

COMMENTARY

Offering Informal Education in Public Libraries through Exhibit Design

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Abstract

The American Anthropological Association's forthcoming traveling exhibit on the subject of migration and mobility is designed to be hosted by public libraries. By recruiting libraries as host institutions, we make scholarship accessible to general audiences and provide a focal point for programming and community engagement. This essay outlines our approach to designing with libraries in mind, aiming to influence public discourse about a topical issue.

Keywords: migration; informal education; museum anthropology; youth outreach

Far more than simply collections of books, modern public libraries are trusted local institutions that support lifelong learning and community dialogue. For anthropologists seeking to offer informal education, they avoid the structural challenges of schools, where students' time and teachers' attention are strictly regimented to meet curriculum and assessment targets, as well as the institutional barriers of museums, which many people perceive as elitist or inaccessible. This essay introduces *World on the Move™*, a traveling exhibit designed to be hosted at public libraries, which offers a humanistic social science perspective on the topic of migration and mobility. The primary project goal is to change the public conversation on migration by helping visitors to recognize it as a shared human experience that connects us all.

World on the Move builds on the earlier experience of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in successfully conducting public education and outreach through exhibition design. In 2007, the AAA launched its first public education initiative, *RACE: Are We So Different?*® The keystone of the RACE project was a traveling museum exhibition, which toured museums in the United States for ten years, had to be duplicated twice to meet demand, and led to an interactive website (<http://www.understandingrace.org>) and two books, one of

which has just come out in its second edition (Goodman, Moses, and Jones 2020; see also Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses 2014).

World on the Move was conceived as a follow-up to the RACE project. By 2009 or 2010, RACE had been recognized by AAA leadership as a “significant contribution ... to the production of public knowledge” (Mullings 2010, 16), and the process was already underway to develop a successor. AAA members were invited to suggest themes that would enable all subfields of anthropology to speak to timely and timeless issues, and a short list of proposed topics was reviewed by a panel of museum leaders, who selected mobility, migration, and displacement as the most promising for a new traveling exhibition.

Human migration is an ideal topic for an initiative of this sort because anthropological perspectives provide a principled, evidence-based counterpoint to so many common misconceptions. While the public discourse often frames contemporary migrations as historically unprecedented or as culturally or economically harmful, in fact, movement is not new: there is evidence of population movement for as long as we have traces of humans on the planet. At the same time, however, the public understanding of migration reflects the particulars of our current historical moment. Much is made of “illegal” or “undocumented” immigrants, for example, but the very idea that migrants ought to have official documentation is itself a recent invention. By presenting case studies from throughout human history and from around the world, we help visitors to distinguish what is really new about contemporary migration from what has remained constant over tens of thousands of years.

For the exhibit design process, the AAA has partnered with two different units of the Smithsonian Institution, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) and Smithsonian Exhibits (SIE), as well as the American Library Association (ALA). Members of ALA’s Public Programs Office were brought on board by the CFCH exhibition development team, who had previously collaborated with ALA on an exhibit about human evolution. The ALA Public Programs Office has a long history of offering public libraries in the United States access to expertly created materials on topics of public interest. Not only are library patrons able to visit these exhibitions at their convenience, but librarians also use them as a focal point for coordinating public programming featuring representatives of community-based organizations and of the community at large.

The partnership with ALA was an inflection point in the design process that brought clarity of thinking to our discussion. When we began envisioning libraries rather than museums as host institutions for *World on the Move*, the benefits were obvious. Libraries will provide access to a different and more diverse audience than museums, at a convenient location with strong ties to the community. In particular, we recognized the opportunity to connect with middle and high school-aged youth;

it's common to see teenagers getting out of school and going to the public library, but much rarer to see them hanging out in the museum.

While designing pedagogical objectives for this target audience of youth library patrons, it is important to recognize that these should not be the sort of objectives that a course instructor might develop for a formal education setting. Museum galleries may employ docents to be present in the space and take on an active role in instruction in a way that librarians do not. The exhibit needs to motivate young people to approach and read it, it needs to be accessible without the intervention of a professional educator, and all interactive components need to be self-facilitated. The type of engagement that an exhibit might enable is not the same as what happens in the classroom; as one of our content reviewers, a museum educator turned middle school teacher, reminded us: "Unless they are led by the teacher with a specific learning objective related to the classroom objectives, then they are not 'students.' They're just teens in the museum, and we should respect them as such."

With all of this in mind, we wrote a content brief for the exhibit, which envisioned that visitors will:

1. Be curious about the history of human migration;
2. Appreciate the complexity and diversity of migration stories;
3. Recognize that migration is a shared human experience;
4. Feel safe to discuss issues surrounding migration;
5. Share migration stories with family members, neighbors, and friends;
6. Feel proud of their families' migration stories;
7. Gain greater empathy toward migrants in their communities and elsewhere;
8. Ask critical questions about migration; and
9. Consider their beliefs and opinions about migration.

To produce an exhibit that would be appropriate for this audience and venue, we had to think carefully about translating scholarship from anthropology and allied disciplines into a form that is both accessible to library patrons and respectful of the resources available to libraries as host institutions. To begin with, the RACE exhibit was designed to fit into a 5,000-square-foot museum gallery, and while a smaller replica was eventually developed, libraries have much more restrictive space needs. To fit into a variety of public library exhibit rooms, SIE designers came up with an innovative modular design that can be easily assembled by library staff and customized to fit into 1,000-square-foot spaces of varying dimensions. As Figure 1 shows, the same modules can be configured in many different ways to use the space that each library has available.

