



# CENTERING THE MUSEUM

Writings for the Post-Covid Age

Elaine Heumann Gurian

ROUTLEDGE 

# CENTERING THE MUSEUM

Drawing on Elaine Heumann Gurian's fifty years of museum experience, *Centering the Museum* calls on the profession to help visitors experience their shared humanity and find social uses for public buildings, in order to make museums more central and useful to everyone in difficult times.

Following the same format as *Civilizing the Museum*, this new volume includes material written especially for a re-emergent time and relevant public lectures not included in the author's previous book. Divided into six separate content clusters, with over twenty different essays, the book identifies many small, subtle ways museums can become welcoming to more—and to all. Drawing on her extensive experience as a deputy director, senior advisor to high-profile government museums, lecturer and teacher around the world, the author provides recommendations for inclusive actions by intertwining sociological thinking with practical decision-making strategies. Writing reflectively, Elaine also provides heritage students and professionals with insights that will help move their careers and organizations into more equitable, yet successful, terrain.

*Centering the Museum* will be an excellent companion volume to *Civilizing the Museum* and, as such, will be a useful support for emerging museum leaders. It will be especially interesting to academics and students engaged in the study of cultural administration, as well as museum and heritage practitioners working around the world.

**Elaine Heumann Gurian** has worked in the museum field since 1968, first as a community activist, then a director of museum education, and subsequently a professional deputy director for institutions dedicated to social justice and during the process of transforming themselves to address and embrace formerly marginalized groups.

# CENTERING THE MUSEUM

Writings for the Post-Covid Age

*Elaine Heumann Gurian*

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To my family—real and imagined,  
pals, and soulmates,  
too many to name,  
who grew older with me,  
or brought their younger selves to play.

You have been my anchor, guide, and comfort.  
My gratitude for your company knows no bounds.

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Elaine Heumann Gurian has worked in the museum field since 1968, first as a community activist, then a director of museum education, and subsequently a professional deputy director for institutions dedicated to social justice and during the process of transforming themselves to address and embrace formerly marginalized groups. Starting in 1993, she has been a senior consultant to many government institutions worldwide—local and national—dedicated to presenting a more fulsome and complex portrait of their history and people. Throughout her entire career, Gurian has been a teacher, writer, and mentor to community-based activist students and practitioners within the heritage field. Her work continues as an elder with the publication of this book.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Josef E. Gurian

## ABBREVIATIONS

AAM	American Alliance of Museums
AAM/EdCom	AAM Education Committee
AAMC	Association of Art Museum Curators
ALA	American Library Association
Beaubourg	Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BCM	Boston Children's Museum, Boston, MA
BOCES	Boards of Cooperative Educational Services
CCL	Center for Curatorial Leadership
CCS	Center for Civil Society
CGA	Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
CHM	Charleston Museum, Charleston, SC
CPTED	Crime Prevention Through Environment Design
DAM	Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
DIA	Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI
DZS	Detroit Zoological Society, Detroit, MI
ESA	Educational service agencies
FB	Facebook
ICA	Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
ICOM	International Council of Museums
IMLS	Institute of Museum and Library Services
MA	Museum Association, UK
MAH	Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA
MAK	Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
MET	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
MMI	Museum Management Institute
MOA	Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada

MOMA	Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
MPSM	My Primary School is in the Museum program
NMA	National Museum of Australia
NMAAHC	National Museum of African American History and Culture
NMAI	National Museum of the American Indian
NMNH	National Museum of Natural History
NAGPRA	Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
NASM	National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC
NECSI	New England Complex Systems Institute
NEMA	New England Museum Association
NYT	New York Times
P21	Partnership for 21st Century Skills
PPS	Project for Public Space
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
ROM	Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada
SCP	Situational Crime Prevention
TBM	The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY
TMG	The Museum Group
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Elaine resolved to turn her attention to a new question: “What if there are no enemies?” That eventuality would turn the indulgent principles of museums (a recurrent theme of our discussions) upside down. These institutions are so self-satisfied when announcing their willingness to admit people of all genders, races, or religions, while generally failing to ensure they all have a reason to visit without fearing rejection. In the vocabulary of museums, anyone is seen as “friendly” as long as they comply with their written or unwritten laws of etiquette, most of which come—like many of their collections—from an imposed hierarchical colonial order. But Elaine’s new hypothesis extends empathy to those we explicitly don’t like or privately reject and ushers in a fresh turning point in social ethics.

Just as Nietzsche seems to take refuge in madness in order to admit that extreme of acceptance of those we dislike, so does Elaine, only that secured instead by the wisdom of her long years of service to her colleagues. But anyway, the ethical problem is still a complex one, and Elaine has coined the saying “up to here but no further” to place a limit on genuinely irreconcilable assumptions—of which there are plenty. This was the case that arose at the meeting of *El Museo Reimaginado 2019* [Reimagining the Museum 2019], which we organized and participated in together in Medellín, Colombia. It went like this. Prompted by the initiative of the Museum of Antioquia, located at the socially troubled heart of the city, where prostitution and drug-trafficking are rife, the museum, which houses a collection of works by the artist Fernando Botero reflecting the abundance of sex workers, invited those practising their trade locally and organized under the name “The Downtown Warriors,” to work as exhibition guides. In fact, they provided the participants of our gathering with an example of the interest of these guided tours, which exhibited their own bodies as a space of political dispute. But the next day, in a session at our Conference, one speaker argued that the truly disruptive thing would have been if the guides were the pimps managing the prostitutes, rather than the prostitutes themselves. Would the tour, if guided by the body trafficker, be a case of “up to here and no further”? Instead of the direct narrative of someone who is the protagonist and victim of a social situation, we would be guided, according to the speaker, into a narrative of speculation and domination without body risk.

