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11 Tips for Designing Collections Areas

Top architects, space planners, and museum professionals offer insights on creating functional, resilient spaces.

DESIGNING RESILIENT COLLECTIONS AREAS

As museums grow and change to reflect changes in their communities, museum professionals need smarter ways to preserve collections, promote better access, and plan for the future. The goal is to design collections care solutions that are truly resilient: strong enough to endure decades of use while also flexible enough to accommodate changing collections.

The following insights from architects, space planners, and museum professionals are intended to help make space planning and product selection processes easier and more thorough, from pre-design all the way through to making final purchasing decisions.

1. INVEST TIME IN PRE-DESIGN

Make sure your institution develops concrete, detailed goals before the design process begins. Those criteria will govern the design process, so it's important to gain institutional alignment on issues like collections area policies and protocols, digitization goals, and visible storage before engaging an architect or space planner.



“Before you even hire an architect, spend the time to understand your own collections and understand your options.”

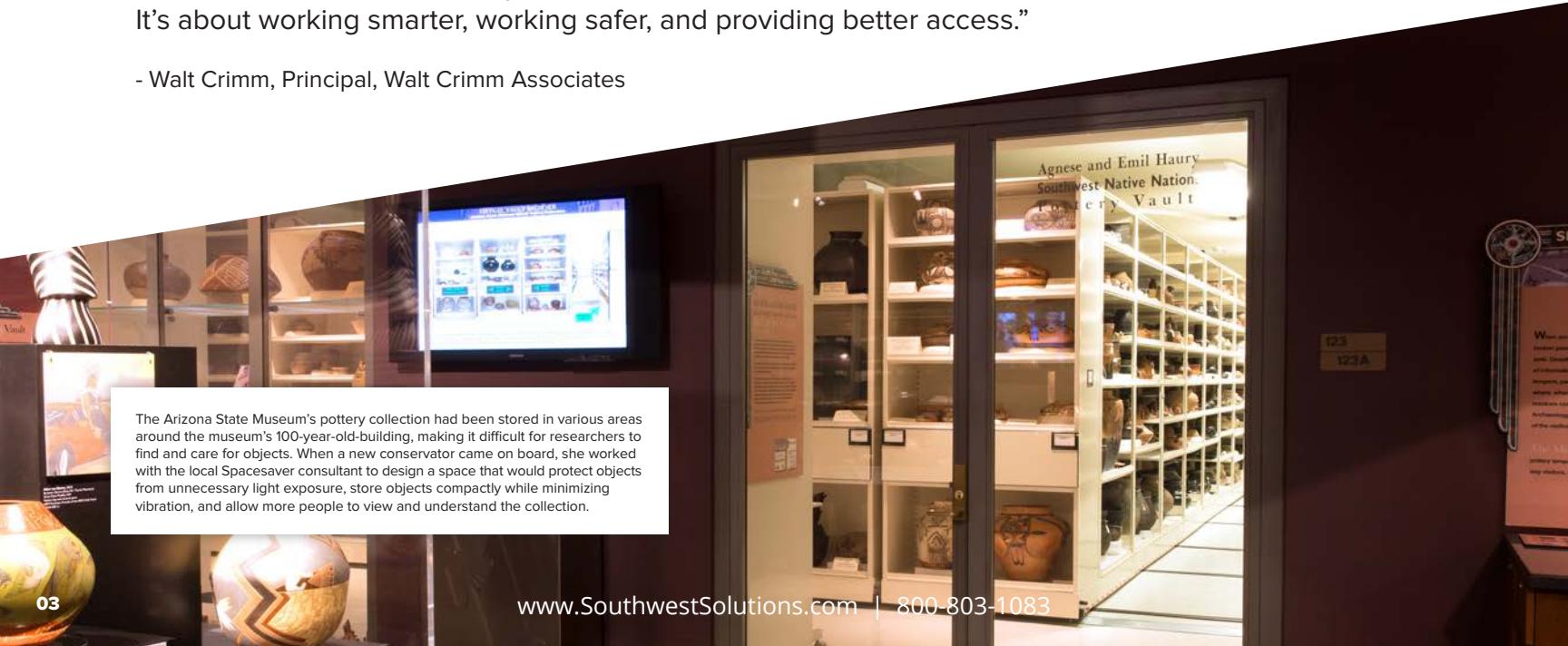
- Jeff Weatherston, Principal at WeatherstonBruer Associates

2. KEEP COLLECTIONS AT THE CORE

When building institutional support for a collections care project – from purchasing a few cabinets to undertaking a major renovation or construction project – keep board members and other stakeholders focused on how the effort will improve efficiency and enhance collections care.

“Don’t use the word ‘storage’ when proposing changes to collections care areas. Frame it as an operations project: it’s about preservation and protocol. It’s about working smarter, working safer, and providing better access.”

