

TrendsWatch

MUSEUMS AS COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE



Center for the Future
of Museums

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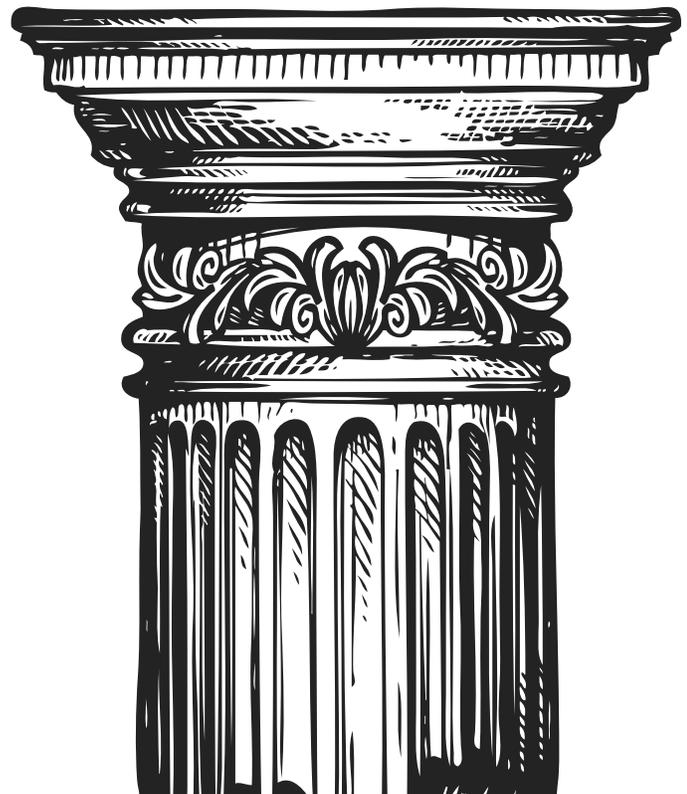
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Introduction

Crises function as stress tests—pitilessly exposing any weakness in how systems are designed, implemented, and maintained. Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested America on a massive scale, and many of our systems—health, education, housing, childcare, elder care, emergency response, and others—have fallen short. In the wake of over five million deaths worldwide, with over eight hundred thousand deaths in the US alone, it would be a profound moral tragedy if we did not use what we’ve learned from this test to rebuild our systems to be stronger, more resilient, and more equitable.

“System” comes from the Greek “systema,” referring to entities that interact in an orderly and organized fashion. The infrastructure that supports our communities encompasses “entities” of all types: public schools and small businesses, churches and American Legion posts, local governments, and private foundations. This edition of TrendsWatch makes the case that museums are vitally important entities in that infrastructure as well, by virtue of their contributions to five pillars of community strength and resilience as outlined in this report:

- ❖ Education for our children
- ❖ Livable communities for our elders
- ❖ Mental health
- ❖ Emergency response in the face of disasters
- ❖ A human-centered culture of sustainability

Making the Case for Museums as Essential Community Infrastructure

Some people intrinsically care about nature—animals or habitats—and passionately believe it is worthy of public support. However, many people don’t value nature as a thing in and of itself. To make an effective case for conservation that sways this latter group, advocates have learned to focus on nature’s contributions to people (aka “ecosystem services”). This approach works: research shows that when people understand how nature improves their own health and wallets, they are more likely to support funding and legislation that protects the planet.

Similarly, there are some people who simply “get” museums—they visit them regularly and value the role they play in preserving and presenting art, science, history, and myriad other topics. But many people don’t: data on the general public from Wilkening Consulting’s [Annual Survey of Museum-Goers](#) consistently shows that 70 to 75 percent of US adults have not visited a

“You can’t fund infrastructure with bake sales.”

— Anonymous



single museum in any given year. Even people who do appreciate and use museums on a regular basis may not understand why they should go beyond paying admission or becoming members to support museums through government funding and their own philanthropy. This edition of TrendsWatch focuses on the good museums do for people and communities whether or not that contribution is directly tied to their missions. This is about the value of museums not as museums per se, but as big bundles of assets that make their communities better, stronger, and more resilient through how they choose to operate.

Prioritizing Community Impact

As Americans rally around the need to strengthen our networks of community support, we are beginning to see some awareness that museums are essential components of those systems. Here's one example: in its [2021 National Risk Assessment Report](#), the First Street Foundation acknowledged the importance of social infrastructure, including museums, that help communities develop “a sense of belonging.” This statement captures only a small portion of the truth. It's up to museums, working together, to expand that insight, helping the public, government, and funders realize the full scope of how museums support their communities.

There have always been museums that foreground a community-centered approach to their work. When the [Wagner Free Institute of Science](#) opened its doors in 1865, for instance, it took the form of a natural history museum, rather than a club or society, as means to make science education accessible to everyone in its community, regardless of class, income, or gender, in an age when education was a vital resource for social and economic advancement as well as individual enrichment. Over a century and a half later, the original buildings and collections are still used as tools for providing educational enrichment for children and adults in Philadelphia. [Project Row Houses](#) (PRH) is a contemporary example of a community-centered museum, created in 1993 by seven visionary Black artists to serve the community of Houston's Third Ward. These founders saw historic preservation as a means to foster art, and art as a means to “empower people and enrich communities.” Now, this self-described “community platform” is a nexus of support for underserved neighbors, including young single mothers, local small businesses, and socially minded artists. While PRH employs some traditional museum formats (e.g., exhibitions, historic preservation, and artist residencies) they have also at various points in their history hosted a community laundromat, a residential program for young mothers, a business incubator, and tutoring services—doing whatever needs to be done.

