

Embracing a New Understanding of the City: The Museum of Vancouver's Vision in Action

Viviane Gosselin

Abstract The Museum of Vancouver recently undertook a major rethinking of its role in the city. New interplays are being proposed between emerging conceptions of urbanity and civic participation, and the museum's collection and function as facilitator and advocate. This short paper provides a brief overview of the museum's recent transformation, situates it in the larger museological context, and examines the articulation of the new vision by zooming into MOV's upcoming exhibition, *Sex Talk in the City*. In doing so, the paper contributes toward defining the specificity and interpretive contribution of city museums.

Introduction

A process of reinvention began in 2008 at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV).¹ Visitation had been in steady decline, membership was stagnant, and surveys indicated that locals considered the museum a destination for school children and tourists, not for them. Speaking to Vancouverites thus became a priority. A series of yearlong consultations in the form of focus groups and individual conversations with multiple key informants provided material and inspiration to create a new vision, outlined in a strategic plan.² From Vancouver Museum, the institution was renamed, in 2009, the Museum of Vancouver (MOV), making its new focus and object of study unambiguous. Its revised mission statement, "To hold a mirror up to the city and lead provocative conversations about its past, present and future," emphasizes building relationships with various community actors across fields and disciplines to generate new understandings of the city.

The Museum of Vancouver's transformation is not unique. It takes its cues from museums that — independently from their mandate — are invested in what I call “civic museography,” a form of curatorial action designed to identify and address issues of public concern and interest while seeking public participation and involvement.³ Museums have always been dynamic institutions, yet the challenges and pace of change over the last ten years are unparalleled. Globalization, environmental issues, relationships with indigenous peoples, influxes of immigrant populations, the emergence of digital technologies, and the global financial crisis have placed new demands and pressures on the ways museums operate as civil society institutions. This particular context has pushed museums like MOV to expand their educational role. Less interested in a top-down knowledge production and delivery model, institutions practicing civic museography consider themselves part of a larger learning system; that is, to carry their mandate effectively they must learn from their public, the local community, other agencies, and other museums.

Two elements often associated with the discourse on globalization are useful to the discussion on the specificity of city museums: the need to respond to global problems by proposing local solutions, and the importance of cities and “city systems” in developing new models of economic, environmental, and cultural sustainability.⁴ City museums are particularly well-positioned to participate in this conversation because their interpretive program and focus can more easily be adapted to investigate how global concerns manifest at a local scale, or “street-level” reality. They can also highlight and at times even enhance the agency of citizens involved in community problem-solving. Recent exhibitions and public programs⁵ at MOV, for instance, have participated in debates over food security (*Home Grown*, 2010) and the city's contested relationship with nature (*The Unnatural History of Stanley Park*, 2008). MOV also featured the local cycling culture and its role in creating a more sustainable city (*Velo-City*, 2009), and explored the presence of interculturalism and hybrid identities in contemporary expressions of Bhangra, a South Asian musical performance (*Bhangra.me*, 2011). Exhibitions focusing on the museum collections capitalized on the public's fondness for objects and were also given new currency through a fresh set of questions; *Ravishing Beasts* (2010) addressed contemporary sensitivities around taxidermy, while *Neon Vancouver | Ugly Vancouver* (2012) retraced the love/hate relationship Vancouverites have with their neon signs, putting the story in the larger context of the city's ongoing obsession with looking beautiful. The strategic plan provided helpful guidelines for those exhibitions, but there were no “cookie-cutter” approaches to collaboration and curation;

each project called for unique parameters regarding the nature and substance of partnerships and the interpretive framing.

It is now three years into the actual implementation of the new vision, and the results are promising. MOV saw dramatic increases in membership and public participation in programs, encouraging visitation figures, and record-high media coverage, in addition to a large social media following.⁶ Furthermore, people and organizations across the city (and the province) alert us where and when there is a need to document Vancouver's historical and recent developments, they submit exhibition and program proposals, and they let the museum know when they disagree with certain decisions. MOV is increasingly on the radar of Vancouverites.

Revealing Narratives: *Sex Talk in the City* at MOV

A look at the *Sex Talk in the City* project is an opportunity to further examine MOV's new vision in action. The central piece of the project involves a temporary exhibition exploring the evolution of "sex talk" in Vancouver, and addresses issues of sexual health, diversity, and education. Planning started in October 2010 and the exhibition opens in February 2013. The question posed at the onset of the project was: how have ideas about sexuality lived — and how have they continued to live and manifest — in the city? Exhibitions explicitly addressing the topic of sexuality have made their appearance in museums; however, employing the topic as a way to generate new understandings of the city remains uncommon.⁷

Making the case for its institutional relevance is straightforward: exploring how people think and talk about sexuality is one way, among others, to understand and investigate the city. MOV values the interrelation between healthy dialogue about sexuality, healthy lifestyles, and a healthy city. MOV felt it had the capacity to invite Vancouverites to come together to discuss this vital issue that affects — albeit differently — everyone. Indeed, after a few initial meetings with sexual health educators and organizations, it became apparent that MOV was uniquely positioned to discuss the topic of sexuality and sexual health in a way that would be less didactic in approach than sexual education in the classroom and less medicalized in tone than most public health campaigns led by government agencies. To that end, an unusually large advisory committee was put together, comprised of sexual health experts, sexologists, youths, sex trade workers, historians, artists, and education scholars. This group was key in determining the target audience (older teens and adults whose role involve informing children about sexuality) as well as developing an interpretive approach that would communicate the complexity and



Chosen Family Portraits was a small exhibition presented at MOV in 2011 featuring 28 photographic portraits of Vancouver queers families and allies. The project initiated by the Vancouver Queer Film Festival and adapted by MOV staff helped launch the planning phase of the *Sex Talk in the City* project. Photo: 10Four Design.

