

Gardiner Museum  
**Strategic Plan**  
2018 – 2020



# Shaping the Earth Together

Evolving the  
Gardiner Museum  
to be imperative  
for its community,  
as well as a  
compelling arts  
destination

# Executive Summary

## Evolution

The Gardiner Museum must evolve to become an active force in the community. This is a shift from being what it is—a ceramics museum—to being known for what the institution makes happen, for how it works with its community to shape the world. Museums have typically been passive, with people coming to them to view the collections on display. Now the public, including public sector funders and sponsors, expect a museum to reach out to the whole community, support creativity, and proactively make collections, and every aspect of their operations, relevant in a contemporary context.

## Becoming more relevant and contemporary

**The real experience of the Gardiner.** The most obvious assessment of relevancy is the experience of a visit to the Museum. The Gardiner Museum should improve its onsite experience with a focus on making collections more engaging and relevant.

Visitors seem to prefer contemporary work, perhaps because they can relate it more easily to their lives or current cultural references. Therefore, the challenge is the display of historical content. Not including what might be exhibited in the Gardiner's temporary exhibition hall, the visitor experience is approximately 85% historical content. And other than the renovated European Porcelain Gallery, the Gardiner's galleries are out of date and not at a level commensurate with the quality of the objects they house. Making the onsite experience more vital is essential. New communication technology, better display techniques, and the introduction of a narrative can have a role in this, as can programs (lectures, events, etc.) to enliven the historical materials and to put them in a contemporary context, especially for a younger audience. The Gardiner is doing an excellent job of creating programs that connect the museum to today's concerns. The historical collections are the Museum's foundation and must be clearly linked to everything we do, especially contemporary programs.

We can be world leaders in education with clay and ceramics. This is an essential aspect of the Museum's brand and is a prime way that we can respond to the world around us in a unique manner, and be connected to health, wellness, and mindfulness, for example.

Being relevant isn't only about making a museum interesting for younger people. *Boomers* live in the world now and want to be connected to content relevant to today; being relevant isn't just a focus on *Millennials*.

**The Gardiner's audience.** A second aspect of relevancy for the Gardiner is its audience. While the Museum is a speciality Museum and will always have a relatively smaller audience pool to draw from than an art or natural history museum, for instance, being relevant still means having an audience that reflects the entire community. The Gardiner continues to increase its penetration of an urban, culturally-engaged constituency, but it must reach out to other communities, and a good place to start is with those where there is a natural affinity with clay and ceramics. Diversity is important in every aspect of the Museum, and this starts with programs that attract a wide spectrum of visitors. From here, membership, support, and board members can be cultivated. Diversity also means age, and reaching younger people is essential to building the next generation of support.

**An arts champion.** A third and essential component of being relevant and contemporary is the role that the Gardiner Museum can play as a leader in the arts community. Where can we lead? As evidenced by the considerable success of the Kent Monkman and Janet Macpherson exhibitions, the SMASH art party, and the second summer of the Community Arts Space, the Gardiner can play a crucial role in the creative world to encourage new work. The Museum can have a unique, high-profile role when we connect contemporary art to clay and ceramics, support emerging artists, and represent Canadian creativity internationally. Narrowing a focus to Canada, while not precluding important opportunities such as showing Yoko Ono or Ai Weiwei, will give the Gardiner a purpose that will help galvanize support from both the public and private sectors.

**Scholarship.** A corollary to this role in the arts community is the Gardiner's reputation in the academic world and with other decorative arts museums and collectors. Strengthening the Museum's position in these areas requires investment in scholarship—both in the Museum's curators and in their research—and also in the intellectual content that the Museum creates, publishes, or disseminates online.

## A shift to today

Being a Museum that is relevant and part of a cultural discussion in a community doesn't mean diminishing our focus on clay or ceramics, but it can mean conceptualizing them in a multimedia context, and making program connections that relate to audiences the Museum may not be used to welcoming. Being contemporary doesn't mean ignoring historical collections, but ensuring that they are presented on site and through programming in a way that makes them compelling, not merely worthy, and makes them part of the spectrum that is supporting young artists, and commissioning the new and provocative.

