



Strategic Audiencing: Best Practices for a Holistic Approach to Audience Engagement in Museums

Eva Vázalová Gartnerová

To cite this article: Eva Vázalová Gartnerová (02 Oct 2025): Strategic Audiencing: Best Practices for a Holistic Approach to Audience Engagement in Museums, Journal of Museum Education, DOI: [10.1080/10598650.2025.2552053](https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2025.2552053)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2025.2552053>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 Oct 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1200



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Strategic Audiencing: Best Practices for a Holistic Approach to Audience Engagement in Museums

Eva Vázalová Gartnerová 

ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of audience engagement in university museums by adopting a comprehensive approach that considers audiences in a broad sense – not only as external visitors, but also as internal stakeholders, including museum staff, volunteers, and students. Based on fieldwork conducted through a series of study visits, in-depth interviews with museum professionals, and observational research, the study draws insights from university museums in the US and Australia. These institutions were selected for their exemplary and innovative integration of museum practice within academic environments and wider communities. The research introduces a strategic model of audiencing that identifies six interconnected elements crucial for effective engagement: audience research, institutional governance, communication, content management, spatial design, and community building. These pillars are further enriched by a set of core institutional values such as inclusion, accessibility, innovation, sustainability, ethics, wellbeing, and interdisciplinarity. Although the research described did not generate detailed examples of internal audiences, the article briefly considers how the proposed model can also be applied to groups such as museum staff, volunteers, and student collaborators. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all framework, the article highlights adaptable best practices intended to guide university museums in creating audience strategies that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and forward-thinking.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 April 2024
Revised 25 July 2025
Accepted 20 August 2025

KEYWORDS

Audience engagement;
strategic audiencing; visitor
experience; museum visitors;
audience development;
university museums

Museums are an essential part of our cultural heritage. They preserve and showcase the history, art, and culture of our society. However, their relevance and success are determined by their ability to engage their audiences effectively. Audience engagement is not a new concept in the museum world, and there have been several studies and books exploring its significance. In recent years, with the rise of digital technology, online access, and interaction, museums have been exploring new ways to engage with their visitors. However, there is still a gap in research when it comes to developing a holistic approach to strategic audience engagement. This article aims to help bridge the gap by gathering and categorizing best practices of a holistic approach to audience engagement in museums.

Changing role of museums: redefining the concept of “public”

One of the first and main elements in the relationship between museums and “the public” is the historical development of museums’ public mission. For a long time, art museums were associated with court society, primarily showcasing royal or ducal collections. Although technically public, these institutions served elite audiences. This began to change at the end of the nineteenth century, when museums started to be discussed as part of the “public sphere,” as described by Jürgen Habermas.¹ While nineteenth-century museums focused on transmitting knowledge, the twentieth century brought greater attention to the viewer’s aesthetic experience.² By the end of the century, visitor engagement and the impact of exhibitions became central concerns.

Pierre Bourdieu’s 1960s research showed that despite claims of open access, museums were frequented mainly by the privileged. He argued that cultural capital – and thus the ability to navigate museum spaces – is unevenly distributed, tied to education and income.³ Czech researcher Eva Velcovská summarizes: “Those who do not speak the language of the museum ... will not come.”⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for a reciprocal relationship between museums and visitors, reinforcing a shift that began in the 1970s: from object-centered to audience-centered institutions. This is echoed in the 2022 ICOM definition of “museum,” which emphasizes openness, participation, diversity, and social relevance. However, many institutions still struggle to reflect these values in their internal practices and physical environments.⁵

Putting audiences and their needs first

Audience engagement is widely recognized as a critical component of the museum experience, as it can lead to a positive visitor experience, increased visitor loyalty, and support for the museum’s mission. By creating meaningful connections with their audiences, museums can facilitate learning, inspiration, and a deeper understanding and appreciation of their collections and exhibits. The main definitions and concepts of audience engagement have been explored by scholars such as Wlazel, who has argued that clarifying these concepts can promote the use of academic studies on audience engagement in the arts, and encourage professionals in the field to enhance the visitor experience with art.⁶

The increasing importance of audience engagement is further evidenced by the establishment of new museum positions, such as director of audience engagement and visitor liaison, that focus on understanding and engaging audiences in a meaningful way. These positions represent a shift in museum practices from a traditional focus on object-centered displays toward a more visitor-centered approach that recognizes the value of building relationships with audiences. By prioritizing audience engagement, museums can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment that encourages visitors to return and to become active participants in the museum’s mission. Furthermore, the insights gained from audience engagement initiatives can inform future programming and exhibit development, making it a vital tool for museums seeking to remain relevant and responsive to the needs and interests of their communities.⁷

Many members of the public feel alienated from museums due to language barriers, lack of awareness of museum offerings, and feelings of exclusion.⁸ In numerous studies and research, it is widely acknowledged that a lack of interest is a significant barrier to museum visits. However, a closer examination reveals that the causes of this lack of interest are multifaceted, with various factors affecting different groups of people. For instance, researchers Mullens and Glorieux⁹ have highlighted gender differences as a potential cause of lack of interest, with men reporting this constraint more than women, while women report more interpersonal and structural constraints. Furthermore, older women face double disadvantages in terms of interpersonal constraints, and those with a lower subjective income are doubly disadvantaged for both interpersonal and structural constraints. Moreover, lack of interest is also caused by many barriers toward different groups with special needs, such as people with physical disabilities. An Israeli study focusing on people with disabilities¹⁰ emphasizes the nonphysical elements of the museum environment, such as staff attitudes and interaction with other visitors, as major difficulties in achieving a complete museum experience. Similarly, a team of Spanish researchers¹¹ highlights the importance of citizen engagement in the adoption of innovative technologies and services, as well as the need for inclusiveness and democratic principles, ensuring solutions endorsed by the entire population. Museologists must reflect on the fact that diversity is not only about considering individual needs or perspectives, but it is also about accepting and accommodating the differences that exist among all visitors, including their needs, education, expectations, desires, and difficulties encountered during museum visits. It is crucial for museums to consider the needs of the non-visiting public to meet their expectations and increase engagement.

