

## Museum Assessment Program

### Sample Community Engagement Assessment Report “Arctic House Museum” North Pole

Reviewer: John Q. Penquin, Director of the Really, Really Cold Museum

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This sample report from the Museum Assessment Program is based on a real museum. The report is a good example of the challenges typical of many museums participating in the MAP program. All of the names of the staff, board members, museum, town, buildings, as well as the Surveyor, have been changed.

#### **Why is this report a good report?**

This report tailors the report writing guidelines to meet the needs of its museum. The report focuses on how to improve its community engagement through interpretive planning, better resource management, and better wayfinding signage and advertising. The recommendations are easily understood and while challenging, not overwhelming. Additionally, the top recommendations are prioritized at the end, helping the museum figure out how to start taking advantage of them.

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## **Executive Summary**

The Arctic House Museum in North Pole has begun a major effort to better engage with its audiences, particularly tourists and the local community. Initial steps are moving in the right direction, and build upon earlier efforts to preserve the site, care for the collections, and open it to the public. It appears that the community would welcome the opportunity to be more involved and the Museum's location, physical assets, and staff are poised to make the site more accessible. With its board and partners, the Arctic House Museum can be an even stronger cultural center for the region. This will require deeper understanding of its visitors (particularly the local community), focusing on programs and activities other than daily public tours, crafting an image that is more welcoming both physically and intellectually, and taking advantage of the skills and experience of its dedicated staff.

## Introduction

In 2011, The Arctic House Museum applied to conduct a Community Engagement Assessment through the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) of the American Association of Museums with the intent to better align their mission with community needs, identify new and more diverse audiences, and create collaborations to address community needs. The museum recently changed executive directors and completed strategic planning and determined that one of its major goals is to change its community's perception as a closed, members only, somewhat elitist institution.

MAP is a confidential, consultative process designed to help museums understand how their operations compare to standards and best practices in the field, while providing suggestions for improvement. The process also draws upon a collegial relationship with a peer reviewer serving as a sounding board for new ideas, challenges, and discussion. MAP offers four different types of assessment and the Community Engagement Assessment examines the museum's understanding of and relationship with its various communities and conversely examines their perception of and experience with the museum. It helps museums develop a better understanding of their constituents, develop a more nuanced view about the community's demographics and needs, respond to the changing nature of its audiences, and incorporate these findings into planning and operational decisions.

As part of MAP, The Arctic House Museum completed a self-study workbook and selected John Q. Penguin to conduct its assessment with a site visit on August 23-24. Since 2001, Penguin has been the Director of the Really, Really Cold Museum.

For this assessment, Penguin conducted a two-day site visit which included meetings with the board, staff, and community leaders; observed a regular public tour; visited similar museums and related historic sites in the community; reviewed the materials provided by the Arctic House Museum, including the self-study workbook; mission statement, by laws, and constitution; 2009 and 2010 financial statements and 2011 budget; 2011 strategic plan; board members' visions for 2020; staff job descriptions; personnel and facility rental policies; 2011 calendar of events; the results of a summer 2010 visitor survey; and recent newsletters and brochures. In addition, he reviewed the Arctic House Museum web site and visitor ratings on Trip Advisor and similar sites, and conducted an online survey with board and staff on community engagement.

## Brief Institutional History

The Arctic House Museum was originally the home of fifteen generations of the Polar Bear family. In the 1970s, it became the summer home for the Seals family. It remained a private home until the 1990s, when the Preserving Arctic Heritage non-profit purchased the property and reopened it as a public museum. They hired Anita Walrus as their director. Today, Elaine Fox is the museum's third director. The Arctic House Museum was recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 1994 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

## Content

The mission of the Arctic House Museum calls for “inspiring those who visit to discover more about the Arctic and help the Museum in preserving its future.”

The interpretive content is found in several places. The Docent Manual includes an introduction, an excerpt from Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage*, possible interpretive themes, job description for the reception desk, safety, sample orientation, and a room-by-room guide on the architecture and artifacts, biographies of family members and servants, and a family tree. I also received a room-by-room outline of major topics and a script for a one-hour standard tour. A small gift shop contains several history books associated with the Arctic, especially the Polar Bear and Seal families.

To understand how this content was interpreted to the public, I observed two tours, although they were unusual because the groups were very small and thus cannot be relied upon as a typical visitor experience. Discussions with staff and volunteers who regularly provide tours showed that in general they like that the existing tour content because about 60 percent is a consistent core experience and 40 percent varies by docent and visitor interest. They also noted that one of the greatest challenges is the size and significance of the collection because nearly every object tells an important story.

