



Image: Participant explores Madame John's Legacy during site discussion tour

Culture Lab Cooperative

A Case Study for Community-Centered Design



Shift

Product design for social change

About the Cooperative

Culture Lab Cooperative was produced by Shift Design, Inc and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, together with Music Box Village, Louisiana State Museum, Ashé Cultural Arts Center, Philippine-Louisiana Historical Society, and Preservation Hall Foundation.

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Community Centered Design

The Idea

Shift Design and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (APAC) developed an engagement around the American Association of Museums conference in New Orleans in May 2019. Shift researched and designed a 1.5 day tour and workshop to engage visiting national partners to contribute talent to local issues, connect local organizations into national discussions, and deepen connections with cultural heritage organizations across the United States.

The Result

We designed an event to support New Orleans cultural heritage community by using Madame John's Legacy as a case study for community centered design.

We designed an event that produced valuable national discussions, while providing solutions to the local community. Site visits and discussions raised group awareness of current cultural challenges in the cultural heritage landscape. The design thinking challenge engaged local and national professionals redesigning a historic home's curatorial plan based on these challenges.

The event increased solidarity between organizations, transformed interpretations of museum practices, and provided a new perspective on Louisiana to local and national participants. Design concepts from the project were directly incorporated into the historic home's new curatorial strategy to increase participation and representation of the local community.



“A successful design workshop will require all partners to be aware of the local experience, abreast of the Madame John's Legacy case, and familiar with the concepts presented in the Culture Lab Playbook.”

Research

Identify

The sponsoring organization approached Shift with interest in creating an impact and engagement event with organization staff, local community sites, and a national network of museum professionals. Together with the sponsoring organization, we defined the target groups for Culture Lab as follows:

- APAC Staff - The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center staff
- Local Partners - Local South Louisiana community-based cultural heritage organizations
- National Partners - Visiting national cultural heritage workers attending the American Association of Museums conference

Define

We contacted each target group through interviews, group meetings, and past documented experiences. These conversations defined each group, identified their interests in participation, and described any complex relationships. This research defined the following design constraints:

APAC staff will participate in an event if presented an opportunity to connect with local community-based cultural organizations who could be instrumental in carrying forward the mission and vision of Culture Lab. APAC staff would appreciate if the event would create a unique experience that would affirm their reputation with national partners in the upcoming conference as leaders in community-engaged curation projects.

Local community-based cultural heritage organizations would participate if the event presented information that could improve their organizations, compensates local attendees for their role as ambassadors, and expected local partners to contribute equally as participants. Local community-based partners would appreciate if event staff could reduce the informational burden on local partners.

National Partners would participate if the event allowed for constructive networking opportunities, and the content presented a view of the city that they would be unable to experience through the conference alone. National partners would appreciate if the activities were fun, experiential, and organized into a describable story that they could share with their home institution.



Design

Support the New Orleans cultural heritage community by using Madame John's Legacy as a case study for community-based museum curation

Concept

Our concept was to design an event to support the New Orleans cultural heritage community by using Madame John's Legacy as a case study for community-based museum design. The event would ask both local and national partners to engage in a design-thinking challenge to improve the historic home's curatorial plan. This concept allowed us to positively impact our community while providing solutions to some of the identified event challenges.

The challenges facing Madame John's Legacy were regionally applicable, and would resonate with issues other local partners were currently facing. Inviting local participants to observe and participate in a national design-thinking workshop around these problems would provide participating organizations immediately applicable information on how to address similar issues with their institutions.

The Madame John's Legacy team was thoroughly prepared to speak about their project. Through the previous activities, they had produced presentations and research describing regional issues to a national audience. Forming discussions around this problem set would allow national partners to access presentations and research. This could quickly bring national partners up to speed on local knowledge without burdening the local partners.

Presenting a local challenge as the focus of conversations would allow other local partners to offer their insights from facing similar issues. We could further equalize the conversation by framing these efforts as experiential tours of local organizations. These tours would contextualize local solutions to shared issues.

Framing the tours around local issues would give other local organizations an opportunity to "look under the hood" of their fellow organizations. This would give local organisations immediate inspiration and connections that positively contribute to their organizations. Tours are a describable expense, and could create a way for the sponsoring organization to compensate local experts for their time. The tour would get APAC on the ground at multiple organizations. This provides a low-pressure format to assess resources for future work. The site visits would take national partners to little-known locations which hold the history of well-known local culture, and provide a tour of the host city's cultural heritage landscape.