The literature in the field of audience engagement in museums suggests that effective engagement strategies should be tailored to the specific needs and interests of the museum's audience, as well as the context and goals of the institution. Given the complexity and multifaceted nature of this field, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to audience engagement that can be universally applied across all institutions and audiences. Instead, successful engagement strategies require careful research, planning, and evaluation to ensure that the museum's programs and activities are engaging, relevant, and meaningful to its visitors. Audience engagement has become an essential tool for museums to create a connection with their audiences, providing visitors with compelling reasons to visit, inspiring, educating, and entertaining them, and improving their mental health. Considering the aforementioned reasons and based on various observations that will be elaborated upon in this article, the author proposes a set of key elements that are crucial to a strategic and holistic approach to audience engagement in museums, collectively referred to by the author as "strategic audiencing."

This article and study take a unique approach to audience engagement by not only focusing on visitors but also considering other audiences that are essential to the success of museums. These audiences can include employees, artists, donors, museum docents, volunteers, and other stakeholders who play a vital role in the museum's operations and sustainability. By taking a holistic approach to audience engagement and considering the needs and perspectives of all these different audiences, museums can create a more inclusive and engaging environment that fosters a sense of community and shared purpose. This approach can also help museums build stronger relationships with their stakeholders and create a more sustainable and resilient organization.

What constitutes strategic audiencing

The original term of “strategic audiencing,” coined by the author, is employed here exclusively within the context of museum audience engagement to emphasize the intricate and multifaceted nature of the discipline, as there are no other prominent applications of this term. Strategic audiencing is understood as the practice of identifying and targeting specific groups of individuals or organizations to maximize the impact and reach of a museum’s programs and exhibits. It is a combination of audience engagement and development with a strategic approach for amplifying the museum experience. This can involve a number of different actions, ranging from conducting an audience research project to understand the interests and needs of different audiences and tailoring the museum’s offerings and marketing efforts to appeal to those audiences, to analyzing and setting up an organizational structure and governance in general, or processes and tools of communication. The goal of strategic audiencing is to increase the quality of the experience and degree of participation of different audiences in the museum, as well as to engage and educate them in a meaningful way with a focus on strengthening the vision, mission, values or goals of the museum. A holistic approach to strategic audiencing is important because it takes into account the varying needs and interests of the diverse audiences as well as the direction and strategy of the museum.

While existing literature on audience engagement offers valuable insights into specific areas of museum practice, there remains a gap in resources that present these practices in an integrated and accessible way for implementation. Instead of proposing a new theoretical framework, this article introduces a model of key elements that contribute to successful audience engagement, each illustrated through concrete best practice examples from museums around the world. This model offers a practical and holistic perspective, recognizing that audience engagement is shaped by a wide range of interconnected factors. Unlike existing approaches, such as Graham Black’s influential work,¹² which often focus on selected dimensions, this model aims to support museums in understanding and strengthening audience engagement across all aspects of their practice.

Context of the research

The entire research endeavor originated from the author’s doctoral thesis, which aimed to examine the environment and phenomenon of university museums in Central and Eastern Europe. The primary finding revealed that university museums with collections are not widespread within this geographical region. Instead, most university galleries primarily focus on temporary exhibitions. Subsequently, the author was compelled to explore how university galleries, in the absence of collections, can effectively engage and interact with their audiences in a sustainable manner.

Through extensive desk research, the United States emerged as a leading example in opening up museums to the broader public and implementing robust educational and public programming. As a result, the focus of the research shifted toward understanding the intricate nature of successful audience engagement practices in the American context, particularly in university museum settings.

Building on this foundation, the research was subsequently extended to include case studies from Australia. This inclusion was motivated by Australia’s internationally recognized and progressive approach to audience engagement and cultural mediation. Their

emphasis on values-based programming and participatory methods makes them a highly relevant point of comparison for advancing the discourse on strategic audiencing.

The following research questions were put forward:

- In what ways do selected university museums engage with their audiences, and what are the main touchpoints of interest for each audience group?
- How can museums develop a holistic approach to audience engagement in order to become more inclusive?

Subsequently, the following objectives were defined:

- (1) To understand the various elements involved in audience engagement and how they work together to create a seamless and engaging experience for visitors;
- (2) To introduce the concept of strategic audiencing through a curated collection of best practices from the United States and Australia, illustrating how innovative, values-based, and inclusive approaches can be applied in diverse institutional and cultural contexts.

A variety of methods were employed to investigate audience engagement as a means of fostering community engagement and driving social change. Twenty-one university museums (see [Table 1](#)) were selected based on the following criteria:

Table 1. List of university museums included in the study.