Based on the information provided and my observations, it is difficult to determine if the content engages its audiences. It is clear that visitors enjoy the experience; however, it is uncertain if the interpretive goals are being met. This is not unusual and indeed, establishing interpretive goals and objectives is extremely difficult. I applaud the Arctic House Museum's mission because it is much more ambitious mission than the typical “preserve, collect, and educate” found at many museums, but it will also be much more challenging to implement. Developing content that is engaging, educational, and enjoyable is difficult and I recommend that it be undertaken in phases and not expect to

complete it at one time. Not only is the organization's resources too limited to make a major leap in interpretation but it is also essential that as many docents and staff be brought along at a speed that is comfortable and builds consensus. To that end, I suggest:

1. Focus the interpretation on the first Polar Bear generation and de-emphasize the other generations. Sir William Polar Bear, Esquire is the primary reason the site is internationally significant and the interpretation needs to build a strong foundation on him—he's your unfair advantage. Editing is difficult work and it is much easier simply to include it all, but to have a lasting impact on visitors, you will need to intentionally select only a few objects, stories, and people.

2. Identify 3-5 interpretive themes. I support the Museum's efforts to move from a tour filled with facts to one with themes. Most people cannot absorb an endless stream of facts and need the help of docents to make sense of what they are experiencing at the Arctic House Museum. Interpretation is similar to playing music—just because you have 88 keys on a piano, you don't play all of them. Even for William's life, the interpretation will need to select and choose what stories to tell, and to repeat the music analogy, identify a melody that repeats throughout the tour experience. Themes provide a welcome structure for visitors and guides. Unlike like topics, which are one or two word subjects, themes are written out as a sentence or paragraph that has a clear thesis or opinion. *Great Tours* and *Environmental Interpretation* provide more details on the process of develop themes, and it may be useful to have an interpretive specialist facilitate a team meeting since it can be especially challenging if you are unfamiliar with the process.

3. Commission 10-15 page scholarly essays on each of themes to provide the foundational content. These will have many functions: docent training, for sale as individual booklets, excerpted for the website, and inspire programs and activities. These essays should be written by scholars with a graduate degree in history or equivalent who are able to both conduct research and present it in a manner that is engaging and thought-provoking. These essays will also clarify and refine the themes, helping strengthen the interpretation. As an example where this approach was used successfully, see *Lincoln's Sanctuary* by Matthew Pinsker, which was commissioned by President Lincoln's Cottage as the basis for its interpretation.

4. Build additional reference tools for docents. A simple timeline will help docents place events in proper sequence as well as provide a context for events happening in the lives of the Polar Bears' and the community. A bibliography of articles and books recommended by staff encourages docents to learn more. If some popular books are unreliable, include them as well but with a note of explanation. Provide copies of historic documents, photographs, and maps to give docents a direct experience with the past.

## Audiences and Community

The Arctic House Museum is located in the North Pole, which is part of the Arctic Circle, and serves the following demographics:

Source: Arctic Census Bureau	<b>North Pole</b>	<b>Arctic Circle</b>
Total Population	27,766 (2006)	80,026 (2010)
Persons under 18	23% (2000)	21% (2009)
Persons over 65	18% (2000)	15% (2009)
White	87% (2000)	93% (2010)
Black	8% (2000)	4% (2010)

The Arctic House Museum also sits near Santa Claus' house, a popular tourist destination for more than a century, and tourism is a major focus for several organizations based in and near North Pole, including the Arctic Circle Office of Tourism, Downtown Business Improvement District, Chamber of Commerce, Regional Economic Development Council, Arctic Community College, Arctic College, and Arctic University. Secondly, the Office of Tourism conducts ongoing professional research on tourists to this region providing in-depth knowledge on this key market. The Museum recognizes how fortunate it is to have these resources available and is developing strong and mutually beneficial relationships with others in the tourism industry.

Currently, the Museum has about 13,000 visitors annually, most of who arrive individually by dog-sled or in groups by airplane. Attendance peaks in June, July, August, and December (each month representing more than 12 percent of total attendance; combined they total 66 percent of annual attendance) and drops in January, February, and March (this entire quarter represents 10 percent of total attendance). A survey conducted in summer 2010 showed that 60 percent of their visitors are over age 50 and less than 10 percent are between the ages of 18-34 years. Although visitors come from across the United States and Canada to visit, 50 percent are from Alaska (and more than half of those from Northern Alaska). The overwhelming majority of visitors heard about The Arctic House Museum from a friend or family. Because attendance patterns vary throughout the year, staff indicated that in other months, visitation is primarily students in the upper elementary grade levels (ages 8-12) and organized bus tours for older adults.

The Museum's mission is "to inspire those who visit to discover more about the Arctic and help the Museum in preserving its future." This statement establishes their intent to actively engage the community and make the site's history relevant to the current day.

