



# Innovation in Action

Three Case Studies from the Intersections of Arts  
& Social Justice in EmcArts' *Innovation Labs*:

Featuring: Alternate ROOTS, Hull-House Museum and The Theater Offensive

PREPARED BY:





## PROJECT SUMMARY

In 2014, a team from the [Jane Addams Hull-House Museum](#) at the University of Illinois, Chicago set out to question the assumption that more and faster actions in cultural practices are always better. They asked, instead: What would happen if a cultural institution and the cultural workers within embraced a different notion of community impact—one based on the assumption of “slowness?” Inspired by the slow food movement, a team from the Hull-House Museum used the EmcArts *Innovation Lab* process to prototype a new approach to community engagement they called the “Porch Project” to connect more deeply to their surrounding community and to their legacy as a space for service, education, and advocacy for immigrants and low-income residents. In effect, the porch at Hull House turned the museum’s wall inside out, and became the site for both curated and informal programs that exponentially expanded the range of experiences for visitors to [the museum](#).



— The Hull-House Museum front porch, which was activated through the Porch Project





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Responsiveness and speed have become, perhaps erroneously, conflated through the professionalization of community-based work.

— Maribel Alvarez, Hull-House Museum Profile Wri

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— Students from the Merit School of Music performed for their parents, evoking Hull House's historic music programs from the turn of the century.



# INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

In common usage, the phrase “slow down” can express the ambivalence Americans generally feel towards the marriage of time and enterprise. Spoken in the stern tone of a parent to a child, the meaning is usually virtuous: “*Slow down...you are going too fast to pay attention to what really matters.*” Invoked by talking heads in cable news shows, the words can, ostensibly, suggest trouble: “*this week we saw a significant slow-down in the NASDAQ.*”

As a society with roots in Anglo-Saxon Puritan ethics, Americans tend to have mixed feelings about the notion of slowness. On the one hand, we value slowness as an emblem of confidence; we presume that success comes to those who are focused and steady. Fast talkers and “nervous” energy largely breed distrust. On the other hand, we admire swift actions: opportunities have to be *seized*; procrastination is frowned upon, and conventional wisdom tells us that rewards accrue to decisive risk-takers, and permeate every part of our lives, including the way we conduct business.

Although not always explicitly acknowledged, most nonprofit business development models are predicated on the assumption of speedy actions. Stasis is largely considered a symptom of trouble or stagnation: for example, a fractured board, an indecisive executive, or a “set-in-their-ways staff” that causes the institution to move slowly. Organizations whose mandate requires being responsive to community needs has usually meant going beyond the call of duty to add programs that address the latest community issues: a police shooting of a young Black man, an imminent economic collapse, an environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, for example. Responsiveness and speed have become, perhaps erroneously, conflated through the professionalization of community-based work.

The actions that emerge out of these grassroots mobilizations—usually artist-driven—often occur without the benefit of designated grants or set-aside

funds. The work that artists and cultural workers put into spontaneous, energizing community-based efforts are usually accomplished with their own bodies and investment through uncompensated labor. As swiftly as the actions bloom, they also quickly wither. The cost of maintaining momentum often proves to be too high. Guerrilla exhibitions might be stymied by curatorial plans that have been drawn months in advance; generative conversations take a back seat to the revenue-generating performance season, and social media campaigns feel scattered in light of responding to the latest viral crisis to hit the blogosphere.

And then there’s the pattern where busy organizations tend to fare well in funding competitions, where they are often asked to submit lists of program accomplishments for the last three years, with numbers of people served and group demographics carefully compiled. One unspoken assumption rears its head consistently: more is better, and faster is better.

What would happen if a cultural institution and the cultural workers within embraced a different notion of community impact — one based on the assumption of “slowness?”

*What would it mean for an institution already committed to raising awareness around social justice to redefine itself as a place where dialogue becomes actualized? What external and internal dynamics of art-making and cultural interpretation would this shift challenge? And what difference would it make toward the movement for social change?*

In 2014, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum at the University of Illinois, Chicago, set out to investigate and question the assumptions that motivate (and reward) “fast” actions in cultural practices. The Hull-House Museum carries forward the mission of preserving and developing the original Hull-House as a site for interpreting and continuing the historic settlement

house vision of linking research, education, and social engagement in community life.

Hull-House, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, was a place where immigrants gathered to study, debate, and to acquire the necessary skills required to live in their new country. The museum is comprised of two of the settlement complex's original thirteen buildings—the Hull-Home and the Residents' Dining Hall—spaces that were used in a variety of ways to support immigrant life, including as a nursery school, a library, and a meeting place for social and political dialogue.

