



CASE STUDIES  
ENGAGEMENT  
COMMUNITY

2024

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDIES

Case Studies in Community  
Engagement by Chicago Arts  
and Cultural Organizations

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A multi-year initiative of the Terra Foundation for American Art, Art Design Chicago has been a platform for collaboration and exchange developed with cultural practitioners throughout Chicago. The initiative, launched in 2013 and concluding in 2025, has sought to catalyze transformative approaches to co-creation and community engagement and stimulate expansive narratives of Chicago art and design, past and present. Building new understandings of the city through the lens of its art and design history and legacy, Art Design Chicago aimed to strengthen the local visual arts ecosystem and encourage new and deeper partnerships between cultural organizations, creatives, and communities.\*

In alignment with its commitment to support inclusive and equitable practices that lead to structural change, the Terra Foundation provided a series of grants to Art Design Chicago partners (museums and cultural centers) for relationship building and experimentation in engagement strategies. These funds allowed grantees to develop and test projects that engaged communities in their creation and implementation, leading to ongoing relationships and mutually beneficial collaborations in several cases. The foundation also provided capacity-building support through funds for the employment of Engagement Fellows at several partner sites.

In addition, the Terra Foundation convened the Art Design Chicago Engagement Learning Community, a peer network aimed at facilitating knowledge exchange, fostering collaboration, and encouraging collective problem solving around the topic of engagement. Led by Terra Foundation Senior Engagement Fellow, Dr. Pascale Ife Williams, Learning Community members worked together to share models for community-centered ways of working, inspire mutual accountability, and support one another in the development of engagement plans.

The case studies that follow are just five of the many examples of innovative community-engagement practices that resulted from these grants and the work of the Learning Community. We hope that these cases serve as a helpful resource to the Art Design Chicago cohort and the larger field toward broadening and deepening relationships between cultural organizations and communities.

We are grateful to NORC researchers Gwendolyn Rugg and Ellen Bloss for their thoughtful and careful research. We also deeply appreciate the staff at each of the participating partner organizations for their willingness to candidly share reflections and lessons learned.

## THE ART DESIGN CHICAGO TEAM

\*For the purposes of this initiative, community is defined as a group of people who are connected by shared geography, attributes, and/or interests. Each institution identified different groups with which they sought to deepen existing partnerships and build new relationships.

The background features a vibrant orange color with several large, white, abstract geometric shapes. These shapes include a large semi-circle in the upper right, a large triangle pointing downwards in the center, and a smaller triangle pointing to the right on the right side. The shapes overlap and create a dynamic, layered effect.

# Case Studies in Community Engagement by Chicago Arts and Cultural Organizations



PHOTO CREDIT Holly Trevan

Jim Denomie (Lac Courte Oreilles band of Ojibwe), *Totem, Animal Spirits* (detail), 2021. Forge Project Collection, traditional lands of the Moh-He-Con-Nuck. Photo by Holly Trevan.

Organizations that serve audiences and publics are increasingly striving to find new ways to meaningfully engage with the communities they exist for and within—whether those communities are united by shared geography, attributes, or interests. Arts and culture organizations in particular have the opportunity to expand the boundaries of traditional, top-down approaches to arts programming and exhibitions by forging relationships with their publics and integrating community perspectives into their work.

This series of case studies showcases five Chicago-based organizations that have designed and implemented community-engagement strategies as part of their Art Design Chicago programs and exhibitions. All organizations were awarded funding to support these community-engagement efforts by the Terra Foundation for American Art. The organizations described in this report embrace innovative processes and practices that center co-creation with community members and institutions. By engaging in such partnerships, these organizations strengthened their own capacity to build relationships and created mutually beneficial artistic projects that amplified the perspectives, experiences, and stories of the communities in which they are embedded.

These case studies describe each organization's project, the key strategies they employed to engage their community/ies, and lessons learned and words of wisdom for other arts organizations looking to connect with their community. They are intended to offer both inspiration and practical guidance for how organizations can successfully engage their communities.



Across these case studies, several overarching themes emerged that highlight key strategies or lessons for successful community engagement. Together, the themes described here and detailed in each case study demonstrate how centering collaborative, inclusive practices can add meaning and value to cultural and artistic projects.

# Overarching Themes



# 01

**ENGAGE IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN.** Centering community voices is essential. Several organizations found success by inviting community members to participate in the early research and design phases of their project. Enabling participatory design allowed organizations and their community partners to envision and realize projects that authentically frame and represent community values and identities.

# 02

**BE OPEN TO PROJECT PIVOTS.** Embracing community-driven decision-making and design approaches necessitated each of the organizations profiled here to adapt their plans in some way throughout the realization of their project. These adaptive pivots, such as committing to evolution in the vision, timeline, budget, and/or content of a project, created stronger, more trusting partnerships that led to more impactful and community-aligned final products.

# 03

**FOSTER INSTITUTION-WIDE BUY-IN.** Several organizations found that making the effort to garner institution-wide support for community-engaged practices can help to unlock the vision of co-creators and enable innovative processes and projects to be realized. Organizations achieved buy-in through various methods, such as aligning initiatives with organizational goals, instituting working groups with stakeholders at all levels, and hosting listening sessions. Buy-in from colleagues and leadership during the community-engagement process ensures sustainable, inclusive outcomes and can also strengthen institutions' relationships with community partners overall.