The strategic plan lays out several actions for accomplishing the community engagement element of the mission, including establishing a visiting center, implementing a social media campaign, expanding relationships with other organizations in the region, considering new uses for the landscape and gardens, and building a board and committees based upon a matrix of skills and qualifications. At this point, the strategic plan is still under development, and I sense that much of the work is focused on providing a better experience for current audiences. I'm sure the next step in the strategic plan will provide more details and an overall set of priorities and schedule, and I would recommend that the Public Relations and Marketing Committee make identification of its market or target audiences a high priority (you need to know your audience before you can reach them effectively).

Like any other business, the museum must know its actual and potential "customers." Although some might bristle that the term *customers* is too commercial and thus inappropriate for a non-profit museum, I'm using it intentionally to recognize to remind us that people are exchanging their time and money for the goods and services provided by the Museum. If they do not believe the museum provides equal or better value to them, their family, friends, or community, they won't visit, attend programs, shop, donate, volunteer, or recommend it to others. In all of your activities, consider the needs and interests of the participants and identify where they overlap with the Museum's mission, products, and services.

I'm also using "customer" rather than "visitor" because it changes the assumption that people have to visit the site to be engaged with or benefit from the Museum's mission. First, some of your visitors will not be interested in a tour, but an event, program, and shopping. "Visitor" often implies only those persons taking a tour and there are actually many different kinds of visitors—some of which wouldn't call themselves "visitors." Second, given William Polar Bear's accomplishments and values, the museum's mission would seem to serve not only a local audience, but a national and international one. That can be daunting because that represents up to 9 billion people, far beyond the capacity of the Museum, however, this can be easily tempered by recognizing that many people will not be interested in Polar Bear, his collection, or his house (no matter what you do) and that many people are not able to visit the Museum and yet can be effectively reached, especially in the Internet Age. Nevertheless, the Museum will need to establish priorities among its many audiences and use a rifle, rather than shotgun, approach to be effective.

The Museum hopes to increase attendance to 25,000 visitors annually within five years through more and new programming, expanding current special events, and offering a menu of specialized tours. To achieve this goal, attendance would need to grow at a rate of more than 10 percent annually. Attendance has been stable for the past few years and although the movie,



*Arctic Awesomeness* will be shortly released, I'm not optimistic that it will double attendance at a sustained level.

I concur with the Museum's recognition that this growth will need to occur on multiple fronts, not just tours, and this will require a significant reprioritization of resources and activities. Some of these changes have already taken place and although they cause disruptions and conflict, they will be essential to achieve this attendance goal. Change within organizations is always difficult, and for the Arctic House Museum, the vision laid out by the board will require extensive organizational and cultural changes. The process will be even more challenging, uncomfortable, and controversial than usual, so it will be essential to follow a clear strategy and communicate it regularly. John Kotter's research and recommendations on organizational change may be very useful.

The Arctic House Museum has identified its target audiences as retirees, school children, history lovers, environmentalists, tourists, and educators. The Museum no doubt has thought about each of these groups, but I'm unsure if there are any priorities among them—one of the most difficult decisions when pursuing community engagement. Museums often feel compelled to serve a broad and diverse public, however, rarely does any organization or business have sufficient resources to be all things to all people. Although museums should welcome everyone (in contrast to a century ago when they were exclusive enclaves), they must determine how to effectively allocate their limited resources to serve a few groups deeply than many people superficially—that's one of the major keys to engagement. A marketing plan would be the typical approach to address this issue, however, it may be too ambitious at this time. Instead, I would confirm if these are the right target audiences for the Arctic House Museum and that there is sufficient room for growth. For example, if school children are a target audience, compare the number you are currently serving to the potential size. Second, I would develop more specific descriptors for each of these audiences (e.g., what do they like to do, read, eat, buy) so that you can modify your programs and activities to make them more attractive and engaging. The fastest and most efficient way to start is with a geodemographic segmentation (aka PRIZM, ACORN, MOSAIC) of your current visitors or of your community through a company such as Claritas. The research technique is best described in *The Clustered World* by Michael Weiss. It will require collecting at least 1,000 street addresses of your visitors to have a sufficient sample and one successful tactic is a drawing for a prize which requires that participants provide their contact information.

