



# CHANGE IS REQUIRED

PREPARING FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC MUSEUM

EDITED BY  
AVI Y. DECTER, MARSHA L. SEMMEL,  
AND KEN YELLIS



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION *for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

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# Change Is Required

*Preparing for the Post-Pandemic Museum*

Edited by Avi Y. Decter,  
Marsha L. Semmel, and Ken Yellis

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For my son, Eliav Decter, my daughter, Alyce Callison, and my grandsons,  
Joshua and Nathaniel, who give me hope for the future.  
A.D.

To my son David, who represents hopes and possibilities  
for the best of our collective futures.  
M.S.

To Jo Yellis, My Life's Companion.  
K.Y.





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## Foreword

A great department store, easily reached, open at all hours, is more like a good museum of art than any of the museums we have yet established.

—John Cotton Dana, 1917

I was particularly fond of the writings of the Newark Museum's visionary director, John Cotton Dana, when I was in graduate school for museum studies in Cooperstown. After all, as a girl from New Jersey, the Newark Museum was the place that inspired me to think about a career in museum work, and my parents often took my brother and me to its galleries and art programs when we were children. Despite Cooperstown's progressive program, as their first African American graduate student, occasional comments and questions indicated that there were individuals who had no experience with difference and little understanding of African American history and culture. "You fit in really well with us," a fellow student "complimented" me the first week or so—a comment I never forgot. I certainly wanted to change attitudes like that.

I identified immediately with Dana's comments in *The Gloom of the Museum*. Although penned in 1917, they seemed prescient. Except for its sometimes flowery Victorian language, his description of museums as stagnant, elitist, and inaccessible could sadly have been written in the 1970s when I was in graduate school. Today, a little more than one hundred years after Dana declared department stores much more visitor friendly than museums, we are still urging museums to break out of their colonial pasts, to make themselves more relevant to their communities and less beholden to the

whims of wealthy board members and donors, and certainly to face the white supremacy inherent in their collections and histories.

Since the 1970s, dozens of the best museum thinkers and writers have been ringing the clarion, warning of the consequences for museums of doing nothing as the nation becomes more diverse. But most museums have simply been tinkering around the edges of diversity, inclusion, and real systemic change, and visitors remain about the same. *Excellence and Equity*, the profession's landmark statement of the public service and education role of museums, was completed in 1992; it marked recognition of the shift from museums that primarily collect and preserve objects to institutions centering people and learning. Perhaps most importantly, *Excellence and Equity* stated unequivocally that there could not be excellence in our institutions without equity. Although some museums took it as a renewed statement of purpose, others either ignored it or handed the report to their educators and told them to "handle it."

Over recent decades, other writers also pressed for sweeping changes in museum practice. Stephen Weil, former Deputy Director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, expanded the conversation by urging museums to transform themselves "from being about something to being for someone," in his compelling article published in the museum edition of *Daedalus* in 1999. "Change by itself is so uncomfortable that institutions do not do it voluntarily or for noble reasons," wrote Elaine Gurian, former Deputy Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and international museum consultant. "They change because they fear the consequences of not doing so, and only then are willing to override the cries of anguish from the discomfited."

Lonnie Bunch, Founding Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and now Secretary of the Smithsonian, sees a grand vision for museums as places that can show Americans how much we share despite our differences, places that can help us to understand one another by courageously tackling the things that divide us, from climate change to race. A variety of increasingly loud voices agree. Movements like MASS Action and Museums Are Not Neutral, the push to unionize museum workers, and the demand to decolonize museums all demonstrate that museums can and should be more than just places that collect things and must become more focused on the people they serve. The tendency to center objects, their collection and preservation, rather than center humanity has at times made museums tone deaf to the purpose for which we protect these objects—to delight and enlighten the visitors we serve. Instead, we have treated the objects with greater care than we have treated our visitors and museum staff.

This is an important book. It is different. If you work in a museum or want someday to work in a museum, this is worth reading. To be sure, a steady stream of books and blogs outlining proposed changes to American museums are valuable and thought provoking. But this book goes further. At the outset, it offers the sage wisdom, experience, experiential common sense, and compassion of some of our profession's most talented individuals—museum colleagues who have always been unafraid to speak the truth. Some of the authors have been leaders and thinkers for decades; others are just now ascending to leadership positions. But most importantly, this book includes the voices of those who are rarely heard or whose voices have been ignored. They are the upstarts, the agitators, the innovators, the people of color, and the emerging museum professionals who, if we let them, will push our profession forward in positive ways in the future.

The confluence of events during summer 2020 brought about a reckoning in American museums, the result of which is yet to be realized. The murder of George Floyd in the midst of a global pandemic illuminated injustices in the American justice system but also made us recognize injustices elsewhere, including within our own cultural institutions.