Name	City, State	Research activity					Accessed
		AE	DA	DO	FG	SI	
Australia							
Chau Chak Wing Museum	Sydney, NSW	X	X	X		X	Sep 2023
Griffith University Art Museum	Brisbane, QLD	X		X			Aug 2023
QUT Art Museum	Brisbane, QLD	X	X	X		X	Aug 2023
University of Queensland Art Museum	Brisbane, QLD	X	X	X		X	Aug 2023
UTS Gallery & Art Collection	Sydney, NSW	X		X			Sep 2023
USA							
ASU Art Museum	Tempe, AZ	X	X				Feb 2022
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive	Berkeley, CA	X	X				Mar 2022
Blanton Museum of Art	Austin, TX	X	X				Dec 2021
Block Museum of Art	Evanston, IL	X	X				Apr 2022
Center for Creative Photography	Tucson, AZ	X	X				Feb 2022
CU Art Museum	Boulder, CO	X	X			X	Oct 2021
Daum Museum of Contemporary Art	Sedalia, MO	X	X				Nov 2021
DePaul Art Museum	Chicago, IL	X				X	Apr 2022
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art	Norman, OK	X		X			Oct 2021
Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art	Manhattan, KS	X	X			X	Dec 2021
Mulvane Art Museum	Topeka, KS	X	X			X	Oct 2021
Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art	Kansas City, MS	X	X		X		Nov 2021
Smart Museum of Art	Chicago, IL	X				X	Mar 2022
Spencer Museum of Art	Lawrence, KS	X	X			X	Nov 2021
Ulrich Museum of Art	Wichita, KS	X	X	X	X	X	Sep 2021–Jan 2022
University of Arizona Museum of Art	Tucson, AZ	X	X	X	X	X	Jan–Feb 2022

Notes: AE – audiovisual ethnography, DA – document analysis, DO – direct observation, FG – focus groups, SI – semi-structured interviews.

- Part of a larger professional body, cluster, or network dedicated to museum or gallery practice, such as American Alliance of Museums (AAM), Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG), Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMAGA) or University Art Museums Australia (UAMA);
- Open to the public;
- Have at least 2 employees in a department connected to audiences (Museum Education, Visitor Services, ...);
- Focus on diverse audiences with special programs intended for minorities;
- Apply digital tools and new technologies toward audiences;
- Open to sharing their data and points of view.

Visits were conducted, and a comprehensive approach encompassing audiovisual ethnography, direct observations, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in museum audience engagement was employed. Drawing upon identified best practices, the essential elements of strategic audiencing were identified.

Key elements of strategic audiencing in museums

Building on the existing literature on audience engagement and observed best practices, strategic audiencing incorporates several key elements that have been identified as critical to successful audience engagement in museums. These elements include:

- (1) **audience research:** understanding the demographics, behaviors, and preferences of museum audiences through various data collection methods, such as surveys, focus groups, and observation studies;¹³
- (2) **governance:** integrating audience engagement into the decision-making processes and structures within the museum, including the development of policies and procedures for engaging with audiences, but also aspects such as pricing policy, opening hours, and ethical codex;¹⁴
- (3) **communication:** developing comprehensive and effective communication strategies that utilize both traditional and digital channels to reach and engage diverse audiences;¹⁵
- (4) **content management:** ensuring the relevance and accessibility of museum content through the development of interpretive materials, the design of physical spaces, and the use of interactive exhibits;¹⁶
- (5) **spatial design:** creating inclusive and engaging physical environments that consider the accessibility, orientation, and comfort of visitors;¹⁷
- (6) **community building:** fostering strong relationships with the audience and the wider community through partnerships, collaborations, and the involvement of community members in museum programs and exhibits.¹⁸

In addition to these key elements, the author suggests that strategic audiencing be guided by a set of core values and ethical considerations that inform and shape museum practice, including:

- innovation
- sustainability

- accessibility
- inclusion
- ethics
- safety
- new technologies
- international dimension
- wellbeing
- and interdisciplinarity

Finally, it is essential to recognize the role of context and adaptability in developing and implementing a strategic approach to audience engagement. Each museum operates within a unique cultural, social, and institutional context that shapes its audiences, resources, and goals.¹⁹ As such, any attempt at replicating best practices should be adapted to the specific needs and constraints of individual museums, while maintaining a focus on the overarching principles identified in the literature.

The following sections look closely at the various elements recognized as key to strategic audiencing and provide examples of best practices identified within the scope of the author's research at selected university museums.

Audience research

Audience research involves gathering and analyzing data about the demographics, behaviors, and preferences of museum audiences. The goal of this element is to provide a detailed understanding of the needs and interests of the museum's audience, which can inform the development of targeted engagement strategies. The data collection and interpretation can include a variety of methods, such as surveys, focus groups, and observation studies, and can help identify predictions and trends, as well as feedback and reviews that can improve visitor experience. Space mapping, as well as the closely related discipline of emotional cartography, can also aid in understanding the spatial needs and preferences of audiences.

Best practice: Measuring belonging

The DePaul Art Museum participated in a 2022 survey aimed at measuring welcoming and a sense of belonging in museums, utilizing a tool developed by researchers Price and Applebaum.²⁰ This universal instrument offers a comprehensive approach to understanding visitors' experience, underscoring the museum's commitment to caring for its visitors and striving to enhance the museum experience. This in-depth survey tool gathered both quantitative and qualitative data on visitors' experiences, allowing the museum to identify areas for improvement. The findings were shared internally and informed concrete changes in museum practices, highlighting how such research can be used not only to gather feedback but also to drive meaningful institutional change.

