

Cincinnati Museum Center's plastic Allosaurus model makes a high-profile trip to its new, temporary residence at The Children's Theater of Cincinnati.

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fig. 1. Cincinnati Museum Center's Collections and Exhibits teams load out a 1950 Crosley Farm-o-Road vehicle from Historic Union Terminal.



# Breaking Free

## Lessons from Shared Collections Stewardship at Cincinnati Museum Center

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In 2014, Cincinnati Museum Center (CMC) successfully campaigned and received a 62 percent majority vote for a five-year sales tax increase to preserve and restore Union Terminal, the National Historic Landmark that houses its three museums, library, and OMNIMAX® Theater. The win was a significant victory for the city and the greater arts community. Since 2016, money raised by the sales tax has enabled critical structural repairs to this iconic, 1930s Art Deco train station. However, for this structural work to take place, we needed to vacate more than 80 percent of the building.

With the city's thrilling "yes" vote, we came to terms with what the victorious campaign meant for us. The scope of the restoration necessitated that we 1) remove and store 5,000 objects from our Cincinnati History Museum and our Museum of Natural History & Science; 2) move 55,000 collections objects out of the building and into our offsite collections facility; and 3) relocate our offices and workshop facilities – all within 12 months (fig. 1). To be successful upon reopening in 2018, we knew we would need to keep our programs and mission active in the community while parts of our museums were closed or dark.

Staff members from our education, exhibits, and collections departments all considered what we felt CMC uniquely offered our region, and how operating as a museum in a historic structure had determined and limited our past options. We also examined our new constraints. Relocating large collections items meant placing significant pressure on our already-shrinking offsite collections storage space, which was nearing capacity. We concluded that we could actually benefit from shaking up some of our operational habits.

## Initiating *Curate My Community* meant breaking apart holistic gallery experiences from our museums, and reconfiguring them in new ways.

Facing 30 months outside of our home, we flipped the orientation of our museum-centered model, dramatically expanding our existing out-of-building programming and developing teams that would engage in deep community collaborations. We prepared to become a “museum without walls,” focusing on initiatives that would pivot our mission outward, into the heart of the region we serve.

Once we embraced focusing our mission outward, we began to see the approach as applicable to some of our most practical

problems. For example, as we eyeballed the terms and conditions for storing large collections objects offsite for 30 months, we realized that it would be far more beneficial to engage local organizations to host object displays at their sites while we were closed. With this initial vision, we developed *Curate My Community*, a project to display more than 700 objects in 55 public spaces in the Cincinnati area. This undertaking, which boasts collaboration with 15 unique partners and covers more than 1,500 square miles, has offered CMC opportunities to work with new partners to tell new stories in new locations as we pilot a collaborative community model for exhibit design and display.

Having determined our desire to place our collections – *en masse* – on public display, the critical task of moving out gave us little time to doubt ourselves. Because our primary objective was to mitigate impending storage pressures and costs, we immediately began discussing the project concept with a pool of 30 organizations that had spaces that could accommodate objects from our oversized collections. We approached prospective collaborators with an ambitious list – our “Big 100,” which detailed our bulkiest objects. Members of the Big 100 included casts of Ice Age megafauna, a historic Aeronca 65 TL Defender aircraft (700 pounds, rigging required), a juvenile Allosaurus, and four historic vehicles.

We were delighted and relieved when Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport and the University of Cincinnati expressed interest in partnering with us. Not only did they see value in hosting object displays, but they were also prepared to support numerous facets of the project by providing onsite coordination, use of installation equipment, printing services, shares of hard costs, and security monitoring.

Emboldened by their enthusiasm, we moved to expand the initiative, establishing relationships with library systems in Kentucky and Ohio. Our widest-ranging partnership has been with the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, which has allowed us to display objects at 38 of their branch locations. Almost two years after forging *Curate My Community's* first partnerships, the project has grown to cover three times more territory than our original expectation.

