



Large Lessons from a Small Project: The San Francisco Mobile Museum

by Maria Mortati

Maria Mortati is the Founder of the San Francisco Mobile Museum. She may be contacted at maria@mortati.com.

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The San Francisco Mobile Museum (SFMM) is a “pop-up” museum project I developed in 2009. “Pop-up” is a buzzword to describe temporary, experimental projects, be they retail stores or food carts. I figured museums were fair game, and saw this as a way to quickly explore ideas in museums and exhibitions.

Iteration (temporary projects), experimentation, and design are all rooted in my educational and professional backgrounds. My academic work was in studio art and design, and I spent the first part of my career working in user-interface design. I’ve typically worked on very large projects with large teams, and have also explored creating exhibitions in unexpected places.

In 2009 I was looking for another vehicle to continue my experimentations when I met Jaime Kopke, founder of the Denver Community Museum project, then about one year old. I was inspired by how she set up a participatory styled museum in a storefront. She would put out a challenge to her public, and they would make objects in response to the theme. We talked and decided to collaborate on an inter-state exhibition. In San Francisco it wasn’t feasible to set up in a storefront, so I set about creating a mobile platform, and the San Francisco Mobile Museum was born.

For a mobile museum I needed a physical structure that would fit a variety of needs for one person (or more when I had the help) to manage. Currently, the “museum” is an eight-sided, 6-ft high steel-framed wood panel system that interlocks and allows for reconfiguration. The additional performance requirements were:

- It fits in my car.
- It can be broken down into segments that I can carry from the sidewalk to a site and set up in about an hour.
- It is of a height and width that works for showing objects for a variety of ages, as well as having good visual impact.
- It allows for exhibit elements to be able to be attached in a way that is lightweight, fast, and secure.
- It is stable to allow “visitors” to touch it and so it won’t blow over (it’s windy here).

I found a local furniture maker to build the structure based on scaled drawings. Working with him was great because I got a result that improved upon my design, and ended up being “green” and fairly cost-effective. An added plus was that working with him fostered additional local interest in the project.

Choosing the First Exhibition Theme

Jaime and I naturally chose an idea around place as our governing concept, calling the exhibition *Looking for Loci*. We then crafted the following “challenge” or call for entries to put out to our public on email, blogs, and social media:

Have you ever found a place in your home, neighborhood or city, and felt an invisible energy, almost like magic? In Roman culture, this was called "Genius Loci," which referred to a location's distinctive atmosphere, or spirit. In our urban environments these places can be more difficult to find,

or lost altogether—but they do exist.

Locate your special place and create a visual tribute to the genius loci of the spot. It can be part of your home, in a park or garden, on a street corner, or just a forgotten place in the alley.

Artifacts can be in any form; photos, drawings, handmade sculptures or totems, a written account—anything that shares the essence of the place.

As these entries would be shown around Denver and San Francisco and needed to be manageable on a variety of fronts, I figured a fixed-format and grid system would give us the best result for a traveling show (vs. how Jaime had done it in the past in her storefront, where people could make anything at any scale). I've also found in my creative work that having limits fosters rather than hinders creative output. For such a system, the sweet spot criteria then became:

- Affordable and easy to source;
- Shippable: flat to send to participants, and good form factor to be boxed up en masse once we got them from participants;
- Manageable for participants: a handy size for artists and non-artists alike to fill or populate;
- Durable enough to withstand constant handling.

I worked out the weight of a box that would attach via magnets without falling off. I ordered them from U-Line. In an



Visitors to the opening of Looking for Loci at the Studio for Urban Projects. All photographs courtesy of Maria Mortati.

envelope I inserted a flattened box with the following instructions:

You will be provided a 9" x 5" x 3" cardboard box as the platform for your entry. Use the box as your stage, canvas or landscape. Your box will be displayed in landscape format.

All entries must fit in the box, and allow the flaps to close fully for shipping. You may choose to decorate the flaps (which must be folded flat against the outside of the box when displayed).

Your work will be shipped between SF and DEN, and you must secure any objects inside your box, or provide adequate padding for shipping. We will seal the boxes. Please keep the total weight under 1 pound.

Then the participants wrote a few sentences about their idea for wall tags and provided their age and location, and we picked up the boxes. They were essentially little dioramas. We had 37 respondents in total for this exhibition,

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While storefronts and garages provided logistical ease, parks by far were the most successful locations to appear in. The SFMM in Dolores Park with Looking for Loci.

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which was more than we thought we could accommodate.

