Approaches to Collaborative Conservation at the Museum During the Age of Covid-19

Erin Murphy, Lead Conservator for the Native American Hall Renovation
Stephanie Black, Assistant Conservator for the Native American Hall Renovation
The Field Museum, Chicago, IL

Overview
The deinstallation phase of the Field Museum’s renovation of its permanent Native American Hall, which was just finishing in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. This pandemic presented unprecedented opportunities to further refine and develop remote working processes as the museum had to remain open during that period. The decision to close the building for two weeks came up quickly and staff had to make preparations for the museum’s closure days before it was announced. There was a rush to get things wrapped up before the museum closed. Williams, Shedd, Field, Chicago, Stad, Stad, Sioux, Google, and VPR access to Ke Ee Ke became the de facto methods for communicating with remote employees. The museum staff was able to use these tools effectively and efficiently, shortening meetings and improving communication.

The Project
The Field Museum of Natural History
Founded in 1893, just after Chicago’s World Fair, the Field Museum is the world’s fourth largest natural history museum in the United States. The museum consists of 14 departments: Anthropology, Botany, Geology, and Zoology. The Anthropology collection contains over 750,000 items, embedded in the Anthropology collection, is significant and large in depth. The Northeast Coast and Plains items are among the most comprehensive collections at any museum.

About the Renovation
The Conservation Department is participating in a multi-year (2018-22) project to renovate the permanent Native American Hall (NAAH). The NAAH is 110 years old and exhibits 1,150 objects across 60 scenes. It was designed by the architect Louis Sullivan and exhibits 1,150 objects across 60 scenes, including 770,000 items, embedded in the Anthropology collection, is significant and large in depth.

About the Field Museum of Natural History
Named for the son of one of the museum’s founders, the Field Museum, located in Chicago, has been collecting, preserving, and presenting natural history for over a century. The museum is the fourth largest natural history museum in the United States, with a collection of over 30 million objects.

Adaptations
Developing Virtual Collaborative Meeting & Documentation
During the 2020-21 renovation of the NAAH, the team was transitioning into the re-installation phase. One of the main concerns of the team was to find a way to efficiently and effectively communicate with remote colleagues. The Field Museum team used Zoom to hold virtual meetings and use online collaboration tools. They also used Google Drive to share documents and Google Meet for video calls. As a result, the team was able to stay connected and work together efficiently.

Case Study: Karen Ann Hoffman Conservation Discussion
Karen Ann Hoffman is an Assistant Conservator at The Field Museum. She has been working at The Field Museum for over 10 years, and her work primarily focuses on tribal and Native American artifacts.

Karen Ann Hoffman’s work was her first time working on tribal and Native American artifacts. She was able to collaborate with virtual colleagues using Zoom to hold meetings and use online collaboration tools. As a result, she was able to stay connected and work together efficiently.

Evolution Process
Our collaborative outreach efforts are continually evolving. However, the importance of remote working processes has remained consistent. Here are some examples:

- Flexibility is extremely important. We need to be able to discuss things both formally and informally according to our colleague’s schedule. Schedule changes will happen, especially in a time of pandemics.
- It is important to use multiple methods to relay information.
- Respect your colleague’s time. Many have multiple (and more important) commitments that could be taken away by colleagues who don’t understand.
- We need to be ready to rework our processes.

Pros and Cons of our current virtual meeting practices
Pros:
- It is easy to have a reasonably quick get together permission from our collaborators to do so.

Pre: Everyone is looking at and talking about the same thing at the same time – it is helpful to have a space to debate and clarify.

Post: We get to meet briefly regularly, allowing us to develop a relationship and share information more broadly. Due to this there is a level of comfort and trust among unique and unspecified information.

Cons:
- Collaborators can only see what we present on the screen or shared documents. Thus the discussion will be directed through our lens to a certain extent.
- However, we can show them more than we would be able to in a one-on-one visit and revisited items or ideas whenever necessary.

Conclusion
The computer-based virtual system that we have worked to get into place during the pandemic has several key advantages. It facilitates the ability of staff from all departments to attend meetings and take notes remotely. The Field Museum also currently working on developing our virtual system for meetings and training. We have developed a comprehensive communication process that helps to direct us to the right processes and ensure a smooth transition.

So much electronic information has been gathered during this time that we are still processing it. We hope to have a more complete idea of the outcomes of all our virtual activities over the coming months. We are also currently working on developing our training and meeting processes with the help of the Case Study: Karen Ann Hoffman Conservation Discussion. The Field Museum is continually evolving and improving our communication and collaboration processes during Covid-19 with the essential need for our colleagues to collaborate in new and unique ways.

Covid-19 hits a beloved entity in natural history. It is essential that we try to leverage this time as an opportunity to improve our communication and collaboration processes.

References

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