How to Turn Items into a Meaningful Collection: What I Learned at Centro

Cultural Hispano de San Marcos

During the Spring semester of 2013, I interned at El Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos. In this paper, I will discuss the Centro, its history, narratives in a museum setting, and what is known as the curation crisis.

Mrs. Philo

Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos was a dream that Mrs. Ofelia Trinidad Vasquez Philo (Hereafter Mrs. Philo) had for more than 30 years before she finally obtained the old Southside Elementary School Building. She grew up in the area and noticing the prejudice and lack of resources for Hispanic citizens, decided that she wanted a place where people could come together and help each other and their community while also endeavoring to preserve their Hispanic culture and values. She carried this dream for years until she finally got the opportunity to make her dream come true. In 2007, a planning group was established to make El Centro a reality. One member, Lupe Costilla made a presentation to the Minority Arts Commission for support. Upon their disbanding, the Minority Arts Commission made a motion to donate the money they had left to El Centro Cultural Hispano. Mrs. Philo then met with the San Marcos CISD Superintendent about the old Southside/Bonham School that had remained unused for years. Once the superintendent drew up the contract, it was official; Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos was born. (Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos 2011)
Southside Elementary School

Southside Elementary School, according to Mrs. Philo, was the “Mexican” school in the city. All Hispanic children went there, and thus, many of the people whose children or grandchildren go to tutoring sessions at Centro attended elementary school at Southside. The school has had a long and difficult history. It started out as a wooden building with only a few rooms. One of the students remembers sitting on a wooden crate in the back of the classroom because the school did not receive adequate funding for supplies. It then was torn down and the current structure was erected.

This seven-classroom structure housed the classes for all the Spanish-speaking children, but for a long time, there was not a single Spanish-speaking teacher. The school nurse collected lice from the students and sold it to University biology labs. In the past, Texas State University (then Southwest Texas State University) did not allow student teachers to train there because they said it wasn’t a “typical” school, even though schools like it were all around the Hill country. The drop-out rates were above 80% and fewer still elected or had the chance to go to college. It seems only fitting now that the school which housed the only classes many of the students would ever attend now houses a place that offers free tutoring, free music lessons, and free dance lessons to the children who can not otherwise afford it.

Centro Cultural Hispano

The goals of Centro are to help Hispanic kids in the community to learn, stay grounded, and prepare for higher education. However, the mission of Centro goes far deeper than that. Officially, their mission statement is: “The mission of Centro Cultural
Hispano de San Marcos (CCHDSM) is to serve as a community beacon for the preservation, development, promotion, and celebration of the Hispanic arts, culture, heritage, and values.” They not only have tutoring, piano lessons, accordion lessons, and ballet folklórico classes for children, but they also offer classes for adults in ballet folklórico, cooking Mexican food without added fat and lard (to try to prevent diabetes which has become a large health concern in the Hispanic population), and art classes for both children and adults in traditional Mexican crafts.

It is easy to tell that Centro is all about community even before you enter the building. On a bulletin board next to the entrance, there are flyers about children’s camps and classes at Centro. The table right inside the doorway is covered in newsletters, local newspapers, and flyers and pamphlets about upcoming local events. The walls are lined with the “Mexican-American Firsts:” the first Mexican-Americans in San Marcos to hold elected offices, the first Mexican-American police officer, and elementary school teacher, among others. The walls feature artwork by Hispanic artists and a new artist is featured three times a year. They have events for Cinco de Mayo (such as luncheons and music), Dia de los Muertos (with arts and crafts, altars, dancing, music, face painting, and lots of food), La Navidad (“Christmas,” with plays, food, and music), and more.