# 04

**CONTINUE THE CONNECTION.** All organizations emphasized the importance of sustaining authentic connections with community partners and local residents beyond the duration of specific projects or exhibitions. These organizations underscored that relationships need to be maintained, and that authentic partnerships require ongoing care, trust-building, and active engagement in the long term, whether through the development of new exhibitions or collections, hiring staff focused on continued engagement, establishing regular avenues for dialogue with and feedback from community members, or other methods discussed across the cases that follow.



PHOTO CREDIT Holly Trevan

# Methods

To identify organizations to highlight in these case studies, we reviewed interim project reports and engaged in informal conversations regarding project status and outcomes. Out of a cohort of approximately 25 Terra Foundation-funded projects, we selected five organizations based on several criteria (e.g., engagement strategies employed, communities served, organization size, and organization geography) with an eye toward selecting a maximally diverse array of organizations and project approaches.

To gather information for each case study, researchers from NORC at the University of Chicago conducted one 90-minute interview with each organization's leadership, project team members, and/or community members with whom the organization collaborated, depending on availability and interest. Interviews centered on understanding each organization's approach to community engagement, how their project and community relationships evolved, and reflections on successes and challenges. Each organization shared lessons learned throughout the process that could be helpful for other arts organizations who may be looking for ways to build mutually beneficial relationships with their communities. Interviews were recorded, and transcripts were analyzed to identify the project-specific takeaways and cross-cutting themes presented here.

01



# Woven in Being

Art for  
Zhegonyak/  
Chicagoland

# Reimagining Participatory Curatorial Processes

**THE BLOCH MUSEUM OF ART** (“The Block”) is an academic art museum on the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, that offers free admission to all visitors. The Block built community engagement into the long-term development and presentation of its *Woven Being: Art for Zhegagoynak/Chicagoland*, an exhibition conceived in partnership with four Indigenous artists. These collaborating artists created “constellations” of their own artwork alongside historical and contemporary artworks, primarily by other Indigenous artists connected to the Great Lakes region. The exhibition centers the voices of these artists in conveying narratives about Zhegagoynak/Chicagoland, interweaving themes such as kinship, landways and waterways, and non-linear concepts of time.

# 01

**DEFINING POSITIONALITY TO COMMUNITY.** The project team at The Block began by defining the museum's **positionality** toward its surrounding communities. Located on the land of the Council of Three Fires: Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa, and on the Northwestern University campus, The Block reflected on its history as an institution in relation to Indigenous people, histories, and the land the museum occupies. This process of reflection helped the project team **identify, in a specific and intentional way, communities with whom to build relationships**, beginning with the Indigenous communities with deep-rooted histories predating the museum's founding and extending outward in concentric circles to Northwestern, the cities of Evanston and Chicago, the larger region, and the Indigenous populations who are a part of all these places. By reflecting on the museum's place within these interconnected communities, The Block laid a foundation for a project rooted in accountability, inclusivity, and a deeper understanding of the past, present, and future.

# 02

**VISIONING AN EXHIBITION CO-CREATED WITH COMMUNITY.** The Block staff set out to **co-create its exhibition with community partners**, beginning with conversations with Northwestern's Indigenous staff, faculty, and students, including through the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research and the Office of Indigenous Affairs. These discussions enabled the project organizers to learn what their partners would want from an exhibition and to help identify potential advisors with whom the museum should consult. The Block project team also hosted a series of **"visioning sessions"** with members of three groups: Indigenous University staff, faculty, students, and allies; knowledge sharers, artists, scholars, elders and activists; and other Block Museum staff members. Sessions were facilitated to encourage open sharing, and conversations were carefully documented, creating a vision that informed decision-making across the project. Guided by the insights from the visioning sessions, The Block identified four Indigenous artists with ties to the Chicago region to serve as collaborators; these artists then invited others into the process, fostering a dialogue between Indigenous creators and ensuring that they shaped the content and the framing of *Woven Being*. By drawing on longstanding Indigenous modes of collaboration and co-creation, *Woven Being* is part of a larger ongoing effort to reimagine how The Block collaborates with communities.

# 03

**CULTIVATING INSTITUTION-WIDE BUY-IN.** The Block also prioritized **engaging its entire staff** in the learning process during the exhibition's development rather than limiting involvement to the project team. Through open communication and collaboration across the Curatorial, Engagement, and Exhibition Management departments, staff members beyond those of the curatorial team contributed to the project. The full museum staff participated in meetings and received reports throughout exhibition development with the intention of building a shared understanding of the significance of certain project ideas. This intentional internal collaboration created familiarity with the project's goals and their relation to broader museum priorities, which proved to be a **key factor in unlocking the vision of its co-creators**.

