



INTERPRETIVE PLAN

2024

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

EXHIBIT
AK

INTRODUCTION

The Sheldon Jackson Museum (SJ) is presented with an enormous challenge and opportunity. The museum facility is at capacity for the safety of the collection, staff, and visitors. There are building needs that need to be addressed in order to serve the mission of the museum. Additionally, the exhibits are due for updating and reenvisioning. SJ Museum will incorporate feedback from local Sitkans, cruise ship visitors, museum professionals, and specifically invite more Alaska Native voices into the updated exhibits. The museum will pay special attention to: boarding school history, and its association with missionary and General Agent of Education for Alaska, Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson; and their work through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which largely happens behind the scenes. This information needs to be represented in exhibit updates to educate the public.

In October of 2023, ExhibitAK and Sheldon Jackson Museum rented a booth at the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Anchorage. Jackie Fernandez-Hamberg, Curator of Collections at the SJ Museum and Dr. Amy Phillips-Chan, Division Director of the Alaska State Library, Archives and Museum, attended with Sarah Asper-Smith of ExhibitAK. The goal was to solicit feedback about the museum as it is now, and how it should evolve in the future. Visitors were given postcards with

information and a link to an online version of the survey. Additionally visitors were informed of SJ Museum's artist in residence program, traveling education objects, and how to access the collection online.

In person and virtual meetings occurred in Sitka in March of 2024. Sitkans were made aware of the meetings through social media, local radio, the newspaper, and personal invitation. Out-of-town participants were invited through an Alaska museum listserv and through personal invitation. Both meetings were open to the public. The purpose of those meetings was to determine what stakeholders wanted to see addressed as we rethink the exhibits and future of the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

In June 2024, a group of Native Alaskan citizens invested in the SJ Museum traveled to Sitka to meet with ExhibitAK and SJ Museum to share their concerns and hopes for the museum. After taking a closer view of the exhibits, we met and listened to their impressions and suggestions.

This document highlights aspects of the planning that will need to be considered in developing an expansion. In the meantime, there are steps to take to update exhibits that can be done in the closer future, while funds are being raised for SJ Museum growth.

REALITY CHECK

- This is an ambitious project.
- The SJ Museum has a small staff, and the other Alaska State Museum is in Juneau.
- It takes years to bring this kind of project to fruition: 10 years is a conservative guess from start to finish.
- The SJ Museum is limited by physical constraints: there is no room to grow or change, without acquiring additional space

OPPORTUNITIES

- The staff is devoted and talented.
- There are many resources in Alaska that the SJ Museum can use and people who are excited to help with the project.
- Reimagining the space and exhibits provides opportunities to work with artists and Indigenous Alaskans who are invested in the museum.
- Because of the content of the museum, the popularity of the artist-in-residence program, and the connections staff have made, it will make finding support for the project easier.
- The people of Sitka will be excited about the new expansion, as SJM is a beloved institution both locally and statewide.

THE DISCUSSION

Community feedback from meetings, statewide surveys, and visitor feedback informed the following:

Things people like about the museum:

- Native Artist Residency Program is immensely popular with museum visitors, artists, and culture bearers across Alaska, provides an opportunity for artists to share their work, do research in the collections, and visit their ancestors
- Educational loan program, which allows teachers/educators to borrow from the educational collection and share in classrooms all over the state
- Considered to be one of the most comprehensive collections of Alaska Native belongings in existence
- The exploratory nature of the exhibits: drawers that open, items displayed overhead, and comparative displays of like items
- Museum appeals to many ages
- SJ Museum frequently asks for public input, and shows a willingness to grow and change
- The museum is part of Sites of Conscience, in collaboration with the local Sitka tribe
- Strong partnership with teachers and students at Mt. Edgecumbe school, which has students from all over the state, who may not have had the opportunity to visit their ancestors' belongings
- Interactive elements are popular with children and adults
- Staff are welcoming, helpful, knowledgeable and kind

Things that need improvement:

- Majority of public and staff want name changed, will defer to local Sitka tribe
- Artist-in-residence program needs dedicated space; a temporary exhibit space would allow for artists-in-residence to have exhibits and to explore other temporary shows
- Potential for an app to tell deeper stories about objects without adding too much text to the exhibit, also could incorporate Indigenous names and terminology, personal commentary, historic photos, stories and video. For example, show how belongings are used, like dancers at Cama-i festival
- If space were available, the museum could collect more contemporary work and exhibit it alongside older pieces
- The collection is accessible to anyone wanting to research, but more people need to know this
- Visitors could learn about the ceremonial use program
- Better technology would allow museum to better serve larger Alaska community who can't visit Sitka
- The museum is about Alaska Native peoples and cultures. With time and funding the museum can tell those stories with Native people and with the pieces that they have

