



## Great Cities Initiative

### Background

Cities are humanity's most influential invention. From their first manifestations in Mesopotamia 9,000 years ago, cities have emerged from societies on different continents at different times to provide for shared security, project power, create sacred spaces, and generate and regulate wealth. Much of the economic, technologic, political and cultural inventiveness of humans have been directed to and realized in cities.

Despite their economic and political advantages, cities have tended to be small, widely scattered and rare for much of human history. This began to change when 17<sup>th</sup> century European cities, through their concentrations and combinations of knowledge, talent, capital and relative freedom from religious dogma, spawned the scientific revolution. Not surprisingly, these cities were the early beneficiaries of scientific and technologic advances, many of which made it possible for cities to grow and support ever more people. The accelerating pace of scientific and technologic advancement since the Industrial Revolution enabled the spread and growth of urbanization around the planet on an unprecedented scale.

In the 21st Century, cities have acquired even greater importance. For the first time in human history, more people now live in cities than in rural areas, with two-thirds of the global population – more than six billion people – projected to live in cities by 2050. Cities are now both the engines of global innovation and the drivers of planetary environmental change. Because of their aggregate demands for resources and their role as the capital markets for countless global goods and services, cities are driving the conversion of native landscapes into agricultural ones, the extraction of resources from throughout the oceans, and the release of billions of tons annually of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere.

### The Need

One of humanity's greatest challenges in the coming decades is how to make cities more livable for more people while dramatically lowering their environmental impact. How we handle the challenges and opportunities of living together in cities will determine our common destiny.

To engage the public in this grand challenge the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), in partnership with museums and other nonprofit partners across the U.S., is launching the **GREAT CITIES INITIATIVE**, a major traveling exhibit and public engagement project about the past, present, and most importantly, the future of cities.

## The Role of Museums and Exhibits

Great cities develop over many years through the concerted effort of a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Great cities have identities and values that come from and are shared with a broad array of citizens and institutions. It takes great leadership, of course, but it also takes the consent of the governed. Great cities require an engaged populace, with a sense of shared values and the willingness to have investments made on their behalf. A museum exhibit can do three things which, taken together, can create momentum for support and change in a city:

*Frame topics for public understanding.* Museum exhibits are fun *and* educational, a unique combination in the public sphere. They frame topics in ways that level the field of discourse for non-experts to participate. Empowering everyone to equally engage on a topic goes a very long way toward common understanding and action.

*Catalyze public attention.* Large museums garner significant press and public attention for major exhibits. This “happening” can catalyze the public’s attention on a topic, and related programs and conversations can build on that. A sense of shared experience remains even after an exhibit leaves, as does the memory of many citizens empowered to participate further in civic life.

*Convene cross-sections of the populace in a shared public space.* Museums are often recognized as increasingly rare “third places,” civic spaces where people from all walks of life can be together as peers. Conversations and programs convened in these museums, spurred by the catalyst of a great exhibit and the shared experience of a well-framed topic, can be extraordinary.

The goal of the GREAT CITIES INITIATIVE is to **elevate and broaden civic conversations about each city it visits**. The ability of cities to face the challenges of the future is directly tied to the breadth and depth of the engagement of its citizenry. The GREAT CITIES exhibit will stand with other initiatives and efforts in cities to create structures of participation so people from a broad populace can make meaningful input on city thinking.

### **Great Cities Key Messages**

- **Cities are humanity’s most influential invention.** In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, cities have acquired even greater importance. Cities are now both the engines of global innovation and the drivers of planetary environmental change.
- **Cities are complex.** Their forms and functions are the cumulative result of innumerable decisions made by their multitudes of residents.
- **Cities are idea incubators.** In an ever more digitally connected world, the personal, face-to-face interactions and exchanges of information and ideas facilitated by cities are increasingly vital.

- **Successful future cities will be nimble.** Disruptive technologies and innovations are appearing with ever-increasing speed. Cities will need to become more agile and adaptable in response to changes that are increasingly difficult to anticipate.
- **Successful future cities will reconcile a great dilemma.** They will be much more livable for far more people while dramatically reducing their consumption of natural resources and generation of pollution.
- **Successful future cities will redefine the meaning of citizenship.** City governance will change, as the distinctions between public and private, profit and nonprofit diminish and more collaborative approaches lead to urban successes.

### **Great Cities Impact**

*Providing social, shared experiences.* In this era of highly mobile and personalized digital content and entertainment, people still seek out and gravitate to large public social experiences. Movies, concerts, festivals, sporting events, and museum exhibits all continue to attract enormous audiences despite the fact that our abilities to inform and entertain ourselves in our own homes have rapidly expanded. We humans are social animals and we desire communal experiences, maybe now more than ever.

Museums, are well suited to serving these desires for shared experiences. Museum visits fit the important niche of being fun as well as educational and meaningful. Visitors typically come with friends or family seeking experiences unavailable elsewhere. Because science museums excel at meeting these needs for trust, insight, sociality and exceptionalism, more than 75 million people visit them annually, more than all the people who attended major league baseball games in the U.S. in 2011.