# 04

**CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO FUNDRAISING.** By embracing a curatorial methodology that centered co-creation and relationships, the *Woven Being* team challenged traditional funding models at the museum. In the application for funding to support this project, The Block's proposal focused on the creation of a process rather than the outlining of specific goals and deliverables, prioritizing discovery and collaborative goal-setting over working toward a predetermined outcome. This approach reframed success as the ability to respond to community input, build relationships, and adapt as the project unfolded. Anticipating this evolving, community-driven approach required The Block to **request grant funds not for a fixed project but for a process**—an unconventional proposition for many funders. To navigate this unfamiliar territory, The Block emphasized transparency by acknowledging unknowns and providing examples of potential outcomes that aligned with its broader mission.

# 01

**ALIGN COMMUNITY-ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES WITH CORE INSTITUTIONAL VALUES.** The *Woven Being* initiative exemplifies a collaborative effort rooted in Northwestern University's broader commitment to Indigenous communities and knowledge and to reciprocal collaboration with Indigenous-led units on campus. This alignment with the University's initiative to embark on genuine engagement with Indigenous communities within and beyond Northwestern supported the project's foundational philosophy of co-creation, representing a vital step toward deeper institutional accountability and the embedding of Indigenous perspectives into The Block's and Northwestern's ongoing work.

# 02

**CULTIVATING AND SUSTAINING DEEP-ROOTED CONNECTIONS.** Partnering with community members and turning their feedback into outcomes are always goals of community-engaged work. Too often, however, engagement projects focus solely on single outcomes such as an exhibition, neglecting **the foundational and follow-up phases that are critical to cultivating long-term relationships**. Block staff proactively acknowledged this tendency at the outset of its *Woven Being* initiative and had upfront conversations about its relational commitments: the exhibition would be only one component of this work. Throughout the five years of exhibition development, The Block and Indigenous-led organizations built reciprocal relationships. The Block staff supported these organizations' efforts by showing up for their programs, sharing The Block's own voice and platform to amplify community priorities while seeking input on the *Woven Being* project. In its strategic plan, The Block formally committed to invest in and prioritize its relationship with the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research at the University after the exhibition ends. The museum has also earmarked funds for staff members to travel to Indigenous historic sites and has begun advertising museum staff positions in online communities in which many Indigenous people participate. Through these actions, The Block sought to model a form of **community engagement that does not end once an exhibition closes but continues to grow and adapt.**

# 03

**BALANCE VISION AND CAPACITY.** Encouraging co-creators to share their ideas freely, The Block welcomed creativity and bold thinking. While practical constraints such as gallery size, staff capacity, and budget influenced what could be achieved, the project **embraced the challenge of balancing ambitious artistic visions with institutional capacity.** Navigating the inevitable trade-offs revealed a strength of the museum and provided opportunities for growth. For example, one artist proposed a work that involved using sand on the gallery floor—a concept that might have seemed impractical or even impossible without buy-in from museum preparators. By embracing the co-creators' vision and stepping outside of its comfort zone, The Block staff was able to support the artist's creative intent and bring the concept to life.

# 04

**EMBRACE DISCOMFORT.** Community collaborations come with varying levels of complexity – some may feel straightforward, while others require deeper efforts and care. Both types of collaborations are valuable. But the more **challenging conversations and partnerships often lead to the most meaningful learning and growth for institutions:** by embracing challenges as opportunities, institutions can build stronger, more authentic relationships. It is essential for institutions to acknowledge past harm experienced by communities they engage with, especially the damage caused by institutional histories and structures, and approach all engagements with openness and respect. The Block team prioritized open communication to ensure transparency and adopted a trauma-informed approach to account for the ongoing impact of complex trauma within the Indigenous communities involved in the project. This mindset fostered empathy and flexibility throughout the process and demonstrated respect for community input while remaining grounded in practical realities. Addressing a community's history creates space for healing, trust-building, and progress.

[Usually] the curatorial team presents the idea...and they bring people in to comment... We started in reverse, [asking] who are the people we should talk to who have a stake in what this might be? And then from those conversations, we developed an approach to the exhibition and what it should be.

– JANET DEES, CO-CURATOR, *WOVEN BEING*

**Special thanks to the following members of the project staff for their time and generosity:**

- Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs, The Block Museum
- Jordan Poorman Cocker, *Woven Being* Terra Foundation Guest Co-Curator; Curator of Indigenous Art, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art
- Marisa Cruz Branco, *Woven Being* Terra Foundation Curatorial Fellow, The Block Museum of Art
- Janet Dees, Co-Curator, *Woven Being*; former Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, The Block Museum of Art
- Kate Hadley Toftness, Assistant Director of Advancement and Strategic Initiatives, The Block Museum of Art
- Teagan Harris, *Woven Being* Terra Foundation Engagement Fellow, The Block Museum of Art
- Erin Northington, Associate Director, Campus and Community Education and Engagement, The Block Museum of Art
- Dan Silverstein, Associate Director of Collections and Exhibition Management, The Block Museum of Art

02



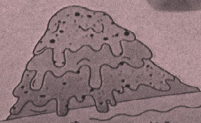
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# Building A Community Archive Through Photographic Storytelling

As a student at Columbia College in the early 1990s, Akito Tsuda photographed residents of the largely Mexican American Pilsen neighborhood on the Southwest Side of Chicago. To preserve and celebrate this piece of Chicago history, the Archives and Special Collections Division of Chicago Public Library (CPL) launched *Akito Tsuda: Pilsen Days*, a community-driven exhibition that created a vibrant archive of life in Pilsen during the 1990s. The project's community-engagement elements included local convenings, free public programs, and the display of *Akito Tsuda: Pilsen Days* at CPL's exhibition hall at the Harold Washington Library Center. This project was one of CPL's largest programming efforts.