Making the changes that are needed will not only enable museums to be relevant and meaningful to broad public audiences and equitable places to work, but they will also ensure their very survival. This task is going to take the concerted effort of all of us at every level, from board members to front-line staff. Reading this book is a great place to start.

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## Acknowledgments

It takes a community to write a book. In this case, many members of that community are here to speak for themselves. We want, therefore, to acknowledge and thank the fifty colleagues and friends who contributed essays (and editorial comments) to the completion of this work. A special word of thanks to Gretchen Sorin for her kindness in contributing the foreword to this book—a perfect grace note in every way.

Many other colleagues contributed to our thinking, either through participation in one or another of our virtual conversations or through helpful counsel and encouragement. The first, critical boost came from our editors, Charles Harmon at Rowman & Littlefield and Aja Bain at the American Association for State and Local History: Their willingness to push for early publication made it possible for us to complete our work quickly and without a lot of wasted motion.

Thanks also to the three (anonymous) reviewers whose critical comments were both encouraging and helpful. We are grateful to the staff at Rowman & Littlefield for their good work in translating the manuscript into a handsome volume. Thanks also to Bill Brookover, who was kind enough to give permission to reproduce one of his powerful *Dissonance* prints *GRAND DISSIDENCE* for the book cover, and to Arc Indexing, Inc. for their fine work on the index.

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A.D., M.S., K.Y.



# Introduction

This is a book about the future of American museums. Like other institutions, museums and zoos, science centers, historic sites, and arboreta, were powerfully affected by the nested crises of the pandemic. In 2020, climate change and natural disasters, the plague of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), social protest, and divisive politics hit the United States like a perfect storm. Businesses, schools, and community organizations shut down. Hospitals, medical services, and health centers were overwhelmed. Social protest, fueled by the killing of Black people by police officers, erupted in rallies and sporadic riots. In the midst of a bitterly contested national election, lies and disinformation proliferated. And then, on January 6, 2021, would-be insurrectionists stormed the Capitol of the United States, seeking to overturn the results of a free and fair election. The fate of civic life and culture, the destiny of American democracy, seemed to hang in the balance.

Each and all of these national crises called for responses from our institutions. But for more than a year, the situation was unprecedented: No one in our nation's history had lived through a convergence of cataclysms even remotely similar. For leaders and for communities, there were no playbooks, no tried-and-true solutions, no precedents, on which to rely. Adapting to novel circumstances and uncertainty became the order of the day; improvisation in society, economy, culture, and polity the new norm; restoration of health and healing the new American Dream.

Museums, as integral components of our social system, were compelled to respond and adapt. Virtually every American museum—from small historic

houses to vast universal museums—shut down for lesser or greater periods. Admissions and earned income declined suddenly and speedily. Furloughs and layoffs decimated museum staffs—among larger museums, an estimated 20 percent fired staff and 40 percent instituted furloughs. For many museums, the challenge was survival, plain and simple. Addressing the distress and needs of nearby communities became mostly a secondary consideration, though here and there museums stepped forward to offer neighbors immediate assistance as sites for clinics, voter registration, food distribution, or emergency day care.

Throughout the pandemic, most museums have focused on restoring the old normal. But even amid upheavals and disruptions several American museums have charted new directions for themselves and their communities. A large number of museums have taken a decisive turn to digital: Even as they were closing their doors to in-person visitors, museums across the country began to ramp up virtual tours, webinars, blogs, and other digital programs, reaching out to regional, national, and even global users.

As virtual audiences expanded and the needs of local communities persisted, a substantial number of museums have taken a turn toward community. Some museums have found new uses for their grounds and exterior walls; others have developed new kinds of collaborations with local neighborhoods; and still others have created new online resources and activities for homebound individuals and families. And, in yet a third turning, some museums have moved issues of equity and justice—internally and in the world—to the center of their institutional concerns.

Each of these strategic turns—to digital, to community, and to equity—has deep implications for museums' values, policies, and practices, as well as their missions and sense of purpose. The turn to digital, for example, raises important questions about online access, service area, public participation, and the collection of born-digital materials in sharp contrast to the usual collection of physical objects.

The turn to community speaks of a willingness to abandon traditional go-it-alone mindsets and suggests possibilities for new kinds of partnerships, alliances, and collaborations with museums and other local organizations. As museums seek to become more diverse and inclusive, the turn to equity can affect almost everything, from hiring practices to core narratives. Above all, these kinds of strategic choices represent an embrace of experiment and risk-taking, based on the premise that standing pat or returning to the old normal will sooner or later lead to a loss of vitality and relevance.

