

# Coming Under One Roof: Creating a Culture House in Missoula

*By Holly Truitt*

Missoula, Montana, is a community committed to ensuring all children and families can access parks, open space, and rich informal learning. However, we also are considered the most expensive city in Montana—a state already named the fourth most expensive in the nation to raise a child based on cost of living and income. One in five of Missoula children live in poverty, and one-third of those who use our Missoula Food Bank are under the age of 18.

To better meet the needs of our community, the University of Montana spectrUM Discovery Area in Missoula ([spectrum.umt.edu](http://spectrum.umt.edu))—a hands-on science center that serves more than 50,000 Montanans annually—has joined forces with the Missoula Public Library and the Children’s Museum Missoula. We will come together under a single roof in a new four-story complex centered in the heart of our city and slated to open in 2020. All three organizations already regularly collaborate around a shared goal of closing knowledge, opportunity, and achievement gaps for Missoula children. For this project, we are additionally motivated by the need for a learner-centered, barrier-free environment for children and families in our community.

The impetus for this approach emerged over the past five years as the Missoula Public Library began envisioning a new building. Early in the planning process, the library began seeking out local nonprofits with similar missions (including spectrUM and the children’s museum), asking if they had a need that the library could help fill. According to Honore Bray, the library’s director, staff ultimately decided that “by partnering with specific nonprofits, the library could strengthen its programming as well as aid in strengthening the programming of others.” The end result is a vision to offer the community “a one-stop shop for family enrichment.”

Along with a floor dedicated to children, our shared space will feature a high-energy, co-designed ground floor with a makerspace, a University of Montana “live lab” where high school students can conduct research alongside university students and faculty members, a café, and space for the library’s new release books and films. Upper-level floors will provide library materials for adults, as well as conference facilities for our partners and Missoula’s significant number of nonprofits in need of meeting space.

SpectrUM was invited to be part of this collaboration in late 2014. I immediately reached out to Marsha Semmel, former acting director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, for insight on other communities that have brought together multiple cultural and social organizations under one roof. She encouraged us to look to Europe—in particular, Scandinavia, which has a long history of uniting separate entities in one space.

I then called a dear friend in Sweden, Linda Thompson, a documentary photographer and educator at Mid Sweden University. She shared that year-round and especially in the cold, dark months of winter (something we know a bit about in Montana), culture-seeking Swedes often head to these one-stop-shops, known as “culture houses.” Such establishments offer a mosaic of organizations, from libraries and museums to theaters and social services, as a





Mothers and their babies visit after daily story hour in the meeting and kitchen space of the Kulturmagasinet (culture warehouse) in Sundsvall, Sweden. Photo by Logan Photography

means to leverage resources and work collectively to create systemic change. She recommended that we visit three culture houses in Sweden: one that was being constructed in her hometown of Härnösand, one in Stockholm, and one that she had collaborated with in Sundsvall.

#### FACT-FINDING IN SWEDEN

A small delegation of museum and library staff and community members involved in the planning process traveled to Sweden in early October 2015. Over eight days of travel, we witnessed firsthand that the culture house model creates a rich learning ecosystem, which easily adapts to and reflects the unique needs and interests of its community.

In Härnösand, we found a community contending with a contracting economy and a recent loss of major employers, including a branch of its university. The municipality is responding to residents' needs by transforming its public library into a culture house that also includes co-working space and workforce training programs.

As Director Susanne Hägglund, who is leading the efforts to reimagine the Härnösand Library, explained, “The culture house has three legs: education, meeting space, and community.” For education and meeting spaces, each culture house we visited weaves together books, art, music, and children’s learning areas that often include a kitchen for parents to warm a bottle, share a snack, and connect with other families. All offer buggy parking for strollers, cozy cafés, and aesthetically pleasing places to sit, visit, and connect.

When it comes to the third leg of the stool—meeting the needs of the community—each culture house is distinct. Downtown Stockholm’s Kulturhuset (culture house) has theaters, galleries, libraries, and a dash of whimsy and magic running through its four-story building. Its Tio Tretton (Ten to Thirteen) Area gives tweens a space of their own to explore, read, make art and create films, or enjoy an after-school snack while they do homework in the kitchen. As you approach the Tio Tretton door, a sign on the floor asks, “Are you between 10 and 13 years of



Over *fika* (coffee and conversation), the Missoula delegation discusses co-programming and collective governance with the staff at the Kulturmagasinet (culture warehouse) in Sundsvall, Sweden. Photo by Logan Photography

age?” If not, you are not invited in during normal public hours. It’s a space for tweens only (besides staff). For a city that Kulturhuset staff members say lacks sufficient public spaces and programming for tweens, Tio Tretton provides a fun, safe, and playful environment at no cost to families.

