

# Forces of Change: The People's Exhibit?

by Kathleen McLean and Adam Nilsen



Extensive changes are underway at the Oakland Museum of California, with complete redesign of its galleries of California history, art, and natural sciences. The 30,000 ft<sup>2</sup> history gallery, with the theme “Coming to California,” takes a traditional chronological approach, beginning with early history and continuing through present times. Within this gallery is **Forces of Change**, a 750 ft<sup>2</sup> installation that represents 1960 to 1975, a period widely remembered for chaotic identity politics, social upheaval, and the flowering of diversity. We are co-designing **Forces of Change** with 24 people from across California, all with different backgrounds and memories of the period, in an experimental process that we hope will be instructive for other museum co-design and co-development projects.

## Getting Started

Because 1960 to 1975 is such an iconic and complex period of California history, early conceptual development of this section was difficult. After a number of design iterations, the exhibition team shared ideas with the Museum's African American, Asian Pacific, Latino, and Teacher Advisory Councils, many of whom had lived through those times themselves. They helped us realize that co-development and co-design would be an ideal way to address the period's complexities. For further inspiration, we looked to the success of the museum's annual “Days of the Dead” installations featuring niches or “altars” created by local artists and communities. Our resulting plan was an assemblage of twenty-four 24in. x 32in. x 24in. niches enclosed in a period environment and soundscape.

We recruited participants to fill these niches with the help of museum staff and advisory

council contacts, email lists, and even “cold calls” to individuals and organizations found on the internet. There was no application process. As the participant list grew, we frequently checked it for balance in terms of gender, ethnicity, location, and story content. These categories do not define the displays, but are a way to increase the likelihood of presenting a wide range of perspectives. We identified only vague criteria up front for co-design, letting participants know that they would be part of an experimental and evolving process. We agreed that if they attended a one-day workshop at the museum and kept up on the subsequent work, we would “facilitate” the actualization of their displays.

Participants attended one of three kick-off workshops at which they shared stories, viewed images of design approaches, and discussed their display ideas. We were amazed at the level of deep respect and attention participants showed each other, despite often conflicting views. We distributed a list of museum artifacts available for display, a list of design ideas, and worksheets for participants to complete. One worksheet focused on “big ideas” and memories to help people develop an overall gestalt and identify potential objects. Another worksheet was for sketches of their display ideas. Over the last nine months, we have been working together—both in person and long-distance—to create full-scale mock-ups that help participants visualize and refine their displays.

## Flexible Processes, Flexible Roles

As the project evolves, we are continually confronted with issues about our roles as leaders, facilitators, co-designers, and partners. Because of the non-traditional approach to the entire gallery project, which embraces

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Mock-ups play an essential role in helping visualize each display. Emory Douglas, who was a member of the Black Panther Party, is constructing his niche primarily with his own graphics. All photos courtesy of the authors.

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flexibility, collaboration, and transparency, we are comfortable giving participants a great deal of artistic license. But participants have different levels of design ability and confidence, and not everyone feels comfortable with creative control. While some participants have fully taken the reins, most fall somewhere in between.

In a similar way, we have had to negotiate our roles as project managers, dealing with a wide range of work styles. We initially tried to standardize the process with worksheets and deadlines, but people responded in very different ways. Many have missed deadlines, some need one-on-one brainstorming help, and one person ignored the worksheets altogether and disappeared for eight months, only to reappear with a nearly completed niche. As a result, we realize that each display must be treated

as a mini-installation with its own flexible, individualized process.

When it comes to giving input, we frequently find ourselves balancing our roles as supporters with our desire for displays to “belong” to participants. Having heard participants’ powerful stories, we want to make sure that they will be presented in a compelling way that will be understood by visitors. We are consciously providing input in a highly measured, individualized way, both by honoring participants’ explicit requests for help and providing conceptual scaffolding where we think it would help. Our suggestions are falling roughly into four categories: storytelling, aesthetics, variety, and artifact safety, with comments such as:

- “You may want to tell fewer stories so your display isn't confusing.”
- “This display is about YOU. You don't need to tell THE story of the whole Vietnam War.”
- “Instead of using all flat objects, are there any objects that could add dimensionality?”
- “Another participant wants to recreate her childhood dresser...would you mind trying something else?”
- “You might want to avoid using that jacket, because we can't display it continuously for conservation reasons.”