Be that as it may, the maxim expresses an individual resistance, which Elaine suggests to those working in museums who, even if they don’t have the power to make institutional ethical decisions, can influence everyday events from their more modest desks. Micro-policies of resistance look like forms that we can all implement, and that may be able to instigate a turn, hopefully, an institutional one. At this stage of capitalism, we can see that unnecessary accumulation and consumption artificially multiply our personalities for us to renew what is individually superfluous, as also are the resonant social scenes, in benefit of the few while leaving a growing number of vulnerable subjects helpless. It is here, in this sphere of alienation, that the formula of inequity acquires its existential consistency, just the way pimps do on their scale. As the Brazilian thinker Suely Rolnik teaches us, it is in these spheres too that our own micro-policies of resistance need to be implemented, regardless of any risk of failure (Rolnik, 2017).

## FOREWORD

*Américo Castilla*

It's early in the morning at Paddington Station, and I'm waiting for someone. We're catching the Cardiff train together to give talks at St Fagans National Museum of History. We've been invited to debate about cultural rights and share our ideas with museum professionals. Before long, I see an approaching figure. She looks just like an immigrant from decades past in full flight, her stick authoritatively beats time directing the ballast of her big suitcase, always handy in the event of imminent exile. This is my friend Elaine.

Everything seems to point to the fact that, without such wanderings, there would be no philosophy. Nor would there be without reflections on friendship. This is maybe why we've been having a twenty-year conversation on the hoof. And when our wanderings seem to lead our thinking toward the vertigo of flight, perhaps we're no longer in the dog days of *flânerie* but the urgent times of mass migration, brazen corruption, and short mercy. In this realm of sudden bombshells that we live in, shifting down a gear and starting to talk can prove exasperating in light of the general acceleration. Friendships against the rising tide recall the opposition between these two questions: is it that there are no friends at the end of the road, as Aristoteles is quoted by Nietzsche, or that there are no enemies, as only Friedrich Nietzsche would dare, in the throes of madness, rephrase many centuries later.

The landscape of Patagonia, the jagged backdrop of the Andes, the tropical scenery of the Argentine Littoral, the urban extremes of Buenos Aires, London, and New York, the human tides of Colombia and Mexico: these have been some of the settings for our conversations about museums' likings and needs. Our interlocutors are groups of young people whose interests and curiosity sharpen Elaine's and my own ideas, and make them ever more complex. Before the Trump administration, Elaine would never have dreamt of going into exile. But the extremism born of overweening arrogance that only the excessive accumulation of money and power seems to rouse brought her to a breaking point. And yet, at the brink of the abyss, stick in hand,

that takes into account all society's problems and empowers museums as dynamic instruments of social change for the benefit of all humankind, not just the well-educated. Latin America has pioneered this comprehensive social policy that has been successfully extended to Mexican community museums and sustainable eco-museums in France, Portugal, Quebec, and Scandinavia. Elaine's twenty years' teaching experience in South America has revitalized many of the concepts outlined in the enthusiastic context of Salvador Allende's interrupted road to socialism. There are hundreds of Elaine's disciples leading this renewed mission.

Thinking about change is present in the minds of many of the actors in the field of museums around the world. They are free spirits who understand that the institution is appropriate as a positive influence on a time when there is a demand for life: human, environmental, animal ... a demand for joint, supportive action to create new and socially generous places for speech. The possibility of social change is a content already inscribed in the current shape of society: it is immanent to the present, and while the refusal to discuss it publicly demonstrates the predominance of a certain structure of privilege, it also highlights the vitality of its opponents.

I see them [the free spirits] already *coming*, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I see them coming?.

(Nietzsche, 1996)

This sentence of Nietzsche's encapsulates Elaine's plan. The philosopher who distrusted everything nevertheless kept faith with young people, the potential continuators of his work. Elaine's writings reflect the fundamentally human vicissitudes we need to come back to. Or rather, that should be expanded on by new generations concerned with the potential and future of museums.

Américo Castilla

**Américo Castilla** is the Director and Founder of Fundación TyPA, Secretary of Cultural Heritage of Argentina (2016), and previously National Director of Heritage and Museums of Argentina (2003–2007).

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- Nietzsche, F. (1996). *Nietzsche: Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rolnik, S. (2017). The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life. *E-flux Journal*, 86.

The now unsustainable crackling of the prevailing world social order requires thought and action, and those of us in a position to promote ideas and schemes have the obligation to reconsider the needs and roles of cultural institutions if they are to truly serve their social contexts. The established ethical codes are inadequate. The colonial order as a form of knowledge still predominant in museums, as well as their exhibitions and implicit messages, have reached a point where they are so obvious that it becomes intolerable not only for the natives of the countries pillaged for the assets on display, but for any citizen who treats equality as a priority. If museums are, as Elaine defines them, public civic spaces to encourage strangers to gather peacefully, they must avoid symbolic shows of dominance that cause offence and deter this gathering of equals.