Best practice: Data-driven audience engagement

The CU Art Museum integrates qualitative and quantitative data to improve visitor experience. Pre- and post-visit iPad surveys capture feedback on expectations, emotional impact, and satisfaction. Simultaneously, student ID card data are used to track visit frequency, timing, and seasonal trends. These insights, analyzed by the university's data

science department, inform decisions on staffing, scheduling, and programming. This comprehensive strategy enhances operational efficiency and ensures museum offerings align with visitor needs and behavioral patterns.

Governance

Governance involves decision-making processes and structures related to audience engagement within museums. It is crucial to integrate audience engagement into the governance structures of the museum to ensure that it is a priority for the institution. This includes the development of policies and procedures for engaging with audiences and the involvement of staff and volunteers in the process. Additionally, strategic planning, HR management, organizational structure, code of ethics, and the involvement of employees and stakeholders are all essential components of governance.

Best practice: Brisbane Disability Action Plan as a model of governance

The University of Queensland Art Museum demonstrates strong governance by embedding accessibility into its core institutional strategy through a detailed Disability Action Plan (DAP). This plan outlines measurable goals that guide all museum decisions, ensuring that accessibility is not an afterthought but a fundamental part of operations. The development and ongoing implementation of the DAP is overseen through structured consultation processes with internal staff, university-wide diversity teams, and external experts. Staff are strongly encouraged and supported to undertake further training in accessibility, such as courses in dementia awareness and universal design, which is then visibly acknowledged on their staff name labels.

Best practice: integrating indigenous governance principles

The Block Museum of Art actively integrates Indigenous governance principles by fostering relationships with Native American tribes and communities. Situated on the traditional lands of the Council of Three Fires, Northwestern's commitment to Native American and Indigenous Initiatives aligns with the university's broader diversity and inclusion goals. The museum supports this mission by enhancing its engagement with Native art and artists and ensuring Indigenous representation in its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs.

Communication

Communication includes various channels and methods used by museums to communicate with their audiences. Strategic audiencing emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and effective communication strategy to reach and engage diverse audiences. Effective marketing communication, labeling and language/voice of the museum, exhibitions, and activities, language accessibility, pictograms and orientation, internal communication, and front desk services are all critical aspects of communication.

Best practice: enhancing accessibility through social stories

The QUT Art Museum utilizes social stories as a tool to improve accessibility and visitor comfort. Originally developed to support individuals on the autism spectrum, social

stories provide clear, simple information about what visitors can expect before and during their museum experience. The social story describes the physical environment, what visitors will see and do, how to behave respectfully in the space, and who to ask for help. This proactive form of communication significantly reduces uncertainty and stress, particularly for neurodivergent visitors, while also fostering a sense of autonomy and preparedness.

Best practice: expanding public engagement through digital integration

The Ulrich Museum of Art employed the Smartify app to enhance public engagement and accessibility. As part of its community outreach, the museum displayed artworks from its collection on 20 billboards across Wichita. Through Smartify integration, viewers could access detailed information about each piece using their smartphones. This enriched the visitor experience and generated valuable data on engagement patterns, including interaction counts and artwork popularity. Analyzed by the museum, this data informed future programming and exhibition planning. The initiative exemplifies how digital tools can support inclusive outreach and data-informed decision-making.

Content management

Content management refers to the way in which museums manage and present the content of their exhibits and programs. This includes the development of interpretive materials, accompanying programs, residencies, the use of interactive exhibits, and much more. It is important to be aware that the museum is not only made by the collection and the exhibitions, but often has much more content that makes it a great place for audience engagement. Ensuring that the content of the museum is engaging and relevant to the needs and interests of the audience is critical for increasing engagement. Collections, exhibitions, education, programs, cafeterias, and design shops are all critical components of content management.

Best practice: online resources

The Blanton Museum of Art offers online resources for teachers, with a team of educators that designs learning experiences that respond to different learning styles, developmental stages, and curricular goals. They also provide a free Guide To Yourself that aims to strengthen and support the wellbeing of visitors.

Best practice: object-based learning

The Chau Chak Wing Museum has developed a highly effective Object-Based Learning (OBL) program that facilitates access to the museum's diverse collections, including archaeological artifacts, artworks, and natural history specimens, by university staff and students for teaching, research, and interdisciplinary learning. A key strength of the program is its tailored approach to content delivery. Museum curators collaborate with academic staff to curate specific object sets and design bespoke learning activities that align with curriculum objectives. These sessions are conducted in specialized studios equipped with audiovisual technology, supporting both on-site and remote engagement (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Object Based Learning workshop at the Chau Chak Museum. Photo by the author.

Spatial design

Spatial design pertains to the physical layout and design of the museum and its exhibits. The spatial orientation and accessibility of the museum can significantly influence the ways visitors engage with exhibits, and thus are a critical factor in increasing engagement. Elements such as benches, parking, water fountains, creative placemaking, and transportation all play a critical role in spatial design. It is imperative to ensure that the museum is accessible to visitors with disabilities.