Embracing change and adapting to novelty also come with consequences and costs. Dissonance in the museum field is echoed throughout almost

every sector, from the academy to the corporation. As in those fields, in every corner of the country, museum professionals are challenging old assumptions, conventional narratives, and customary practices.

The very names of new websites, virtual talking circles, and online communities suggest both the aspirations and antagonisms that now engulf museums: *Death to Museums*, *Hyperallergic*, *MuseumHue*, *Facing Change Working Group*, *The Inluseum*, *Museums & Race*, *The Empathetic Museum*, *Museums Are Not Neutral*, *Museum Workers Speak*, *Museum as Site for Social Action*, and so on. Many of these initiatives precede the pandemic and owe their voices to a prescient choir of pioneers, including such colleagues as La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski (*Museums Are Not Neutral*), Adrienne Russell and Aleia Brown (*Museums Respond to Ferguson*), Richard Josey (*Collective Journeys*), Stephanie A. Johnson-Cunningham and Monica Montgomery (*Museum Hue*), June Ahn, Emma Turner-Trujillo, and Rose Cannon (*Death to Museums*), Rose Paquet, Aletheia Wittman, and Porchia Moore (*The Inluseum*), and numerous others.

Another indicator of upheaval: In just the past year, staff at some of our most prominent art museums—including the Guggenheim and New Museum in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—have voted to unionize, citing disparities in pay, abusive work cultures, and racial discrimination. Some museums have restructured themselves; some have created senior positions to promote diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion; some have lost established, prominent leaders to retirement or resignation.

Across the museum landscape, new voices are being raised, and their calls for transformation, internally and in society at large, can now be heard loudly and clearly. The editors and authors of this book are among the proponents of significant changes in the museum field. American museums have adapted and transformed repeatedly over the past century in response to social, political, and cultural change. Now, we believe, is the time to do so again. Although our past and even our present provide neither models nor solutions, what they do put before us are possibilities. It is the purpose of this book to envisage some of those possibilities and to suggest why and how they might be realized. The essential element, of course, is the will to change. We think that systemic change in museums can be energized by ideas that infuse and enrich our perspectives. And we think the time for that change is now.

We understand, of course, that no one idea, no single innovation, no particular model, can serve as a universal template. At a conservative estimate, there are more than 30,000 museums in the United States. Large and small, they are diverse and ubiquitous: Every state in the nation has hundreds of

museums and even small communities can boast a local historical society and a historic house museum. We have museums dedicated to trolley cars and crayons, trout fishing and textile manufacture. Despite their radical diversity, museums generally share at least some values and practices, needs and challenges; suggestive ideas, then, can benefit museums of varied scales, stripes, and colors, wherever they may be located. It is our intention and hope that the ideas presented in this volume will resonate in many different museums and communities.

In its depth and range, this book constitutes an invitation to join in the growing, lively discourse about possible futures for museums in the United States. Our invitation extends not only to our professional colleagues but also to all those interested in cultural affairs and institutions—journalists and critics, artists and writers, museumgoers and general readers. Although museums are the topic at hand, similar disruptions have arisen in other organizations and in our everyday lives. Accordingly, the authors have eschewed technical terms, jargon, and obscure references in their essays, and they speak personally, in their own voices, to the ideas under consideration. By making this volume accessible—and, we hope, interesting—to many kinds of readers, we want to engage a broad audience in the surging conversation around what has long been a significant and valued type of institution in our society.

All the editors and authors are engaged, active practitioners in the museum field. In fact, the book is the product of a long and critical conversation that began in 2019 as a series of blogs by Yellis and Decter, that transformed, in partnership with Marsha Semmel, into several virtual convenings with more than thirty colleagues, and that led to a *Manifesto for Next Practice*, published by the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM) as its first-ever white paper. By early 2021, the three editors—all veterans of more than forty years of museum work—had drafted a prospectus for the book and were contracted by Rowman & Littlefield. Nine months of strenuous writing and editing have followed. In the end, more than fifty colleagues from all corners of the museum field joined in the composition of this book.

Because this volume is really a collection of reflections on contemporary America and its culture, we have taken pains to engage authors who are diverse in age, race, gender, expertise, and experience. Some are chief executives, others emerging museum professionals. About half of the authors are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), and a fair number identify as LBGTQ. Some have spent all or most of their professional lives in one institution; some have moved around; and some have worked in the field mostly as independent museum professionals consulting on a variety of projects. No one group of professionals, however diverse or broad-gauged,

can hope to comprehensively represent a field, let alone a nation, but the contributors collectively are representative of both the museum sector and our multicultural society.