Except when there are concerns about conservation or feasibility, we give participants an easy opportunity to reject our ideas and go with their own gut. They overwhelmingly want their displays to “look good” and are glad to enlarge their pool of ideas. And some need more help than others.



One participant, a political activist, has compelling stories about organizing demonstrations and being investigated by the FBI. As eager as he is to share these stories, he sent a note accompanying his “big idea” worksheet saying, “Unfortunately I do not have the creative skills necessary to create an exhibit... I am sure that there are people in the museum that can help in that area.” It would be a greater offense to exclude his story from the installation, for the sake of making this strictly “his” display, than it would be to provide scaffolding that would enable him to participate. As a result, we have presented and discussed ideas to come up with a design that pleases him.

Most other participants have made attempts to design their own displays. One woman has independently taken her idea quite far, but frequently checks in for our approval. Her display will contrast her story of immigration from Hong Kong in the 1960s with her husband’s story of growing up as a Chinese American in Sacramento. She asked if she could use a photo of her 1979 wedding, which we initially discouraged since it was from beyond 1960-1975. She insisted that the image represented the culmination of her experience during that period, so we backed down and let it go. After all, this is her display.

With another participant, we were careful to help hone her ideas in a respectful way. On her “big idea” worksheet, when asked to distill her thoughts into one sentence, she wrote, “It was a time of great changes and upheaval in my life, the joys and problems of a new second interracial marriage, raising interracial children, fighting for civil rights, fair housing, employment, People’s Park,



Participants worked together in day-long workshops to exchange stories and explore potential display techniques with staff.



Personal objects assembled in mock-up niches begin the narrative design process. Dugan Aguilar will focus his display on his experiences as a Native American before, during, and after the Vietnam War.

protesting against the war, embarking on a new career in the Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley and a teaching career, and folk music singing.” Certainly, memories are often multifaceted; while a display covering all of these topics is doable, we encouraged her to imagine how a visitor would view it. We shared our experience that dense, unfocused displays



*Cathy Callahan has taken full control of her display, locating artifacts and creating a quilt to tell the story of her 1960s youth.*

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can be overwhelming and confusing—a view she appreciated hearing. Instead of covering everything, she decided to focus on three topics that were most important to her. While one could argue that we quashed her way of remembering, we believe it would have done her a disservice not to share our knowledge of visitor behavior. Regardless of the amount of influence we have, whether requested or not, participants do not seem to feel that it diminishes their ownership of their displays. We plan to gather participants' thoughts about this issue of ownership when the project is completed.

### **Going Forward**

With such an experimental process, we have a number of ongoing questions. Will these displays be interesting to visitors? Will the installation be more than the sum of its parts and really convey the greater essence of the period? Will our facilitation overshadow the voices and personalities of our co-designers? Since we have had at least some influence in the displays, will they have a redundant “museumy” feel to them? Should we have required participants to make their niches entirely

themselves, and possibly ended up with some being crude or difficult to interpret?

As we work through the challenges of this project, we remember our advisory councils' passions about capturing the spirit of the times, as well as our very reason for employing a co-design process. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of “power to the people,” and in that spirit, this is truly the “people’s installation.” The “people” are not all artists, they do not all have a lot of time to work on this project, and they do not all have great artifacts. But they do all have compelling stories about the forces of change, and their contributions add a palpable diversity and authenticity to the stories of California history.

This diversity and authenticity is not something museums can conjure up on their own. By bringing the community into the design process, and by working together to create multiple voices in exhibitions, museums may just be able to keep up in this user-generated world. We hope that *Forces of Change* can serve as a model for both empowering and supporting these voices. ✨