

## Bringing the Museum to the Community

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**COLLABORATOR:** Margaret Kadoyama, Education Program Consultant for the Museum of Craft and Design

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While out of town one weekend in June 2010, the Executive Director of the Museum of Craft and Design (MCD), JoAnn Edwards, received an alarming phone call: water and debris had broken through a section of the museum's ceiling, damaging a textile installation on view for the exhibition *FourSite: 4 Artists | 4 Materials | 4 Sites*. This latest in a series of ongoing issues with construction taking place throughout the building in which the museum was housed marked a breaking point for MCD; the museum needed a new home. However, even with the necessity of finding this new home looming large, there was another matter perhaps even more pressing that was weighing heavy on the minds of MCD staff – what would happen to the museum in the interim? It was clear that the untenable situation of their current location meant that they could not keep the doors open throughout the search for a new space. Was it possible for the museum to remain visible and viable in a community if, technically, there was no museum?

As it turned out, the answer is yes. During a business trip in Washington, D.C., JoAnn encountered a pop-up clothing store that planted the seed for the Museum of Craft and Design's interim strategy – pop-up exhibitions. JoAnn brought the idea back with her to San Francisco, where she presented it to MCD staff and had a proposal prepared for review by the museum's board. Two and a half years later, with several pop-ups under their belt, and a new permanent location almost ready for move-in, MCD took time to reflect on the opportunities and pitfalls of this experience in the CAM Conference session *Taking It To the Streets: New Models for Mobile Museums*.

Speaking with session moderator Margaret Kadoyama, Educational Program Consultant for the Museum of Craft and Design, I learned how the pop-up approach not only solved the problem of visibility for the museum during its closure, but more importantly, served to forge stronger bonds with communities throughout San Francisco. Although a valuable and transformative experience for the museum, Margaret was quick to point out that pop-ups – especially at the scale MCD approached them – are extremely labor-intensive and should be taken on with careful regard to the museum financial and personnel resources. With the museum's move still fresh (MCD had its grand opening April 6, 2013), firm plans to continue pop-ups have not yet

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*Banner announcing the Museum of Craft and Design's new location. Image courtesy of the Museum of Craft*

been put into place. However, with pop-ups having been so key to the museum's survival these past few years, as well as an innovative way to reach different communities, MCD is making a concerted effort to integrate them into their new operations. Detailed below are the two primary challenges that MCD experienced during their pop-up period, and the ways in which the museum plans to address those challenges to produce a more tempered iteration of a pop-up program as it settles into its permanent home.

### **Physical distance between staff and pop-up locations**

The pop-ups, which took place in neighborhoods throughout San Francisco, greatly expanded the museum's visibility and influence. However, it also put tremendous strain on staff who were working out of a small interim office space downtown, far removed from those locations. Day-to-day issues easily became fraught with logistical complications. For example, in MCD's museum space, virtually all the tools for install were a mere storage closet away. When working off-site though, if the right tool wasn't on hand, the process of procuring it could quickly push already tightly-budgeted timeframes. Although a seemingly minor issue, when you compound such interruptions over the course of an exhibition's lifespan, it translates into a fatigued staff struggling to manage the unique demands of pop-ups on top of their regular workload.

In addition to logistical issues, the distance between the staff and the pop-ups resulted in a feeling of disconnectedness. When working in a museum, it's easy to take for granted the satisfaction that comes from regularly seeing the fruits of one's labor, including visitors experiencing an exhibition or families participating in programming. With MCD staff removed from these day-to-day goings on, it was challenging at times to feel connected to the communities they were working so hard to engage.

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In order to address these issues brought on by distance, MCD has decided to focus its energies on reaching communities closer to the neighborhood in which the museum is now located. As explained by Margaret, this more focused approach will enable the museum to continue to offer off-site programming, while not pushing the limits of its staff. Working within a smaller pool of neighborhoods means that the museum will be able to forge deeper community connections. Additionally, working primarily within specific neighborhoods will alleviate the staff burnout that resulted from the considerable time-investment required for building relationships with community partners – a process that began anew with nearly each pop-up the museum undertook.