The book is structured to reflect many of the key issues that currently roil the museum world. Each chapter addresses one or more dimension of the museum journey, ranging from institutional purpose to the well-being of visitors to the metrics by which we measure success. For each chapter, we have invited multiple authors to share their perspectives and reflections. These are individual views, rather than institutional statements, grounded in personal and professional experience. Many authors reference the work of their home institutions, but their essays are intended to offer broad ideas rather than case studies. Readers will find plenty of granularity in these texts and lots of concrete instances; the authors are by and large a realistic lot, even as their thoughts and expectations are speculative and aspirational. In many chapters, readers will find a variety of lenses and topics, and because we are advocates for experimentation and next practice, we have made no effort to harmonize these diverse perspectives.

Although the authors address a multitude of issues and ideas, the gist of our collective concerns about the situation of contemporary museums can be summarized simply:

- Why should American museums change? What are the risks and costs of inaction?
- What might that change look like? What do we think museums must be able to do in the future?
- What will it take for museums to change? How can museums marshal the conviction and resources needed to change?

### **Why Must Museums Change?**

Until recently, American museums, despite their remarkable variety and distinctiveness, have intended to promote one or more of three broad purposes:

- to produce new knowledge and encourage learning,
- to preserve and interpret cultural heritage and traditions, and
- to inspire wonder, awe, curiosity, and imagination.

Often, of course, these broad purposes were linked and embodied in a single institution.



But museums—like other forms of public institution—were established and maintained by society to serve yet another critical purpose: *to authenticate the social order*. They celebrated American entrepreneurship and economic success, the triumph of new technologies, the mastery of nature, and the historical progress of American life and culture. Validation of the American Way and of normative culture could be found in museums large and small, from the Museum of Modern Art's narrative of how abstraction triumphed in the United States to stories of pioneer pluck and provincial success in thousands of small historic sites and community museums. In one historic house museum after another, for example, one could encounter relics of early European settlement, demonstrations of "colonial" or traditional cooking, an array of items associated with prominent people, fancy furnishings, and stories of community adaptation and achievement, housed almost without exception in former homes of the rich and powerful. Questions like Who has been or is empowered? How did they win their power? and What did they do with their power? were generally unvoiced or evaded.

This began to change in the 1960s. A tremendous demographic wave coincided with the civil rights movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam to galvanize an American counterculture willing and ready to challenge the "Establishment" on a wide array of issues and ideas. Postmodernist theory and cultural studies probed the power structures and constructed meanings that undergirded conventional thinking. The New Social History, feminist, ethnic, and racial scholarship, and revisionist historians expanded the scope and depth of American historiography, creating a more inclusive and critical view of collective memory. Environmentalists called attention to the costs and consequences of the human conquest of nature. The efficacy of science and technology, even the longstanding idea of "progress," came under scrutiny.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the growing fissures in US society were manifested in an ongoing culture war over public education and collective imagination. In this struggle, America's museums were not exempt. Sporadically, and then more frequently, museums were embroiled in fierce and well-publicized cultural (and political) conflicts. Initially, museums became sites of contestation. Furors over exhibitions such as the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe (Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, 1990), *The West as America* (National Museum of American Art, 1991), the Enola Gay project (National Air and Space Museum, 1995), and the *Sensation* show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (1999) fueled the national debate over who gets to set the cultural agenda and define what is and what is not normative. As Timothy Luke puts it: "Art works, historical expositions, nature interpretations, and technological exhibits, as they are shown in museums,

are products of the ongoing struggle by individuals and groups to establish what is real, to organize collective interests, and to gain command over what is regarded as having authority.”<sup>1</sup>

The current crises have shown us what the world looks like when the facade of civility, tolerance, and good government are peeled away: unemployment, economic collapse, natural disasters, social protest, police violence, political division, and contention. The moral certainties have been dissolved. We are exiles from our former lives, from family and friends, from our work lives, and from our former recreations. Many of us feel like aliens in our own homes, our workplaces, and our places of faith. We have crossed over into uncharted territory; so, too, have our friends and neighbors, our workmates, and our fellow citizens.

A good part of our dislocation stems from a sudden, intense, inescapable reckoning with who we are as individuals, as communities, as a nation. In just a matter of months, Americans were forced to question the validity of some of our most cherished beliefs about the singularity of our national virtue, the character of our cultural authenticity, and the harmlessness of our mastery of nature. For a great many Americans—and a growing number of museums—these core myths have been exploded.

We need to be present for communities that are looking to museums for programs about diversity and understanding, expanded public menus, and greater civic engagement. Americans are now 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.

### What Might Change Look Like?

In the face of unprecedented changes like these, efforts to return to the old normal are not only futile but fatuous. Museums were struggling for recognition and relevance before the pandemic and that struggle has only intensified in our disrupted present. Unless museums address the issues of the day, they will be less relevant than in the past. In a time when individuals, families, and communities across the country are trying to regain their footing in an uncertain time, irrelevance will, sooner rather than later, prove fatal to museums.