The unsuccessful discussion at the 2019 ICOM World Assembly about defining what a museum is leads us to a ground zero from which to weave fresh meaning. The fact is that 70.4 percent of the world's museum delegates refused to discuss this definition, which described them as:

democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

Why might a museum wish not to be described in these terms?

What this refusal makes apparent is that, were the definition accepted, the capacities installed in museums should be modified to incorporate suitable experts responsible for their new functions. It also makes it clear that these characteristics are not currently being achieved. The leading museums' exhibitions are focused on well-educated, largely white, high-spending, middle-class tourists more interested in looking at exceptions than normal social occurrences. If this were the case, almost none of the specific characteristics of the new definition would be needed. However, if we look at the planet's citizens as a whole, we see that the number of people never to have set foot in a museum is above 70.4 percent, among other things, because they don't see them as places sensitive to their problems and representations. This gap between the indulgence of peers in a kind of mutual appreciation society and other "different" people, whose admission cards aren't really recognised, calls for thinking like that found in this book of Elaine Gurian's.

Back in 1972, UNESCO organized a meeting in Chile about the mission of Latin American museums. The discussions of the regional experts were truly innovative, not to mention revolutionary. The novelty, as mentioned by Huges de Varine, ICOM president at the time, was the proposal of an integrated museum

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Each of us bears the imprint  
Of a friend met along the way;  
In each the trace of each.  
For good or evil  
In wisdom or in folly  
Everyone stamped by everyone.

*(Levi, 1985)*

In a long life, one makes and remakes family, friends, and mentors. Like Levi's poem one has been changed at the end of each day by the influences of others. I find myself drawn to reading acknowledgments in other people's books. Vanity sometimes suggests that my name may be on the list. When that happens, I am very pleased and hope seeing my name in print will impress my grandchildren. On other rare occasions, I know some of the people who are named and think the author has good taste in friends. And sometimes I am interested in knowing if the author, who I do not know, is generous, and if not, that tends to determine my attitude toward the writing.

All acknowledgments inadvertently omit someone of importance, and both the author and the overlooked feel terrible afterward. In addition to singling out certain names, I have decided to characterize essential groups that have sustained me, hoping that everyone connected to each will find themselves recognized and appreciated. Categories seem the only way even to begin to thank all those who have come unbidden to my aid. Even so, the thanks I owe surely extends further, and the failure to spell that out is mine alone. Here is my *mea culpa*: deep in the culture of constant guilt, I want you to know that I am already pre-emptively sorry.

To the Taylor & Francis publishing people, most especially Heidi Lowther for her endless good cheer and patience, thank you, and I thank her assistants Katie Wakelin and Kangan Gupta. I did not think I wanted to publish another book, but Heidi's request that I do so came at a perfect time. I was going to be sealed into my home with a newly installed right hip while Covid-19 was swirling about outdoors. Writing this book has made the homebound time seem magical rather than limiting, and the lack of conflicting demands was a significant gift.

To my friends and colleagues who are writing professionals, my constant thanks: Anne Butterfield, who taught me to write in the 1970s and 1980s by allowing me to edit her ghostwriting so it said what I wanted and has collaborated on grants ever since; Ellen Hirzy, who copyedited and straightened out my published books, including this one, and allowed me to give her ideas on the museum education books she edited for others; and my husband and partner Dean Anderson, who reads and edits everything I write in as many versions as I need with a quizzical look and a generous use of track changes. My life as a learning-disabled writer would not have happened without them.

I know it is unusual for authors to give thanks to places, but much of my life is affected by the areas where I live and work. I currently reside in three different worlds. Two are physical spaces that oscillate according to the seasons, and the third is a metaphysical place that has physical characteristics. I spend roughly half the year just outside Washington, DC, in South Arlington, Virginia, in a small economic and ethnically diverse neighborhood called Barcroft. In the winter, I live on Vieques, a small United States island in the Caribbean off the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico. I have created a life in both places for more than thirty years. They are both my "real" homes. I thank both sets of neighbors for always being exactly as neighbors should be: available, practical, and generous.

I wish to acknowledge and credit the actual places I have called home:

- Apartment 4W at 106–15 Queens Blvd., Forest Hills, New York, from 1941 to 1949 during World War II, which shaped a life surrounded by relatives, other Jewish immigrants, inadequate public schooling, friends who taught me stamp collecting, pitching hardball, tree climbing, speaking German at home, and worrying about the Holocaust in a faraway land.
- From 1949 to 1954, my neighbors and school friends, now forever siblings, from 88 Beverly Road, Kensington, Great Neck, New York.
- Now I live part-time in Barcroft, which has about 1,500 families. Though it fills only about one square mile, it is one of the few DC-area neighborhoods that is multi-everythinged—ages, ethnicities, economic levels, races, religions, and citizenship statuses. Half the population lives as family units, the public schools are excellent, and neighbors are generally kind and supportive of each other even though they don't speak the same languages. The education level of South Arlington residents is fascinating. Thirty-three percent have advanced degrees, and a similar number have a high school diploma or less. New million-dollar infill houses are arriving, yet sections of housing remain where a

