



Museums in Strange Places
**“Why We Work: Improving the Way Museums Work at The
Baltimore Museum of Industry”**
(S02/E07)

Episode Description: Located in a waterfront 1860s oyster cannery in the Baltimore Harbor, The Baltimore Museum of Industry is trying to inspire and engage their visitors around the concept of work by telling the stories of historical workers. But in order to better fulfill this mission, the museum has to be constantly re-evaluating themselves and their assumptions about work. In this episode, I talk to staffers Beth Maloney and Auni Gelles about how an experimental interactive and a new job description are pushing the museum beyond more traditional education and interpretation methods.

This episode is sponsored by [Grove History Consulting](#).

Music in this episode is by The Bumper Jacksons, off their new album, *I Never Met a Stranger*.

Hannah (Scripted): *Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I’m your host, Hannah Hethmon, a consultant specializing in podcasting for museums and cultural nonprofits.*

Museums are the keepers of our history and culture, but they are also reflections of who we are now. In each season of this podcast, I explore a different country, state, or region through its museums. In Season 1, I traveled around Iceland, and now I’m visiting the museums of Maryland, my home state, to discover how they reflect and shape this state’s unique identity.

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Hannah (Scripted): *There are a few things that people all over the world have in common....one is that we all have to work. Whether we are growing food, developing software, writing parking tickets, repairing shoes, building spaceships, or taking care of children at home, work is a universal. But it's also something that can be very unique to our culture, region, or class. Exploring which work is available and valued in a place can tell us a lot about that place's people and culture.*

Located in a waterfront 1860s oyster cannery in the Baltimore Harbor, The Baltimore Museum of Industry is doing just that....From a port that was once a global hub for shipping, travel, and immigration, they are telling the stories of Baltimore's workers, the industries that employed them, and the companies born out of the region's fierce entrepreneurial spirit. Their mission is to inspire tomorrow's worker by celebrating yesterday's worker.

I pulled into the museum campus on a blistering hot Monday...the kind of pavement-melting day that made me feel grateful this museum was indoors.

The BMI is closed to visitors on Mondays, but Beth Maloney and Auni Gelles had offered to show me around anyway....that's one of the perks of this podcast...private tours and having museums all to myself. After grabbing lunch together at the Cuban place down the street, we headed back to the museum, and Beth and Auni showed me all around the museum's themed displays.....taking me into the main street shop, the oyster cannery, the textile workshop, the horseradish manufacturer, the automobile age, and many other beautiful settings that are used to help visitors imagine what it was like to work and shop in historic Baltimore.

The Baltimore Museum of Industry is all about connecting visitors to the past, but they know that in order to this, they need to—paradoxically—think forward and find new ways to museum, to engage their community, and to inspire all of us to think more deeply about work. And that's what I was there to talk about with Beth and Auni.

Beth Maloney: *I'm Beth Maloney, I'm the Director of Interpretation here at the Baltimore Museum of Industry. So I work with the team that develops programs and is thinking about visitors and their experiences here in the museum.*

Auni Gelles: And my name is Auni Gelles. I'm the community programs manager here at the BMI. I came on board last year, last May and I help plan our public programs including our farmer's market and do some community outreach.

Beth: So, I guess I a year ago, I had this opportunity to kind of join my life here at the museum with what I also do, which is teach through the program useums and society at Johns Hopkins University. That's an undergraduate program. Um, and we sort of had this idea of creating an interactive space at the museum, and doing that over the course of a semester with undergrads.

Hannah (Scripted): *This is Beth, telling me about an experimental space she developed in the heart of the museum's more traditional exhibits:*

So I sort of started the fall semester last year with, um, a really blank slate. I knew I had this temporary gallery and I knew I had some students interested in museums. And we had a syllabus that was chocked full of readings and guest speakers and field trips and research and sort of, the hope, the blind faith that something compelling would come from a semester's worth of work. Um, so we sorta started off in the classroom thinking about what makes a good interactive space in the museum...not just in museums; in other spaces as well.

We spoke with folks at museums here in Baltimore. We brought in some folks who are doing exhibit development other places. And then we came down here to the museum and the students went into our archives and went on tours and spent time in the gallery thinking about work and what this museum is about. By the middle of the semester, they settled on this idea of trying to create a space of the museum that was really about people. So centering the experience of real people. Um, and also thinking about today. So what is it like to work today? Because you know, we've gone on this tour, Hannah, and you've seen, we do a beautiful job, a really interesting job of, of talking about like the past and we have these really gorgeous and compelling interior workspaces. But, again, where are the people?

So with these ideas in mind, the Hopkins students then partnered with some students from the Maryland Institute College of Art and their professor, Jeremy Hoffman. And those MICA students, those art students came up with nine different designs for a space that would help sort of tell that story about people and contemporary work experience. And so with the Hopkins Students, they sort of came up with this blueprint for what they wanted to see. And the semester ended. And then in January we were sort of, we were tasked with....and we were lucky enough to have funding from the Mellon Foundation to actually do what the students had envisioned.

Hannah (Scripted): *You enter the experimental space from a big, open gallery filled with neon signs and other artifacts of 20th century industry. Unlike the rest of the space, the outside of the student's gallery is strikingly contemporary. The exterior wall is gray with the words Why We Work in bold black and yellow lettering. The inside of the gallery is painted a bright yellow. It's small a room, about 15 x 15 feet or 4.5 x4.5 meters. The wall visible from the doorway is covered in grid of large unlabeled portraits of people at work, some in color, some historical. The other walls are home to huge interactive infographics covered in colorful dots.*

One element here that's really powerful and really gets at that idea of people is this portrait wall. There are 16, uh, historic images is pulled from the Library of Congress, from the museum's collection, from the photographs of [NAME?], that are all pictures of Working People here in Baltimore. And they're all pictures where you're really like centered in on the person. Like you maybe see the background of their work environment, but really these are portraits.

Hannah: Yeah. They feel more like portraits in an art gallery than kind of the images you might see small with a lot of text in a history museum typically.

Beth: Yeah. And then, um, the students really wanted us to pair those historic images with contemporary images. And luckily, Jeremy, the MICA professor, was connected to a photographer, a local photographer named Christopher Myers. And so he opened up his whole archive to us to cull through and think about which images we'd like to pull and there are 16 color images, contemporary images of people working in Baltimore that are, and they're all kind of mixed up together to sort of show in this one on this one wall, the faces of working people. I think it's a real, like a draw. So you walk past the gallery and you peek in and bam, you see these pictures of real people looking right at you. So that's a real draw.

Now the other big element here is an interactive, and the students really wanted something that would be an interactive that visitors could build together so that like people would come and do something, and then over the course of time, all their responses, all their comments, all their, their votes would create, like this thing would create this big message. And so walk into the gallery and your first, your first opportunity is to take a sticker sheet, with a category that you feel best describes the kind of work that you do. And some of the categories are culture/creative, trades, manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality, technology, military, government. You take that sticker sheet and on the sheet, um, are three dots and they're color coded. So I have this culture creative sticker sheet in my hand and it's lime green.

And then you use those three dots to answer three questions that are like full on the wall, like cover the entire wall. Um, the first question is what is your favorite time of the workday? Um, and the options are the start of your work day, lunch, your break, the end of the workday. And so use your sticker to make your mark, to leave your mark, to plot your, to plot your answer.

Hannah (Scripted): *Identifying yourself by your trade or field is the first action you are prompted to take. The sticker sheets, which are really nicely designed by the way, have instructions on what to do with your sticker dots.*

And so as each person places a dot color coded to their industry in the square on the wall corresponding to their answer, the white infographic fills in with colorful data, letting you know how different people feel about their workday.

We started with this one because the students felt like, you know, let's start with something that's, that's, you know, kind of concrete, kind of easy. You know, not the stakes aren't too high. The second question is "Describe your current work in one word." And on the wall there are different options. Like rewarding, fun, safe, purposeful, interesting, boring, draining, stressful, toxic, disappointing. And these words actually were words that, when we tested out this prompt, describe your current work, your current work in one word, our visitors actually wrote some of these words. This was what people people told us. And this is an interesting one in that like it seems like, well you can't really make general assumptions I guess, but you know, sort of all over the place. But it seems like a lot of our visitors find their work rewarding, fun, purposeful and interesting, more so maybe than toxic or disappointing, though there are a lot of dots down there on stressful and draining.

Hannah: There's a lot of them on stressful. But then mostly on the other ones it's like a positive. So I wonder if they're just feeling like maybe there's an impulse to describe your job positively or to not like complain. I don't know. I mean, but that's all part of work culture. So that's something interesting to think about.

Beth: Yeah, I definitely think it's something interesting to think about and I feel like, you know, one of the sort of tests that we, that some folks, you know suggested that we do and then we experienced in person was that if these prompts, you know, get people talking. If they, you know, they're not like dead end streets, that that's a good sign. And sure enough in here, I feel like people get talking about the answers that they're, the stickers that they're placing.

And the last wall is "What motivates you at work?" And this one's a little bit, this one has like a lot of different options for what you, what you might choose. Things like responsibility, people, accomplishment, creativity, learning, ownership, money, accountability, deadlines, recognition.

And this one, it's interesting, I feel like hopefully they'll take a picture of it, but you sort of see a whole lot of those hospitality, military, government folks over here, they've chosen service. We can tell by the color of the dots. And of course creativity is, yeah covered with those greens.

Hannah (Scripted): *The answers for the first two questions are a fairly even mix of colors. It's almost as if one's industry doesn't have much effect on what time of the workday you prefer or how you feel about your job....but when you come to the motivation question, you can see differences start to emerge in how different industries respond. For example, people who work in the military have by and large chosen service as their motivator, leaving their light blue dots in that answer space, while learning is filled with the dark green dots of educators and the pale yellow dots of people who identified their work as culture/creative.*

Hannah: Okay. So you could really think about this for a long time.

Beth: For me, I just want people to linger in this space.

And you've got these, you got these really cool little hexagonal cushions and chairs that you could kind of lay on or sit on and play in. And so in the carpets, the floors carpeted, which is the rest is like concrete. So you could sit in here and I would come and sit here cause my feet always hurt in museums. Um, you're nodding at me cause you're pregnant.

Auni: We hear that from a lot of our visitors. It's like, what can we do to improve and they're like "add more chairs."

Hannah: But so, so it, it does invite you in. It's a, it's a little cozier to sit and linger for a while. I imagine. I would just going to look at the dots and the pictures. Yeah.

Beth: And for me, honestly, this was this, this was a huge learning experience for me to work on this exhibit. I mean it was really big and part of that I think was just trying to like, let go of like my own ideas about what would this space look like and just lean in to letting students drive what they wanted to explore here. And then trusting visitors, you know, with, um, when we tested out these prompts, what might work and trusting my design partners, the students and Jeremy Hoffman, and you know, really just kind of letting the project grow on its own. But I just feel so proud of it and I feel so lucky that you wanted to come by and take a look at it.

Hannah (Scripted): *Now it was Auni Gelles' turn to explain how her new position at the museum was put in place to help reimagine the education department and make public programming more about engaging people with the museum and its mission and less about making money.*

But first I want to tell you about this episode's sponsor: Grove History Consulting:

As you may know, podcasts require a huge time investment. This show is no exception. And traveling to museums costs money. If I didn't have sponsors, I wouldn't be able to keep episodes coming out. That's why I'm so grateful to Grove History Consulting for helping to keep Museums in Strange Places going. Grove History Consulting empowers history organizations to demonstrate their relevance and define their impact through exhibition development, education strategy, and writing. Tim Grove has been described as one of the most engaging, innovative, and entrepreneurial leaders in our field. He has years of deep experience in public history work, and is the co-founder of the History Relevance Initiative. I had the privilege to work with Tim on several history projects during my time at the American Association for State and Local History, and can personally recommend Grove History Consulting to any history organization looking to develop more effective education programs and engage visitors with relevant exhibitions. Learn more about Grove History Consulting's services and Tim's qualifications at GroveHistoryConsulting.com."

Auni: Previously the BMI had a good suite of public programs, but they were more development focused, like revenue generating, which was an important function for a museum. And it wasn't really no one's dedicated job. So a few of the folks in education department helped and someone over in our administration building that had more of a development background. But when I was brought on board about a year ago, we kind of reimaged it...or I wasn't part of that process...but Beth and the team, reimaged it as part of the education department.

So our public programs really serving the mission of the museum and talking about, you know, using our galleries as a starting place and really exploring contemporary issues and, you know, trying to kind of stay on the heartbeat of the issues. And then also thinking about the community here in South Baltimore, in Baltimore city, in Maryland generally. What is our role? Who is our community? I would say we haven't necessarily come up with a single answer for that, but it's something we think about a lot and try to ask visitors, you know, where are you coming from? How did you hear about us? Whether it's people from the neighborhood or people from across town or the whole state or visitors from out of state who have experiences with work, which is basically everyone, um, you know, how are we serving them and how, how does this relate to their life?

It is exciting to, to have this new role and to be thinking about things that haven't really been answered. And something that I'm kind of interested in doing is more kind of data collection or surveys of trying to figure out who, who's coming, how did they hear about it, you know... is their interest history? Is it a specific industry? Like say printing, perhaps they are really into the

linotype machine and they're here specifically for that. Um, but then we also have a farmer's market here on Saturdays. And so that, that caters to a pretty different audience than someone say coming to a lecture about the port of Baltimore. You know, it's perhaps not a big history buff, but someone who lives across the street and just need some vegetables. So, I think that is helpful to reach a really different audience and especially a really local one.

And we're inviting them to come onto our campus. Eventually, hopefully they'll get inside and then see we have, you know, programs for kids or you know, a range of different programs that might, that might interest them. Even if they think industry means, oh, we're only talking about steel and shipbuilding and yeah, exactly. Like no, industry means lots of different things and we do try to bring it up to the present. So hopefully everyone has a connection.

Hannah: I think it's, it's significant you're talking about and she had a lot of people are talking about in the field that we can't just assume what people want. We can't assume that people want lots of text or assume that people want to just see objects without text or assume people want to touch stuff or assume people want to. Whenever you have to, you'll have to ask and find out. Otherwise you're just going to be doing like you have no idea. You could be missing a whole group of people or people could not be having the experience..... you won't know until you ask and you look.

Hannah: So what are, what has been kind of one of the biggest successes in your role in this new role in the last year?

Auni: Well, um, I think one project that's been really interesting is our visitor kiosk, which was in the garment loft where we're able to ask up to three questions at a time. And that was something that started as an idea last summer. We, the education department, which is four or five people sat around, kind of sketched it out. A volunteer built it in like a week. It was just very basic. We're just like, you know, let's just do this, go for it. And we are able to be really flexible and Nimble and say, oh, did you read this really interesting article was ask a question about it. And sometimes we keep questions up for a longer period of time. Like we asked how can we improve The Baltimore Museum of Industry? And that's kind of an evergreen question. It was interesting to hear what people said, like "more chairs," you know, just really basic stuff that like perhaps we're, we've forgotten. But then also topical things or a related to specific galleries. Like what's your favorite artifact in this gallery or this exhibition? Or we asked that about this room, the communications gallery, and people really did actually respond to the prompt. It's not... we do get thousands of school kids, but I think the rate of staying on track, like answering the question was pretty high. There weren't a lot of like, you know, it's just silly like obviously a nine year old goofing around with his friends kind of responses. People do, you know, actually respond. So to see in, in like obviously kids' handwriting, what their answers are.

That is really cool. And I have typed all of the answers up in one giant document, it's like over 50 pages now. So, you know, literally reading and transcribing everyone's response, um, has been really illuminating and kind of surprising sometimes. It's not necessarily what I would have thought, but again, I'm not all visitors, so there's no way I would know what they're thinking without literally asking them.

Hannah: And what has been the biggest failure?

Auni: There are certain things that we think is interesting like among staff or perhaps gets a lot of press coverage but the public just does not show up. And so clearly, I don't know if it's the format, the timing, the topic.

Hannah: Like what?

Auni: We had a panel discussion about the gig economy last year. I was like, oh, it's like really hot topic. And like all these millennials will have opinions about like driving Uber or having second jobs or freelancing or whatever. And I think there were 12 people total and that included Beth and myself and the director of the museum. And then like some of the...there were like four panelists and like their spouses and that was pretty much everyone...no members of the public came.

Beth: However, I will say, you know, the people who came got a ton out of it. And I mean, and I actually, in terms of relationship building, you've gone back to some of those folks and involved them at other programs or you know, reached out to their networks. So it wasn't, I don't consider it a loss. I really don't.

Hannah: There's a difference in a failure and a loss. So failure can be positive, right?

Beth: I think we did learn something. Um, but again, I do, I do feel like the networking that happened with 12 people was pretty great networking.

Hannah: Because it didn't go according to plan. But you may have seen a different need than you thought existed. You saw the need for a conference. They saw the need for a working group or a networking event.

Auni: And I think, um, another challenge for me has been, when we are trying to get the public in here, I'm working with like food trucks and vendors and you know, inviting these like local small businesses to come participate in our programs. And I think the museum field operates pretty differently than like say the restaurant industry. And so, you know, I'm like trying to

make these reservations like six months in advance and you know, trying to be, you know, really make a plan, have it all concrete and then, you know, like their truck breaks down and they can't come. And then I'm like, well that was my only food vendor. So like what's, what do you mean? And you know, like, because in the museum it's like, what's going to break down? Like we're not going to cancel something, you know. So just kind of managing expectations and thinking about, okay, we're trying to make these....build bridges with different types of people in different industries and yeah, not all of them, like think months in advance or put out there printed program brochure, you know, for the full next season. Like, we need to be more flexible I think with working with them and coming to them and also being prepared, perhaps by inviting more than one to events because stuff happens and I get that.

Hannah: So what's something, what's the big thing that you hope you can try in the next year or that you hope will, will come out of your planning? So what's, what's the big thing that'll be hopefully a success next year?

Auni: Well I'm going to be out of the office for three months...

Hannah (Scripted): *Auni is very pregnant when I visit, and so her immediate goals are to make sure everything runs smoothly while she's on maternity leave.*

Since recording this episode, Auni had her baby, who is very fittingly named Edison and is objectively adorable. Beth had the idea to ease Auni's transition back to work after maternity leave by giving her a private office so she could bring Edison into work once a week. They would argue that being a mother and having her baby nearby makes Auni a better educator because she is hyper aware of the needs of families.

Auni: But in terms of like more thematic things, I think leaning into, we've had some hands on workshops for adults, so not just your traditional lecture, which are great and we've had some really successful ones, but thinking about skills that adults can walk away from the museum with. So we had like a intro to machine sewing. We had a quilting, we had a printmaking workshop. We've talked about a podcasting workshop. We're talking about doing a hand-lettering workshop since, you know, sign painting is kind of a tradition and an industry. We had a photography workshop. We've got this great garment loft, so more textile apparel manufacturing, that sort of thing. Kind of using the galleries as an inspiration and then connecting them to contemporary skills that people want to do either for work or maybe it's just a skill that they think would be interesting.

So leaning into that more and looking for new ideas and working with these craftspeople, it's been super fun and it's a really good format because it, they're really small. Like our quilting

and machine sewing once were six people. So they get to know each other really well. They have this great experience. Sometimes they're intergenerational, like mothers and daughters doing it together. And then they walk away with like a finished product. And they think of the BMI sometimes in a new or different way. Or sometimes it's people who've never been here, but they heard, oh, I really want to take this class.

Hannah: So that works more like a community center, what's on offer, which is, is very different than the traditional museum where it's, you come and look and go away. You don't, you may learn, but it's a different kind of learning. So that's very interesting. Yeah. I look forward to coming back in a year and seeing was on.

Auni: Yeah. Yeah. So we'll see if you have any ideas or if your listeners have any ideas for different skills. Um, you know, we're, we're always open to new ideas. All right, awesome. Cool.

At the Baltimore Museum of Industry, they have exhibits and programs that showcase industries and brands unique to the Chesapeake Bay area, like oysters, tobacco stripping, Old Bay Spice, and Tulkoff's Horseradish. What would a museum of work look like in your home region? What industries would it showcase? What products would folks learn about? What contemporary issues and ideas around work would it tackle? Let me know via email, Twitter, or Instagram. I'm on social media as @Hannah_rfh

Thanks for joining me on this adventure as I explore Maryland's museums. Today's episode was sponsored by Grove History Consulting. If you enjoy Museums in Strange Places, please help me keep it going by leaving a review on iTunes or sharing this episode with a friend.

The two featured songs in this episode are "Many Paths to the Top of the Mountain" and "Old Birds" by Baltimore locals, The Bumper Jacksons, off their new album I've Never Met a Stranger. You can find more music by The Bumper Jacksons, photos of The Baltimore Museum of Industry, and more information on the topics discussed on my website, hhethmon.com

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