On the other hand, museums can respond in meaningful and timely ways to urgent social, cultural, and community questions, concerns, and challenges. The pandemic offers 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 overthink it: The way to find out what people need is to ask them. We also 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 position our museums as the vital centers and catalysts for meaning making and the positive social change our communities need.

At the outset, we will 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 culture, science and society, environmental and social justice, open inquiry and democratic process and principles.

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. We must rethink leadership and authority, giving greater priority to skills like openness, thoughtful listening, collaboration, and adaptability. We also need to open our decision-making by making space for more diverse participants, by amplifying the voices of emerging professionals, and by inviting our communities into the conversation.

We will need more porous structures that are open to diverse voices from all levels of staffing and from the community at large. We will need to develop new interdisciplinary, team processes. We will need to revalue public knowledge and multiple forms of expertise. We will need to tell new stories in new ways, making the experiences of previously invisible individuals an essential part of a reconsidered American narrative. And we will need to play a role as places of healing, focusing on the care, connection, and well-being of our staffs, volunteers, and audiences.

We must not go it alone. Instead, our museums need to work with other types of institutions within our communities, including other cultural, educational, and social service organizations, as well as to forge new alliances with museums across the country and around the globe. Sharing ideas and expertise will empower museums to try new things. Partnering will be a critical professional skill, an essential strategy in this networked age. Partnership is required to make a meaningful impact, to contribute to positive social change, and to make a difference, not only in the museum's bottom line but also in people's lives. Museums will therefore need to build a partnership mindset into their work and to create conditions for successful collaborations as part of the organizational chart, mission, vision, and infrastructure.

Creating an alternative paradigm for museums is no easy task. With more than thirty thousand museums in the United States alone, a single template is unlikely to apply to even most museums. Moreover, the field is sharply divided over what purpose and perspectives should prevail. In 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) published a proposed 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." If we commit to rethinking and reinvention, this is what change might look like.

## What Will It Take to Change?

Adapting to novelty is neither simple nor easy. Although people talk boldly about their readiness to change, we are all captives of our life experiences—and those experiences are familiar, customary, normal. Habits, as numerous studies report, are difficult if not impossible to break, especially in a time of great uncertainty. Added to the uncertainty of the present is the prospect of the unknown future. Thus, the overwhelming majority of institutional responses in the spring of 2020 was survival and return to the old normal (however dismal and unhappy that was).

Resistance to change slipped in wearing the mask of "resilience." Much has been said and written during the pandemic about the importance of resilience, "the capacity to recovery quickly from difficulties . . . and the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape." Resilience may be apt and even essential when we consider individuals and their historical responses to tragedy and trauma as well as all our current struggles to "spring back into shape" after the disruptions of the past two years. Museums must and should help foster the resilience of those who work in and for them, and

their programs and projects should help support the resilience of members of their surrounding communities.

But is resilience what is most needed by our museums now? Do we really want to spring back into former shapes? The events of the past months—from the uncertain, lingering, evolving presence of COVID-19 and its variants to the mandate for all museums to confront and address the ongoing impacts of our racist past and colonialist roots—require moving forward and not simply springing back. There are many problematic aspects to the current “shape” of many museums, and the recent disruptions compel us to embrace opportunities for necessary change.

We are in an acutely uncomfortable place to begin that work. Neither museums nor our society at large is set up to deal with unprecedented crises. We have no playbook, no tried-and-true strategies and not even a museum think tank to speculate on possible scenarios. We are, in short, at sea without a compass. But, as Andre Gide remarked, “One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.”

We are reminded of the long, tortuous history of the modern environmental movement in the United States. For fifty years, anyone who could read had access to one study after another that warned of the disastrous effects of human impacts on climate and the even more consequential effects of impending climate changes. Today, amid drought and floods, wildfires and ocean warming, mass migration and extinction of species, we have reaped the whirlwind. And yet we as a nation and as a species have yet to embrace the changes needed to avert catastrophe. As biologist Edward O. Wilson puts it: “Too paralyzed with self-absorption to protect the rest of life, we continue to tear down the natural environment, our species’ irreplaceable and most precious heritage.”<sup>2</sup>

So what is to be done? The majority of US museums, zoos, gardens, historic sites, and arboreta will continue their struggle to return to the old normal. Smaller institutions, in particular, hardened to living with modest budgets and small circles of support, will hunker down to business as usual. Some large museums, notably the major science and technology centers, which earn a living at the gate, will struggle to regain their old revenues but are likely to stay the course. Large art and history museums will probably follow suit but with gestures sufficient to demonstrate their willingness to respond to the social and cultural movements of the day.