THE BUILDING

Physical space is the biggest challenge facing the museum

Building needs: COLLECTIONS

- **Increased space for collections storage**
Because the space is full, SJ Museum can't accept donations, increase contemporary collections, or remove/switch out items, etc.
- **Exhibit space**
Main gallery is at full capacity. Lighting is inadequate, cases need to be replaced; current mounts and plinths need to be addressed, mannequins are unnatural and may not be the best for the objects.
- **Temporary exhibit space**
Additional space would provide opportunities for temporary exhibits by artists-in-residence, traveling exhibits, or featured items from the collection.

SPACE

- **Dedicated programming space**
Programs are currently held in the lobby, which is an awkward space next to flushing toilets and with limited AV, which is necessary for presenting lectures online.
- **Dedicated workspace for Artists-in-residence**
Need a space for artists that allows for gallery display of art; a place to work with good lighting, sound dampening; welcoming visitors; privacy for visiting with ancestors' work.

- **Staff offices**
Staff have limited space, making private conversations impossible, problematic when meeting with donors or talking about NAGPRA issues, etc.
- **Workshop**
Dedicated space for working on exhibits and photography; currently gallery must close to make any exhibit changes, and there is inadequate space for photographing large pieces
- **Storage space**
Need space for library, archival supplies, hands on loan collection, chest freezer, records and documents. Currently at capacity.
- **Presentation space**
Separate presentation area that doesn't conflict with visitors entering museum, restrooms, and noise from HVAC
- **Research space**
- **Museum Shop**
- **Hands-on collections storage**

VISITORS

- **Larger entrance** to prevent bottlenecks on cruise ship days
- **Wayfinding**
- **Increased rest room capacity**

The Sheldon Jackson Museum needs to expand to allow for the safety of the collection, to meet the needs of a growing visitorship, and to continue to further the mission of the institution.

