

Why Museums Matter Episode 2: Access

Welcome to Why Museums Matter, a limited series podcast exploring the role, value, and changing public expectations of museums created as part of the national *Reconsidering Museums* project.

The Why Museums Matter podcast is produced in Alberta on the traditional and contemporary meeting ground and home for many Indigenous Peoples, including the Cree, Saulteaux, Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Tsuut'ina, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. We respect that this work takes place on the lands of Treaties Four, Six, Seven, Eight, and Ten, as well as the Métis Nation of Alberta. We acknowledge the responsibility of working on these lands as museum professionals and citizens of this place. Guests are joining us from across the land that we now know as Canada.

Episode Two: Access

Chloe Dennis: Hi, I'm Chloe Dennis, Project Coordinator for *Reconsidering Museums*. As part of *Reconsidering Museums*, a national research and advocacy project, we conducted a public engagement campaign where we heard from Canadians across the country. Out of that engagement, three themes emerged. The first theme, and the one we're exploring on this episode is access. Access means many things. It means physical accessibility of the site, as well as decreasing financial and time barriers to visitation. But it also means that source communities have access to collections. It means that information and knowledge is shared in a way that is understandable, relevant, and engaging. It means that the museum is inclusive, and a place where people see themselves reflected in exhibits, collections, and programs.

Here's Eleonora Sermoneta, Adult Learning Programmer at the Royal Alberta Museum, speaking about what accessibility means in the context of museums.

Eleonora Sermoneta: Accessibility is a broad term. It came from focusing mainly on the physical dimension of museum access in the past, to include more facets over time. And today, when we talk about accessibility, we think about physical, digital, cultural, intellectual, and also financial accessibility. Considering these different aspects is important because accessibility is about supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, and recognizing that different audiences have different experiential needs when they come to the museum. And we want to ensure that the widest number of people can enjoy the museum building, collections, exhibitions, and of course, special events. Accessibility and all the different facets that it embodies – it's basically about meeting your audience where your audience is at, it's about making the audience feel welcome, and creating a culture of inclusion.

Chloe Dennis: Accessibility is about people. In our research, we heard museums are safe and welcoming. But that's not enough. People want the museum to do a better job representing all Canadians.

Eleonora Sermoneta: This is a perception barrier, and making sure that museums are perceived as a welcoming space as a place where everybody can find something that interests them is of paramount importance. This is not about audience development. This is not about bringing more bodies through the door. This is about making sure that people perceive museums, not as cultural facilities for the elites, but as community infrastructure where everybody belongs. It's about listening, actively listening, to the needs of your community, and incorporating them into your accessibility plan as you go. It's a social investment, a social cohesion investment, because we're providing a gathering space for the community where communities can learn about each other, where community can understand more and care more. It's about democratizing museums and expanding their reach, but not for the audience development. Again, this is about investing in your community. So this is what accessibility is about to me. The end game of accessibility is ownership, but that only happens when we address the community's needs, when you're open to listening, when you incorporate a mindful reflection of their needs in your planning.

Chloe Dennis: Maggie MacIntyre, Executive Director of the Association of Nova Scotia Museums, joins us to talk about how museums can embed accessibility into everything they're doing.

Maggie MacIntyre: Over the years accessibility has really changed its definition to me. I encourage people when they're having these conversations, to think about accessibility more broadly. Accessibility is anything that is making the museum, the collections, and the stories easier for people to get into their hands. We've been talking about infusing accessibility into everything that we're doing, infusing diversity, equity, and inclusion into what we're doing so it changes everything that we're doing. It's not just doing the equity box or doing the accessibility box, because there's a lot of overlap between these pieces.

When we look at museum standards, we have to accept that the checkmark version no longer works. We have to look at museum standards as this constantly evolving back and forth, changing to each person who comes into our door, every community, every visitor, the standard needs to be a little bit different for. Every museum, it needs to be a little bit different for. What's appropriate in one museum might not be appropriate in the next museum. Instead, we should always just be raising the bar together and working together to have these things be the best we can have them. So, the museum standard might be that we never touch the artifacts without gloves because the most important thing is that we protect the artifact. From an accessibility perspective, maybe we need to change that and have an opportunity for people who have visual impairments to be able to touch that artifact. But then from an EDI

perspective, maybe that artifact has cultural significance. And again, we need to have that ability to touch the artifact and have that different engagement with it. So, the standard of ‘we must never touch the artifact, protect the artifact at all costs’ becomes secondary to telling that story, relating to those communities, making sure that this is accessible culturally, physically, all those different ways. And the museum standards were created as a bit of gatekeeping. And looking at when we have to stop doing gatekeeping in museums, and instead go back to our real roots of educating, storytelling, sharing. The standards are something that is nice to have, but we don't have to be as uptight about them.