As mentioned previously, the fastest and most efficient way to begin is a geodemographic segmentation (aka PRIZM, ACORN, MOSAIC) of your community through a company such as Claritas. You provide them the zip codes or geographic boundaries for your community and they will describe each of the segments by lifestyle and behavior, identify them by neighborhood, and rank them by size. Armed with this information, you can begin to make

more informed decisions about the types of programs, advertising, and price points that would be most attractive to each segment. It will also help you prioritize among the many different audiences in your community to determine who you can best attract and engage. Again, everyone in your community should be welcome to the Arctic House Museum; however, you cannot be all things to all people because of your limited resources. Like a restaurant, you'll have to make choices about what to place on the menu that will please your primary guests. A large retail company, such as Wegman's or Hilton, typically conducts a geodemographic study prior to moving into a region and may make it available to you for free when it is not longer useful to them or can be used by competitors. Most valuable would be in-depth community research through surveys and interviews, particularly those who are not visiting the Museum, to understand their motivations and interests and to test ideas and potential programs. This work can be expensive and complex, so I suggest you consult with the marketing or sociology department at a local university or the Visitor Studies Association.

Collaborative events and programs seem to be an obvious next step in building attendance and engaging the public. Although in its infancy, "First Fridays" seems to be a good collaboration among downtown businesses and attracts a non-traditional audience to the Museum. Other possibilities include guided tours, enjoyable walks, or topical itineraries through a brochure, podcast, cell phone, website, or signs or a multi-destination discounted ticket (sometimes called a visitor "passport"). The *Travel Market Research Study* makes several strategic recommendations and I would determine if any can be easily aligned with your strategic plan. There are many attractive possibilities available and it will be easy to be pulled into different directions, so again, the Arctic House Museum will need to carefully consider each one given its priorities and limited resources. Developing a matrix that evaluates the different ideas against the same criteria (e.g., relation to mission, alignment with strategic plan, potential attendance, primary audience, expenses, income, staff time, publicity impact, partners) will help decision-making process.

Although there is a strong foundation to engage tourists, there is much less information about the local community. Census data is a start, but it is too vague to help the Arctic House Museum make effective decisions. Although two days is insufficient time to adequately gauge the community's perception of The Arctic House Museum, the most common statement during my interviews with community leaders and staff was that nearly everyone in town was aware of it but very few had visited it in the last few years. Like most historic house museums, the Arctic House Museum either suffers from the attitude of "been there, done that" (no need to visit again) or that "nothing changes, it's always available, we can visit later" (no need to visit now). When people do visit, they really enjoy it and offer to tell their friends. Likewise, the Museum seems to have taken a passive posture to the community. As one staff member mentioned, "The Arctic House Museum waits for people to come to it."

Although the Museum wants to attract a “diverse public” as stated in the mission and perceives it is doing better than it was ten years ago, it isn’t as successful as it would like to be.

Interviews with business leaders and a review of the *Travel Market Research Study* (2011) suggest that while the tourism market has great potential, it is also composed of several segments and the Arctic House Museum will need to prioritize them. For example, 72 percent of travelers are composed only of adults, so developing family programs for tourists should be a low priority. It also suggests developing strategies that assemble experiences for visitors that include their interests in scenic beauty, nature, wine, art, and theater. The “History’s Hometown” brochure is well designed and very useful for tourists to help them find and make connections among the many attractions in this region. I would not only continue to prominently display this brochure in the visitor reception area but consider using it at the end of the tour to establish yourself as a “concierge” to visitors. Tourists rely heavily on personal recommendations to make travel decisions and develop a stronger affinity for organizations that are helpful.

To make better decisions about programming and activities, I strongly recommend expanding the collection of data about visitors and programs. Given the Museum’s resources, I recommend in order of priority:

1. Tours are the Museum’s largest program, so that’s where I’d start collecting detailed information. For every tour, not only count the number of visitors but also categorize them by age, day, and time of visit. Additional information can also be collected that will help to better serve future visitors (such as disability), to quickly assess new or repeat visitation, or to separately evaluate walk-in or scheduled tours. The docent could collect this information on a form similar to this:

Scheduled *or* Public **Name:**

**Day:** M Tu W Th F Sa Su **Date:**

	9:	10:	11:	12:	1:	2:	3:	4:	Daily Totals
<b>Time of Tour</b>									
Children (0-6 yrs)									
Children (7-12)									
Teenagers (13-18)									
Adults (19-34)									
Adults (35-50)									
Adults (51-64)									
Seniors (65+)									
<b>Totals</b>									
First-time visitor									
Limited English									
Vision impaired									
Hearing impaired									
Limited mobility									

2. On a monthly basis, collect information on all the ways that people engage with the Museum, including social media and Web site visits, and analyze it on an annual basis. A sample form used by National Trust Historic Sites is attached, although some of the information it captures will not be useful to the Arctic House Museum.