Image: Jo Ann Minor, Associate Director at Ashe Cultural Center leads discussion on community during a site visit

Implementation



Image: Culture Lab Cooperative participants at Shell Beach, LA

“The Culture Lab Cooperative was one of the most meaningful cultural experiences I’ve ever been a part of.”

-National Participant

Implementation

The event took place in the two days preceding the American Association of Museum conference in 2019. There were twelve local partners, eight national partners, and seven APAC and Shift Design staff. Over the two days, we visited six locations, facilitated four discussions, and hosted a design workshop.

The experience started at Madame John’s Legacy with a discussion of the curatorial redesign, and a brief description of the Culture Lab Playbook. Shift and APAC facilitated an introductory discussion on organizational interests, goals and curiosities for the workshop. The group then toured Preservation Hall, the historic French Quarter jazz venue, and held a discussion on issues of external communication, social media branding, and staying contemporary while presenting older artifacts. We then visited the historic Pontalba Apartments for non-facilitated networking. The group discussed issues of equality in Louisiana over dinner.

The next morning we met at a Ashe Cultural Center to take a tour of community-based living and the value of property ownership for a community and for cultural heritage organizations. We discussed issues of financial stability and programming community engagement. We then boarded a bus for an abbreviated historic tour of New Orleans. On

the road, local participants began an unguided discussion on the impacts of Katrina, hurricanes, and national disasters from a community lens. The group discussed the trauma and memory, and gave examples of how this still pervades living New Orleans culture. On the bus towards Shell Beach, beyond the New Orleans Levee Protection System, The New Orleans Phillipino-American Historical society lead a conversation on diasporas, racism, and cultural folklore. On arriving at the beach, we facilitated a discussion of ecosystem environment and land rights associated with changing populations.

These experiences and discussions informed the resulting design workshop. We began the workshop with a reflection exercise. Shift staff guided the group in collecting their individual experiences into solvable challenge themes. Participants then split up into groups to design solutions that would address these challenge themes within Madame John’s Legacy. These design groups presented their final concepts to Madame John’s Legacy staff and the group for further discussion and ideation. We wrapped the workshop with a discussion on how the concepts designed by the groups could be valuable in thinking around other local and national organizations.



Last weekend, Shift's USA team partnered with @SmithsonianAPA to run #CultureLabNOLA and it was a BLAST. Hit the hashtag to take a look back...



Above Left: @shift_org: https://twitter.com/shift_org/status/1131949259627073536

Above Right: Participants talk on the bus ride to Shell Beach to discuss maroon culture with Randy Gonzales.

Bottom Left: Participants discuss equity with Preservation Hall Director Ron Rona.

Bottom Right: Groups present designs during the design-thinking workshop.



Review

Along with initial positive reviews from participants, both local and national participants sent emails and letters extolling the value and the impact the event had on their perspective to the cultural heritage field.

We received feedback that the facilitated discussions were enlightening and honest. APAC was able to create lasting community connections through the event. The places visited were reported to be valuable visits in planning for future projects. Local participants found it valuable to meet others in the field. They also enjoyed discussing their shared experiences with other community partners. The event increased solidarity between organizations who had never previously collaborated. National partners remarked how the event transformed the way they think about their work. Both local and national partners were deeply impressed by the tour locations, and commented that the experience changed the way they perceive Louisiana.

Madame John's Legacy staff were also pleased with project outcomes. The concept presentations were immediately used to develop an updated mission and vision for the historic home. Some of the design concepts

were directly incorporated into the updated blueprints. Since the event, Madame John's Legacy's updated strategy has been approved by stakeholders, and the museum is moving forward to change their curatorial strategy.

Refine

Culture Lab, the Library Make'n'Shake, and Architecting Sustainable Futures all apply the same methodology of bringing in the local community as an equal partner from design to execution. In the future, we see this same design theory impacting other areas seeking cultural collaboration.

Incorporating local community into large-scale, national institutions or events can be a departure from existing practices. With this departure, there are the challenges of functionality, additional work, and changes in both process and production. Shift approaches these challenges through interaction studies, creativity, design-thinking, and a community lens. We will continue to design events that improve equity in the cultural heritage field through community-based design.