Chloe Dennis: Accessibility means changing the way that museums work. It means adapting to suit the needs of the community, rather than expecting the community to adapt to your way of working.

Maggie MacIntyre: I think the idea of holding the museum sector to account is something we might even need to let go of. There's a very colonial idea of ‘we must read a certain bar and do things the right way’. Who set that right way and who set that bar. It's a very colonial perspective, it is often academia, it is often the victor, the dominant society who came up with these ways. So instead of the idea that museums still need to be held accountable, we have to look at who museums need to be held accountable to. Is it those standards that we've always held up there in academia? Or is it new standards that we need to be looking at? We aren't accountable always to cultural groups, to our community, to members who haven't been visiting museums, and maybe that's who we need to be accountable to. We need to be accountable for that history and to that truth, and to sharing that.

Chloe Dennis: One of those communities that museums need to be accessible and accountable to is Indigenous communities. Our partners at the Canadian Museums Association have recently released *Moved to Action*, a resource that can assist museums as they work to implement UNDRIP into their work.

Here's Rebecca MacKenzie, Director of Communications at the Canadian Museums Association, and co-author of *Moved to Action*, to tell us about the report and how it can support increasing accessibility for Indigenous communities and museums.

Rebecca MacKenzie: The *Moved to Action* report was essentially laid out as a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action number 67, and to implement the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into Canadian museological work. But more than that, from the Canadian Museums Association perspective and from the Canadian museum sector perspective, it was also meant to replace a rather dated previous document, which was the Task Force report that was released in 1992. Fundamentally, in all ways, it's essential. That's one of the main premises of the *Moved to Action* report is and of UNDRIP more broadly, is that Indigenous self-determination needs to be at the centre of

museum work, particularly when it relates to Indigenous collections and cultural representation. To do that effectively access is one of the first places you start and you can move beyond that, from access to Indigenous self-determination, to authoritative control and guidance, but to start with access. You could really break that down into those few subcategories as well, cultural access does look different from physical access from financial access. Different elements of access will affect different ways that museums and Indigenous communities can work together.

Chloe Dennis: Accessibility for Indigenous communities and other source communities is deeply connected to collections. From our public engagement campaign, four in five respondents agree that an important role for museums is to preserve objects and knowledge from Indigenous history. Respondents who identify themselves as Indigenous are even more likely to indicate this is a very important function of museums. Museums have a role in preserving Indigenous culture, but need to change how they do that work.

Rebecca MacKenzie: We want to create a very clear pathway to understand that even if we understand museum collections to be properly accessioned, there may be space to understand that some of those items maybe actually don't belong to museums, and that there's a pathway for repatriation. A lot of museum objects were acquired under duress, and so I think it's important to always carry that in mind when looking at museum collections. Of course, there's a very important part of this where we don't want to necessarily create an unfair portrayal of Indigenous commerce. During these periods that there were definitely items that were willingly sold and provided and ended up in museum collections, but I think it always warrants a conversation with interested communities. And another thing that comes up too, when it comes to access, there is a strong relationship between access and repatriation.

Chloe Dennis: Stephanie Danyluk, co-author of the Moved to Action report and Senior Manager, Community Engagement and Indigenous Initiatives at the CMA, joins us to speak more about what access could look like.

Stephanie Danyluk: There was a lot of focus on changing the idea of access and what access means for communities. So, taking the institution to the communities, moving to communities, 'thinking outside of museum walls' was one of the specific quotes that we heard. Thinking about the museum as one part of a camp space and in a larger territory was another example that we heard that was wonderfully graphic. Yeah, kind of shifting the idea of what that means to enable self-determination, you know, when you're not requesting people to come to you, but going out and connecting in other ways to community.

Chloe Dennis: Our communities are constantly changing, which means that the accessibility needs of the community are constantly changing. Rethinking accessibility is a journey, but one that museums must undertake in order to remain relevant to their communities.

Host: Thanks for listening. In response to the need for museums to rethink the way they approach accessibility, we've created communications and advocacy resources as part of the *Reconsidering Museums* toolkit. These resources include Fact Sheets and Data Stories to support the need for increased representation and relevance in museums.

To learn more about *Reconsidering Museums* or to access the toolkit visit reconsideringmuseums.ca. *Reconsidering Museums* is a national project undertaken in partnership with a consortium of provincial and territorial museums associations and the Canadian Museums Association, led by the Alberta Museums Association. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Cultural Investment Fund. Music from this episode is Inspirational Piano and Orchestra by Raphael Crux.