



Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums' White Paper
Reflections on Re-Assessing Museum Purpose

Plenary (Town Hall) Session 10/12/23

The attached series of papers were presented at the 2023 Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums' Annual Meeting, and by design were intended to be provocative and open up difficult questions and dialogue with participants at the conference. Indeed, there were a range of strong responses expressed by attendees. MAAM's Board and staff thought it would be interesting to share these papers with our members who did not attend the conference. We invite any and all who read them to send responses to us at info@midatlanticmuseums.org or respond on MAAM's social media platforms, including Facebook or its blog post. We look forward to extending the dialogue of the conference and to hearing from you.

Introduction

Avi Decter is the co-editor of *Change Is Required: Preparing for the Post-Pandemic Museum* (2022) and author of *Exploring American Jewish History through 50 Historic Treasures* (2024). With Ken Yellis, he is the author of the MAAM White Paper, "Seizing the Moment: A Manifesto for Next Practice" (2021). He hosts *Museums and Change*, a twice monthly forum on ideas and issues confronting contemporary museums.

Marsha Semmel is an independent consultant working with cultural and educational organizations on leadership development, strategic planning, and partnerships. In 2022, she co-edited *Change Is Required: Preparing for the Post-Pandemic Museum* (Rowman & Littlefield/AASLH). In 2019, she published *Partnership Power: Essential Museum Strategies for Today's Networked World* (Rowman & Littlefield/AAM). Semmel has served as Senior Advisor and faculty for the National Center for Science and Civic Engagement, the Noyce Leadership Institute, the Executive Leadership Institute of the Southeastern Museums Conference, the Smithsonian Institution and Bank Street College. From 2003-13, she served in leadership roles at the Institute of Museum and Library Services (including Director for Strategic Partnerships, Deputy for Museum Services, and Interim Director); she also has worked in leadership positions at National



Endowment for the Humanities. Semmel has been President/CEO of Conner Prairie, in Indiana, and Women of the West Museum in Denver. Current board service includes the Council of American Jewish Museums, Planet Word, Museum of Contemporary Art Arlington, and the Jewish Museum of Maryland.

Back in 2005, Stephen Weil, one of our most thoughtful colleagues, argued that “[p]urpose isn’t the most important thing in the museum, it’s the only thing.” Moreover, he wrote, “if [a museum] fails to provide a social benefit, it wastes society’s resources. To produce a social outcome—to provide a positive benefit to its targeted audiences—must be such an organization’s first responsibility.” He famously posed two basic questions: Why? and What for? But Weil's admonition leaves open some key questions: exactly what social benefit? And who are the actual beneficiaries? And how might we proceed—especially under conditions of novelty? This last phrase is important, for we live in a moment of unprecedented crisis in America. In addition to the pandemic (which still persists, by the way, and which disrupted the lives of nearly all Americans), we are dealing with climate change, environmental degradation, and natural disasters; economic dislocation, inflation, and inequities; demographic shifts; social and political divisiveness, denial, and disinformation—in short, a tsunami of nested crises.

But confronting change, even fundamental change, is our condition, our reality. As Ken Yellis has written, “every museum, whether they know it or not, is on a journey. And every museum professional, whether they know it or not, is also on a journey.” It follows that, as John Cotton Dana suggested more than a century ago, that every museum must “reposition itself continuously in order to ensure its vitality.” More recently, Darren Peacock writes that the “ability of any organization to respond to change is enabled or constrained by the quality of its conversations about purposes, values, practices, and identities.”

In his seminal 1971 essay, “Temple or Forum,” Duncan Cameron argued that museums should be forums “for confrontation, experimentation, and debate. . . unfiltered by convention and established values, so that new values and their expressions can be seen and heard by all.” This is true not only in public, but inside museums as well. We and our colleagues are obligated to continuously reassess our purposes and our values. In short, the failure to adopt reflective



practice is leading us and our institutions toward a dead end: all too often, we are fighting to preserve different parts of a broken system.

So in planning for this session, we have asked our panelists two basic questions:

First, if you could effect any change in American museums in the next two or three years, what changes would you make?

And second, if you could influence the policies and practices of museums over the next twenty years, how would you re-direct them?

Here are their responses.