Settlement houses emerged in the late 1880s, first in England and later spreading to the United States, with more than 500 settlements across the country at the movement's peak in the late 1920s. Upper and middle class citizens would move to settlements and provide social services like education and childcare to the poor residents in urban communities. Reformers hoped that settlements would bridge divisions between the “haves” and “have-nots,” creating greater social understanding and exchange in communities. For the poor, settlements served as turn-of-the-century hubs where immigrants who were displaced by urbanization and industrialization could organize themselves, acquire skills, and develop resources for full participation in their communities.

It is hard to overstate the role that settlement houses played in establishing many of the social “safety net” services that today we take for granted. When Addams and Starr first opened Hull-House in 1889, they had very modest goals. Initially, they hoped to offer art and literary education to their less fortunate neighbors, but the Hull-House quickly grew beyond what either woman could have imagined. The settlement house continued to evolve to meet the needs of the community and soon, at the request of the surrounding community, Hull-House residents began to offer classes to help new immigrants become more integrated into American society, such as English language, cooking, sewing and technical skills, and American government. Hull-House became not only a cultural center with music, art, and theater offerings, but also a safe haven, a place where the immigrants living on Chicago's Near West Side could find companionship, support, and the assistance they needed for coping with life in the modern city. Hull House in Chicago, under Addams' fierce leadership, was a pioneer in establishing the first juvenile justice court, the first public playground,



– The Hull-House Museum brought its front porch programming to the South Side Community Art Center, where visitors discussed and demonstrated the African-Diasporic tradition of hair braiding, which is practiced on stoops, in kitchens, and in beauty salons across the globe.



– Hull House offered dialogues about immigration on the front porch for public audiences

the first pre-school day care for children of the poor, the first food pantry and many other core services. These services were developed and cemented on a core belief on human creativity; therefore, arts, language and culture offerings were intrinsic to the Hull House approach to social reform. In 1935, Jane Addams became the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace prize for her work. Before its closure in 2012, the Hull-House settlement became a system of community and neighborhood centers scattered around Chicago.

In its current iteration, the Hull-House Museum aims to establish connections between Addams' legacy and contemporary social issues through continued research, education, and public engagement. The museum is housed in the original Hull-House, where Ms. Addams also lived, and is charged with preserving both the physical historic property as well as developing the programs and exhibitions that tell the story of the social reform and the settlement movement in order to inspire new generations. The social reform mandate of the Museum is part and parcel of its core identity, and this is mostly expressed in the subject matters or topics that comprise the exhibitions and public programs. Although the content of its curatorial program reflects the mission and vision of the original Hull-House settlement, the container of a museum sometimes obscures it.

Hull-House was poised to be displaced from its Near Westside location at Halsted and Polk streets by the University of Illinois's expansion plan to build its Chicago Circle campus in 1965, resulting in an estimated 8,000 people and more than 600 businesses being evacuated. To appease community opposition to the plan—including numerous lawsuits until the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case in 1963—the original Residents Dining Hall and Hull-House buildings were preserved prominently on campus facing Halsted Street. Today, academic and artistic professionals, many of whom live outside of the Near West Side community in which the institution resides, staff the museum although it still functions within the settlement model.

Whereas the original Hull-House sought to give voice to the informal cultural expressions of its residents (covering the range from painting to ceramics to gardening and the culinary arts), the Museum is now professionalized with curatorial expertise, research and pedagogic objectives. There is no question that its exhibitions, public talks, workshops, and events carry a definitive

## LEISURE AS HUMAN RIGHT

A popular bumper sticker seen in American roads reads: *“Unions—The People Who Brought You The Weekend.”* As the porch of the Hull-House Museum transformed into a lab for informal democratic culture filled with chatter and improvised games, it almost became too easy to forget what protracted social struggles had preceded the basic establishment of leisure time as a hard-earned right of the working class in the United States. The movement to make into law the 8-hour work day, the accumulation of vacation days, the building of public playgrounds—these were humane dislocations of power and capital that Jane Addams strongly advocated for.

