

MUSEUM NOTES

PRACTICAL INFORMATION ON OPERATING A COMMUNITY MUSEUM

Number 4

DEVELOPING A CONSERVATION POLICY FOR THE MUSEUM

In the *Community Museums Policy for Ontario*, the purpose of a community museum is stated to be acquiring, conserving, studying, assembling and exhibiting a collection of artifacts. Although conserving is second on the list, few museum boards have formulated a policy for conservation, or indeed have thought much at all about conservation's place in the scheme of things. Yet the very basis of a museum's existence is its collections. Without artifacts, there can be no studying, assembling and exhibiting. It is for this reason that conservation of the collections must be of prime importance to all those concerned with running a museum.

What is conservation? Generally speaking, it can be divided into two functions — preservation and restoration. Preservation means protection from harm, from extremes of temperature and relative humidity, from excessive light and ultraviolet radiation, from careless handling, incorrect storage and display methods, dust and dirt, damage in transport, pests, and other problems which may result from an inadequate physical plant and untrained staff.

Restoration is an attempt to overcome the damages that time and harmful conditions can cause. It includes cleaning, mending, replacing missing parts, corrosion and tarnish removal, straightening crooked pieces, and a myriad other processes. While preservation can and should be carried out by all museum staff, restoration requires a professional conservator or fully trained and supervised staff workers.

Conservation is necessary to maintain museum collections so that the artifacts may usefully be studied, exhibited and interpreted. It is the responsibility of the governing authority to ensure that conservation of the collections is a top priority, and that artifacts are housed, cared for, exhibited and interpreted in the safest possible way.

A conservation policy should aid in carrying out the overall goals of the museum, which should include bringing the collections meaningfully to the public without causing them harm. This implies that those who set this policy, the board of trustees or committee of management, must be familiar with the museum's collection and understand its conservation needs.

Physical Plant

The museum building should be of prime concern. It must be suitable for housing a museum collection, with appropriate control of relative humidity, temperature, lighting and air cleanliness. If it is an older or recycled building, ways must be found to upgrade collection areas without damaging the actual structure. A historic house museum is especially difficult to improve environmentally without losing the appearance of historical accuracy.

Once the building has been made environmentally sound, it is important to ensure that maintenance programs are established. These include not only regulation and upkeep of mechanical systems, but also building cleaning and pest control programs. When building layouts are being planned, sufficient space must be allocated to artifact storage areas and workrooms. Perhaps a basic conservation lab may be included if space, utilities and trained staff are available.

Storage

The temptation exists for a museum to put much of its energies and resources into exhibition, for this is the most highly visible aspect of its services, and the most attractive to the public. However, considerable thought must be given to storage areas, because these are often where a great deal of the collection is kept. The conservation policy should ensure that artifacts are kept in a secure, environmentally controlled area which is designated strictly for artifact storage. The objects must be accessible with relative ease, which means that they are stored in an orderly, uncrowded fashion, and that the location of every artifact is known and recorded. Admittance should be restricted to trained staff or researchers under supervision. Storage shelves, containers and packing materials must not be harmful to the objects, and security, fire and other controls must be as stringent as possible.

Exhibits

The concerns about artifacts on exhibit are very similar to those for stored objects. As a beginning, a policy must be established that artifacts are to be handled only by people who have been trained to do so. Conservation principles must be considered in all aspects of planning for an exhibit. Control of the environment, especially lighting, is important, as are protection from theft and public handling. The pieces selected for display must be in satisfactory condition to exhibit in terms of both strength and appearance. Artifacts must not be put in the exhibit area until all other work has been completed, and display materials and mounting techniques must be safe for the objects.

Artifact Condition

Periodic checks on the collection, both on exhibit and in storage, are necessary in case artifacts undergo a change in physical condition. It is important that these checks be made part of a conservation policy, especially in the case of long-term loan material. The museum is responsible for the well-being of its collections, and this responsibility is doubly important for material in its care which belongs to someone else. Similarly a policy must be established on any conservation treatment of borrowed material. It must be considered whether the museum has the resources to cope with more than its own material, and terms of agreement must be reached with the owner about legal responsibilities

Loans

Outgoing loans impose an added responsibility on the custodians of a collection. Potential borrowers must be investigated to ensure that the standards of exhibition, storage and handling they can provide are up to the lender's own. It is also important to have a policy outlining the conditions under which artifacts may actually be loaned out. This should be based both on the physical state of the artifact and the conditions in the borrowing institution, and the person making the decision should fully understand both these factors. Loan agreements must make it absolutely clear that the borrower is responsible for the continued well-being of the artifacts. Complete condition reports on all incoming and outgoing material should be a matter of policy, for they are the only sure way to determine changes in an object. Packing must be carried out by suitably trained people using safe methods and materials, and shipping must be done by a trustworthy carrier.

Role of the Conservator

A conservation policy has to deal with important considerations if the museum has a conservator or if an outside conservation service is used. Conservation treatments must be carried out only by qualified persons. It must be made clear also who determines priorities for conservation treatment, conservator or curator, and who has the final word on how an object will be treated, stored, exhibited or loaned.

It is important, especially if building or renovation projects are being planned, that the management of a museum understand and support the importance of the role of conservation. Consultation with the museum's conservator, or with qualified outside consultants, is essential whenever the collections are involved. Thus anything affecting the environment of the building, exhibit spaces and methods, storage space and methods, and any other factors affecting the physical state of the artifacts will require an informed opinion so that appropriate decisions may be made.

