'A statement of us': With a new building, the Milwaukee Public Museum aims to redefine narratives and create new community spaces

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Published 12:55 p.m. CT Dec. 22, 2021

At full height, Ellen Censky, president and chief executive officer of the Milwaukee Public Museum, stands eye-to-eye with the glasses-rimmed eyes and white, bushy-haired brows depicted in Samuel A. Barrett's portrait in her wood-paneled office.

The two figures from separate generations have a lot in common.

Barrett, who served as director of the museum from 1921 to 1939 and before that its first curator of anthropology, sought to build a more authentic museum experience by consulting with local communities in the creation of the museum's pioneering life-sized dioramas.

Like Barrett before her, Censky once again wants to get Wisconsin's community voices front and center in the process of reconceptualizing the museum.

While plans are underway to relocate the museum and rebuild it and its collections from the ground up by 2026, Censky must deal with the museum's current struggles, including: re-envisioning its collections, looming financial struggles, possible loss of its accreditation, and problems with the structural integrity of the current building, including potential flooding of exhibits and collections.

With the new reconfiguration of the museum and increased community input in the new designs, the hope is to redefine what a museum for Wisconsinites really means and what it can represent in the present day.

"It's really museums now starting to learn where authority lies, and what is our role in the 21st century?" Censky said. "Having worked in museums for 45 years, it's something that I
don't think we've even thought about and now we're being challenged to think about it or to lose our relevancy."

**Financial fears, reaccreditation and a crumbling museum**

The Milwaukee Public Museum, which officially opened its doors in 1884, houses roughly 4 million artifacts and objects from across the state, globe and even outer space, as well as functioning as an active research laboratory that collaborates with universities.

Due to structural neglect and deferred maintenance in excess of $15 million, the museum is preparing to relocate for the fourth time in its history and also to downsize.

Without a moisture barrier or insulation and with sewer pipes carrying water and waste right above priceless geological collections, the building would likely be unprepared for a or any sort of catastrophic event.

"These conditions are threatening our ability to care for the collections as well as affecting the visitors' experience," Censky explained to the County Board's Parks, Energy and Environment Committee on Dec. 7.

As such, the museum could lose its accreditation by June 2022, as the current building is "utterly inadequate to meet even the most minimal standards of care for the collections," according to Evans Richardson, chair of the Accreditation Commission at the American Alliance of Museums.

That loss of accreditation would bar the museum from hosting touring exhibits — a big revenue source. It also would cut off grants from the federal government.

For now, the museum's fate lies in the hands of its reconceptualization and relocation to West McKinley Avenue and North Sixth Street — just north of Fiserv Forum's parking structure. Its current deteriorating home, which opened in 1963, is at 800 W. Wells St.

The proposed $240 million project has already received $40 million from the state.

Censky says it needs $45 million from the county before the museum can ramp up a $150 million private fundraising campaign. Another $5 million is expected from federal sources.

The County Board is expected to vote on that funding request in early 2022.
"I'm confident that we'll get through this, but we won't if we're left in the (current) building," Censky said.

'A statement of us — Milwaukee and Wisconsin'

With the help of more than a dozen designers, as well as Censky and her staff, the goal has been to go back to the drawing board in an effort to re-invent the museum for its newly designed 230,000-square-foot space.

The museum will incorporate the intersection of nature and culture and community, as well as the connection between architecture and design, with the hopes of making the museum a future community space.

"I want people that go there to say this is mine. This is my home," said Todd Schliemann, one of the designers for the new Milwaukee Public Museum. "I want it to be a statement of us — Milwaukee and Wisconsin."

Wanting to bring the museum into the 21st century and, in turn, incorporate the voices from communities across the state, the team embarked on a seven-day, 30-stop tour of some of Wisconsin's most unique geological and cultural sites in September.

All of the stops included conversations with local communities and experts, which ranged from meeting tribal leaders to visiting cranberry festivals, from learning about the history of ginseng farms to exploring the state's northernmost islands and state parks.

One stop was at UW-Madison's Native American Cultural Landscape Tour, which tells the importance of indigenous languages and histories and engaging with Wisconsin's First Nations.

Omar Poler, the university's Indigenous Education Coordinator, said he appreciated the team involving indigenous voices in the process, as historically Native American communities have faced many stereotypes and even erasure in society throughout history.

"Any attempts to kind of raise general understanding and knowledge is a really good thing and especially when it's engaging directly with native peoples and communities and helping them tell their own stories," Poler said.

All of the information and feedback collected along their travels will be incorporated throughout the design and building process, according to the team.
The museum has also most recently carried out workshops with local residents and persons with disabilities and organizations that work with them.

**What can we expect to see?**

The black, orange and cream Numata longwing butterfly was quick to land on Censky's red and black cardigan, as she stood pointing to the weekly shipment of now-hatching chrysalides from Cuba incubated and displayed behind glass.

While the collections are still being re-evaluated as the museum has started the process of decreasing inventory, the butterfly exhibit — one of the museum's most popular attractions — as well as its dinosaurs are definite to remain, according to Censky. The museum has also confirmed the incorporation of a planetarium in the new building.

As for the other millions of artifacts, planners are unsure which will be moved and displayed at the new site in roughly four years. But the process of categorizing, digitizing and barcoding all of the artifacts will help slowly identify what will be relocated to museum's new home.

"Digitizing helps us to organize all those records so that when we pack them, we now scan the code, we know the QR code, we know what's in the box, we know that we packed them in a way that protects each of them so that they come out the same way they went in," Censky said.

"It's just a long process," she added. "We don't know what's going and what's not. We do know whatever goes is going to be reinterpreted."

Milwaukee County owns the museum's collections and those items will be be moved to the new museum even if they aren't planned for display. Decisions on a myriad of other exhibit items and props remain.

The displays and dioramas that have heavily featured information on and artifacts from statewide indigenous communities will be reworked, incorporating the voices and expertise that come about during the conversations with tribal leaders.

"That's the one thing that we plan to do in the new museum is really make sure that those stories are shared from the perspectives of the cultures that we're talking about," Censky said.

The museum said it will be starting up conversations again with the tribes involved in the original creation of the exhibit "A Tribute to Survival," which currently features a
contemporary powwow and other aspects of contemporary American Indian life on reservations and urban landscapes.

"We're using the past to inform the present and to talk about the future," Censky said. "It's utilizing what we have to go a step further."

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