# Background

## Building on Success

The Gardiner Museum is building on the momentum created primarily by the previous strategic plan's focus on increasing awareness of the Museum to targeted constituencies that have the potential to engage with it. This has been accomplished through greater brand clarity, enhanced marketing, and collaborative, provocative programs.

The next three years need to support the *leap forward* begun in 2017, and facilitated by a staff reorganization, including adding three new positions during 2016 (Programs Manager, Chief Operating Officer, and Chief Development Officer), upgrading the institution's financial expertise, and establishing revenue targets that support expanded operations. Growth is also supported by an evolving Board that is increasingly diverse, connected to diverse communities, and philanthropic.

# The Strategy...

## From:

An important specialty museum that the community is becoming aware of as a destination that offers varied experiences relating to ceramics

## To:

A museum rooted in its community, with international significance, which helps artists take risks, and inspires diverse audiences through clay

# Why the Gardiner is Relevant Now

## Build on these strengths

- Clay connects us to our humanness; it's something real in an increasingly virtual world. Clay education is part of a growing interest in mindfulness and wellness; it offers an authentic experience.
- The onsite experience of the Museum can better use technology, but its intimate scale also allows for more human connection and direct engagement with objects—more real and authentic experiences.
- Clay can connect communities, and many communities can find expression through clay and ceramics. For example, a diverse population attends clay classes.
- Clay and ceramics can be a dominant theme of exhibitions and programs, but can also be the connector of many artistic disciplines and prompt many discussions not directly related to craft or art.
- Clay is an exciting medium for artists, and many more now incorporate it into their practice.
- Relating to the sense of shaping and making the world with clay, the Gardiner can use soft power to bring attention to topics connected to its exhibitions and collections that are important to various communities. The Gardiner is well positioned to be a forum for public conversation when these discussions have a link to exhibitions and collections.
- The Gardiner can have a significant, positive impact on artists, particularly who are emerging and Canadian. The Museum can be unique in this role by supporting artists in Canada, as well as promoting Canadian artists' work internationally. The Gardiner can be a launch pad.
- The Gardiner can contribute to scholarship through research and publications (in print and online), and will collaborate with the world's most important museums whenever possible.
- A wide public engages naturally with contemporary expressions of clay and this should inform all exhibition and program choices. The Gardiner is also valued as a steward of historical collections, but primarily when it makes these collections relevant or contributes to a scholarly discussion of them.

# Shifting Brand Attributes

From:

Vital and Audacious

To:

Inclusive and Trailblazing

# Compelling Institutional Belief – What's the Big Idea?

The insight is that [clay is something most people can care about](#), it's real, and it's almost universally cultural intrinsic. It's a popular interlocutor between a museum and most communities. The Gardiner Museum needs to emphasize the humanity that clay embodies as a unique opportunity to connect with everyone.

Activated in the following ways, this concept can inspire the Museum to be an essential community resource:

# 1. Enhancing the Onsite Visitor Experience

From: A museum with a beautiful building, offering an intimate and right-sized experience, with a good collection, and pleasant shop and dining experiences

To: A uniquely memorable destination, in all respects, with the experience of the historical collections as new and vibrant as that of the contemporary

**Why visit the Museum?** The total experience of a museum is more than the interaction of the visitors with the permanent collections and temporary exhibitions. A visit encompasses the Gardiner Museum's website, plaza, garden, shop, bistro, and public areas including the stairwell, halls, and whether there is adequate seating in galleries. All components, along with pleasant and helpful staff encounters onsite, combine to answer the question, "Would I recommend a visit?"

That said, at the core of the visit are the collections. Just because objects are worthy or important doesn't necessarily make them of interest to the public; it's also how they're presented, the stories a museum tells about them, and the emotional engagement they spark. Especially with historical materials, a visitor asks, "Why should I care about this?" Education, entertainment, surprise, and beauty are all things the display of collections must offer the public to make it relevant for them.