In today's social climate, the nonprofit staffer is often neglected as a worker. Often, it is through his or her body and labor that “good work” for society gets capitalized. In most instances, their intellectual labor does not receive any of the protections afforded to tenured scholars. Even in a project that explicitly sought to question the ideology of efficiency, the Porch Project was compelled to offer deliverables. “The irony is that the project about slowness created a lot more work,” Marks observed.

social value that favors being inclusive of many invisible community sectors through alliances, partnerships and direct engagement efforts. Nonetheless, it is also clear that the Museum is not a service agency, an activist training hub or an advocacy and organizing grassroots organization. If seen within the context of an institution of higher education, this change is a natural development. When examined in light of the empowering social values that underscore the Hull-House legacy, the professionalization of the cultural work of Hull-House has been a subject of debate and tension for the staff and the community. Whose voice is ultimately affirmed in their programs? What perspectives remained in the shadows? How can visitors to the museum have a more impactful experience leading to reflection and social change?

The idea of “slowness” as a path to explore the larger question of impact intrigued museum staff, and they chose to explore the tensions and contradictions through the *Innovation Lab*. Can impact be measured by quick fixes and “attention-grabbing” hyper activity or does a long-term idea of impact demand a certain lingering, meandering, and reflecting? “Does being hyper-busy all the time stand in the way of forming more meaningful relationships?” said Associate Director Lisa Junkin Lopez. As the staff pondered that question, three distinct dimensions surfaced: the relationship among visitors, partners, and staff.

As the goal of becoming a more effective institution took center stage in their inquiry, it became clear to museum staff that producing more meaningful visitor experiences, creating more substantive and egalitarian community partnerships, and hiring and utilizing more critically reflective staff were all connected in terms of the *time* it took for each of these outcomes to form. In each instance, Junkin Lopez said, time pressures had erected an invisible but very seductive “instrumentality;” in other words, things didn’t grow organically, but in almost all cases, situations were intentionally crafted and staged. Performance outcomes steered the interactions to pre-determined parameters: visitors came and saw; partners signed up; staff produced. But, what else was not happening? And most importantly, was something being lost in that process that had intrinsic value to the goal of creating more meaningful and socially relevant experiences that the museum aimed to fulfill?

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# PROCESS

## About the Lab

Hull House Museum was accepted into Round 3 of EmcArts' *Innovation Lab* for Museums and started the program in July 2013. The *Innovation Lab* is a three-phase program that provides a strong framework in which new strategies can be explored and prototyped in relatively low-stakes environments before a full launch. The first phase focuses on researching and assessing the adaptive challenge at hand, and developing a cross-constituent team to plan strategies for intervention. The second phase accelerates the project by building organizational momentum through decision-making at a five-day intensive retreat. The third phase involves prototyping, evaluating and refining the adaptive interventions. [Read more about the \*Innovation Lab\* for Museums.](#)

Valuing “slow” actions above fast actions focused on efficiency requires somewhat of a counter-intuitive move. It took the Museum staff approximately one year to develop a process that would prototype a different approach to their work. The idea of taking time to let the ideas “cook” during the *Innovation Lab* was important. It was also somewhat contrarian to the habits the Hull-House Museum has developed as a high-performing cultural institution.

There has always been a prized level of intellectual satisfaction in the Museum's style of “guerrilla programming.” “Hull-House is quite comfortable taking risks and challenging assumptions,” said Annie Marks, a facilitator with EmcArts who worked with the Hull-House team through the *Innovation Lab* process. “As an institution they have good muscle memory to think issues [through] deeply and not hesitate to take new things on,” she said.

A few precedents in their own practice offered a good place to start. Among them, the Slow Food Movement, out of which several museum programs had developed over the last six years. A global movement that opposes “fast food” practices by insisting that people rediscover

the communal experience of eating, this culinary innovation was one of the first serious inquiries about slowness to emerge in American communities. Also helpful to museum staff was an Alternative Labeling project they had undertaken. In the project, an artist had re-written the wall label that accompanied Jane Addams's travel medicine kit into a 40-page prose poem. Baffled about to what to do, staff decided to design a 30-minute experience around the text: A visitor could sit in Ms. Addams's room and read the poem at leisure while staff served them tea. A third source of inspiration came from several Hull-House Settlement movement pioneers' theories of play and improvisational theater. A Restorative Justice movement project, through which the museum education staff had received training, provided a last source of inspiration. Designed to collectively identify wrongdoings between individuals and within the criminal justice system, this movement teaches the value of “slow healing” through painful conversations.

Informed by these breakthrough ideas, the museum staff chose to explore “slowness” during the prototyping process as a path toward meaningful relationships; they were surprised to learn that they were already closer to creating more meaningful relationships than they expected.

