Preliminary Exhibit Planning for the new Tomaquag Museum

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It is an exciting time for the Tomaquag Museum, Rhode Island’s only Indigenous Museum dedicated to sharing the culture, art and history of tribal communities of Southern New England. It is actively preparing for a move from a small, remote site in Exeter, Rhode Island to an exciting new location at the University of Rhode Island campus which will be easily accessed and centrally located.

In an entirely new building, which will be surrounded by an interpretive, indigenized landscape, guests will find an engaging and inspiring museum campus that prompts discovery of the past and the present. Through programs and exhibitions, visitors will be invited to explore the opportunities, challenges and events that shape the culture and lives of Southeastern New England’s tribal communities.

Exhibit experiences will be located both indoors and out: in galleries, across the landscape, and in unexpected niches in the buildings that comprise the museum campus. It is a critical time to begin this work; exhibits and the visitor experience around these exhibits, must dovetail with the architectural and landscape design. The work of this study can inform the architectural and landscape design, as well as the interior exhibit design and visitor experience planning that is forthcoming.

This study is exhibition-centric, as it focuses upon what the visitor experience can and should look and feel like, rather than the architecture or landscape design. It explores what types of narratives might be included as well as what sorts of exhibits might be imagined when the exhibitions are designed. The recommendations and findings in this study were not made in a vacuum—instead, they are the outcome of multiple creative focus group sessions that totaled nearly 50 people. All focus groups of which were attended by tribal members, stakeholders, staff and museum supporters while facilitated by professional museum planners. In addition, nearly 150 people were reached through questionnaires which like the focus groups, included tribal members and the museum community. This entire process has been a collaborative between the Tomaquag Museum and seasoned museum planning and design consultants with extensive experience in developing interpretive museum experiences.

*To see the visuals used in the focus groups for facilitated discussion, see appendix.
INDIGENIZING EXHIBITION & EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Throughout this early process of exhibition planning and future phases of exhibition design, it was and will be, critical that an indigenization of the storyline and narrative takes place. This means that a “weaving or braiding together” of Native knowledge systems, along with Euro-centric knowledge, be told in order to decolonize the content, dismantle colonial ideologies, and rebalance power structures (Antoine, asthma-na-hi).

To inform this process, it is essential that planners and designers of the visitor experience continue the active engagement of the tribal communities whose stories will be told here, and consider indigenous pedagogies, in the exhibition planning and design.

In order to appropriately and authentically tell indigenous stories, indigenous voices must be heard while acknowledging the importance of recognizing untruths and misrepresentations, which through time, have caused a shifting in interpretation that prevents an authentic narratives.

• The recommendations and findings in this study were not made in a vacuum—instead, they are the outcome of creative focus group sessions and questionnaires that together account for nearly 200 respondents.

• Tribal members, stakeholders, staff and museum supporters were included in all planning sessions.
PLANNING AHEAD: WHO WILL MAKE UP THE AUDIENCE?

Comprehensive planning of a visitor experience (the exhibitions) begins with the exploration of the question “who will the visitors be?” By fully understanding who a museum wants to reach, only then can a plan be developed to reach those people.

Through facilitated focus group conversations, participants from the museum’s community agreed that the museum should be designed to welcome an audience that will be, at a minimum, inclusive of the following groups:

- Local tribal members
- Tribal members from across the country
- Students from URI, where the museum will be located
- Public school students
- Multi-generational groups
- Family groups
- Tourists
- Local Community

As we explored this question of “who will attend?” more deeply, questionnaires were issued and asked respondents to think about who they would be inclined to visit the museum with. Data tells us that of the nearly 150 people surveyed, most believe they will visit with their immediate or extended, inter-generational family.

The overall take-away to the question, “who will be the audience?” is that the museum community should expect a broad audience, who is both indigenous and who is not, to visit. It was also acknowledged that these visits will primarily occur in the form of multi-generational, family visits.

Of the nearly 150 people surveyed, most believe they will visit with their immediate or extended, inter-generational family.
What do these results mean?

This suggests to us, as professional museum exhibition planners and designers, that the experience should:

- Offer exhibits that foster **social interaction** of the visiting family, rather than primarily exhibits that are meant for one person at a time.

- Present experiences that are designed with both young and older guests in mind; typically this means some **high-tech** (like touchscreens) alongside **non-tech**.

- **Serve all ages**, which means including tactile, as well as visual, audio and possibly sensory exhibits.

- Offer content that can appeal to people with a range of **learning styles**.

- Provide places for families to **hear and share stories**. Visiting family groups often like to hear stories of other families.