- My Boston Children's Museum bosses, teams, colleagues, board members, and neighbors, my many housemates, and my children's friends who hung around the many suppers and meetings at 240 Clinton Road, Brookline, Massachusetts from 1970 to 1987.
- The moveable but specific location where every year, my AAM family would convene for the annual membership meeting, and I would feel loved, exhilarated, politically trained, intellectually enriched, and exhausted.
- My many bosses, colleagues, and friends, formerly at the Smithsonian Institution and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who continue to live a subtle revolutionary museum life that masquerades as conformity. The Smithsonian is in good hands at last with Lonnie Bunch as secretary, but many did the nearly invisible preliminary work that allowed him to land in a receptive spot.
- My Detroit-area pals from the Cranbrook Institute, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, the Museum Studies Program of the University of Michigan, and the Detroit Zoo, who came serially to get me in Birmingham off Woodward for many different but engaging reasons.
- West Plaza Hotel in Wellington NZ, where the hotelier always supplied a bookcase and a set of dishes to my corner room, so I could eat a "Pav" from the New World Market and walk to my work while first stopping at the Lido where I learned about hot lemon and ginger and how a public café becomes family space. I imagine each member of the old Te Papa crowd hanging together in my mind. We stay in touch now on Zoom, Facebook, and email, and the whole team has each other's backs, as we always did. I must thank Sean Sweeney, who first suggested me, and Ken Gorbey, who hired me. I am so grateful that Conal McCarthy of that team has made me an adjunct research associate at the University of Victoria so I can meet and speak to the next generation and carry on that tradition.
- The serviced apartments in Kingston, Canberra, Australia, where there are excellent small eateries right outside the door, as well as chattering magpies, so I could be "at home" as we built the National Museum of Australia under Dawn Casey. I moved on to Sydney, walking to the Powerhouse for Dawn, and then walking again to ACME for Katrina Sedgwick. People relocated, and I got to move with them.
- For the last decade I have been spending whole months in Buenos Aires, always in a different but beautiful apartment in one Palermo section after another so that I could bus to work with the extraordinary people of Fundacion TyPA. There my compadre, Américo Castilla, who wrote the introduction to this book, was and is my guide to a life well lived. I love his wife, dog, friends, and colleagues, I travel with him wherever he wants to convene a conference, and I have learned so much about doing everything with next to nothing from all the past and current "TyPA-kins" who created the programs sponsored by the foundation and for whom I serve happily as honorary abuela. And, by the way, the ice cream in BA is the best in the world, with dulce de leche granizado the very best flavor of all.

large percentage of our neighbors are food insecure from the Covid-19 pandemic and economic recession, and are fed weekly by the neighborly other half through organized direct food packages.

For over a decade, we have been blessed to have our entire life in Barcroft overseen by the Trone family—Margie, Mark, and Lily. And Chris Bolcik and Steve Cline, tech wizards, friends, and protectors. Without them we would be lost.

For five months a year, I move to Vieques, which our US government on multiple levels forgot during and after Hurricane Maria. I admire the local Viequense residents who had so much pluck they united to overcome that abandonment. Although I have been a winter resident there for more than thirty years, I remain a non-Spanish speaking “North American”—a useful soul, but one who can never be fully integrated into the local Hispanic mainstream.

My Vieques gratitude demands some names. I am grateful to the Cordero-Cruz family—Dayanara Cruz-Maldonado, Jose Luis Cordero, Danailis, Jaelis Dayan, and Zahid Cordero-Cruz—for being my island family, support, translators, and organizers of all aspects of our life and for doing so with constancy, humor, integrity, and inventiveness.

After Maria hit, I was asked to join the board of directors of ViequesLove, a not-for-profit that works toward disaster preparedness and relief. I have learned how the most inventive manage community survival with unending creativity. I thank my fellow board members and ViequesLove’s intrepid principals—founder Kelly Thompson, Mark Martin Bras, Paul Lutton, and Jorge Fernandez-Porto—for allowing me to participate.

Thanks to all my island friends, who breakfast at Rising Roost, dine at Coqui Fire, keep me honest, and provide useful company, cogent insights, and good books. I must name Harry and Ellen Parker, museum friends of more than forty-five years, who invited us to the island thirty-two years ago and remain family. And Colleen McNamara, who can be found weekly at the breakfast table helping to strategize a better Vieques future.

The third place I live, additionally and spiritually, is both conceptual in nature and widely diverse geographically. I write to and keep in touch with a group of smart and engaging folks called “Pals,” who don’t always know each other but remain mutually supportive. And once in a while I see one or another of them. They understand that actually and metaphorically sharing ideas is a form of friendship, and I have been doing so with some of them dating back to the 1950s.