The wrap-around porch that serves as a visible physical marker of the Hull-House building was activated as the centerpiece of the “slow museum” project. More than 6,000 visitors and passersby participated in activities such as conversations, drinks and meal sharing over the summer months of 2014. In effect turning the museum's wall inside out, the porch at Hull-House became the site for both curated and informal programs that exponentially expanded the range of experiences for visitors to the museum. Amongst cookouts, poetry readings, yoga classes, facilitated dialogues, portrait painting workshops, and musical concerts, the public gained a greater role in shaping the museum's activities and programs. A different sense of stewardship around the Hull-House legacy and culture began to emerge.



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“The porch around the Hull-House building was like a magnet,” said Isis Ferguson, the Program Manager who ran the Porch Project. Ferguson supervised four recreation workers who were hired to curate a series of programs and gatherings, many of which grew out of conversations with community organizations and other cultural centers throughout the city. Some popular programs included the *Edge of Desire* poetry workshops which encouraged participants to link sensuality to social organizing: “Let us desire something political,” read the advertisement for the program. The *Unselfie* Project asked students age 10 and above to “look close” at another human being and sketch, draw or paint the portrait while exploring “transgressive slowness.” A teach-in, organized on a Wednesday night in July, explored the racially discriminatory system of policing marijuana use among Black youth. In late August, the porch was transformed into a Belizean kitchen while people danced to the beat of Garifuna drummers.

Activating the porch around the Hull-House Museum turned out to be a revelation. “A porch, unlike a gallery inside a museum, allows for multiple types of public engagement,” Ferguson said. “Some activities were organic and some were planned. Scholars came by and sat with us, university staff stopped by for a cold drink... there’s something about sitting. The furniture attracted bodies. Some of the museum staff brought their laptops and sat at the picnic tables outside. It was rejuvenating.”

For an organization whose mission is also related to social reform such as the Hull-House Museum, defining what makes a museum function better can be a loaded question. To the extent that being a “better” institution in conventional practice implies doing more to fulfill the mission, slowing down did not feel like a viable option for the Hull-House Museum. “The pace at Hull-House is generally very fast,” said Ferguson. “To be flexible to community needs, to galvanize people and be responsive, our approach usually involves quick analysis and a rigorous platform of rapid programming,” she added.

The concept of slowness, as part of a prevailing ethos of urgency in social justice movements, has always been like an elephant in the room for museum staff. “We embraced an idea we didn’t know at first how to define,” explained Junkin Lopez. “We knew that we didn’t mean ‘slow’ as in ‘set in your ways’ or ‘unresponsive,’ yet we recognized in ‘slowness’ the idea of being intentional,

and that referred us back to what we valued about our work.”

“The first meetings [to plan the Porch Project] were very meandering,” noted Marks. “We ate together; we lingered; we listed several options for possible projects, all of which were counter-intuitive to [what the staff saw as their] strengths. In the end, a desire to challenge insularity became the running thread. [They asked questions like:] What if we took the time to engage directly the community’s different points of view? Hull-House staff hold their curatorial value so precious—I mean, they feel strongly that they have things to say, but are they so principled that it also makes them difficult partners? What if they invited the community to just hang out, and chat, and drink lemonade without any pre-determined outcome in mind? [The concept of] slowness by itself didn’t convince anyone, but as an idea attached to their working process, it made sense.”



— Preparing for a day of Porch activities

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— The Porch was used for local meetings, informal dialogues, refreshments, community building and art activities



# DISCOVERIES

Reflexivity in their museum practices was not new to Hull-House staff, but up until the Porch project, their focus was mostly confined to matters of content. In many ways, the staff exercise a radical ethics of popular historiography since they take great pride in presenting historically sound and rigorously researched material in museum programs. The Porch Project went further, though, by materializing the insights gained through previous experiments into a new form for approaching how programming is planned and executed. That form utilized community participation as the epicenter of programming. Participation was defined largely in terms of open-ended conversations, structured and un-structured feedback circles, or by taking charge of specific programs that fell outside the purview of museum staff's expertise. For example, the museum will revive Ella's Daughters, a Chicago-based network of artists, scholars, and writers working in the tradition of civil rights activist Ella Baker, through potential programming like youth and adult teach-ins, a reading group, a re-vamped 7 Sisters Campaign, and possible events tied to the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer. In another example the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health installed artwork created by Hull-House youth to provoke conversations around sexuality.

"The Porch project taught us something really special about the meaning of slowness as defined in terms of relationship building," said Junkin Lopez. "In essence, the question we ended up examining had something to do with slowing down in order to sustain ourselves. Our connection to the community is at the center of why we exist as an institution. Sustainability for us will always be connected to going back to the quality of the relationships we form."