Best practice: architecture as an invitation to engage

As a hybrid institution dedicated equally to visual arts and film, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive has developed its architectural concept around the idea of openness, accessibility, and multifunctionality. The museum's design integrates indoor and outdoor spaces in a way that encourages both spontaneous encounters and planned cultural experiences. A standout feature is the outdoor cinema screen, located on the museum's public-facing façade. This space is not only used for film screenings during festivals and special events, but also to promote ongoing exhibitions inside the museum, effectively blurring the line between public realm and curated content (Figure 2).

Best practice: designing space for safety, reflection, and emotional engagement

During its groundbreaking exhibition *A Site of Struggle: American Art Against Anti-Black Violence*, the Block Museum of Art took a holistic approach to spatial design, recognizing

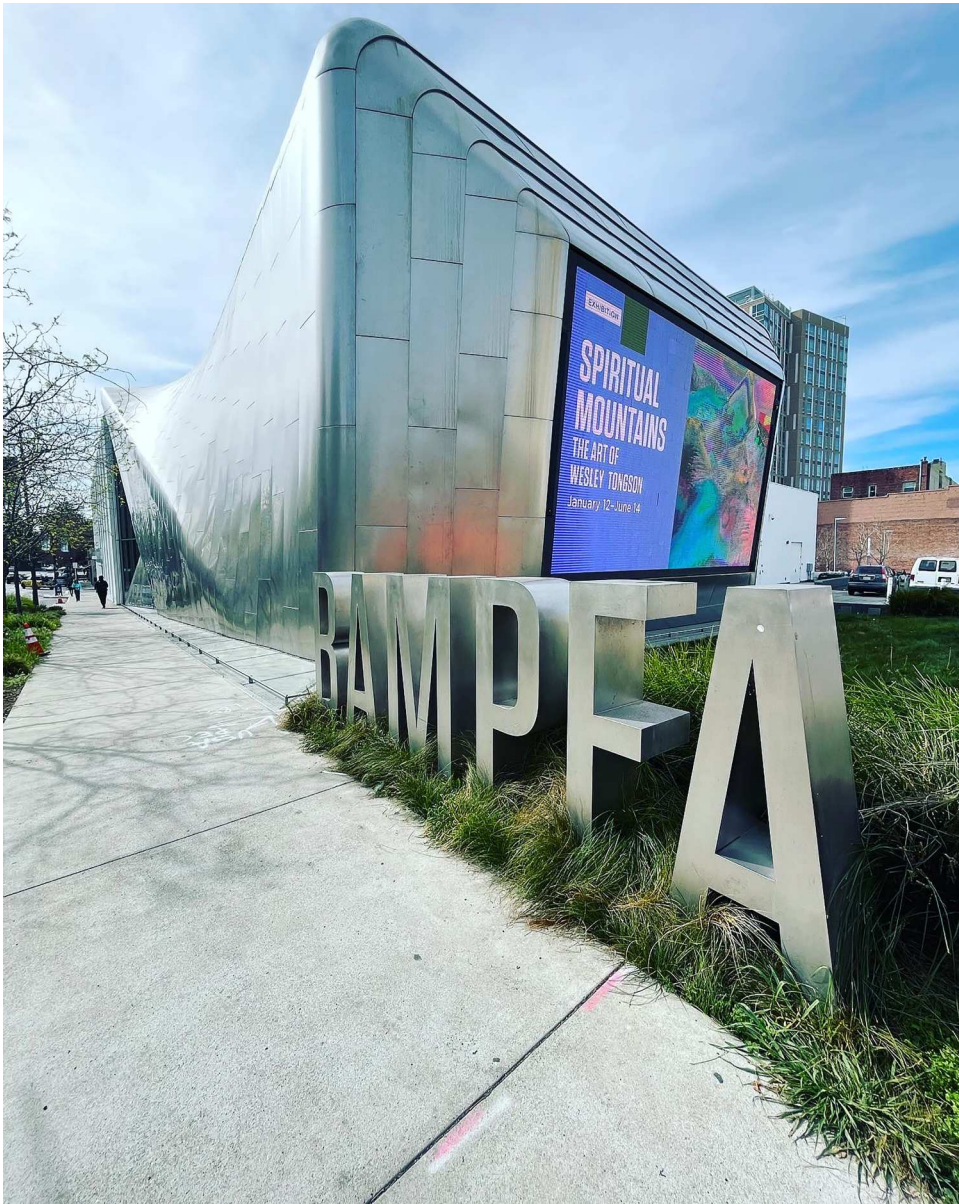


Figure 2. Outdoor cinema as a public engagement strategy at BAMPFA. Photo by the author.

that the content required sensitive and supportive visitor experiences. To ensure psychological safety and accessibility, the museum integrated “quiet zones” throughout the exhibition space, offering visitors moments of pause and recovery and allowing them to step away from emotionally intense works and reflect in a calm, neutral setting. Additionally, the museum introduced a meditation station with headphones offering guided audio practices, and a resource library with books and materials for deeper learning or personal grounding. The museum also developed a thoughtful exhibition publication that also included a comprehensive list of mental health and community resources (Figure 3).