- Provide places to sit within the exhibit galleries and around the outdoor exhibits. This is for the young parent carrying an infant or the elderly grandfather who needs a break. **Seating** is important to integrate when appealing to families.
Facilitated focus group sessions, each of which were attended by more than one tribal member, suggested the narrative in the exhibition galleries and/ or outdoor exhibit spaces should represent the stories of indigenous people through the lens of history as well as contemporary times. The narratives should remind visitors that indigenous people are vibrant and live as active community members; the narrative should allow guests to learn how the histories of these people shapes present day lives.

Questionnaires illustrate the same results as the focus group with 94% of people interested in learning how the past and present intersects in the lives of indigenous people from southeastern New England.

What do these results mean?
This suggests to us, as professional museum exhibition planners and designers, that the exhibition experience should be planned to be easily updated by staff. To appropriately tell stories of the present, contemporary voices will need to be added to the narrative to keep it contemporary and fresh. This may take the form of a feedback station, some exhibits that are easily refreshed with new graphics or stories, or a place to explore “hot topics.” As events or experiences unfold in the future, they can be easily and quickly incorporated into the experience.

As an example, imagine a museum exhibition that opened just before Covid and which tells the stories of a community. If the exhibition did not plan ahead for “easy updates” then the story of Covid would have no place in the exhibition. But, if the design is strategic and allows for easy updates, the exhibition would quickly make these changes. The exhibits at the Tomaquag Museum needs to be of this type to a degree.
THE EXHIBITION STORY: THEMES & NARRATIVES

During the facilitated focus groups, each of which were attended by a broad audience that included indigenous tribal members, many types of stories, or themes, were discussed. These consistently centered around 5 “big ideas” which are summarized in the adjacent diagram, and include:

- Sharing Stories and Traditions (traditional way of life, shared memory)
- Connecting to the Landscape (how we use and once used, the land)
- Our History (a long continuum, misrepresentations, accuracy)
- Living Alongside the Sea (resources access, past/present)
- Creating Culturally Inclusive Spaces (social justice issues, etc.)

Questionnaires allowed the respondent to reflect on the diagram that emerged from the focus groups (shown adjacent) and rank each category, in terms of interest.

Results show that of 5 offered categories, “Our History” was of the greatest interest, followed by “Sharing Stories and Traditions” and “Connecting to the Landscape.” “Creating Culturally Inclusive Spaces” and “Living Alongside the Sea,” lagged behind. All would be told through a lens of past and present.
What do these results mean?

Given the focus groups had a very strong support for the inclusion of topics described as “Creating Culturally Inclusive Spaces,” which was described a place to tackle hot topics like cultural justice, decolonization of the mindset, bias, activism and more, it is possible that the diagram left the respondent somewhat unclear what could take place in this zone. For this reason, we do not feel it should be eliminated although it had the least interest in the questionnaire format, but perhaps given an exhibit footprint in keeping with its response—meaning, tell these stories in a small space.

For the purpose of space planning in the exhibit gallery, these results could be interpreted and in turn, direct space allocation in the following manner:

- The largest space: **Our History, then/now**
- Second largest space: **Stories & Traditions, then /now**
- Connecting to the **Landscape and Living Along the Sea**, then/now could be combined and equal Stories/Traditions in footprint or be somewhat smaller
- Smallest exhibit footprint: **Culturally Inclusive Spaces**
THE EXHIBITION STORY:
EXPANDING THE NARRATIVES WITH TOPICS

The focus group discussions yielded five “big ideas.” These provided a foundation upon which to test potential smaller stories, or messages that could work together to deliver content in each of the five big idea “zones.” These messages, along with some additional ones added to by staff and the professional museum planning group, are reflected in the adjacent diagram.

This diagram was then shared with questionnaire respondents. Although it was made clear that this is simply a list of ideas—not a final list of content—respondents were invited to react by identifying what areas were of greatest interest.

Two different word clouds were created from the nearly 150 respondents with the following messages at the top:

- decolonizing the mindset
- history
- origin stories
- critical lens
- environment
- sovereignty

These seem like really good overall categories, and although I ranked “Living by the Sea” last in my interests, I’m also really curious about “clamming then & now” - my hope would be that through something as specific as clamming, I would get a window into the other themes—culture, history, the environment, and politics.

—one questionnaires respondent
Which specific story would you be most interested in learning about?

Narragansett Niantic Indigenous make Connecting Sovereignty
cultural justice Social justice come Critical Lens Thanksgiving
stories Roger Williams Columbus history sea
Decolonizing mindset living Origin stories
people culture Sharing Stories Traditions Critical Lens
Connecting landscape Environment indigenous people
Niantic Indigenous People landscape Language

people Living Climate change Indigenous
Access coastal resources Social Justice Place Names
Narragansett Niantic Origin stories culture
Critical Lens local History Language
Decolonizing mindset Cultural Justice Sovereignty
Clamming tribes stories Environment today Medicine
A deeper look at the respondents reaction to messages and the proposed thematic organization of the exhibition story provided additional information, all of which confirms a general enthusiasm for the preliminary content framework and development:

**How likely are you to recommend visiting a museum that has the types of theme areas and stories that we have identified in the planning diagrams?**

94% are likely to recommend a visit!

