act, both individually and collectively. For example, visitors to the Gage Center reflected that "they felt far more inclined to work with others to find commonality around these issues moving forward." Across many of the interviews conducted in this study, other interviewees explained that visitors to their museums had similar experiences. One participant shared that often people who come to his museum feel moved to action by their experiences, noting that "the action of [the museum] space is something they want to make present in their everyday life." In this way, dialogue, interaction, and learning serve to inspire greater social and political change.

These results and responses are unsurprising in light of literature from democratic political theory and critical pedagogy that suggests that political power can be derived through engaging with one another, participating in deliberation, or coming together to address a common issue (Mathews, 2014a; Levine, 2013; Boyte & Kari, 1996). Literature on value and power of public spaces suggests that the places in which these activities occur are important civic spaces.

### ***Museums are Uniquely Positioned within Society***

The story from the Gage Foundation captures another notion suggested by many interviewees, which is the idea that museums are uniquely positioned to serve as public spaces that are effective free spaces. In running this program, the Foundation used its unique assets, in this case its history and the physical space of the Gage Home. It also responded to its mission, which is not to simply interpret and preserve the history of Gage and other suffragists, but also to educate “current and future generations about Gage’s work and its power to drive contemporary social change” (Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation, 2009). This example stands as one example of how museums can be places that foster dialogue and interaction, enable learning and the realization of individual and collective agency, and inspire social and political change. The idea that museums have a unique opportunity to perform such roles echoes claims made by other interviewees from the study.

### *Museums Have Potential*

It is important to remember that this story from the Gage Center is just one example of how museums can meet their potential as public spaces. Many other interviewees provided similarly inspiring stories, thus acknowledging that there are indeed many museums that are engaged with this particular type of innovating museum work. Nonetheless, it is also important to keep in mind that while all interviewees felt strongly that museums have the potential to be public spaces, they also recognized a number of considerable barriers that inhibit museums from reaching that potential.

### **Implications for Further Action and Research**

This story highlights many themes that emerged from the findings. However, other responses from interviewees provide a rich set of insights into the role of museums in democratic society. In many cases, insights from study participants raised more questions than they answered, which suggests that there is much more to be explored. These additional findings, implications, and opportunities for future research are explored here.

One of the most consistently discussed topics across all interviews was the issue of power, privilege, and representation in museum work. Addressing issues of power, privilege, and representation is not only an ethical and humanitarian obligation, but it is also democratic. Drawing from the oft-quoted rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, “no one is free when others are oppressed.” For all of the reasons discussed in the previous chapter, as well as reasons not enumerated in this thesis, addressing this issue of how to democratize and make museums more inclusive warrants greater and deeper inquiry.

Another issue that interviewees suggest that museums need to address is the notion of the “stranger problem.” In the event that museums are public and are able to attract a diverse audience, engagement can still be challenging as people are often hesitant to engage with others. Further research into ways to facilitate dialogue and interaction with diverse publics would provide richness to the discussion on museums as public spaces that are effective free spaces.

Interviewees’ suggestion that dialogue is not the only form of engagement that can and should occur in museums is also particularly interesting. This thesis privileged interaction, broadly writ and vaguely defined, and dialogue as ultimate goals for museums as free spaces. While valid to explore, and while many participants did praise museums’ capacity to facilitate dialogue, it is important to note that there are other modes of interaction that could play essential roles in fostering democratic societies. Additional research and “radical imagination,” to quote one interviewee, would also contribute richness to future studies that explore the role of museums in democratic society.

### **Final Thoughts**

Interviewees’ responses indicate that in instances where museums have served as free spaces, these settings have been created intentionally and with considerable effort. Like the enabling settings discussed in Chapter Two, museums that serve as free spaces do not meet these functions organically, but rather through intentionality on the part of the staff and leadership. This observation indicates that with effort, commitment, and intentionality, more museums could more fully fulfil their role as public spaces.

In reporting that most museums do not currently meet their potential to be free, public spaces, interviewees often expressed that more museums should aim to do so. Many participants even contended that in general, there are not many such spaces in society, whether they take the form of museums or other institutions. This reflection affirms Oldenburg's concern that public spaces are on the decline in modern society (1999). Simultaneously, interviewees' enthusiasm towards the idea of museums that see themselves as public spaces suggests two exciting ideas along this line of thought. The first is that these types of spaces are essential and needed in order to create and sustain healthy democratic societies. The second conclusion is that there is indeed great potential for museums to fill this role. This thesis presents rich findings around the role of museums in society, but fully acknowledges that there is both more research and more work to be done to truly make museums essential civic spaces.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

Though this thesis research asks questions about museums, it is fundamentally concerned with addressing issues of democracy. In drawing on theories of democratic politics, this thesis aims to discuss and illuminate the importance of democratic spaces to individual and collective well-being. As outlined in this thesis, public spaces, and particularly free spaces, are recognized as being essential civic spaces. In this conceptualization, public spaces are the everyday places where people engage with the everyday activities of democratic citizenship. Public spaces take many shapes and forms, and this thesis seeks to understand whether museums can be public spaces as defined in this framework.