In San Francisco, we carefully photographed each box because I wanted to play with the then-popular notion of “extending the visitor experience” online. I would post each box on the blog with its copy from the participant. In some cases, I invited the “maker” to add more back story to the piece, and in others, I did a little research and added imagery to the post to flesh it out. I felt this was important not just to document the work, but to fully express how far you could take a participant-made exhibit model. Given that the exhibits were up for a day here and there, the blog also gave them a life and an impact beyond the temporary nature of the exhibition.

In addition to the panels that held the boxes, I wanted to have an element where visitors to the museum could add their thoughts about a special place in the Bay Area. On one panel I included a map with pencils and Post-its with the following prompt:

*Are you looking for loci?
Is there a place of special meaning for you? Write it on a Post-it note, and*

locate it on the map. Please include your name, the name of the place, and why it’s important to you.

This worked fairly well in terms of feedback. I would get around 20 responses per showing.

Where did we go for our first time out?

In San Francisco, our opening was at the Studio for Urban Projects, which is self-described as a “storefront space that readily converts from a private work space to a public venue for the staging of workshops, talks, film screenings and meals that foster civic dialog.” From there we went to a variety of local parks in the city, the suburbs, and a workshop garage. In Denver, Jaime had closed the DCM, so she “popped up” in various shops and at a late-night event at the Denver Art Museum.

Second Iteration of Mobile Challenge-Based Exhibits: FREE Shrines

In the second exhibition for the SFMM, I wanted to see if I could loosen up the format since it wasn’t being shipped from city to city. I was starting to get curious about the idea of going with an open format and adding in background visuals or text to set the context for the exhibition.

I created a prompt and invited people to respond. I decided to lightly riff on the theme (*shrines* was somewhat similar to *location*) but play with the format. The theme was *FREE Shrines*, inspired by my long commutes to work at that time, where I would pass roadside shrines and wonder who they were for or who maintained them. Here was the prompt:

I suspected that if I created a more designed and integrated participation panel, I might get richer feedback.

Have you ever come across a shrine, either in a church, by the side of the road, or in your community and wondered about it?

Shrines are objects or places that work as points of communication between ourselves, our desires, and the larger world around us. They can be found in our homes, on our bodies, and in our landscape.

Shrines give tangible form to our ideas around what we wish for, revere, and remember.

The Challenge:

Create a shrine that is your idea of someone, a remembrance, an icon of joy, or a representation of a special wish you have.

Make it so it can fit in the palm of your hand (no larger than 5”D x 5” W x 10” H). Use materials that are low cost, easily available, and not too heavy.

It can even be something that was burned, devoured, or shredded.

With changing to an open format (vs. boxes) for the entries, I wanted to see how creative the responses would be. I also explored adding interpretive materials such as background graphics and a little text, wondering if that made a difference.

For the visitor participation element on *FREE Shrines*, I wanted to give people a richer experience than the map graphic and Post-it notes in *Looking for Loci*. I suspected that if I created a more designed and integrated participation panel, I might

get richer feedback. In my research for the exhibition I saw Japanese Ema Shinto Shrines with their wooden wish card kiosks and found the perfect solution. I mocked up a panel to resemble them, put a prompt in the center, and provided hanging shipping tags to write on and attach with clothes pins.

The Ema Shrine panel was a huge success—not only in terms of quantity (there were around 70 cards in one showing at the Exploratorium After Dark event), but in terms of the quality of responses. When asked to make a wish and given a designed context (and a little bit of history) people were reverent, funny, insightful, and generous.

Two Approaches and What Has Worked Best

The Form Factor for Entries:

What I found was probably not that surprising in terms of the form factor for the entries: while the creativity of the participants was fairly high across a spectrum of novices to artists and engineers, the work itself didn't help the visitors to the SFMM understand that this was a museum vs. just a bunch of panels holding some other people's artwork together. Having the form of a box did three things:

- It helped people perceive the entire grouping of boxes as a whole.
- It helped visitors more quickly see the differences from one idea to another, and it leveled the playing field for the wide age group in that case (5 to around 65 years old).
- In terms of set-up and tear-down

I think museums can and should untether themselves from thinking that good work comes from large projects.