We saw a similar response to local needs at the Kulturmagasinet (culture warehouse) in Sundsvall, a community experiencing high rates of young adult unemployment and decreasing enrollment in higher education. Comprising multiple libraries, museums, and social services within four historic, glass-encased warehouses, the Kulturmagasinet also offers a dynamic teen and young adult space, centered on a café with a stage for live music and gallery space for monthly art shows. Coffee and food are sold at a fraction of normal retail prices to encourage lingering. The center employs a number of local teens and young adults in the café, as well as musicians and artists, giving them an outlet for work, connection, and purpose.

During our travels, many of our hosts told us that

we had to visit Diesilverkstaden, a culture house built into a former diesel engine factory in Nacka, a bedroom community on the outskirts of Stockholm. Diesilverkstaden is situated in a vibrant shopping area that was teeming with young families on our midday, midweek visit. The space brings together culture, creation, and recreation, with a climbing gym running through the center. The design feels in sync with what we were told is a family-focused, hip, and active community. Other aspects of the culture house include art galleries, co-working space, a library, two cafés, and studio space for classes in ceramics, printmaking, music, and dance.

Each of the culture houses we visited also is assisting with the wave of refugees arriving in Sweden each day, offering free language and culture lessons, support for navigating social services, and even cell phone activation. This very powerful work underscores how culture houses are positioned to respond rapidly to community change—often, as regularly noted by those we visited with in Sweden, more rapidly than the government can.



The Missoula delegation visits with Stockholm's Kulturhuset (culture house) staff in the Tio Tretton kitchen, which is designed to serve as both a teaching area and space for tweens to work on homework. Photo by Logan Photography

### LEARNING TO FLEX OUR MUSCLES

During *fika*, a Swedish time for coffee and conversation, Inga Lunden, acting director of culture for the City of Stockholm and mentor for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, told us that “culture houses really show their muscles” when they work collectively and align programming. Based on Lunden’s wise words and having seen multiple iterations of the culture house, we have a deeper understanding of what lies ahead as we attempt to import the culture house model to Missoula.

As a result, we are working with our architects to design a space that seamlessly weaves a number of child-family educational, cultural, and social services into a single dynamic floor. SpectrUM and the Children’s Museum Missoula, both of which currently charge admission, will become free and open to the public in exchange for a custom-designed, rent-free home. Exhibits will spill beyond the walls of our museums, and the library will complement exhibits with relevant book collections. Our local food bank will offer free breakfast and lunch to children in the summer; the space also will host

counseling rooms for WIC (the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s supplemental nutrition program) and court-ordered parenting classes. The university will offer free afterschool tutoring and other opportunities for youth to engage with role models in higher education, among other social services that will exist alongside library and museum programming.

In many ways, designing, funding, and building our new facility feels like the easy work. We are now doing the harder, more thoughtful work of developing a collective partnership that is robust and vibrant enough to allow for program integration and collective governance of shared spaces. A key ingredient is formalizing the collaboration by developing an agreement that outlines our collective vision, mission, principles, and rules. We also will create an executive leadership committee to help steer the planning of the facility and the future use of shared space, joint programming, and long-term planning. With this formalized partnership in place, we are optimistic about our ability to flex our muscles.

Missoula Mayor John Engen articulated the importance of our efforts in terms of advancing Missoula’s goals of better serving youth, families, and low-income residents. When I asked him for his thoughts on this project, he said, “Too often, organizations serving particular groups of constituents put on blinders, defend their missions at all costs, and worry about losing if someone else is winning. This partnership makes winners all around and, ultimately, the Public, with a capital P, wins.”

To learn more about our travels and efforts to bring a culture house model to Missoula, visit our blog at [www.allunderoneroofblog.wordpress.com](http://www.allunderoneroofblog.wordpress.com) and photo gallery at [www.loganphoto.shootproof.com/gallery/Sweden](http://www.loganphoto.shootproof.com/gallery/Sweden). ■

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**Holly Truitt** ([Holly.Truitt@umontana.edu](mailto:Holly.Truitt@umontana.edu)), founding director of the University of Montana spectrUM Discovery Area in Missoula and the recently launched Broader Impacts Group, works to inspire the next generation of Montanans about their potential and the transformational power of higher education.