Everything about the old elementary school has been repurposed to function as a community center. The old nurse’s office to the right has been turned into Gloria Salazar’s office. She is the heart and soul of Centro. When you walk into the building, she comes out to greet you. She is the woman with all the answers. She knows everyone and everyone knows her. Past Mrs. Salazar’s office is the hallway stretching to either side of the school. To the right, the hallway has a small room used for exhibits (I call it “the
annex”), the music room, and at the end of the building, the ballet folklórico costume room. In the hallway to the left of the lobby, there are the other old classrooms, which are now used for meetings, mariachi classes, Amigas and Comadres, Spanish classes, and more. At the far end of the lobby is the old main office, which is now the museum room. This room has been set aside to teach the history of the Hispanic population in San Marcos. There are cornhusk dolls, statues of the Virgen de Guadalupe, old photographs, cooking pots and jars, dishes, rosaries, paintings, church memorabilia, and more assorted artifacts. However, these artifacts and household objects were everywhere, not labeled, not cataloged, and sitting in display cases in no particular order. This was my project. My job was to help get the museum off the ground.

**My Duties**

One of my duties was to write placards, or descriptions, of the artifacts already housed in the museum. This was an interesting task in part because I got to do research on many types of artifacts, but mainly because I didn’t know what a lot of the items were. I am not Hispanic, and a lot of the items were very culturally specific. For example, we have cornhusk dolls, yoyo pillows, 5 old wooden rosaries, clay pots and dishes, molcajetes, matates, “cancionero” books, among others. When I first began writing the placards, I didn’t know why some of these things were important because it isn’t a part of my culture. So I did my research (through the internet, books, and interviews) and talked to people at El Centro about the artifacts. The cornhusk dolls were made by disabled women in Mexico who make the traditional dolls as a way to supplement their income. The yoyo pillows were present in every Mexican home and were made from old clothes and blankets. The rosaries came from an old hacienda in Eagle Pass, Texas and were used
Wolter

on the altar of their chapel. The clay pots were used to cook and make hot chocolate. The matates and molcajetes were, and still are, used to cook and make salsas, guacamoles, and other foods. The “canicioneros” (or “Singers”) books were collected by Mrs. Philo when she was a girl and they featured the most famous Mexican singers of the day. I learned a lot about the culture by researching the kinds of things they use every day, but that I would not normally encounter as a non-Hispanic individual.

I also helped scan and retouch old photographs of people in San Marcos. As an avid amateur photographer, this was a very fun project, and one that I was very passionate about. I was given a series of about ten photographs. They were all old, some were originals and some were copies. I scanned them into my computer, and I was able to get rid of folds, stains, rips, and other damage to the photographs on a computer program called Adobe Photoshop. We then printed the photos and mounted them on cardstock to be displayed in the museum. The difference in the photos was amazing and I was so pleased to hear so many people at El Centro comment on how wonderful it was to see such beautiful photos of their family and friends. Restoring the photographs was my favorite duty at El Centro. Photographs give one an incredible chance to literally see into the past, and I believe they are a crucial part of a museum exhibit for that reason. I have offered to continue retouching photographs at El Centro as a volunteer, and already, many more photographs have been donated.
The Narrative

The most difficult part of getting a museum started, in my experience, is deciding what narrative to tell. All museums are slightly different, but all good museums use their artifacts to tell a story. The story that a museum decides on is crucial. It is the foundation for the artifacts to be accepted and the exhibits to be created. The narrative is everything. This, however, is what I happened to overlook at the beginning of my internship.

My supervisor wanted to jump straight in with labels for the museum and, so I began to get ready for that. However, when writing placards, the descriptions for the artifacts on display, I realized that I was merely describing the artifacts and not using them to tell an overall story; they had no cultural significance. This realization was only made stronger after a discussion with my internship coordinator, Dr. Hadder. He asked what our narrative at the museum was and I threw out some information, but when I got to thinking about it, I drew a blank. I then proceeded to sit down with my supervisor at work, Mrs. Bobbie Garza Hernandez, and really flesh out what our narrative would be. This experience opened my eyes to the importance of getting this good solid base around
which the museum would be built. After talking with Mrs. Garza-Hernandez, we came up with a narrative, which we then proposed to the museum committee who ratified it.

**Centro’s Narrative**

To come up with a narrative for the museum, there were a few things we had to consider. We needed to decide what kind of museum we were and what kind of museum we wanted to be. We were already a community museum, which is usually part of a bigger entity, in this case, a community center. We also wanted to be a narrative museum that tells a story with the artifacts as visual evidence and has an educational goal.

