Crowd-Sourced Curation: Towards an Institutional Ecology

Jeff Ponitz
California Polytechnic State University

Constructed in 1938 as one of the last WPA-funded projects under the New Deal, the Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) represented a golden age of urban public space: the art-deco structure was free and open to the public, and visited by generations of schoolchildren. The building was vacated in 1994 when the GRPM relocated; today it embodies the dilemma of how to handle the physical and cultural remnants of public institutions as a time when their civic role and relevance are in question. Crowd-Sourced Curation is a proposal for the GRPM that uses local and global data networks to shape public space at an architectural scale, and uses architectural space to engage the expanded scope of contemporary public institutions.

For 160 years and counting, the GRPM has steady accumulated artifacts with great enthusiasm, and without much curatorial focus. To keep pace with this burgeoning collection, the institution has maintained another growing collection: a multitude of sites to store and display these artifacts, extending well beyond city limits. Similar to its collection of artifacts, the only thing linking these sites is that they belong to the GRPM. At the heart of this problem lies the institution's struggle to balance spaces of storage and spaces of display—storage has historically consumed as much or more of its resources than display, and the GRPM continually invests land, buildings, staff, and energy in something the public may never see.

Crowd-Sourced Curation declares the sum of these artifacts and sites to be less than their parts, but instead of attempting to consolidate this collection, the proposal embraces it as a heterogeneous ecosystem in need of networking. The vacant structure is re-purposed as a hybrid storage/display center that serves as a gateway to the institution's collections of collections: warehouse and lobby in one. A network of tracks is suspended to support mobile vitrines containing the GRPM's collection. These vitrines would serve as modern-day "cabinets of curiosities," in which seemingly discordant artifacts are arranged and rearranged according to shifting taxonomies. The movement of these vitrines would be directed by an algorithm fed by a multi-platform search engine: museum visitors as well as those searching over the web would collectively compile trending themes, similar to recommendation algorithms used by Netflix and Amazon. While the algorithm works imperceptibly fast to order the search results, the vitrines move almost imperceptibly slowly and deliberately, creating a subtly shifting field of light. The lag between the speed of data and the slowness of matter creates a disjunct for those entering the curated hall of light, where they encounter curious juxtapositions that could spark new interpretations of interconnectedness across time, geography, and discipline. In the process, an extensive and incomprehensible network is momentarily revealed and framed at a human scale, connecting local and global actions and consequences. Technology enables action across incredible distances, but equally important is how it simultaneously expands and focuses our field of vision—we understand the impacts of our actions, and also experience the impacts of others'.
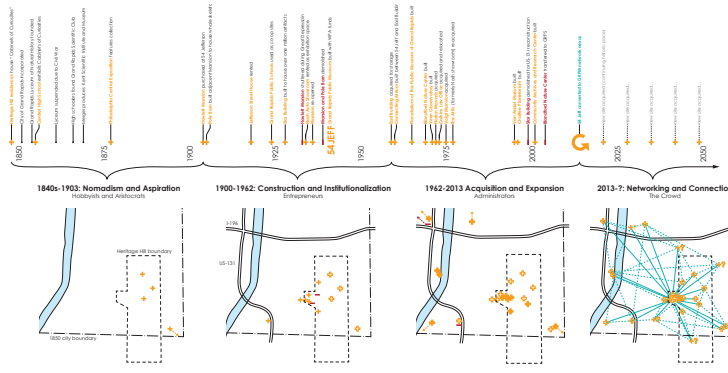
Crowd-Sourced Curation
Towards an Institutional Ecology

Jeff Ponitz, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, with students My-Linh Pham and Mariana Diaz
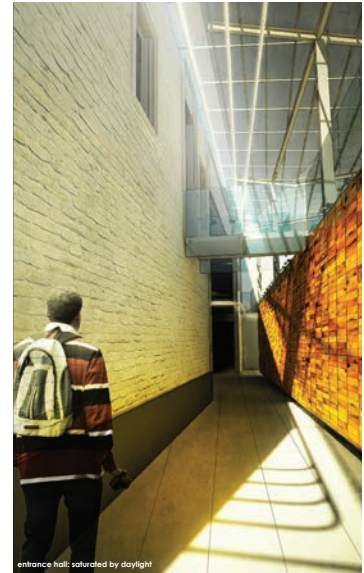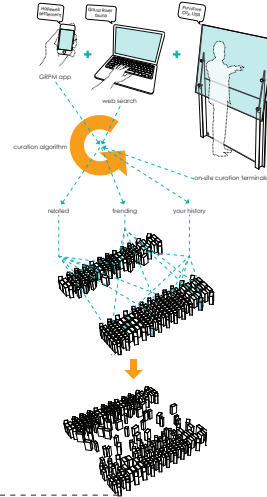
Constructed in 1938 as one of the last WPA-funded projects under the New Deal, the Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) represented a golden age of urban public space: the art-deco structure was free and open to the public, and visited by generations of schoolchildren. The building was vacated in 1994 when the GRPM relocated; today it embodies the dilemma of how to handle the physical and cultural remnants of public institutions as a time when their civic role and relevance are in question. Crowd-Sourced Curation is a proposal for the GRPM that uses local and global data networks to shape public space at an architectural scale, and uses architectural space to engage the expanded scope of contemporary public institutions.