In exploring the role of museums in society, this research looks to museums to understand their role in American democracy. In inquiring about museums' roles, the specific objectives of this study were to understand:

- whether museums can be effective free spaces for fostering the public interaction and dialogue that is essential to creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies.
- whether museums can enable individual and collective agency and learning.
- whether museums can meet the goals of enabling and inspiring greater social and political change.

To address these objectives, narrative data was collected from a sample of 12 engaged museum professionals and scholars. Given that the selected study participants hold views that are

progressive with reference to the majority of museums in the United States, the findings and conclusions of this study are not generalizable to the larger population of museum professionals, scholars, nor to the institutions with which they affiliate. Nonetheless, the findings from this study provide compelling insight into the role that museums do and can play in American democracy.

Generally speaking, interviewees indicated that while they felt strongly that museums have the capacity to serve as public spaces, and while many believed that museums should serve in that capacity, the majority of interviewees recognized that most American museums do not fully live up to this potential. Interviewees provided insight into the kinds of barriers that keep museums from realizing this potential. Commonly identified barriers include issues of: power and privilege, representation and inclusivity, perceived or desired neutrality, financial restrictions and funding, and lack of imagination and fear in museum leadership.

Despite real and perceived barriers, the majority of interviewees concluded their interviews with tones of pragmatic optimism for the future of museums as important places in society. All interviewees recognized that there is potential for museums to play meaningful roles in democracy, and that many museums are making positive steps to move in this direction.

If museums are to meet the potential that is suggested by interviewees, museum professionals and scholars across the wider scope of the museum field need to take up a number of questions and have honest conversations with and amongst themselves about the issues surrounding the modern museum. Perhaps the overarching question of this research, which asks about the role of museums, is a good place to start this reflection. For example, museum leaders should have honest conversations about museums' implications in preserving oppressive



structures of power and privilege. From these reflections, questions about hiring practices and exhibition contention can follow, as can questions about who the museum truly intends to serve.

### ***Final Reflections***

Drawing from the rich body of work related to democratic political theory and community development theory that underpin this research, combined with the findings gleaned from the extensive narrative data collected in this study, I conclude that there is an underutilized, and possibly unrealized, opportunity for museums to serve as free spaces and enabling settings as conceptualized in this thesis. Moreover, my experience of doing this work further reinforces my conviction that if and when museums are conceptualized as free spaces and enabling settings, they have the capacity to play a central role in creating and sustaining healthy democratic societies.

It is my hope that this work, and any subsequent works on the subject, will motivate and encourage museum leaders to think even more deeply about questions such as: “Which publics, or communities, do we serve?”, “What does engagement mean to us, and what does meaningful engagement look like?”, and “What is the role of museums in today’s society?” In addition to these key and central questions, I hope that this work will also inspire museum leaders to ask questions of: “Which publics, or communities, *should* we serve?”, “What *should* engagement mean to us, and what *should* meaningful engagement look like?”, and “What *should be* the role of museums in today’s society?” It is also my hope that when answering these questions, museums leaders will see their responsibility to be important to the fabric of the American democracy.

As interviewees discussed, museums generally have the capacity to serve as free spaces, but they frequently do not do so because of a number of factors. In order for museums to be important democratic institutions, they need to push these boundaries – they need to be places that encourage and enable the “radical” acts of democratic citizenship can occur.

At the close of my interviews, I asked each participant had any final thoughts left to share. One interviewee responded by saying that it is “important for young scholars like yourself to do the research but also to take a stance; there's no neutral in these sort of positions of research – so I just encourage you to be brave and fierce in your own scholarship and to find ways to apply it to your own practice.”

It is with this advice in mind that I articulate my closing remarks: Based on this research and on my own academic background in community development, I conclude further that not only do museums have the potential and the promise to be important civic, public, and free spaces, but that they also have a responsibility to do so. To create change, museum leaders, scholars, and young academics like me need to recognize and respond to this responsibility.

## Appendix A:

### Study Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: Research Inquiry: The role of museums in society

Body Text:

Hello \_\_ (Potential Participant Name) \_\_,

My name is Alyssa Gurklis and I am an undergraduate student in the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University. I study community and economic development and I am working with Dr. Theodore Alter to complete my undergraduate honors thesis.

I am interested in learning about the role that museums play in modern society, particularly with respect to their promise in facilitating citizen interaction and dialogue that I hypothesize is essential to creating strong communities. I understand that you have relevant experiences and insights regarding this topic based on your extensive work with \_\_ (institution/university/relevant projects) \_\_.