Likely, it is in the midsize museums that change is most likely to occur because they tend (but not always) to be relatively nimble, flexible, and open to the pressures and ideas of the moment. Some smaller community or culturally specific museums, which are closely connected to their constituents,



may also be places with potential for fundamental change. They, together with a few visionary, experimental new projects, will probably lead the way, informed and inflected by the myriad of informal online groups who are advocating for museums to become more progressive, more activist, and more engaged.

The precondition for new initiatives is committed leadership. This may come in three distinct forms. Some boards, at least, are concerned about how to adapt to new realities. A recent survey of corporate boards reported that a substantial minority of those boards had embraced “at least one structural change, one process change, and one change to collaboration since the COVID-19 crisis began.” For these boards, managing large-scale risks, revisiting their organization’s purpose, encouraging innovation and growth, and staying current on technological trends were the keys to moving forward.

Museum executives and senior managers are another potential source of adaptation. Given a world of dramatic shifts and complex new challenges, for museums to move forward will require a new and different set of leadership skills. Museum leaders will need to exemplify the qualities of curiosity, humility, tolerating ambiguity, and probing the wider contexts and implications of current issues. They will need to understand the importance of responding to community needs and tapping into the wisdom of the crowd, whether that “crowd” be their own staffs or voices beyond the museum walls. As agents of change, leaders will need to be open and adaptable, inclusive and collaborative, decisive and transparent. They must encourage continuous reflection, while also being practical, linking aspirations to concrete actions.

Museum leaders who privilege listening, innovation, and experimentation will have to share authority with other members of the staff. Distributing authority and including a wide range of voices in decision-making will give younger and more junior members of the staff opportunities and agency in redirecting their institutions. Thanks to a proliferation of museum studies programs, the museum sector is now being populated by emerging museum professionals who are well-trained, thoughtful, and energetic. New hires trained as social workers and community organizers will also give the field a jolt. Museums are overdue for new ideas, and a new generation of young professionals are ready to accept the challenge and burden of leadership.

Perhaps the two most critical needs, if museums are to adapt and innovate, are a renewed sense of purpose and a compelling sense of urgency. We 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? Lacking a clear sense of purpose, we will not be able to advance. But we also need a deep sense of urgency. Unless we are



prepared to act *now*, all our reflection and thoughtfulness and intentionality will go for naught. Urgency is the catalyst for change.

How change-ready *are* our 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 better 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? Based on the essays in this volume and the exemplary initiatives of museums across the continent, we are encouraged to believe that American museums will continue to create public value and social capital and to contribute in meaningful ways to civic culture and individual fulfillment.

The challenge we face is to reimagine how to address our circumstances as we reimagine 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.

## Notes

1. Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxiv.

2. Edward O. Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014), 177.

## PART I



# CONFRONTING THE CRISIS

The twin crises of the pandemic and the racial reckoning affected virtually every museum in one form or another. Museums closed doors, implemented layoffs and furloughs, canceled exhibitions and programs, and faced reduced revenues and budget shortfalls. With the May murder of George Floyd, the long-simmering issues of systemic racism came to the fore and led to national demonstrations and calls for museums to examine their policies, programs, and positions on equity. The following months also saw an increased number of hate crimes against Asian Americans, given the purported links between the COVID virus and China. In fact, 2020 witnessed the largest number of recorded US hate crimes since 2008. In the wake of the national malaise, long-simmering museum worker dissatisfaction with their own status and their museums' stances on equity also reached a boiling point.

Although all our authors address ways in which museums have and could address the disruptions of 2020–2021, the reflections in this opening part introduce specific examples of how museum leaders have confronted them. Their stories provide a useful entry into the other perspectives articulated throughout the book.

Some contributors to this section, with years of experience in their respective museums, found that strategies, planning, and preparations that had been put in place before the pandemic served as sturdy foundations for significant pivots. Their museums' successful (although not cost-free) navigation through 2020 drew on practices rooted in earlier leadership and organizational decisions.

Kristin Leigh, for example, writes about how Explora's model of "transformative listening" and "turning outward" had positioned the museum as a trustworthy, dependable community partner—a recognized asset that had proven its ability to address community aspirations and needs. When COVID hit Albuquerque, the museum was invited to work with current partners—and cultivate new ones—to provide programs and services that served both its mission and the pressing priorities of its diverse and far-flung audiences.

In San Diego, Museum of Natural History director Judy Gradwohl had already worked with her board and staff to create a strategy "roadmap" that provided a "compass" for the museum's future while enabling year-to-year flexibility. They had reconsidered the role of the museum's physical building in its larger natural environment, diversified the financial model, stabilized operating expenses, distributed authority for budget planning, and established an Evolutionary Venture Fund (EVF) that supported the staff's "out-of-the-box" thinking, risk-taking, and experiments. Each of these strategic steps, in conjunction with a strengthening of the museum's already collaborative culture, served it in good stead during the unanticipated disruptions of 2020.