This data should be summarized monthly and analyzed annually to assign resources appropriately. For example, the Museum is open for tours 2,080 hours per year (7 hours daily Tuesday-Sunday all year, with an additional 5 hours on Sundays from July to mid-October). When compared to your annual attendance, that is an average of 6 visitors per hour. However, an examination of the individual months shows that it reaches a high of 12 visitors per hour in July and only 1 or 2 visitors per hour in January and February. That suggests that it would be prudent to close the Museum during the winter months, perhaps open only for scheduled groups or on weekends for drop-in tours, and instead use that time to prepare for events or care for the collections.

3. Conduct visitor research regularly at a deeper level to both assess current programming and to provide a benchmark to measure progress. The summer 2010 survey is a great start and begins to reveal a clearer picture of your visitors, but I recommend moving to a more formal process that collects information more scientifically to ensure it is reliable, complete, and unbiased. This level of research will become increasingly important as the Museum works to engage the community, which more often requires measuring quality rather than quantity, and outcomes rather than outputs. Although some will propose doing this work in-house, the organization is at a fragile point in its transition, thus it is essential that this research is conducted by someone with demonstrated expertise so you are provided with information that is as reliable and accurate as possible, allowing you to confidently make decisions. I suggest you work with a marketing department at a local university, ask the Visitor Studies Association for recommendations for consultants, or consider the Visitor Counts program of the American Association for State and Local History to develop visitor research strategies.

## **Engagement Methods**

Every audience or marketing segment has particular ways of engaging with museums and historic sites. A method that works for teachers (such as lesson plans and field trips that connect to the state standards for learning) will not be as effective with tourists (who will want a good map, a convenient tour schedule, and a nearby place to park). Historic sites and museums have many methods available to them, such as tours, period rooms, websites, exhibits, signs, events, concerts, performances, and publications, and indeed, the staff and board offered many diverse ideas, including themed tours, evening tours, programs for high school and college, music and art events, theatrical

performances, historical re-enactments, garden programs, and children's activities. Methodologies often generate the most interest because they are tangible products, thus often considered first but it should actually be done last. Determining which methods will be most effective and engaging is the *end result* of matching content and audiences. Nevertheless, there will be constant pressure from all sides to try a new program or tweak an existing one, and maintaining focus and unified direction will be difficult. The strategic plan helps immensely with focus, but when plans deviate, I strongly recommend framing it as an experiment that involves risk. Therefore, it is essential to write out expectations and measures of success in advance, as well as begin projects as prototypes with easy exit strategies in case of failure.

For the Arctic House Museum, the work of determining methods of engagement is particularly difficult and risky because it has not fully developed its content nor fully understands its target audiences. This vulnerable situation doesn't seem to be apparent, however. An online survey of staff, board, and docents showed that most were moderately satisfied with the Arctic House Museum's efforts to engage a diverse public. The survey comments and follow-up discussions, however, suggest that it was an appraisal over the museum's recent efforts to improve engagement, not its efforts over the long term. For example, one person mentioned, "The Arctic House Museum has, under the current administration, begun to reach out to the general public in broad, far reaching ways. They should continue this outreach. For too many years the Arctic House Museum has been the private social club of the wealthy elitists of this community."

Although the Arctic House Museum has not fully developed its content nor fully understands its target audiences, there seem to be some existing initiatives and new opportunities that should be explored.

### **Public Involvement**

The Museum involves the community in many ways including as receptionists, ice gardeners, docents, board members, vendors, and sponsors, and is seeking ways to engage more through committees of the board. The core method of public involvement is the house tour—that's the programmatic element that offers the most ways for the community to participate with the Arctic House Museum, whether it's taking a tour, working the reception desk, or leading tours. The Arctic House Museum has also actively built relationships with many community organizations, such as the YMCA, Santa Claus House, Chamber of Commerce, Historic and Cultural Sites Commission, and Business Improvement District. In conversations with board, staff, and community leaders, it seems that much of the expansion in public involvement occurred recently.

I recommend this effort continue and to avoid placing all the relationships with one person (such as the executive director), spread these relationships among senior staff and executive board members. This not only avoids the burnout that often follows from maintaining strong relationships with so many organizations and people but also reduces disruption if a person leaves the Arctic House Museum.

Secondly, seek ways to involve the community in ways beyond the tour program. Advisory groups for programs and activities are a common strategy but affinity groups, as described by Anita and John Durel's article "A Golden Age for Historic Properties," may be much successful at the Arctic House Museum. These focus around specific tasks, interests, or audiences such as the garden, Civil War, teenagers, literature, and paintings, and are similar to book discussion groups, however, they are clearly related to the organization's mission, are open to the community, and often provide both a forum to pursue a special interest and support for the museum.