From there, we discussed what we wanted to focus on in the museum. In the end, the committee and I came up with the following narrative:

“The Centro’s Museum will look at the development of Mexican-American communities in the Greater San Marcos Area. This will include looking at the founding families and their careers, churches, organizations, schools, etc. We will aim to show the integration of Mexican-Americans over time by displaying (on maps) the different *barrios* (“neighborhoods”) and their chronologies. “

We then took maps and blocked out the *barrios*. When looking at San Marcos, Mexican-Americans were confined to certain areas at certain times and over the years have expanded these communities. This is what Centro intends to show.

The Hispanic population in San Marcos has not always been accepted and welcomed. They were segregated and treated poorly for a long time. Towards the turn of the 20th century, San Marcos became a cotton-producing center. Many ranches and farms surrounded the town, and many Hispanic people lived and worked there. However, they
began to move into the city to try and start their own businesses, and as they did, the
*barrios* began to form.

There are four main barrios present in San Marcos. The first barrio is called “El
Barrio del Jorobado,” (The neighborhood of the hunchback) because during that time,
there were men called “pachucos” (zoot suit era) and they walked hunched over. This
neighborhood stretches from Guadalupe St. to Reynolds St. with the railroad tracks on
the west and Cheatham St. on the east. The Second Barrio was called “El Barrio de la
Nalga Pelona” (The neighborhood of the bare butt). This neighborhood sprung up during
the Great Depression, and the children who lived here were so poor that they wore their
pants until they had holes all the way through them, leading to the name “nalga pelona.”
This barrio stretches from Cheatham to IH 35, and Guadalupe St. to Reynolds St. The
third barrio was called “El Barrio de la Victoria” (neighborhood of the victory). This
neighborhood was populated around the time of World War Two and all of the streets are
named after heroes or presidents, such as Knox, Armstrong, Patton, etc. This
neighborhood stretched from Guadalupe St. to IH 35 with railroad tracks on the west and
Ellis St on the East. The fourth barrio was “El Barrio del Pescado” (the neighborhood of
the fish), which is most likely because it was next to a fish hatchery and a river.
Sometimes, this neighborhood was also referred to as “Little Mexico,” because the streets
are called Tampico, Laredo, Saltillo, etc. It crossed IH 35 to the east side; the boundaries
were IH 35 on west, San Marcos River on north, to Staples Rd (which runs parallel with
Fish Hatchery). These neighborhoods are not strictly Hispanic anymore, but are still
predominantly Hispanic.
During my time at Centro, I also learned a great deal about the importance of curation. Curation, put simply, is the managing of artifacts within a museum, archive, or repository. When I began to look at the artifacts in El Centro, I noticed that some had curation needs that were not being met. For example, there were photographs with scotch tape and electrical tape on them. The acid contained in the tape will not only eat through the emulsion on the photograph, but also eat through the photograph paper itself, ruining the precious photo. There are two cowhide chairs in the collection as well. I didn’t know much about the care and maintenance of leather and cowhide, so I called a leather company. I learned that they need to stay out of direct sunlight and in a room with controlled humidity. All these artifacts are so important and deserve to be maintained and preserved. However, there are so many artifacts and so many different types of materials
in El Centro’s collection that it is difficult to find out how to take care of all of the items. This is not just an issue in small institutions like El Centro, it affects agencies both big and small.

