



OPINION COLUMN

Collaborative curatorship



By George Jacob, Museum Matters
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The treadmill of trepidations has never held back progress for communities committed to a better tomorrow. Institutions are stronger when they collaborate and work in synthesis towards a larger collective purpose.

In the last one year, the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum has taken several decisive steps for collaborative co-existence among peer institutions and professional organizations. Laying the groundwork for a future federal partnership, the museum has committed itself to a fully bilingual website that was launched in November last year and undertaken to develop all education and outreach programming in French and English.

The same policy has been extended to all future traveling exhibits that will be developed for regional, national and international audiences.

The museum is now an institutional member of the Canadian Association of Science Centres, the Canadian Museums Association and the Alberta Museums Association. In addition, the President and CEO of the museum serves on the Peer Review Council of the 28,000 member American Alliance of Museums. These affiliations allow for the museum staff to learn from peers, industry trends and benefit from multiple perspectives in vital areas of museum practice including curatorial, retail, visitor services, education, technology, non-profit management, leadership and administrative tools and techniques, among others.

Local partnership initiatives have made positive strides as well with Travel Alberta, GPRTA and Rotary. Extending corporate and individual engagement has yielded in a string of sponsorships and underwriting offers for various exhibit elements and public spaces within the museum. In fact, the very land that it sits on in Wembley was generously donated by Chris Anderson, an outstanding member of the Grande Prairie community. Perhaps the most significant contribution was made by the late Roy Bickell, who donated his entire collection of marine fossils to the museum after three rounds of conversation with me adding to it, two diamond saws. His memorial cheques are still pouring in to support the museum's mission and mandate.

Don Gnatiuk has taken the collaborative approach towards progressive growth of our communities by committing to a Memorandum of Understanding between the museum and the Grande Prairie Regional College. Endorsed by Reeve Leanne Beaupre and board chairman Ross Sutherland, this has been six months in the making following my induction on to the Advisory of the GPRC Tourism and Hospitality Program. GPRC Vice President of Research Susan Bangrove has taken active research in supporting this long-term partnership. We envision joint certificate programs and pursuance of potential grants in months and years ahead.

Curatorship practices focus on scholarly research, fieldwork, publications and educational discourses that ultimately influence exhibit induced experiential learning offered by museums as repositories of material culture. Museum environments are distinctly different from those tendered by colleges, universities and research institutions, in that they hinge the interpretive prowess on artifacts and collaterals. Cognitive learning is offered using a spectrum of time-tested methods ranging from passive viewing, interactive engagement, immersive environments and scenario based projections activated by visitors. Carefully calibrated reading levels, visual cues and word-count are aimed at minimizing cacophony of information overload, shrinking attention spans of an average child and visitor fatigue.

The museum is in the process of engaging in long term curatorial conversations with the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian Museum of Nature, Telus World of Science, National Geographic, University of Alberta, and others at various levels. These efforts will gain strength and depth of vision overtime, optimizing resources and shaping great minds in years ahead.

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