When James Turrell designed *The Way of Color* Skyspace installation in 2009 he looked closely at the Southern community of Bentonville, Arkansas and the stunning natural environment of the future site for Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Commissioned two years before the Museum was completed, *The Way of Color* was a daring introduction to art considering the rather small, rural community. And yet the work played a pivotal role in crafting the future for engaging community discourse and support for the visual arts. I offer three points as to how the Skyspace was critical to dialogue around information needs; visibility and timing of the installation, community access to the work, and partnering opportunities resulting from exposure to the Skyspace.

First, the physical location and the timing in opening *The Way of Color* created profound interest among a new and curious audience. Crystal Bridges Museum, designed by world renowned architect Moshe Safdie, occupies 120 acres of natural Ozark forest adjacent to the thriving downtown center of Bentonville. The campus contains 3.5 four miles of varied trails highlighting outdoor sculpture, natural springs and topography, and a built environment of 201,000 square feet arrayed in eight pavilions surrounding two spring-fed ponds. Construction began in Fall 2006 and concluded with the opening of the Museum in Fall 2011. *The Way of Color* Skyspace is nestled into a berm alongside beautiful hiking/biking and art trails connecting the charming town of Bentonville to the Museum. Among the few Skyspaces that are circular, it clearly reflects the site’s natural setting and takes on the organic, rounded shapes of the hillside and Museum buildings. Typical of Turrell’s use of native materials in Skyspace constructions, the circular exterior wall of *The Way of Color* was built with native stone from the Fayetteville, Arkansas area. The limestone rock for the bench seats and back rests is from Topeka, Kansas, and the floor is made of stone from Paris, Arkansas. The 4’ 9” open oculus is stainless steel, and on the floor beneath the oculus is a circle of black volcanic sand.

For nearly two years prior to the Museum’s completion, in anticipation of the November, 2011 inaugural opening, a large number of community members, as well as national and
international visitors, passed by the Skyspace on a mile long hiking and biking trail leading to a wooden observation deck overlooking Crystal Bridges’ construction site. At first they were only able to view the exterior of the Skyspace and were informed by Museum volunteers stationed along the trail that it was an “art installation structure” soon to be open to the public. The volunteers collected data; such as zipcode, age, and awareness of the future art museum, and they took comments from the trail goers. Curiosity about the “round stone building on the trail” was expressed by many of the over 5,000 visitors counted (sampling total 5,324, 1,344 surveyed). Not surprisingly, the five regional public libraries were increasingly receiving information requests from Northwest Arkansas community members about not only the Museum complex and art, but also about the “peculiar” art structure.

In August of 2010 I hosted regional librarians at the Skyspace for a private sunset viewing; the optimal times for *The Way of Color* are sunrise/sunset when the transition from natural twilight to full light is enhanced by a computer-driven LED light display—revealing changing hues and light levels. It was our first time meeting and none of none of the librarians, indeed very few local people, had experienced the Skyspace interior. Later that fall the Museum opened the Skyspace to the public on eight Friday and Saturday evening sunsets (the installation is now open from sunrise to sunset every day). There was no extended labeling of the installation at the early viewings, but volunteer Skyspace facilitators welcomed guests with brief introductions about James Turrell and the structure. Once inside *The Way of Color*, groups of adventurous arts enthusiasts gathered on the heated limestone benches, and although it was nearly impossible for the curious first-time guests to slow their minds and bodies to a meditative level and experience the installation as a peaceful, contemplative space. They were clearly curious and engaged with the installation, inquisitively probing the stacked trapezoidal stones of the cone-shaped chamber, alternating gazes up through the oculus in the ceiling and down to the circular recessed area in the floor directly below the oculus filled with black volcanic sand. They discussed how the walls appear wider towards the top of the structure and how voices resonate
and are amplified as bodies move under the center of the oculus—which is the only position from which the oculus appears as a full circle. Guest interactions, as noted by facilitators, ranged from jubilant to enigmatic as they anxiously anticipated what they understood to be a “kind of light show.” They watched for fifteen minutes as the sun began going down and the lights slowly changed colors. When the sun had completely set, the oculus appeared solid black and the lights inside returned to a warm, neutral white to give their eyes a rest. What followed for nearly twenty more minutes they experienced a dazzling burst of saturated, fast-moving color that completely surrounded the viewers, leaving them feeling energized

The initial librarian preview, as well as the public preview, and hundreds of repeat public Skyspace experiences in the following opening year, played a pivotal role in engaging community interest and support for the visual arts.

