



(above) The exhibition's banner image featured local community members.

Radical Collaboration: Building to WE in Exhibition Design

Essential Elements for Confronting Social Issues with Community

Darcie Fohrman, Janeen Bryant



iNUEVOlution! Latinos and the New South was designed to address contemporary issues in the South’s rapidly diversifying racial and cultural landscape.¹ This award-winning, 3,500-square-foot traveling exhibition, which opened in September 2015, was created by North Carolina’s Levine Museum of the New South (LMNS) in collaboration with the Atlanta History Center and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Bilingual, immersive, and interactive, it featured robust visitor contributions, year-long programming, civic dialogues, collaborative art, and online media that explored the surprising ways Latinos are shaping the South and the South is shaping Latinos.

The exhibition was inspired by the Latino New South Project, a multiyear series of listening sessions launched in 2012 with the support of the American Alliance of Museum’s Innovation Lab. The project initiated listening sessions in Charlotte, Birmingham, and Atlanta that focused on understanding and documenting the dramatic and rapid demographic shift

occurring across the South, and to develop strong partnerships with Latino communities. The exhibition grew from the “7 Insights” distilled from this project: 1) Latinos are here to stay; 2) Latinos are from many cultures; 3) biculturalism is growing; 4) extended families are important; 5) bridging is essential; 6) language is a powerful symbol; and 7) becoming “documented” is difficult, often impossible.²

So, how does one turn a fascinating topic into an exhibition that becomes a catalyst for confronting contemporary social issues? And, what’s so radical about our collaboration? Janeen Bryant, former Vice President of Education at Levine Museum, with more than 10 years of highly collaborative community-centered program design, and Darcie Fohrman, a 40-year veteran of exhibition planning and emotive design, will share what they’ve learned about the collaborative exhibition design process during almost a decade of working together on projects at Levine Museum of the New South.

1 For more on *iNUEVOlution! Latinos and the New South* at Levine Museum of the New South, see: www.museumofthenewsouth.org/exhibits/nuevolution-latinos-and-the-new-south.

2 See “7 Insights,” Latino New South Project at www.museumofthenewsouth.org/learn/latino-new-south-resources/the-7-insights (accessed July 3, 2017).

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In this article, we’ll offer an honest and open perspective on the push and pull of exhibition development, including weathering the storms of group tension, exploring difficult questions, and taking the chance to fail. What is now regarded as a very successful project is also a good vehicle for sharing our insights on the notion of “radical collaboration” which we developed together. We also hope to offer answers to some top-of-mind questions, such as how does radical collaboration work? Is it worth the commitment? And, can it be replicated for other issues-based exhibitions?

From I to WE

Typically, the word collaboration is overused. Any group gathered to provide input to a product or process is not necessarily collaborating. A collaboration is a gathering of people oriented towards a focused purpose that results in expanded capacity for all involved.

A radical collaboration is a long-term commitment, building trust through authentic relationships, taking risks beyond the known, and building collective power with the community rather than solely through the museum’s authority. The museum planners share authority with community partners and each other. We believe it takes “radical collaboration” to create exhibitions that are catalysts for confronting and impacting contemporary issues.³

3 See the Radical Collaboration website, “a guide for individuals and organizations wishing to become more skilled at collaborative relationships,” at www.radicalcollaboration.com.

Our experience creating *iNUEVolution!* is an example of radical collaboration. We know from past LMNS projects that if you want to have an impact on your community, it takes a long-term commitment – in our case, years – to establish and maintain trust with internal and external partners. Our planning team spent months listening and learning from our partners’ different perspectives.⁴ We constantly reevaluated our assumptions about how the museum could address the issues and needs of the communities. We were committed to creating an experience for the museum’s visitors, but as a facilitator, not as a teacher. We learned from our communities and one another, which sometimes meant improving our ability to embrace conflict. WE experimented together to determine what could make a difference.⁵