Staff Training

Even if a trained conservator is not available, a conservation policy must address the capabilities of the museum staff. Every person who works in the museum, from curator to volunteer to custodian, must be aware, or be made aware of every aspect of preventive conservation, especially handling and housekeeping. This would require a policy of on-going staff training within the museum, as well as encouragement and funding of further education through outside programs. Staff members must be encouraged to put their knowledge into practice, and there should be enough people available to cope with the demands of preventive conservation programs. Certainly any attempts at conservation treatment should not be made unless space and sufficient trained staff are available. The level of in-house conservation treatment must be determined by the resources at hand.

A conservation policy should provide for meeting all the above standards, as it is ultimately the responsibility of those who set the policy that the museum's collection is as well cared for as is humanly possible. Other policies too have a direct bearing on the care of collections.

Security

Security considerations have a great impact on the well-being of artifacts. The following sources of danger must be dealt with — fire, flood or water damage, vandalism, theft, and handling by the public. Museum policies must be established not only to prevent these problems before their onset, but also to cope with the results should any of these problems occur. Contingency plans and staff training in emergency procedures are essential parts of these policies.

Collections Policy

The collections policy of a museum must take into account, among other things, certain conservation concerns. Objects which are in very fragile or damaged condition impose a strain on the resources of a museum. If such objects are accepted into the collection, the museum must have the capability at least to preserve them without further deterioration. If there are no conservation services available, then the acquisition of such objects should be seriously questioned. The cost in dollars and human resources of making the object suitable for museum purposes may be more than the piece is worth.

Other aspects of a collections policy also have a bearing on conservation. All objects in the collection should be fully documented, not just identified and located. Detailed notes are needed

on the condition of the object. "Good condition" or "poor condition" are not enough. A complete description of dirt, damage, missing or loose parts, and disfigurement is required. Well-trained staff are needed to carry out this process. The policy should also set priorities for conservation so that severely damaged or endangered artifacts which are valuable to the collection receive attention first when conservation treatment becomes possible.

A museum's collections are its reason for existing, and so preservation of the collections must be a top priority. A comprehensive conservation policy can be the first step in achieving good collections care. It will address the needs and capabilities of the physical environment, so that the highest possible standards are met. It will also deal with improving and maintaining an adequate level of staff awareness and training in the care of artifacts. And finally, it will ensure that when the other important functions of a museum, acquisition, research, exhibition and interpretation, are carried out, the preservation of the collection is a primary consideration.

The following *Conservation Policy for Museums* is an example of one that might be established by your museum. Each museum's policy will differ according to the nature of its physical plant, staff capabilities, etc., but all of the points mentioned in this example should be covered.

A Conservation Policy for Museums

1. The museum is responsible for preservation of the artifacts in its collection. It will provide the best possible physical environment, preventive maintenance programs and conservation services to meet this responsibility.
2. The museum will consult with qualified experts in the field of conservation before taking any course of action which may affect the physical state of the artifacts.
3. The museum will attempt to achieve optimum environmental standards for the preservation of the collection in all physical areas where artifacts may occur. Control standards for temperature, relative humidity, lighting and air cleanliness will be established in consultation with qualified experts. The museum will provide the facilities and equipment to achieve and maintain these standards, and will delegate responsibility for regulation and maintenance of these standards and systems to a qualified person.
4. The museum will establish procedures and provide support for protection of the collection from damage or loss through fire, flood, water damage, theft, vandalism, accident and damage from insect pests and vermin.
5. The museum will establish procedures for care of artifacts in the event of physical emergencies such as fire, flood, accident, etc., pre-designate an emergency work area, and ensure that all staff are thoroughly familiar with these procedures.
6. The museum will provide storage areas and artifact workrooms sufficient to accommodate the size and material composition of the collection.
7. The museum will provide storage space for the collection which will be orderly, clean and environmentally controlled, and will allow adequate physical access to the artifacts. Access will be restricted to (the curator or designate). The storage area will be used only for the storage of museum artifacts.
8. The museum will develop standards and procedures and will designate appropriate responsibility for handling, storage, exhibition, packing and transport of its artifacts in order best to preserve the collections.

9. The museum will provide in-house training for all staff, both paid and unpaid, in the handling and preventive care of artifacts. Where further training is deemed necessary the museum will provide (financial or other) support for staff participation in outside training programs. Only staff with appropriate training will be permitted to handle artifacts.
10. The museum will ensure that a sufficient size of staff is provided to implement preventive care of collections programs.
11. The museum will ensure that all artifacts in the collection, whether owned or borrowed, are correctly documented with respect to ownership, incoming and current condition, and need for conservation treatment.
12. The museum will ensure that all artifacts loaned to other institutions will be protected from damage both in transit and in the borrowing institution.
13. The museum will designate a qualified person responsible for determining conservation priorities and the nature and extent of conservation treatments to be carried out.
14. The museum will ensure that cleaning, repair or restoration of any artifact in its collection is carried out only by qualified personnel, and in such a manner as to maintain the historic and artistic integrity of that artifact.

The need for a conservation policy is evident — the trustees of a museum are those who hold in trust for their community the collections of that museum. It is they who are ultimately responsible for the physical well-being of the artifacts. This means that they, together with staff, must take into account every danger to which those artifacts may be exposed and try to protect them from harm. It is their responsibility to ensure that the collections are passed along to the next generation as much as possible in the condition in which they received them.

Not only must a policy be established, but procedures must be developed from it. It is up to the governing authority of a museum to ensure that both policy and procedures are known and understood by the people who work in the museum, and that they are followed at all times. This is a great responsibility, but part of the privilege of being in charge of our material history.

2011: Please note that the Ministry of Culture is currently reviewing this Note and other Museum Notes. Any errors and/or outdated information will be corrected as a result of this review.