“Resetting Our Intentions”

Darryl Williams, Ph.D, senior vice president of science and education at the Franklin Institute, is known for his contributions over the past decade as a leader across the enterprise of STEM education research, evaluation, and program development in both formal and informal settings.

My highest priority for making change in museums over the next 2-3 years would be to remove the concept of “permanence” from our sector’s vocabulary and overall practice. As a person of science, I bring this lens to the museum field, though it might be viewed as counterintuitive to some traditional philosophies our sector relies on and what society has learned to expect whenever they navigate our physical spaces. If we explore the definition of permanence, we find that it means “the state or quality of lasting or remaining unchanged indefinitely.” Many of our organizations create spaces within our brick and mortar that we describe as “permanent,” and that’s a problem for us and for the audiences we seek to engage. Why is this a problem? Here’s why:

- Permanence creates unnecessary constraints—it binds us to a particular way of thinking and determining what is relevant and meaningful, often from a skewed perspective that



negates other ways of knowing and overlooks the rich, lived experiences of our audiences with whom we intend to engage. There is a rigidity to permanence that does not allow us to reimagine, to experiment, to take risks.

- Permanence establishes a false sense of comfort—we have rested on our laurels, and many of us are scrambling to figure out how to stay afloat. What we never saw as potential competition is most certainly competition, particularly as markets shift, habits and interests evolve, and there are more options for our audiences’ attention, time, and money.
- Permanence reduces possibilities for creating meaningful impact—by being bound and rigid, many of our organizations have little agency to let go of control and be truly rooted in community [SB: perhaps something here about saying that our communities grow, change, and diversify, and permanence essentially does its best to lock new voices out of the conversation]. Our general purpose should be to support individual and community well-being, affirming the value we all bring to the human experience. Embedded in this should be a sense of reciprocity, where there are shared power dynamics between us and our respective communities, guided by rules of engagement anchored in listening and trust building that leads to shared values and goals.

So back to being a person of science (actually, I’m an engineer by training), I am familiar with change that is guided by the processes of experimentation, discovery, and design iterations.

These are dynamic by nature and innate characteristics of science and engineering. With these in mind, what would it mean to adopt this kind of framework and embrace a more dynamic approach to how we develop our spaces and experiences with a bit more experimentation and risk taking, with insights and participation from the audiences we currently target and those we have yet to fully connect with?

I believe we are afraid of rethinking everything about what we do, how we do it, and more importantly why we do it (what are our true intentions?). Are we trapped in our own echo chambers and unwilling to do the hard work of change? We had the catalyst of the pandemic that thrust all of us into a universe where there is immense uncertainty about the future and how a new “normal” will manifest itself. My deepest concern is the looming regret—regret that



we didn't take advantage of the opportunity to lay notions of permanence to bed and accept the gift before us to remove constraints, get out of our comfort zones, and truly create meaningful impact. The only thing that should remain permanent is change.

My highest priority for making change in museums over the next 10-20 years would be to lean into the practice of intentional co-creation. This is really an expansion of my thoughts concerning change over the next 2 to 3 years, so you will hear some throughlines in this regard. The practice of co-creation is not an easy one, which is perhaps why many of us either shy away from it or make quasi-attempts to include other voices and perspectives that are not our own. Co-creation is more than a set of focus groups and surveys, observations, and interviews. Those are data collection mechanisms that provide us with some information to influence a design process, but they don't really give any agency or allow others to be at the table involved in challenging the ideas and assumptions that are being made while also contributing to how things are executed from start to finish.

Co-creation, at its core, is about giving way to an emergent process that is not prescribed by already established objectives and a defined scaffold or architecture that has been dictated by those who presume to know more about a given challenge or issue and have more resources at their disposal. It is heavily reliant on the assets of all involved, with recognition that all involved have invaluable assets regardless of title, position, resources, or other characteristics that describe the collective body pursuing to make change and/or create something new. It is rooted in principles of equity and belonging, where the power dynamics are balanced. Everyone brings their full selves and experiences to the table, uninterrupted. Co-creation also gives space for the collective to embrace past and current traumas as an effort to build lasting trust. And most importantly, co-creation takes time.