Over 1,260 community members previewed the Skyspace that fall and they were always hungry for more information: “what exactly does it mean?”; “How could this be called art?”; “Is it abstract art?”; “Is it really a psychedelic ride?” More commonly we heard, “you need signage explaining this.” So, in the spring of 2011, approximately six months before the November opening, the Museum trained staff and volunteers to host facilitated public talks at the Skyspace, and every evening visitors came in numbers too large to hold the 24-person capacity. Soon after that, the Museum designed simple signage about the Skyspace, including information about Turrell and core concepts around the experience. *The Way of Color* was so well received that staff soon also recognized the need for trash disposal, dog waste stations, restrooms, and bicycle and stroller parking along the trail to the installation. Word about the Skyspace spread quickly—Bentonville was excited! The community some thought would not support a world-class art museum was suddenly embracing non-traditional, installation art. In this case, visibility and timing were essential. Museum planners had the foresight to commission a daring work of art, place it on a beautiful trail accessed daily, and stage a public soft opening of the installation a year before the Museum opened. Clearly, the Skyspace dialogue signaled a
critical need for information from not only a community of typical researchers, regularly exposed
to culture as has been the traditional focus of art museums but a small public community nearly
three hours from the closest major art museum. As an art librarian it wasn’t difficult to recognize
the beauty of this—the extent of the community’s need for more information—not only about the
Skyspace but about American art. There was indeed a jubilant demand for community access to
information (my second point), and the only route towards that end was to build a strong
relationship with the regional public libraries.

However lofty my collaborative vision was upon realizing the excitement and
information-seeking behavior generated by Turrell’s Skyspace, there were other strategic
imperatives during my first year with the Museum. The most challenging undertaking from the
onset was gaining institutional support for the library. As many in this audience have
experienced, it took a boundless amount of patience delivering “dumbed down,” or should I say
oversimplified presentations, on metadata, OCLC, controlled vocabularies, and so forth—all in
an effort to persuade Museum administration that a one-time conversion project for over 55,000
items was the only logical route to filling the Museum’s general art reference shelves in 16
months. Thankfully, my efforts did not go unheeded. We contracted the services of “Backstage
Library Works” for the project, recruited 60 plus volunteers to unpack and alphabetically shelve
the items, and staged over 4,000 linear feet of shelving in an historic building in downtown
Bentonville for the organization phase. At the same time, and as a result of hearing that the
Museum library would be “browsable” but not circulating during one of my desperate pitches, a
Museum donor stepped forward with funding for five regional public libraries to start their own
small collections of books about American art that could be checked out by the community.
Ensuring public library circulation to American art titles made perfect sense. The Museum library
could provide recommendations to the libraries regarding general reference art books and
special exhibition materials, and they would acquire and circulate their choices to the
community. The model, surprisingly, was not without precedence. Kenneth Soehner, Chief
Librarian at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, noted in his keynote address of The 2010 Art Museum Librarians Symposium that a similar 1917 collaboration occurred between the Cleveland Museum Library and the public library whereby the libraries exchanged card catalog lists of art books.

Returning to the patron’s proposal—which, though it arrived in the midst of chaos, stress, and accelerated pace of organizing a new library—was in fact the much-needed catalyst in re-connecting with the regional librarians I hosted at the Skyspace. What a pleasure it was to reach out to each of them with this generous gift and the invitation for collaborative collection development efforts. Thus, the third point I want to make is that the dialog spurred by the Skyspace inevitably led to an expansion of information needs that could not be provided by a traditional non-circulating art research library. This unique community appetite for information about art revealed that the only logical route was through a partnership with regional libraries. As Soehner suggests, art museum libraries [should] be prepared to maintain traditional research values but remain “agile” and “innovative” should an institutional focus change (2010). As a brand new museum, Crystal Bridges had the opportunity to adopt a dual research/community access model that would enhance content, context, and access; creating balance between the three elements that is essential to ensure growth, development, and sustainability of the Museum library collection.