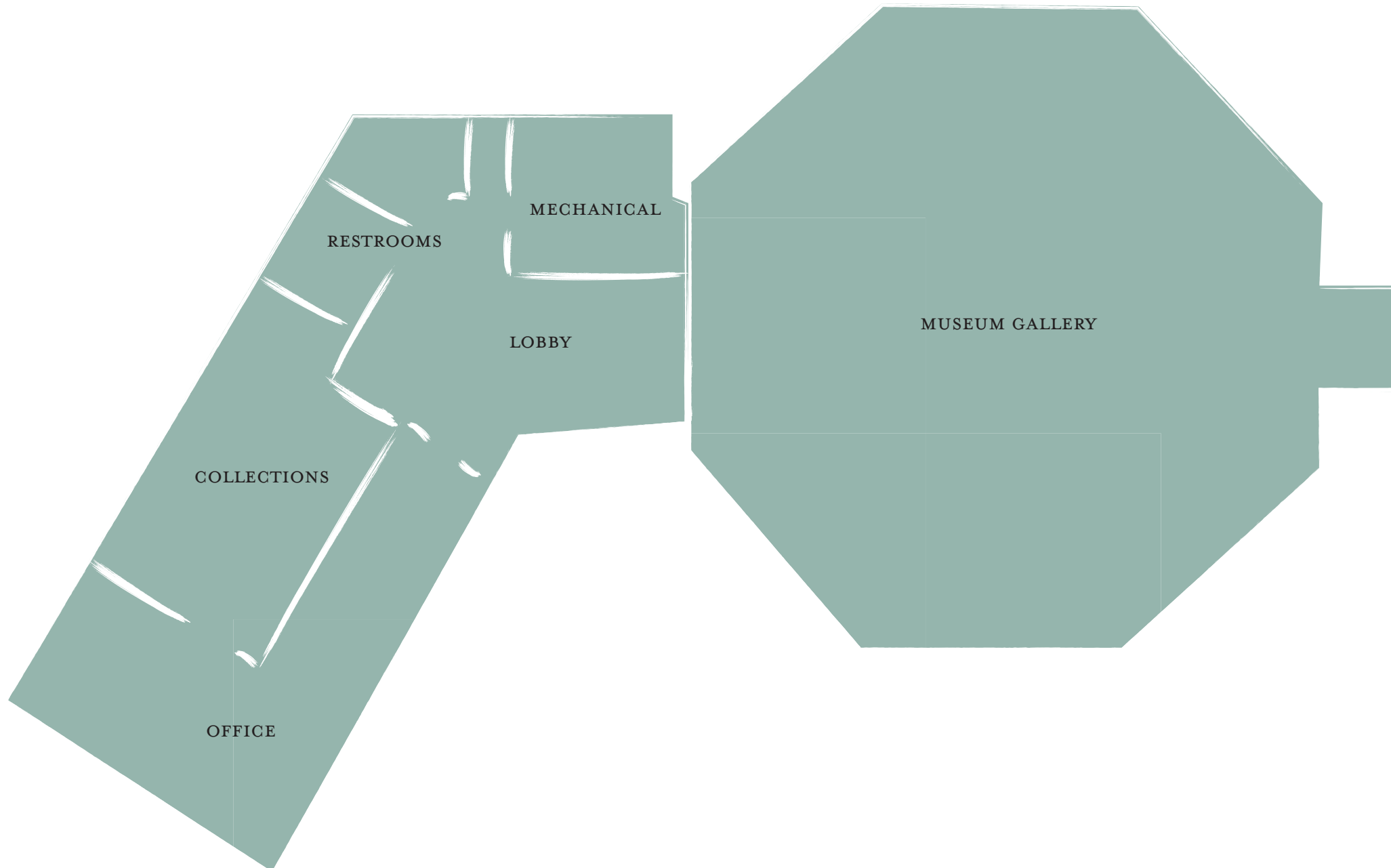
FACILITY

- **HVAC system**
- **Seismic evaluation of concrete structure**
- Effects of greatly increased visitor numbers on the museum
- Adequate parking for cars and bus traffic
- Address land issues with Sitka Fine Arts Camp

In the short term:

- **Name change**
The name of the museum is problematic; while SJ Museum is not a museum about boarding school history, it is important to find a place to discuss his legacy in the building. Majority of public and staff want name changed. SJ Museum will collaborate with local Sitka tribe to determine a new name for the space.
- **Signage**
Replace exterior signage, which is dated. Create templates for SJ Museum staff to make temporary signs, purchase sign holders for events and information.
- **Facility planning**
Hire a conceptual designer to come up with a holistic plan for a new facility, taking use of the real estate we have and are not currently utilizing, and accounting institutional needs.