### **Considerable expense**

When the pop-up plan was first envisioned, MCD staff forecasted a budget of around \$5,000 for each project. The actual budget for the pop-ups turned out to be closer to \$25,000. Often, the spaces in which the pop-ups took place required some level of development to make them exhibition-ready. Although JoAnn and the rest of the scouting team worked to alleviate these costs by seeking spaces needing minimum development beyond a coat of paint and temporary walls, it was nonetheless a source of time and expense that MCD never had to consider when mounting exhibitions within their own space. As well, negotiating short-term leases for each pop-up necessitated the input of a lawyer, thereby further inflating project costs. Although the return on investment leveraged during the interim period ultimately made these and myriad other expenses justifiable, the model is simply not sustainable now that the museum has a permanent space and all the overhead costs that come with it.

According to Margaret though, this does not mean that the museum is abandoning pop-ups altogether. Rather, they are simply scaling back. Instead of pop-up exhibitions that include the whole spectrum of museum offerings, from the exhibition itself, to a store (yes, each of MCD's pop-ups was accompanied by a tiny museum store), to an array of public programming, MCD is just focusing on the latter, where their resources are able to go the farthest. Although offered prior to MCD's closure, the museum's MakeArt<sup>1</sup> program took on increased significance during the interim period due to its role in helping the museum stay visible and engage the public. Even better, the program was fairly inexpensive to run. Since the program featured projects

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<sup>1</sup> MakeArt is a program that offers hands-on workshops for families at partner organizations around San Francisco and on-site at the museum's new MakeArt Lab. For more information about MakeArt, as well as MCD's adult programming, visit <http://www.sfmcd.org/programs/>.

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that could easily be replicated at home, the materials were necessarily low-cost and easy to obtain in quantity. As well, partner organizations – eager to provide hands-on arts and crafts opportunities to their communities – were far easier to secure, often at little to no cost to MCD. For these reasons, MCD believes that focusing future pop-up programming on MakeArt



opportunities will best utilize funds for the greatest public impact.

*MakeArt: Day of the Dead Masks; photo courtesy of the Museum of Craft and Design*

## Long-term plans

Overall, with regard to a longer-term plans for pop-ups, the museum is more concerned about being strategic than in simply doing something for the sake of doing it. During the interim period, the pop-ups were not merely an “experiment” – they were a key means of meeting their goal to remain a visible and relevant organization. Now that the museum has a permanent space, their goal remains the same, but the avenue by which they plan to achieve it has necessarily shifted. MCD wants to continue stretching beyond its walls in order to reach the community in unique ways, but it also has to ensure that its permanent space is a vibrant primary source for that creative energy. In Margaret’s words, it’s about being clear in identifying outcomes. There is no shortage of good ideas out there (pop-ups being just one of them), but there *is* a shortage of resources – both human and financial. If the projected outcome of a project is aligned with the goals and resources of the museum, then it will be worth pursuing. For MCD right now, that means focusing on its neighboring communities to deliver programming that ignites creativity and fuels a desire to explore the wellspring of that creativity lying within the museum’s new walls.

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### About the Author/CAM Fellow

**Alison Konecki** graduated with a B.A. in Art History and English from Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y. and received an M.A. in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. While in D.C., she worked as the Development & Community Outreach Coordinator for Transformer, a non-profit alternative art space, and was Co-Founder of Knowledge Commons DC – a free, self-generating “school” designed to provide non-traditional community learning and instruction. After transplanting to the West Coast in 2012, she became the Development Associate for the FOR-SITE Foundation in San Francisco, and a Fellow with Emerging Arts Professionals/SFBA. An aspiring travel and arts writer, she is intent on experiencing as much of the world’s cultural wealth as possible. She recently received a Narrative Travel Writing Award from *Transitions Abroad* for her piece “An American Girl in El Salvador.”