## House Tours

Guided tours of the house are the primary method of engagement with the public. Visitors park behind the house, pay for tickets in a rear room of the house, and then a docent takes the group outside to the front door to begin the tour, which then follows an established route through the house through a variety of period rooms and exhibit galleries. A detailed evaluation and analysis of the tour is beyond the scope of this MAP report and I suggest developing an interpretive plan in consultation with a team of scholars and interpretive specialists. Superficially, some elements could help with improving and enhancing public engagement:

1. Examine the entire visitor experience from the street to the start of the tour. The Museum is clean, safe, attractive, and well maintained, however, for someone not familiar with the site, it can be difficult to navigate and first impressions suggest it is a private home. The museum is surrounded by a high fence and bushes that block visibility from the street, whereas most other properties on the same street have low or no fences. The entrance is unclear, the front gate is difficult to open, and signs are small, so you have to make more effort than expected to visit a historic house museum. For example, at times that tours are offered, place a large attractive sign, banner, or flag that is visible from the end of the block that welcomes visitors and announces that the site is open.
2. Help visitors "suspend disbelief" by removing distractions of the modern life whenever possible, especially inside the house where you have the most control. The Museum's recent efforts to remove the reception area from the house's entry hall and reestablish the period parlor helps in this regard; however, the two exhibit rooms on Arctic Summers and the Arctic's Future at the end of the

tour are awkward. This is a guided tour, yet visitors are now expected to explore the exhibit on their own, read labels, and do hands-on activities under the watchful eye of the docent. Slightly less jarring but odd when examined overall are the bedrooms upstairs. They are furnished to represent different family members living in the house at different times but none belong to Sandy and William Polar Bear. Indeed, weighed as a whole, the tour dilutes the international significance of William Polar Bear with stories and objects of so many other people who are much less significant. It is very challenging to prioritize and refine a tour for a house that contains so many interesting objects associated with generations of the same family, but the work of editing is essential if the Museum wishes to make a serious impact on its visitors.

3. Integrate engagement into the tour, especially during the conclusion. Because the museum is not conducting first-person tours, it has great flexibility to mention how the community supports the museum, show “membership dollars at work”, or list ways local residents can be involved. In addition to thanking visitors, the end of the tour is an ideal time to suggest what to do next: visiting the Santa Claus House or Arctic Fox Park, attending an upcoming event, or supporting your work by becoming a member.

4. Continue to transform the tour from a presentation of facts and object identification to a conversation about stories and a discussion of ideas to better fulfill the organization’s mission. This is major step up in quality for most tours at historic house museums and will require additional docent training on methods. The work of Sandy Lloyd, Lois Silverman, and Sam Hall will be especially helpful; however, you may want to work with an interpretive specialist to review the docent manual and training program to address your specific needs.

### **Monthly and Annual Programs**

I did not have the opportunity to observe or evaluate the Arctic House Museum’s special events, but based on the responses in the MAP Self Study Workbook, the Museum offers several public programs on a monthly, quarterly, seasonal, or annual basis (which I will refer to as a group as “special events”). Most successful are the bi-annual open houses, candlelight tours at Christmas, book lectures, and First Fridays and less successful are the brown bag lectures and craft programs. Without additional information, I can only offer the following observations and recommendations:

1. Because the Arctic House Museum is “always available” to the local community, daily tours will not be a compelling reason to visit. A major event has to provoke a local resident to visit, such as guests from out of town, a deadline, or a special occasion. Otherwise, it is very easy to postpone a visit since it will be available tomorrow or the next year. Therefore, engagement with the local community will not only require a good experience or content,



but it will require some element of urgency. Special events and programs offer this unique situation, thus to engage your local community, do not emphasize the regular daily public tour. For example, rather than the standard rackcard for the Arctic House Museum that promotes daily tours, make a different version for the local community that highlights the calendar of special events.

2. Conduct evaluation and visitor research for special events at the same level and consistency as the daily public tour. This can be difficult for large programs, but as much as possible count not just the number of people attending, but try to break it down by demographic categories. When you have sufficient resources or are ready for the next stage of analysis, conduct more in-depth visitor research through focus groups or formal surveys. Do not rely on comment cards, guest books, or letters to make decisions about programs or activities—these methods tend to exaggerate visitor responses in both positive and negative directions and you lose the perspective of the much larger middle portion.

3. Collect contact information as much as possible, especially email and mailing addresses. This will allow you to build your lists to promote future programs, attract members, and identify supporters. A guest book, small forms on cards, and annual drawings for prizes have been ways to collect contact information. To ensure contact information isn't misused, you may want to develop a privacy policy and allow persons to easily opt out.