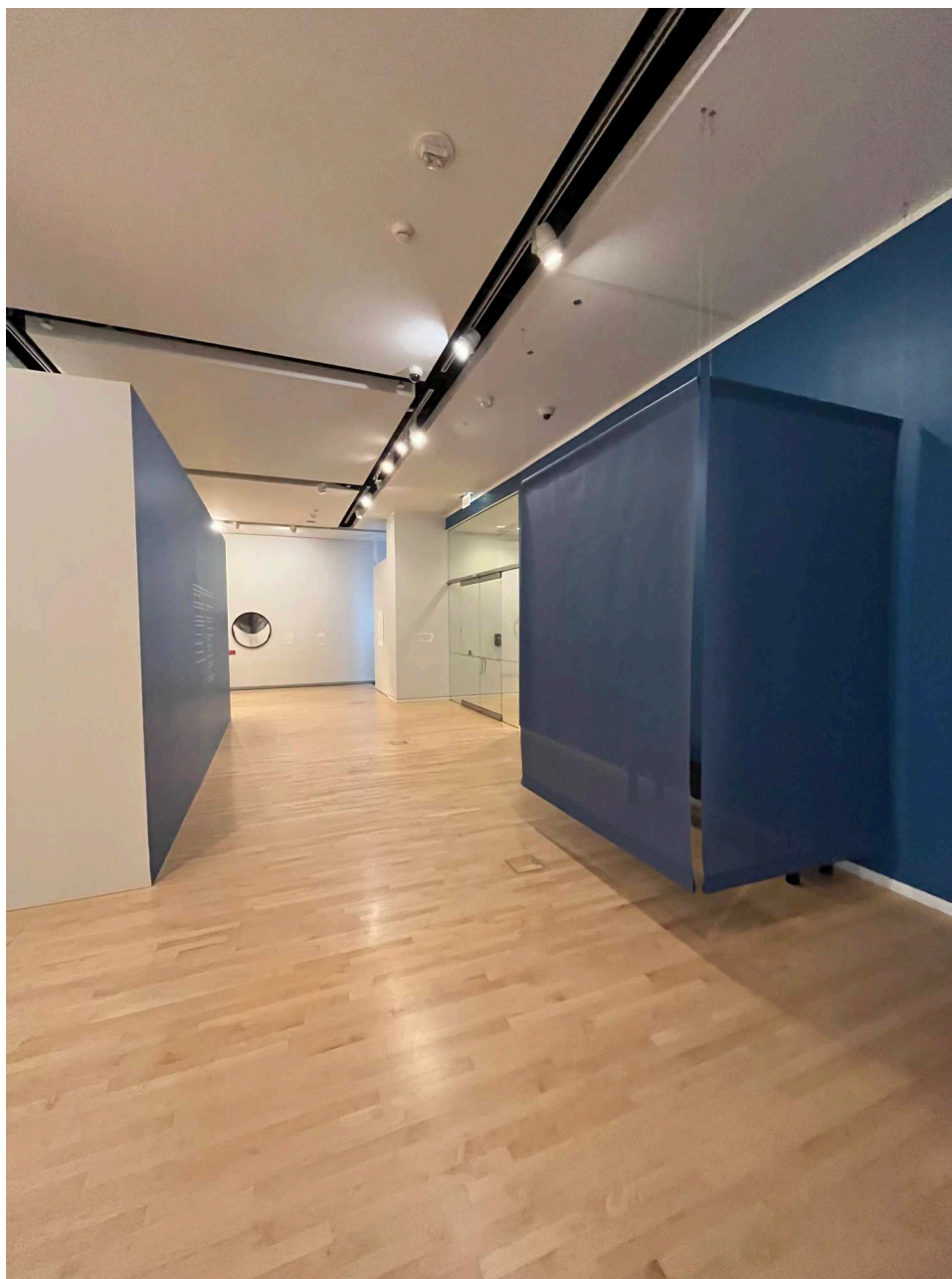


Figure 3. Designated quiet zones supporting visitor wellbeing at the Block Museum of Art. Photo by the author.

Community building

Community building encompasses the ways in which a museum builds relationships with its audience and the wider community. The importance of this element lies in the development of partnerships and collaborations with community organizations and the

involvement of community members in museum programs and exhibits. These practices increase audience engagement and support for the museum. This element also involves engaging with internal and external professional communities such as museum docents, schools, seniors, ICOM, AAMG, UMAC, etc.

Best practice: workshops for LGBTQIA+ youth

A compelling example of community building in the university museum context is the Mapping Q program at the University of Arizona Museum of Art, a series of art-based workshops designed for LGBTQIA+ youth. These workshops, offered virtually but also on-site in recent years, focus on topics such as self-expression through art-making, strategies for self-care, and approaches to harm reduction. In many editions of the program, the outcomes of the participants' creative work are exhibited in the museum, validating their voices and perspectives within the institutional space.

Best practice: relationship-driven programming

One notable example of community building at the Ulrich Museum of Art is the Salon Circle, a program originally designed for close supporters and friends of the museum. Participants were offered enriching experiences such as private seminars, artist-led workshops, exhibition-related trips, and dinners with curators and artists. The museum also continues to successfully engage another important audience through its Senior Wednesday initiative, a long-standing program tailored for older adults. With regular guided tours, talks, and social art activities, the museum fosters lifelong learning, combats social isolation, and demonstrates an ongoing commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

Ethical considerations

Elements of strategic audiencing are guided by a set of ethical considerations as mentioned above. Examples of how these can inform and influence audience engagement include:

Innovation

- The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art was the first in Kansas to join the Bloomberg Connects platform, offering a free digital guide that enhances on-site and remote engagement with exhibitions, collections, and outdoor sculptures through multimedia and multilingual support.