Before the collaboration, current holdings of American art titles by the regional libraries were very limited, but three of the five librarians had acquired at least one title about James Turrell during the six months after experiencing the Skyspace, and they were all on-board with my guidance in selecting titles relating to museum collections and exhibitions. Initially I provided the libraries with a basic bibliography of accessible yet authoritative American art survey books and artists’ monographs, including: Wayne Craven’s American Art: History and Culture; Susan Davidson’s Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation; and Frances Pohl’s Framing America: A Social History of American Art. Overall, during the Museum’s first year of operation, I sent the
libraries eleven exhibition-related lists of recommended titles from which each library has acquired varying numbers of books. For every Museum exhibition, I select anywhere from 8 to 12 authoritative titles to be placed on end-panels in the library. Each book is displayed with a bellyband featuring exhibition branding and title citation, as well as a listing of which local libraries offer the book for circulation. I also provide the same information, compiled in partnership with the other libraries, as a printed handout for Museum Guides (docents) and other departments, as well as for guests should they want access to a title on the Museum Library shelves. Bentonville Public Library has been particularly involved in the collaboration, including promoting both print and website American art titles available for circulation. Bentonville Public Library’s 106 titles directly supporting interest in American art have been used 617 times, averaging 5.82 uses since the Museum opening in 2011. This average is higher than their overall collection use. Our other public library partner’s circulation of American art titles also increased due similar print promotions and in library displays highlighting art or exhibitions at Crystal Bridges. Albeit the early stages of assessment provide exciting anecdotal evidence and increased circulation of American art titles at the public libraries, we hope to compile thorough empirical data for more complete future analysis.

I should also briefly share our collaborative efforts with the University of Arkansas Libraries. In addition to being part of the collection development project, the University Libraries played an integral role in establishing the Crystal Bridges Library—from the first library acquisition of 25,000 items in 2005, to second and third library acquisitions of roughly the same number in 2006. They graciously provided storage, as well as consultation on many aspects of the library space and hiring decisions before I arrived. Carolyn Henderson Allen, Dean of the University Libraries and Judy Ganson, UA Libraries’ Director for Collection Management Services and Systems, served on the hiring committee for the Museum Library Director, and worked tirelessly to help us transition to the sharing of their online catalog. University Fine Arts Librarian Phil Jones proves an invaluable resource for us and the increasing numbers of
American art history students who frequent both libraries. Most recently our two institutions collaborated on a digital exhibition highlighting selected Crystal Bridges nineteenth century color plate seed catalogs and an array of materials from University Special Collections manuscripts and books. The online collection serves interdisciplinary researchers, students, and the communities of Northwest Arkansas, and serves as a model for future digital collaborations.

In conclusion I want to cite an IFLA report, Public Libraries, Archives and Museums: Trends in Collaboration and Cooperation, "... partnerships bring together shared knowledge, expand resources, support community development, and broaden audiences" (2008). This is certainly true in my experience with our regional and University libraries because Turrell’s Way of Color was absolutely critical to dialogue around information needs at a place and time that allowed broad access and rich partnering opportunities. Together we have helped to shape a community network of people who are active information seekers. Over 750,000 guests have toured the Museum since November of 2011 and nearly 20,000 have visited the library. Yet it should not go unnoted that in many cases, the exterior installation art along the trails connecting the Museum to downtown Bentonville ignites guests' initial curiosity. Today, along with The Way of Color, the outdoor sculptures include: Roxy Paine’s striking stainless steel Yield at the Museum entrance and a Robert Indiana’s LOVE at the south entrance, Lowell’s Ocean by Mark DiSuvero, Luis Jiménez’s Vaquero, and Leo Villareal’s Buckyball soon to be installed at the Museum’s entry drive. Like the Skyspace, these works very much help craft a future for engaging community discourse and support for American art. Moreover, they are a tribute to Crystal Bridges’ position as a paragon for small community revitalization in the arts, and a seed for increasing goodwill potential and support between organizations and the broader global community (IMLS, 2013).