PHOTO CREDIT Erik Paul Howard



PHOTO CREDIT Oscar Arriola

# 01

## **BUILDING A COMMUNITY-GENERATED EXHIBITION.**

Tsuda's photographs remained largely unseen until he began sharing them on social media 20 years after they were taken. The community response was immediate and powerful: Pilsen residents recognized themselves, their families, and neighborhood landmarks in Tsuda's photos, evoking a sense of nostalgia and pride. In 2019, members of the Pilsen community raised funds to bring Tsuda back to Chicago from his home in Japan and introduced him to the Library's Special Collections Unit. This **community action led to a collaboration** involving CPL, the artist, and the community, which sought to tell a story about Pilsen not just through Tsuda's images but through the voices of its people as well.

# 02

## CONDUCTING PARTICIPATORY EXHIBITION DESIGN.

The Library's Archives and Special Collections Division often works with historical materials, so the project team used its archival expertise to its advantage. For this project, the team's and the artist's vision extended beyond a traditional documentary approach; they wanted **the residents of Pilsen to actively shape the exhibition narrative**, ensuring their stories, memories, and voices were at the forefront of the project. With this goal in mind, CPL staff and members of Yollocalli Arts Reach, an initiative of the National Museum of Mexican Art, began reaching out to individuals featured in the photographs to gather their stories and personal reflections on life in the neighborhood. These conversations added layers of meaning to the photographs and captured the spirit of 1990s Pilsen from the perspectives of those who lived there. Audio interviews with community members were featured in *Akito Tsuda: Pilsen Days* and are available to the public on the Library's website, marking the first time CPL has integrated audio recordings into its digital archives.

# 03

**DEVELOPING PLACE-BASED PROGRAMMING.** To foster deeper connections between the artwork and Pilsen residents, the **project team organized a series of public walking tours** through the neighborhood, beginning at the Library's Lozano branch in Pilsen and following routes leading to locations featured in Tsuda's work. An unexpected but meaningful addition to these tours came when local residents spontaneously joined the walks, sharing personal stories and memories tied to stops along the route. Beyond Pilsen, CPL hosted a series of **free public programs** across its branches throughout Chicago to provide residents with resources to document and archive their own personal and family stories through hands-on activities such as photography, photo archiving, and zine-making. By leveraging its expansive network, the Library empowered community members to document their own histories while also fostering a deeper connection between library branches and their surrounding neighborhoods.

# 01

**ADVOCATES CAN HELP BUILD COMMUNITY TRUST.** Initially the CPL project team encountered misgivings from community members who were wary of working with such a large municipal agency. CPL staff noted that **partnering with a dynamic artist with ties to the Pilsen community went a long way toward building bridges.** By placing his trust in the Library and advocating on its behalf, Tsuda enabled community members to place their trust in CPL as well.

# 02

**ADOPT RELIABLE PROJECT-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES.** The Library's team learned that **effective communication is critical** when working with new collaborators and quickly recognized the importance of **establishing clear roles, schedules, and expectations.** Early discussions outlining responsibilities and priorities—such as adjusting schedules to accommodate community members' availability—helped the Library keep its engagement work sustainable. Further, the CPL project team learned to pivot in its use of resources where possible to match the evolving vision for the exhibition. This adjustment entailed a careful process of **responsive budget management and planning** to align bold ideas with realistic financial parameters—guided by the aim of ensuring that the community's and the artist's visions were honored and empowered in the exhibition.

# 03

**EXPECT PROJECT COLLABORATOR TURNOVER AND ESTABLISH CONTINGENCY PLANS.** Staff and collaborator turnover is an inherent challenge for projects involving a significant number of collaborators and with longer timeframes. It can be a particular challenge for grant-funded projects, as funding cycles often take several months to be initiated, followed by a year or more of work during the grant period. To plan for long project timelines, CPL developed contingency plans to ensure continuity in the event of team members becoming unavailable. Flexibility from funders is equally important since multifaceted **community-based projects are inherently dynamic and often involve changes in collaborators and resource needs.** These realities require funders to be supportive of a flexible, adaptive approach, which for CPL proved essential to the project's success.

# 04

**CONTINUE THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION.** The *Akito Tsuda: Pilsen Days* project aimed to preserve Pilsen's cultural heritage while strengthening connections between CPL and the communities it serves. The Library is committed to cataloging historical community archives throughout Chicago, and with this engagement project, CPL hopes to have positioned itself as a trusted partner and advocate for community representation. But building trust takes time, and the team recognizes the need to continue community relationships beyond the project period. Ongoing efforts to engage local Chicago communities through outreach and programming will help ensure that Chicago's many communities feel seen, heard, and represented in the Library's collections.

I think we've built a stronger relationship with the community, by reputation... We're hoping that we can be thought of as a place for the community to turn to in the future.

