A Journal of the Plague Years:

Reflections on Crisis and Change in the Museum World

Avi Decter and Ken Yellis



When forced to close during the pandemic, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England, released re-imagined images of some of its most popular works, like Millais’ “The Twins,” shown above.

Perhaps the time has come for museums to re-imagine themselves.

-----Avi Decter and Ken Yellis

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We are, of course, solely responsible for the ideas represented in this series of reflections and the language in which these ideas are couched. Comments and corrections of fact are welcome. Please respond to Avi at avidecter@gmail.com or Ken at Kenyellis@aol.com.

**Introduction and Overview**

Like millions of other Americans, we were shocked and horrified when the pandemic struck in early 2020. The healthcare crisis was met with denial on one hand and panic on the other. The rising number of deaths, the economic disruption, and the unprecedented challenges created a moment of high anxiety across the continent. No one and nothing seemed stable or safe.

Museums, of course, were not exempt. Virtually all museums closed their facilities; many furloughed or fired their staffs; and a few closed permanently. The rhetoric of the AAM (American Alliance of Museums), intended to marshal public support and government funding for museums, exaggerated the risks and seemed to portend the demise of one-third of all American museums. Like others who had made their careers in museum work, we were appalled by the threat posed to a cultural sector we respected and loved.

But we were also concerned by the failure of most museums to respond productively to the pandemic. Instead of rushing to the aid of their communities (or even their own staff and volunteers), most museums hunkered down, biding time for things to settle and return to the old normal. We were heartened by the small number of museums who rose to the occasion by offering their constituents facilities and space for emergency testing and care, food and shelter for those in need, and all manner of remote services to housebound families. But these exceptions stood out amid a sea of seeming apathy.

And in a matter of months, the crisis caused by plague was exacerbated by a series of other crises. The murder of Black people at the hands of the police and the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement put America's systemic racism at the forefront of public discourse. Violent weather conditions--floods, droughts, tornadoes, and wildfires--underscored the significance of climate change and environmental degradation. Inequities in provision of healthcare and emergency assistance provoked protests and demonstrations for social and environmental justice. And all of this was unfolding against a backdrop of divisive political rhetoric fueled by misinformation, disinformation, false equivalency, and irrelevance.

We, like all Americans, were made aware that we are actors in and witnesses to history. So are our institutions, including museums. But how could we and our colleagues bear witness in a time of crisis and change? Adapting to novelty is rarely clear and never simple--all the more so when communities are conflicted over their principles and priorities. The closing of museums and the dissolution of in-person conversation made things that much harder and more complicated.

We were encouraged by the emergence of online platforms for airing our shared concerns. Soon after the pandemic struck, NAME (National Association for Museum Exhibition) organized two weekly coffee hours, one for Eastern museum professionals (hosted by Jenny-Sayre Ramberg) and one for Western ones (hosted by Eric Siegel). Initially these sessions provided space for colleagues to commiserate, but many conversations also offered reflections on the state of institutions, public discourse, exemplary projects, and new possibilities. Both of us were regular participants in the NAME coffee hours and drop-ins on a host of other online sites that promoted progressive ideas about museums and their roles in American society.

Challenges to old assumptions, conventional narratives, and customary practices multiplied in new websites, virtual talking circles, and online communities. The very names of these initiatives --The Incluseum, Death to Museums, Museums & Race, Museums Are Not Neutral, Museum Hue, Facing Change Working Group, The Empathetic Museum, Museum Workers Speak, Hyperallergic, and Museum as Site for Social Action--suggest their aspirations and commitments. Many of these initiatives precede the pandemic and owe their voices to a prescient choir of pioneers, many colleagues of color. All have been inspiring to us personally and have been reflected to greater or lesser degree in our writings of the past three years.

As long-time writers on museum matters, both of us subscribed to the idea that we would only discover what we were thinking when we wrote down our thoughts. Within weeks of the March 2020 closures, we had started to exchange notes and jottings about the crisis. In April 2020, we published the first of a series of blogs on the nested crises of the pandemic, submitting them to the editorial attentions of Aja Bain and posting them on the AASLH (American Association for State and Local History) website. The deeper our engagement, the more we wrote. And the more we wrote, the deeper our need for new ideas and other perspectives.

To supplement our participation in the NAME coffee hours and other regular online meetings, we decided in early summer 2020 to convene a few conversations with other colleagues in the field. Part of our intention was to gather new thoughts for our own reflection and writing, part to touch base with our colleagues, and part to test the structures and boundaries of professional discourse under conditions of extreme pressure. As we sorted through the names of prospective invitees, we realized that our friend and colleague Marsha Semmel was an unrivalled source of suggestions of people to invite to join us in conversation.

Accordingly, in July, August, and October 2020, the three of us convened three online conversations about the crisis and the state of the museum field. More than thirty colleagues, representing all kinds of museums, geographic regions, professional expertise, and levels of experience joined us in ninety-minute discussions. As we wrote and disseminated the minutes of those meetings, we concluded that a book of short essays was in order. Marsha and we then set out to replicate the content and tone of our online discourse in a book we tentatively titled "Seize the Moment." Its theme was simple and clear: Change is required.

The book project consumed much of our attention and energy from late 2020 to the spring of 2022. But our intense engagement with more than sixty prospective authors of every stripe and color also fueled our own thinking. Together, we began formulating our own manifesto about what was to be done. In the last months of 2020, we drafted a lengthy document that summarized our thinking and began searching for an organization to publish our emergent ideas. The Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM) was receptive, thanks to the intervention of its board chair Gretchen Sorin and its executive, Avery Shaughnessy-Comfort. In April 2021, MAAM published *Seizing the Moment: A Manifesto for Next Practice* as MAAM's first-ever White Paper.

Up to that point, and despite our growing preoccupation with our book project, we had continued to post blogs on the AASLH website. Then, in mid-2021, Aja Bain, the editor of AASLH publications, either impressed or distressed by our stream of postings, invited us to take over the "History in Progress" column in *History News*, which had long been authored by Carol Kammen. Over the next fifteen months, we published five quarterly columns in *History News*. In August 2022, our book with Marsha Semmel, *Change Is Required: Preparing for the Post-Pandemic Museum* (Rowman & Littlefield) appeared. With the completion of the book, we resumed posting occasional blogs as a supplement to our *History News* columns.

In the wake of the book's publication, many of our *Change Is Required* authors have been invited to share their evolving ideas with interested colleagues. Online platforms such as MuseumExpert.org webinars and our own Museums and Change forum in particular have hosted about twenty of our authors and drawn substantial audiences across the continent and beyond. The positive reception of these ideas has been most rewarding. Of equal import are the deep and salient responses of our colleagues, manifested in Chat comments and follow-on emails. We are, in short, tapping into the zeitgeist of the field and, perhaps, enriching it a bit as well.

It is now three years since we posted our first blog on the pandemic. Despite strenuous national efforts to return to the old normal of February 2020, the nested crises of the past three years continue to disrupt the lives of millions of Americans. Many have been displaced from their former lives--they have lost their place in the world. One result of so many being in exile from their own lives is a widespread, intense burst of nostalgia, a longing for an earlier time when life was simpler, stable, and satisfying. The problem, of course, is that the real world was never so simple, so stable, or even so safe.

"This nostalgic impulse is of course extremely powerful," writes the novelist Sally Rooney, "and [it] has recently been harnessed to great effect by reactionary and fascist political movements." The mix of fantasy and fact has created a toxic environment. Our information ecosystem is polluted with misinformation and disinformation. The signal-to-noise ratio is off the charts. How then can our museums bear witness to what is factual and real and true? How can we promote social change and equity against a backdrop of dismissive destructiveness?

As this compendium of our writing suggests, we need to acknowledge our civic and communal responsibilities, then to engage the difficult issues of our day, even as we provide space for multiple ideas and opinions. We need to increase mutual understanding among our constituents by exposing them to each other and to new and challenging interpretations. We need to discard exhaustion and emotional despair and to embrace encouragement. We need to cultivate collaboration with our colleagues and our communities. We need, above all, to bear witness so that we and our communities can move towards a safer, fairer, more compassionate world. This journal of the plague years is a part of that effort.

**1. After the Plague**

AASLH Blog 4/1/20

In the midst of the pandemic, our museums, sites, and organizations are preoccupied with loss of income, layoffs, and the need to send up a few online flares to remind our stakeholders and patrons that we are still here (or perhaps that we are sinking fast?). The condition of stasis that has been imposed on us and our institutions raises fundamental, existential questions about what we will be and how we will cope once the plague has passed.

This is—or should be—a moment for reflection within the field. Instead, much energy is being put into placing markers on the Internet. What little energy is left seems to be focused on how our institutions can recover financially. Both efforts are understandable and sensible, but neither comes to grips with how the world is changing and what it will look like after the pandemic.

Will our institutions survive in anything like their previous forms? Will our former visitors seek a different kind of experience from what we used to offer? What if the burst of online programming were to displace altogether the community- and visitor-focused activities developed and tested over time?

We need to consider these questions now, when we can already begin to glimpse how the culture will change and what people are likely to seek and need in post-plague America. Other media are already exploring this. Waiting until the pestilence ends risks putting us behind the curve and finding us frozen in pre-plague modes or preoccupied with virtual experiences and unable to address our new realities.

It is best to start now, even if our sense of how things will play out is off the mark. At least we will have begun to ponder the imponderable, to open our minds to new kinds of ideas, and to start practicing the arts of imagination and improvisation. One thing is almost certain: we will need to provide our traditional users with new kinds of programming and experience. Changing our programs will be even more important for attracting new audiences: if what we offer stays the same as before the pandemic, why would audiences who have avoided the museum previously bother to come now?

If we think of museums as the present’s best guess as to what the future will need to know, what will that mean in a new and different landscape? We probably need to reconstitute our organizations as think-tanks. This can be done at distance, using the wide range of social media at our disposal. Brainstorming can be done remotely and safely. Sharing of scenarios, options, instincts, and ideas will help us to affirm our intentionality and agency. While we are living and laboring under the cloud of coronavirus is an optimal time to engage in blue-sky thinking about our subject matter, our modes of presentation, and our practice.

It is likely that we and our institutions will need to take more, rather than fewer risks than formerly. We will probably have to be much more nimble and flexible to stay relevant and keep up with sudden sweeping changes. We may need to give less attention to long-term planning and more attention to a continuous process of strategic thinking. The harsh reality is that we cannot know for sure how things are going to play out. But we need to begin preparing ourselves for a very different future. We need to start finding ways to adjust to and be comfortable with that future. And we need to start now.

**2. So Much Trouble in The World**

AASLH Blog 4/16/20

The way earthly thin's are goin',

Anything can happen.

“So Much Trouble in The World”

Bob Marley and the Wailers, 1986.

Much of the trouble in the world right now has to do with uncertainty about and a lack of preparedness for whatever happens. It’s too early to say whether the pandemic crisis marks a radical change in the world or accelerates changes already underway. Whichever turns out to

be the case, the ecosystem our organizations will swim in when the plague is over will be

different in both degree and kind. Whatever we hope for, it’s not too soon to start thinking now

about the nature of those changes and their implications for our operations and practice. That

thinking could address three levels of concern:

1. What is necessary?

2. What is possible?

3. What can be dreamed of?

Most urgent would be Financial Capacity. At present, museums and cultural organizations

generally are preoccupied with the immediate financial impacts of the pandemic. In the mid-

term, national, state, and local governments will focus on the hardships of unemployment and

lost business; in the long-term, governments will be saddled with tremendous debt and

growing debt service. This means a major source of support for the cultural sector will enter a

steep and prolonged decline. Few institutions will be immune to this. Meanwhile, private

philanthropy will need to respond to the humanitarian and health care crises, leading to

reduced funding for the cultural sector from individuals and foundations.

Urgent, too, is Re-Tooling for Renewal: Disruptive change brings what Ronald Heifetz terms "adaptive challenges"--changes for which there are no established solutions, no clear ways

forward, no consultant to offer tried-and-tested remedies. This leaves cultural organizations in

need of new kinds of leadership, visionary, experimental, risk-taking. It also means abandoning

long-term strategic planning for a continuous process of strategic thinking. It means re-thinking

the balance between managing our collections and engaging our communities. It means not

just reconstituting our staffs, but re-structuring them. It means expanding our capacity for

imagination and innovation and repressing our instinct to return to normal. All of us in the

world of arts and culture are going to have to move out of our comfort zones—we need to

adapt to novelty.

In the realm of possibility, two major themes occur to us, both of which many organizations

have already introduced and tested. One is Politics and Civic Engagement: The relevance of civic life in its broadest and its narrowest dimensions is being brought home by economic

dislocation, mass unemployment, loss of health care coverage, and inadequate means for

retirement. Americans, however situated, will be more aware of and more concerned about the

politics of everyday life. This suggests that all kinds of museums, sites, and historical

organizations, if they hope to remain relevant, will need to focus greater attention to politics

and civic life, to agency and activism, and to the responses of earlier generations to large-scale,

disruptive crises.

A second possibility is an increase in Global Awareness among our constituents. The pandemic

has been a dramatic demonstration that like it or not we live in a global system. In art museums

and encyclopedic ones, this is likely to accelerate the shift from a Euro-centric focus to more of

an emphasis on multicultural creativity. For culturally specific organizations (ethnic, racial, or

religious), greater global awareness may increase interest in the roots of specific sub-cultures

and the journeys these groups have taken here in America. For science and natural history

museums, global awareness will mean foregrounding the issue of climate change. For local

historical organizations, the most numerous class of museums in North America, global

awareness may call into question the basic content and interpretation of those sites. The re-

imagination of their stories will be a critical need.

The dreamscape of the future remains murky, but we think that it is not just individual

organizations that need to re-imagine their stories: the cultural community, however defined,

must do that as well. We need a series of think tanks to serve as the nexus for such a project.

Any new, aspirational vision will need to demonstrate--as libraries already have--that museums

are not just socially useful, but indispensable. Perhaps we can take a cue from the New Deal:

what might our organizations do to help put people to work who need work and to stitch up

the tears, large and small, in the national fabric. That sounds like a dream worth having.

**3. Sharing Authority after the Plague**

AASLH Blog 4/27/20

Watching the President, Vice-President, and assorted scientists and governors awkwardly "sharing authority" daily, questions arise as to exactly what we mean by this resonant, if vague,

term and what, if anything, it could possibly mean in the post-pandemic world.

In the museum world and more generally, we’ve seen a version of this before. In the aftermath

of 9/11, the national narrative seemed to have become murkier, with little impetus toward

clarifying or challenging it. There was, however, greater readiness to talk about whose narrative

it is, who needs to be part of the conversation, and how to make the process more open and

transparent. In terms of “what just happened?” museums were demure, speaking in a sub voce,

comforting voice.

By the late 2000s, a growing discomfort with this reticence was bubbling up in professional

ranks. In a 2011 article in Museum, “Let Us Now Praise Museum Authority,” Erik Ledbetter

spoke of “museums' growing discomfort with their own curatorial authority.” He cited

Christiaan Klieger’s question of the day; "What training qualifies a curator to serve as the sole

filter for the stories of 36 million living Californians? Who, among many possible gatekeepers,

might be best qualified to decide which stories to feature in a museum?”

At the same time, if museums wanted to demonstrate they were necessary, they had to define

their role somehow. How that has played out is best expressed in their behavior over the past

decade. The cultural landscape is peppered with museums committed to inclusiveness,

collaboration, transparency, responsiveness, and relationships with community groups, civic

organizations, colleges and universities. These have shaped and made possible a range of

programs that have positioned them as forums, conveners, catalysts, cultural touchstones,

good neighbors, and good citizens.

What does this redistribution of agency mean in terms of the ambivalence museums feel

toward the very notion of sharing authority? Have museums, by playing this role, exerted a

different form of agency and, as a result, earned a different form of authority, that of the

honest broker, the disinterested observer? Is that what we now need museums to do?

Maybe. Museums and the culture at large are at a crossroads, as many have noted. America has

a lot of choices to make and that will take some time. In the interim, museums will likely need

to temporize, manage crises, and seize opportunities as they can. Risk-taking is likely to be the

default setting, but it shouldn’t be the only setting.

But this is also a teaching moment and museums have something to say about what strategies

might be available to organizations surrounded by a social and cultural climate entirely

different from the prevailing circumstances of their creation. Museums are not the only entities

who’ve had to deal with this, but there are a lot of them that have or soon will. Sharing

authority is not the only strategy to think about in this way, but it might be one of the most

interesting.

It may sound reductive, but authority and prestige have value and that value changes a

conversation about support from supplication to parity. Museums are not alone in being able to

do this.

It’s important to be aware that sharing authority is not a binary choice set. Determining whose

narrative it is, who needs to be part of the conversation, and how to structure the process are

related but separate subjects and should be treated that way. We need to be prepared to

articulate clearly what we mean by sharing authority, what it has to offer, and how it can be

implemented. It is all too easy to think of sharing authority as a means of diluting content, but it

can enrich and deepen content as well.

**4. Are We Stronger Together?**

AASLH Blog 5/8/20

In a recent blog, Randi Korn and Paul Pearson underscored the importance of each museum or site, arboretum or zoo clarifying its core purpose and value―and then planning accordingly. We agree that our organizations reside in distinct communities, have distinct identities, and respond to distinct imperatives. But this does not mean that our museums need to rely solely and exclusively on those qualities that make them unique and different, that is, to rely only on themselves.

In practice, many of our institutions, perhaps most, do engage in a variety of partnerships, alliances, and collaborations to further their particular institutional goals. Some of these networks are based on a common locality, others are grounded in the traditions and practices of an ethnic, racial, religious, or occupational group, and still others are based on the shared interests, ideas, or expertise of the institutions themselves.

