

Taking Up Space: The Sedgwick Museum's co-curated Community Cabinet

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(CC3) Connecting Communities to Natural History Collections, Lecture Theatre 3, Appleton Tower, 11 Crichton Street, EH8 9LE, June 8, 2022, 2:00 PM - 3:30 PM

The Community Cabinet programme challenges stereotypes and preconceptions of a historic University Museum by inviting local people to display their geological collections and share their interest in Earth Sciences with museum visitors.

Built in 1904 to house the University of Cambridge's geological collections, the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences holds over two million specimens from around the world. Its historical collections contain familiar names in European Earth Sciences from the last two centuries and draws on the scientific expertise of the University of Cambridge's Department of Earth Sciences. The Museum is a member of the University of Cambridge Museums consortium (UCM).

The Museum actively welcomes diverse audiences, striving to break down barriers to Earth Sciences and challenging stereotypes within the Earth Science and Museum sectors. Since 2015 the museum has co-curated displays with people from the local community to contribute to making it a more welcoming, relevant, inclusive, and democratic space.

Involving contributors throughout the exhibition process, from loans documentation to label writing and installation, both empowers them and helps demystify many aspects of museum practice. It also encourages the Museum to reflect and revise these practices to facilitate broader accessibility and participation.

The lockdowns and intermittent nature of reopening during the Covid-19 pandemic shifted our focus for community cabinets. The latest Community Cabinet 'Gravel Hunters' was developed from an online resource of the same name, produced to encourage families to get outside and explore their local area for fossils in gravel driveways and car parks.

We have found that valuing communities and embracing their relationships and experience with Earth Sciences has created mutually beneficial experiences for both those communities and the Museum. The displays decentralise and diversify the voices present in the gallery, and allow the contributors and museum staff to connect in unique ways, creating new possibilities and opportunities.

Relationships formed through the community cabinets have organically created a community of people who feel a sense of belonging to the museum through volunteering, repeat visits, and regular exchanges on social media. We aim to develop and sustain these relationships through the introduction of a community cabinet alumni network.