The Essential Elements of Our Exploration of Radical Collaboration

Sharing Trust Trust – built over time across museum staff, trustees, volunteers, and local stakeholders – informed the authentic role that the museum could play in the community. With *iNUEVolution!*, where teams from the three collaborating institutions and several independent consultants worked over long distances, tensions sometimes built up. We were communicating across state lines, different time zones, and with sometimes competing agendas. Internally, visual cues were missed over the museum conference calls – affirming nods, subtle disagreement cues – and this meant that we had to work hard as a team to acknowledge each other’s input as valuable

4 Janeen Bryant and Kamille Bostick, *What’s the Big Idea? Using Listening Sessions to Build Relationships and Relevance*, AASLH Technical Leaflet #263 (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 2013); see <http://resource.aaslh.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2014/01/Tech-Leaf-263.pdf>.

5 “Me to We,” chapter 3 in Nina Simon’s *The Participatory Museum*, explores ways to enhance visitor experiences via interactions with others. See www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter3.

and take the time to disagree constructively with a focus on problem solving. It was crucial to write up the outcomes decided, give everyone a chance to weigh in, and update the concept plans and drawings for the record. We had weekly check-in calls to be sure that we resolved misunderstandings quickly.

Before we even began concept planning, internal team members agreed in writing to their roles, responsibilities, tasks, and the timeline for the project. As new consultants and partners joined the team, we spent time defining and periodically refining our roles. Darcie put these descriptions in writing for editing and buy-in. Janeen and museum staff held listening sessions in local churches, credit unions, school libraries, dining rooms, and grocery stores in a deliberate effort to cultivate a fluid, relational give and take – real reciprocity – between the museums and community stakeholders. Our approach required more than the typical focus-group method, which is often a transactional interaction with no long-term feedback or investment by “audience members.” We worked to have people see their diverse identities reflected in the work of the exhibition.

We flattened the hierarchy of contribution; the museum didn’t dictate the possibilities for stories or content. Our very intentional community collaboration came in the form of several meetings with multicultural organizations, follow-up emails, and participation that grew out of radio announcements, cards, and invitations to exhibition openings and programs. Externally, even as trust developed, it took over a year of collaborative push and pull with museum team members, consultants, and Latino organizations to agree on how we would work together to create an exhibition that would directly address hard-to-discuss issues. As a consultant, Darcie flew in periodically and expected the team to be fully engaged in conflict resolution. She’d forget that new team

members weren’t used to her frankness and tolerance for ambiguity – how she questioned like a visitor. She had learned from her other LMNS projects that Southerners often aren’t comfortable speaking their mind in public. Collaborative pressure forced our multifaceted team to value different cultural perspectives *and* work styles. It took a lot of work to get at each other’s points of view, let alone agree. (And when the diverse museum staff didn’t agree, the voices of the community ruled.)

Through all the back and forth, we learned an important lesson: whether internally or externally, the more we share trust the better we understand and expand our capacities to be candid about real issues from each other’s varied perspectives.

Deeply Understanding the Issues The “7 Insights” from our two years of community listening sessions in Charlotte, Atlanta, and Birmingham were the foundation for creating *INUEVOlution! Latinos and the New South*. Now we had to find the partners who were willing to work with us to share their stories about how they are dealing with building community and confronting issues. For Darcie, that meant consistently asking, “Who else should we talk to?” For Janeen, it meant that a priority was creating a new, permanent position: Latino Coordinator. This full-time museum employee would work with community groups and be a spokesperson for the project, and represented an ongoing commitment to representation, voice, and community collaboration.

To deeply understand the issues, we had to take multiple perspectives into account. Note, for example, that in South and Central America alone, the term “Latino” encompasses 20 nationalities. This meant that even the most basic word in our conceptual design carried the tension of multiple identities and

nuanced meaning. Sharing trust means having a willingness to explore multifaceted meanings and to hear everyone’s perspective. Ultimately, the idea that the museums trusted the wisdom of community partners allowed the real issues to emerge. Once the issues were acknowledged, and our community partners working on those issues identified, we came up with different approaches to addressing those issues.