**What do you like most about the exhibit theme areas/exhibit stories as shown?**

- 21.49% used the word “history”
- 13.22% used the word “themes”
- 9.09% used the words “past and present”
- 9.09% used the words “variety”
Word cloud captures respondents description about what they most like about the exhibit theme areas/exhibit stories as shown.

culture now people incorporate showing center areas place way overlap exhibits love way present overlapping themes connect Interweaving past present circle major story thread will theme areas variety connecting past present themes seem history creating culturally inclusive past present indigenous indigenous peoples interplay past present connection past present future think exhibit stories stories learned culturally inclusive spaces museum space everything love Thematic interested specifics flow topics
I would love an interactive map for land indigenous land acknowledgment. If someone comes to visit the museum, it would be so cool if they could put in their home address in and see whose land they live on.

Beliefs

It might be discussed in the stories of family, but I would love to see some exploration of gender roles, identities, and norms and how past practices can inform more recent concepts (like two spirit identities, etc.)

Use and interaction with native plants and the rivers?

I don’t think anything is missing. Is there a designated space in the design for art (photography/painting/sculpture)? Or is this incorporated into the design as a means of storytelling?

Ancestral stories that focus on life, survival, finding peace and happiness.

I’m not sure if this is completely missing but I would like there to be a heavy focus on specifically indigenous female excellence. Past, and present.

How can non-indigenous people show cultural appreciation and avoid cultural appropriation. What are micro aggressions and how can we learn about them so we don’t use them?

The pursuit of happiness—certainly re-envisioned but this is an important and complex component of Narragansett identity

Individual biographies; uses of land; seasons/climate; housing then + now

This seems very encompassing — great work so far!

As part of the process of evaluating the exhibit themes and stories, we asked, what is missing? Respondents offered the following insight:
THE EXHIBITION STORY: USING THE NARRATIVE TO INSPIRE DESIGN

Exhibit design is the process through which a museum brings the messages and narrative to life. A gallery’s design is tailored to engage the intended audience through the experience. The best museum practices include a design approach that offers accessible, inclusive exhibits that create relevance between the messages and the guest. Contemporary design thinking is to include a variety of exhibit types in a space, which together encourage engagement like: reading, looking, feeling, making, hearing, smelling, doing, or discussing.

While the exhibition space at the new Tomaquag Museum will use lots of different exhibit “types,” four types were suggested to gauge how people felt.

Listening Stations: with narrated video of Indigenous people sharing stories 40%

Viewing of Belongings (the museum collection): 35%

Interactive Touchscreen (with varied content): 15%

Make & Take: places for guests to make and take something that represents Indigenous art, history or culture 10%

“...I would like to see a physically comfortable space provided that is meditative - a place where visitors could sit with all the rich information that they are experiencing - to process in any way that they need to. The room would be identified as such and an invitation extended to visitors to enter and reflect.”

— one questionnaires respondent
If you could choose one word to describe how you think people should leave the museum feeling, what would that be?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected</td>
<td>14.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired</td>
<td>12.59%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humbled</td>
<td>9.63%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td>8.89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enlightened</td>
<td>6.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>2.96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who is the Audience?

broad, general audience, which includes:
- elder groups
- school groups
- college students
- tourists
- locals
- indigenous people

Who do they visit with?

- intergenerational family groups
- friends
- academically-oriented groups
- tour groups

How do they visit?

- guided
- unguided tours

Slides used during focus groups. These were facilitated creative discussions attended by nearly 50 people.
Where will guests find interpretive exhibits?

Across the site, exhibits can be found indoors and out.
Experience Planning Guidelines: Circulation

Circulation

Across the site exhibits can be experienced in a non-linear order

Circulation

In the exhibit gallery, the experience will also be non-linear
Outdoor Experience/Exhibit Inspiration
Indoor Experience/Exhibit Inspiration
Indoor Experience/Exhibit Inspiration
Indoor Experience/Exhibit Inspiration
Thematic Development: What Should The Lasting Memories/ Impressions/ or New Knowledge Be?

Thematic Development: What Should The Themes/ Content Look Like?

Big Ideas from Staff/ Stakeholder Meeting

- place to learn who the local tribe is
- guests should learn that we are still here
- stories should be "alive": evolving, enduring
- stories should be of past, present, future
- strong interest in showcasing "topical" stories over time (i.e., fishing)
- create relevance