Initiating *Curate My Community* meant breaking apart holistic gallery experiences from our museums, and reconfiguring them in new ways. It was emotional for visitors to encounter empty spaces within each gallery as we moved objects out, but we were able to use these targeted moves as chances to point toward the new stories we would be telling after restoration. Our new offsite installations, meanwhile, inspired fresh excitement upon arrival. Empty vitrines delivered to library branches were met with curious smiles from staff and patrons, followed by “What’s going inside?” Our life-sized Allosaurus model took the ride of its life when we moved it to its temporary home at The Children’s Theatre of Cincinnati, belted in with forearms and snout protruding from the back of a 26-foot box truck on the I-75 highway ([intro image](#)). Internally, we embraced the unpredictable as a source of positive energy while managing more than 90 object and exhibit transports – an undertaking that left our small work team way too busy and determined to spend much time feeling proprietary or sentimental.

Moving collections to new public locations brought our installation process out from behind closed doors. Our days of opening a gallery to unveil a flawless and complete exhibition were gone, and instead we

welcomed our host sites’ customers, students, employees, visitors, and patrons to witness how an exhibition comes together. Letting people in on our work facilitated wonderful moments of engagement. During the installation of a massive cast of a 365-million-year-old *Dunkelosteus* specimen in Mount St. Joseph University’s student union, staff and students peppered us with enthusiastic questions about the cast’s weight, how such models are made, and how they’re transported. Our host contact, a professor of biology, interpreted enthusiastically as the group watched our setup process. As we placed the vitrine over the three-foot-tall and two-foot-wide armored fish skull, spectators broke into spontaneous applause. Making that installation public demystified some of what museums do, and it taught us that we can win allies and advocates when our collaborators contribute to our process.

*Curate My Community* has been and continues to be a gargantuan undertaking that is only possible because of strong trust among internal departments and engaged community partners. It has not been easy, but it is rewarding. What follows are our ongoing observations about that process and its outcomes.

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**fig. 2.** Two members of the airport facilities staff lend a helping hand installing our Mastodon cast in the Delta terminal at the Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky International Airport. To offset costs, the airport offered their time and equipment to assist in the installation of the exhibits.



**fig. 3.** Inspired by the collaborative exhibits being installed, the faculty was interested in how to best display and highlight their work and collections on campus. At the University of Cincinnati, department heads collaborate with CMC’s team to suspend a Mosasaur specimen in their Geology and Physics Atrium, which was previously displayed in a space where few people had access.

### **Stewardship can form a positive feedback loop.**

For this project to excel, we had to let go of controlling it by ourselves (fig. 2). Initially, we anticipated that it would be burdensome to expect partners to provide anything besides storage and display spaces. Our perception was inaccurate. Our hosts were willing, even inclined, to mutually contribute to planning, execution, and ongoing collections care. We collaborated intensively with our partners to set expectations, to define and plan for risk, and to develop our display strategies. During execution, we also shared in hard costs, cross promotion, and staff to complete each installation. Nearly two years into the project, our partners are sustaining stewards who help us to monitor environment and object safety, gauge public responses to displays, and complete checks as extensions of our team. This type of interdependence has helped our organizations to have greater appreciation for each other’s missions.

As we planned for our public displays, we brainstormed risk scenarios that our

collections could and could not withstand. We also specified optimal standards for safe, credible object displays in the spaces under consideration. We used these “worst” and “best-case” criteria to recommend compatible object assignments that would work well with each site, requiring minimum mitigation – and we also consulted with our collaborators about what else could go wrong. By working through mechanics with partners and amassing a dream team of advocates who wanted to see the project succeed, we were able to actually recruit new stewards engaged in caring for CMC’s collections (fig. 3).

Stewardship doesn’t stop at physical guardianship; it extends to storytelling. Cincinnati Museum Center’s collections are centered on the history and prehistory of southwestern Ohio. When we display objects outside of CMC and deliberately place them closer to their points of origin, we glean new anecdotes and perspectives from people who have personal connections to them. Alternately, our displays also invoke fresh, exciting responses when unfamiliar audiences encounter them. We learn how our displays and our presented narratives are



fig. 4. Cincinnati Museum Center's 1940 Aeronca 65 TL Defender airplane greets customers as they arrive at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport.

received through feedback from our hosts. During these conversations, our hosts have also shown us self-generated interpretive materials that they provide to their audiences. Understanding these responses to our displays inspires new modes of storytelling and lines of inquiry for future interpretation. Our objects and host organizations are ambassadors, offering us reality checks on our content; we know what stories we think are significant, but are those the stories and perspectives that our community believes are significant? Gauging these responses helps us to consider how we retell and restructure our narratives to best serve the city once we're back in Union Terminal.