### **Physical Access**

If you arrive by car, it is difficult to determine where to park. Again, it's unclear if you should enter the driveway, the signs tell you where not to park, and the lot behind the house isn't marked with parking stalls. Parking on the street is metered or prohibited, and although a municipal parking lot is conveniently located adjacent to the site, it's unclear if that's the best place to park and many visitors are confused by the metering system. The Museum is in an attractive historic downtown; however, it is separated by both a surface parking lot and multi-story parking garage. Walking from downtown, the path to the Museum is not certain, is not attractive, and doesn't feel safe.

The Museum is aware of these weaknesses and working to address them. The Business Improvement District has made a wayfinding signage system for the area a priority for the next year. Onsite improvements will be challenging and the Museum is evaluating traffic and visitor circulation on the property as part of its facilities master plan, including a new side entrance from the municipal parking lot. Because the visitor experience includes parking and walking to the entrance to join a tour, addressing the site's presence on the street is crucial if it wants to more actively engage the community. It currently appears closed off and isolated, so look for ways to welcome visitors and make it easier to come in. This could include larger signs that explain what there is to do and

see, temporary banners, more prominent entrance gateways, and thinning the landscape that provides a view of the building from the sidewalk and downtown.

Currently, it's a bit too difficult to figure out what to do when you arrive, so the Museum could add an "open" flag at the front gate; post a sign visible from the street that would direct them to parking (e.g., "parking down this driveway and behind the house" or "car and bus parking in adjacent lot"); and an orientation banner or sign in the parking lot. The back of house will be a naturally uncomfortable location because that's not how houses are typically entered, plus the architecture is confusing due to the multiple doors and paths. Therefore make this orientation sign bold and large, and place it where you want visitors to walk next. It should provide an introduction to the site, with a title ("Welcome to The Arctic House Museum"), stating when and where tours depart, admission fees, what do to while waiting ("enjoy the gardens or explore an exhibit on the Global Warming Concern"), and upcoming events or other related places to visit nearby. Use temporary materials (e.g., color inkjet banners) and treat this as a test to see how visitors respond before installing more permanent signs.

Longer term it should map out the ideal visitor circulation from beginning to end (including parking and return to their cars) for tours and events. I would consider if visitor reception could occur much earlier (I suspect it should move to the location of the carriage exhibit) and if visitor parking could be moved off site during the busiest periods (most likely to the adjacent municipal lot). This will be complex and involve many trade-offs and compromises, and a landscape architect will be a useful resource in weighing the various options.

## Online Access

The Arctic House Museum has an attractive and well-organized website and has begun using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. These are all valuable technologies to maintain because they are becoming the most influential means for making travel decisions and attract non-traditional audiences. To better engage its audiences, I recommend:

1. Collecting statistics on usage for all online media. Although statistics vary by media, they can all be used to analyze effectiveness, user interests, and levels of engagement, in the same way as tours and events. Google Analytics is a free but powerful (often overwhelming) tool for the website, which not only provides a count of visitors but also length of time on site and search terms used to find your site. Facebook Fans and Twitter Followers can be easily counted along with daily attendance, and Facebook and Twitter can be searched to see how your Site and community are being perceived (although it'll be difficult with North Pole since there are also so many Santa Claus fans).

2. Recognizing that adopting online media is addition to, rather than a replacement of, traditional media. For the foreseeable future to reach various audiences, promotion will continue in both print (such as newsletters, newspaper, and rackcards) and online (website, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr), which means that existing resources will be stretched even further. Continually seek ways to integrate various technologies, for example, a post to a blog can also automatically post to Facebook and Twitter. Be aware of the demands for ongoing maintenance of online media and the need for high quality content and design—the Internet is a level playing field and for users, you are now easily compared to organizations around the world, not just North Pole. Regularly monitor a technologies effectiveness to establish priorities, but also recognize that some grow linearly and others geometrically. For example, Facebook tends to grow slowly at first and quickly later on because it relies on current fans influencing future fans.

3. Begin to build more content on the website to attract more users and develop a “long tail” (see Chris Anderson). Information about the family, house, and collections is brief and news is limited to upcoming events. For example, convert press releases and newsletter stories into posts for an integrated blog called “news;” expand the biographies of family members and include a bibliography; include an “object of the month” feature to highlight the extensive collections; or add links or information about your partnering organizations or nearby related destinations.