While the places we first met have country and city names, the neighborhoods dear to me are always a tiny section of an overall area. People think I travel a lot, but they are wrong. I get on the airplane a lot, but I am almost always going to a series of home-like locations where I am privileged to be the long-time consultant on a project. There, I know how the supermarket works, use a weekly public transport pass, have a coffee shop where they serve me my “regular” every morning, and frequent the available take-out where staff help me decode the mysteries of the local cash currency. I check in on the people I love, one location at a time. To the following places with appreciation:

- My many gifted teacher friends at Interlochen Arts Academy, who brought me in yearly to work with their visual arts seniors, creating a pop-up interactive exhibition in five days, and who always reserved the lakefront Frohlich Lodge as superb accommodation while there.
- The Oswego Hotel, Victoria, BC, where they always have green apples waiting and I can walk to the Royal BC Museum, stopping on the way for my daily coffee and late-night dinner, wearing my security badge as if I worked there, thanks to Jack Lohman, whom I follow wherever he goes. He always has a super-exciting, devoted, excellent, and kind staff, most especially Lily Jer-Nakamura, who constantly takes singularly good care of me.
- Kyiv, Ukraine, at Yom Kippur time, where I take bus 24 from my apartment in the Maidan to my office in the Lavra, and the ticket taker says welcome back in Ukrainian, which I do not speak. In the museum of the Maidan office, we greet each other as a long-lost cousins, even though most of us cannot really speak to each other without the aid of the glorious Dara Sereda who has translated for me since she answered a Facebook ad at age 17, living on her own, in a country that had just successfully won the Euro-Maidan liberating revolution. The director, Ihor Poshyvailo, understands more than anyone I know that documentation protects one politically and makes things irrefutable. They and I go nowhere without the cameraman, whom I adore, nicknamed “Bodyman” (for Bohdan “Bodia” Poshyvailo).
- In 1984, I began to live part-time in London, first in Islington and then in Kings Cross. I owned a home in Walthamstow for a short time and made professional friendships that have lasted forever and grow in number every year. No year seems whole if I do not go to my favorite apartment on York Way, have breakfast at the Caravan, and then see everyone I care about. That life now includes pals who live all over the UK but consent to come to London so we can clap eyes on each other. I cannot do without them. My thanks especially go to Mark O’Neill, for his annual always-thrilling all-day conversation from morning train-station pick-up to evening train-station return.
- And there are other significant people in other places—Ann Arbor, Copenhagen, Gothenburg, Jackson, Santa Fe, San Francisco, and elsewhere—who invited me to work with them, only to find that I would gladly wander with them as their lives and careers took them onward.

I have seen generations of museum people begin, flourish, and retire, and throughout it all, I have been privileged to hang around as if I had never gone away. I find myself walking down the streets in each town, yelling out loud (as is permitted an old lady) about how happy I am to be back. My life in many places has a certain storybook aura: I enjoy imagining my life there extending far past the time that my work has allotted.

Then there is a group of women who, in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, cracked open the then-sexist museum world by becoming leaders and public figures. Joel

Bloom labeled them the “women’s mafia” and often gave them mold-breaking tasks and opportunities. These self-labeled “Go-Girls” met each year at AAM for dinner, made too much noise, and kept in touch for life, providing each other continual support. Over and over, I am grateful to each of them who individually remain in my life. But I must mention that this all started because of Bonnie Pitman’s birthday, and she remains the leader of us all.

To the founding members of the Museum Group and every member who joined after that, thank you for twenty-five thoughtful years.

I learn so much from my formal mentors and mentees. Thank you for either accepting me for guidance when I needed it, or asking for advice I was happy to give. I will not out you here, but know how proud I am to play a part in your lives.

I have chosen to walk down the path of my advanced-age work life in the beloved company of Johnnetta Betsch Cole as my Elder Sister because, as she says “We still have work to do.”

In addition to those listed above, a long list of people asked me to join them as teachers in classes or as co-teachers in workshops. We often wander through foreign lands and equally foreign ideas, sometimes as a pack, doing sessions that count on each other’s quirky sensibilities, knowing we can quickly figure out how to repair the damage we caused during the day over a good meal that night. I am grateful and in sync with each who took a chance on me, but one person, Jim Volkert, has reappeared as co-leader in my teaching life over and over again, and each time I greet that opportunity with joy. Thank you.

A special thank you to Charles and Diane Frankel for their kindness and intrepid spirit. Thank you for inviting Dean and me to be traveling partners over decades of adventures into fabulous places, constant good food and drink, and nonstop delicious conversation.

The reality is that throughout my life, a vast number of people have been continuously generous. Many took on roles that were traditionally or genetically assigned to others—parents, siblings, teachers, partners, guides. The creation of my personal pack has been the essential grounding for my well-being. These individuals have never failed me, and I am deeply grateful to each and every one.

I have reached the age where a child, mentors, relatives, and some of my closest friends dwell in a nonearthly place, having departed this life. But their memory and life lessons sustain me every day.

My whole life has been enriched by other people’s parents, who willingly took on the supporting role I invented for them and then did not look askance when I showed up for Thanksgiving in their house uninvited. These people, whom I nicknamed some version of mother or father, knew who they were and made it possible for me to become an adult even when I was already one. Thank you to all the members of the Bain, Barry, Conway, Farber, Glatzer, and Holz families.

To my family, birthed and acquired, all loved, all supportive, all thriving in the direction of their choosing, and all loving of each other, thank you. To my pseudo-siblings Ken Kay and Karen Christianson, Joan Farber, Franklyn and

Ronald Holz, Aylette Jenness, Rex Moser, Douglas Reese, Judith Wechsler, and to my actual cousins Alan, Marsha, Ronald, and Elizabeth Cahn, Peter and Barbara Frank, and Doris Maier, thank you.

I have beloved children (both birthed and welcomed): Erik and Merideth Anderson, Matt Anderson, Kiara Gharthey Ellozy, David and Ali Gelles, Josef and Karen Gurian, Ateret Shmuel, Eve and Aaron Wachhaus, and nieces Jen Bisbee and Deb Regen. And at this time of my life, I lean on them for advice when once I gave it. The surety of having children one can always count on, cheer for, forgive and be forgiven is forever sustaining.