Marsha Semmel, in her recent book, *Partnership Power* (2019), argues that partnering is a critical professional skill and an "essential strategy in this networked age." She goes on to say that "Despite significant and increasing activity in this area, many museums have not built a partnership mindset into their ongoing work, and do not necessarily create resources or conditions for successful partnerships as part of the organizational chart, mission, vision, or overall infrastructure."

It's worth asking why this is the case. Are such partnerships not budgeted for reasons of cost in staff time and other expenses? Do they fail to see any benefit to them from collaborating with other organizations, such as learning something, gaining access to certain resources, or creating something not possible alone? Do they feel their mission or focus or agenda constrains them? Is there something about the culture of museums that militates against working well with others?

Identifying the source of the resistance might be helpful. We know that going it alone is not always the best or the most efficient way to get things done, but is efficiency a goal? In many areas of communication, information sharing, engagement, and outreach, collective action is needed to achieve success, but is this a goal? Partnerships allow you to take on a project whose magnitude or complexity, such as, say, the current pandemic, that would not be doable alone, but is going bigger a goal?

In life, working—and playing—with others is how we learn. This is true of organizations as well, maybe even more so. Partnerships necessarily change the partners in order to achieve common objectives; they’re worth doing, if only for that reason. Networks can bring diverse, often complementary, perspectives to bear on a problem; they’re worth doing, if only for that reason. Moreover, productive partnerships can be developed that engage both for-profit and non-profit organizations in a mutual project or cause.

We are in a moment of scarcity such as the museum field has never experienced before. Most American museums are closed to public visitation, incomes are depleted, and layoffs are ravaging our institutional staffs. Museums are not alone in this; their supporters and also potential partners may be going through it, too. Now is a good time to ask ourselves what new skills, what new practices, what new modalities are likely to help us thrive during and after the pandemic and to meet the needs of our constituents.

An obvious starting point are partnerships of various kinds among community organizations with overlapping interests―museums and libraries, community centers and historical societies, schools, colleges, and universities, performing arts venues, archives, and other cultural organizations. These can be one-off arrangements focused on a specific goal, but they can also be long-term, multivalent relationships. Eventually, some enduring alliances will create networks, processes and systems that can operate for institutional and communal benefit.

But to get onto the partnership track requires that we ask ourselves what aspects of our institutional mission can best be realized by following that path. We should also ask what threat to organizational needs or values partnerships might pose—and how to respond when that fear is voiced.

**5. Reconnecting with Key Constituencies**

AASLH Blog 5/27/20

At the moment, no one can predict with any accuracy what the long-term effects of the global

pandemic will be on American museums. In the short-term, two consequences are pretty

obvious. Some, perhaps many, museums will close or merge due to financial fragility. Those that survive will, over the next several years, likely see a substantial drop in on-site visitation, due to the requirements for social distancing so long as the plague remains active in our midst.

Many museums have fired or furloughed substantial portions of their staff in an effort to

economize. Only a few―for example the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where the

education department is busily at work (https://hyperallergic.com/563185/asian-art-museum-

educationcovid19/?fbclid=IwAR0SJtqzO3jIBGV\_IVsBMfS5Z8cuaCVuGZhOsc9NFdc1VWIGw2qD-UqQGZo) have retained their staff intact and re-structured those staff to increase institutional capacity for outreach and engagement.

It is impossible to know if one tack or the other is preferable, and it may well be, as Randi Korn

and Paul Pearson have suggested, https://aaslh.org/moving-forward/, that the mandates of

mission and the demands of specific circumstances will determine how most museums choose to respond.

One key element stands out, however, as worthy of special consideration in thinking about the

prospects for many American museums―our audiences and their expectations. Two audience

segments in particular demand our attention. One is the category of what we might term "museum-adepts," people who have a decided understanding of and need for what museums

offer at an emotional and spiritual level. In normal times, they visit museums multiple times each year. They constitute something like 15% of all Americans.

The second category of museum visitors that’s worth a close look is students coming in groups

from schools, grades 3 or 4 through high school. Both groups constitute a significant portion of

annual attendance at most American museums, whether they be local historic house museums or the Smithsonian Institution.

For museum-adepts, a return to normality is highly desirable. This population, which skews

toward highly educated, well-to-do professionals, executives, and business owners, has benefited from being able to live in relative comfort, perhaps working and communicating remotely or, in some cases, relocating to safe refuge in low-impact areas. Yet for these people, no matter how many virtual tours they take online, no matter how many visual resources they access, no matter how many lectures and classes they access via Zoom, the urge to resume actual visits and directly and immediately experience works of art, history, and science in museum settings in the presence of others will remain compelling. For museum-adepts the museum journey is an integral part of their personal ethos of experiencing the world and discovering themselves.

The challenges of social distancing are, however, likely to constrain the numbers of people that

museums are able to accommodate. Museums will probably have to increase the number of staff to assure visitors' health and safety under unusual conditions. Two implications follow: first, museums will want to organize their space in new and different ways―developing temporary or remote facilities to conserve tight visitor space for direct access to collections―and to create the next generation of programming and outreach that engages museum audiences without increasing pressure on limited gallery space. Both initiatives, incidentally, will require a staffing up rather than downsizing.

Student visits will almost certainly continue to decline for some time to come. School districts

and independent schools have been struggling for years to support field trips for their students.

The pandemic has ravaged education budgets and disrupted the educational development of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of young people. Restoring educational continuity is likely to

preoccupy schools and to lead to a decline in museum visits.

Moreover, providing additional digital resources to teachers is unlikely to offer a satisfactory

alternative to the traditional field trip. Piling yet another digital resource or curriculum on

teachers is not likely to win much favor with them or provide much help to them. Instead,

American museums will likely to need to beef up their education staffs to reach out to students

and teachers in their classrooms―and to the community at large in community centers, senior

centers, libraries, etc.―bringing with them exemplary objects, images, texts, and voices from

their collections.

It may be that we are too pessimistic about how prolonged the virus crisis will be. For our two

groups, our sense is that over time the museum-adepts and students are likely to prove loyal and resilient in their respective ways. For both, too, the re-entry of museums into their lives should prove most welcome, for different but related reasons. For American museums to retain and grow their audiences for the long term they will need to re-introduce and even re-brand

themselves to lure museum-adepts and young learners back into the fold. This process should

begin to take place during the transition period, however prolonged that turns out to be. The task will be how to evoke the feelings of discovery, surprise, excitement, awe, and transcendence that create an effective and rewarding museum journey.

**6. The New 3 Rs: Resilience, Responsibility, and Risk**

AASLH Blog 6/11/20

As if a virulent virus, social distancing, and an economic recession were not enough, museums and other social institutions are now confronted by yet another pressing demand―to be more responsible agents of social justice and civic awareness. Put in its broadest terms, as Maayan Belding Zion has argued, "If we expect people to show up for our pain, we have to show up for theirs." Drawing out this insight, we conclude that if we expect our communities to support our museums, historic sites, and interpretive centers, then our institutions must engage the most pressing, contentious issues of our time in addition to contending with disease and depression.

For most of our organizations―and especially for history museums and historic sites―this new demand for attention and resources may appear outlandish, if not impossible. Virtually every museum in the country is afflicted with financial fracture and loss―loss of visitors, loss of revenue, loss of members and donors. The road back to financial health is fraught and the footing tricky. Travel restrictions and concerns about close proximity are likely to suppress re-opening and substantial attendance for a year or more. Re-staffing and staffing up for secure, safe visits will impose still further financial burdens. And residual concerns within our communities about protest and potential violence are likely to inhibit on-site visitation from both locals and cosmopolitans.

But do we and our organizations have a choice? At a moment when many Americans are living through distress similar to 1918 (pandemic), the 1930s (unemployment and displacement), and 1968 (protest and violence) all at once, can we in good conscience shirk our responsibility to document, engage, and interpret the strands of crisis that infect our daily lives? Anyway, what would we gain standing off and standing apart when the society that sustains us is trying to figure out how it can possibly hold together, let alone move forward. If we have something to say, we should say it. If there is something we can do or give, we must do and give. If there’s a way to get involved, we should embrace it.

In any case, from an emotional perspective, life in the DMZ is both boring and tense, with all the terror of war and none of the glory. More importantly, silence on matters of consequence only seems safe; we get no points for saying nothing. On the contrary, by making the work of museums less socially relevant and culturally salient, we risk consigning our institutions to the sidelines of the national debate. We are better off under siege than ignored. If museums seek to demonstrate they are necessary, they have to take risks. Otherwise, who cares and who will defend them?

Our instinct is that we and our institutions must take on the risk (and costs) of responsible, active interpretation. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has observed, the risks of evasion are often greater than the risks of engagement. Few choices are more likely to impede resilience than a rush to irrelevance. For better or worse, the commingled crises of our day represent a challenge and an opportunity. We are at a moment in history when we need to embrace crisis, activism, and conflict as subjects of collection and programming. This is a moment in history when our museums need to reestablish themselves as forums for community conversation about the issues that most matter and most immediately affect our daily lives and the future directions of our nation.

There are no simple ways to go about this. To take but one instance, the traditional nostrum of “balanced interpretation” favors the powerful in an unequal battle. We should be dispassionate in our work and non-partisan in our presentation and inclusive of diverse voices. But in many instances truth and justice do not reside in equal measure among all views; the truth is rarely found in the middle.

This may not be the traditional stance we have taken, but it may be a necessary one as we re-invent our institutions. There may be blowback. But as Jennifer Martin suggests, "In museums, our focus on social change for positive impact in education, learning, self-confidence, innovation, and creativity is pretty exciting stuff." By embracing our communal responsibilities in at time of crisis and taking calculated, calibrated risks now, we may be starting off on the path to long-term institutional resilience. For museums, resilience, if it means anything, has to be about more about financial stability. It has to be about establishing a strong emotional connection to the lives, the concerns, and the dreams and passions of the community and the nation.

**7. Episodes of Change: A Long View of Museum-making in America**

AASLH Blog 6/22/20

The long-term impact of the pandemic on American museums is hard, if not impossible, to

predict. At the moment, one immediate outcome is likely to be the closing or merger of many

financially fragile museums. But if history is any guide, long term consequences will probably

manifest as an integral part of larger political, social, demographic, or economic shifts. No one

factor can account for the development of new kinds of American museum nor their proliferation over more than a century. Instead, key changes in the evolution and make-up of the American museum field can be traced to a variety of discrete historical factors.

A century and a half ago, a number of museums, many of them quite substantial, came into being as an aspect of America's nationalist project―an assertion that American culture, like American economic power, was ready to dominate the world. Among those initiatives were the American Museum of Natural History (1869) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870) in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1870), followed closely by the Smithsonian Institution, which in 1873 began to morph into a national museum of science, the humanities, and the arts. This nationalist project continued to populate the American landscape with new museums through World War I, despite the horrific Spanish Flu, and well into the 1920s.

Another key shift in the American museum field occurred as a result of a tremendous

demographic shift―the Baby Boomer wave. The first children's museum was founded in 1899

(The Brooklyn Children's Museum), but the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) dates only to 1962―testament to the proliferation during the postwar decades of new children's museums, science and hands-on learning centers, and discovery spaces in established museums

of art and history. Innovative museum directors and pioneering educational theorists are

generally credited with expanding sites for the engagement of children and their families, but the underlying demographic shift and the rise of a child-centered culture in postwar America appear to have been decisive influences and driving forces in the growth of this sector of the museum field.

The Civil Rights movement and the rise of identity politics in the 1970s and '80s wrought an

even more dramatic alteration of the museum landscape and unleashed much creative energy.

The assertion of racial and ethnic identities―and competing claims of comparative

victimization―led inexorably to a radical expansion of what have been termed "culturally

specific" museums (a term that may apply equally to so-called mainstream museums, as well).

Before 1950, there were about 30 African American history museums in the U.S., most

sponsored by historically black colleges. Today, the Association of African American Museums

(AAAM) has more than 120 institutional members. In 1977, only seven Jewish museums in the

country were professionally staffed; today more than 60 institutions are members of the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM). Latino, Asian, and Native American museums have also multiplied in recent years as assertions of racial and ethnic identities remain powerful and relevant.

The full blown arrival of new digital technologies, exemplified by the Interne, at the turn of the

current century has led to a radical shift in and expansion of American museums' capacity for

communication and outreach. These digital technologies opened the world for users in an

unprecedented fashion―one of the key functions that museums (among other legacy institutions) long saw as their role. Until the pandemic hit, museums have been uneven in their embrace of digital technology and possibilities. But in the face of national and local shut-downs, many museums have invested heavily in using the Internet as a platform to engage, inform, and build loyalty. We are, therefore, experiencing an exponential expansion of the virtual museum. And with this comes a new possibility: what museums can do, perhaps, that nothing else seems able to do is help visitors to structure and frame what this all means.

What will be the lasting consequences of a global pandemic, mass social distancing, the shut-

down of national economies, and the intense resurgence of racial and social protest? Hard to say, but we can say there is reason to think the United States will continue to be a Nation of

Museums. Since the Civil War, museum-making has been an important aspect of how America

and its many peoples and cultures and generations and regions and cities have defined and

expressed themselves. Patterns of community self-awareness have led to a continent rich in

museums offering a remarkable array of experiences. These impulses are unlikely to be undone

any time soon.

Museums have long demonstrated their protean ability to transform themselves and learn to

speak in many voices. They have also demonstrated their ability to respond to―and even to

come into being because of―social movements, deep concerns, and communal needs. We don’t typically think of museums as answers to questions, but that’s exactly what they are and that is exactly what they will need to be in the future that awaits us.

**8. Seizing the Moment: An Opportunity to Explore and Experiment**

AASLH Blog 7/19/20

The perfect storm we have been living through has given pivot new currency and relevance.

Everyone, or so it seems, has begun to pivot―from the real to the virtual, from in-person and

face-to-face engagement to social distancing and remote workplaces. Many of our museums,

historic sites, zoos and gardens have pivoted as well, closing themselves to the public and even

to their own staffs.

One consequence for museum and public history professionals is a pivot from an energizing

sense of productivity and meaning to a palpable sense of sorrow and loss and uncertainty. We’ve heard background echoes of these feelings in Zoom calls and meetings we’ve sat in on over the past couple of months. What, folks have been wondering, are we supposed to do now? We can’t answer that question for everybody, but we can offer this as fellow professionals: we are in a moment. We can either let it play out or, as our title suggests, we can find ways to seize it. Carpe diem is, we think, the healthiest and most promising stance toward the disordered universe we find ourselves in.

The reality is that even now, when so many unknowns are at work, we have agency, and while

our ability to act may be constrained it is far from gone. We can choose to examine our

circumstances, reassess our resources, and hold ourselves open to new opportunities as they

announce themselves to us. Being ready all the time ought to be our default mindset.

What we propose is a kind of journey of exploration and discovery, experimentation and

learning. Taking small steps in new and meaningful directions can lead us, our organizations,

and our communities toward better versions of ourselves for years to come. Here are a number of specific approaches that might help to guide us on our varied journeys. Some are counter-

intuitive, to be sure, but in a crazy time a bit of contrary thinking is in order!

**Replace strategic planning with strategic thinking**: Every few years, our institutions feel

required to develop or revise their strategic plans. Everyone is mobilized in the effort―board,

staff, community leaders, opinion-makers. After the dust settles, the strategic plan typically finds a resting place in a file cabinet or as a space-filler on a decorative shelf, ne’er to be consulted until the next update is necessary, usually a matter of extending by a year or two the timeline for accomplishing goals.

Ordinarily strategic plans call for champagne and cocktails somewhere down the road, but at the moment it is raining lemons. We suggest making lemonade. In fact, if not in theory, most of our institutions are already practicing strategic thinking, engaging in a continuous process of identifying strategic challenges and seizing unforeseen opportunities as they rise to the surface of consciousness.

This makes thinking immediate, relevant, and meaningful. If you want to know more about

strategic thinking, by all means contact your local business school! Beyond this, familiarize

yourself with what local merchants are doing, how they’re responding. What’s going on in small

STEM or charter schools in your communities or how small theater groups are adapting to

changing audience behavior and cultural assumptions.

**Staff up, not down**: When colleagues are being furloughed or losing their jobs, it seems almost

impossible or inhuman to contemplate new hires. But a couple of thousand dollars won’t buy someone's job back or even postpone his/her lay-off for a meaningful period of time. It’s

dangerous to undertake re-opening or program continuity with human resources depleted and

demoralized. Those small investments can buy you a full-time summer fellow (8-10 weeks of

work), plus the equivalent of a day's worth of exceptional consulting time.

New talent in this form can expand and diversify the voices engaged in thinking about and

organizing new initiatives and ensuring you’ve got coverage where you need it. These neophytes can also bring different kinds of experience and background to the table and, having never been in the box, are freer to think outside it. Fresh blood comes cheap and can energize the patient!

Flatten the hierarchy and expand the chorus: We are hearing a lot about DEIA these days and

also a lot of calls for leveling out our conventional hierarchies. These are complex, sensitive

issues, but they need not be all-or-nothing challenges. We can take some small steps toward

making things more open―and they are even reversible if they fail to deliver. One approach is to take seriously the idea of staffing up with some new (and possibly provocative) voices, as

suggested previously.

Another is to organize one or more teams or task groups to address a new and pressing problem. If we stop to reflect, we’ll find that whenever we have a crisis, we don't turn to our usual suspects―we organize a task force composed of regulars and irregulars to deal with the issue at hand. If, however, we constitute these groups with insiders and outsiders, senior staff and newbies, experts and amateurs, we are likely to hear new voices and to gain new perspectives while trying out a more inclusive and democratic model.

