

Bridges Crossed: International Public History Collaboration

Julia Brock^(*)

The partnership between Kennesaw State University's Museum of History & Holocaust Education (MHHE) and Hassan II University's Ben M'sik Community Museum is at the vanguard of public history work. Public history, a term generally applied to work done by scholars and practitioners who focus on producing historical knowledge for public audiences (e.g. in museums or archives), has largely been confined as a field to the United States – it was in the U.S. that the discipline got its start and here that it has grown into a viable field of practice and study. As such, public history work and scholarship has been very much centered stateside; though art museums across the globe have had long-time international partnerships (furthered by such programs as the International Partnerships Among Museums [IPAM] project of the American Association of Museums [AAM]), history museums have been so grounded in local, regional, or national history that collaborations outside U.S. borders have been relatively few. Programs like the Museums and Community Collaborations Abroad (MCCA) of the AAM, which funds our project, are helping to change public history practice entirely. As public historians and scholars Jennifer Dickey and

*. Kennesaw State University, Georgia, the United States of America.

Catherine Lewis wrote about the early stages of the MHHE/BMCM partnership, “we are exploring new territory on multiple continents and believe that the structure and outcomes of our projects make them replicable models for other [public history] community partnerships.”⁽¹⁾ This essay reconfirms that conclusion, and it showcases the work of this year’s MCCA grant and the way in which our project furthers current and developing international public history practice through civic engagement, multi-partner collaboration, and the use of technology and new media.

Our current project is titled “Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context,” and the final “product” of our work will be an online exhibit exploring themes of identity, migration, and the experience of Muslims in the metro Atlanta area and in the Ben M’sik neighborhood of Casablanca. More than just an exercise in exhibit design, our year-long project is centered on what has become known in public history and higher education as civic engagement. Civic engagement, according to Barbara J. Little of the National Park Service and Nathaniel Amdur-Clark of Harvard University, means “building communities by creating or reinforcing relationships between people and promoting a healthy dialogue about, and active participation in, civic life.”⁽²⁾ Museums have increasingly committed to civic engagement in order to increase their relevancy in society and to connect to new audiences. Institutions have created innovative public programming that draws upon history and historical knowledge to engage audiences about our common civic life and pressing current-day issues.

Organizations that seek to expand international public history partnership have also adopted the mandate of civic engagement. One of the earliest to do so was the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, founded in 1999 by the District Six Museum, South Africa; the Gulag Museum, Russia; the Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh; the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, U.S.A.; Maison Des Esclaves, Senegal; National Park Service, U.S.A.; Memoria Abierta,

1. Jennifer Dickey and Catherine Lewis, “Building Bridges: Public History in an International Context,” *Moroccan American Studies* (Casablanca: Laboratory Publications, 2010), 51.

2. Little and Clark, “Archaeology and Civic Engagement,” Technical Brief 23, DOI Departmental Consulting Archeologist/NPS Archeology Program, National Park Service, Washington, DC, November 2008, <http://www.nps.gov/archeology/pubs/techbr/tch23.html>. Accessed 12 January 2012.

Argentina; the Terezin Memorial, Czech Republic; and the Workhouse, United Kingdom³). Upon formation, the Coalition adopted a mission statement that reflects its purpose of fostering “democracy in action” at member sites:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting democratic and humanitarian values as a primary function.⁴

Sites that are part of the Coalition reach out to their publics through exhibits and public programming; one of the earliest and most successful of these projects is the “Kitchen Conversations” program at the Tenement Museum in New York City—a program in which trained facilitators, after guiding visitors through a historic tenement building in the city’s Lower East Side, lead conversations about the complexities of present-day immigration⁵). These multi-perspective dialogues use the past and the sharing of personal experience to encourage a deepened understanding of immigrant experiences, an issue that can be incendiary in American public discourse. Such Coalition-sponsored programs have become increasingly influential as models for museum practice⁶).

The AAM, in its MCCA program, is also committed to fostering partnership, not only between international institutions but between those institutions and their audiences. The program’s stated objectives to “strengthen connections between museums and their communities as well as the connections of US citizens and people abroad through direct community engagement” directly invoke the spirit of civic engagement. This year’s MCCA recipients reflect that goal: a partnership between the Children’s Museum Jordan in Amman and the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, to focus on teaching children the values of conservation; a project that explores the legacy and impact

3. International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/about-us>. Accessed 12 January 2012.

4. Liz Ševčenko and Maggie Russell-Ciardi, “Foreword,” special issue “Sites of Conscience: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue,” *The Public Historian* vol. 30, no. 1 (February 2008), 9-10.