And I have grands who enter the world each an engagingly different and fascinating person: Eliana, Kaita, Sam, and Margo Gurian; Lowen, Helena, and Gus Wachhaus; Briget Stanley and Matt Brown. There are no words of thanks too extreme to use. There is only thankfulness that they allow me to engage in many adventures with each, watching their specialness shine.

To my honorary greats, Tristan and Nico Brown, Yousef and Adam Ellozy, Franny and Clark Gelles, Oriya and Aviv Shmuel, the world looks like it will be in good hands.

And, finally, again, and always, to my husband, partner, foil, and editor, Dean Anderson, a man who never misses a moment to be supportive, I can only think how lucky I am to have chosen such a righteous person to spend my life with, my unending thanks.

### Cover image (paperback version)

The multi-coloured carpet and reflective swing ball - The 2017 Hyundai Commission SUPERFLEX: One, Two, Three Swing! in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern. SUPERFLEX, a Danish collective, known for their interests in unifying urban spaces and commenting on society with authenticity through art. London, 02 Oct 2017. Credit: Guy Bell/Alamy Live News

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# INTRODUCTION

## Centering the Museum

### Introduction

This book, *Centering the Museum: Writings for the Post-Covid Age*, is about occupying, helping to orchestrate, and celebrating “the center”—a position between disagreeing parties in dispute often derided as insufficiently principled and wimpy by those of contesting opinions. Museums should and could become explicators of complexity by modeling human acceptance of and compassion for uncertainty, where people come together to learn about, live uneasily with, and tolerate partial and exploratory resolutions for issues of consequence.

### Museum Meaning

Wherever I use the word museum throughout this volume, I am using its broadest possible definition. The reader will not be surprised that I embrace all institutions that collect or borrow objects of whatever sort. That would include zoos, botanic gardens, archives, historic human-made structures often listed as heritage, etc. I include institutions that focus on manufactured experiences like planetariums, living history installations, and faith-based sites that incorporate intangible heritage, including sacred spaces, whether natural formations like Uluru or human-constructed ones like Stonehenge. And I also embrace institutions where the “objects” are displays that have been created, often for interactivity, as in children’s and science museums. I use technology and physical interactivity interchangeably and am eager to learn more about artificial intelligence (AI). I flirt with and sometimes encompass libraries, hiking trail displays, and art-based climbing structures. However, I exclusively focus on organizations that operate for “the public good,” known in the United States as not-for-profits, and in other countries are either embedded in government agencies or established as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or charities. I, therefore, omit commercial and for-profit organizations

closed-down interregnum provided a rare opportunity to reconsider first principles. I thought the material I had written over the previous decades might suggest a way forward into a wholesale rethinking of museums based on a far-reaching open-hearted welcome for all.

For those interested in more thoroughgoing change, the term *decolonization* was arising worldwide as a construct for museum repurposing. While not a word I use, I thought decolonization helped spotlight opportunities for profound reconsideration. It has always been clear that the origins of many collections, and entire museums, were tied to conquest and domination. That was not in dispute. What was under consideration was our present and future positions given that historic reality. For some people, “spoils of war” was a plausible explanation for keeping objects on display with only modest historical notation; for others, that reality was shameful and in need of long-overdue repair. And there were many in-between positions to choose from.

The truth was that whatever viewpoint you held, the methodology to reach a successful reconciliation had never been created and still was not clearly envisioned. The post-Covid, post-BLM decolonized museum is an institution whose creation awaits our collective efforts. So far, we have seen tiny adjustments, unrealistic promises, a handful of museum directors as winners and losers with sometimes quite brutal transitions between them. A promising trend is an increasing number of new staff hired from formerly underrepresented communities. Yet it does not seem enough, and I suggest that now is the time for experimentation and messy try-outs, not only a rush to buying new stuff created by the formerly colonized while sending old stuff back, or selling old good stuff created by the cultural majority to buy equally good stuff created by those not represented sufficiently in the collection—and feeling thereby virtuous enough to be done with it. I am surprised at how settled this large issue seems to be in many museum administrators’ minds, while not in mine.

I propose that museums need to be basically rethought within a much broader context. For all organizations engaged in civic life, societal reconciliation between the political left and right and amelioration of the effects of income and cultural inequality are two of the most crucial issues for the foreseeable future. I hope that this is how and where museums can engage in what my beloved colleague, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, described as “speaking across differences.” That phrase, currently in use in many places elsewhere, could well be considered the prerequisite for the task of museum centering.

Political pendulum swings have shown how fragile and dangerous our immediate social environment can be when aggrieved parties are left unsympathetically seething. We retreat to the peripheries at our peril. Our responsibilities lie in the center. When I discuss centering, I am not, however, including the extreme ends. I am against embracing the murderous edges of the spectrum of belief and behavior. I write about methods for engaging potentially reconcilable adversaries to create a workable, if uneasy, middle. The boundaries between such, and their respective extreme fringes, will likely reveal themselves by the presence or absence of civility,

that appear “museum-like” in certain of their activities, such as retail stores, shopping malls, and amusement parks. I have studied and admired their crowd handling and display techniques and advocate borrowing good ideas from any source I can find. I am not worried about blurring the definition by importing from elsewhere.