For 160 years and counting, the GRPM has steady accumulated artifacts with great enthusiasm, and without much curatorial focus. To keep pace with this burgeoning collection, the institution has maintained another growing collection: a multitude of sites to store and display these artifacts, extending well beyond city limits. Similar to its collection of artifacts, the only thing linking these sites is that they belong to the GRPM. At the heart of this problem lies the institution's struggle to balance spaces of storage and spaces of display—storage has historically consumed as much or more of its resources than display, and the GRPM continually invests land, buildings, staff, and energy in something the public may never see.

Crowd-Sourced Curation declares the sum of these artifacts and sites to be less than their parts, but instead of attempting to consolidate this collection, the proposal embraces it as a heterogeneous ecosystem in need of networking. The vacant structure is re-purposed as a hybrid storage/display center that serves as a gateway to the institution's collections of collections. To accomplish the dual goals of storage and display, a network of tracks is suspended in the building to support mobile vitrines containing the GRPM's collection. These vitrines would serve as modern-day "cabinets of curiosities," in which seemingly discordant artifacts are arranged and rearranged according to shifting taxonomies. The movement of these vitrines would be directed by an algorithm fed by a multi-platform search engine: museum visitors as well as those searching over the web would collectively compile trending themes, similar to recommendation algorithms used by Netflix and Amazon. While the algorithm works imperceptibly fast to order the search results, the vitrines move almost imperceptibly slowly and deliberately, creating a subtly shifting field of light. The lag between the speed of data and the slowness of matter creates a disjunct for those entering the curated hall of light, where they encounter curious juxtapositions that could spark new interpretations of interconnectedness across time, geography, and discipline. In the process, an extensive and incomprehensible network is momentarily revealed and framed at a human scale, connecting local and global actions and consequences. Technology enables action across incredible distances, but equally important is how it simultaneously expands and focuses our field of vision—we understand the impacts of our actions, and also experience the impacts of others'.

1840s-1903: Nomadism and Aspiration
Hobbyists and Aristocrats

1900-1962: Construction and Institutionalization
Entrepreneurs

1962-2013 Acquisition and Expansion
Administrators

2013-?: Networking and Connection
The Crowd

Crowd-Sourced Curation: Creating Physical Space out of a Virtual Network

entrance hall: saturated by daylight

### Track Network and Storage/Display Cabinets
A steel lattice attached to existing structure provides efficiently dense storage in the wings flanking the Great Hall, and becomes more expressive in a central curated zone. The links and crossings of the track network in the Great Hall create spatially defined moments where algorithmically curated cabinets are juxtaposed. The track connects to more storage the Community Archives Building and extends out to State Street Park, where it serves as an entrance canopy and displays cabinets as a form of signage. The illuminated cabinets move slowly and deliberately, creating a subtly shifting field of light.
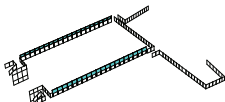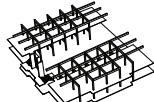
Curation Edge
Guardrails overlooking the Great Hall double as digital curation terminals, where visitors and researchers can search the GRPM collections and observe the shifting field of display cases below. These transparent touchscreens also serve as micro-billboards to the space below, showing items currently being searched as well as related items suggested by the GRPM algorithm. softly illuminate the hall with images of items of items
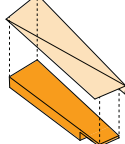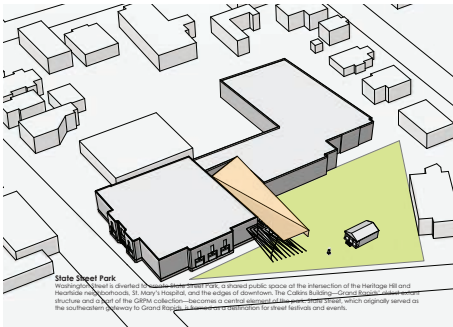
Wedge
This brick-and-mortar architectural insertion creates a new common entry for 54 Jeff and the Community Archives Building. Service and administrative spaces are located on the ground floor, and the mezzanine level serves as a lounge space with views of the Great Hall and the park. A scrim diffuses natural light into the entry hall and is used as a projection surface—for signage facing Jefferson Avenue, and for public movie showings in the new park amphitheater.

Warehouse
All existing non-structural interior elements are removed to create as much continuous storage space as possible.

the great hall: upon entering, a visitor discovers the material results of the previous visitors' digital searches

State Street Park
Washington Street is diverted to form State Street Park, a shared public space at the intersection of the Heritage Hill and Heartside neighborhoods, St. Mary's Hospital, and the edges of downtown. The Collins Building—Grand Rapids' oldest known structure and a part of the GRPM collection—become a central element of the park. State Street, which originally served as the southeastern gateway to Grand Rapids, is formed as a destination for street festivals and events.

Architecture in an Expanded Field, From Interiors to Landscape