



HISTORY IS HEALING

The Kansas City Museum is using restorative practices to develop exhibitions and programs for and with its community.

By Anna Marie Tutera and Paul Gutiérrez



In 2015, the Kansas City Museum

in Missouri began a multistage, multiyear restoration and renovation in partnership with the city, its Parks and Recreation Department, and the Kansas City Museum Foundation. This time of change has been an opportunity to not only restore the museum's physical structures, but to also reimagine the museum as a welcoming, inclusive, and responsive gathering place where visitors would learn about the past, present, and future of Kansas City, Missouri.

The Kansas City Museum—formerly the private estate of lumber baron and civic leader Robert Alexander Long and his family—is comprised of five original Beaux Arts–style buildings on 3.5 acres in a residential neighborhood of Kansas City, adjacent to extensive and historic parkland. The museum began collecting in 1939 and boasts holdings of more than 100,000 artifacts and archival materials that document, interpret, and preserve Kansas City's local and regional history. The museum closed to the public in 2017 for construction on Corinthian Hall—the main building on the property and former Long family mansion—and will reopen in fall 2021 with history exhibits.

As we embarked on this renovation, we visualized the reopened museum as a portal into Kansas City's history and cultural heritage, where we'd showcase our partners and inspire visitors to explore other attractions, destinations, and activities in the city. We pictured bold exhibits and programs that featured the unfolding and often *untold* stories of the city's history through multicultural, intergenerational, and multidimensional experiences. We brainstormed about how we could co-create offerings with the community and sustain a truly participatory environment. We contemplated how the museum's content could be a call to action for visitors to become more engaged citizens.

All our ideas and aspirations were driven by a core belief that museums play a vital role in the equitable development of neighborhoods, parks, and public spaces and that museums are catalysts for social justice and positive systemic change. We realized that many residents, and especially youth, don't know the city's history and, in particular, don't understand how American Indians, enslaved African Americans, immigrants, and refugees have contributed to the growth, vibrancy, and creativity of the city. We knew

that the Kansas City Museum could be a place and a key catalyst for a more just and unified Kansas City.

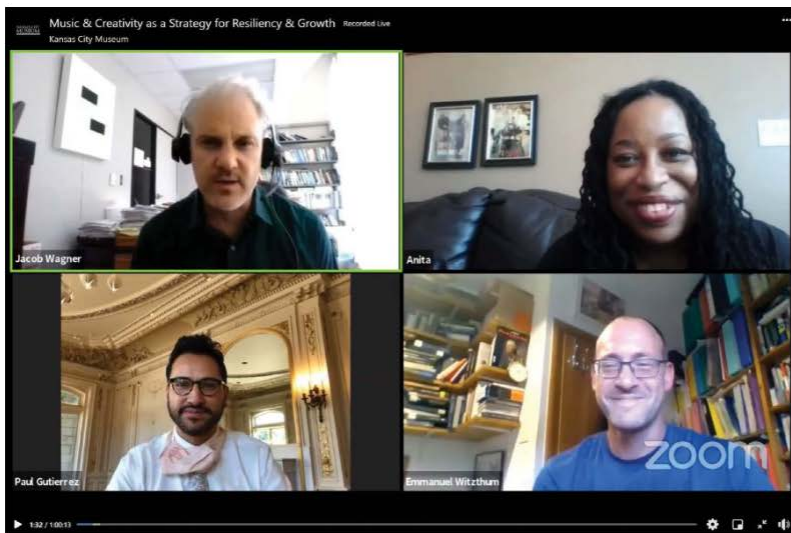
Back in 2016, in the midst of a nascent renovation project, we didn't fully understand the magnitude of our social responsibility to fulfill this vision, the depth of the political implications of our work, or the level of commitment we'd need to realize our goals. During those early years of planning, we didn't yet know that the word “restoration” would mean so much more than the physical design and construction of the museum, that it would come to define how we work with our community and how we produce programs and exhibitions for and with them.