*Customized to each city.* While major portions of the exhibit will provide all audiences everywhere with a common experience, selected exhibit components will be developed and designed to be readily customizable so that audiences in each host museum will encounter experiences specific to their city. Exhibit audiences, therefore, will simultaneously expand their awareness of cities in general while enhancing their understanding of their city in particular.

*Engaging citizens in civic conversations.* The ability of cities to face the challenges of the future is directly tied to the breadth and depth of the engagement of their citizenry. The exhibit will link with other initiatives in cities to strengthen that engagement and help cities and all their citizens thrive in the 21st Century. The exhibit will catalyze conversations in each city about that city's future, bringing together municipal leaders, civic designers and experts, and citizens. Partnerships with both local groups and national organizations will produce a wide array of activities around each exhibit host city and its future.

*Creating partnerships to multiply impact.* At each venue for the exhibit, SMM will work with the host museum to connect to municipal leaders and key stakeholders, create civic dialogues, develop workshops, organize lecture series, and more. SMM has already initiated discussions with several anticipated host museums, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and the Minnesota district council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), seeking partners that can help the GREAT CITIES exhibit achieves maximum impact in the cities that it visits.

NRDC's Urban Solutions Program is working to build healthier and more affordable communities by bringing practical, proven solutions to scale across the U.S. SMM is exploring with NRDC how the presence of the GREAT CITIES exhibit and the cooperation of host museums could leverage NRDC's work. SMM is currently developing programs with the Minnesota district council of ULI, establishing the working relationships in advance of a collaboration around the GREAT CITIES exhibit. This joint programming also serves as a prototype for future efforts in Minnesota and with ULI district councils in other cities that host GREAT CITIES.

As awareness of and interest in this project grows, SMM looks forward to involving other entities in conversations about how they and the museum can work together to further enhance the impact of the project.

### **Great Cities Key Audiences**

SMM's GREAT CITIES INITIATIVE will focus on serving three key audiences – the general public, urban stakeholders and policymakers, and museums:

#### **General Public**

GREAT CITIES will enable large public audiences to better understand and appreciate the places where they spend the vast majority of their lives. The exhibit will be highly interactive, fun, provocative, and engaging for children, their families, as well as adults visiting on their own. To be successful, an exhibit must be a kind of leveler, evoking the curiosity of novices and experts, young and old alike, and bringing them into a common shared experience. Serving a broad general public well will leverage the other goals of the project.

Great exhibit experiences are first made possible by great stories, and cities have always been and still are filled with them. The urbanization of Earth is one of the biggest stories on the planet, one that affects us all. SMM estimates that at least three million people will see GREAT CITIES during its tour to at least 15 U.S. science museums and centers over five years. Five years is the minimum length of time that SMM's traveling exhibits stay on tour, although the majority have toured for 7-8 years, substantially increasing the number of people reached.

#### **Urban Stakeholders and Policymakers**

Never has it been more essential to inform the design and governance of cities and never has it been more possible. The habitability of cities will be determined by human decision

making, either by default or by design. SMM's recent experiences with its RACE: ARE WE SO DIFFERENT? and FUTURE EARTH exhibits exemplify how exhibits can serve both as a popular attraction and as catalysts for powerful conversations about challenging subjects.

The presence of the Race exhibit at SMM and at host museums across the U.S. has motivated numerous corporations, nonprofits and government agencies to organize anti-racism training opportunities around visits to the exhibit. SMM's dialogue programs offered during the run of Race, for example, were extremely popular. Originally slated to hold 100 conversations, SMM hosted more than 300 during the four-month tenure of Race in St. Paul.

While the conversations about race were more personal, other projects have spurred more public policy-oriented conversations that brought the public together with stakeholders and policymakers. For example, SMM's FUTURE EARTH exhibit has catalyzed numerous forums and discussions with a wide array of stakeholder and policymakers about climate change adaptation and mitigation, excessive urban heat propagation and amelioration, and advances in building energy efficiency. SMM will build on the experience gained from these exhibits and others to inform the opportunities for powerful civic conversations about urban issues at each venue of the GREAT CITIES exhibit.

### **Museums**

Science museums and centers typically occupy positions of high regard and esteem in the cities in which they reside. The public perceives them as neutral forums where science topics and issues can be explored without the rancor that often arises in other settings. Exhibits have provided large public audiences with shared experiences that raise the level of civic discourse on numerous science and society issues. However, the leverage these large urban institutions have to convene and catalyze their communities has not been brought to bear on this most urban of challenges - creating and sustaining livable cities (Miami is a recent exception). While some museums are engaged in innovative collaborations with city governments and urban organizations, the current lack of major exhibits about cities and urban issues means that one of the most powerful strengths of museums - their ability to create big, widely shared experiences - is not being employed to the benefit of cities.

The GREAT CITIES exhibit will engage large public audiences as it travels from city to city. Its presence will reaffirm to a wide array of local stakeholders that the host museums are essential civic institutions offering a vital public service that can be delivered by no other organizations. Through GREAT CITIES, citizens will share public experiences that can ignite civic involvement. Urban organizations and city governments, in turn, will use the public visibility of the exhibit to generate workshops, forums and events that further raise the prominence of the exhibit and thereby help drive more attendance in a virtuous cycle.