Sustainability

- The Griffith University Art Museum embeds environmental consciousness into its curatorial practice, frequently collaborating with climate-focused artists and developing exhibitions addressing ecological issues and sustainability in the arts.

Accessibility

- The Spencer Museum of Art has enhanced accessibility and engagement by implementing audio loop technology for visitors with hearing loss, providing Braille and tactile maps for those with visual impairments, offering wheelchairs and strollers

for families, and creating an outdoor experience with a small library and interactive lockers holding creative workshop kits that encourage playful exploration of the sculpture collection – an initiative that proved especially valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 4).

Inclusion

- The UQ Art Museum applies a social model of disability and an intersectional framework, acknowledging that d/Deaf and disabled individuals may also identify with other marginalized groups, and addressing systemic barriers to participation in cultural life.



Figure 4. The “Little Free Museum” community engagement installation outside the Spencer Museum of Art. Photo by the author.

Ethics

- The Mulvane Art Museum adheres to strict ethical standards, encompassing responsible stewardship of collections, professional curatorial practices, transparent acquisition processes, and public accountability.

Safety

- The Block Museum of Art adopts a care-centered approach, incorporating trauma-informed practices into exhibitions and programs, with a focus on social justice.

New technologies

- The Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art uses the Smartify app to deliver instant digital interpretation of artworks through image recognition, offering text, audio, and video content for both on-site and remote visitors.

International dimension

- The University of Arizona Museum of Art fosters global collaboration, highlighted by hosting the author of this article as a Fulbright Scholar. This partnership enhances the museum's international network, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and contributing to global discussions on museum governance and curatorial practices.

Wellbeing

- The CU Art Museum hosts recurring *Art + Meditation* workshops, using art-based mindfulness practices to foster emotional health and reflective learning.

Interdisciplinarity

- The Smart Museum of Art's *Art to Live With* program integrates art into students' everyday lives by allowing UChicago students to borrow original artworks for their dorm rooms. This initiative fosters interdisciplinary dialogue between visual arts, student life, and areas of academic study.

Implementing in practice

A holistic approach to audience engagement recognizes that there are many factors that contribute to engagement, and that successful engagement strategies will often involve a combination of different elements. By taking this approach, museums can better understand the needs and interests of their audiences and develop targeted strategies that are more likely to be successful in increasing engagement.

When attempting to implement international best practices in a local museum context, it is essential to move beyond inspiration and apply a strategic, step-by-step approach: First, conduct a needs assessment within your institution: define the specific challenge or gap you want to address and gather data on your audiences, internal

capacities, and available resources. Second, identify which elements of the best practice are core to its success and which can be modified to suit your conditions. Third, secure internal buy-in by involving key stakeholders early in the process, such as educators, curators, and front-line staff, and clearly communicate the intended benefits. Fourth, consider potential partnerships to fill resource gaps. Finally, design a pilot version of the program with clear goals and indicators of success. Build in opportunities for feedback from participants and staff, and be prepared to adapt based on what works in your specific context. In this way, best practices become catalysts for locally grounded innovation rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Conclusion

This article explores audience engagement in university museums through a holistic lens, recognizing that audiences are not only external visitors but also include internal stakeholders such as staff, volunteers, and students. By considering these multiple layers of engagement, the study emphasizes that audience strategies must be embedded across institutional structures, daily operations, and long-term planning.

The research was conducted through a series of study visits, interviews with museum professionals, and on-site observations across selected university museums in the United States and Australia. These regions were chosen for their rich and diverse museum ecosystems embedded within higher education institutions, as well as their strong track record of innovation and public engagement in the cultural sector. University museums in both contexts often operate at the intersection of academic research, education, and public service, making them ideal case studies for examining evolving practices in audience engagement.

Rather than proposing a rigid framework, the study introduces a strategic audiencing model built on key elements identified through both literature and fieldwork: audience research, governance, communication, content management, spatial design, and community building. These elements are further grounded in shared institutional values such as innovation, sustainability, accessibility, inclusion, ethics, safety, wellbeing, new technologies, interdisciplinarity, and an international dimension.

By showcasing best practices identified across different museums, this article aims to provide inspiration and guidance for institutions seeking to deepen their audience relationships. The strategic audiencing model encourages museums to reflect on their own contexts, adapt engagement strategies to meet diverse audience needs, and foster meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable connections with both their internal and external communities.

Notes

1. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.
2. Kottová, *Instituce a divák*.
3. Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*.
4. Velcovská, *Muzeum a návštěvník*.
5. "Museum Definition - International Council of Museums."
6. Wlazel, "Engaging the audience vs. audience engagement with art."

7. Bush and Paul, *Art and Public History: Approaches, Opportunities, and Challenges*.
8. Mullens and Glorieux, "No interest, no time! Gendered constraints to museum visits in Flanders"; and Lin, Yung-Neng, "Leisure-A function of museums? The Taiwan perspective."
9. Mullens and Glorieux, "No interest, no time! Gendered constraints to museum visits in Flanders."
10. Poria, Reichel, and Brandt, "People with disabilities visit art museums: an exploratory study of obstacles and difficulties."
11. Gea, Alaman, Rodriguez, and Martinez, *TOWARDS SMART & INCLUSIVE SOCIETY: BUILDING 3D IMMERSIVE MUSEUM BY CHILDREN WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES*.
12. Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*.
13. Falk and Dierking, *Museum Experience Revisited*; and Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.
14. Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*; and Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays*.
15. Doering, "Strangers, Guests, or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums"; and Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*.
16. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*; and Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance*.
17. Dawson, "'Not Designed for Us': How Science Museums and Science Centers Socially Exclude Low-Income, Minority Ethnic Groups"; and Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*.
18. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*; and Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays*.
19. Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*; and Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.
20. Price and Applebaum, "Measuring welcoming and a sense of belonging in museums."

