

An Open Letter to Museum of Chinese in America's Board of Trustees

We are former MOCA staff. Between us, we represent 20 years of MOCA history (1998-2018) and have collectively dedicated 43 years to MOCA. We were drawn to MOCA because it proposed a way of building community based not only around shared ethnicity or cultural background, but shared values.

We were part of the first major expansion of the Museum into Centre Street. Our time at MOCA represents both its humble roots at Mulberry Street and its exciting promise at Centre Street.

We are writing because we have heard from local elders whose family objects are in the Museum's collections that they are concerned and feel unvalued. We have heard about long-standing artists in the Chinese / Asian American community voicing their concerns, asking for dialogue and being turned away. We have read and seen aggressively defensive communications from the Museum that leave us, as stakeholders and as former staff who lovingly and painstakingly helped shape the institution, concerned.

Beginning a Journey

MOCA began as The Chinatown History Project. The Project emerged from the oral histories and belongings of a passing generation, who against all odds, made a life for themselves as Americans during the Exclusion era. We felt an urgent call to salvage and daylight a part of American history that was in danger of willful ignorance and disposal.

The Museum's formation was a pact to document the "Chinatown" we knew—not the one that served tired tropes of perpetual foreignness, but a place of resilience, resistance, inspiration, and joy. If you want to understand America, you would do well to take a closer look at Chinatown. It contains both the beauty and ugliness, the risks and rewards of the "American dream." It has always been dynamic and changing... constant and comforting. But it is also a portal to a larger, ever-evolving New York City and American story.

70 Mulberry Street

We were never tethered to a traditional definition of a museum. We practiced community-rooted research and fieldwork, where community members were invited to participate in successive stages of articulating and interpreting their own history and lived experiences. We were a

pipeline for young people of color who wanted to explore work in the arts when the rarified air of the museum world made that feel impossible for many. We were a lab of sorts, for what we believed to be meaningful, cultural work.

It was not uncommon for people to stop by to tell us about a beloved local business closing its doors after many years (Do we want to salvage any items or interview someone?), or express that we should be doing something more on an issue/topic, or air their grievances on a spectrum of matters that impacted the neighborhood, or simply just to say hello.

The trust gained from whom we served made the very opportunity to represent our own history and tell our own stories in our own images possible.

Taking a Leap

We chose to take the leap. It was not only a leap of faith in our mission, but a leap of hard work. We believed that the expansion of MOCA meant building on the communities we already served. Our hope was to offer new generations a place of wide, open doors—a place that recognized community-building and relationships as a key source of strength, knowledge, resiliency, creativity... and ultimately institutional relevancy.

What makes cultural institutions essential is their ability to hold spaces for us to reflect and make meaning of the world around us... it can be a difficult conversation, but meaningful conversations usually are.

We were there when we questioned the methods by which we would scale or grow. We were there when we decided we would have to open our doors wider, become more comfortable with engaging with people whose lived realities were different from our own as staff and even as Board. This meant walking the slippery slope of navigating class politics, of power-sharing, of creating a space where all of our stories mattered and had equal value. It meant facing our own preconceived notions of what a \$15M campaign would mean—what we would gain and what we could lose in terms of who held power over the direction of the Museum. It also meant reaffirming and balancing our core values of social justice against the shine and pull of enticing mainstream acceptance.

We dreamed that the new physical MOCA could be a beating heart for the neighborhood. A place where the whole community could come together to celebrate our stories; engage in difficult dialogue; but most importantly be a place that felt like a home to everyone.

As stakeholders...

Rooted in the stories that carry the weight of multiple generations and communities, the Museum's existence offers a way forward for future generations to stake a claim to the American story. Its expansion was an opportunity to open the institution to even more people; document and present more stories; serve an even larger constituency. MOCA was a model of treasuring the objects, stories, and differences of an overlooked community, elevating, and centering them.

MOCA was that kind of place—a place that drew people of passion, of conscience, of action. It was more than a job, more than a museum. It cultivated staff who believed process and relationships were just as important as “the product.” Generations lent their skills, personal sacrifice, and dreams to this place out of love for the community and the promise of MOCA.

We saw MOCA not just as shelves of precious objects, but as a sacred trust. It was this trust that allowed those objects to come into the Museum in the first place... that supported us even when we didn't always agree... that forged a path that honored the journeys of our most disenfranchised community members alongside that of our stars, whose adjacency to power is just one strand of a diverse experience.

All of this is to say, MOCA was indeed a special place—not a romanticized place of constant harmony, but a real place where deep thought, discussion, risk-taking, and bridge-building was valued, alongside dreaming big. It had a compass. Such special places must be protected.

As the Museum set off on its expansion plans, it went through a series of crises in leadership on the staff and board levels with concerning ramifications: what we perceive as disengagement from the local community is a lack of vision and comprehension of MOCA's true promise.

As professionals in the field, we will be the first to acknowledge the challenges of cultural institutions of color to expand and sustain themselves in New York City's market ecology, or how few cultural organizations of color are afforded the opportunity for substantial funding.

With the \$35M from the City of New York, MOCA has inherent responsibilities to its stakeholders. There are stakeholders protesting outside your door, artists pulling out of planned shows, people wondering where you stand on key issues that impact Chinatown (and arguably communities of color around the nation).

With the \$35M from the City of New York, MOCA has reached a defining moment.

We are asking MOCA to pause and reflect on who it is beholden to, and to articulate that clearly. Which path will you choose that will be worthy of your incredibly diverse stakeholderhood... and to future generations?

Signed,

Carolyn Antonio
Former VP External Affairs
2003-2013

Nancy Bulalacao
Former Director of Public Programs
2005-2007, 2012-2013

Beatrice Chen
Former Director of Education
2003-2012
Former VP of Programs
2014-2018

Cynthia Lee
Former VP of Exhibitions, Collections, and Public Programs
1998-2010

Sophia Ma
Former Manager of Operations
2010-2013

If you agree that the Museum of Chinese in America needs to be more transparent and in conversation with the community, you can include yourself as a co-signer to our letter by filling out [this form](#).

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeIBcHEzflTbtJjtsfWxXpJACYwYi81zXKm_3HRNX0Gso5HQw/viewform