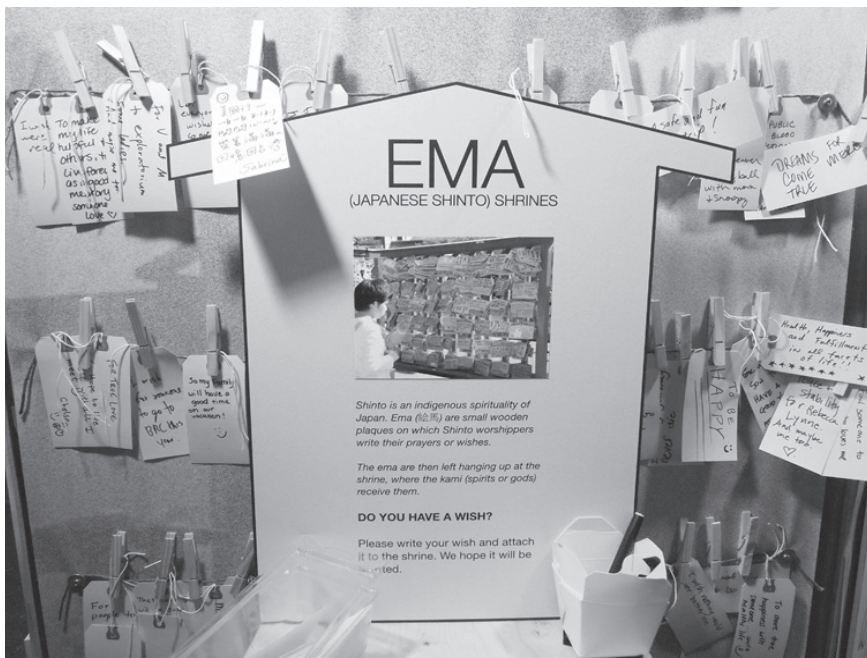
I think it's important that museums have the agility to improve upon exhibitions.

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time, the same format of the boxes made it more efficient.

Locations

Parks and events are by far the best locations for the Mobile Museum. It's essentially going to where the people are, and it worked well. Storefronts and



This is a photo of the Ema Shrine participation panel at FREE Shrines, which had an image of an Ema shrine in Japan with related text to give context for visitors.

garages were interesting, but only for openings and invite-driven events, not for the casual passer-by.

Onsite Visitor Participation

As I said above, giving context, design effort, and an example of what the prompt is that you're asking people to respond to tremendously boosted the quantity and quality of responses on the visitor participation panels.

Take-Aways For Larger Institutions

I think museums can and should **untether themselves from thinking that good work comes from large projects.** I believe there is a place for smaller, nimbler structures to express and test concepts with each other and our changing public. The world is shifting so quickly under our feet in terms of media, funding, and future audiences that it is essential to have the ability to grow.

Museums also need to be **better able to handle creative content.** In other words, not only curate, select, or edit, but foster the development of and manage streams of creative content by visitors and artists alike. This requires new skills and tools for figuring out how to do this from an operational perspective. Creating a platform for experimentation such as a pop-up can prepare a museum for adaptation.

There are some basic questions to ask yourself when starting out:

- Do you want to experiment or engage with a new community?
- Are you trying to test out how to work with visitor creations?
- Do you need to figure out how to get on-the-spot input and feedback from visitors?

Any experimental exhibit vehicle needs to be developed in a manner that matches the particular task at hand: in my case, figuring out how to engage a community with an idea, and share it with "visitors." Putting yourself out there in a bold way is a great if your primary goal is



FREE Shrines installed at the Exploratorium (ADA accessible!).

participation or active engagement.

From an operational point of view, these types of projects can simultaneously build confidence in taking risks while answering questions. Plus, pop-ups **engage your public in a fresh way** that a traditional exhibition can't pull off.

Given the perpetual challenge of relevancy for museums—more important now than ever if we accept the data coming out of places like the Center for Future of Museums—I think it's important that museums have the **agility to improve upon exhibitions**. Involving the public in that process creates a sense of invitation which dovetails nicely with the notion of museums as informal educators.

It's easy to dismiss projects like these as they are not coming from a committee or panel. But that is precisely why they are valuable. A key to thriving on the road ahead is **having nimble vehicles that allow institutions to experiment and grow** in our ever-changing landscape. ✨

Further reading:

- Demographic projections from the Center for the Future of Museums can be found in the report *Museums & society 2034: Trends and potential futures*. Retrieved Feb. 24, 2012 from <http://www.futureofmuseums.org>
- For more information on the Denver Community Museum project, see *Curator*, October 2011, Denver Community Museum. Retrieved Jan 2012 from <http://www.curatorjournal.org/archives/980>
- The San Francisco Mobile Museum blog: showings, artworks and plans. <http://sfmobilemuseum.blogspot.com/>
- <http://www.slideshare.net/mortati/san-francisco-mobile-museum-maria-mortati-aam2011>