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to extend my sincere appreciation to the Fulbright Czech Commission for affording me the invaluable opportunity to engage in research within the United States. Furthermore, the author is deeply grateful to Josef Kocourek, the esteemed Dean of the Faculty of Multimedia Communication, for his steadfast support throughout the duration of my research endeavors. Additionally, the author is indebted to all university museums that graciously accommodated and facilitated my research activities during the tenure of my Fulbright fellowship.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Tomas Bata University in Zlín.

About the Author

Eva Gartnerová, PhD, is an assistant professor and the head of the Department of Arts Management at the Faculty of Multimedia Communications at Tomas Bata University in Zlín as well as the director of the G18 university gallery in Zlín, Czech Republic. Her scientific inquiries now focus on the field of audience engagement in museums and cultural institutions. She is active in the field of

cultural and creative industries at the academic level as well as a consultant and advisor in several international cultural, artistic, and development projects. As a Fulbright scholar, she conducted her research on audience engagement in university museums in the USA in 2021/2022, further developing it in Australia in 2023 with a focus on inclusion and accessibility of audience engagement. She is a member of several international educational and research networks such as ICOM, AAM, AAMG, UNIVERSEUM, ELIA, MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION and international projects funded by INTERcost, Visegrad Funds, ERASMUS+, and Creative Europe.

ORCID

Eva Vázalová Gartnerová  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0225-2696>

Bibliography

- Bennett, Tony. *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays*. n.p.: Routledge, 2018.
- Black, Graham. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. n.p.: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, Alain Darbel, and Dominique Schnapper. *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*. Edited by Dominique Schnapper. n.p.: Polity Press, 1997.
- Bush, Rebecca E., and K. T. Paul, eds. 2017. *Art and Public History: Approaches, Opportunities, and Challenges*. n.p.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dawson, Emily. ““Not Designed for Us”: How Science Museums and Science Centers Socially Exclude Low-income, Minority Ethnic Groups.” *Science Education* 98, no. 6 (2014): 981–1008. doi:10.1002/sce.21133.
- Doering, Zahava D. “Strangers, Guests, or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums.” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 42, no. 2 (1999): 74–87. doi:10.1111/j.2151-6952.1999.tb01132.x.
- Falk, John H. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. n.p.: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.
- Falk, John H., and Lynn D. Dierking. *Museum Experience Revisited*. n.p.: Left Coast Press, 2013.
- Gea, Miguel, Xavier Alaman, Pilar Rodriguez, and Vicente Martinez. “Towards Smart & Inclusive Society: Building 3D Immersive Museum by Children with Cognitive Disabilities.” In *EDULEARN16: 8th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies*. Spain: IATED-INT ASSOC TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION A& DEVELOPMENT, 2016.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. n.p.: MIT Press, 1989.
- Hein, George E. *Learning in the Museum*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998.
- Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance*. n.p.: Routledge, 2007.
- Jagodzińska, Katarzyna. “From a Visitor to Participant. Strategies for Participation in Museums.” *Zarządzanie w Kulturze* 18, no. 1 (2017): 75–93. doi:10.4467/20843976ZK.17.006.6289.
- Kottová, Karina. *Institute a divák*. n.p.: Display, 2019.
- Lin, Yung-Neng. “Leisure-A Function of Museums? The Taiwan Perspective.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 4 (2006): 302–316. doi:10.1080/09647770600602104.
- McConachie, Bruce. *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. n.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Miglietta, Anna Maria. “The Accessible Museum: Barriers, Actions and Thoughts.” *Museologia Scientifica*, no. 11 (2017): 11–30.
- Mulle, Francisca, and Ignace Glorieux. “No Interest, No Time! Gendered Constraints to Museum Visits in Flanders.” *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure* 42, no. 2 (2019): 244–265. doi:10.1080/07053436.2019.1626036.
- “Museum Definition - International Council of Museums.” International Council of Museums, 2022. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

- Poria, Yaniv, Arie Reichel, and Yael Brandt. "People with Disabilities Visit art Museums: An Exploratory Study of Obstacles and Difficulties." *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 4, no. 2 (2009): 117–129. doi:10.1080/17438730802366508.
- Price, C. A., and L. Applebaum. "Measuring a Sense of Belonging at Museums and Cultural Centers." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 65, no. 1 (2022): 135–160. doi:10.1111/cura.12454.
- Sandell, Richard. *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. n.p.: Routledge, 2007.
- Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. n.p.: Museum 2.0, 2010.
- Velcovská, Eva. *Muzeum a návštěvník*. 2010. <https://is.muni.cz/th/d2j7q/>.
- Weil, Stephen E. *Making Museums Matter*. Edited by Stephen Weil. n.p.: Smithsonian, 2002.
- Weil, Stephen E. "From Being About Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum." *America's Museums* 128, no. 3 (1999): 229–258.
- Wlazel, Agnieszka. "Engaging the Audience vs. Audience Engagement with Art." *Journal of Audience and Reception studies* 18, no. 2 (2021): 374–390.