I hope readers of this book will come from the broadest possible range of career trajectories and institutions. I have often wrestled with defining “museums” and have published some of those ruminations. For further reflections, see “A Blurring of the Boundaries” (Gurian, 1995) and “What Is the Object of This Exercise?” (Gurian, 1999). Both of these definitional discussions can be found in my previous volume, *Civilizing the Museum* (Gurian, 2006).

## Background

When this volume was being prepared for publication in 2020, the world was deep in an uncontrolled Covid-19 pandemic with vaccines just beginning their roll-out. The situation in the United States and worldwide included economic downturns that showed no sign of abating, a social justice movement (Black Lives Matter (BLM)) with parallel demonstrations elsewhere prompting some promising early equity developments (including in the museum world), and a profoundly troubling American president and worrisome elected officials in other countries whose behavior, rhetoric, and actions ignored many of the norms of civil society. All of this was about to conclude in the most consequential US election of my lifetime. As the book went to the publisher, Joe Biden had been elected but not yet inaugurated as president. Donald J. Trump was behaving so alarmingly erratically that many loyalists of consequence had begun to distance themselves, but only for a short time and not long enough to prevent the invasion of the US Capitol building.

As you engage with this book, new and subsequent US presidencies may have come and gone, other countries may have veered to the extreme left, right, and/or back again. One hopes Covid-19 and its consequences will have receded and been replaced by a more sociable daily life. When encountered, the “afterwords” at the ends of most of the following chapters, written during this tumultuous period, may now seem exaggerated, prescient, or quaint. The times felt almost cataclysmic on the one hand and unexpectedly tranquil on the other, given the isolation and quietude of lockdown and quarantine. My days were mostly uninterrupted, set in a beautiful sequence of seasons unfolding first outside my windows in Arlington, Virginia, and then in Vieques, Puerto Rico. I had two fully mature and beautiful gardens to enjoy in their fullness, each created over thirty years of planting.

With the leisure to study far-ranging museum practices during the Covid shutdown, I was mostly disappointed to find that many institutions in many different environments, while gradually reopening (with many then shutting down again), continued to behave as if their prior methods and purposes were fine and the only changes needed were safe social distancing methodologies, a new infusion of formerly marginalized people on staff, and more collections related to minority cultures to round out and update their missions. But I felt otherwise. I thought the

the principal tool of peaceable disagreement—another related matter addressed in this volume.

This anthology illustrates various ways for museums to change their policies and practices to accommodate new patterns of behavior toward building a society that encourages workable coexistence of irreconcilable differences.

### About This Book

*Centering the Museum* reflects my belief that knowledge of one's ethical core is inextricably linked to professional practice and essential to responsible leadership. It begins with essays organized in five parts—exhibitions, administration, activism, public space, and civil systems—and concludes with a group of autobiographical writings called "Memoir Snippets." All essays written and often published previously have an updating afterword written in 2020. Other articles written expressly or wholly transformed for this volume do not. The subtitle, *Writings for the Post-Covid Age*, reflects the new environment the museum reader is facing or has settled into as we move through this turbulent time. This volume is a companion to my first book, *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*; the two are intended to work both separately and as a set.

The writings in this book reflect the contemporaneous events and personal philosophies of the times in which they were written, and the dates are noted. Many were requested as speeches and so had a more colloquial voice than most papers published in academic journals. Additionally, over the years, my tone has become more passionate and more personal. Having had my writings taken seriously in the academy for many decades (although I have always remained a practitioner) I now find myself less interested in creating detached and objective material. Increasingly I bypass peer-reviewed journals and post my writings on my website, in the blogs of individuals and organizations, as chapters in anthologies, and as personal postings to a group of friends I refer to as Pals. I have discovered to my pleasant surprise that by doing so my work is increasingly widely read. More importantly, for me, these less formal venues often produce a contemporaneous response that feeds my person. So, should you have a comment or question as you read this book, please feel free to get in touch with me at [egurian@egurian.com](mailto:egurian@egurian.com).

The closing section, "Memoir Snippets," is written in a style I have never tried before. It is a form of autobiographical retrospective, looking back at my work life using excerpts from texts written over decades. These writings are both public and private, but each was composed separately, at a different time, from a personal point of view, and often at the request of others. Many came as answers to journalists' questions or as speeches marking significant professional events. As I reread them in 2020, I saw each in a different and sometimes unflattering light. When I found myself disagreeing with my earlier views, I have so noted in this book. And I have revised many of them to include multiple viewpoints that interweave my current take on today's issues in their texts.

I have also included recollections about my family and childhood using memories (and sometimes notes and jottings) written earlier but now put together from my vantage as an elder. This is not a presentation of a happy childhood of the sort seen in first-grade readers. The bumpy story is the basis of my lifelong belief in complexity. The people I love were flawed and tried their best. In certain respects, their best was not good enough, and reconciliation and acceptance underpin my museum journey. I look at my own regrets, and I wish the act of writing was an actual do-over of life itself. But alas, we go around only once and cannot go back and change events, only comment upon them.