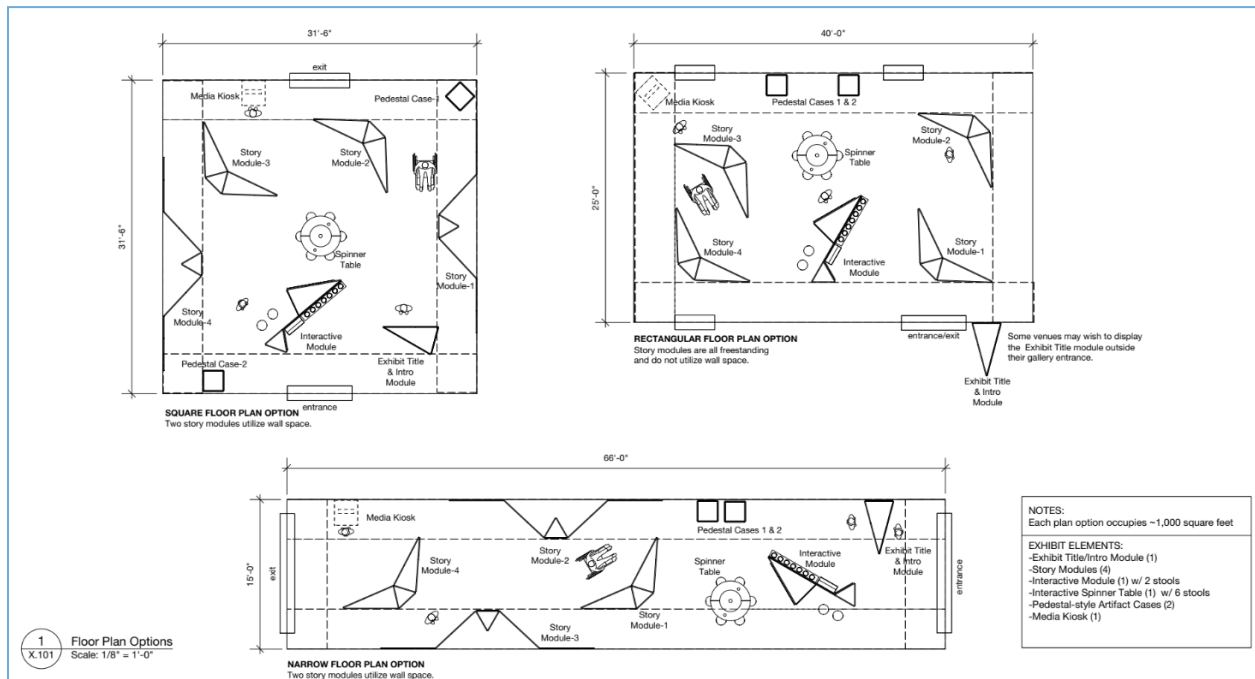


Figure 1. Exhibit floor plan options

Being flexible about gallery space means that we cannot control how visitors move through the exhibit, so we needed to create exhibit content that did not follow a strictly linear script. Rather than telling a single story from start to finish, we developed four thematic areas for the content modules of the exhibit—*where do we come from, why do we move, who does migration change, where are we going*—each of which allows us to include a variety of stories from different times and places. For instance, under the heading *who does migration change*, we explore the West African roots of Cuban *Santería* traditions, the arrival of a Bhutanese / Nepali community to upstate New York, and the influence of South Asia on British culinary tastes.

While this diversity of viewpoints supports the mission and concept of the project, we also recognized that it might be disorienting to the visitor, so we selected four geographic areas to be represented in every module of the exhibit. The crossroads sites that we selected are the Eastern Mediterranean, home to early urban settlements as well as contemporary refugee flows; Central Africa, source of much of the common cultural heritage of the African Diaspora; Beringia, which was not a “land bridge” to North America, but a site of stable human settlement until sea levels rose; and East Los Angeles, which has seen early Native American settlement, colonization by Spain and the United States, and modern-day gentrification. Not only do these crossroads stories provide coherence across sections of the exhibit, but the metaphor of the crossroads is crucial to the way we

tell stories of migration: to counter commonplace narratives in which “we” live “here” and “they” are more or less welcome arrivals, we encourage visitors to envision themselves instead as observers at a crossroads, watching people come, go, and stay as the millennia unfold.

While we have put a great deal of time, thought, and research into identifying and retelling stories and selecting engaging illustrations, we recognize that no amount of text on a wall will fulfill the exhibit’s empathy-building mission. To provoke introspection and conversation, we have also designed a series of interactive components, drawing on the principle of “designing for empathy” (Gokcigdem 2016) that envisions the exhibit visitor developing a compassionate worldview. These activities allow visitors to respond to what they have read, tell their own stories, and record their thoughts and responses for the benefit of subsequent visitors. Opportunities for local adaptation are also built into the exhibit. Space is provided for relevant books and artifacts from libraries’ own collections or on loan from community members, and host libraries will also be expected to partner with local organizations and other experts to offer public programming on related topics. In this way, host libraries will be able to deepen not only their partnerships with community organizations, but also their staff’s knowledge about the communities they serve.

As members of the community come into the library to participate in these programs, we anticipate that library staff will also have the opportunity to explore issues of migration and mobility more deeply. This was our experience with the RACE project; as RACE exhibit designer Joanne Jones-Rizzi told the Center for the Advancement of Informal Science Education, “staff were interested in having the same kinds of conversations that we were offering as public programs connected to RACE. So we started offering dialog sessions for staff as well and learned that the exhibition was this incredible catalyst for conversations about this complex topic,” including a critical consideration of the museum’s own policies and practices from a racial justice perspective (Bell 2018). We anticipate that *World on the Move* will prompt similar conversations within public libraries.

World on the Move is expected to launch in 2021, and it will be made available through a competitive application process to be coordinated by ALA. For any anthropologists who are interested in staying informed, advocating for the exhibit to come to their community, or participating in public programming, visit <http://www.understandingmigration.org> to learn more.

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