Turning to Restorative Practices

In 2019, during construction on Corinthian Hall, the museum assembled a team of consultants and organizational partners to develop history- and humanities-based education and public programs. A couple of members of the team with expertise in restorative practices proposed using such a model to develop programs *with* the community. They believed that restorative practices would honor the extensive restoration of the museum's brick and mortar project and carry that transformation forward to strengthen relationships between the museum and its diverse community.

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Graduate School, “restorative practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities. Though new to the social sciences, restorative practices has deep roots within indigenous communities throughout the world.” IIRP explains that the main principles of restorative practices are empowerment, honesty, respect, engagement, voluntarism, healing, restoration, personal accountability, inclusiveness, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Often used in social work and some innovative judicial systems and schools, restorative practice intentionally connects people. It validates all experiences and perspectives to repair trust and unity among individuals and communities that have been harmed. Restorative practices focuses on how to work *with* (not to or for) community to co-create and negotiate truth.



"Music & Creativity as a Strategy for Resiliency & Growth" was a Restore KC program that took place on August 28, 2020.

Restorative practices values and prioritizes healthy and equitable relationships—how to form, maintain, and restore them after conflict or damage has been done. Restorative practices recognizes that every individual story has meaning and is comprised of—and leads to—a multiplicity of voices and a shared experience that transcends the boundaries and borders that separate us. This approach often stands in contrast with traditional ways of telling history, wherein an exclusive, white-centric point of view drives the narrative.

On the third floor of Corinthian Hall, we've designed an exhibition gallery called "A Cultural and Community Restoration: Kansas City 1970s to

Present" that will feature one Kansas City neighborhood for six to nine months. In partnership with the University of Missouri-Kansas City Center for Neighborhoods and UNESCO Creative Cities-Kansas City, museum staff will work with neighborhood residents to co-produce exhibits, digital media, programs, and events that explore the history, identity, accomplishments, challenges, and dreams of each neighborhood. Through a series of meetings and gatherings, residents will build a community timeline, collect objects, and document stories. We will fabricate an installation component that also lives permanently in the neighborhood when the exhibition closes at the museum.

RESOURCES

International Institute for Restorative Practices Graduate School: iirp.edu

Center for Neighborhoods at the University of Missouri-Kansas City: cfn.umkc.edu

UNESCO Creative Cities-Kansas City: en.unesco.org/creative-cities/kansas-city

Black Archives of Mid-America: blackarchives.org

Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center: kcparks.org/places/bruce-r-watkins-cultural-heritage-center

African American Artists Collective: aaackc.org

Creating Restore KC

In May 2020, we were deeply engaged in using restorative practices to develop future exhibits and programs for the reopening. It occurred to us that we needed to build awareness about the work we are doing and expose our city to the restorative practices philosophy. So we established Restore KC (#RestoreKC)—a series of virtual programs for Kansas Citians to connect, process, and heal during the global pandemic, economic crisis, and social awakening on systemic racism after the murder of George Floyd.

Restore KC was launched in July 2020 in partnership with Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, Black Archives of Mid-America, University of Missouri-Kansas City's Center for Neighborhoods, UNESCO Creative Cities-Kansas City, and African American Artists Collective. Together, we believe that history- and humanities-based experiences provide new opportunities for equity, justice, collaborative action, and solidarity. We committed to present programs that identify creative, resourceful strategies to achieve a mutual understanding, strengthen relationships, repair harm, and embrace a shared humanity.

From July 2020 to December 2020, the Restore KC team produced 11 one- or two-hour virtual programs using Facebook live and radio podcasts. The format included a moderator and two or three panelists talking about a topic and highlighting projects in Kansas City. Each program included audience questions and answers, and additional resources were

listed on the museum's website. Topics included an introduction to restorative practices; restorative justice; creative placemaking during crisis and reckoning; music and creativity as a strategy for resiliency and growth; food as a bridge to unity; the tradition, significance, and evolution of Día de los Muertos; mindfulness; and mental health and well-being in Spanish.