It is well known in the world of anthropology that there is a curation crisis. The idea of this crisis was brought to light in the 1980s and is still being discussed today (Bustard 2000). In 2000, there was a report done on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ collections. The report found that of the millions of artifacts, “in about 75% of cases, artifacts had been stored in improper conditions and were quietly disintegrating: about 10% needed immediate attention.” (Bawaya 2007: 1025) Generally, most of the problems leading to the curation crisis fall into one of five categories: “accountability, accessibility, conservation/preservation, deaccession policies, and storage.” (Bustard 2000. Pg. 10)

Accountability deals with knowing what an agency has and knowing where it is. This has become a huge problem in curation. In agencies both large and small, there are usually large backlogs of uncataloged items, and this backlog continues to grow as agencies obtain new artifacts and documents. Keeping up with this backlog can be quite a time-consuming task, and one that is a hassle for small organizations. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) passed in 1990 has been significant in helping to fix the problem of accountability by forcing agencies to do inventories. NAGPRA requires any agency that receives federal funding to repatriate (return) Native American cultural items to their lineal descendants and culturally-affiliated tribes. This means that agencies must do full inventories of all of their holdings and assess their conditions.
Accessibility refers to whether a collection can be used by the public, researchers, and other qualified individuals. 36 CFR 79, published in 1990, provides standards for the care and management of collections, including the associated records. This applies to both old and new collections. It states in part 79 that federal collections must be made available for “scientific, educational, and religious uses” (36 CFR 79 1990).

Accessibility can be improved with technology such as electronic databases and barcodes. But this is also a problem of space. Some facilities simply do not have the room to store artifacts and are overcrowded, making it difficult to access items.

Conservation and preservation deals with caring for the artifacts both in the short and long terms. If a facility is not equipped to deal with certain types of materials, the specimens may suffer and degrade in the long run. A lot of attention has been paid towards archives recently because of their importance for research. The problems now are that technology is changing so quickly that backups of documents on computer tape, floppy disk, CD ROM, or micro fiche, are outdated almost as quickly as they are produced. So now the question becomes, how to preserve the data? This question has not yet been answered.

Deaccession policies involve culling collections for a variety of reasons including cost and management. When managing a collection, a facility may run out of room, lose funding, or come across a variety of problems and may need to discard items. But who makes those decisions and what is a justifiable reason to discard an item? Where will the item go and what will become of it? Every facility needs a plan for this, and unfortunately some do not.
Storage is a huge problem of having enough room to properly and securely store artifacts. Ideally, the storage facility should have temperature and humidity controls, integrated pest management, light controls, security, fire protection, and ample space to store artifacts properly. This rarely happens though. Many facilities have run out of space or are about to. In one case, a university museum ended up utilizing an abandoned two-bay car wash as storage (Bustard 2000: 13). But, real estate is expensive and all the characteristics a facility should have are expensive to create, so not many places are equipped to properly house artifacts. This can lead to artifacts being lost, damaged, forgotten, and losing all educational or research value.

Conclusion

During my internship at El Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos, I learned a lot about the Mexican American culture. It was especially nice since my minor is Spanish, so I also got to utilize that and practice with my co-workers at El Centro. I was lucky enough to grow up in a solid middle-class family of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and I never suffered any real hardships, but the people at El Centro have. Frank Contreras, the old principal of Southside School (as well as a former student), gave a speech at the historical marker dedication ceremony about the educational injustices experienced not only by him but also by his friends, family, and neighbors. His speech was so sad and so moving. He remembers being called names, being looked down upon, and having people assume he was stupid just because he was Mexican. I grew up hearing about injustices, but it was a real eye-opening experience to talk to Mr. Contreras and hear about it from him.
I was worried, going into the internship, because I don’t belong to the Mexican-American culture. I felt like maybe I didn’t belong at El Centro and that maybe I shouldn’t help create a museum about what I didn’t know. But I always felt welcomed and everyone always greeted me with a smile. It was a warm and comfortable place to work and I will always value the friends I made there. I would strongly recommend El Centro as a place to work.

In the future, I hope to attend graduate school focusing on Cultural Anthropology. Whether that will take me the museum and curation route I don’t know. But I do know that museums will always be a huge part of my life, and this experience has only strengthened that desire. It takes a lot more work than I ever imagined starting a museum from the ground up, and it has given me a newfound appreciation for them.
Erin Wolter, Ofelia Trinidad Vasquez Philo, and Bobbie Garza Hernandez

El Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos Museum at the end of the internship
Resources

Bawaya, Michael


Bustard, Wendy


Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos

2011 About Centro Cultural Hispano de San Marcos

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