5. For more information see Ruth J. Abram, “Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,” *The Public Historian* vol. 29, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 59-76.

6. For examples of other types of Coalition projects, visit <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/activities/whats-new>. Accessed 12 January 2012.

of nuclear waste sites in Kazakhstan and Nevada; a collaboration between students in Philadelphia and Riga, Latvia, to collect oral histories and take part in community service projects in their communities; and, of course, our “Identities” project, one of only two continuing MCCA grants that extends the community work begun in the previous grant.

The ‘Identities’ project is committed to creating a dialogue about post-9/11 stereotypes of Islam, which, in America, can have toxic and destructive effects, as well as conversation in the Muslim world regarding western (mis)understandings of Islam. In line with MCCA objectives, ‘Identities’ was crafted as a project in public engagement. In the continuing grant’s original language, “sharing authority” with audience allowing public priorities and input about our exhibit to inform the final outcome is at the center. Teams in Morocco and America have reached out to our communities through surveys and focus groups are using the information collected to shape decisions about exhibit content and design.

The MHHE team conducted four focus groups, three in university classrooms and one in which the broader public and previous participants in MCCA grant activities were invited. In the focus groups MHHE team members asked participants to complete anonymous surveys that asked for demographic information and for attitudes and perceptions of Islam and Muslims. The final question, “What are five things you’d like to know about the experience of Muslims in the South?” went to the heart of what the MHHE team wanted learn: that is, what kinds of information we could include in our exhibit that would speak to audience interest and that would inform areas where public knowledge about Islam was lacking (most answers to this question centered on questions of daily practice and concerns about the challenges Muslims faced in a region that has been historically defined by racial oppression and friction). Moderators then engaged the focus groups in a larger conversation; through an open dialogue we were able to ask more nuanced questions about attitudes and perceptions, including how 9/11 and the mainstream media affected participants’ awareness of Muslims. When moderators posed the question, “How might negative stereotypes and ignorance surrounding Islam be countered?” the resounding answer was education (perhaps not surprisingly in a university setting). Our exhibit, we hope, will be a way to answer the call by these American audiences for more information and education about Islam.

BMCM team members conducted an impressive study of the attitudes of one hundred university students at Hassan II in Casablanca. They collected de-

mographic information about participants and researched attitudes about westerners and western understanding of Islam. Their questions gauged students' perceptions of western understanding of Islam and what kinds of things that students want our audience to learn about Morocco, Ben M'sik, and Islamic practice there. BMCM members collated information gathered in the surveys, which will greatly inform our exhibit content. The results of each team's work with formal focus groups and surveys will not only be included in the exhibit—the themes that emerged in talking with our potential audience members have shaped the content of what we will include. Once the exhibit is in its final stages of completion, we will conduct a summative evaluation of our work in the form of electronic surveys. Feedback from these surveys will allow us to modify or alter the exhibit's content, navigational organization, and even its aesthetic.

Beyond engaging audiences in focus groups and surveys, both teams reached out to the community in broader ways to establish greater visibility and as part of our commitment to creating partnerships. The BMCM represented the project at the high-profile Research & Innovation Expo in Casablanca, where Moroccan universities and engineering schools exhibit scientific research and inventions. The MHHE had opportunities to visit Islamic community centers and masjids to learn more about the Muslim community in Atlanta and to spread news about our work. Our project community liaison Ali Abedi, for example, hosted us at his community center, Dar E Abbas in Lilburn, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, where members welcomed our team and spoke with us about our project. MHHE team members also visited the Hamzah Islamic Center in Alpharetta, Georgia, where we met with youth groups to discuss their experiences and to talk about the goals of the project. Community outreach initiatives such as these are important in establishing relationships with neighbors but they also work to increase visibility for the 'Identities' project and the work of our respective museums.

Co-authorship of the exhibit is taking place externally with community partners, but our work as a project team is built upon internal collaboration between the American and Moroccan members. This type of multi-partner work is a growing trend in public history international museums and historic sites taking equal part in the shaping of a common project. The 'Identities' project team is made up of students from Hassan II University and Kennesaw State University, as well as faculty and staff from both. There are challenges in co-curating an exhibit with thirty people, but our team has done well in establishing mutual

communication and trust. We have gained this sense of connection largely because of the travel component of the grant, which allowed seven MHHE team members to travel to Morocco in December 2011 and will bring seven BCMCM team members to Washington, D.C., in March 2012.