CURRENT FLOOR PLAN



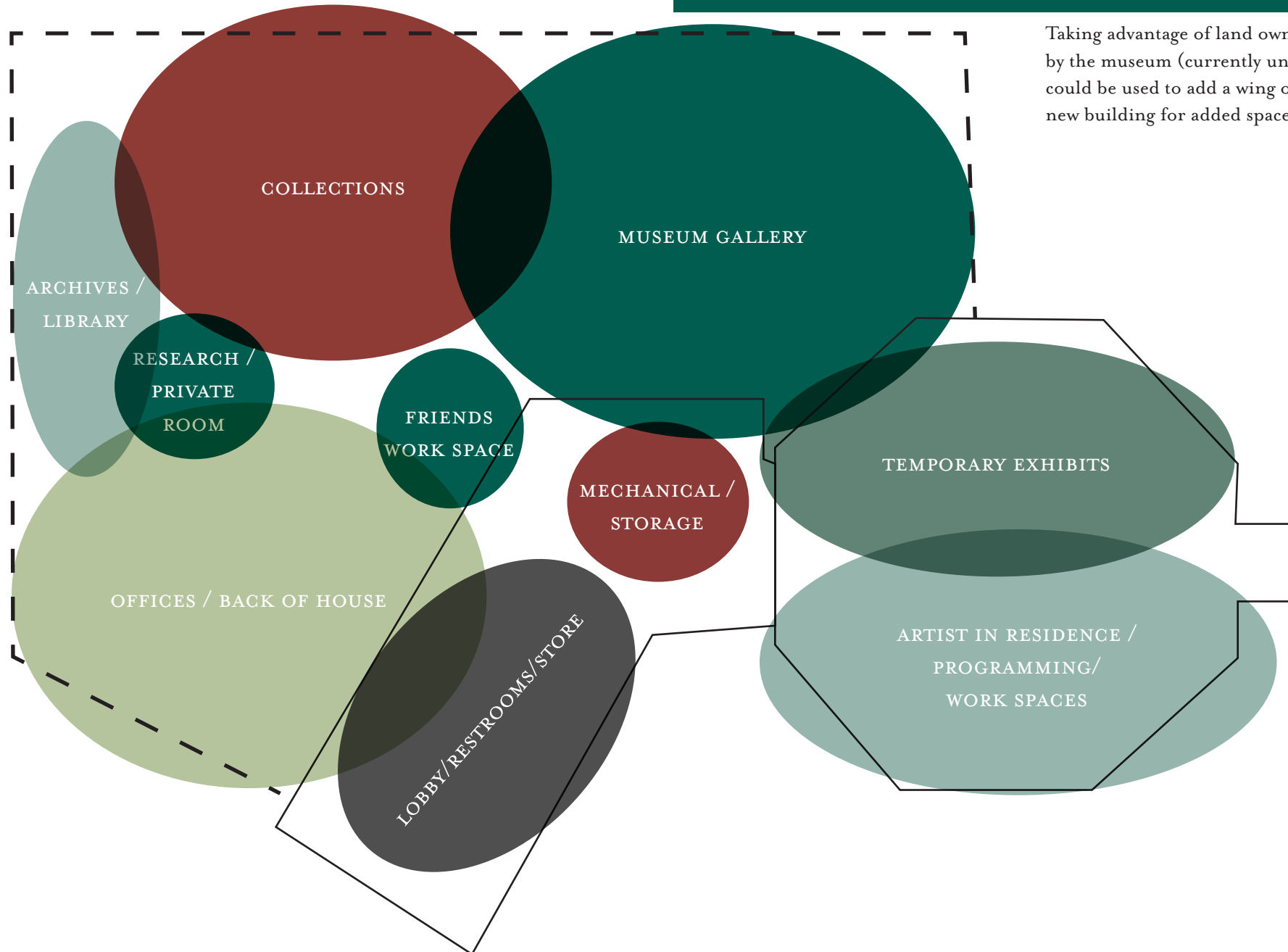
SPATIAL BUBBLE DIAGRAM

Bubbles represent amounts of space needed for museum operations



POTENTIAL EXPANSION

Taking advantage of land owned by the museum (currently unused) could be used to add a wing or new building for added space.



INTRODUCTORY EXHIBIT

The Alaska State Museums (a state educational agency comprised of the Alaska State Museum and the Sheldon Jackson Museum) identify, collect, preserve and exhibit Alaska's material and natural history and provide public access to services and collections of the Museums. The Alaska State Museums interpret and disseminate knowledge of the history of the state, its people, and its resources, and support others in these efforts. The Museums also assist and advise in the growth, development, and excellence of other museums within Alaska.

BIG IDEA

Cultures of Alaska are alive and well and strong, and complex and varied.

MISSION

The museum's welcoming exhibit, curated in partnership with indigenous Alaskans, will explain to visitors that they stand on Sheet'ká K̄wáan territory in Lingít Aaní. The exhibit will provide contemporary context to the diversity and breadth of Alaska Native life, as shown by the works of ancestors, and current pieces by artists in the Artist-in-Residence program artists.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Sheldon Jackson Museum will

- indigenize the curation process by including Native Alaskan curators in exhibit planning
- form a cultural committee to decide how objects should be cared for
- use the present tense when discussing Alaska Native cultures
- prioritize transparency in exhibits: when in doubt about the provenance of a piece, tell visitors that we don't know where something came from, otherwise they might think it's being kept from them
- continue to be transparent about the process of exhibit planning, development, and design, keeping the public informed along the way and listening to feedback

Visitors to Sheldon Jackson Museum will

- recognize that Alaska is big and diverse cultures inhabit it
- learn about Alaska's cultures from first person quotations and photographs in exhibit labels
- see native cultures as living and adaptable
- make the connection between the usage of a tool and materials used and the land where it was made and the purpose of its use
- know how to find out more about what was on display at the museum, or what the museum does behind-the-scenes

AUDIENCE

Sheldon Jackson Museum serves local populations and school groups, cruise ship visitors and other travelers, and Alaska Native artists and culture bearers.

- Reaching each of these distinct groups with learning materials tailored to each group's knowledge level is difficult. And although cruise ship visitors make up the majority of the counted visits, local Sitkans and Native Alaskans are lifelong users of the museum. Visitors to Sitka have increased dramatically, rising quickly every year other than 2020 and 2021. Buses of tourists are brought to SJ Museum daily in the summer, stressing the building and workers to capacity.

VISITOR TAKEAWAYS

“This collection is full of amazing cultural and artistic heritage.”

These are the ideas visitors will leave with after visiting the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

“You can tell a lot about people’s traditions, climate, landscape and technology from these belongings.”

“I didn’t realize Alaska Native communities were so unique from one another.”

“That was a difficult story to read about, but I’m glad I did.”

“This was made by my ancestor.”