So how do we pursue authentic co-creation when there are real constraints to grapple with? Constraints, such as time and money, are real things that we are all faced with on a daily basis. Many of us don't have the capacity to navigate past and current traumas of the diverse communities that make up our respective locations, let alone hold space to work through what could be an uncomfortable and ambiguous process. For example, we are all guilty of the one-off funding opportunities confined by the parameters set by the funders that required us to



“partner” with said community to demonstrate feasibility of something, and then when the funding dried up, so goes the fabricated relationship with the participants. In this context, we weren’t really given allowance to settle into the real challenges and barriers in order to create something sustainable. We were faced with (and continue to be faced with) missed opportunities to authentically co-create.

So I don’t really have an answer to what I’m sharing with you today. As I’m speaking to you, I’m also speaking to myself because I recognize the potential power of co-creation. I do believe that we need to find the courage to be self-aware and uncomfortable, and that courage will ultimately lead to confidence in our ability to navigate ambiguity and the freedom to do something different. And once we build momentum with small wins, we will be compelled to commit and trust the process.

“Sitting with Discomfort”

Jonathan Edelman (he/him) serves as the Collections Curator at the Capital Jewish Museum (CJM) in Washington, DC. In this role, Edelman curated the main exhibitions for the new museum, oversaw the museum’s archive, and acquired new archival collections. He came to CJM after completing a master’s in museum studies at The George Washington University and working for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

For the past four years, I’ve been part of the curatorial team creating the new Capital Jewish Museum in Washington, DC. We were afforded an unusual opportunity to transform a 60-year-old Jewish historical society into an entirely new history museum in our nation’s capital. This was an immense responsibility that we did not take lightly. The curatorial team wanted to teach a more complete history which included times when our Jewish community fell short.

However, what we found as we began to piece together the stories was immense resistance towards a fuller picture of the community’s history. Board members and major donors wanted this identity museum to be a celebration of our community, a nostalgic hall of fame of yesteryear. For instance, restrictive covenants. We heard time and again from older members of



our community that their parents faced housing discrimination as Jews. We worked with the *Mapping Segregation DC* project which pulled the deeds for over 29,000 lots in DC and found that only 1.3% contained language restricting Jews. At that same time in the 1930s and 40s, many Jewish real estate developers built new neighborhoods in DC, with restrictive covenants, keeping Black Washingtonians from buying homes and creating intergenerational wealth.

Any opportunity to speak about times when Jews were oppressed was more than welcome, but when Jews were the oppressors, those moments received great resistance from donors and members of the board. An ugly battle between curators and board members led to changes in staff and script, and a delay in opening the museum.

Curators from other identity-based history museums have shared similar experiences with us about the challenges of trying to tell more complete stories. Beyond identity-specific or even history museums more generally, many museums are facing this type of resistance. In the next two to three years, I want to see more museums take on the challenge of embracing new narratives. Important parts of almost any local, regional, or group history are likely to be forgotten, ignored, or repressed. Some of these elements are simply unknown; others are uncomfortable. Museums are among our most trusted institutions for a reason: they tend to confirm the biases of their users!

What we need in the next few years are museums that try to tell a fuller and therefore a more authentic story. This is likely to involve multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and conflicting narratives. But if we are socially responsible institutions, we will lean into the controversy. Lifting up these voices includes bringing them to the table in planning exhibitions, programs, and archival collecting. Step away from the lie that neutrality is the guiding principle. Neutrality is just another tool of oppression.

There are of course risks to this. We will lose donors and members who have come to expect a neutral temple of nostalgia. We experienced that during the transition from an historical society into a contemporary history museum. But what is at stake far outweighs those risks.



What is at stake is the very character of our democratic traditions. Our audiences don't know what they don't know, and while clearly some people will be upset, we still need to present them with difficult material, possibly for the first time. There is something thrilling about the responsibility we have to give space for these new narratives. In a time of book bans, let's widen the shelf. In a time of filtered media, let's show a clearer picture. Our audiences have for too long come to expect narratives of celebration, celebration of white European culture and values. And they continue to see it time and again. Much growth can come from sitting with discomfort, and that can occur once we are willing to grapple more honestly with our history.