- Walt Crimm, Principal, Walt Crimm Associates





3. CHANGE OR CRISIS = OPPORTUNITY

After establishing concrete goals and gaining institutional support, it's time to start designing ideal preservation environments. A new building or renovation project presents the opportunity to carefully inventory not only the collections themselves, but also collections care equipment. Make short-term, medium-term, and long-term plans to repair or replace cabinets, shelving, and other equipment, always keeping collections care goals in mind.

"At times of great change or times of great crisis, when it's your turn in the spotlight as the collection, that's the time when you need to go for that cabinetry. You can apply for grants, or institutional money, or federal money. It won't be available to you another time, and you want to get as far ahead as you can. If you're not at the long-term solution yet, optimize that medium-term investment that will carry on. You can justify the expense because it's working towards a long-term vision of where you're going."

- Carolyn Leckie, Conservator, Canadian Museum of Nature

4. LOGISTICS PLANNING SAVES TIME IN THE LONG RUN

While collections care is of central concern during the planning process, be sure to consider logistical issues, too. By thinking through logistics right from the start, your planning team can help ensure a smooth transition to new equipment.

“The lesson we learned is to take time up front. Don’t rush too fast because there’s excitement about doing it. The more methodical you are, the more you realize what you need to take care of. So if you can take that time and really think about it, it definitely helps you in the end. They [advance planners] knew where everything was going. They thought about every single thing: it was coming from this spot, traveling this way, and winding up there. That type of organization, you can’t underestimate the importance of it.”

- Major Museum’s In-House Architect

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Here are just a few of the logistical considerations for taking delivery of cabinets and other equipment. Thinking about these issues during the planning process will help ensure that move-in goes smoothly.

- 1. Is time built in to the move-in schedule to allow for onsite cabinet leveling, ganging, and/or stacking?**
- 2. Will a loading dock be available to accept delivery of new cabinets and other equipment?**
- 3. Is a freight elevator available?**
- 4. Is every doorway between the delivery point and the equipment’s final location large enough to accommodate new cabinets?**

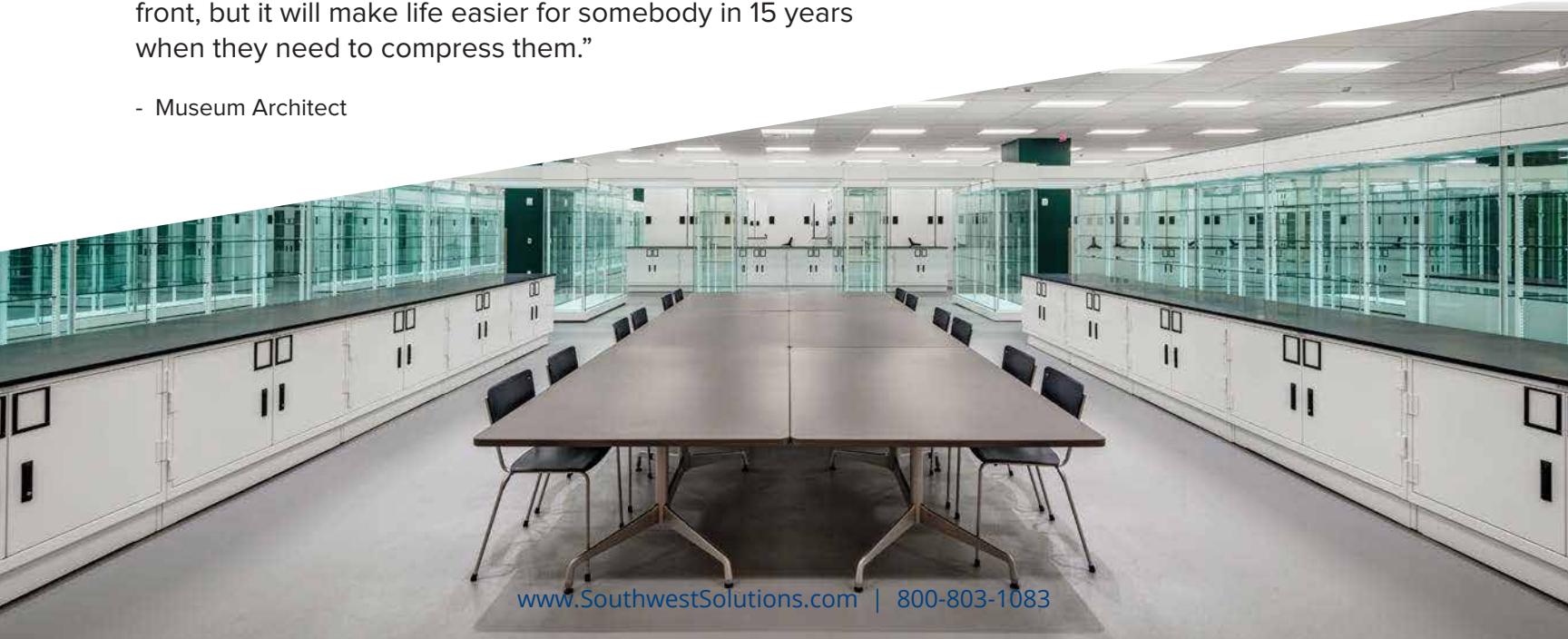
Our project managers and your local Spacesaver consultant can help you think about these and other logistical concerns.