The museum also produced a two-part Restore KC program called "Shining the Light on Human Trafficking in Our City" to expose the perpetrators, violence, injustice, and trauma of human trafficking; to reveal a largely unacknowledged crime in our city; and to illuminate the healing, hope, and redemption of the survivors. The conversation included architect and glass artist Hasna Sal, who made *Into The Light: A Memorial for Victims of Human Trafficking*, a permanent art installation in Kansas City; survivors of human trafficking; and city and neighborhood stakeholders.

It was important for us to offer virtual programs to stay connected, engaged, and relevant with our community. Our biggest concern from the outset was how to make these digital programs accessible. Therefore, in addition to sharing the programs on Facebook, One Kansas City Radio, a multicultural radio station, turned the programs into podcasts. In 2020, Restore KC programs reached more than 21,000 people on Facebook in just five months.

We have continued Restore KC in 2021 and plan to produce virtual programs specifically for elementary through high school students in the fall

SPREADING THE WEALTH

Since the late 1960s, the Kansas City Museum has received an annual property tax levy, enacted by Missouri state statute and dedicated to the Kansas City Museum. Currently, the museum annually receives approximately \$1.8 million from the levy. This public funding source continues to be the financial lifeblood of the museum in addition to the earned and contributed revenue needed for sustainability. The tax levy can be increased with a public vote.

Over the years, we've talked about the possibility of increasing the levy to benefit both the Kansas City Museum and our small- to mid-sized museum partners that are also either city owned or operated and continue to be underfunded. During these discussions, we've grappled with how we would effectively allocate and distribute additional public funds.

In 2020, it occurred to us that we could employ a restorative process for the strategic planning necessary to convene a consortium of institutional partners and work with our community on an equity framework for prioritizing funding and mobilizing resources. Although there are no current plans to increase the levy, we will continue to work restoratively with our partners, advocate for one another, and pursue a sustainability plan for the city's cultural assets.



A view of the parkland that is adjacent to the Kansas City Museum.

in collaboration with our teacher and youth advisory councils. Some topics will connect Kansas City history to school curriculum, including the Indian Removal Act of 1830, racial residential discriminatory practices, women’s suffrage, and civil rights and desegregation. Other topics will cover the impact of COVID-19 on students and teachers and the disparities exposed by the pandemic.

Lessons Learned

Have you ever heard the saying “Get your own house in order first”? Recently, we acknowledged that before we continue our work with the community, we must implement an internal restorative process for ourselves as staff and leadership to address conflict more effectively, respond to criticism, and express opinions and concerns. Currently, we are a small staff of six, and as our capacity grows, we want to ensure that we build restorative practices into trainings for staff and volunteers.

We have also learned the following in our restorative practices work and will move forward accordingly:

Collaboration is a necessity. We will begin to work with the International Institute for Restorative Practices Graduate School and our Restore KC partners to deepen our collective capacity and competency. We want to explore how to engender a restorative framework for working with residents, colleagues, and stakeholders to co-curate exhibits and programs on

Kansas City’s neighborhoods; for conducting effective community input meetings; and for creating a space in the museum that fosters open, respectful conversations among visitors and for making decisions about collections acquisitions that allow us to tell the stories of those who are often unacknowledged and overlooked. We want to design a model that can be replicated for the museum field.

Restorative practices is a commitment. It requires patience, honesty, time to build trust, and a willingness to embrace your humanity. Restorative practices requires vulnerability and courage. Impassioned, hard conversations will happen, emotional and mental exhaustion will arise, fear and doubt can occur. Yet, as we navigate those dark moments, hope, creativity, and transformation emerge to shine a bright beacon of light to lead our way.

Today, we refer to the Kansas City Museum as the “Home of the Whole Story,” where often overlooked perspectives and experiences from people and communities are acknowledged, honored, and elevated. Restorative practices has helped us stand firm in our conviction that “history is healing” if we share the stories that are often intentionally hidden, disregarded, or erased from traditional history learning.

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