– JOHANNA RUSS, CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

**Special thanks to the following members of the project staff for their time and generosity:**

- Oscar Arriola, Curator, *Akito Tsuda: Pilsen Days*, and Head Clerk, Sulzer Regional Library, Chicago Public Library
- Michelle McCoy, Senior Archival Specialist, Chicago Public Library
- Johanna Russ, Unit Head, Special Collections, Chicago Public Library

03



PHOTO CREDIT Mikey Mosher

# Establishing A Community- Oriented Chicago Letterform Archive

## **THE DESIGN MUSEUM OF CHICAGO (DMOC)**

explores how design shapes everyday life, from architecture and urban planning to street art and choreography; yet, a vital piece of Chicago's design history had been missing from institutional archives and design scholarship: the typographic traditions of local communities. In response, DMoC developed an initiative to preserve and celebrate these overlooked narratives. The museum invited members of two communities to become storytellers and historians in collaboration with community-based arts organizations, typographers, graffiti writers, and lettering artists. Through workshops, residents preserved text-based materials from their own collections about their neighborhoods, while also sharing oral histories about their communities and identities. The project culminated in DMoC's *Letters Beyond Form: Chicago Types*, an exhibition that displays these findings and amplifies the community voices behind them, highlighting their contributions to Chicago's typographic history.

# 01

**TAKING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO EXHIBITION RESEARCH.** When conceptualizing this project, the project team sought to identify unique typographies embedded in communities that were resisting commercialization and gentrification. Its research led it to focus on Pilsen on Chicago's Southwest Side and Bronzeville on the South Side—neighborhoods already actively preserving their cultural heritage. The project team then adopted a **participatory approach to exhibition research** by meeting with local graffiti writers, designers, and cultural creators, especially those often excluded from mainstream design spaces. From there, the project team immersed itself in these design communities, spending time with lettering artists to learn about their practices, histories, and the evolution of their craft.

# 02

**MAKING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION ACCESSIBLE** DMOc was able to engage community members in the exhibit design by **hosting workshops at community-based organizations** in the two neighborhoods. DMOc partnered with the Pilsen Arts & Community House and the South Side Community Art Center in Bronzeville to host workshops that created a space for neighbors to learn about typographic design and lettering, develop skills in the preservation and archiving of cultural heritage, and share stories that ultimately became part of the exhibition. Community members feel comfortable working with both of these partner organizations, which are deeply entrenched in their communities. In these workshops, participants gained archiving skills through a semi-structured learning experience and received materials to preserve their personal collections. The workshops also focused on documenting and building archives, with discussions led by an archivist on familial documentation and cultural preservation. In Pilsen, DMOc and the Pilsen Arts & Community House responded to the community's demographics by enlisting **a bilingual archivist and bilingual lettering artists to ensure workshops were accessible** for both Spanish- and English-speaking participants.

# 03

**LEADING WITH PRESENCE.** A guiding philosophy of the project team was the **idea of presence—showing up to build genuine relationships without being performative or transactional.** This approach is rooted in a desire for mutual learning and benefit. The project’s curator played a vital role in building authentic relationships with local graffiti writers, type designers, and lettering artists, spending months engaging with their work and observing their unique lettering styles and techniques. DMoC then recognized the contributions of these artists by naming and celebrating their work in the show. Building these relationships and, in turn, recognizing marginalized artistic communities were essential aims that were aligned with the exhibition’s vision. Guided by the philosophy of presence, *Letters Beyond Form: Chicago Types* ultimately became an inclusive, community-driven resource that showcases typographic material and culture, textually weaves oral histories into exhibition didactics, and honors individual, family, and community histories through design. of potential outcomes that aligned with its broader mission.





PHOTO CREDITS Mikey Mosher

# 01

**LET THE COMMUNITY TAKE THE LEAD.** The team initially anticipated that the community workshops would yield physical artifacts to include in the exhibition. However, typography is a nuanced art form that did not lend itself to participants bringing in tangible items that were traditionally typographic. Instead, what emerged were powerful stories and themes deeply tied to community members' lived experiences in their neighborhoods. DMoC gained valuable insights into this idea by engaging interns to gather and report community members' experiences in workshops, which confirmed community members' satisfaction with the opportunity to share their stories. This finding became a guidepost that influenced DMoC's decision to **redefine its exhibition plan based on what the community was able and willing to offer**, and the stories community members brought to these workshops unexpectedly transformed the exhibition's focus. Rather than centering on physical objects, the project team adopted an anthropological approach, weaving community members' stories into the exhibition narrative. By adapting its project to align with community contributions rather than predefined expectations, the exhibition team moved beyond traditional art historical frameworks to offer a representation of Chicago's typographic heritage understood through community engagement.

# 02

## **BALANCE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AND BOUNDARIES.**

By approaching this project with presence and as a learner and collaborator, DMoC created an environment of mutual respect and authentic exchange with artist-designers, graffiti writers, cultural workers, and community members. The project team members came to recognize the delicate balance that must be found between showing up to an interaction as representatives of the museum with the intent of furthering the project and showing up as humans with the intent of forming personal connections.

**Building mutual respect by connecting on both personal and project levels is important, but it requires thoughtful navigation:**

where needed, there must be boundaries and clear expectations.