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, Su Oh, in her senior vice president role, had also retooled the museum's public experiences, and her team's efforts to broaden audiences had paid off handsomely. The innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking that had become her team's norms proved enormously valuable as the museum faced a slew of challenges brought on by COVID-19 and racial injustice within and beyond the museum walls. The crises called for leading with empathy and flexibility, empowering staff to create innovative virtual programming to keep audiences engaged. The younger, digital natives on staff became the idea generators and risk takers, with the crises unleashing their "vibrant creativity, depth of content knowledge, and enthusiastic engagement." Lower-level staff also took the lead on addressing inclusion and equity.

Leigh, Gradwohl, and Oh exemplify many established museum leaders who found people with previously unrecognized and untapped skills and ideas throughout their staffs. They supported and recognized these staff members for their nimble pivoting through the days of shutting down and reopening (and perhaps shutting down and reopening once more).

Finally, in chapter 4 Andrea Jones recognizes that 2020 created "a full-blown identity crisis for museums," with these organizations facing the same transition challenges as individuals, either getting stuck in the past; moving on without doing the necessary reflection and work required for real, lasting change; or using the transition to experiment with new models and forms.

She acknowledges the stresses and strains of living in uncertainty but argues that this need not result in paralysis. It can also fuel positive and courageous change. Jones invites museums to mourn what has been lost but then to “listen to the winds of change,” consider, with intention, what may be possible, and experiment with new ideas—even new identities—that may provide the building blocks for successful reinvention.

The authors in this part have long recognized the “constancy” of change and the need for leaders, and organizations, to listen, learn, and adapt to fast-moving societal currents. They were buffeted by the extreme disruptions of 2020, but they benefited from the flexibility, adaptability, and experimentation they had incorporated into their individual and institutional mindsets. Despite the impossibility of predicting the future, each found ways to “seize the moment” and confront the looming crises, unleashing the talents of their staffs, solidifying connections to their communities, and inventing new roles and possibilities for their museums.

## CHAPTER ONE



# A Wake-Up Call

Kristin Leigh

**Kristin Leigh** is deputy director at Explora in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She began her career as a classroom teacher and joined the team opening Explora in 2001. Kristin received an Association of Science-Technology Centers' Roy E. Shafer Leading Edge Award for her work around authentic community listening and leadership of Explora's listen, welcome, and co-create community engagement approach.



Martin Luther King has remarked that “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” The “ultimate measure” of our museums has been tested in these challenging times. The past eighteen months exposed more clearly than ever the vast impacts of health inequities and systemic racism, with each morning's news bringing us story after horrifying story. At the same time, museums around the world were closing doors indefinitely due to pandemic-related public health orders. Extreme societal adversity forced us to take a raw, unfiltered glimpse into our organizational cultures. It helped us to see that those museums focused on turning outward, building trust, and increasing their relevance to their community, and whose organizational values and practices prioritized listening, purposeful partnerships, and deep community engagement, are more resilient and more essential to their communities.

The first step is to cultivate listening. Listening sounds simple, but it's also undervalued. Listening, really listening, can be transformative.

Transformative listening results in a museum taking an honest look at itself through the community's eyes, asking hard questions about the impact of its programs and services, and listening carefully for the answers. When we at Explora carried out a series of twenty-two community listening sessions, not one participant mentioned science when discussing the type of community in which they want to live. We had to reframe what this meant for our STEM-based organization.

We learned that our goals—inspiring inquiry and developing scientifically literate citizens—were not among the top community priorities. We had to understand that it may be a privilege for a family to even consider scientific literacy when worrying about ways to meet their children's most basic needs. Instead, many Albuquerque families cared deeply about their children being prepared for jobs that could end generational cycles of poverty. We heard story after story about opportunity gaps and inequitable educational and economic outcomes. We began to understand that Explora could contribute to systemic change in education and economic development.

STEM could lead to inspirational discovery and scientifically literate citizens, but of more relevance was the fact that STEM jobs are some of the highest paying in New Mexico. The more we heard parents talk about their aspirations for their children, the more we realized the power of STEM for achieving their hopes and dreams. Accordingly, we reframed our message and chose strategic partners and allies to place our STEM education efforts in a workforce development context. With that repositioning, our programs and exhibits became much more meaningful for families. We had found the sweet spot where our mission and core values intersected with our community's aspirations.