multi-dimensionality of human sexuality while grounding the narrative in Vancouver.⁸ The exhibition concept, referred to by the team as “the 4Ps,” organized the exhibition thematically and spatially. The following is a brief description of the content featured in each zone:

- Pleasure Zone (how sex is good, fun, and healthy) explores the alluring history of sex toys (through local collections), the specificity of Vancouver’s queer culture, and the local burlesque scene;
- Pedagogy Zone (the many ways people learn about sex and sexuality) historicizes the evolution of sexual education in Vancouver’s classrooms, and presents the role of “alternative sex educators” such as popular culture, the Internet, and the local porn scene;
- Politics Zone (how groups in positions of power make decisions that affect the way we express our sexuality publicly and privately) discusses how, over time, Vancouver has internalized ideas about contraception and abortion, as well as laws and bylaws related to the sex trade. It also demonstrates how public health campaigns related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are mediated by cultural assumptions about sexuality;

- Permission Zone (giving ourselves — the public and the museum — permission to talk about sexuality) is a convivial space where people can sit, consult resources from various sexual health agencies, listen to audio-stories, investigate the contents of “discovery boxes,” and hopefully strike up conversations with other visitors.

Through this thematic breakdown, the exhibition features diverse and at times divergent perspectives, while highlighting issues and concerns often shared across age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and expression.

The need for more comprehensive and inclusive sexual education, for normalizing diverse expressions of sexuality, and for alerting various populations to the rise of STIs are global concerns that are made to resonate in *Sex Talk in the City* at a local level by grounding the stories in the social and physical geography of the city. Design solutions make this reality apparent by displaying city maps of “red-light” districts across historical periods, juxtaposing 1980s to present-day local AIDS campaign posters, projecting sexual education films with Vancouver as the backdrop and video interviews with Vancouver activists, and by making reference to progressive local sex toy stores and reflecting on sports events like the 1990 Gay Games.



Gold, silver and bronze medals of the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver. Gifts to the MOV's collection documenting the history of sexuality in Vancouver resulted as people learned about the *Sex Talk in the City* project. Photo: Museum of Vancouver.

I argue that when strategically staged in the museum, the topic of sexuality can generate new understanding of the city. In the case of *Sex Talk in the City* for instance, the way people in Vancouver “internalize” or “own” ideas about sexuality can be *revealing*; examining how conceptions of sexuality materialize in ubiquitous ways in the city — in the form of public events and spaces, policy, objects, images, and language — demonstrates clearly that sexuality is not only biological but also cultural and political. Conversely, working on this culturally sensitive topic has been instrumental in consolidating MOV’s new identity as a keeper and maker of culture. As I write, the exhibition is not open to visitors yet, and so one can only speculate about the public reaction.⁹ I like to think, however, that the public life of a collaborative exhibition starts from the early planning stages, through meetings and design charrettes and countless interactions with the larger community of stakeholders. From that perspective, *Sex Talk in the City*’s public performance is off to a great start: people call to offer leads and expertise, and want to contribute to the museum blog, lend and donate artifacts, and share their stories. It is at such an intersection, I would argue, that civic participation and civic museography meet.

Notes

1. The Museum of Vancouver is Canada’s largest city museum. The historical society that led to the creation of the Museum was formed in 1894. The building currently housing the museum was inaugurated in 1967, along with a multitude of cultural institutions celebrating the nation’s centennial anniversary.
2. The strategic plan document is available on MOV’s website: <http://www.museumofvancouver.ca/sites/default/files/VM%20Final%20Vision%20Book.pdf>.
3. I coined the term “civic museography” while writing this article. I felt a need to generate an expression that would speak specifically to the idea of civic engagement in the context of museum practice.
4. Some key discussions on this topic include: Jeb Brugman, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution: How Cities Are Changing the World* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2009); John Lorinc, *The New City: How the Crisis in Canada’s Large Urban Centres is Re-Shaping the Nation* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006); Stephen Wheeler, *Planning for Sustainability: Creating Livable, Equitable, and Ecological Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
5. The public programs at MOV are led by the Audience Engagement and Dialogue department. While this department plays a key role in augmenting the interpretive agenda set by exhibition projects, it also operates independently, curating events, programs, and collaborative performances with no direct ties to the exhibitions presented at MOV. Their lighter infrastructure (compared to the demands of exhibition development) makes them particularly adaptable and responsive to the needs of community stakeholders.
6. Between 2009 and 2012, MOV saw its membership increase over 300% from 600 to 2,000 members; attendance increased 17% from 58,000 to over 70,000 visitors.
7. A few recent examples of museum exhibitions addressing the topic of sexuality explicitly include: *Hello Sailor! Gay Life on the Ocean Wave* at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, UK (2006); A Canadian component was added when it travelled to the Maritime

Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2011; *Sex: the Tell-All Exhibition* at the Montreal Science Centre (2008); *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (2010) at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington.

8. Members of the advisory committee were asked to participate in one all-day long meeting and five three-hour long meetings in the course of two years to help define the exhibition themes, and messages, raise red flags, comment on design solutions and review the exhibition texts. More active members helped generate research. The same group provided directions for exhibition programming and marketing. All meetings were very well attended with a minimum of 15 participants. Ongoing email correspondence with the entire group and multiple individual emails and conversations helped further ideas and increase committee members' input.
9. Given the sensitive nature of this exhibition topic, multiple information sessions led by partnering sexual health agencies, will be held for MOV front line staff and educators several weeks before and after the opening of the exhibition.

About the Author

Viviane Gosselin is curator of contemporary issues at the Museum of Vancouver and associate researcher with the UBC Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness.