

ARCS 2015 Biennial Conference Session Review

What to Expect When You're Expanding: Pitfalls, Solutions and How to Manage Your Move

Presenters:

Athena Smith, Center for Puppetry Arts
Katherine Steiner from the Mint Museum
Scott Pittman, Bonsai Fine Arts

Review Submitted by:

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Successful collection moves are the product of good project planning and expecting the unexpected, such were the themes of this session. Athena Smith and Katherine Steiner gave an overview of their recent collection moves which occurred during a time of expansion and collection growth at their respective institutions. Scott Pittman, who worked with the Mint Museum during their move gave his insight into the role of the professional packing and transport team in context with the planning process.

The speakers' recommendations for a successful collection move are summarized below.

1. Participate in the Institutional Plan

As both museum speakers recognized, their collection moves were part of a broader institutional expansion. Under these circumstances, both speakers stressed the importance of being part of the institutional planning process from the outset and to "dream big" to maximize the opportunities that may come your way in terms of space, furnishings, improvements or donations. Being part of the broader conversation advocates for the collection but ensures that mutual needs from different areas of the institution also come to light.

Being proactive in the institutional planning process may also help anticipate and minimize disruption to collections operations by being aware of construction or renovation plans and time frames. Meeting with the construction crew and discussing the construction or renovation plans and the commissioning period of the new space are valuable conversations that may prevent issues further down the line. Acquiring a copy of the architectural and mechanical plans in advance of construction may also prevent significant physical barriers from suddenly appearing that will impact collection access to hallways, doors or even exhibition halls. More importantly, understanding the design parameters of any HVAC system will allow you to anticipate the preservation impact of its operation. Knowing the construction schedule is also advantageous from a budgetary perspective where large scale purchases of moving equipment, packing materials or hiring external consultants could potentially be staged across fiscal years.

Another aspect of being part of broader conversation is to understand which areas of the museum will have priority in terms of minimal disruption to normal operations. The Center for Puppetry Arts minimized its disruption to visitors by having the gift shop up and running before most collection storage spaces were ready. Rightly or wrongly these institutional priorities had an impact on the collection move that could have been minimized if they were known from the outset. One final recommendation, in terms of participating in an institutional planning process, is to plan ahead and state any adjustments to regular collections operations including donation moratoriums, loan processing, research requests and all other collection projects. These plans may require working with your communications team to ensure that donors, researchers and visitors are given accurate and honest information including time frames which also take into account the time for unpacking after the move has taken place.

2. Identify Limitations and Working With Them

In terms of collections, there could be no greater need during a move than to adequately plan on which spaces are going to be used, how each space will be used and whether each space will even be accessible. Accessibility must also be considered in terms of installation as well as de-installation in case regular access routes will be inaccessible or severely reduced during construction or renovation. As previously mentioned, knowing the construction plans in advance allows collection staff to prioritize which pieces or crates will be moved first based on accessibility or whether some pieces will have to stay in situ and be appropriately wrapped, labelled and secured. For the Center of Puppetry Arts, the physical limitations of the heritage building had an impact on their collection move because of reduced hallway widths, lower door heights and also inadequate elevator dimensions and weight restrictions. These physical limitations required careful measurement (down to the millimetre!) and creative solutions including hiring mobile cranes to lift crates out of the building because they were unable to be turn around corners. For the Mint Museum, their loading dock was particularly challenging and required tractor trailer tests to ensure that collection items could even be delivered via this route. Both institutions handled the need for photography and conservation differently with the choice to either perform this work internally in either a dedicated or ad hoc space, or to outsource because of both space and staffing limitations.

Collection moves typically require more staff than what is available especially when collections are moved externally and therefore require both a receiving and delivering crew. Both speakers handled this issue in two distinct ways. The Center of Puppetry Arts combined bringing in interns and allowing time for their training, cross-training other staff from other departments and bringing in a “registrar reinforcement crew” of external professional staff to assist when necessary. Staff were provided with access to Drop Box Pro (an affordable and easily accessible platform) to upload photographs and move documentation which the registrar could then process when time permitted. The Mint Museum divided their team by task and also hired external art packers which significantly reduced the stress on staff by having a team of experienced and trained workers to perform the critical tasks and who were also responsible for ordering and monitoring supplies and having the right tools and

equipment on hand. As Scott discussed, using external agents does not relinquish control over the task, in fact using external agents provides greater control and confidence over time frames and budgets because of the prior experience these external agents bring to the project. All speakers emphasized the need to monitor staff time appropriately in context with working conditions and weather to prevent injury or burn out and to ensure that breaks are taken and that snacks and water are also available.

3. Develop a Standardized Method of Practice for the Life of the Move

Applying a robust and institution specific labelling procedure when moving collections cannot be underestimated in terms of performing a successful move. Most collection moves provide an opportunity to improve upon the existing storage or labelling systems and these should be incorporated into the move from the beginning if possible. The Center for Puppetry Arts for example aimed to future proof their collection arrangement by grouping the puppets by region while the Mint Museum standardized their box and shelf labels. Both speakers created and applied a color coding labelling system and location map for their collection move. Color coding is a particularly useful technique for fast sorting especially if items need to go for conservation, photography, off-site, high priority etc. The Mint Museum applied colored tape on their boxes while the Center for Puppetry Arts used “Post It” notes. However, most members of the audience expressed caution about using color coding systems particularly to ensure that the system does not extend beyond the life of the collection move because it may confuse future projects or documentation. Further, audience members urged caution at applying “Post It” notes because of how easily these tags fall off or even transfer onto nearby boxes. Moreover, the soluble dye in these labels is well known to run when wet and can potentially cause irreversible damage to collection material. Another audience member discouraged color coding from the simple perspective of having collection staff who were color blind, instead this audience member proposed using a letter coding system.

From the perspective of the art packer, using standardizing box and pallet sizes facilitates a collection move and gives greater control over budget. Standardized boxes are particularly useful for planning shelf sizing, conducting storage estimates, formatting standardized labels and determining the size and quantity of trucks needed. In addition to standardized boxes, the Mint Museum also applied standardized “L” pallets for oversized objects and groups of paintings. The design of the “L” pallet allows for objects to be strapped to one vertical support in addition to the floor of the pallet and gives an open view of the object which allows quick identification and a visual indication as to how this item should be handled. The concept and application of these pallets was particularly impressive and could be used to move a variety of collection materials.

4. Embrace the Unexpected

All speakers acknowledged that the amount of time and effort put into the initial planning phase of a collection move had a significant impact on the final outcome as measured by budget, resources and time. But, all speakers emphasised that being both flexible and resourceful in the face of unforeseen circumstances contributed to

the success of their moves. Missed construction deadlines or running out of space were two issues that had the biggest impact on each move respectively. For the Center for Puppetry Arts, the impact of construction delays led to overcrowding in storage areas which was partially resolved by using mobile shelving units or putting wheels on crates so items could be moved quickly. For both institutions, repurposing previously defined collection spaces was the main resolution to storage shortage although it was not exactly desirable from a location tracking perspective which had to be modified at short notice.

The final recommendations from both speakers were probably the most valuable because of how easily they can be overlooked: incorporating emergency preparedness into your collection move and allocating time for unpacking after the move. Even though collection moves are largely controlled by collection staff, they usually occur within the larger context of an institutional expansion or renovation which adds additional risk to an already high risk undertaking. Risks from vibration, dust, water, temperature or RH shifts, movement, fire or theft are significantly increased during construction or renovation so it is important that disaster kits are well stocked and that the emergency preparedness plan is up to date and everyone working on the move has received some training in the emergency management plan. Moreover, as mentioned, construction delays or inappropriate new spaces may introduce new risks that were previously controlled e.g. security and access, which means that different components of the emergency plan may need to be implemented until the risk is lowered to an acceptable level i.e. introduce security patrols rather than remote monitoring. It is important therefore that emergency preparedness is included in any collection move budget both for preventative and response purposes and that a risk assessment is included in the collection move plan.

Finally, it is easy to overlook the plan for unpacking especially when a collection move is done at short notice. Trash removal also needs to be managed especially if materials are going to be stored for future use or recycled to other institutions. It is important to include a budget allocation for the continuation of the project including hiring staff (preferably those that performed the move) and to hire any necessary equipment. Collection moves produce a significant amount of work in addition to the regular workload of collection staff so having additional staff available to unpack, update locations, process photographs, file condition reports etc is important for finalizing the move and allow collection staff to return to their regular duties.

The recommendations from this session on planning a successful move were well presented, extremely comprehensive and applicable to institutions both large and small, and I thank the ARCS Board and Cooke's Crating & Fine Art Transportation Inc for providing me with the opportunity to participate in this session and to attend the 2015 biennial conference.