EXHIBIT THEMES

Currently:

While the labels don't reflect it in every area, staff interpret the collection to visitors using the themes of

- connection to land and environment
- technological brilliance
- adaptation and living well
- how big and different Alaska is

The collection also reflects changing times: pieces are largely from the 19th century, and many pieces show European influence, and trade between cultures

Potential themes for remimagined exhibits:

Public input will be solicited on themes to highlight, but some of the themes we heard are

continuity of culture

- recognition of living, indigenous communities
- contemporary examples of continuing culture and language

acknowledgement of trauma and resilience

- contextualizing Sheldon Jackson from a Native Alaskan perspective

creation and connection to land

- continue to and improve upon showing process; how things are made, from what materials and for what purpose; connection to climate and landscape

connection to ancestors

- how we care for our belongings
- how we live with these objects

THE EXHIBITS

Many updates to the exhibits should be considered while upgrading the physical space with a major renovation. However, some changes can happen sooner.

Long term goals:

ALASKA NATIVE CURATORS

Because the collection comes from Native Alaska, a reimagining of the exhibit will include an indigenization of the museum by hiring Native curators to help decide what stories to tell and what goes on display. Curators will be hired from different cultural groups, and will consult with community to make decisions.

THE MUSEUM SPACE

The layout of the space is complicated. While many appreciate the historical feel, the many pieces on display, the drawers of storage, it also comes across as stuffy and accompanied by a heavy sadness. In rethinking the spaces, and reorganizing the exhibits with indigenous co-curators, a balance can be met while reenvisioning the exhibits as alive and contemporary.

In the short term:

Indigenous experts/artists will be hired to curate an introduction to the Sheldon Jackson Museum in the lobby. Working with the SJ Museum’s Curator of Collections and Alaska State Museum’s Curator of Exhibitions, this exhibit can replace the current exhibit about Sheldon Jackson, and use photographs, contemporary art, and first person quotations to

- explain to visitors that we are on Lingít Aaní, the land of Sheet’ká K̄wáan.
- highlight contemporary Alaska Native artists
- address contemporary Alaska Native culture

Consult with Alaska Native culture bearers on the belongings that may not be suitable for display. Solutions will take into account limited storage space, but could include removal, signage, or covering with a cloth.

Ongoing maintenance: continue to tackle items from SJ Museum assessment 2017 (paint touch ups, admission desk, plinths and mounts, etc.); HVAC replacement (2024)

Continue to find places for temporary exhibits, such as the wall in the lobby or the artifact of the month case, which could highlight new work from the artists-in-residence, or other pieces acquired for the collection.

Long term goals:

REFRESH CONTENT

Because the collection has been largely stagnant, an opportunity exists to bring contemporary pieces into the gallery, and make the connection that Alaska Native cultures are alive and thriving

TRANSPARENCY

Make plans to explore the following in re-imagined exhibits: NAGPRA and how the museum complies with requests, Sheldon Jackson and boarding school legacy

In the short term:

Some exhibit labels can be updated by SJ Museum staff; templates for labels to be provided by ASM staff. New labels to address:

- removal or use of term Eskimo to describe Iñupiaq/Yup'ik culture
- removal of the term Aleut to describe Unanga and Sugpiaq cultures
- explanation of self-identifiers
- description of the ceremonial use program

Inside the museum, (perhaps to the right of the door), take space to address the legacy of boarding school history and Sheldon Jackson's role in acquiring objects. Discuss why we don't know where things came from (poor records, no known provenance,) and how Jackson came to have and donate these pieces to the museum.

In places where a NAGPRA consideration has been made, add a label to explain the process (ex. mortuary pole that is no longer in the museum collection but is being cared for by the museum as it awaits a decision from the true owner).

THE EXHIBITS

Long term goals:

ACCESSING COLLECTIONS

The amount of works on display is remarkable to visitors who want to know more about the works. Suggestions for adding this content without overwhelming them with text are an app, touchscreen, or QR code that allows visitors to learn more about the objects. This could include

- photos
- video
- oral histories
- object names and description in the language of origin

Because there is not a lot of information about many of the objects, visitors may assume that museum is keeping this information secret. Again, transparency in what the museum knows about pieces is important.

Visitors want to know

- Where did this piece come from?
- Who made it? What cultural group are they from?
- How is it used? How does this practice continue today?

Language of origin will be incorporated into labels.

In the short term:

• **Kiosk**

A computer kiosk in the lobby could allow visitors to access the information that is publicly available on the Argus database

IDEA SAVER

Things that might not go into the interpretive plan, but a space to remember other ideas.

Suggestions:

- **Catalog**
Develop an updated catalog for the SJ Museum collection
- **Alaskan Indigenous Collections Care Guide**
SJ Museum is an expert in collections care for Indigenous materials, and has the connections with Alaskan artists and culture bearers to collaborate on a care guide that could serve museums all over the state