**Think nationally―and globally**: We are all pivoting toward the digital, complaining as we do

that we may be losing touch with our local constituents and communities. However, if we turn

the process on its head, we discover that our new virtual programs have potential to connect us to national and even global audiences―and resources―as well as to re-connect us to our local

crowd. This is a moment that cries out for seizing. While what works for a strictly local clientele may not work for a more cosmopolitan crowd, digital media might be useful in catching up with

natives who have migrated out, but still retain an interest in the old home town. And our unique resources, if shared in clever ways, might draw an unusual, disproportionate level of attention from the previously uninterested all over the place.

**Serendipity and surprise can spark interest**: Many, perhaps most, museums earn their

reputations for some specific aspect of their institution―an exceptional collection, or a beautiful facility, or outstanding programs or publications. But the digital media enable every museum to dig into and re-mine its collections, foregrounding resources that are less well-known. While an art museum may never be able to fully display or interpret its archive, its holdings might well spark new interest among a new or wider audience. Resources that rarely or never see the light are perfect grist for the digital media mill. And nothing is more exciting than having a new story to tell or having the chance to tell an old story differently.

**Pilot new kinds of collaborations and partnerships**: Typically, when a museum starts to think

about collaborations or partnerships, we start with our near neighbors, usually for very good

reasons: often, these are institutions that complement our museum. A community center, a public park, a local library, college or university are all good examples of the kinds of institutions that might share our interests, but draw on somewhat different segments of the community.

Now, with the field's pivot to the virtual, it is possible for museums and sites located very far

from each other to work together on a digital project that highlights their overlapping interests

and resources. As some recent initiatives suggest, pilot collaborations that transcend time and

space can yield new knowledge, new networks, and new users.

Any or all of these initiatives can be organized as one-off, short-term experiments. And if they

are treated as pilots, forays into the unknown, the goals are simple and clear―to learn what

works and what doesn't at minimal cost and risk.

Seize the lemonade moment! The success rate will fluctuate, but what will be constant is the

environment of new challenges, learning, and personal growth. If we hold ourselves in readiness, we are likely to find that environment stimulating and nourishing. Seize the day.

**9. Authenticity and Authority: The Role of Historic Sites**

AASLH Blog 8/9/20

Historic house museums historic sites and history museums constitute the largest class of museums in a nation rich with museums. These places constitute the fabric of our national tapestry. Stitched into that textile are the people and places, episodes and ideas that give our country some of its most important stories. For this reason, history museums enjoy a special status in the minds of ordinary Americans. In a 2018 broader population sampling conducted by Wilkening Consulting for AASLH, 1,000 people were asked about the trustworthiness of four history sources, and “museums”. “81% of respondents ranked history museums and historic sites as ‘absolutely’ or somewhat trustworthy—making them more trustworthy than history textbooks and nonfiction, high school history teachers, and the internet as sources of history information.” (<https://aaslh.org/most-trust-museums/>) Another study done by Museums R+D, Reach Advisors (https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/#\_edn25) reported that “The American public considers museums the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, nonprofit researchers, the U.S. government, and academic researchers.”

This, of course, raises the question―why do folks repose so much confidence in history museums and historic sites and the stories they tell? One answer is that many of these places anchor their narratives in authentic structures and the landscape itself―they are where things actually happened. Another could be that history organizations ground their narratives in careful research in primary sources, so their interpretations of the past are accurate as well as authentic.

But a quite different explanation may also apply. For many individuals and their communities, historic houses and historic sites are valued because their narratives offer comfort, not challenge. As Erin Mast, Director of Lincoln's Cottage, observed at the Combating Antisemitism conference in Washington, DC (June 19, 2019), history museums are endowed with high public confidence because they conform to and confirm the ideas and beliefs of their constituents and communities.

The notion is not new, of course. Back in 1999, Zahava Doering ("Strangers, Guests, or Clients?" *Curator* 42/2) argued that "people tend to frequent the museums and exhibitions they think will be congruent with their own attitudes, with whose point of view they expect to agree." Seen as a function of user expectations and worldview, history museums and historic sites are more mirror than microscope.

The story may be even more complicated than that. History museums and historic sites are not just places to recall the past, but also places to put it to rest. Amnesia is often a prominent feature of our history sites―and for good reason: history museums are not only sites of memory, but where we go to make peace with the distressing past. For many, making peace with the past cuts close to the bone. Life is unbearable when the past will not be still. Putting it to rest so one can get on with life is an emotional imperative, perhaps even an existential one. The past is filled with horrors, violence, guilt, suffering, loss, failure, sacrifice, destruction, anguish. Why go there? As a result, in many local history sites, the past is static and unchanging, fixed, timeless, inert.

The tendency to avoid conflict and controversy in many local history museums, historic houses and historic sites is reinforced by their mode of operation. Many of these local organizations are community-based, often — in the smaller ones — volunteer-staffed, or else run by people who have very little training and see their role as largely custodial, and dependent for their funding and overall direction on a board of locals who don’t want to make waves.  We can see how powerful the pull towards conformity and amnesia is when, as sometimes happens, a history museum tries to break the mold and tell more unvarnished truths about aspects of the past represented by that organization This often causes visitors to become upset, or at the very least, puzzled by what they’re now seeing in their formerly placid historic house museum or site.

In contrast, for public history professionals, historical places are sites, not sources, of authority; their narratives are not timeless, but contingent; the stories history museums tell are constructed through a dynamic process of shifting relationships among sites, their staffs, and the communities that use them, conditioned by changing social, intellectual, and political currents. For those who interpret the past for a living, making sense of the past is no less imperative than coming to terms with it. Understanding the past certainly has an emotional dimension, but it comes out of a different kind of need. To accomplish it requires establishing psychic distance and acquiring control of the past’s cruelty, disorder, and havoc.

This disconnect helps explain the intense conflicts that periodically erupt over how museums present history. There is often a dramatic difference between what visitors are hoping to experience and what museums are trying to accomplish―between making peace with the past and making sense of it. Because these two processes originate from very different emotional places, they have very different destinations.

The result is a tension one can often detect in history museum visitors, as they look for a way to get interested, to become engaged. When they pose questions that have no answers, they show puzzlement, frustration, even anger. At least we could try to become more adept at ferreting out what is the real question behind the questions they pose, to―as librarians do―conduct reference interviews to get at the riddle behind the spoken query. At living history sites, interpreters learn how to do this. In more traditional settings, the record is spottier. We often don’t probe for, much less answer, visitors’ real questions.

Dealing with visitors’ emotional discomfort is not always covered in the training manual, but it needs to be. Two things tend to happen: visitors get upset about things that were not expected to be upsetting; and visitors don’t get emotionally engaged with things intended to engage them. Other kinds of interpretation and visitor engagement are needed and available: dialogue, text study, interpretation as provocation (a la Freeman Tilden), and site as forum. We probably need them all.

While many people continue to cite historic places and history museums as sources of authenticity and authority, we in the field need to be more skeptical of our standing in this respect. This dialectic suggests that history museums and historic sites have special opportunities and responsibilities for engaging users in a continuous dialog about the meaning, significance, and salience of the past as it presents itself at any particular site or venue.

To be sure, we need to make more and better efforts to unsettle, but we have to find ways to make certain visitors are equipped to hang in there; the experience will be more rewarding for them if they do. Opening up new perspectives might actually make historic houses and sites more exciting to visit, even stimulate repeat visits. In this moment of national debate over public memory, what was satisfactory before is unacceptable now. The stakes for the history biz have been raised: we have to up our game.

Special thanks to Carl Siracusa, PhD, for his editorial comments.

**10. What Then Must Be Done?**

Nothing Ever stands still. We must add to our heritage or lose it,

we must grow greater or grow less, we must go forward or backward.

―George Orwell

AASLH Blog 9/16/20

For us, as for many Americans, the current crisis is the most consequential moment in our lives.

A plague has killed nearly 200,000 Americans; millions are unemployed; natural disasters (flood

and fire) have piled on; social protests on race and equity proliferate; and we are in the midst of a bitterly contested and divisive electoral campaign. Each of these crises feeds into the others,

creating an unprecedented―and unwelcome―synergy.

Museum responses to the crisis stand in stark contrast to those manifested by health care centers and homeless shelters, food banks and first responders, delivery services and sanitation workers. Even professional athletes have found meaningful ways to respond. The WNBA and NBA, the NFL NSL, and even the USTA have taken steps to publicly engage the crisis. Sports teams have modeled prophylactic behavior, stood up for social justice, and offered use of their stadiums as polling places.

Yet in this most consequential of moments, the museum response in general and the response of history organizations in particular have been largely inconsequential. To be sure, many

museums―history museums, historical societies, and historic sites among them―have issued

public statements addressing national issues like racism, inequity, and climate change. But what

have our museums actually done to make things better for our communities?

Our friend and colleague, Zahava Doering, has been systematically tracking 175 American

museums, large and small in all regions of the country, to see what programs and activities they

have sponsored in response to the expressed needs of their communities and what structural

changes they have made to address systemic prejudice and racism. To our surprise and dismay,

she has discovered precious few instances of museum action for the benefit of communities in

distress or to effect structural changes. The data Zahava is assembling has two components:

museums that act and museums that don't. Let's assume it's easier not to act than to act, so what is the missing piece that triggers some kind of response?

As she puts it, “There are two major types of actions: [a] temporary and specific to the moment

(e.g., food distribution); and [b] more systemic ones that will change an institution. My goal, as a sociologist, is to understand the underlying causes. There are also those that made statements that were not followed by action and those that were totally silent. The gold stars are those that made no statements but took steps to change the very structures of the institutions. With the shadow of museum history hovering, I fear that museums will hold fast to the status quo and fail the public. We are already beginning to see the signs of 'business as usual' in reopening rituals, fund-raising galas, employment notices, and forthcoming exhibitions."

A substantial number of history museums are collecting stories, objects, and art that reflect the

current crisis. But many fewer museums are directly engaging the crisis and providing needed

services to their communities. In March, as the pandemic took hold and shut-downs were

mandated, the Baltimore Museum of Industry (BMI) offered use of its parking lot to set up a

health services clinic. Old Salem Museums and Garden in Winston-Salem, NC, made produce

from its gardens available to people in need. The Oregon Jewish Museum and Holocaust

Education Center in Portland opened a special exhibition on discrimination in Oregon history.

Just this month, the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced the hiring of its first full-time

Indigenous curator. But instances of structural change, including revision of mission statements,

are remarkably rare.

It feels as if our museums have suffered a collective fit of absent-mindedness—or a loss of a

sense of place. What accounts for this? Are they too set in their ways? Are they preoccupied with their current financial distress? Are they too under-resourced to shift gears, much less change course? Do they see social intervention or involvement as outside their mission? Are they risk-averse? Can they not find or conceive of a way to be helpful?

Only an in-depth, systematic survey can provide definitive answers, but even a cursory look at

the museum terrain and environment provides some obvious explanations. The clearest, most

universal condition is one of financial constraint: virtually every museum of which we know or

have heard about from colleagues has suffered a loss of income, membership, or donor support. This has led, even with emergency grants, to a plethora of furloughs and layoffs.

Of course, every museum—of which the U.S. has north of 30,000—faces a unique set of

circumstances and the choices it makes are often sui generis. That said, there seems to be an

underlying—and diagnostic—pattern to these staff reductions: they have fallen heavily on those involved in visitor services and education ―the very staff most often and most directly engaged with the local public. The diagnosis: when budget-making time comes around those activities are not considered functions at the core of the life of the museum. Other cost centers are more essential, it appears.

More problematic, the areas most affected are those whose main function is relationship-building and maintenance. Suspending that activity implies management feels that this function can be picked up at some point in the distant future with no loss of momentum. Juxtaposing this with another pattern, the flood of virtual programming flowing from closed museums, suggests another pattern. However laudatory, reaching out to a global audience via online programs has also had the effect of re-directing the focus of museums away from their own local constituencies (with the possible exception of programs targeted specifically at the museum's donors and members).

Two environmental conditions also hamper museums' efforts to provide service to local

communities. One is the simple fact that even in the best of times, museums serve a limited

audience. Study after study has shown that only about 15% of the American population are

regular visitors to museums; the 85% visit only occasionally, rarely, or not at all. In short, with

the exception of those we term “museum adepts,” museums don't impact the common life of

most Americans. If 17 of every 20 Americans didn’t really need you in normal times, what do

you have to offer during this dystopian epoch?

Another factor, unacknowledged in museum literature, is that Americans already spend 90% of

their time indoors―and most museums offer exclusively indoor experiences. Zoos, arboreta,

gardens, and some historic sites are mostly outdoor experiences, but the overwhelming majority of museums―and especially history museums―are not accustomed to making use of out-of-door opportunities for programming and events. Museums have focused what attention

remains―after trying to stabilize their finances and developing virtual programs―on re-opening their doors to the public.

It may be that―much as these patterns seem diagnostic to us―there may be a single, deeper

source for our failure to respond to the collective needs of our communities: institutional inertia. Instead of experiment, abstention; instead of innovation, stasis; instead of moving forward with new kinds of public programs and services, falling back on collections as our primary, if not sole, raison d'etre.

In a recent article, Betsy Bradley, director of the Mississippi Museum of Art, poses the

existential question: “What if art museums can't measure up to the present moment?" The

question applies to all categories of museum: are we really relevant to our communities? Ms.

Bradley points us in what we believe is the right direction: “How do we reprioritize our

museums’ missions, so that community care comes first? How do we join [the] movement that

is, indeed, changing our world?”

We are reminded of the classic story of two men who encounter each other in a wilderness and

discover they are both lost. “Let us go forward together, since the way we have come is not the

way.” We believe there is a future for museums, but only if more prepare to re-think themselves in terms of service to their communities. Return to the pre-Covid life is a step backward, if it’s even possible. What is called for are steps going forward. We need to jettison best practice and embrace next practice, to advance new voices and new narratives, to help our communities as well as ourselves to become greater by moving forward together.

Special thanks to Zahava Doering, PhD, for her editorial comments.

**11. What *The Plague* Has to Tell Us**

AASLH Blog 10/15/20

Albert Camus’ 1947 novel *The Plague*, set in Oran, Algeria, seems to anticipate our experience

of the pandemic and its attendant crises--unemployment, economic collapse, natural disasters,

social protest, violence, and a contentious election campaign. Despite marked differences in time and circumstance, Camus’ allegory and our reality are closely parallel. Americans have been no more eager than the leaders of Oran to face reality and no more ready than the people of Oran to learn from their experience. That’s a pity; our Covid might teach us how to instruct the future and ourselves.

Camus tells us that "The first thing that plague brought to our town was exile…that sensation of

a void within which never left us that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed

up the march of time.” Like Camus' characters, we, too, are in exile--from our former lives,

from family and friends, from our work lives, from our former recreations. We have become

aliens in our own homes, our workplaces, our places of faith. We have crossed over into

uncharted territory; so, too, have our friends and neighbors, our workmates, and our fellow

citizens.

Americans’ season of reckoning feels like the dislocation and disruption Camus captured. In the

short-term we may evade the challenges of racism and inequity, but in the long-run we must

confront our complicity in white privilege, our Faustian bargain. Historian Tony Judt tells us that

Camus confronted "the dilemmas of moral contagion" by insisting on "placing individual moral

responsibility at the heart of all public choices . . . [cutting] sharply across the comfortable habits of our own age." (Tony Judt, “On The Plague," *The New York Review of Books*, November 29, 2001.) The harsh reality is that a reckoning is upon us now. We can no longer claim

innocence; instead, we are obligated to expand the boundaries of our personal and communal

moral responsibility.

But where to begin? Camus offers us a hint: "The first thing that plague brought . . . was the

sensation of a void within which never left us--that irrational longing to hark back to the past or

else to speed up the march of time.” Like the residents of Oran, we are prone to denial and

mindless, premature celebration. But we sense that these are not the ways to go forward. What

we need is a new and different framework for thinking about what museums can do, if—and

when—our pandemic is actually subdued.

We can begin with a much-needed Museum of Pain and Loss, a project that would seek to

reckon with and acknowledge troubling issues and events―as well as the flagrant disparities in

suffering between those who have lost so much and those who have sacrificed little. We can

broaden this into a Museum of Untold Stories, recognizing in retrospect and in the present those stories we ordinarily ignore, narratives too painful or provocative (such as the persistent damage of slavery and racism), stories of complex trends (such as the costs of de-industrialization or climate change), and accounts of losses that still scar the national landscape and yet still go undescribed.

Museums, through their exhibitions, programs, publications, and other media may and can be

especially suited for addressing stories of this kind and variety. Representation or documentation are things that museums already do: we know how to bear witness, how to clarify and explain, how to find meaning and to structure story. We also know a good deal, if not yet enough, about how to engage a variety of communities. Many of our museums recognize and respond to issues, concerns, and feelings; many are already confronting the need to recall the past, however difficult, and the parallel need to reconcile with our past, however difficult.

Embedded in their communities, able to create alliances and partnerships, experienced in

creating immersive experiences, prepared to deal with complexity, and ready to think about past, present, and future, museums have a range of options and versatility not always available to other media and institutions. They should be especially good at equipping us to process our

national crisis, its antecedents, its consequences, and its rubble. We can do what Camus sought

to do: prepare us for the future. Indeed we must. Who else in our society will play this role?

**12. Adapting to Novelty: Toward Next Practice**

AASLH Blog 10/28/20

If you cannot find the road, then you make a new one.

―Simon Conway

Interpretation is not information; it is provocation.

―Freeman Tilden

At present, history organizations are increasingly faced by what Ronald Heifetz in *Leadership*

*Without Easy Answers* (1998) distinguishes as “adaptive challenges”―those for which there is no established solution, no clear path forward, and no external consultant who can offer tried-and-true remedies. Adaptive challenges are hard to address, “because they demand of organizational leaders that they question their own ingrained assumptions, admit contrary evidence, and deviate from established behavioral comfort zones.” Moreover, embracing an adaptive approach entails new risks with unknown outcomes.