Through this process, DMoC learned how to build genuine partnerships aligned with both human and institutional needs.

# 03

## **MAINTAIN THE CONNECTION. FOR DMOc, THE SUCCESS OF A PARTNERSHIP IS REFLECTED IN ITS LONGEVITY.**

The museum's connection with the Pilsen Arts & Community house had been established through a prior exhibition and grew into an ongoing collaboration for *Letters Beyond Form: Chicago Types*. DMoC staff shared that one signal that longer-term trust has been formed is when community partners feel comfortable enough to reach out to the museum for guidance or support. This trust allows for open, candid conversations and a sense of shared purpose that extends beyond any given project. Museum leadership feels that such ongoing connection is vital to ensure that future projects can emerge organically from the strength of the relationships that the exhibition engendered.

We don't need to get what we [initially] intended. We can still learn from anything, and not be upset that we didn't have the outcome we had hoped for. There's always an outcome, and that outcome can be a success if we change our metric, which is what we did. And we learned a lot from that.

– AMIRA HEGAZY, DESIGN MUSEUM OF CHICAGO

**Special thanks to the following members of the project staff for their time and generosity:**

- Amira Hegazy, Curator, *Letters Beyond Form: Chicago Types*, Design Museum of Chicago
- Tanner Woodford, Founder and Executive Director, Design Museum of Chicago

04



PHOTO CREDIT National  
Museum of Mexican Art

# Building Capacity To Serve Audiences With Blindness & Low Vision

**THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICAN ART (NMMA)** in Chicago celebrates Mexican art and culture through collections and programming. NMMA launched an initiative to build new connections with people in Chicago who are blind or have low vision, and to enhance equitable access to the arts in conjunction with its Art Design Chicago exhibition, *Arte Diseño Xicágo II: From the World's Fair to the Present Day*. Defining its strategies in collaboration with an accessibility-focused design firm, NMMA institutionalized best practices for creating accessible exhibitions. The measures adopted included providing staff training, crafting visual descriptions for artworks, creating an accessibility style guide for exhibition design, forming a Disability Community Advisory Group, and piloting a museum tour for members of the American Council of the Blind.

# 01

**LEADING WITH “FIRST VOICE.”** NMMA adheres to a “first voice” principle, which specifies that communities should be the primary voices considered in the development of projects that affect them. As such, NMMA consulted people who are blind or have low vision at various stages of its project. Its Education Department partnered with an accessibility-focused design firm, Prime Access Consulting; attended the annual Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability conference organized by The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts’ Office of Accessibility and VSA; and hosted several education and training sessions for museum staff focused on accessibility. **Leveraging learnings from these efforts, NMMA updated its physical space** to incorporate visual descriptions into its Art Design Chicago exhibition, describing each piece’s style, color, and composition. The written visual descriptions appear in large type and can be accessed audibly using smartphone digital text readers. The museum staff redesigned a case in the permanent-collection galleries as well, using larger labels and integrating detailed audio descriptors into Bloomberg Connects, a popular mobile museum app. NMMA also provides complimentary sensory kits for visitors to borrow, and plans to incorporate representative tactile objects, samples, and swatches to accompany exhibitions and to grow expertise in guiding visitors who are exploring the tactile objects during their visits. All these tools were used in the development of an accessibility style guide and checklist for museum staff to inform future work, which will be important as NMMA lays the groundwork to install large-text visual and audio descriptions for five more cases in its permanent-collection galleries.

# 02

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.**

An important tool for NMMA's engagement initiative has been its accessibility project roadmap, which outlines the phases of its accessibility efforts, details key deliverables, and tracks completion dates. The roadmap has been instrumental in making the team's vision a reality by **assigning and aligning accessibility projects across the museum's diverse teams and stakeholders.** The roadmap has a practical application, as the museum-wide Inclusive Design Working Group holds regular meetings to review the roadmap's components to keep the project on track. In these meetings, the group uses a RACI matrix (a project-management tool that outlines responsibilities and assigns roles). Finally, NMMA continues to utilize its design firm's resources and leverages feedback from partners in its newly formed Disability Community Advisory Group, comprising disability advocates and professionals in the Chicago area who partner with the museum on accessibility-related topics. NMMA's Inclusive Design Working Group, project roadmap and management tools, and Disability Community Advisory Group represent important material steps that will sustain its community-engagement work in the years to come.

# 03

## **TRACKING PROGRESS AND OBTAINING FEEDBACK.**

**NMMA assesses its community-engagement impacts** through various methods, including tracking usage of the sensory kits and monitoring the completion of tasks outlined in the roadmap. It assesses the extent of cross-departmental involvement in accessibility workstreams as well because increased participation in accessibility projects encourages more departments to make accessibility a core component of their work. Recording and acting on feedback the museum receives from tours it has hosted with blind and low-vision community members are essential to enhancing these communities' experiences moving forward, so such feedback received after tours is accounted for and tracked using the museum's roadmap.

