

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Strategic Direction – Vision Document

June 22, 2009

Executive Summary

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research unit of the New York Public Library, is recognized as the leading research library and cultural center in the world devoted exclusively to collecting, preserving, providing access to, and interpreting research resources on the global black experience. Established in 1925 as a unique reference collection, by 1926 it was offering the 10,000 items from the personal collection of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg. Today, the Schomburg Center, with collections of over 10 million items, exists as a “hybrid” institution. It is the most acknowledged institutional model by African and diasporan nations and communities developing research, educational, and cultural centers and has been the model for three of four *public* U.S. institutions dedicated to this field.¹ The Center sets the standard for African American and African diasporan cataloguing and normalizes the nomenclature for the field. Its attendance is among the top five African American museums although it is a research library² and it is among the top three tourist destinations in Harlem.³

Now in its eighth decade of service to the nation and the world, the Schomburg Center has reached a crossroads in its development. In this time of fiscal crisis and anticipated leadership transition, and expanded transnational diaspora relations among citizens, governments, and multilateral institutions like the African Union, the Center is challenged to plan for its future. The institution has wisely decided to begin planning for its leadership succession, and identification of revenue generating opportunities, as well as opportunities to further increase its on-site and off-site visitation. In late 2008, Lord Cultural Resources was contracted through a grant from the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone to assist the Schomburg in the planning, facilitation, and execution of a Strategic Visioning Charette to create a roadmap, guiding the leadership of the Center in the design and development of a renewed Schomburg Center for the 21st Century. ⁴

¹ The Schomburg was a model for The African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale, The Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta, and the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, Denver.

² The four African American museums with the highest attendance are: the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit; the Museum of Afro-American History, Boston; the National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, and the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Baltimore. Source: 2009 Official Museum Directory.

³ The other top tourist destinations in Harlem are the Apollo Theater and the Studio Museum. Source: 2004 Audience Research & Analysis commissioned by Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone.

⁴ The Schomburg’s process included a research and assessment phase which resulted in the production of an Environmental Scan, Contextual Analysis and Market Brief prepared January-March, 2009.

The Charette, co-chaired by Drs., Johnetta Cole and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was attended by fourteen leaders in the arts, culture, and academic fields including representatives of the New York Public Library, scholars, and subject experts from the east coast region. *A complete list of the participants is included in the appendix of this document.*

The Strategic Direction Document and Executive Summary represent the conclusion of the Strategic Visioning process. The final recommendations;

- Affirm the need and method for the Schomburg Center to function as a relatively autonomous institution;
- Envision the immediate future for the Center (the next 5-10 years);
- Define the leadership style and characteristics or qualities necessary for the next leader of the Schomburg Center.

Recommendations of the Strategic Advisors

Because of the Schomburg's hybrid identity, Charette participants made the following recommendations for the future development of the Schomburg Center:

- 1. Continue to function as a relatively autonomous entity within The New York Public Library.**
- 2. Continue to build its extraordinary collections, especially its special collections materials.**
- 3. Continue to build its reputation as a leading repository of the legacy of black people.**
- 4. Continue to build and expand its brand recognition nationally and internationally.**
- 5. Develop and implement a robust marketing plan to build brand recognition, recruit and service donors, and promote the use of its collections and services.**
- 6. Grow its exhibition interpretive and cultural programs and enhance marketing of the same to increase on-site users.**
- 7. Realign allocation of staff and resources to better serve remote users while continuing to provide state-of-the-art services to on-site users.**
- 8. Expand its digital presence on the internet by increasing production of on-line exhibits and products while offering on-line access to full text collections, images and audio-visual resources.**
- 9. Commission a major marketing study.**

10. Commission a major study of the use of digital materials from the Schomburg Center.

11. Conduct major capital campaign to finance and support the growth and development of these initiatives.

12. Recruit a first-rate Director to lead the Schomburg Center into its 9th decade.⁵

Finally Charette, Co-chair Dr. Gates concluded the session with a final comment on the leadership of Howard Dodson, saying “there’s been nobody...who combined the various skills and talents, intellectual attainments, interests, and capacities, particularly intellectual blended with entrepreneurial and marketing...than Howard Dodson.