Even so, we have little choice: we can shape the emerging “next practice” or have something

considerably less appealing imposed on us. President Trump’s chilling September 17, 2020,

speech on history education at the National Archives foreshadows what might be in store for us

if history museums and the museum field generally do not find ways to be more proactive and

more vocal in this critical national struggle for ownership of the national story.

The stakes in that struggle could not be higher, as the Organization of American Historians’

September 25th rebuttal to Trump’s address makes crystal clear. The OAH statement

characterized the President's effort to return history to a narrow, celebratory story as an effort to "restrict historical pedagogy, stifle deliberative discussion, and take us back to an earlier era

characterized by a limited vision of the U.S. past." What is at stake is our sense of who we are as a people and as a nation, as individuals and as members of community. Without an open, honest, and realistic understanding of where we have been and where we are now, we will find it hard to move into an uncertain future with a sense of common purpose.

In this time of crisis, our history organizations will need to adapt to novelty. We are living in a

time of unprecedented crisis and change in American life. The pandemic, economic dislocation,

social protest, natural disasters, and a divisive national election are having profound effects on

our history organizations―and on our historical narratives. The historiography of America, the

bedrock of our narratives, is being re-thought amid changing circumstances. Our collective

history and the purpose of our historical organizations is in play. We therefore need to re-

consider our priorities and our narratives. We cannot stay with what has been—till

now—considered a safe, agreed-upon national narrative, considered safe and agreed-upon, that is, by the privileged.

Instead, our history organizations will need to assert in new ways our commitment to civic

culture and civic engagement. Best practice, a remarkably vacuous idea, will have to give way

to "next practice" and new narratives. Anything less is likely to lead to short-term frustration and long-term failure. As has been observed, “Repeating the same behavior under changing

circumstances leads to a muddle.” We’ve already arrived at the muddle stage. Our job now is to

work on a ‘next’ iteration of practice that looks to the future for the field at large. This entails the development of new kinds of organizational structure and new ways of interpreting our shared histories with methods and strategies that may take us out of our comfort zones.

Embedded in our national narratives are myriad specific stories and a multitude of individual and communal voices. And there are more to come: as the writer and translator Maria Dahvana

Headley has observed: "There are also stories that haven't yet been reckoned with, stories hidden within the stories we think we know. It takes new readers, writers, and scholars to find them, people whose experiences, identities, and intellects span the full spectrum of humanity, not a just a slice of it."[[1]](#footnote-1)

We are not advocating for any particular storyline. Instead, we propose that history organizations consider three broad approaches in developing their historical narratives. One is to focus on a more critical, inclusive past, which will entail the telling of many untold stories. The second is to emphasize the importance of individual agency in history by talking about a wide range of community activists. A third approach will be to use the lens of crises to explore the limits of community at the local, regional, and national levels.

**Critical, inclusive stories**: Alan Taylor, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, opens his book

*American Colonies* (2001) by declaring that "the traditional story of American uplift excludes too many people." Moreover he argues, "Indian deaths and African slavery were fundamental to colonization." In short, American history begins in two tragedies--genocide and slavery. If we are intent on promoting an authentic understanding of America's history and culture, then we are going to have to address difficult subjects and challenging stories, among them stories of suffering, pain, and loss. But if we want fresh, accurate perspectives on our past and present, then we will need to engage and comprehend a host of little-known stories, many of them unpleasant and disturbing.

**Individual agency in history**: This time of crisis is forcing most Americans to make a wide range of choices, about family and home life, work and schooling, personal and political priorities. But ours is not the first generation of Americans who have confronted difficult situations and hard choices. In fact, individual choice is one of the key tropes of our historical narratives. As David Hackett Fischer, also a Pulitzer Prize winner, writes in *Washington's Crossing* (2004), history is about "people making choices, and choices making a difference in the world." It is therefore one of our primary responsibilities to construct interpretive narratives that tell "a story of real choices that living people actually made."

And one of the easiest ways to do this is to tell the stories of the community activists who are present everywhere and at all times. By emphasizing individual agency--from registering to vote to marching in protest--our history organizations can explore pressing issues while encouraging active participation in civic affairs.

**Looking at history through the lens of crisis**: The present moment is not the first time that

Americans have confronted a wide range of crises. Epidemics (cholera, influenza, smallpox,

polio) and natural disasters (floods and fires, tornadoes and hurricanes), wars and depressions,

punctuate American history. By looking back at these past crises, we can see what roles the

governmental and private sectors, institutions and individuals played in specific circumstances.

We can see what worked and what didn't. And, perhaps most importantly, we can see how each crisis defined our communities--that is, as Charles King puts it in *Gods of the Upper Air* (2020), "the web of beings who deserve our ethical conduct, whatever we deem ethical conduct to be." In every crisis, some are succored, others ignored. By looking at our past responses to crisis we can learn how we have defined the limits of "community" in different ways at different times.

For the most part, visitors come to our museums and sites looking for confirmation not

provocation, nostalgia not new understanding, reassurance not challenges. We will want to

consider a somewhat different view of what it means to engage history. Encountering people in

historical circumstances―talking and thinking about where historical characters were and how

they reacted to their situations―is a humanistic endeavor. As we understand more about the

diversity of human experiences and as we accumulate more strategies for thinking about those

experiences, we generally (though not always) develop a degree of empathy for others (or even

The Other). As we learn about the choices that people have made in history, we begin to

understand contingency and agency. And as we encounter the welter of circumstances in which

all people, then and now, function, we begin to develop an appreciation for the complex

challenges of our own time and place. This is not easy knowledge, but its power can be

affirming, liberating, and empowering.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**13. Where Are Our Think Tanks?**

AASLH Blog 2/4/21

This is what you shall do…re-examine all you have

been told at school or church or in any book…

―Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Every industry has at least one—or more. Every discipline has one—or more. Every belief

system has one—or more. Every enterprise of any scale or consequence has one—or more. Why since time out of mind have museums considered deep and systematic thought unnecessary—if they’ve ever thought of it all?

We bring this matter up because if ever there were a moment the museum field needed a think

tank, now is that time! The nested crises of a pandemic, mass unemployment, social distancing,

natural disasters, contentious discourse about race and equity, and divisive politics are

challenging many of our most basic assumptions about our museums, our missions, and our

modes of work. To respond to these crises in society and in our field, we need fresh thinking,

imagination, and commitment. So where are our think tanks?

Adapting to novelty is never simple or easy. It is made more difficult and complicated by the

absence of institutional reflection on the state of the museum field—and little awareness or

recognition of the utility of intentional mindfulness. There are more than 30,000 museums in the U.S. and yet American museums do not have a single institute or group “organized for

interdisciplinary research with the object of providing advice on a diverse range of policy issues

and products through the use of specialized knowledge and the activation of networks.” (Stella

Ladi, *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

None of the main museum trade associations in the U.S. quite does this or has the resources and the mission to take it on. To be sure, we have the AAM Center for the Future of Museums, but with few exceptions, the Center has functioned as an informational aggregator rather than a catalyst for new thought. The AAM does help to shape thinking in the field through its MAP and accreditation programs, but in many ways these programs embody dated and outmoded standards and practices rather than the fresh, salient ideas we need so desperately. AASLH offers somewhat fresher thinking in the History Leadership Institute, its StEPs program, and a variety of professional development activities. One could also argue that the plethora of graduate programs in museum studies, public history, and related fields provides a rich resource of ideas for those entering the museum field.

But, by and large, museums as institutions and as parts of networks need to rely pretty much on their own to access and engage ideas about what’s coming next. For individuals, lacking

sustained institutional encouragement and support for long-term professional development, the work of reflection, visioning, and planning is even more challenging.

It is worth mentioning that in the past year we have seen a surge in what we might term ‘pop-up think tanks’―small-scale, voluntary efforts to identify new thinking, resources, opportunities, and collegial connections. Some of these are quite radical forums, focused on basic issues and concerns. Domestic examples would include Death to Museums, Museum Hue, and Change the Museum. Others are more eclectic, such as the weekly NAME Coffee Breaks and the Council of American Jewish Museums weekly Talking Circles. Still others collect and disseminate programmatic content and resources, such as Museum Hack. And, as one might expect, there are many small talking circles of like-minded and similarly situated professionals who gather via Zoom and other online modalities to schmooze, speculate, and share ideas.

Taken together, we now have a virtual network of informal think tanks. But what is still lacking

is a research agenda, a set of core questions that we need to be asking ourselves as institutions

and as individuals about what it will take to shape nimble, responsive, dynamic, and resilient

museums in the post-pandemic moment. We may not need conventional brick and mortar think tanks. What we do need is at least a handful of centers that will refresh our thinking and practice as we respond to what Richard Heifetz calls adaptive challenges―the kinds of challenge for which there are as yet no tried and true solutions.

To deal with the radical social, political, and environmental changes that envelop American

museums, we will need to develop a network of think tanks. These are likely to be largely virtual projects, but even so, they will probably need some kind of institutional home. Some might lodge in one or another national organization; others may be best placed in universities in conjunction with a museum studies program; and still others might be situated in progressive museums. The work of systematically identifying new ideas, developing strategies for institutional change, and creating a new set of standards and metrics is just beginning. We need to create new structures to help us think our way into the future while our sense of urgency remains profound.

**14. Straws in the Wind: Signs of Change in American Museums**

*History News,* Spring 2021, Volume 76, #2

As we have argued in a previous blog, “Where Are Our Think Tanks” (https:/aaslh.org/where-

are-our-think-tanks/), our museums need to address the challenge of adaptive change brought on by the nested crises of the pandemic. While our past and even our present provide neither models nor solutions, what they do put before us are possibilities. Now we need to muster the conviction and will to change. American museums have adapted and transformed repeatedly over the past century in response to social, political, and cultural change. Now is the time to do so again.

We cannot, of course, know with any certainty what the landscape will look like going forward.

But by being attentive to the growing number of specific changes reported over the past year and what they have to tell us―straws in the wind, as it were―we might catch a glimpse of some of the trends emerging among American museums and where they may lead us.

Lock-downs across the U.S. have shuttered many museums for longer or shorter periods. These

have had consequences likely to shape museum operations for some time to come. The first, of

course, was a spate of firings and furloughs as museums struggled to stay solvent. This has

produced a legion of unemployed and underemployed professionals, many of whom are seeking to establish themselves as consultants and contractors. The number and significance of IMPs was recognized by the AAM with the establishment of the IMP Network in 2019.

As museums struggle with financial constraints and demands that they be more nimble and more responsive, reliance on IMPs rather than in-house, full-time staff is likely to grow. This trend will be augmented by the explosion of remote work caused by social distancing during the pandemic. Estimates about the proportion of workers operating out of remote locations vary widely, but in future a substantial number of museum professionals who remain on staff are likely to conduct at least a portion of their work off-site. Today, even as museum people

complain about Zoom fatigue, many museum staff are spending much of each day conferring

with colleagues, locally and globally, via online modalities.

These re-configurations of how we manage work, are unlikely to be reversed once the pandemic declines. In fact, growing facility with online modalities is likely to make new kinds of

collaborations and alliances easier, cheaper, and more feasible. Six mid-size museums in

Philadelphia, for example, have begun planning a new collaboration focused on aspects of

contemporary art, using a weekly online call to feel their way. New forms of collaborative work

may also reduce the burden presented by the high costs of retaining lots of senior managers in

organizations’ budgets.

Another trend stems from the turn toward the digital. Deprived of in-person attendance, many

museums have shifted to online, virtual programming to engage audiences and mark their place

in the cultural and communal landscapes. Aside from forcing a revaluation of digital media and

the skills needed to deploy those media effectively, the turn to virtual reality raises fundamental questions about collections, especially tangible collections. Despite a chorus of (largely museum) voices claiming that direct experience of the real stuff is different from and superior to virtual encounters, the exponential growth of virtual and augmented-reality games among younger generations suggests that digital may take us where we previously never thought to go.

The turn to digital also raises important questions about the scope and make-up of museum

constituencies. The old John Cotton Dana invocation of “service to community” takes us only so

far. Digital has empowered museums to transcend their local community of service and engage

global communities of interest, what Dan Spock and others have termed “volitional

communities” or “communities of affinity.” The Jewish Museum of Maryland, for example, has

partnered with museums in Great Britain, Australia, and South Africa on a series of virtual

tours, drawing audiences from several continents. As museums adapt to far-flung constituents,

we will need to rethink our business and management models to produce new sources of support and greater efficiency.

Yet even as our museums reach out to new global audiences, they are under growing pressure to respond to the immediate, pressing needs of their local communities and regions―illness,

unemployment, social protest, and political divisiveness. While many museums have been

preoccupied with the existential challenges of sustaining themselves, a number of museums

across the country have responded to community needs in compelling and ingenious ways. The

Baltimore Museum of Industry offered its parking lot as an emergency medical site; the

Brooklyn Museum served as a food pantry; Old Salem gave away produce from its gardens; and

the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry became a certified emergency day care provider.

These and other efforts to ameliorate hunger, illness, homelessness, unemployment, isolation,

displacement, and distress are worthy of wider adoption. Healing the wounds of racism,

intolerance, inequity, and divisiveness is a more complicated challenge. A number of museums

have issued statements about Black Lives Matter and, more recently, the white supremacist

attack on the Capitol. Many of these statements are couched in general terms; active follow-up

has been rare.

Progressive, reformist postures point in a somewhat different direction―toward the structure and practices of museums themselves. This inward turn draws on decades of field-wide discourse about DEAI issues, leading to many instances of symbolic and even systemic change within American museums. In some ways, the symbolic changes may have more durable consequences within the field—and the culture as a whole; decisions taken in a climate animated by ideas can infuse and enrich our perspectives.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art announced just recently the appointment of its first indigenous curator, while on the other coast the Museum of Man in San Diego changed its name to the Museum of Us. The Mississippi Museum of Art highlighted development of its Center for Art and Public Exchange, a project intended to focus public discourse on issues of race and inequity, and the Oregon Jewish Museum and Holocaust Education Center opened a major new exhibition on “Discrimination and Resistance.” The Princeton University Art Museum is engaged in planning for a new building, including a new generation of exhibition galleries that emphasize cross-cultural exchange and raise questions about the institution’s colonialist history. Organizations like Museum Hue (established in 2015 to advance Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color in the cultural field), and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, (founded in 1999 to promote and protect human rights) are gaining new traction in the field.

Museums' willingness to confront their own dark history is commendable. Also compelling are

efforts to forcefully address instances of workplace bias, abuse, and inequity, which led this past year to the resignations of several directors at leading museums. Ironically, one such case

occurred at the Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Complaints of harassment,

mismanagement, or inequity have led to the formation of unions at the Museum of Fine Arts,

Boston, the New Museum in New York, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Other workplace

issues include exploitation of interns, discrimination against POC staff, especially in service

positions, and gross inequities in compensation between senior leaders and lower-level staff.

A singular marker of the moment is the emergence of discussions of fundamental change in what museums should or could be. Last year, ICOM proposed a new definition of museums as

“democratising [sic], inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and

the futures…aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and

planetary wellbeing.” This jargon-rich formulation was tabled, but its essence has resonated in

blogs and articles, as well as conferences and webinars challenging museums to re-think and

radically reform themselves. New forums like Death to Museums and Change the Museum,

spearheaded by emerging museum professionals, are demanding action now, and calls for change are echoed in talking circles like the weekly NAME Coffee Hour and in myriad informal

conversations among like-minded colleagues.

These straws in the wind tell us a great deal about the climate changes we are experiencing and

what tomorrow’s weather is likely to be. We can’t prepare for everything that might happen, but what we can plan for in our organizations and ourselves is a posture and an approach that keeps us alert, flexible, open, proactive, and useful. Our domain is the world around us and the peoples within it are our community; they need us to respond to them as creatively as we can.

**15. Seizing the Moment**

**A Manifesto for Next Practice**

MAAM White Paper April 2021

**Introduction**

This is a manifesto championing next practice among museums in the United States. We mean to speak emphatically to museum professionals, boards, funders, and to those in the media who report on the cultural sector, and to museum communities and the public at large who treasure museums. We seek to excite their thinking and stretch their imaginations to recognize both the need and the opportunities for change. Our case is simple: changes in our society and the global environment require that we rethink and repurpose our organizations if we intend to remain relevant in the post-pandemic moment. Some of the changes we propose have been advancing for years, but have gained urgency in a time of plague, social upheaval, technological change, systemic racism, and environmental disaster. Other ideas have come to the fore as a direct consequence of contemporary disruption, economic scarcity, social and political division. Still other insights have come from imaginative colleagues of varied backgrounds across the museum field.

Since the spring of 2020, we have tried to consider the post-plague future, to identify the challenges museum leaders face now and will face going forward, and to envisage the possibilities that may emerge. Our intent is to think beyond the urgent present to a more inclusive, engaged, sustainable future. In recent months, we have convened a series of conversations with colleagues from museums of various kinds across the country and participated in numerous webinars and talking circles. Our proposals are grounded in the insights, the concerns, and the spirit of hope and possibility that suffused these conversations. The museum field needs to have more such conversations as we prepare for an uncertain future.

This is not the first time that social, technological, and environmental changes have dramatically reshaped the museum landscape in the United States. Generation after generation, museums have proved adaptable to new realities. After World War II, for example, the wave of Baby Boomers led to a proliferation of new children's museums, science centers, and hands-on learning sites, as well as discovery spaces in established museums. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Civil Rights movement and the rise of identity politics wrought a dramatic alteration of the museum landscape, unleashing much creative energy and a radical expansion of culturally specific museums, including African American museums, Jewish museums, Latinx, Asian, and Native American museums. Most recently, natural history museums, zoos, arboreta, gardens, and science centers have responded directly to the dangers of climate change, mass extinction, and environmental disaster.

