



This column explores innovative informal education projects being undertaken within our local museum community. As active spaces for dialogue, connection and critical thinking, it seeks to highlight programming that makes our institutions more inclusive and that encourage more meaningful engagement with our visitors.

SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUM ED

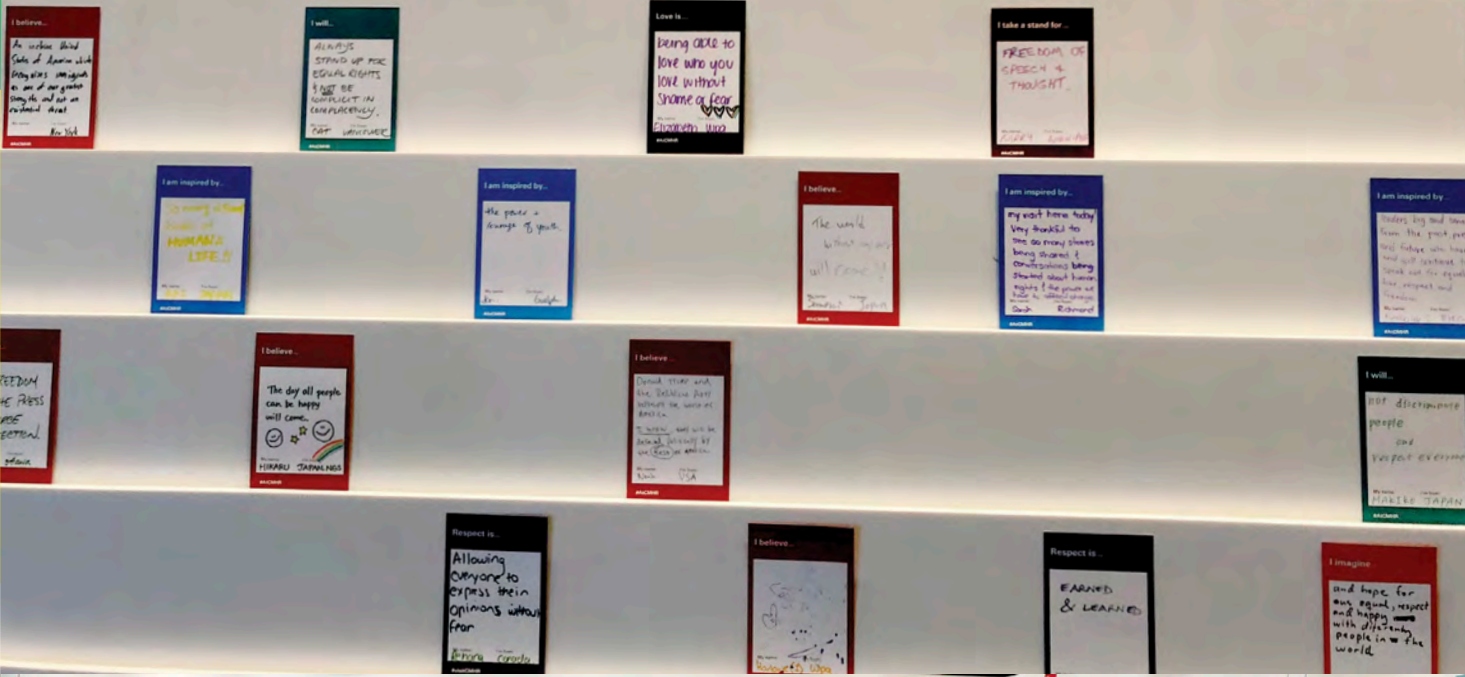
ENGAGING WITH COMPLEXITY Creating Space for Dialogue at the CMHR

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Carlson

Located on the crossroads of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers that has long served as a meeting place, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) seeks to uphold that ancestral role by fostering an appreciation for the importance of human rights and encouraging reflection and dialogue. While the creation of Canada's newest national museum was not without **controversy**, it is the approach the museum takes towards human rights education and advocacy that initially sparked my interest during grad school and became the subject of my masters thesis. Like most museums, the CMHR has developed a range of programs that cater to the interests and needs of its visitors, including tours, lectures, film screenings, drop-in family activities, and school programs (supported by fantastic online resources, such as the **Canadian Human Rights Toolkit**). As a museum educator, what I was most curious about was to see first-hand how their programming would engage with the complexity of the subject

matter, acknowledging the gravity and significance of human rights issues without overwhelming or intimidating visitors. When I visited Winnipeg in September, I took part in a 90 minute guided Explore the Galleries tour. The galleries are designed thematically so that various topics or 'threads' run throughout the museum, an approach that is well-suited to guided tours as it enables visitors to explore interconnections throughout their visit. While the tour was structured similarly to other tours with curators and artists I'd participated in before, one highlight for me was the space that our guide created to ask questions and begin conversations about the human rights issues raised in the exhibits. The use of multiple perspectives and contrasting opinions within the exhibits encouraged us to think critically about our own views and make personal connections, whether we chose to share them with the group or not.

Share your thoughts about human rights



Top: Example of cards shared by visitors in the Inspiring Change Gallery. *Photo credit: Sarah Carlson.*

Bottom: Inspiring Change Gallery. *Credit: Photo credit: Sarah Carlson.*

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The museum also uses participatory digital tools to offer opportunities for personalized, hands-on learning. Within the museum space, interactives, such as the Debate Circle and Imagine Wall, encourage visitors to contribute and voice their opinion is through digital media. In addition to being a tool for wayfinding and platform for hosting the audio component of the self-guided tour, the CMHR app has a unique feature called the Mood Meter, which allows visitors to not only track their moods throughout their journey in the museum but also to plot their feelings alongside those of other visitors. Digital delivery allows for the CMHR to keep content relevant to current issues surrounding human rights beyond what can be addressed within temporary exhibits. This ongoing, evolving discussion is key to supporting the museum’s mandate as it provides opportunities for conversations surrounding human rights issues to take place and empowers visitors to take action.

In his article, *The Urgency of Empathy and Social Impact in Museums*, Mike Murawaski from the Portland Art Museum urges us to remember that museums are made of people and to use that perspective to shift how we think about serving our communities. Museums can be powerful, active spaces that “bring people together, facilitate open dialogue, and elevate the voices and stories of marginalized groups to promote greater understanding.” My visit to the CMHR has inspired to think more deeply about how our local museum community can create space for dialogue around challenging, relevant



issues, or support organizations already having these conversations. If you are curious about the social impact of museums, I would encourage you to start with the Museums Association of the UK visioning document [Museums Change Lives](#). Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Reflect on your current impacts. Listen to users and non-users and research local needs, as well as what other museums are doing, to determine where your museum is likely to have the most useful impact.
- Encourage wider participation in all aspects of your work: bring more voices into interpretation and devolve power.
- Innovate and be willing to take risks.
- Reflect and celebrate your work. Learn from and with partners and participants.
- Strive for long-term sustained change based on building lasting relationships.

Canadian Journeys Gallery.
Photo credit: Sarah Carlson