Getting out into the community to test concepts and gather stories was one of several collaborative challenges. Darcie’s perspective – as a consultant from California – could not represent and illustrate Southern Latino culture. Could our interstate listening sessions help us synthesize a larger vision of a rapidly changing cultural phenomenon? Demographic profiles were different in Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina. Atlanta has an established, diverse urban community that has been continuously confronting issues of race and inclusion, Birmingham’s Latino communities are more rural, whereas Charlotte’s ethnic communities are newer and suburban. This meant that gross generalizations were out. Our research and listening had to reflect a nuanced appreciation of identity that is not often at the center of historic narrative. This was/is a story about change while the change was still happening, which meant that our collaborative work could help reshape an existing, monolithic narrative.

We debriefed after every meeting, even if we only had five minutes, by asking: 1) What was supposed to happen? 2) What happened? 3) What could we do differently in the future for better outcomes? Both of us feel that constantly reviewing the process worked. Based loosely on the “After Action Report” (AAR) used in fast-paced military campaigns, after every listening session, meeting, and group gathering we documented the outcomes in real time. This feedback loop helped us stay

on track and improve the process as needed. It was time consuming, and sometimes involved us debating for hours on the merit of selecting one word over another. But later, when we adjusted the reports with that one “right” word, it made it worthwhile, because language definitely mattered in future decision making.

As we created sustained relationships, established over time, to understand the shifting perspectives in Charlotte and the region, we learned that the issues of the rapidly increasing Latino population in the South were different in each state. Nevertheless, we were able to build trust, find consensus, and plan the exhibition guided by the seven insights.

We’re all part of the everyday evolution and revolution of these changes in our communities.

Creating “With” Instead of “For” Levine Museum of the New South wanted to open *iNUEVOlution!* in Charlotte, accompanied by a year of related programs and facilitated dialogues for groups from various organizations – police, churches, businesses, schools, and more. We saw the exhibition as a comprehensive “project” because it was designed as a catalyst for programs and events in the community, at the museum, and online throughout its run.

But before design on the exhibition/project began, we had several months for debates to make preliminary decisions on the design approach and desired visitor experience. We couldn’t design the look, feel, and tone before determining whom we wanted to reach. If the design is targeted to “everyone” it could be diluted and not resonate with anyone. We allocated a few months to test our assumptions

and find consensus on the goals of the project. From the discussions at several community gatherings with different age groups, we decided to create the design style to reach millennials from all cultures. Of all the groups we met with, the 20- and 30-somethings seemed more curious about cultures other than their own and more open to blending cultures; if we reach them, we reach the future. We tested proposed graphics and exhibition drawings with them and made adjustments based on their feedback. The design and tone needed to be a dynamic, colorful, vibrant mash-up of surprising encounters and insights.

From our previous LMNS projects, *Courage: The Carolina Story that Changed America* (which confronted regional issues of race) and *Changing Places: From Black and White to Technicolor* (which explored the impact of changing demographics in the Charlotte region), we knew that highlighting the impact of historic and current events on our lives today made the issues relevant. We applied the same thinking to this exhibition about the growing Latino presence in the South, hoping to dispel stereotypes and increase empathetic understanding. We're all part of the everyday evolution and revolution of these changes in our communities. Therefore *iNUEVOlution!*

Connecting to Universal Values We are all shaped by where we live and we shape where we live. With *iNUEVOlution!*, we wanted to provide opportunities in the exhibition, online, and in programs for visitors to realize this and gain personal insights into our common joys, struggles, accomplishments, hopes, and fears. Getting to know individuals fosters understanding. Our personal values might not be that different from our neighbor or the community newcomer.

But how could we create an exhibition that would serve each partner city's audiences

and the huge diversity of Latino voices? We were willing to take the risk of not pleasing everyone. The seven insights that emerged from the Innovation Grant Listening Sessions gave us the foundation for understanding the differing Latino issues in each city.