For now, long-term strategic planning is simply not possible. What *is* possible is to think strategically and empathetically and to extend our vision beyond the present. Among our 30,000 museums, some will be capable only of modest changes; a few will be able to fully rethink and restructure themselves. But if we want our museums to *matter*, i.e., to be relevant to the challenges at hand, we need to adapt to novel and new conditions. In what follows, we address six key areas of concern and promise. In our analysis or interrogation of each, we pose three questions: *What are the critical challenges we face? Where are their remedies, their resources and safeguards, their opportunities? And how might we get from here to there?*

**The Six Key Areas**

**1. Paradigms**

We urgently need to consider shifting our paradigms. For decades, the American Alliance of Museums has defined museums as “educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule”. This is not an all-encompassing definition. Some museums have only a notional educational or aesthetic purpose; many small museums have no professional staff or a staff that is only nominally professional; some museums have no collections; and a growing number of museums collect, preserve, and display intangible culture rather than stuff.

The criteria used by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is more comprehensive as its criteria allow for museums to include volunteer-run organizations, non-collecting institutions, an emphasis on intangible heritage, born-digital artifacts and documents, and projects focusing on digital games, music, film, etc. But the pandemic raises larger issues of definition and purpose. The turn to digital suggests that museums of all kinds have to revisit their definition of “community” since the Internet is not limited to a local or regional cluster of nearby residents and users. Museums also have to rethink the possibilities of becoming more virtual rather than actual. As has been happening since the pandemic struck, in all likelihood, many more museums will become hybrids of virtual and actual places, with the nature of the visitor experience changing in tandem.

Even more fundamentally, we need to acknowledge that many of our current crises are bound up with one another. Climate change, extinction of species, immigration, demographic churn, ethical issues, pollution of the rivers, lakes, and oceans, and COVID-19 are inextricably tied to social injustice and inequity, racism, bigotry, colonialism, and divisive ideologies. We therefore need a global paradigm that embraces both nature and society, science and society, environmental and social justice, open inquiry and democratic process and principles.

Creating an alternative paradigm for museums is no easy task. With more than 30,000 museums in the United States alone, we find a remarkable diversity of mission, type, and scale―so much so that a single template is unlikely to apply to even most, museums. The field is sharply divided over what purpose and perspectives should prevail. In 2019, International Council of Museums (ICOM) published a proposed―and promptly contested―new paradigm that viewed museums as “democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures” that preserved and interpreted memories as well as objects, and that aimed “to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary wellbeing."

We urgently need to revisit this topic and to reflect on its relevance and utility. Our present crises are more than a hiatus in our normal practice; they call for radical rethinking and repurposing of our museums, zoos, arboreta, science centers, aquaria, gardens, parks, and historic sites. Our museums are different and have their discrete missions, but even a slight stretch of thought could expand our paradigms to embrace a global, holistic perspective and contribute to the causes of environmental and social justice. We need to commit to a future different from the present.

This is a radical thought, but we live in the Anthropocene, an epoch when humankind is reshaping the planet, endangering humanity’s future and that of other creatures. The choices we make in society, economy, and polity affect our common home. In turn, the damage to the Earth affects every aspect of our social, cultural, and material well-being—and is by no means the only threat we face. Our thinking *now* requires a sense of urgency, a willingness to reimagine our paradigms, and a commitment to change.

**2. Utility**

In this time of turmoil, our foundational values—and our adherence to them—are challenged by communities with limited access, long excluded, under-resourced, including indigenous people and people of color, LBGTQ+ people, colleagues, members, even donors. These challenges call into question not just the viability and value of museums but their relevance and consequence—are they an indulgence competing for resources in an age of anxiety, scarcity, and need? Hence, the existential question: why should museums exist and what are they good for?

At bottom, the answer must be that a museum serves some social purpose, that it is *useful* to some group that constitutes its community. But what is meant by community or communities is often unclear, as is the end to be served. When the pandemic hit, many museums turned *inward*, working frantically during the crisis to secure their survival. This internal focus came at just the moment when our neighbors were struggling with massive unemployment, social protest, a divisive election, and high anxiety. If public value means serving needs that originate in the local community, and public trust means showing up when and where people need you, then many of our museums have fallen short in helping to meet the challenges confronting our neighbors.

A growing number of museums *are* taking steps to meet their communities’ needs. Some have offered use of their facilities as emergency medical sites, day care centers, polling places, places for meditative practice, or food pantries. A few gardens and historic sites have provided direct aid in the form of farm produce. And some museums have found novel ways to deploy their staff: a designer to create public service signage or an administrator to help neighbors fill out unemployment or PPP forms. Too often, however, our museums have limited their service dimension to keeping their staffs intact, which helps to sustain the local economy as well as the museum, but makes only a modest impression on the wider community. Maybe museums would do better if they did what other organizations can’t, taking advantage of their special skills, physical assets, and knowledge. As the examples above suggest, willingness and openness can do wonders.

The pandemic offers our museums a unique opportunity to rethink and re-purpose―above all, to refocus on earning the trust of our communities and the individuals that comprise them. We don’t need to over-think it: the way to find out what people need is to ask them. We do need to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: Why are our museums needed? What are our roles and who are they for? What can we mean to our communities, our regions, the world? How can our museums better listen to and communicate and co-create with our communities? By taking these questions seriously and addressing them transparently, we can begin to embody qualities at the heart of community-building and advance our museums as the vital centers and catalysts for meaning-making and the positive social change our communities need.

Museum people have long sought greater public interest in what they do; now that we have started to attract that interest, we need to enlarge the conversation and engage in a wider discourse on the importance of what we have to offer. This means reaching out for community comment; exercising “radical hospitality” to engage new voices in the discourse; and using our imaginations and our resources―however straitened―to develop actionable agendas. For most museums these initial steps will be small and experimental. Even so, if we are at the table when pressing community issues are identified and want to be part of the solution as the community addresses them, we believe that even modest, incremental changes can have profound, long-term consequences. The ancient sages declared, "If not now, when?" Now is the time to begin to engage with one another and take greater responsibility for where we are and who we can become.

**3. Authority**

In most museums, authority is linked directly to power, money, and expertise, organized in a hierarchical fashion with limited opportunity for discourse across ranks, roles, and disciplines. This has to change. In keeping with our commitment to community engagement, we need to redefine leadership and establish more porous structures that are open to diverse voices from all levels of staffing and from the community at large. We need to develop new interdisciplinary, team processes. And we need to revalue public knowledge and multiple forms of expertise. This means sharing authority more widely from the trustees to the custodians and security guards, but especially with emerging museum professionals (EMPs), who bring new generational perspectives to the table.

This is a time of change, yet museums are too often static. Part of our stasis, a large part, stems from current power structures. Traditionally, the board and the executive have monopolized decision-making about the mission and other core issues. Development staff have focused on money, curators on managing collections. This burden of tradition and legacy weighs heavily against a shift toward education, outreach, and community engagement, just when we most need to expand our services to (and with) the community. The situation is made worse by our focus on survival, which all too often has meant slashing education, engagement, and visitor services staff, the very front-line people who tell our stories and directly serve the public.

That said, while many museums remain hierarchical, expert-driven, white, and internally-focused, more and more are turning outward, becoming more deeply embedded in their communities, and much readier to work through partnerships and networks. Even with greater organizational and leadership commitment to moving in that direction, the full impact of these initiatives may not be fully felt. The people on the frontline in these relationships need to feel the organization has their back and is inspired by their effort. Leadership, staff, board have to be part of the program.

We need to break out of the confines of what has passed for “best practice.” Instead, we need to acknowledge the limitations and biases of our own training and scholarship. In fact, we need to revise our notions of expertise and acknowledge other forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge and public knowledge. What are the other kinds of relevant expertise and knowledge that exist outside the museum but are in various ways tied to it—or could be? Rather than stick to what we think of as best practices, we might do better to think in terms of “next practice.”

It is also time for us to address the gap between our pronounced values and administrative practices in relations with staff, artists, and contractors. The press for DEAI within our museums is critical and urgent. Wage inequity is apparent in the exploitation of interns, the prevalence of low salaries for highly credentialed staff, and disparities of compensation. Executives and senior staff often earn multiples of the wages paid to emerging professionals, guards, and maintenance staff. Moreover, retrenchment has hit staff people of color, lower-paid employees, and emerging professionals especially hard, even as many museum leaders and senior staff have avoided pay cuts. And some museums are now using independent museum professionals, working at lower wages, to replace fired staff. The advent of unions at a number of leading art museums is a signal that it is past time for museums to confront their skewed salary structures and to recalibrate their compensation practices. If we want greater workplace diversity and a more nourishing workplace culture, we will need to create more transparent and equitable compensation schemes.

Museums also need to reexamine their professional development practices. Museums of all kinds could begin lowering barriers within the profession by making clearer the pathways for entry and professional advancement. Most museums do little to encourage professional development beyond attendance at a conference. New forms of internal reflection and training, complemented by online access to workshops, webinars, and institutes are needed to retain, encourage, grow, and nourish coming generations of museum professionals who, after all, represent the future of our field.

Much of this work requires looking in the mirror and examining our (even unconscious) complicity in creating or maintaining organizational inequities. Leadership and senior staff need to ask themselves what is their role going forward―to lead, to share space, to make room for others, or to get out of the way? We need new models of distributed leadership that provide room for a variety of perspectives and voices at multiple levels of our organizations. We need to reward and advance competence and create opportunities for shared leadership. These challenges are made more difficult when resources are scarce and staff are being laid off. However, by realigning our museums and reimagining alternative use of resources, we may renew ourselves and, in the process, generate new and additional support from our boards, members, donors, and communities.

**4. Priorities**

Collections have long been at the heart of museum culture, but well before COVID-19 many events had begun to drive museums toward reexamining their priorities. Until recently, it was natural to think of collections as the soil and seed stock from which projects grew. Today, the tangible physicality of stuff can be less of a legacy, more of a burdensome management challenge—what to keep, what to collect, what to deaccession, even as intangible culture―stories, memories, born digital works―and virtual programming have moved toward the center of attention and activity in many museums. Refocusing on next narratives comes into play here, too, especially in light of the national reckoning on racism and inequity. If we want to remain relevant, we need to embrace new kinds of stories, new kinds of media, new kinds of holdings.

That said, the physical object may prove essential. Not long ago, many natural history museums were thought irrelevant; some considered disposing of collections or even closing. Today those specimens have shed vital insights on the evolution of our natural world and biodiversity. Collections will still serve as part of the patrimony the past will leave to the future, embodying what the past has to say to us and informing our legacy to the future. Our task is to imagine what that future most needs from us. Addressing climate change, ecological disaster, colonialism, and racism, and the fractures in our polity, society, and culture requires an openness to new thinking and the inclusion of new voices. Museums of every type have benefited from the efforts of citizen scientists and citizen historians to help transcribe or interpret significant collections that had never been properly documented or researched and to contribute to original scholarship.

We also need to open up our conversations and decision-making. The pandemic has underscored the power of digital communication in bringing diversity into our deliberations, while layoffs and retirements have created opportunities to restructure our staffs, work lives, and institutional cultures. Boards need to be more diverse and engage more directly with a variety of staff and with the community. Museums need to rethink who is on their boards and what is expected of board members. Current leaders often say they cannot find POC to be on boards, but that claim is suspect. Cross-training can increase institutional flexibility and agility. Interdisciplinary conversations can recast old forms and traditional narratives. Sharing and distributing authority more widely throughout our museums can make space for more diverse participants and amplify the voices of emerging professionals. We need to give greater attention to processes that cut across formal job descriptions and nominal ranks: collaboration is called for to meet new and unscripted challenges.

Museums need not go it alone. The pandemic has created both the need and the opportunity for our museums to work with other types of organizations within our communities, including other cultural, educational, and social service organizations, as well as forging new alliances with museums across the country and around the globe. Sharing ideas and expertise will lead to new collaborations and partnerships, empowering museums to try new things. The turn to digital may facilitate and support new kinds of partnerships, alliances, and networks. Partnering is a critical professional skill, an essential strategy in this networked age. Museums will need to build a partnership mindset into their work and to create conditions for successful partnerships as part of the organizational chart, mission, vision, and infrastructure.

Collaborations can empower museums to take on projects whose magnitude or complexity would not be doable alone. We can start with one-off arrangements with specific goals, and slowly develop long-term, multivalent relationships. Networks can bring diverse, often complementary, perspectives to bear on a problem; they’re worth doing, if only for that. They are likely necessary to move the needle on critical, complex, and challenging problems.

**5. History**

Many of our museums were created to introduce Americans to and educate them about the canons of Western Civilization. What do they need to do now? Art and anthropology museums, ethnic and history museums, cultural and social organizations of many kinds are woven into the fabric of our collective history. That history remains grounded in genocide and slavery, inflected by prejudice, discrimination, and inequity. In too many museums, narratives reflect blatant cultural biases, while much of the painful and hateful episodes of our past and, indeed, the present remain unknown and unspoken.

The social justice movement has exposed the inaccuracy and inauthenticity of much of the mythos that passes for our national history; calls for a reckoning with racism, injustice, and inequity have multiplied in the world outside and within museums. Can museums lead the conversations we need to have? This is another area where our museums need to begin with a deep look inside all aspects of the organization before they can be fully successful in their external work. Many have begun to address the systemic culture of white supremacy that shaped and governs them. How can we replace that with more inclusive, strategic, robust, sustainable museum cultures? We must, if we want to earn the trust of our communities, our stakeholders, and our supporters, our staffs, and our volunteers. Why—and how—do museums benefit from the colonial endeavor? What are the costs of those benefits? How can we give more attention to the peoples whose voices have been silenced, suppressed, and ignored?

Visitors come to museums to make meaning for themselves and find a better understanding of the present. Often, however, even when museums work collaboratively, they tend not to co-create a storytelling framework larger than the sum of its parts. We need to extend our welcome to all—and to engage a more diverse audience in meaningful discourse. The new digital technologies at the turn of the current century have led to a radical expansion of museums’ capacity to extend communication and outreach.

The upheavals now taking place, propelled by COVID-19, require innovations more seismic than what has been developed so far. If museums are to find new forms of utility, they will need to open the world for users more widely. Museums can help address issues of digital and media literacy and access, nurturing critical thinking and analysis. Motivating visitors to engage in deeper stories and understandings should be at the top of our agenda.

People in the United States are grappling with their history. Reconsidering exploitation, dispossession, and displacement as well as the unfulfilled potential of our democratic ideals will continue to bring pressure to bear on museums to engage issues like reconciliation and reparations, and to make clear the link between social and environmental justice. The potential begins to open for us to tell new stories in new ways, making the stories of previously invisible individuals an essential part of a reconsidered American narrative. In this, communities look to museums for programs about diversity and understanding, expanded public menus, and greater civic engagement.

With this comes a new hope: museums can help their visitors and communities make sense of the current inflection point in the unfolding national trauma. In the words of the NEH authorization: “Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens.” Museums have an important role in supporting democratic ideals and values—a role that some already play—and addressing the current deep polarization in American society. The United States has paid civics education short shrift in recent years, but museums can help fill this deficit by bolstering civics education in the context of history, using programmatic, dialogic, and convening formats.

Museums also have a role to play as places of healing. Much of the recent literature talks about organizations needing to focus on the care, connection, and well-being of their staffs. This is also an audience and public need our museums can and should be addressing. As we slowly recover from the pandemic (and as we learn more about generational trauma afflicting minority communities and lingering COVID-19-related PTSD among health care, frontline workers, and others), people in our communities will need our help in healing.

**6. Metrics**

If we want to change, we will have to develop new metrics for assessing progress and success. Current practice typically focuses on a few measures of effectiveness: meeting the annual budget; attracting a given number of visitors and users; building collections. These are metrics that are easy to generate, but they are often inward-looking and of limited help in decision-making, especially in a time requiring change and renewal. If we really want to understand how our mission and values express themselves, we will need more complex, nuanced, focused metrics. Both quantitative and qualitative evaluation strategies are important in this; we need to fit the metric to the methodology and to go beyond outputs to outcomes.

Museum leaders and staff might want to begin by interrogating their existential indicators of success: if our museum were to close, who would miss it and why? Who do we care about? Who do we most want to care about us? Who do we hope to serve but are not reaching? Most museums need better information about the demographics of their communities, their current users, their neighbors, and their non-users. If we claim to represent diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, which of our policies and procedures reflect these ideals? Which are based on untested, and ultimately unwelcoming, assumptions?

If we seek to expand our partnerships with community organizations, local businesses, and government agencies, or our alliances with other museums, what are the metrics we need to measure the effectiveness of our networks? How, in other words, do we define and measure our public value? There are a number of reasons for putting this subject at the center of our thinking. We are in a moment of scarcity unlike any the museum field has experienced before. Our losses of income and support require that we reconsider our traditional funding models and what fuels those models. Museums need to better align money and mission. This will require transformation in our relationships with donors, authorizing agencies and officials, and members. We will need supporters interested in dynamic, mission-driven change, receptive to reform, ready to pivot in response to opportunity, and open to thinking in terms of greater complexity, size, and impact.

All this requires better, more salient information. Some of our metrics may relate to broader, already-existing, community-wide measures of impact. We tend to think about sustainability only as money, but in the long run people have to believe we make a difference. For many museums already, financial support hinges on making a case for vision and impact. We must decide what we are willing to give up in order to make that case convincingly. It seems unlikely the old business models will prove viable when the pandemic ends. We need different operating paradigms that bring money and mission into alignment.