In the next 10 to 20 years, in agreement with the sentiments of some of my co-panelists, I'd like to see the whole thing blown up. Too much of this field is tied to its colonial origins. And the oppressive systems at those roots still permeate in many parts of our field today. We need to democratize our policies, structures, and practices.

I want to see a reorganization of our staff structure that gives voices to newer and more diverse colleagues. The "Guarding the Art" exhibit in which the Baltimore Museum of Art invited their security staff to be guest curators is a fantastic example we can all look to in doing this work.

When the same field that often requires monumentally expensive masters and doctoral degrees also often pays those same people incredibly low wages, it slams shut the opportunity for a wider range of individuals to have a seat at the table. Let's open our exhibits to more communal collaboration and curation. This democratization can occur only when we are willing to relinquish some of our grip. Opening every aspect to community collaboration and more equitable staffing opportunities in all fields is necessary for our survival.

Whether we look three years ahead or thirty, we have much work to do in our field. The task feels monumental but necessary, overwhelming but overdue, and I look forward to pushing towards that change together.

"Justice Now!"



Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell is a Washington, DC based programming strategist who works at the intersections of social justice practice. In 2023 she was appointed the inaugural Senior Program Manager, Arts with The Aspen Institute, serving to leverage the arts for social impact both inside and outside the organization. She served as the inaugural community engagement specialist with the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and has launched new programming initiatives with the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, National Museum of African American History and Culture, and National Museum of Women in the Arts, among others.

This is not going to be a comfortable talk. Museums are too good at finding the comfortable middle. I don't know where in our society we became convinced that "middle ground" equals good. Because in social justice work, oftentimes "middle ground" means the literal status quo that limits social good.

I think if we examine our obsession with the comfortable middle, it stems from the demand we placed on ourselves to be nonpartisan. If you take nothing away from me today, take this: nonpartisan might mean apolitical but it doesn't mean asocial. The political parties are discrete, organized entities. It should not be that hard to avoid them. Ideas are not beholden to parties. Social good is not beholden to parties. We put these limitations on ourselves!

Because we've trained ourselves to believe certain limitations about our work, this is going to hurt. Because change, radical change, is uncomfortable. You can't go from one way of being to a completely different way of being, without some pain. Fitness heads say "no pain, no gain," right? But we're all on this journey together. It will hurt more for some than others.

So if I could change anything about museums in the next two to three years what would it be and why? If I could wave my magic wand, I would turn all museums' purpose to justice, YESTERDAY. Justice-purposed museums are a big change, but the reason that I choose this as my first step rather than the 20-year goal is simple: I am tired of waiting. I am tired of the circular rhetoric that only serves to maintain the status quo so museums don't have to change.



Here's what I mean. At the onset of a global pandemic and national public shutdown we collectively, as a society, witnessed the state-sanctioned murder of an unarmed Black man. We were heartbroken and outraged. We called this a turning point, a catalyst for sweeping change. Institutions said no more and audiences said prove it. So institutions said look at our solid black square, look at our heritage month programming, look at our...um...new marketing materials? Don't look at our hiring practices. Don't look at our DEAI plan. Don't look at our salary practices. Ok, fine, we'll work on all those too, I guess. Shrug.

This happened three years and five months ago. Where are we now? Still shrugging, that's where.

Justice. Now. Not 10, 15, or 20 years from now. Now. If the murder of George Floyd can't set us straight nothing will. We will do justice to this movement, and we will do it today.

What does this new purpose look like? I won't be prescriptive but it starts with true commitment and a reality check. Do not let another museum director tell me that they don't know where to start, or that the only way to properly start is with another lengthy staff survey process.

Here's the reality check: the work must start *now*. Not after a lengthy data gathering process that will confirm what we already know. It's not a necessary step when AAM, in partnership with Mellon Foundation, on a three-year cycle, conducts a nationwide museum staff survey that demonstrates the most problematic areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in museum careers. Those who are actually committed to real change will refuse to continue the cycle of duplicating existing work to avoid making real change.