Eventually, we selected 17 distinct stories of Latino life that conveyed topics and issues to which we can all relate, such as food, music, work, religion, housing, fear, dreams, influence, and power. The stories reflected the different geographic areas in the South as well as different countries of origin, ages, gender, levels of education, professions, and more. To present these first-person experiences from many Latino perspectives, we searched for a Southern Latino filmmaker to work with us. Ultimately, we produced two-minute videos that served as the centerpiece for each of the stories in the largest section of the exhibition, "Our *Encuentros*." Along with still images and quotes, the variety of stories conveyed a nuanced picture that best represented the diverse, complex stories of Latinos in the South.

Whether we are newly arrived or long-time residents of the South, we all seek to belong in the places we call home. Belonging is to be included, accepted, recognized as a valued member and contributor to the community. But when our communities change, belonging is challenged. Whether we are new arrivals in an old community, or established members of a transitioning one, belonging takes on new meaning for all. Ultimately, the multifaceted design of the exhibition – with its focus on the diversity of language, culture, socioeconomic status, citizenship, geography, and identity that belied commonly held stereotypes – mirrored the issues that Southerners are confronted with as they navigate new cultural intersections.

Creating Collaborative Criteria for Content and Design

It's always excruciating to decide the wording for the exhibition's "big idea," which guides our choices about tone, content, and design. Building on museum practitioner Beverly Serrell's definition, the big idea is not only what the exhibit is about, but why anyone should care.⁶ After eliminating several options that looked at ideas about home or belonging, we agreed on this: "In surprising ways, Latinos are shaping the South and the South is shaping Latinos. Where do I belong in this Nuevo South?"

Getting to this precise wording was a painful and time-consuming process but again, worth it. Now we had our direction: find first-person stories from many different perspectives that were surprising to Latinos and non-Latinos. We looked for people whose stories would address our questions: as the South becomes home to an increasing number (and increasingly diverse group) of Latinos, issues of community, identity and belonging become more complex, more challenging, for both the newly arrived and long established. What does it mean to be Latino in the South? What does it mean to be "Southern" as the region becomes increasingly complex, changing with a growing Latino influence? How do new and native Southerners navigate the region's emerging nuevo and global personas? How and why does this give rise to conflicted identities, barriers to belonging, and simultaneous consciousness of inclusion and exclusion – for all who call the South home?

Our studies showed that Latinos and traditional Southerners have many misconceptions about each other. We could dispel stereotypes and intercultural misconceptions, provide opportunities to get to know the diversity of Latino neighbors, and develop content in

support of how we all contribute to the fabric of Southern community, confront stereotypes, and give visitors, non-Latino and Latino, the opportunity to put themselves in others' shoes. We wanted visitors to reflect on how their identity affects where they live and how where they live affects their identity.

Organizing the Experience "Arc"

The use of the "arc of experience" as a formal principle occurred to us after years of trying to describe what museum leadership requested every time we played with a big idea: show me an exhibit with ME in it. This is similar to the educational principle of highlighting and connecting to the learner's background first to create the cognitive space for relevance. The arc, based loosely on the "arc of dialogue" used by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, provides the infrastructure for the visitor experience in the exhibition.⁷ Our take on the arc, driven by the belief that we all want to be acknowledged, revolved around a key question: how could we intentionally recognize the personhood of so many?

To create the "arc" for *iNUEVolution!* the concept planning team sought out the questions, interactives, and general organization that would build to help visitors see themselves in Latino issues. Darcie asked our guest Latina experience developer, from the Oakland Museum of California, to think in Spanish about the meaning behind our desired visitor experience. She came up with "*encuentros*" which means much more than its English equivalent, "encounter." Non-Spanish speakers couldn't really comprehend the depth of its meaning, but it communicated that we wanted everyone to connect in a journey of identity and understanding. *Encuentros* touched a nerve with our Spanish-speaking team members.