Now is a good time to ask ourselves what new skills, new practices, new modalities, and new metrics we are likely to need. This means devising new ideas about what matters (e.g., partnerships and collaborations) and revising what our field considers to be significant. Many museums with very limited resources are far from equipped and organized in ways that would enable them to measure impact, performance, and benefits in a systematic fashion. Even the American Alliance of Museums, the museum industry’s largest trade association, is not structured, equipped, or expected to serve as catalyst for projects of this kind. As a field and as an industry, we need to establish formal think tanks to reflect on our current practice, to generate new ideas, to promote new kinds of training, and to enrich our professional discourse.

**Facing the Future**

Our communities (and many museum professionals) are watching—and will not be satisfied with pro forma changes and one-off initiatives. We need deep, sustained change, and we should make those changes despite our natural fears and hesitancy. Change nourishes our visitors—and ourselves. In a time of ferment, diversity of voices, and energy, we see a real moment for museums to change. To do so, we will have to think and talk across fields of learning, types of museum, region, viewpoints, etc., and to go beyond internal organizational issues. We need to be both self-aware and transparent. We need to become nimble enough to stay relevant, flexible, and proactive.

This means jobs have to be rethought. We need to be as intentional about revenue as about program. Sustainability requires us to be loved and valued as well as useful. We need new operating paradigms and new kinds of partnerships. Now, more than ever, we need new, more refined indicators of organizational wellbeing and impact. Even as we reimagine and reinvent our museums, we have to protect those critically important, exemplary organizations that nurture and thrive on innovative thinking. These models can lead others toward a better future.

Our present reality finds us caught between tidy and messy. Tidy is more comfortable, but messy may be more productive. We need to be experimental; we need to take some calculated risks. The nation finds itself confronted with fundamental, even existential challenges. We must question the systems and structures that obstruct greater equity and inclusion, transparency and openness. What will be our museums’ role and our duty going forward?

The great task before us as a people and as professionals is healing―to heal from the dangers and traumatic wounds of the pandemic, our foundering economy, our damaged and threatened planet, our social, cultural, and political fissures. We need to move toward resolution and reconciliation of our nation's racist, colonialist history. We need to ponder our role in collecting and presenting evidence and, as trusted institutions, in presenting and interpreting the truth.

How change-ready *are* museums? Why did it take a pandemic and social unrest to push us along? Why have we not been bolder and more skeptical of our structures and systems? We need ―and we *know* we need―to communicate our values and missions. Even so, despite many shared values and the impulse to do right, we sometimes find ourselves blocked by internal divisions over priorities, objectives, and values. We are frozen in these conversations even when there is goodwill on all sides because it is not altogether clear what doing right means in any given set of circumstances. How can we find a way to signal to the public that we are doing meaningful work even as we reflect on what constitutes that work? Can we find ways to venture forward courageously, even with uncertainty, confident that the public has our back?

The challenge we face is to re-imagine how to address our circumstances as we re-imagine ourselves. Most important—and perhaps most difficult—we need to stop thinking about our museums as isolated institutions and, instead, to understand them as integral parts of the cultural sector and of our communities. If we are transparent, we will earn trust. If we are opaque, we will be seen as a lost cause with little redeeming social value. We need to recognize that building and maintaining trust is a long-term effort that requires sustained engagement and can be easily undermined by inconsistency in intent or action. Only by helping to make safe and comprehensible the places where people live and work and raise their families, will we be valued by our communities and deserving of their trust.

**Conclusion**

This manifesto is not a call to arms so much as a summons to engagement, advocacy, and participation on the part of all those who are—whether they know it or not—citizens of the world’s museums. We have a choice. We, you, and many others must find ways to be change agents when such agency seems unwelcome or out of the question. We, you, and many others must find ways to insist on the role of change, welcome or not, in responding to the existential crisis museums and the entire cultural world face. This is our choice: we, you, and many others can seize the moment, together. Or we, you, and many others can hold back and allow the threats we face to do all the harm they are capable of. It’s not even a close call. We must seize the moment.

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**See also:**

*Informal Learning Review,* Special Issue 2020 #2

ISSN 2642-7419

*Inside: We offer this special issue of the ILR in the hopes that the pieces in it―all written in the midst of the first weeks of the COVID-19-19 crisis, will help us come together as a field, keep learning from one another, and build collaborations, especially across field specializations and professional networks*

**Websites**

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[https://deathtomuseums.com](about:blank)

[https://www.museumhue.com](about:blank)

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**16. The Cucumbers of Egypt and the Need for Generational Change**

AASLH Blog 4/15/21

The biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt may hold some important lessons for contemporary museum leaders, but it is not clear whether they will focus on the most important ones.

As you will recall, the Hebrews were liberated from the House of Bondage after divine intervention and the Ten Plagues forced Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Even then, Pharaoh regretted his decision, pursuing the Hebrews as far as the Red Sea, where he and his armies were drowned. The sudden, miraculous story of a people's liberation from slavery is one of radical disruption, calling to mind the ruptures of the current pandemic.

That story may evoke features of the pandemic, but the more useful parallel may be less inspiring: like Moses' followers, it turns out we are neither tractable nor prepared for what comes next. According to the Bible, no sooner were the Children of Israel liberated, than they began to have second thoughts. The harshness of free life in the wilderness recalled to them the luxuries they enjoyed as an enslaved people. Their whining and bellyaching reached a peak when they complained to Moses that they longed for 'the cucumbers of Egypt' [Numbers 11:5].

To us, the Israelites' clinging to the habits of a lifetime―notwithstanding their long hoped-for liberation from bondage―speaks volumes about our yearning to return to what we consider normal. Much the same might be said of how many museum leaders have reacted to the blows inflicted by the pandemic, taking drastic measures thought needed for survival and restoration of a pre-Covid normal.

Though these measures were meant to reduce costs and establish a sustainable model, the price has been high, including massive firing and furloughing of key staff, a turning toward digital programming, and, in far too many cases, reduction of front line staff and an indifference toward the compelling needs of their local communities. Like the ancient Israelites, it seems that many museum leaders would prefer to endure the conventional inequities and indignities of pre-Covid museum life rather than find ways to adapt to their new circumstances.

That's a miscalculation. Just as the newly liberated Israelites were on a journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to Canaan, our museums are also on a journey. In fact, swept forward by the current pandemic, our museums have reached a critical stage in their journey. Oddly, though, while many museums think and talk about the visitors' journeys, they fail to consider their own, ongoing institutional journeys even though we all know that institutions, like individuals, are in constant motion and experience constant changes. Mostly these are small, incremental adjustments, but sometimes―as in transformational events like the Exodus or the current pandemic― radical changes are in order. And sometimes, as now, these changes to respond not only to external circumstances, but also to the internal imperatives of DEAI.

We yield to no one in our fondness for cucumbers, but the Israelites in clinging to old habits of mind and diet under changing circumstances led to disaster. As they approached the Promised Land, scouts were sent into Canaan to spy out the land. On their return, they reported that the land of their dreams was impregnable, a report all too readily accepted by the mass of people. Exasperated, the Deity immediately condemned their servile cowardice, vowing to kill off the entire generation of those who had left Egypt by leaving them to wander in the wilderness for forty years in order to bring about what we would term generational change, that is, to enable a new, emboldened generation to step up to the challenges of entering the Promised Land.

American museums find themselves in somewhat similar circumstances today. Many senior museum leaders, already risk-averse and conservative in outlook, have seized on the nested crises of the pandemic to revert to the habits of a lifetime. They have emphasized sustaining traditional functions and practices―reliance on small cadres of donors, focus on collections at the cost of visitor engagement and community responsibility, maintenance of hierarchical structures and workplace inequities, embrace of internal institutional perspectives rather than an outward-looking posture. Often, these same leaders have vigorously resisted and muted the "impatience" of younger colleagues who have been insistent in demanding new thinking and new practices in the museum workplace and the community at large.

The disruptions of the pandemic are not likely to be supplanted by the new old normal. Undeniable fissures in our society, culture, and polity have been revealed. Workplace racism and inequity have been called out and challenged. New and more progressive museum definitions have been mooted. The sanctity and priority of collections is being challenged as deaccessioning expands. A spate of prominent museum leaders have resigned under fire; unions have been voted in at several leading museums. The pace of change is accelerating, even as many museums struggle to reinstate the status quo ante.

Whether they realize it or not, like the Israelites of old, the senior generation has begun to fade away, while a new generation is preparing for a more inclusive, equitable, accountable future. None of us in the field today are likely to see the end of the museum journey on which we are embarked, but we may at the least acknowledge—and celebrate—the new generation of museum professionals who are not tempted by the cucumbers of Egypt and who are, even now, crossing over Jordan.

**17. National and Local: Better Together**

*History News,* Autumn 2021, Volume 76, #4

At present, American communities across the nation are confronting three related sweeping

crises. The first, of course, is the COVID-19 pandemic; the second is climate change, manifested

in wildfires, storms, floods, and drought; and the third is a reckoning with genocide and systemic racism. To be sure, each of these is a national challenge, but each is also pervasive and one or another of them affects every American community large or small, rural, suburban, or urban. Unlike many other important historical events and issues, our nested crises are simultaneously national and local. They cannot—and should not—be de-coupled.

However, many community museums and historic houses continue to ignore current crises,

despite their profound impact on local residents, local groups and organizations, and the local

community at large, preferring to hunker down with their traditional narratives about American

exceptionalism, material progress, and environmental exploitation.

Why is this so? The reasons are many. Survival is the highest priority for many community

history organizations. Ingrained habit also plays a role―traditional stories represent convention, comfort, and distance from the unpleasant present. Also, people, including museum people, see what they are accustomed to seeing and ignore unexpected intrusions, what psychologists call "inattention blindness."

But perhaps most important, people tend to resist difficult issues and bad news, and the worse the news, the more powerful the denial. Denial is diagnostic. So are the forms that denial takes. The usual defenses for ignoring critical aspects of the past are: 1) We don't know the story well

enough to interpret it and don't want to offend people, including those erased from history; 2)

Interpreting complex, troubling stories that might excite rancor is not our mission; 3) We are a

local institution and should not try to engage with larger national stories.

While detaching the local narrative from the national story is a popular strategy, it condemns

both tales to conveying less meaning and bringing less resonance into the lives of visitors and the community at large. It is also, all too often, evidence of a preference for the superficial, which presents itself as risk-free, over the deep, in which both the nation's and the community's difficult and painful experiences are addressed and, one hopes, better understood.

As it happens, history takes place in specific places, in distinct ways, at particular times, so

studying the role of big ideas, trends, and movements can and should be done at the local level.

Otherwise, neither the local nor the national makes—or conveys—much sense. Micro-histories

provide important insights into how national narratives play out in real life and sometimes

demonstrate how local people, events, and conditions shape larger narratives. Both connections give our perspectives on the past a salience and presence all too readily overlooked.

Fortunately, a growing number of local history organizations are choosing to collect, preserve,

and interpret local instances of larger events, movements, and trends. The Greensboro (NC)

History Museum, for example, documented local responses to the national reckoning on

American racism and demands for social justice by collecting nearly 20 pieces of street art as

part of the Summer 2020 protests. The Museum also interviewed artists and protest organizers,

then invited members of the community to share their personal experiences, stories and objects related to the protests, pandemic, and economic crisis. The result was a new kind of exhibition, an exhibition "about NOW." It was also unfinished, "because we are in the middle of the story."

Even before the pandemic struck in March 2020, several history organizations had created

exhibitions and programs to commemorate the 1918 Influenza epidemic that killed millions

worldwide. The Mutter Museum in Philadelphia organized an exhibition titled "Spit Spells

Death," which was launched with a commemorative parade "to memorialize the Philadelphia

victims of the influenza pandemic and to honor the tremendous work being done every day by

community health groups." Similarly, the Louisiana State Museum organized a theater piece staged in the French Quarter of New Orleans that dramatized the trauma of the 1878 yellow fever outbreak. By showing how ethnicity, race, class, and gender shape behavior and individual decisions, "the project drew strong parallels to contemporary disaster response."

Climate change and environmental degradation are contentious contemporary issues that affect us and future generations as well. Recent wildfires, storms, floods, and tornadoes have affected every region of the US. Projects like the Gallery of California Natural Sciences at the Oakland Museum represent the diversity of climate, geology, habitats, wildlife, and ecosystems, and also explore issues of land use, conservation, and environmental conflict. By closely examining the succession of habitats within Oakland itself, the gallery demonstrates the human impact on diverse ecosystems and how nature continues to affect the local community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

These and other instances of engaging national ideas, events, and movements show the way

toward integration of local and national narratives, deepening their meaning and making them

more relevant to diverse communities. Community history organizations―historic house

museums, local historical societies, and historic sites―generally want to engage their

communities. But if they ignore crises that directly affect their constituents in favor of silence or

cleansed and shadowed narratives, local history organizations are also choosing to distance

themselves from their constituents and their communities.

In the long term, organizations that choose avoidance over engagement are investing in

marginality and/or irrelevance. These choices may buy some time but they are unlikely to build

audiences, much less deepen their connections with their communities or attract media and

public attention. More consequentially, all three of our nested crises―the pandemic, systemic

racism, and environmental degradation―have long, deep histories throughout America. Local

history organizations have a role to play and insight to bring to bear on the process of shaping

and informing civic discourse around these and the other important issues of our time.

**18. Playing for Time:**

**Imagination and Improvisation in Public History**

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Carl Siracusa, PhD, was co-author of this piece.

Despite the rigors of the pandemic, public history professionals need to renew their sense of play. Most of us have entered the field because we care about preserving the past and sharing historical narratives with our communities. But as in any relationship, too tight an embrace may be crushing. And as the years go by, we may slide into too rigid notions of "best practice" that end up confining us and our institutions in mental straightjackets. In short, we need to let our museums breathe by looking out for new ways to let in fresh air.

For the past two years, Covid--with its mandated closures, furloughs, and layoffs--has disrupted our work. But Covid has also created a host of new opportunities. By making all Americans witnesses to history, the nested crises of the pandemic invite all public history organizations to re-consider the stories that they tell, who they tell them to, and why they are relevant.

Lots of history organizations have developed digital programs, activities, and resources, expanding our audiences beyond the local community and on-site visitors. Online platforms have enabled public history professionals to reflect together on our practices and policies; digital modalities have also encouraged many museums and sites to collaborate with government agencies, businesses, and other cultural and community organizations. Internally, retirements, layoffs, resignations, and remote work have opened up possibilities for re-structuring, redistributing authority, and establishing more collaborative and inclusive processes.

In short, the arenas for intellectual play have grown exponentially in the past two years. As public history professionals, we need to cultivate our capacity to imagine and improvise in order to adapt to novel conditions.

**The Power of Play**

Intellectual and imaginative play can be keys to re-framing our institutions and our narratives, engaging our audiences, and reaffirming our relevance in a complex, contentious world. One of the simplest ways to begin is to ask "What if?" questions.

Many of our organizations celebrate the achievements of prominent persons and the steady march of community progress. What if we were to interpret the environmental and social costs, as well as the benefits, of local successes? What if we were to refocus a portion of our programming to look more closely at those in our community who were (or are) committed to, advocacy, agitation, and protest? What if we were to re-center our idea of "community" by speaking about a "community of communities" and calling attention to *all* the many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups who have lived, worked, worshipped, and played here? What if we were to invite representatives of these varied groups to co-create programs with our staff, rather than try to represent the full diversity of our places on our own?

Asking "What if?" questions empowers us to think clearly about what we have been doing and what we might do differently to accomplish those same ends. As psychologist David Kuschner writes in *As If* (2009), "We don't have to accept reality as it is but can, in effect, change that reality by making believe it is different, by acting *as if* it is different, and, ultimately, causing it to be different."

**The Power of Improvisation**

Once we ask the "What if?" questions, we can begin to improvise. Like "play" "improvisation is not a term of art in public history. We tend to speak of "experiments," which is just another term for improvisations. Whichever term we prefer, we and our organizations will want to try out new stories and new modalities.

To do so, we will have to overcome our personal, professional, and institutional proclivities to resist change and avoid risk-taking. An important initial step is to recognize that *not* seizing opportunities for change and growth can be a mistake. If we don't figure out how to harness the power of digital (virtual) reality, we stand to lose our future audiences, since younger people under 20 are already immersed in the metaverse via games and social media. If we don't begin to address issues of diversity and inclusion, we stand to lose women and members of minority groups, who cannot see themselves represented in our programs and activities. In time, we will also lose the attention and support of even our most faithful audiences, as our fellow citizens focus on new and more relevant sources of information, ideas, and experiences.

Even the element of short-term risk can be mitigated. As Patti Smith puts it in her memoir, *Just Kids* (2010), "You can't make a mistake when you improvise . . . if you miss a beat you can create another." Reducing the risk of an experiment is relatively easy: you cast just each new initiative or program as a "pilot." The purpose of a pilot is not to *succeed*, but to *learn* what works and what doesn't work. If a pilot proves to be disappointing, we have learned not to do things quite this way the next time. No matter what the outcome, a pilot pays off in new knowledge and new insights.

We can also reduce the risk of improvisation by adjusting our metrics. At present, most history organizations measure their effectiveness my citing a handful of metrics--how many items do we have in our collections, how many visitors came to our site (or website), how many members do we have, and how much money have we raised for operations, programs, and capital projects?

While these are worthy measurements, they may not be the most important or germane at this moment in history. We might do better by asking how many new pilots did we create, implement, and evaluate this year? How many new partnerships and alliances did we engage in (especially with other cultural and community organizations)? How many new stories did we tell and who were they about? How much new language did we adopt to make our resources and programs more appealing and accessible? Did we attract new kinds of audiences, on-site and in the community, and how did they respond to their experiences?