But the matter of sustainability also took unforeseen shades of meaning as the project evolved. In some areas the change was welcome and transparent, and was considerable enough to cause a ripple effect after

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the project ended. For example, methods for delivering content were shaken out of their conventional protocols: Staff—already responsive to community desires—was challenged to listen more deeply to an outspoken public, suddenly empowered to evaluate art offerings on the spot. Professional curators skilled at weaving stories of social change in coherent tableaux were asked to leave programming decisions in the hands of recreation workers whose relationships with communities went beyond their role as museum staff. In fact, recreation workers often spent time in dialogue with reform and social-justice minded partners that did not result in direct programs at the Porch. In some cases, the programs on the Porch facilitated “talk-backs” that were not directly related to museum exhibits or themes. For example, a night for updating Wikipedia entries by “queering” them was convened in early September.

Although the floodgates of public engagement were pried open by this variety of happenings, the exchanges between the museum and the public were not always easy. On more than one occasion the museum staff was forced to confront the difficulties of negotiating the commitment to speaking to a public versus listening to it. “The relaxed space of the porch created a transformative hub where new ideas could be voiced,” said Junkin Lopez. In one workshop about policing black youth, a young woman of color approached the microphone and made a statement that perpetuated a common stereotype about the role of black women in collaborating with the police to incarcerate black men, and recreation workers were at a loss on how to redirect the conversation away from stereotypes. Afterward, the end, staff spent a great deal of time reflecting on the questions raised and agreeing to a new set of dialogue protocols to help guide future conversations. The group’s consensus was that while the museum was willing to make itself vulnerable as an institution that welcomed

dialogue, it also needed to remain faithful to speaking up when racist or sexualized statements attempted to derail conversation and circulate simply as “opinions.”

Even the porch itself as a site of informal conviviality came to light as an ideological construct that demanded further reflection. In one instance, a community partner’s suggestion for a program on hair braiding and African American home businesses raised concerns about holding the program on a university campus. People were concerned about the implications of holding the program away from the specific neighborhood context, making it subject to the voyeurism of non-Black audiences, as well as to the scrutiny of law enforcement. “We learned to think about ‘hospitality’ more critically, both in the sense of considering the different ways that people learn—not just by what they see but where they see it—as well as how we maintain control of the boundaries of dialogue.”

Without a doubt, the Porch project represented a bold step towards reflexivity around museum practices. Expediency commands a seductive hold over most aspects of cultural production nowadays. Given the rootedness of traditional notions of efficiency as ideological constructs in museum practices, Hull-House’s staff decided to craft a project that was largely aspirational (“what if” things were done differently) as well as experimental (“let’s lead with changes in behavior first”). After the Porch Project, Museum staff felt a greater level of commitment to inviting and sharing knowledge informally among non-experts engaged in open-ended conversation as a routine component of program planning. “After the project ended, we didn’t remove the furniture from the porch,” said Ferguson, succinctly summarizing the its ethos.

The Porch Project helped the Hull-House Museum push the envelope on those aspects of museum practices



– Don’t Call was a poster project rooted in conversations about police brutality in urban communities of color. It encouraged visitors to consider dynamics of safety, violence and community accountability.



that were most clearly implicated in the role of the institution as a social change catalyst in its community. In other words, the lessons learned from the prototype programming had the greatest chance of becoming lasting adjustments in the museum’s regular practices the closer they related to the external thrust of service of the organization. In terms of the internal dynamics at play in the institutional setting of the University, the discoveries and innovations were much more modest, and in some cases negligible. Ironically, while the theme of slowness was felt throughout the museum programs, the staff in charge of producing such programs was working more than ever.

Paradoxically, the core funding structure of the Porch Project dictated the terms that constrained staff from slowing down: more programs were held in summer than ever before. In the end, the Lab funds were to support a project, which reinforces that organizations have to continue taking on projects to remain funded. The Porch Project aimed to examine leisure and question productivity as a commoditized form of culture. The only ones exempted from truly “slowing down” were the museum staff and workers. The last chapter of this story, however, has yet to be written. “At some point we had to stop and consider how we as staff were relating to the project’s theme as full human beings,” Junkin Lopez said. “The staff at Hull-House Museum remains committed to the idea that our work culture can benefit from our slow values and our slow lessons in community building.”

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## ABOUT EMCARTS

EmcArts works alongside people, organizations and communities as they take on their most complex challenges. Through rigorous workshops, coaching, and labs, we create space and conditions to test innovative strategies and build adaptive cultures. Our practice is deeply influenced by the artistic process, which we believe unlocks entrenched beliefs and opens up new ways of seeing.

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