Results

The main discussion and design topics from the experience



Photo: Shift Director Jon Voss organizes participant feedback and sentiments during the design thinking workshop

Am I allowed here?

What habits are we taught around historic buildings? Participants discussed how cultural habits create ceremonies of acceptable entry, and experiences on how people approach locations differently. How can we communicate a decidedly new patterns? A community-based design needs to consider how people may enter and gain acceptance in locations.

Tremendous Culture Loss

How do we discuss the negative aspects of loss? Participants discussed connections between language, music, and the process of cultural connection, and marveled at all of the languages that have been lost in this one house. They discussed music as a way to preserve and honor things that may otherwise be lost, and how we can recognize people through music. How can we preserve and honor without exploitative or touristic intents? A community-based design needs to develop events in ways that recognize people and their tremendous contributions.

Subverting Power

How do we not prioritize one voice or narrative? Participants discussed how power is cyclical and is constantly reinvented. They discussed how naming can be a way to assert power, and how the role of artists is to challenge and change narratives. How can we make this house function to support contemporary cultural evolution? A community-based design needs to define and reduce ways people are left out.

Sensory Memory

How do we share the truth and history? Participants discussed how museums can rush to fill a space, and create interpretations that are not meaningful or honoring. They discussed how sometimes telling the full truth is dangerous, especially in places heavy with history. Can we create immersive multi-sensory experiences without exploiting the people represented? A community-based design needs take existing negative experiences and make the feeling more intentional.

**“I remember, and
will always
remember, the wind
blowing over the
choppy water and
the feelings of being
simultaneously
heartbroken and in
love.”**

-Participant comment during
the design-thinking workshop

Reflect

“The Culture Lab Cooperative provided an incredible opportunity to build lasting relationships with people doing similar work across the country.

Over the course of the two days, we heard from local culture bearers and gathered insight from each of the participants through meaningful conversations and their reflections on the landscape.

Our team’s experience with the cooperative has directly influenced the plans for not only the future of Madame John’s Legacy (MJL) but the museum’s other historic sites as well. It has increased our focus on accessibility, sensory experiences, and **the power of storytelling**.

As we plan for the re-opening of MJL, our team is working on an interpretation plan that highlights the experiences of the diverse people that lived in the house and the unique physical environment they occupied. Through an audio guide, tactile experiences, and built-in opportunities for pause and reflection, we hope that visitors will come away with a greater understanding of the incredibly rich history of this city and the people who created it.

It was real.”

-Madame John’s Legacy Staff

“Working with the Shift Design team was a gift. I can’t thank you enough. The Culture Lab Cooperative has to be one of the best programs I’ve ever been a part of at APAC, I loved every minute of it.”
-APAC Staff



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Listening to stories from Tito Randy Gonzales of the Philippine-Louisiana Historical Society and efforts to insert the Filipinx narrative to Louisiana/New Orleans hxstory. “History keeps slipping away. We’ve been here. We’re still here. Let that be part of our narrative. Our goal is simple. Let our story be part of Louisiana history.” I’m just beginning to process all of the layers here. #CultureLabNOLA @smithsonianapa

“It is especially heartwarming and reaffirming for me, as the member of a small community-based institution to be included, it is professional development I could not get otherwise. Thank you!”
-Local Partner



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#culturelabnola. Ahé’hee nítsgo to @drztl ☺️🌟 for co-creating an experience/adventure I’ll carry and learn from moving forward. To the rad folx of Shift - ahé’hee for sharing your home 🍷🌟. #shellbeach #louisiana #nola #gulfofmexico #museumpro #bulbancha #bulbanchaisstillaplace #nola #bandphoto

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About Us

Shift is a global non-profit that designs for social change. Our US entity, Shift Design, Inc is based in New Orleans, Louisiana. A 501(c)3 non-profit corporation, Shift Design, Inc was established with a specific focus to “support libraries, archives, museums and state and local cultural heritage organizations in efforts to increase access to and discovery of photographic, sound, and video collections.” We are committed to an inclusive record of our shared cultural heritage, and help promote equity in the historical narrative through tools, platforms and field-leading convenings.