But perhaps the most meaningful metrics we can adopt to assess our present vigor and future viability relate to reflection, self-examination, and improvisation. It is in our internal conversations and organizational play that our future lies, not in restoring the status quo ante. If we want to reshape our history organizations and better serve our contemporary communities, we need to begin by opening ourselves to new ideas, multiple perspectives, and the possibilities of imaginative play.

**19. Releasing Potential Capital**

AASLH Blog 5/22/22

For more than two years, the disruptions of the pandemic have challenged America's history organizations. Mandated closings, layoffs and furloughs, climate change and natural disasters, social protest, and divisive politics have become the new normal. Yet within this context of continual crisis, History organizations have discovered many new ways to release untapped capital.

Like many other kinds of organization, history museums, historical societies, and historic sites often have resources that are unused or under-utilized. Close examination of physical facilities, staff structures, programs, and alliances can reveal new and unexpected opportunities for an organization to realize more of its potential capital--and during a time of crisis, newly released capital can make a lot of difference.

Here are a number of ways in which history organizations across the country have found ways to exploit dormant resources for themselves and their communities of service.

**Expanding Digital**: The most common effort to release potential capital has been the turn to digital. Organizations large and small have deployed online programs to engage their traditional local and regional audiences--and to expand those audiences nationally and even globally. The turn to digital has also empowered many history organizations to make use of the internet skills of junior staff; this, in turn, has led to a wider distribution of leadership and authority, yet another release of potential capital.

Perhaps the most far-reaching effect of the turn to digital is the creation of new, online collaborations and partnerships. Seattle’s Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) helped to establish a national network called the Blk Freedom Collective, a partnership among African American museums from coast to coast that now produces an annual virtual production about Juneteenth. In Baltimore, the Jewish Museum of Maryland created a four-part online program with sister institutions in Australia, South Africa, and Great Britain. In a networked world, these kinds of creative partnerships enable history museums to transcend their traditional practices.

**Re-deploying Facilities**: With the onset of the pandemic, amid almost universal closures, a number of history organizations found ways to use their physical facilities for the benefit of their communities. Some organizations offered their parking lots to community organizations as sites for inoculation, food banks, and other services. Old Salem Museums & Gardens in North Carolina, expanded their vegetable gardens to provide food for the hungry. Other organizations opened their gardens and as sites for outdoor recreation, when indoor facilities were closed to the public; still others made use of their exterior walls and fences to mount panels and to project images, providing access to historical content while protecting public safety.

**Reorganizing Staff**: A number of history organizations have mobilized their staff to provide needed skills for their communities. Curriculum development and related online skills have helped local and state collaborations to produce a wealth of new resources for teachers and students who have been dependent on remote learning. One outfit deployed its staff's administrative skills to help community residents complete paperwork required for financial reimbursement.

The search for equity and justice, embodied in the DEAI movement, has challenged many history organizations to rethink their structures of authority, recruitment, and decision-making. More equitable practices in hiring, promotion, and compensation--plus the establishment of DEAI committees and DEAI officers--are changing traditional museum cultures and practices.

Some history institutions have begun to move away from corporate, hierarchical models and to redistribute authority within their organizations. Expanding the leadership team can produce not only more equitable, but more productive decisions. At the Ohio History Connection, for example, the leadership team grew from 5 to 22 (for a staff of 200), bringing perspectives and ideas to bear that were absent in the original, more limited structure. New emphases on team processes and cross-disciplinary discourse are also releasing important ideas and energy that previously lay dormant.

**Rethinking Collections**: For generations, most museums gauged their stature based on the size and scope of their collections. In recent years, as financial and other pressures have mounted, museums are taking a hard close look at their collections and the costs in staff time and space needed to preserve those collections. Efforts to make collections more representative of the diverse communities they serve have raised questions about acquisition standards and practices.

Even more fundamental questions are being raised by the "active collections" movement among museums. As the burdens of collections care mount, more museums are struggling to refocus their efforts on those aspects of their collections that are relevant and meaningful to their audiences and users. The Valentine Museum in Richmond, VA, has just completed a comprehensive study of their collections, which will elevate levels of curation and care of mission-critical parts of the collection while setting in motion new procedures for deaccessioning or other disposition of collections deemed tangential to the museum's mission.

As new collections standards and practices take hold, history organizations will free up space and staff time for new kinds of initiative that will enhance their value to the public.

It is often said that "It's an ill wind that blows no good." The nested crises of the pandemic have evoked a variety of creative responses from history museums, historical societies, and historic sites; many of these initiatives have entailed previously unimagined use of human, physical, technical, and financial resources. In the long run, public history professionals may count the release of potential capital as one of the signal achievements of the pandemic years, capital that can be invested in implementing new ideas and a new generation of public history practice.

**20. Learning from Art Museums**

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At a time of disruption and rapid shifts in politics, demography, environment, and culture,

American museums are being called on to address a wide range of current ideas and issues.

History museums, in particular, are beginning to open up their spaces and programs for more

content on social and environmental justice, including greater attention to DEAI concerns. That

said, it may well be that public history venues could learn a great deal from the practices of

leading art museums.

Historically, art museums have been among the most conservative cultural institutions in

America. Their emphasis on canons has limited the range and relevance of their collections and

exhibitions. Their imposing buildings and authoritative voices have appealed to a relatively

narrow range of museum adepts. Their internal hierarchies and siloed departments have stifled

imagination and adaptation, while their inequities in pay and advancement have become staples of public discourse.

But this seems to be changing rapidly among leading art museums coast to coast. Recent visits to some leading art museums suggest that they are outpacing history museums in areas ranging

from inclusion to inventiveness. Much of this newfound responsiveness can be attributed to the

nested crises of the pandemic years and to new concepts of global art and cultural exchange.

Beyond this, the current state of the art market has had a profound impact on museums as they

struggle to collect representative works of contemporary art amidst an intense and rapidly rising market. Moreover, since artists are often in the vanguard of cultural change, their recent work frequently reflects important ideas and issues of the day.

Here are some specific instances in which public history professionals might learn from the

practices of their colleagues in American art museums. History museums might want to broaden the range of viewpoints and voices represented in their collections. Both the Brooklyn Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others, have taken provocative (and highly publicized) steps to broaden their collections to be more representative of non-Western art and work by women, minorities, and self-taught artists.

History organizations are struggling to be more inclusive in their narratives and programs. The

Philadelphia Museum of Art recently reinstalled its sequence of Early American art galleries. In

the very first gallery, PMA includes works of art and craft by Native Americans, Hispanics, and

African Americans highlighted by interpretive texts that call attention to the diversity of

American art since the colonization of the New World. PMA also hosted a major exhibition last

year titled "New Grit: Art and Philly Now," which included the works of 25 contemporary artists

with ties to Philadelphia, an unusual effort to engage local living artists, many of whom are

BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+, which might be emulated by history museums.

Including multiple voices in exhibition labels is another tactic worth considering. The Phillips

Collection in Washington, DC, opened “Seeing Differently: The Phillips Collects for a New

Century,” an exhibition that included polyvocal interpretive texts composed by curators, artists,

and student visitors. These announce that art museums are taking inclusivity and DEAI issues

seriously, internally and in their communities.

Art museums are also being inventive in creating experiences that empower visitors to shift

perspectives and view things in a revelatory way. One obvious approach is to juxtapose things in unexpected ways, jostling visitors to look and understand them in fresh terms. The LA-based

Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) has recently installed galleries that embody unexpected

juxtapositions. Lauren Halsey's installation "Bricks 2, 2020 (Watts South Central)," a shed-size

shimmering work in which visitors encounter urban graffiti and mirrored images of themselves,

shares space with small weathered models of vernacular Southern buildings in Beverly

Buchanan's "Shack Series," while in another gallery Piet Mondrian's "Composition Number III"

(1939), resplendent in primary red, yellow, and blue, yields pride of place to Essie Bendolph

Pettway's "Two Sided Quilt" (1973), designed in identical primary colors.

These installations are very reminiscent of what Fred Wilson did in his 1992 exhibition "Mining

the Museum" at the Maryland Historical Society. Oddly, Wilson's innovative project, while

widely noticed and discussed, had few offspring among history museums; its much deeper

impact has been felt by art museums.

It is not all or nothing. History museums might try smaller, more modest juxtapositions like

those at the Getty Center in LA. Here, an "Object in Dialogue" places a recent work of art in

striking adjacency to a canonical painting or sculpture, directly raising questions about influence, affinities, continuity, and disruption. The Getty features several iconic objects borrowed from other museums, which are installed with related artworks. Inserting one or two new objects into an existing exhibition or gallery can freshen up the narrative and engage visitors in new conversations.

Contemporary artists are among the more publicly engaged, vocal, and prescient activists, and art museums have deployed their work to demonstrate their institutional engagement with issues of social and environmental justice. The Broad Museum in Los Angeles, for example, displays El Anatsui's undulating, shimmering sculpture, "Strips of Earth" (2008) is composed of recycled bits of metal, calling attention to the links between consumption, waste, and environmental degradation. History museums might incorporate work by contemporary activists that shed new light on older objects or provoke consideration of historically significant contemporary trends.

At a time when Americans are anxious about a host of unprecedented changes, art museums have created for their visitors moments of surprise, astonishment, provocation, inspiration, and

reflection. In the project to birth new narratives about inclusion, equity, and justice--and the

meanings of America--we have much to learn from the practices of our colleagues in America's art museums.

**21. Louder than Words**

AASLH Blog 7/25/22

Although DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion) has been around for more than twenty years, it is all the rage these days in the wake of economic disruption, social protest, and the effects of climate change. Museums have hastened to adopt DEAI rhetoric; consultancies on DEAI have proliferated; press and media have given DEAI a lot of coverage. But what in practice has been accomplished? Are our museums and kindred cultural organizations changing their policies and practices internally and in relation to their communities? Or are we just engaged in the kinds of performative gestures that impede rather than promote effective changes?

AAM, AASLH, and other national groups have taken clear steps to implement DEAI policies within their organizations and to promote DEAI practices among their membership. Since 2019, AAM has published two books specifically on DEAI, devoted an issue of *Museum* magazine to the subject, established an annual award for DEAI practice, and organized a task force (Facing Change) to advance museum board diversity and inclusion. AAM has also devoted its latest issue of *Museum* to the subject of climate change and environmental justice across the museum field and established , created a Climate Toolkit, and established an Environment and Climate Network.

AASLH, too, has taken steps to advance DEAI practice within its organization, establishing committees on Diversity and Inclusion and Climate and Sustainability. The former has instituted a survey of the AASLH Council, committees, and staff; the latter is developing educational resources on climate change, a key element of environmental justice. AASLH has committed itself to inclusion and equity as core values in its 2020 Strategic Framework, a commitment reiterated in its recent "Reframing History" report (2022). In 2019, AASLH sponsored a webinar on "Accessibility and Inclusion," published blogs and *History News* articles on DEAI, and incorporated discussions on DEAI in its annual Leadership Institute. AASLH has also honored a good number of organizations and sites with Awards of Merit for inclusive history programs.

The commitment of these national organizations to effecting changes in internal DEAI practice is manifest, but what effect are they having across the museum field? Here the evidence is largely anecdotal. Many museums and related interpretive sites have adopted statements of support for DEAI policies and practice, both within their institutions and in relation to their local communities. A substantial number of large museums--most notably leading art museums--have appointed DEAI officers to coordinate institutional activity, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto appointed the first-ever curator of climate change. The Brooklyn Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum or Art, and the Broad Museum, among others, have expanded the scope of their collections and exhibitions to be more diverse and inclusive. It is noteworthy, however, that a number of leading art museums have made headlines with recent scandals about harassment, inequity, sexism, racism, and more--distinctly not walking the DEAI walk!

Despite these exemplary initiatives, the full scope and scale of changes in DEAI practice remain undocumented and obscure. The only systematic survey on DEAI practice, the *CCLI National Landscape Study: The State of DEAI Practices in Museums* by Cecilia Garibay and Jeanne Marie Olson, was published in 2020, just as the pandemic was taking hold of museums and other cultural institutions. The report's general conclusion, however, is clear and critical: "Despite more than three decades of discussion about DEAI, however, our organizations still wrestle with questions about where to focus, how to gauge success, and how to make changes "stick" so that these efforts endure beyond one person, project, or program."

The CCLI study focuses on *organizational change*--the need for our institutions to "to examine our own biases, prejudices, and assumptions . . . [and] the many organizational variables that can promote or inhibit authentic equitable practices in individual institutions and in the museum field." Systemic, effective action, however, remains elusive. The key finding reads as follows:

*Museums report that DEAI is an organizational priority but have not taken strategic, consistent action at an organizational level foundational enough to support and achieve enduring equity and inclusion. While a large majority of respondents (90%) report that DEAI is an essential or relatively high priority and most (73%) report that boards understand the importance of DEAI, less than half (48%) have DEAI action plans and 89% have not established metrics to measure DEAI progress. Only 38% of boards have asked for/approved changes to policies or processes necessary to support DEAI efforts.*

The good news in the CCLI study is that many museums, especially smaller ones, *are* making efforts to advance equity and inclusion. More however needs to be done. Much of the DEAI effort is directed toward public-facing programs, less to adopting DEAI practices internally. While DEAI work is evident in exhibits, programs, and events, much of this lies outside core practice, and too little effort is being made across the field in collecting data and devising metrics of success. In short, much more work is needed to implement DEAI in practice and not just as an aspirational goal.

Over the past two years, AASLH has commissioned and collaborated on a series of studies intended, as John Marks observes, "to help practitioners better understand the wider context in which their work is being received by public audiences—particularly audiences that are different demographically than the people who mostly make up the professional staff of history organizations." It is probably time for AASLH and the public history field to launch a vigorous probe into what our history museums and historic sites are doing *in practice* to advance the DEAI agenda, institutionally and in relations to the community.

Given a field with more than 21,000 history organizations of all sizes and types, such a study will be intensive and costly, but because we are looking for concrete data on *institutional* *action*, this might be simpler and less demanding than previous studies on *public attitudes* toward history. In any case, we are talking about an ongoing process of adapting to novel circumstances and effecting systemic change. If we want our DEAI actions to speak louder than words, we will need hard data and new metrics. The time is ripe. Let's get started.

**22. Everyone Their Own Historian**

AASLH Blog 8/7/22

It is now more than 90 years since Carl Becker delivered his presidential address to the American Historical Association. "Everyman His Own Historian" has since become the most cited AHA talk, and its thesis still resonates in the thought and practice of public history professionals. The implications of Becker's argument, however, are still being worked through by history organizations and public history practitioners. It is timely, then, to revisit Becker's landmark address and to assess its utility in a new and different era.

Becker's thesis is quite simple--"Every normal person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history."

Moreover, says Becker, at any given moment, everyone weaves new perceptions into their

personal pattern of memory and knowledge, that is, in our particular consciousness, past and

present merge in a living history. It follows, then, that what "we affirm and hold in memory . . .

can not be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation after

another. . . . It is rather an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes." As Richard Rabinowitz puts it, we all "speak history," and the AASLH also believes that "everyone makes history."

If this view is correct, and we think it is, then most of the people who encounter our facilities,

exhibitions, and programs bring with them their own historical narratives, beliefs, and memories. The museum experience--actual or virtual--thus becomes an encounter between the user's version of history and the organization's version. Sometimes these align. Sometimes not. Whichever the case, the familiar notion that visitors come to us empty of ideas and expectations, hoping to be "filled" with new information and new narratives, is certainly a false assumption, as Lois Silverman, John Falk, Lynn Dierking, and many others have contended.

In fact, a recent survey by the AASLH, "History, the Past, and Public Culture (2021)," tends to

support the idea that all of us are "suspended in webs of significance" we have spun for

ourselves. For one thing, 92 per cent of those surveyed expressed interest in learning about

events in the past (Fig. 8). Moreover, they appear to learn about history almost continuously:

two-thirds of all respondents pick up historical information and narratives from movies and

television in the form of documentaries, fictional films, and news programs; they also pick up

historical ideas from a wide variety of other sources, ranging from Wikipedia to video games to

social media (Fig. 14), though they prefer to learn about the past from direct encounters with

historical objects (Fig.46).

The AASLH survey goes on to report that respondents prefer to encounter history "on its own

terms and to actively investigate it rather than passively receive it." So much for users as empty

vessels waiting to be filled! In fact, 62 percent of the survey respondents reported that knowledge of history should change, suggesting an openness to revising their own ideas of history (Fig. 112), and 89 percent said that "knowledge of others was just as important to know as was knowledge of [their] own racial or ethnic communities" (Fig. 70).

Viewing our users as "active agents who are pursuing their own agendas," as Jay Rounds puts it,

comports well with the emphasis on meaning-making that is evident across the museum field in

general and public history in particular. Museum audiences are not just looking for new facts and new information; they are actively constructing knowledge through interaction with objects and texts, other people, and different kinds of cultural institution. People are, in short, on personal journeys, and along the way they--and we--assimilate experiences, ideas, and memories in personal narratives about their place in life and in history, just as Carl Becker argued all those years ago.

Becker's insights and those of more recent theorists of museum learning have several clear

implications for the practice of public history. One is that history museums and historic sites,

even though they are the most trusted sources of historical knowledge, are neither seen nor used by visitors as exclusive or authoritative narrators. Instead, our sites should be viewed as contact zones, places for fostering participation and dialogue. Recognizing this, our history organizations need to be clear about what we are saying and how we are saying it, ceding agency (and final say) to our audiences and communities. This certainly does not mean that we have to present manifestly false or patently skewed interpretations, only that we should acknowledge our users as full partners in considering differing historical narratives and reflecting on what makes one more plausible, authentic, and accurate than another.