So that's part one of the first steps. You want the data to back up the claim, go see what's already there. Step two is again, go see what's already out there. We have so many grassroots people—powered movements and resources who not only have the expertise and skill sets to help this industry right itself, but also the commitment to justice. So go see about The Empathetic Museum, Museums and Race, The Museum As Site for Social Action toolkit. Go see what community-led service organizations you can hire from your own community to speak



truth to you while you compensate them for their labor. Do not go to another corporate leadership racket, sign away hundreds of thousands of dollars to be told what you want to hear. This is not an easy process. Anyone who tells you otherwise is taking you for your money. Center community. There is no justice without it.

I could rant about this all day, but I am tired. So damn tired that I left the field in 2022. Because I wanted to put my labor, time, effort, and energy into work with demonstrated impacts, I joined a think tank. Which brings me to my next point.

If I could change anything about museums in the next 20 years, what would it be and why? I would reposition museums to *behave* more like think tanks. I wrote about the 21st century museum as a think tank for UK-based Museum ID's The FutureMuseum Project in 2016, and now that I work at a think tank, I feel even more excited about this big idea. At their core, a think tank is a body of experts, often multidisciplinary and from diverse backgrounds, that gathers to provide advice about social issues. A good think tank is designed as a site of co-production and ideation with the communities it serves.

At a bare minimum, I want to see museums as robust sites of co-production and ideation with communities in 20 years. But my high dream is that as much as museums impact social issues (and they do greatly, by taking funding to support their existence, by utilizing police and security forces in their infrastructure, by adding to the gentrification of neighborhoods, the impacts are many) they would also serve to improve them. I think museums have an opportunity to build upon their social good in education, but could be doing so much more. The possibilities of what museums paired with a think tank paired with community organizations—those are literally the building blocks of a better society.

“Forging Brave Space: New Museum Paradigms for Community and Justice”

Nafisa Isa is an educator and designer with a passion for transformative learning and collective liberation. She was the lead planner of the ground-breaking Culture Lab exhibitions during her tenure at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and is the



founder of the Muslim Writers Salon at the Asian American Literature Festival. Nafisa holds a BA in history from Davidson College and an MA in Learning, Design, and Technology from Georgetown University.

Grace Lee Boggs once said “community is not something we have, it’s something we do.” This belief in forging and nourishing community is why I wrote an essay entitled “Communities over Collections” two years ago. In this essay I offered three principles for partnerships: 1) community-centered design; 2) demonstrating relevance and care for community; and 3) demonstrating care for staff.

Community-centered design is an approach that highlights the importance of the process as much as, *if not more than*, content in our field. It’s a way of going about co-creation. This design process centers people as learners, as partners, and creators. And because it’s rooted in design thinking, community-centered design embeds empathy, relationship building, active listening, and iteration into our work. This isn’t just audience “engagement,” this approach entails actual conversations, showing up, investing time and energy, and building trust with people and our greater creative ecosystems.

I had the privilege of co-designing the Culture Lab and Asian American Literature Festival models several years ago at the Smithsonian APA Center—utilizing this approach. We sought to provide a space for our partner activists, artists, educators, and community organizations to co-create opportunities for hands-on engagement with a chosen theme. We developed Culture Labs to bring people together in creative and ambitious ways—and to show that anyone can curate collaborative, participatory, and socially responsible spaces where people can come as their true selves for many purposes—to learn, to heal, to create, or to just be.

Ongoing adaptation to community priorities and needs leads to my second principle—social relevance and care for community. We live in a society that is unwell, where there is so much injustice and unease—in order for museums to be “partners in care” we need to embrace opportunities to collaborate with other organizations and people in service. I like to share the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum’s partnership with Feed the Fridge (at the height of the COVID pandemic) to provide free meals to local community members as a great example of



care not just through words, but in action. Museums can also show care by acknowledging, responding to, and combating various forms of social trauma and violence—talk about and figure out ways to address the most pressing issues of our time, whether that’s racism, climate change, or poverty.

Finally, museums need to remember that our staff are themselves members of our communities. How often do we take the time to engage directly with and listen to our frontline and support staff about what interests them about the role of the museum in their community? There is knowledge, wisdom, and community in staff members. The trust and empathy that museums seek to build externally must start from within.