Personal connection has, in fact, been the glue that solidifies our work and collaboration. The trip to Morocco did much to cement friendships and ties that make communication about and work on the project exciting. The trip was transformative for everyone involved; though only there a week, MHHE members were immersed in Moroccan culture and daily life thanks to the generosity of the BCMCM students and Prof. Samir El Azhar, BCMCM director. We traveled to different parts of the country, were guests in family homes, and had ample social time to converse with and get to know our Moroccan partners. Successfully establishing personal ties allowed for great progress on the project; in workshops during the week we came together and collectively established a blueprint for the exhibit and wrote exhibit text for its different pages. Though the work was important for our project deadline, it would not have been possible without establishing mutual trust between partners.

Our project would be impossible, too, without new technologies that aid in transatlantic communication and that are increasingly used in the way museums connect to their audiences⁽⁷⁾. Skype, Facebook, and our Wordpress blog have been particularly important in sharing ideas, suggesting articles and websites of interest, and meeting our partners “face-to-face.” Our first Skype meeting in October allowed for introductions and a tutorial for American and Moroccan students on conducting focus groups and surveys. We met again via Skype in November to update on work completed by that time each team had created an exhibit concept statement to guide interpretation and design and Skype was a useful way in which to present our outlines. Between these “face-to-face” meetings our group relied upon a Wordpress blog created by team member Matt Scott specifically for the ‘Identities’ project⁽⁸⁾. Using different forums on the blog, we

7. For a discussion of the relationship between Web 2.0 and social networking tools, see for example Erika Dicker, “The Impact of Blogs and other Social Media on the Life of a Curator,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of Museums and the Web, Denver, Colorado, April 13-17, 2010), http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/biblio/impact_blogs_and_other_social_media_life_curator. Accessed 11 January 2012.

8. See <http://www.mcca2011.com/>.

could take part in multiple conversations and update each other about events and general progress. The blog has also been a useful space for general announcements, for sharing documents and photos (we also use Flickr for images), and for alerting team members to relevant media or websites. American and Moroccan students exhibited an impressive knowledge and comfort with the blog format and we easily integrated it as a main communication medium. Though Skype and Wordpress have been crucial for internal communication among team members, our team has also established a public face via Facebook⁽⁹⁾. In lieu of a website, which will be the final outcome of this year's grant, Facebook has proved a helpful way to connect to supporters and potential audience members. Here we have updated our progress and have documented our focus groups, outreach activities, and travel with photos. Individual project members have also become 'friends' on Facebook, which works to strengthen personal connection and is a testament to the ties made during our travel. Though technology cannot act as a stand-in for personal interaction, it has been fundamental in our efforts to work in a global context.

A commitment to civic engagement, successful multi-partner collaboration, and effective use of technology are all defining components of this year's continuing MCCA grant and of current public history practice. All of these have been crucial factors in constructing our online exhibit through community dialogue, collaborative workshops, and the sharing of ideas through social networking tools, we have identified the important themes and kinds of content that will make up our website. For example, in focus groups we learned that audiences connect to personal and human stories; with this in mind we will feature oral histories of Muslims taken by previous MCCA grant participants from MHHE and BMCM. We will also include a short history of both communities (Atlanta and Ben M'sik), a resources page of relevant books, films, and websites, and a gallery of photographs taken by Moroccan and American team members. All content will work to illuminate the theme of identity formation in our respective communities and we hope will highlight the commonalities in both cultures.

Our MCCA grant was intended to be a model for future collaborations between international museums. Our project, in fact, is incredibly timely as public

9. See [http : // www.facebook.com/pages/Identities-Understanding-Islam-in-a-Cross-Cultural-Context/153697171394015](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Identities-Understanding-Islam-in-a-Cross-Cultural-Context/153697171394015).

historians venture increasingly into international partnerships. The International Committee of Historical Sciences/Comité International des Sciences Historiques (ICHS/CISH)⁽¹⁰⁾, for example, approved an internal commission, the International Federation for Public History (the steering committee of which is based in the United States), only last year⁽¹¹⁾. The Federation, like the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, is working to deepen the ties between historical sites and museums across the globe. Now that institutional bridges, such as that between MHHE and BMCM, have been built, public historians are charting new territories in their crossing.

10. See <http://www.cish.org/EN/index.htm>. Accessed 12 January 2012.

11. For a full report of this development see, Arnita A. Jones, "Creating the International Federation for Public History," *Public History News* vol. 31, no. 1 (December 2010), 1, <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010-Dec-Newsletter-FINAL-compressed1.pdf>. Accessed 12 January 2012.