



Seizing the Moment

A Manifesto for Next Practice

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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, LBGTQIA+ 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 repurpose—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
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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

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The pieces that follow were written in May 2020 while most museums were closed due to the COVID-19-19 pandemic. As we were putting them together, the murder of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis sparked unprecedented civil unrest in the United States, with echoes around the world.

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