⁶ To learn more about the "big idea," see Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

⁷ See "Designing the Arc of Dialogue," created by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, at www.sitesofconscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Members_member-Benefits_010.pdf.



fig. 1.
Entrance to “Our Encuentros” gallery, where visitors were invited to connect with their Southern/Latino neighbors.



fig. 2.
The introductory “My Encuentros” gallery “icebreaker,” where visitors began to explore ways in which they connected with their various communities.

Our collective concept of “Encuentros” forced us right out of the museum doors and into collaborative building of intentional spaces and moments of meeting. Looking for ways to engage whole families led to piloting interactives on street corners, at community festivals, and in the lobby. We accosted, cajoled, and embraced across language barriers, in various settings, and with a shoestring budget. These smaller meetings continued to inform every step of our journey, both internally and externally. Connecting with the people in our

communities and with each other solidified our main premise. We could finally begin the design phase in earnest (fig. 1).

After back and forth within the core team and input at staff and community presentations, we decided that the exhibition’s arc should begin with an icebreaker interactive that would encourage visitors to start thinking about civic identity by asking them to reflect on and respond to how they fit in in their communities (fig. 2). The arc would then

grow from the personal, *My Encuentros*, to the communal, *Our Encuentros* (fig. 3), and end with pondering trends, *Future Encuentros*.

Visitors could contribute their thoughts and feelings along the way. To encourage them to do so, we created many low- and high-tech interactives. These built an interactive visitor experience arc that grew from reflecting on personal identity, to communal identity and responsibility, to hopes and fears for future identities. The arc facilitated a journey through awareness building, to questioning “norms,” and ultimately led to a synthesis of new ideas.⁸

What We Learned

After *iNUEVOlution! Latinos and the New South* opened at Levine Museum in late 2015, the awards it received and the formal evaluation

8 For a survey of the ways museums are incorporating user-contributed content in exhibitions – and the idea that we should consider our visitors partners – see Kathleen McLean’s article, “Surviving in Two Way Traffic,” in Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock, eds., *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions* (Washington DC: Association of Science-Technology Centers: 2007), 8–13.

that was undertaken praised the project for its success in forming collaborations with community stakeholders and museum partners.⁹

The journey to this success had been bumpy. There is no checklist for the best way to create exhibitions that truly impact the community, our museums, or ourselves. There is no single person who is the gatekeeper for a whole community. And institutions have to make a sustained commitment to incorporating multiple perspectives.

One valuable realization from working on a highly collaborative team is the awareness that your work will likely be handled, massaged, critiqued, dismissed, and lauded within the same two-hour meeting. The work of the internal team requires a maturity that develops from years of exposure to this push and pull.

9 *iNUEVOlution!* earned an American Alliance of Museums (AAM) Media and Technology Professional Network 2016 MUSE Award for “Interpretative Interactive Installation.” It was also awarded a Southeastern Museum Conference (SEMC) “Excellence in Exhibitions” Gold Award and SEMC Technology Competition Silver Awards for “Gallery Installation” and for “Campaign.”



fig. 3. Overview of the “Our Encuentros” gallery, which featured 17 southern Latino stories told through personal videos and bilingual narratives.

To reflect a larger community, institutions need to connect organically with the individuals in that community, and the more controversial the topic, the more difficult the connections. Our role as a community catalyst is to create places where visitors feel agency where there was none. We must listen vigorously, prototype solutions, and trust evaluations. We must test our assumptions and reject binary thinking for the sake of creating a more comprehensive and inclusive exhibition.

The collaborative challenges we faced required our process to be tense, messy, dialogic, hopeful, and grounded. The voices we worked with were necessary for the development of an exhibition that was designed to address complicated and at times contentious issues. Attempts to tiptoe around the social challenges of our time do not serve our institutions or our communities. Because now more than ever, our museum spaces are challenged to creatively and honestly address social issues that affect us all, and to be catalysts that spark true understanding. ■

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