# 01

**BUILD CAPACITY IN STAGES.** NMMA recognized early in the process that it **had more questions than answers** about how to improve accessibility; the staff realized that it lacked the expertise and connections needed to seek out “first voices” and form an advisory group as part of the project’s initial phases. But it saw this deficit as an **opportunity to pivot, seeking out external expertise** via an accessibility-focused design firm as a first step to advance the museum’s community-engagement efforts. Next, NMMA added accessibility tools—including detailed visual descriptions and texture swatches, beads, and other representative tactile objects—in its galleries, which were used when hosting guests from the American Council of the Blind for a private tour. This visit marked an important step toward developing relations with individuals in Chicago’s blind and low-vision communities. After staff members took additional time and care to learn accessibility and inclusion practices and to build internal capacity, they felt ready to foster community relationships by establishing the Disability Community Advisory Group. NMMA’s **staged process of capacity-building contributed to a growing sense of expertise internally.** The museum now has answers to its initial questions and appropriate resources to lean on for answering new questions and building additional capacity.

# 02

**LOOK FOR GRASSROOTS SIGNS OF SUCCESS.** NMMA staff anticipates the museum will have reached a meaningful milestone in accessibility when people who are blind or have low vision, along with supporters outside the community, **begin to organically promote and respond to the museum’s offerings.** NMMA highlighted a recent success in this arena—an artist whose work is on display in its galleries independently created a tactile object not originally included in their exhibition to match the museum’s existing accessibility offerings. Additionally, the museum has observed community-driven engagement via online listservs, where individuals have independently posted and emailed about NMMA’s accessibility features. The museum takes these grassroots efforts as evidence that it is making progress in the accessibility space.

# 03

**REFRAME BARRIERS AS OPPORTUNITIES.** NMMA approached perceived challenges related to community engagement as **opportunities rather than barriers**. For instance, a tour of NMMA for members of the American Council of the Blind provided an opportunity for the museum to build capacity to welcome blind and low-vision visitors that was lacking prior to the visit. Similarly, NMMA understood that establishing a Disability Community Advisory Group required building trust early on to ensure group members felt welcomed and connected. NMMA carefully considered how it invited members and during the initial meeting. To address group members' potential concerns and ensure they understood that the museum was earnest in its engagement and dedication to increasing access, NMMA communicated the museum's intentions and shared progress to-date on its accessibility initiatives. NMMA emphasized that community-engagement work can feel intimidating; nonetheless, **organizations should not be afraid to start small**—taking the first step is crucial.

# 04

**FOSTER INSTITUTION-WIDE BUY-IN.** NMMA emphasized the importance of **engaging all museum staff in accessibility efforts**. Its initiative may have started with leadership buy-in, but NMMA highlighted the need to involve individuals from all levels of the organization, not just directors. Accessibility education and training sessions helped staff members understand the mission and align themselves with it. During all-staff meetings in the early stages, the project team regularly shared accessibility plans and updates on progress, which kept the broader group informed and made everyone feel united in working toward a common goal.



PHOTO CREDITS National  
Museum of Mexican Art



# 05

**CONTINUE THE CONNECTION.** Lastly, NMMA encourages organizations to view **community engagement as a continuous, evolving process rather than a one-time effort.** Building mutually beneficial relationships takes time and effort, which should be reflected in an organization's structure and roadmap. Beyond its Art Design Chicago exhibition, NMMA has accessibility ambassadors in each museum department, who continue to advocate for accessibility across the museum's initiatives. NMMA also keeps accessibility at the forefront of its grant-seeking efforts and actively pursues additional funding to make ongoing improvements to accessibility programming, exhibition design, and the museum's built environment.

One of the things that I think has made this project successful is that it's cross-departmental; multiple kinds of roles and responsibilities are included in the project. Everybody's got a role. Everybody can do something.

– BARBARA ENGELSHIRCHEN,  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICAN ART

**Special thanks to the following members of the project staff for their time and generosity:**

- Barbara Engelskirchen, Chief Development Officer, National Museum of Mexican Art
- Vanessa Sanchez, Director of Education and Yollocalli Arts Reach, National Museum of Mexican Art



PHOTO CREDIT National  
Museum of Mexican Art

05

PHOTO CREDIT Deborah Awwad,  
Red Line Service artist



# Modeling A Fully Community- Led Organization

**RED LINE SERVICE (RLS)** is a Chicago-based arts organization whose mission is to leverage resources from the art world to empower a sovereign community of individuals with lived experiences of houselessness. Artists with lived experience of houselessness are at the heart of RLS's efforts, and rather than working for Chicago's community of houseless artists, RLS embodies the philosophy that the community is the organization. RLS artists lead the organization and shape its direction and impact. Thus, for RLS, community engagement is not a project-based strategy but is rather a transformative vision of what arts organizations can be. For its *Designing Belonging* project, RLS hosted a series of public talks with artists, designers, and scholars about public space, and these conversations informed the development of a public art object. RLS's project provides a glimpse into its fully community-led ethos, demonstrating how arts organizations can move beyond project-based engagement models to build close ties to communities at the organizational level.