Transformative listening confirmed our museum's role as an honest broker, an essential player in a larger ecosystem that acknowledges the value of public knowledge and local wisdom, collectively addresses community aspirations, and overcomes the barriers to achieving them. Transformative listening was essential to remaining abreast of changing community rhythms, the ebb and flow of the generally accepted public narrative—whether one of hope or despair—that can indicate the community's readiness for change. Understanding this “public knowledge” joined STEM-related content and effective learning pedagogies as core staff competencies.

Listening also builds the trust necessary to create effective partnerships essential to fulfilling community aspirations. No single organization can address all pressing needs. Creating change is difficult; it takes time, and it takes systemic, collective effort. Trust paves the way for co-creation with community members and other area organizations and increases the likelihood that we are spending time and resources on projects of real significance and greater impact.



Partnerships proved essential during the pandemic, both for the communities we serve and for the sustainability of the museum itself. In partnership with the school district, Explora had planned to provide thirty-six family science events, but we couldn't bring anyone inside the building due to pandemic-related closures. Instead, we developed a menu of options for schools, teachers, and families and a school year that included Explora educators providing televised science lessons in both English and Spanish on the local PBS station; home delivery of science kits with trays of enchiladas; online teacher professional development and Maker-in-Residence programs; and gather-your-own-materials virtual family science events. By March 2021, more than sixty-nine hundred people from sixty-seven schools had participated in the Explora/Albuquerque Public Schools Title I partnership.

Effective museum-community partnerships work best when both parties have invested time and resources to nurture and grow the relationship. Successful partnerships must be based on shared goals, authentic listening, relationships of trust, and co-creation that involves give and take, along with fair compensation for all the partners and community members involved in the work. Partnerships are hard, however; developing them takes practice. Some cocreation projects go well, and others do not. It takes experience to look ahead, anticipate some missteps, and know how to course-correct. Authentic partnerships can grow and evolve over time, continuing to add value and make a difference.

Last year, even with a menu of new online programs, it became clear that families in New Mexico were struggling as they attempted to support their children's at-home learning. At the midpoint of the past school year, more than twenty-two thousand enrolled students in our state were listed as "chronically absent," having missed more than 20 percent of instructional time, and almost six thousand students were completely unaccounted for. Because of our community-based organizational culture and deep relationships across the learning ecosystem, many of Explora's civic, cultural, and educational partners asked us to double-down to support families learning from home. We worked closely with the public schools to expand virtual programming and support remote learning.

Virtual learning works, however, only for families with broadband access. One-on-one phone conversations with partners at the Office of Diné Youth and Navajo Transitional Energy Company addressed the question of how to provide similar support for families in the Navajo Nation without broadband access. Based in an area deeply affected by COVID-19, these partners explained that local regional newspapers remained the critical source of information for families; they suggested Explora use ad space in the papers to

share family science activities. They also provided translation of the activities into Diné. We managed to remain relevant and useful as we addressed basic community needs. Having to learn how to do this work for the first time amid the many challenges of the past year would have been incredibly difficult. Our long-held practice of co-creating with partners was, therefore, critically important during the pandemic and will remain vital in the future.

In museum partnerships, as the organization turns outward, internal shifts are also required. A commitment to a partnership ethos affects a museum's organizational structure and dictates necessary staff skills and mindsets. A museum might start with a new position created solely to focus on authentic community engagement and partnership building; as museums get better at incorporating transformative listening and co-creation efforts, it becomes important for each staff member to take a learner's stance and embrace a humble curiosity.

It is also important to find staff who demonstrate an abundance mindset, rather than one of scarcity. When working in true partnerships, our museums must be generous with time and resources. A grant we may have hoped to use entirely for our museum, for example, must be shared with our partners. Any credits must also be shared. To embed this within the organizational culture, these values must be held and lived throughout all levels of staff and on the board. At Explora, we have used storytelling as one way of helping staff and board members understand the power of transformative listening and authentic partnerships. We regularly share the stories of new doors that have opened because of this work.

An effective partnership practice can ensure that museums are invited to the table when community issues and challenges are being considered; the more actively the museum participates in these conversations, the more critical we can be to the civic ecosystem. Effective partnering is essential to demonstrating our public value and garnering the community buy-in that can grow and sustain a thriving museum. Our partners and community members can help ensure our museums have needed resources. They can help our museums come back from pandemic-related closures and financial challenges.

What began in 2020 and continues today has been a wake-up call, catalyzing long-overdue work around racial justice, health inequity, and opportunity gaps. This must be a wake-up call for museums as well. It's time to go all in. It's time to understand the barriers and listen to the aspirations in your community, aligning them to your organization's mission and vision, and framing your work through this lens. Only then will museums be seen as highly relevant contributors to community change, during emergencies like the ones we're facing now and throughout future highs and lows. It's time to do more.