## 2. Innovating With Clay Education

From: A provider of high-quality clay education for adults and children, and a good school destination combining in-gallery instruction with hands-on clay studios

To: A recognized education innovator providing unique programs, often with collaborators, where clay supports health and mindfulness, master classes by artists in residence and visiting artists, corporate programs, and classes that engage diverse communities

### Observation:

There are many institutions providing clay education. In many ways, it's commodified and difficult to use as a branding component, or too premium to increase revenue. The Gardiner has to separate what it does with clay for educational purposes from what is offered elsewhere. [The Gardiner can use its unique clay education to forge bonds with communities and to be an innovator.](#)

### 3. Pro-actively Connect with Communities

From: A museum with loyal supporters who love ceramics

To: A museum where many communities can feel at home and can also collaborate to create programs that are imperative for them

#### Observation:

Many communities can collaborate with the Gardiner but don't necessarily know about the Museum, or its opportunities, and hence the Museum must be proactive in reaching out to these communities. The Gardiner should collaborate with communities to create tailored programs rather than assume it has the expertise, beyond technical, to structure appropriate programs. This outreach in the context of maintaining current/traditional stakeholder relationships will involve the identification of a community partner in each priority community to be the key collaborator.

# 4. Championing the New, Emerging, and Canadian

From: A museum without a perceived mandate to encourage artists who work with clay, although gaining recognition for contemporary programs, and an onsite experience that focuses on the historical content

To: A museum known internationally as a champion of the new, emerging, provocative, and Canadian, and for how it makes its historical collections relevant to a diverse public

## Research/Observation:

Research suggests that the public is more engaged by contemporary art, and contemporary clay and ceramics, than by historical collections. The media typically report on contemporary work, or historical content presented in a radical manner. Public granting agencies, such as the Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council give funding preferences to initiatives related to contemporary themes or to the presentation of historical material in relevant ways. The support of young artists and new ideas is ceasing to be just an option if a museum wants public funding; private sector funding is following a similar pattern. To connect with the community, the Gardiner must make clear what kind of resource it can be—and championing the new, emerging, and Canadian vis-à-vis clay and ceramics is a role that can take the Museum into the future.

That said, the historical, permanent collection will remain the majority of the onsite visitor experience and can't be disconnected from a museum if it strives to have a role in the contemporary art world and society. Therefore, gallery revitalization and programs that connect collections to current audiences is part of what it will mean for the Gardiner to champion the new and be a vital force in shaping the world today.

# Critical elements for success

**Fundraising.** No growth is possible without additional revenue, and fundraising is the area where the greatest revenue increases are to be realized.

Fundraising should include strategies for building the endowment that don't cannibalize on donations to operations.

A new Development Strategy will be created and presented to the Board, and progress made to achieving its goals will be regularly reviewed.

**Membership growth.** Membership is a key area for revenue growth as the Gardiner has a relatively small membership to visitation ratio. Membership growth is counter to trends, especially with a younger demographic, who may attend multiple times a year but don't want to become members. There must be highly visible reasons to join, particularly at the philanthropic levels.

**Increasing earned revenue.** Increased revenue assumptions cannot be detrimental to core museum operations. Earned revenue, particularly with a new hospitality agreement in place, will reach a limit beyond which it's likely to interfere with the operations of the Museum as a museum.

**Young patrons.** While the Young Patrons Circle has been established, further investment is required if it is to grow the next generation of Museum leaders. As well, the tone and manner of YPC events is an indication of how successful events can be produced in the future, and used as models for revitalized Gardiner activities.

**Continued good PR and online presence.** Additional resources for social media are essential as the transition from traditional communication and print continues.

**Staff.** While staff salaries have been considerably increased over the last three years, many areas are still below or just at average levels. To be an exemplary museum to retain the best staff, salary levels will need to be further increased, as will the availability of staff development. The Museum should also plan, as all smaller institutions do, for younger staff to move to new opportunities as the Gardiner cannot necessarily offer these.

**Curatorial recognition/international presence/investment in curatorial.** To have stature in the international museum community, a greater investment in curatorial research, travel and conference participation is required.

**Board.** A fully engaged board and good board succession planning is essential. Continued board-building ensuring diversity, including youth and artist representation, and people with connections to varied communities, is necessary.

[A note about research](#). The strategic plan is supported by consultations by senior Gardiner Museum staff with current and potential program collaborators, artists, arts administrators, curators and academics, members, teachers, board members, donors, public funders, and other stakeholders. Research provided by the University of Toronto's Museum's Studies program has also been reviewed.