### People notice.

Cincinnatians who grew up visiting the Cincinnati History Museum or the Museum of Natural History & Science can tell you exactly where their favorite iconic objects were displayed. The *Curate My Community* initiative has allowed CMC to place these favorites into new settings, allowing for moments of serendipity when our audiences stumble upon them. These surprise reunions wind up shared through word of mouth and social media. For example, our polar bear mount was a familiar fixture at the entrance

of the Museum of Natural History & Science that greeted visitors for years. Now, it invokes nostalgic delight and surprise from patrons at the main branch of our public library.

In highly trafficked locations with high and hectic through-put, such as Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, we take advantage of playful sightlines (e.g., a giant Ice Age Ground Sloth cast greeting arriving travelers), captive audiences (e.g., our antique cars in baggage claim providing diversion), and major ingress and egress paths (e.g., our 1940 Aeronca Defender airplane in ticketing, just before security) (fig. 4). Through these encounters, people remember that we are still here, or they come to learn about our institution for the first time.

We have also observed that the format of a small exhibit or solo object display can incite quick, intense curiosity. With the absence of a larger exhibit shaping the story, a viewer gets to experience a display, however briefly, in his or her own unique way. Additionally, when an object stands alone in an unexpected location, it can underline that the object is important. That has worked to our advantage. When people stand amazed in front of a polar bear on its hind legs in the atrium of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, they ask "where did this come from and why is it here?" It opens a door to explain CMC's restoration project to audiences we were perhaps not previously reaching. There are no expectations that someone encountering one of our objects will do anything beyond enjoying that single engagement. If sparked, though, they have the opportunity to go deeper because of the breadth and saturation of our installations around Cincinnati.



fig. 5. Ipuh, CMC's 1500-pound Sumatran rhino mount, receives red carpet treatment during a challenging load-in across cobblestones on the University of Cincinnati's campus.



### **The work is worth it.**

With 55 unique installations in locations across three counties, *Curate My Community* has had its challenges, trials, and snafus. During one very public moment at the University of Cincinnati, with press, staff, and students looking on, we held our breath as we precariously rolled our 1,500-pound Sumatran rhinoceros and his display case across a bumpy cobblestone plaza (fig. 5). On an installation of a massive redwood stump at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, our load-in was nearly defeated by one unmeasured door. Airport facilities staff resolved the issue for us by cutting a stump-sized hole into the offending wall. At those moments, either participating party could have resisted complication, and pulled back on the scope of what we were trying to achieve. Instead, all parties met difficult scenarios with creative solutions and generous, can-do spirits. The results were not only terrific displays, but the creation of unforgettable stories that have deepened our mutual trust and our bond.

As Union Terminal nears the end of its restoration in November of 2018, many of our “ambassador objects” will return. We are gathering the team and digging back in, planning afresh as we prepare for new internal CMC exhibits and displays. However, the popularity and effectiveness of this project has shown us that it should not end. The partnerships that we have developed will continue long after our museums reopen, and so will opportunities for the public to encounter our collections around the city.

This project has required ongoing negotiation of shared responsibility, need, and trust. Executives, department heads, project managers, curators, coordinators, designers, fabricators, and partners who undertake

a project like this will be pushed to think in fresh ways, and we submit that those struggles are worthwhile. As much as *Curate My Community* began as a solution to a time-specific challenge, this project has shown us new ways that museums can be assets for their regions. It has allowed us to reach new audiences, tell new stories, and explore what it means to serve and rely on our community. By changing up everything from how we create exhibits to where and how we display them, we engaged a more diverse cross section of Cincinnati in advancing and caring about our mission.

By undertaking this project, we learned that our object-based storytelling does not have to happen within a single building to be powerful. We also observed that sharing stewardship of everything from collections care to interpretation can win deep alliances for museums’ informal learning missions. Similarly, making it possible for the public to encounter the work-in-process parts of storytelling can be as compelling as the polished narratives we seem determined to present.

Other museums need not complete an extensive construction project in order to test our observations!

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