White Paper

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Project Director: Timothy Priest, Director of Facilities and Exhibitions
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Introduction:

In 2018, the Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) was awarded funding support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Sustaining Cultural Heritage Grant Program in the amount of $40,000 to plan the transformation of the Museum’s archival storage at the Community Archives and Research Center (CARC) for 21st-century object preservation and access.

With the support of the NEH, the GRPM completed a range of planning activities with Museum staff, community stakeholders, and conservators. Planning activities included inventory of the collections, analysis of existing storage and preservation issues, research into 21st-century storage methods, redesign of the CARC layout and a plan for implementation of the redesign. The project plan will increase use of the collections within the CARC and improve the storage of artifacts by updating and adding new storage methods.

The GRPM maintains one of the largest public Collections in the State of Michigan with more than 250,000 artifacts and specimens. Only five percent of the Museum’s collections are currently on display for public view at the Van Andel Museum Center. The remaining items are stored at the CARC. In recent years, the GRPM has opened up the Collections to increase public access, particularly for research and educational purposes with CARC tours and research requests having increased dramatically. Further driving the increase of public access to the Collections is the establishment of the Grand Rapids Public Museum School. The Museum School was launched in 2015 starting with a middle school (grades 6 through 8) at the Van Andel Museum Center. The high school launched in Fall of 2018 in a space adjacent to the CARC. Created in partnership with the Grand Rapids Public Schools, Kendall College of Art and Design, Grand Valley State University, the City of Grand Rapids and Downtown Grand Rapids Inc., the Museum School uses an innovative curriculum based on three key pillars: museum studies, design thinking, and place-based education. Unprecedented access to the Collections is a vital component of the school curriculum. Because of the unique model, the Public Museum High School was selected as one of the top ten winners of the XQ: The Super School Project which recognized the most innovative new high school models in the nation.

As part of its strategic goal to drive engagement with the community through innovative programming, the GRPM has also begun to re-classify its Collections into 3 tiers. This will guide the way that Collections are used both internally by Museum staff and externally by various audiences. Tier 1 objects are the most significant, fragile, valuable...
or hazardous artifacts that require extra care and “restricted access.” Tier 2 objects are designated for “facilitated access,” meaning that audiences, including visitors, teachers, students, researchers and others can handle them with proper equipment and supervision. Tier 3 objects are hands-on items which, while still authentic artifacts and specimens, have been deemed appropriate for general use. By making the Collections more accessible and creating new forms of engagement, the Museum is looking to plan ways to balance these forms of access with continued preservation of the Collections.

**Project Activities:**

*Analysis of Collections and Their Current Storage Systems*

A collection inventory took place between October 1 – December 31, 2018 by Collections Curator Andrea Melvin and Collections Manager, Holly Waldenmeyer, to determine the volume of rehousing work that would be required for implementing the project. Highlights from this activity involved reviews of items previously inaccessible for inventorying that the Museum now has a better understanding of such as oversized artwork, dozens of oversize duplicate maps and rolled material as well as a complete review of 5,000 books and periodicals. This activity directed staff and consultants to areas of the collection to prioritize.

*Research storage systems*

Between December 1, 2018 – February 28, 2019 GRPM staff and consultant, Gayle Debruyn, visited other museum storage facilities that integrate visible and compact storage. Visits were made to the Nelson Atkins Art Museum in Kansas City to explore art storage and mechanical assisted compact storage with their Head of Registration, Jill Kohler. The team also received a behind-the-scenes tour with Walter Anderson (Collections Manager) and Erika Umali (Mellon Curatorial Fellow) of the Brooklyn Museum of Art visible storage exhibits. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s visible storage and the Museum of Natural History’s new storage systems were also explored. Locally, project team members visited the newly renovated Innovation Center for the Grand Valley State University Art Gallery with Interim Director, Nathan Kemler, which featured art storage systems for 3D object and flat storage. Their open and accessible archives included movable and reconfigurable furniture in a space within their archives that would allow for different size groups and classes to meet within the archive - a strong model for the CARC redesign.

*Analyze and Select Storage Systems and Determine Other Amenities*

Between February 1 - March 30, 2019 staff worked with conservators Mary Fahey, Chief Conservator at The Henry Ford Museum for a conservation assessment of objects.
and Marieka Kaye, Head of Conservation at the University of Michigan Library and Amy Crist of Crist Conservation for an assessment of books and papers to determine the collections needs for balancing preservation and improved access. Their work at CARC resulted in reports recommending important improvements that guided the redesign priorities. They assessed all archival spaces and room 145 which holds small objects, art and the papers and the Grand Rapids Press Collection, in particular was viewed as requiring the bulk of improvements in terms of preservation as well was the most “hidden” away from view.

**Design a CARC Layout**
From June 1-August 31, staff continued to work to determine final needs for CARC by talking with suppliers of archival storage systems. Meetings with President and Museum Storage Specialist, Brett Danielson of Delta Designs, resulted in their collaborative work with GRPM’s design team to create layouts for the spaces at CARC that incorporated Delta’s cabinetry and compact storage systems shown in this report. These new storage designs aligned with existing plans for a new lobby and classrooms to be designed at the CARC building.

**Move Plan**
Staff met with Steven Wayward from Corrigan Moving Company in August to create a plan for the movement of artifacts that would be required for this project. It resulted in a preliminary logistics plan and timeline as well as a proposed budget to relocate artifacts within the CARC building while the cabinetry installation happens. Corrigan would then return the artifacts to their permanent storage under the supervision of GRPM Collections Management staff.

**Project Budget**
An itemized budget for implementing this plan was developed through work with suppliers and contractors.

**Project Results and Dissemination:**
The project resulted in a schematic design that addressed three main concerns 1. The need for cabinetry to replace broken, poor condition and non-archival quality storage for sustainable and long-term preservation 2. Conserving space at CARC for the growing collection and 3. Creating safe and open spaces for increased visitor capacity at CARC to research and tour the collections.
Improved Museum Archival Preservation and Access Planning Grant

Concept Design

Grand Rapids Public Museum
Proposed Lobby

Collection Database access via touchscreen.

Research station

Lobby to be tiled in GR City Hall tiles
View from Lobby into Modular Research Space
View from Museum School door looking into Modular Research Space
View from elevator/stairs looking into Modular Research Space
View from classroom looking into proposed Processing Room
Overview Proposed Processing Room (Left)
Freezer (Center)
Proposed Science Labs (Right)
2nd Floor - Room 145 Proposed Storage Plan

- Compact Storage
  - 04- new grey - existing

- Visible Storage
  - Glass Lid
  - Drawers

- Flat Files
  - Stacked in 4's & 2's

- Visual Storage
  - 10 - 54" wide & 16 - 36" wide
Room 145 Grand Rapids Press Compact Storage