I wrote my "Memoir Snippets" for others who, like me, are trying to succeed against type or who have an uneven education and/or learning difficulty, or an imperfect family, a variety of unfortunate experiences, first-hand knowledge of life's real tragedies, or strong personal regrets. They are meant to include the unexpected joy and unplanned fortunate event as well. I hope you will find here additional support for becoming triumphant through your own tenacity and willfulness in whatever challenges you encounter.

I make all my writings available retroactively for free on my own website because I believe in accessibility and appreciate the finances of many of my studious colleagues worldwide. Nonetheless, this anthology is published in both print and ebook forms to facilitate the primary way universities and courses of museum study have used my material in the past.

Much of this book is a testament to the value of friends and real or imagined family in one's work and life, and indeed this book is dedicated to all who have supported me and each other, sometimes for decades, and give each other guidance, permission, and strength to continue. Américo Castilla is one of my constants. Through his work he has made museums change by sheer force of his originality and personal indefatigability, serving as an inspiration to others. Américo lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina, was educated in part in England, and is a well-known painter and lawyer who had to flee during the dark days of Argentina's military junta. Subsequently, he has helped successive governments twice as Deputy Cultural Minister under opposing administrations, and guided private foundations similarly supporting cultural equity. He also created his own foundation, Fundacion TyPA, which works tirelessly in support of contemporary museum justice with events and training for the next generation of leadership, especially in Latin America. I am thrilled that he agreed to write the foreword to this volume.

## **My Hope for Museums**

I started my museum career naively and idealistically believing that impediments to greater access and use of museums were inadvertent and needed only to be pointed out and then enthusiastically removed. The corrective actions I described were, I thought, logical and practical. But I long ago came to understand that neither the general public nor those who worked in museums wanted to see much change,

anyone not conforming to the customary visitor profile could be such a person and should be watched. I clearly have never forgiven MOMA as an institution. I am “exotic-looking,” as I was once told by a regal White museum director, using a phrase he hoped I would find charming rather than the euphemism it is. I am not exactly a person of color, just a Jew from Queens.

As the subsequent recipient of many such comments, I still hope for systemic welcome in the way museums operate. In this era of social upheaval, I implore museums to take the time to study and implement many small but meaningful changes in policy and practice that will make their spaces feel safe and inviting for everyone. I hope that this new volume will help create that spirit of welcoming to all, in every possible way.

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except around the margins. Most museum employees are generally satisfied with the work they do, as provided to the same visitors who already appreciate it.

But I still find a steady and encouraging stream of museum staffs who want more thoroughgoing repair. They tend to be liberal in their politics, activists by nature, and congenitally unable to refrain from attempts to redirect their institutions. This smaller part of the museum universe, where I associate myself, mostly admire each other and often become friends. We have almost all become well known for espousing inclusive rhetoric, which most everyone (especially young students) wants to hear but fewer want to put into practice. I sometimes ruefully refer to my high profile in the field as a substitute for others' action. Still, speaking out has some usefulness, and I continue to be deeply engaged in the activity.

I thought about naming this volume *Museums for My Mother*. In the introduction to *Civilizing the Museum*, I summed up my many decades of museum work as follows: "I have unconsciously dedicated my career to making museums safe and inviting enough so that my reluctant mother, now dead, might have chosen to enter" (Gurian, 2006). The sad fact is that she felt uncomfortable entering any institution, and therefore rarely did so, and I never succeeded in my aspirations. She believed that institutions were inherently unsafe—especially for the undereducated, for immigrants, for members of a historically and recently reviled Jewish remnant—and watching her helped me appreciate minority and immigrant experiences better than any scholarly study ever could have.

When I was fourteen, I visited a museum by myself for the first time. At the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, a security guard followed me around as if I were suspect. I never forgot the humiliation. Years later, as part of a professional interview, I railed at a startled fledgling MOMA education officer for her organization's profiling of a young, terrified, seemingly White Jewish girl from Queens some thirty years before—clearly, something that she had nothing to do with.

But what I did not know then, and do now, is that for my Black colleagues, that same unwelcome experience of being targeted by security never stops. Sometimes called "shopping while Black," many African Americans are followed closely around a store because they are considered a security risk,

but [shopping while Black] can also include being denied store access, being refused service, use of ethnic slurs, being searched, being asked for different forms of identification, having purchases limited, being required to have a higher credit limit than other customers, being charged a higher price, or being asked more rigorous questions on applications.

(Wikipedia contributors, 2020)

Being followed was my first unescorted introduction to museums. I had rarely visited one before, and I clearly showed my insecurity because I didn't know how it all worked. Why did the MOMA security officer follow me? I imagine the justification was guarding valuable stuff. If thieves might arrive at any moment,

# MUSEUM BASICS

## Definition and Principles

### My Definition of Museum

- A museum is a civic space that encourages strangers to congregate peaceably.
- A museum presents forms of evidence so visitors can create understanding and build knowledge for themselves.

### My Core Principles

- Patrimony belongs to everyone.
- Our institutions should be welcoming both philosophically and physically to all.
- Museums hold collections in trust no matter what the law says about ownership.
- Inclusion is always more achievable, with progress to be made through many incremental, interconnected, and seemingly unrelated adjustments all the time.
- The non-visiting public is not waiting for an invitation. We must ask what might inspire their participation and try to provide it.
- The way staff treat each other creates an atmosphere that is evident to the visitor and should always be genuinely considerate.