5. PLAN FOR FUTURE GROWTH

No one can predict exactly how collections will grow in the future, but you can still help set up your future colleagues for success. Smart options include designing for greater floor loads than current needs require, planning for floor rails for compact mobile systems, and purchasing cabinet drawers and trays that can be stored and used later.

“Right now the registrar’s files are just file cabinets in rows, but we put channels in the slab so that we can put in rails later on. It didn’t cost a lot up front, but it will make life easier for somebody in 15 years when they need to compress them.”

- Museum Architect



6. ENGAGE AN INTERMEDIARY

Understanding a collection's needs is one thing, but translating those needs into a language understood by architects and engineers is another. That's why it's important to work with professionals who can advocate for your collections while also working through the challenges posed by floor loading requirements, local building codes, and other structural issues.

“End users often don’t know how to interface with architects and engineers, so you need an intermediary who can do that.”

- Museum Architect



Spacesaver's in-house project managers work with local consultants to advocate for the needs of museum professionals and their collections.





7. SHOW PLANS TO POTENTIAL FUNDERS

Donors are more willing to help fund projects when they know exactly how their money will be used and how it will help further the museum's mission. Drawings, renderings, and fly-throughs.

"We showed them [potential donors] plans, renderings, all that stuff. We actually "sold" the art racks and artifact cabinets. It gave people a real sense of investment in the building, a connection to it. They were here for the opening day, and they saw their little plaque, and they were really proud."

- In-house Museum Architect

8. CONSIDER ADJACENCIES

By thinking through your institution's current processes, and processes that will be followed in the future, collections areas and adjoining workspaces can be designed to minimize the distance that objects need to travel.

"Adjacencies were important to us. What activities go on near other activities so that objects can flow through, for instance, from the laboratories into curation?"

- Silas Hurry, Historic St. Mary's



The study collection is accessed multiple times every day at Historic St. Mary's, so staff wanted cabinets mounted on a powered compact storage system to facilitate storage and retrieval. They also ordered small cabinets fitted with wheels to keep artifacts organized and protected during transit to classrooms elsewhere in the building.

9. COLD STORAGE CONSIDERATIONS

Cold storage is essential for the long-term preservation of film, skins, and other items that tend to deteriorate quickly, so a growing number of museums are installing freezers and coolers to create optimal storage conditions for their collections. These areas are expensive to maintain, though, so it pays to design them with compact mobile shelving that makes the most of every cubic inch.

"The cool and cold storage spaces are the most energy-intensive areas of the building, so we wanted to treat the least amount of volume of air. In order to not build those areas bigger, we designed them to have compact moveable carriages from the get-go."

- Museum Architect



Cold storage areas can be designed with room to grow while still occupying the smallest space available. Spacesaver compactors at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science protect collections, save space, improve organization and efficiency, and comply with applicable codes.

10. FLEXIBILITY APPLIES TO CABINET INTERIORS, TOO!

External modularity is important when designing with an eye to the future, and so are configurable cabinets. Although it's important to make thoughtful estimates as to how collections will grow and change in the future, allow for a great deal of flexibility as time goes by.

"A 920 cabinet can be configured for two-inch trays today, and in ten or twenty years the panels and accessories can be removed and replaced with panels that support six-inch drawers, dividers, or even hanging rods and shelves."

- Ben Adamitus





The Viking 920 Preservation Cabinet features interior components that can be reconfigured as needs change over time.

11. ABOVE ALL, EMBRACE THE CHALLENGE

Designing new collections care areas is notoriously difficult, but it's also an opportunity to make a major impact on your institution for decades to come. Through careful planning and thoughtful investments in cabinets, shelving, and other collections care equipment, you can improve processes and create a better preservation environment for collections now and into the future.

"If you're lucky, if you're really lucky, you're going to be involved in a building project, and that's a chance for you to put everything on the table and rethink how you're doing things and review your practices. And, to be honest, you're never going to work as hard as you will when you get involved in one of those big projects, because there's a lot of moving parts that you have to dovetail, between your cabinet orders, quality control issues, and so on, and then you're trying to marry that with a construction project where everybody's concerned about things being on time and on budget. But don't shy away from it. Embrace it, because it's an amazing opportunity."

- Collections Director, Major Natural History Museum



When staff at the Bess Bower Dunn Museum were planning a move to a renovated office building, they wanted to improve visibility and access to their collections by housing collections on multiple floors. They realized during the intensive planning phase that the building's structure wasn't robust enough to handle the weight. Although the decision to locate the collections in the building's basement was a painful one at the time, the collections area is now a prize-winning showplace in addition to being a safe and efficient place to work.