# 01

**LETTING THE COMMUNITY LEAD.** *Designing Belonging* was conceptualized, designed, and executed entirely by people with lived experiences of houselessness. The project aimed to create a public object that invites all individuals to engage with art in public space. The concept resonated deeply with the RLS community given the unwelcoming nature of many public spaces. Examples include the park bench designed with obstructive features like a central piece of iron to prevent people from lying down, and green spaces that are closed to the public at night, restricting access to those without a place to sleep. Because of the unique relationship that people with lived experience of houselessness have with public space, **co-production in the creative process** was vital in the design of the project. RLS artists drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including Little Amal, a mobile, twelve-foot-tall, human-operated puppet that represents the story of a young Syrian refugee. After seeing Little Amal in action, RLS artists proposed their own interpretation: the Puppet of Care. This oversized puppet with friendly, approachable features would be built and operated by RLS artists and would interact with observers, making emotional connections and offering a sense of belonging in public spaces.

# 02

**FOSTERING COMMUNITY CARE.** The concept of **community care** is the cornerstone of RLS's work. For the *Designing Belonging* project, the group decided to unveil the Puppet of Care in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, at a school where a significant portion of students were housed in temporary shelters. The Puppet of Care's first act was symbolic: the group placed a "cloak of care" on the puppet, demonstrating a simple yet powerful truth: "You can't offer care if you don't first take care." With this message, the puppet led a procession through the neighborhood, becoming a symbol of connection, compassion, and care. For RLS, **community care** means compensating RLS artists for their artmaking and labor, paying them a fair wage for the Chicago area. RLS also provides stipends for transportation and meals and offers resources focused on healing, repair, and restorative justice. RLS's commitment to community care is formalized in its co-created community charter, which serves as a guiding framework for the organization's internal operations and for its external partnerships..

# 03

**LEVERAGING COMPLEMENTARY PARTNERSHIPS.** RLS's external **partnerships** are extensive and deeply rooted within Chicago's art and design community. For *Designing Belonging*, RLS leveraged existing relationships with experts in design, architecture, community development frameworks, houselessness, and criminalization in public spaces and created an eight-month free lecture series for RLS artists and the public. During these lectures experts shared insights with RLS artists about principles of design, design research, and designing for inclusion. These lectures served as a foundation to equip the project team with the tools and ideas needed to conceptualize the Puppet of Care.

# 01

**BE ADAPTIVE AND NIMBLE.** Red Line Service began its Art Design Chicago project with the idea of creating a static public art installation. But the team's **flexibility and willingness to think outside the box led it to pivot** toward creating the Puppet of Care. The idea came to life through internal design workshops in which every detail – from concept to final execution – was discussed among the project's nine-person design team. RLS leadership placed trust in the team and supported its design pivot from a static installation to the mobile Puppet of Care.

# 02

**NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES AND EMBRACE THE REWARDS OF COLLABORATION.** As an organization, RLS aims to create a safe, supportive environment where artists with lived experiences of houselessness can connect and collaborate effectively. But for many, trusting others does not come easily, as their experiences may have taught them to rely solely on themselves. By encouraging collaborative artmaking, RLS provides a space where artists with lived experiences of houselessness can **learn to trust others, accept feedback, and critique work constructively**. However, RLS recognizes that conflict is inevitable in its diverse community. Consequently, RLS has adopted a **restorative justice framework for resolving disagreements** in compassionate ways. This helps RLS cultivate an environment where every community member feels valued, cared for, and supported.

# 03

**STRIVE TOWARD CONTINUITY.** Building relationships is at the heart of RLS's mission, and the hallmark of a strong relationship, according to RLS, is **continuity**. Community engagement is not about completing a single project and moving on; it is about **staying connected to a community over the long term**. According to RLS, a community thrives when people in the community learn to lean on and trust one another. Within the context of this project, RLS is committed to sustaining the feelings of belonging and care that the Puppet of Care engenders by maintaining its presence in communities over time.

# 04

**EMPOWER COMMUNITY VOICES.** RLS recognizes that when programming decisions are made before community input is received or even sought, it can be harder to foster genuine engagement and buy-in. Thus a marker of true community engagement for RLS **occurs when artists throughout the organization feel comfortable enough to approach the organization's leadership with ideas**, and when those ideas are in turn authentically received and embraced. RLS also encourages community-driven input by **installing community members on its Board of Directors**. In fact, RLS has formalized this principle in its by-laws, which state that 50% of the Board must have lived experience with houselessness. This requirement ensures the organization's priorities are aligned with the community's needs.

**Special thanks to the following members of the project staff for their time and generosity:**

- Tracey Christmas, Artist and Board Member, Red Line Service
- Rhoda Rosen, Founder and Executive Director, Red Line Service
- Dave Scott, Artist and Program Committee Member, Red Line Service
- The Reverend Von Ferdinand, Artist, Red Line Service

I hear [of] organizations doing something [for community engagement] and then having the community buy in. The buy in would be built in if you had the people working with you develop whatever it is you're going to do.

– TRACEY CHRISTMAS, RED LINE SERVICE



PHOTO CREDIT EYA SILVERMAN

TERRA

FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART

The background is a dark brown color. It features several large, overlapping geometric shapes in a vibrant orange color. In the upper right, there is a large triangle. In the lower left, there is a large, multi-pointed star-like shape. In the lower right, there is a large circle. The shapes overlap each other, creating a dynamic and abstract composition.

[artdesignnchicago.org](http://artdesignnchicago.org)