Everything I wrote two years ago still stands. I believed that these three principles could (and still can) help unlock the potential of museums to be integral to building a healthier, sustainable, and harmonious society. But before we can uphold principles and implement specific strategies we have to address the structural issues that prevent progress. I see colleagues doing amazing work around the country, but museums (as a field) still don’t seem to be engaged with broader discourse on social justice, inclusive learning, and social infrastructure. That’s because the internal structures and culture are still the same or they are going backwards. **THIS IS WHERE I’M GOING TO GET REAL.**

So, what hasn’t changed? Objects matter more than people, and among people, executive leadership and curators (the least culturally and socio-economically diverse category of staff) reign like gods, relying on the wealthy, the elite, to fund their ideas. Museums value objects and elites over the rest of humanity and the natural world. What does this reflect other than institutional and disciplinary complicity with the same forces that are destroying our societies and the planet?

This is why I propose a fundamental restructuring of power. Decision-making should come from the outside in. The world is in a state of crisis, we don’t need those who don’t feel the impact of these crises to run and shape the institutions that claim to represent and serve people. It’s why we need to ask ourselves: **Who counts as experts and why do we limit ourselves to the few and the privileged?**



People of color, people in the global south, lower income people, people of the global majority—however you want to describe those who are excluded and marginalized—are the ones who feel the impact of national and global crises first and more than everyone else and should, therefore, decide what matters.

Traditional notions of hierarchy and expertise are what **an explicitly social justice approach paired with community-centered design aims to subvert**—these stale notions of who has a say and who gets to make decisions. How can we fund, center, and uplift people-powered, socially and environmentally conscious movements—artistic, educational, scientific, entrepreneurial, and especially where these disciplines may intersect because THAT is where you’ll see the most innovation, impact, and reach.

Within museum staff, museum programmers, educators, and frontline staff need to be heard first. The people who have been underpaid, undermined within these institutions also have the depth of connection to communities that we need. We need to implement inclusive, equitable hiring practices and pay people a living wage/as much as anyone else and have them co-lead strategic decision-making processes.

If we envision a new future for museums over the next two decades, we must re-imagine the role of museums in society. Think of a paradigm in which museums are an integral part of our social infrastructure, connecting with educational spaces, fostering inclusivity, and serving as havens for learning, connecting, gathering, and growth.

But what is social infrastructure, and why have museums not traditionally been included in this concept? Social infrastructure, as defined by sociologist Eric Klinenberg, refers to the spaces and places that contribute to the well-being of society. Public libraries and parks exemplify such spaces, while museums have often lagged behind in this regard. You can read Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People* if you want to learn more and explore this question with me.

Museums should become fully public spaces, providing accessibility to all—museums need to become spaces for community care practices and community ritual. As someone who advances



education justice in the field of higher education now and continues to consult with museums, I want to see more partnerships between museums, community organizations, and formal educational spaces so we can bridge the gaps in learning and motivation among the most marginalized communities. This type of transformation requires a reevaluation of funding, governmental structures, and values to support a societal mission.

In conclusion, we are at a critical juncture in the evolution of museums. We must no longer merely talk and think about change but actively engage in the work that will redefine our institutions. By embracing community-centered design, prioritizing the voices of those most impacted, and reimagining the role of museums in society, we can embark on a transformative journey. Let's strive to make museums places of inclusivity, learning, and social well-being, where objects (even as we care for them) take a back seat to the flourishing of humanity and the preservation of our planet. The time for action is now; let's forge this brave space together.

Conclusion

Marsha Semmel and Avi Decter

American museums have long been, as Bob Janes remarks, temples of the dominant society that interpret the world in terms consistent with values that our users hold to be appropriate and views of social reality that our audiences hold to be true. Yet Martin Buber warned us many years ago against "the disease of fluency." This is a condition in which we have grown so familiar with traditional or conventional rhetoric that we have lost the ability to interrogate our own propositions and assumptions, substituting rote recital for active engagement. Acquiescence and acceptance in what we choose to term "best practice" can be maladaptive in a time of fundamental change. Instead, we need "next practice."

We museum professionals are not alone. At a divisive, complex moment, Americans in general appear to be embarked on a search for new meanings in their lives and the life of our society. To provide new models of past, present and future, we need new kinds of conversations, new and deeper ways of thinking. The first step toward a different future for ourselves and our museums



is to imagine something different. Let's embrace reflective practice, untested ideas, and risk-taking for our sake and the sake of our neighbors.

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