This means that our museums and sites are, or should be, places for conversations, even difficult conversations. We can start by acknowledging multiple narratives and interpretations of salient historical trends, events, figures, and movements, not with the intention of knocking down straw men and validating one preferred storyline, but rather to open up the conversation. Our goal for those conversations should not be consensus or acquiescence. Something more modest is in order--to foster civility in discourse and mutual understanding as an outcome. "I never thought of it that way!" may be sufficient, especially in a time when many traditional narratives have broken down and our polity is roiled by divisive disinformation and concepts in conflict.

If we want our historical narratives to be more inclusive and more complex, it's a good idea to

begin with the conviction that our users are themselves historians. They may not be familiar with the latest historical scholarship nor trained in the academic study of the past, but as Carl Becker showed, they know how to call up memories of things said and done and learned and how to use those memories to guide their future attitudes and actions. If we welcome people as the historians they are, rather than passive beneficiaries of our authority and expertise, we are more likely to engage them and inform their interpretations and stories about our shared, but unstable past.

**23. Let's Try Something Different: Why We Need to Experiment**

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Whether we know it or not, we and our museums are on a journey, and our narratives, programs, and structures are all part of that journey. Even if we and our institutions would prefer to stay pretty much the same, doing the same thing under changing circumstances while expecting the same results is likely to lead us into a muddle, especially in a time of radical social, political, economic, and environmental change. In short, if we want to sustain and grow our museums, we need to embrace continuous change, to try new and different things--in a word, to experiment.

Sustaining our organizations. Ten years ago, Jay Rounds proposed a new paradigm for

American museums, which he termed "The Emergence Model." In this model, the museum is "a

process unfolding in time. Like individual humans, organizations grow and change over time,

integrating new experiences, information and know-how into their structures and operations." The idea is not to elaborate on existing ideas, practices, and structures, but to replace them--to

adapt. And adaptiveness, as James G. March puts it, "thrives on serendipity, experimentation,

novelty, free association, madness, loose discipline, and relaxed control."

This requires, as Rounds asserts, "flirting with the ambiguous, the exotic, and the unknown." If

we seek long-term sustainability, we will have to embrace adaptation and exploration as integral components of our ongoing practice and structures. Investing in the long-term in a time of constrained resources requires us to be both disciplined and open-minded, to see opportunities in new challenges, to adopt an abundance mindset, to experiment with new and different ways on a variety of fronts.

**Promoting generativity**. Earlier this year, we argued that history organizations need to be more

imaginative and playful. During the past two years of plague, the arenas for improvisation have

grown exponentially. Many history museums and historic sites have begun the shift to a hybrid,

part-virtual model; others have created new forms of partnership and collaboration with their

communities; still others have begun to rethink their narratives and their structures. If we want to generate new purposes, new ways of being and doing, then we will need to promote the curiosity and creativity of our colleagues. Intellectual and imaginative play are keys to re-framing our institutions, engaging our audiences, and reaffirming our relevance in a complex, contentious world.

**Encouraging leadership.** Together with Marsha Semmel, we have just completed editing a book

of 50 reflections on adapting to change. Time and again, our contributors cited the urgency of

encouraging professional colleagues to employ their often under-utilized skill sets to develop

new ideas and new programs. Encouraging leadership across institutional hierarchies and

disciplinary specialties has proven productive. At the Columbus [OH] Museum of Art, the

Manager of Engagement focused inward, challenging the staff, leadership and Board to address

racism, misogyny, and imperialism, while the Leadership Giving Officer launched “Loud and

Proud,” a first of its kind affinity membership group for LGBTQ individuals. At the Natural

History Museums of Los Angeles County, the millennial digital natives were the idea generators

and risk takers, grabbing the opportunity to bring programs, activities, and practices online. We

needn't await a crisis as profound as the pandemic to begin empowering our staff; instead, we

should be looking for opportunities to encourage new leadership in every quarter of our

institutions.

**Redistributing authority**. Encouraging emergent leaders across an organization’s whole staff brings us to changes in institutional structure, the most challenging of which is redistributing authority. Experimenting with shifts in authority need not be comprehensive or wholesale or subversive of authority. At the Ohio History Connection, for example, the leadership team was expanded from five to twenty-two; this broader representation of staff around the leadership table regularly bring perspectives and ideas to bear that were absent with the smaller, more closed grouping.

Similarly, The Rockwell Museum in Corning, NY, adopted several key ideas for revamping their internal structures to ensure more effective communication among departments, working groups, and the larger staff so that anyone within the organization could understand the work, processes, and dialogue of the various teams. And at the Princeton Art Museum, a new series of formal and informal talking circles led to new cross-disciplinary relationships and new ideas. If done thoughtfully and with care, experimenting with structures of authority can be done at modest risk and cost, while the benefits in terms of institutional adaptability are potentially great.

**Creating alliances**. The pandemic has led many history organizations to make two critical turns-

- to digital and to community. Both of these shifts have opened up opportunities for new kinds of partnerships, limited only by our imaginations and our willingness to try out new forms of

collaboration. Old Salem Museum and Gardens in North Carolina repurposed its education

gardens and its historic bakery operation to feed families in the local community. In a very

different vein, the Jewish Museum of Maryland in Baltimore partnered with sister institutions in

England, South Africa, and Australia to present a four-part online series on Jewish history and

culture. The Dyckman Farmhouse Museum in New York City transformed its narrative and

public programs in collaboration with the local community, making the museum relevant and

accessible (bi-lingual) to its contemporary audiences.

In a time when creating alliances will be critical to sustainability, experimenting with new and

unexpected forms of collaboration will become a necessity rather than an option. As Brian

Whisenhunt has argued, "Museums must conduct conversations about what collaboration means to their organization and how it is activated in their practice and work within the community. Too often, collaboration is a one-way street where larger organizations present opportunities for engagement to specifically identified people or organizations. Opening the lines of communication to move in both directions, using an open call for ideas and opportunities and saying yes when communities, people, or organizations come forward with ideas are essential to a truly collaborative museum." Here, too, whether we knew it or not, we and our museums have found ourselves on a journey. And whether we recognize it now or come to appreciate its presence in our work and lives, exploration and experimentation lead the way.

**24. Becoming Braver Angels:**

**Engaging Visitors in Dangerous Conversations**

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Today, many Americans are anxious, regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs. Ongoing crises--the pandemic, climate change (droughts, floods, wildfires, and storms), racism, and inflation--are exacerbated by economic uncertainty, global upheaval, demographic shifts, inequities, disinformation, and gender issues, which have generated fear and distrust, political polarization, and challenges to our most basic civic institutions.

In this climate, sponsoring and hosting public conversations about divisive issues, including interpretations of history, looks on the face of it a daunting prospect. It is little wonder that museums in general and history museums in particular feel constrained about addressing challenging ideas and issues. The effort can be dangerous, the risks high. Yet this is the very moment when history museums, historic sites, and historic houses might make a difference in public discourse.

There is also danger in ignoring the salient debates of our own time. As the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience puts it, "erasing the past can prevent new generations from learning critical lessons and destroy opportunities to build a peaceful future." There is, therefore, value in promoting public discussions about problematic issues. Joe Keohane, for one, has written about "The Surprising Benefits of Talking to Strangers" [*The Atlantic,* August 4, 2021]. He writes, "Talking to strangers can address many of the biggest problems facing our societies and ourselves. . . . Again and again, studies have shown that talking with strangers can make us happier, more connected to our communities, mentally sharper, healthier, less lonely, and more trustful and optimistic."

So, why are most of us reluctant to talk to strangers. One reason is cultural messaging that warns us 'not to talk to strangers'--the stranger danger inhibition. Another stems from what is termed the 'lesser minds problem." "Because we can’t see what’s happening in other people’s heads, we tend to assume that others’ minds are less sophisticated than or own, leading us to believe that others don't have much to offer." [Nicholas Epley, *Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*.] And all this is compounded by differences of race, gender, class, and culture.

Is it even possible to transcend these social facts, especially in troubled times? We know from decades of research that one of the primary reasons people visit museums is to share a social experience--to visit together, share observations, and learn from each other. We also know that visitors to history museums are open to learning new things not only about themselves, but also about others. A recent survey by the American Historical Association, "History, the Past, and Public Culture (2021)," reports that 89 percent of respondents said that "knowledge of others was just as important to know as was knowledge of [their] own racial or ethnic communities" (Fig. 70). Moreover, 62 percent of the survey respondents reported that knowledge of history should change, suggesting most visitors to history museums accept that history (or, more precisely, interpretations of history) change and evolve in a dialectical process and also an openness to revising their own ideas of history (Fig. 112).

At a time when public discourse is deeply divisive, history organizations might make new use of their expertise in continual revision to engage visitors in informative dialogue about present and past--an idea that is echoed in a 2022 report published by More in Common titled "Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's National Story " https://www.moreincommon.com/.

We are not alone. History organizations can take heart that other organizations are already actively engaging strangers in shared discussions about all manner of challenging issues. Sites of Conscience (SoC), for example, "connects past struggles to today’s movements for human rights--[turning] memory into action." To do so, SoC establishes guidelines and ground rules for dialogue at its varied sites of memory:

1. Share the air: leave room for everyone to speak.

2. Our unique backgrounds and social status give us different life experiences.

3. Seek first to understand — ask questions to clarify, not to debate.

Based on these principles, historic sites and museums in every region of the United States are receiving training to share the stories of how marginalized communities were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and equip their communities to be more resilient and compassionate.

Still other kinds of organization are addressing partisanship head-on. Braver Angels, for example, is a national initiative committed to "building civic trust . . . [and] healing the wounds between left and right." The mode that Braver Angels--and other organizations--have chosen is to bring people of divergent viewpoints together to talk out their differences, welcoming "opportunities to engage with those with whom we disagree." In short, these organizations are creating forums for civil discourse, reconciliation, and community building.

A good number of history organizations are already equipped to foster open discussion about meaningful public issues. Tour programs at the Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Hartford, CT, for example, not only "promote vibrant discussion of her[life and work](https://hbstowecenter.wpengine.com/harriet-beecher-stowe/harriet-beecher-stowe-life/)," but also aim to "inspire commitment to [social justice and positive change](https://hbstowecenter.wpengine.com/programs-learning/salons-at-stowe/)*.*" Other sites invite strangers to converse informally in designated areas with titles such as Front Page Dialogs, Kitchen Table Conversations, Let's Talk Resting Places, and Talk to Me.

We like to say that 'everything has a history.' This includes social inequities, environmental exploitation and degradation, political protest, and even extreme partisanship. By welcoming strangers into our buildings and sites and then engaging them in meaningful discussions about the history of issues that matter to our communities, we will help our constituents and ourselves to become 'braver angels' and better citizens. Our history museums, historic houses, and historic sites may not by themselves be able to resolve the crisis of political polarization, but we may be able to provide safe spaces for productive dialog about issues that matter to most or all Americans.

**Conclusion: Healing Ourselves**

While the pandemic has largely subsided, Americans are still living in a long moment of rupture, exile, and sorrow. This may—or may not—also be a moment for healing, not only for ourselves, but for our communities and for our nation.

Healing is very much in order. As individuals, we need to recover from distancing and isolation, displacement and anxiety. As a nation, we need to quite literally heal from the shocking waves of illness and death inflicted on America by the rampaging pandemic. We need, too, to mend our economy and restore the millions of jobs that have been lost. We need to face up to the damage being done to our shared planet. And we need, as a people, to move through the stages of recognition, resolution, and reconciliation as we come to terms with our dreadful racist, colonialist past, which still lingers beneath the surface.

These are not trivial matters. The challenge we face is to figure out how to address them as we re-imagine ourselves. One approach is to embrace what Nina Tumarkin has termed Therapeutic Amnesia. What this comes down to is letting time do its work of societal healing: after enough time has passed, people can forget or repress their painful pasts and move on. In her book, *The Living and the Dead* (1994), Tumarkin describes how the Soviet Union put off completion of a Museum of the Great Patriotic War for more than 30 years; by the time the building was finished "no one could agree on what to put into it, since the once cohesive memory of World War II had dissipated." We don’t propose this, but for a society in great pain, Therapeutic Amnesia may represent a navigable path forward. It’s certainly a path America has often trod.

We prefer instead to encourage a search for next narratives. If we are to contribute to the long-term process of communal healing, we will need to challenge the stories that currently give meaning and value to our personal and familial identities, our local organizations, and the places we call home. Far too often, the stories with which we are familiar are simplistic, idealized, or inaccurate. But we cling to these narratives because they are familiar and comfortable. We know that people who enjoy public history are self-selected and that many of those who visit our museums and sites are looking for confirmation of their entrance narratives―their beliefs about history, identity, and community.

Many of our conventional stories begin by ignoring the harsh realities of our history. As Pulitzer Prize-winner Alan Taylor has remarked in *American Colonies* (2001), Indian deaths and African slavery were fundamental to our colonial origins and the direction of our national history. The tragedies of genocide, dislocation, and slavery are of such huge import that we can scarcely get our heads around their implications, let alone begin to make amends, much less actively address how we might recalibrate our narratives or reconcile our differently remembered pasts. Recognition of our tangled, troubled histories is a key part of the social upheaval we refer to as "the Reckoning."

Moreover, the actors in our histories―like those in the contemporary moment―encompass an enormous diversity of ethnic origins, language groups, cultures, faiths, and traditions. Supposedly shared identities based on skin color such as Black, white, brown, yellow, or red do not begin to account for the diversity of American communities from the beginning of our history to the present day. Early colonizers came not just from England, but from Spain and Portugal, France and Germany and Russia. Later immigrants have arrived from across the world; today just one high school in Baltimore, MD, enrolls students from Asia and Africa, Latin America and Europe. Few communities of any size are so utterly homogenous that a single story can encompass all the myriad peoples who constitute "the community."

Our communities are remarkably diverse. But so are our ethnic, racial, and religious groupings―the basic units of our narratives. The African American community, for example, comprises Black Americans, Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Latinos, divided not only by place of origin, native language, region, education, and class, but also by diverse views on social, political, and cultural issues. The same can be said of many other groupings in contemporary America including Latinos, Asian Americans, First Peoples, and American Jews. Narratives about categories of Americans need to be made with precision, nuance, and accuracy rather than in sweeping generalities.

And then, of course, all of these varied people have interacted and influenced each other across multiple generations. Majority and minority cultures have interacted from the start of the colonial period (as commemorated in our stereotyped tradition of the first Pilgrim Thanksgiving). Contemporary American culture is an amalgam or hybrid―what historian Jack Wertheimer has termed “mash-up culture,” composed of bits and pieces from many groups and communities and, in recent generations, inflected by global culture as well. We can see this interaction of cultures most clearly in music, visual art, and literature, but also in the manifold forms of popular culture.

Given this variety and complexity, how can museums hope to contribute to the healing of themselves and their communities? To put it bluntly, there is little use in preaching equity and healing if we are not prepared to embrace DEIA values and norms within museums and to make those commitments transparent to our communities. The movement to embrace DEIA norms, which affect the roles of staff as well as of users, calls upon and enables museums to recruit and encourage a diversity of voices among staff, board, and volunteers; this will entail developing new forms of shared authority, higher valuation of public knowledge in relation to expert knowledge, and consistent inclusion of community voices in programming and governance.

If we really want to effect healing in our communities, we are going to have to reach out to new and different audiences--neighbors who don't usually (or ever) choose to visit our museums. In fact, the people we may most need to engage may be folks we actively don't like! If we are truly committed to making our history organizations safe spaces for addressing difficult, contentious issues, we will need to develop new forms of what Julianna Ochs Dweck has termed "radical hospitality." Instead of waiting passively for people to visit us, we are going to have to reach out to them in unexpected, unconventional ways, provide effective reassurance that they will be welcomed and treated with respect, and then make good on our promise to tell authentic, meaningful stories. This is likely to be slow, hard work, but it is the kind of work we need to do if we hope to reconcile disparate factions and to restore a sense of common discourse and decency.

It will help us to move forward if we stop thinking about our museums as isolated institutions. Many of our museums are remarkably insular. Instead we need to think of our organizations as part of an ecosystem of collaborations, partnerships, and networks that include cultural institutions, community organizations, businesses, and government agencies. The pandemic has created opportunities for both large and small museums to work with other museums, not only those of similar scale and shared interests, but also with different kinds of museums. Marsha Semmel, in her recent book, *Partnership Power* (2019), argues that partnering is a critical professional skill and an “essential strategy in this networked age.” She suggests that museums will need to build a partnership mindset into their work and create resources or conditions for successful partnerships.

Finally, we need to adopt a relentlessly experimental posture―testing and assessing every current program, planning for alternative activities, and piloting many new projects. Change nourishes our visitors—and ourselves. In a time of ferment, diversity of voices, and energy, we see a real moment for museums to change. To do so, we will have to think and talk across fields of learning, types of museum, region, viewpoints, etc., and to go beyond internal issues.

Our lives are embedded in fluid, complex growth; museums should reflect this complexity and the dynamic energy it releases. We need to be both self-aware and transparent about our policies and practice. We need to disclose and examine our assumptions. Our communities are watching. We cannot be satisfied with pro forma changes and one-off initiatives; we need deep, sustained change, and we should make those changes bravely and without fear.

1. *Beowulf: A New Translation* (2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rebecca Herz, Adam Nilsen, and Miriam Bader, "Exploring Empathy: Research on a Hot (But Tricky) Topic," Museum Questions website, May 4, 2015 https://museumquestions.com/2015/05/04/exploring-empathy-research-on-a-hot-but-tricky-topic/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emlyn Koster, PhD, has written compellingly about the importance for museums of dealing with environmental

   issues. See https://rka-learnwithus.com/geological-context-of-climate-change-implications-for-public-

   understanding-and-museum-relevance/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)