I am interested in speaking with you about this matter, and I am also writing to inquire whether you might be interested in participating in my research study as a key informant interviewee. The interview will last for around an hour, and you will be asked to share a bit about your experiences related to your museum work. Your responses will be treated confidentially and there are no risks to participating.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this note by \_\_ (date) \_\_. If you wish to participate, I will provide you with a consent form prior to conducting the interview, and we work to determine a time to conduct the interview that works optimally with your schedule.

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions, comments, or concerns. I can be reached via email or via telephone at: \_\_ (researcher's telephone number) \_\_.

I look forward to hearing from you soon, and thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Best,  
Alyssa Gurklis

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# ACADEMIC VITA

## **Alyssa M. Gurklis** Curriculum Vitae

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(412) 715-3036

### **EDUCATION**

**Pennsylvania State University** 2013 - 2018  
Schreyer Honors College  
College of Agricultural Sciences  
B.S. Community, Environment, and Development (CED)  
*Concentration:* International Development  
*Specialization:* Intercultural Studies  
*Honors Thesis:* Museums as Public Spaces: Reimagining the Role of Museums as Spaces for Democracy (Forthcoming 2017)

### **RELEVANT COURSEWORK**

- Power, Conflict, and Community Decision Making (CED 417H)
- Community, Environment, and Development Research Methods (CED 404)
- The Foundations of Civic and Community Engagement (CIVCM 211)
- Human Development, Health and Education from a Global Perspective (PSYCH 472)
- World Media Systems (COMM 419H)

### **WORK EXPERIENCE**

#### **Center for Economic and Community Development, Penn State University**

*Research Assistant, Dr. Theodore Alter* January 2016 – Present

- Contribute to various research initiatives by collecting data, writing, and editing manuscripts
- Perform office management tasks to ensure smooth team operations

*Escaping the Resource Curse, Research Assistant, Dr. Timothy Kelsey* January 2016 - Present

- Assist on various research initiatives by pulling samples, revising surveys, analyzing data
- Research the community and economic impacts of oil and gas drilling

**Student Farm at Penn State** January 2016 - Present  
*Communications and Outreach Intern*

- Create print and online marketing materials for the Sustainable Food Systems Program
- Redesign and curate content for an updated Student Farm website
- Manage social media outlets to connect and maintain relations with community members

#### **Penn State Extension - Allegheny County**

*AFRI-EFSNE Project, Food Systems Intern* June - August 2015

- Outreach and Consumption Research Team member for project funded by the USDA
- Market workshop series focused on promoting scalable agriculture and sustainable living skills

## PAPERS

Alter, T.R., Sterner, G.E.III, Engle, E.W., Miller, M.S., Gurklis, A. M., Frumento, P.Z., Barsom, S.H., Calore, G.S., & Goldberg, D.E. Achieving the promise of sustainability through civic engagement and public scholarship. Prepared for *Public Scholarship, Sustainability, Community Engagement Colloquium*.

## PRESENTATIONS

Gurklis, A., Hoch, H., & Pillen, L. (2016, July 30). *Cultivating food systems engagement through a collaborative, community-based cooking program*. Presentation at the 2016 Sustainable Agricultural Education Association National Conference: Santa Cruz, CA.

Pillen, L., Gurklis, A., Hoch, H. (2016, July 30). *Sustaining the Buzz: Growing Student Involvement on Student Farms*. Presentation at the 2016 Sustainable Agricultural Education Association National Conference: Santa Cruz, CA.

Pillen, L., Gurklis, A., Hoch, H., Hunter, M., Mortensen, D., Cranage, D., Hinrichs, C., & Karsten, H. (2016, July 29-31). *A Sustainable Food Systems Program is Born*. Poster at the 2016 Sustainable Agricultural Education Association National Conference: Santa Cruz, CA.

Hoch, H., Gurklis, A., Michalisin, N., Heine, C. (2016, June 14). *Student Farmers Taking a Stand in the Food System*. Presentation at the 2016 University of Vermont Food Systems Summit, Burlington, VT.

## GRANTS

Erickson Discovery Grant Summer 2016

- Undergraduate honors thesis research funded to \$3,500

## HONORS AND AWARDS

Penn State Student Leadership Award	2016
Gamma Sigma Delta, Honor Society of Agriculture	2015 – Present
Rosemarie C. and Howard R. Peiffer Scholarship	2015 – 2017
Schreyer Honors College Academic Excellence Scholarship	2013 – 2017
Provost Award Scholarship	2013 – 2017
Dean's List (GPA of 3.5 or higher)	2013 – Present

## LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

### **Penn State Student Farm Club**

*Campus & Club Engagement Coordinator* August 2016 – Present

- Work in conjunction with executive team to foster community amongst active members and with the larger Penn State and State College community.

*Project Coordinator - Cooking Collaborative*

August 2015 – Present

- Co-create and organize a series of cooking events aiming to engage attendees with their food system