## Other Observations

Although beyond the scope of a Community Engagement Assessment, as a colleague working in historic house museums and as a consultant who advises on non-profit management and strategy, I have the following observations:

1. Staff is often the greatest asset and expense for a historic house museum, but I often find they are not provided the resources to conduct their work adequately or treated respectfully for the daily contributions they make to their organizations. That does not simply handicap the staff, but reflects poorly on the organization. In the case of the Arctic House Museum, working conditions must be significantly improved so that staff can function effectively. The Executive Director is currently sharing an office, so confidential issues related to personnel or finances cannot be handled. Others are placed in spaces that are not designed to be offices, so they are cramped, poorly lit, or noisy. There are no appropriate places to hold meetings or greet donors or officials without being continually interrupted. Space is always tight in a historic house museum, but the balance between public spaces, collections, and staff work areas must be reconsidered immediately to avoid staff turnover and inefficiencies. At the Arctic House Museum, I would reconsider the use of all the spaces on the second floor, including the exhibit rooms, to determine if

they could be better used and organized, or if the second floor of the Wood Shed can be improved into staff offices.

2. The organization had made many significant accomplishments in its administration during the last few years that have moved it in a much more professional direction. Award of the state charter as a museum, staff policies manual, housekeeping manual, collections policies, emergency response plan, maintenance plan, and by-laws are all major projects, and I'm surprised so much has been accomplished with such limited resources so quickly. I recognize that many are still in draft form and incomplete, but these are foundational documents that protect the site, staff, and visitors from unnecessary risk and harm. The staff and board are to be congratulated for tackling these projects while managing so many other daily responsibilities at the site.

3. The Arctic House Museum is undergoing a tremendous period of change to make its resources more accessible to the public. That effort is controversial but necessary given the Preserving Arctic Heritage's intent to reduce its financial support, the major source of funding for the Museum. The Museum now must develop and embrace new sources of support while still maintaining its preservation and education goals. There's great potential for success but also failure. It is clear that the Museum is moving in the right direction, that the board and community leaders are supportive, and that the staff is working under great stress. It will be essential that board and staff (both paid and volunteer) continue to stay focused on the goals and strategy, continue to communicate its vision, recognize that some efforts will fail, and mutually support each other. This is an incredibly stressful time for everyone involved, so avoid making more changes than needed, be clear about priorities, and continually look for ways to recognize accomplishments.

## **Recommendations**

Suggestions and ideas are integrated into the report but overall, my top recommendations are:

1. Know your audiences better, especially the local community, through research. Then identify which segments of your community you can effectively reach and serve well. You will need to go through the difficult process of establishing priorities and target audiences, but remember that although everyone is welcome, you have limited resources to spend on publicity and programming.

2. Keep experimenting with special events to attract and engage your local community. The daily public tour isn't the best way to reach more people and you need to pursue other strategies. However, do not do this blindly or

randomly. Develop goals and expectations in writing in advance and evaluate the program afterwards to determine what went well and what could be done differently or better.

3. The current staff has the skills and qualifications to move the Arctic House Museum to new levels of operation and management; however, they need the right tools and environment to succeed. The current office conditions do not allow staff to work at their best and unnecessarily adds to the challenge of working in a non-profit organization in this economic climate.

4. Changes in staff and programs will always generate controversy and debate, especially in organizations that are well-loved. I believe that the administration has taken the right steps to advance the organization's mission and move towards financial sustainability, and that the board has seriously taken on its role as community representative and steward of the site. Although it is essential to listen to various concerns and perspectives, ultimately the organization must make choices for the good of the public, especially the local community, and cannot be swayed to serve the needs or interests of a small group.

5. The daily public tour has recently been revised but I suggest a more thorough review and evaluation by an interpretive specialist. The content, tour route, methodologies, visitor experience, logistics, and docent training all need some improvement to match the quality of historic sites similar to the significance of the Arctic House Museum. A planning grant from a state or national humanities agency would be ideal for this work.

## Resources

### Bibliography

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### Best Practices

Guided tours of the historic district through a brochure, podcast, or cell phone

- Brochure: *Deerfield: An English Settlement* (Historic Deerfield, Massachusetts)
- Brochure: Literary Mount Vernon (Maryland Humanities Council)
- Booklet: Historic La Jolla Walking Tour (La Jolla Historical Society, California)
- Topical travel itineraries: [www.visitrichmondva.com/Plan/Sample-Itineraries](http://www.visitrichmondva.com/Plan/Sample-Itineraries)
- Cell phone tour: “Half Had Not Been Told to Me” (Decatur House, Washington, DC)
- Cell phone tour: “Embassy Row” (Wilson House, Washington, DC)

- Podcast: “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Oak Park” (Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, Chicago)
- Podcast: Audio Tours for Europe ([www.ricksteves.com/news/audio-tours.htm](http://www.ricksteves.com/news/audio-tours.htm))
- “American Icons” visitors’ pass for several attractions (Berkshires, Massachusetts) ([chesterwood.org/visit/american-icons](http://chesterwood.org/visit/american-icons))

### **Attachment**

Results of an online survey of board, staff, and docents on community engagement, administered in August 2011.