Organizations like the Wagner Free Institute and Project Row Houses may seem like extreme examples of museums shaping themselves around community needs. But look closely at almost any museum and you will find programs and services that support communities in “non-traditional” ways: [raising](#) and [distributing](#) food, creating [housing for homeless artists](#), providing [self-care programs](#), fostering [happiness](#), keeping [teens out of prison](#), supporting [childhood health](#), providing [art therapy for military veterans](#), and serving as [voter registration centers](#) and [polling stations](#). However, seldom do individual museums, much less the field as a whole, get the credit they deserve for all the good they do. While we can build a strong case around the role museums play in local systems, that case would be even stronger if more museums measured these impacts and touted them as metrics of success.

Building on Success

One of the principal goals of the American Alliance of Museums is advocating for museums: helping legislators understand the value museums provide to society and encouraging them to provide commensurate support. Some legislators are already on board, reliably helping to secure robust funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, even in difficult times. Their support has been critical in ensuring that museums have been included in pandemic relief funding as well, such as the \$1.2 billion for museums in Shuttered Venue Operators Grant funds and more than \$1 billion from the Paycheck Protection Program. As another example, the bipartisan \$1.2 trillion [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act \(IIJA\)](#) recently signed into law by President Biden includes \$50 million in grants for museums and other nonprofits to upgrade their facilities for energy efficiency and \$65 billion to support broadband access for all. As I discuss later in this report, while some people [simply “get” museums](#), others will support our field only when they understand the tangible, quantifiable benefits museums provide to society. This is true of our elected representatives as well—by framing museums as essential community infrastructure, we can convince more legislators to support museums, not as amenities that are merely “nice” to have, but as essential contributors to their constituents’ health, education, and safety.

Raising the Stakes

In addition to making an effective case for support, quantifying the benefits museums provide to their communities will influence museum practice as well. This is a good thing, because as much good as museums do now, they could do even more. As I discuss in chapter five, “Right-Sizing the World,” the way we choose to define success shapes the systems we create. A narrow focus on traditional metrics such as attendance, collections size, and square footage constrains the potential of what museums can achieve. It is my hope that this report will inspire you to reexamine how your organization defines success and create metrics that challenge you to expand your thinking about what the museum can achieve.

In 1910, [Daniel Burnham](#) exhorted city planners to “make big plans; aim high in hope and work.” Museum planners should have equally lofty goals: to become vital players in the complex systems that help their communities thrive in the face of crises yet to come.

Yours from the future,



Elizabeth Merritt

*VP Strategic Foresight and Founding Director, Center for the Future of Museums
American Alliance of Museums*

“Museums, aquariums, and zoos are key partners with cities, states, and the federal government as we work together to build a more sustainable and equitable future. These institutions are national treasures—serving as centers of conservation and research, while also helping to educate and inspire future generations ... These institutions, located across the country in thousands of cities and towns, represent our cultural heritage and are social, economic, and educational pillars of our communities.”

—US Representatives Mike Quigley (IL-05) and Jesús “Chuy” García (IL-04), in an April 19, 2021, letter to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure calling for strong support for museums in infrastructure funding

How to Use This Report

This edition of *TrendsWatch* frames the case for museums as essential community infrastructure. The format is designed to help you start discussions among your museum's board and staff, consider how you might maximize the "positive externalities" of your work, and make the case to funders and legislators for support commensurate with the good you do.

Each chapter is devoted to one "pillar" of infrastructure, and:

- ❖ Introduces the **issue**
- ❖ Suggests **critical questions** for museums
- ❖ Describes the **challenge**
- ❖ Summarizes how society, and museums, are **responding**
- ❖ Presents a **framework for action**
- ❖ Documents **examples** of museums tackling these issues
- ❖ Shares a **"signal of change"** (story, report, or event) to help you explore the future
- ❖ Provides additional **resources**

We know that each download of *TrendsWatch* is shared, on average, with ten other readers. This year, please double down on that practice. Share the report with:

- ❖ Everyone on the museum's board, staff, and volunteer corps to provide a starting point for tackling these difficult topics.
- ❖ Funders, to support a conversation about how they can sustain the museum, and how you, in turn, can help them achieve their goals.
- ❖ Journalists, to help them do a better job of reporting about your museum and the field as a whole.
- ❖ Policymakers, to help them understand how museums can be integrated into a "whole-of-society" approach to critical infrastructure.
- ❖ Local leaders and government officials, to build awareness of the essential roles your museum does and can play in supporting the community.

Here are some suggestions for how to use the report with board and staff:

- ❖ Share a printout of the report in a breakroom, or a digital copy in a workspace online, and encourage staff to annotate with questions, observations about how it resonates with their experience, and ideas about how what the museum might do.
- ❖ Dedicate a board meeting to discussion of the five “pillars” explored in this report, or parcel them out as agenda items across a series of meetings.
- ❖ Use individual chapters as the basis for a deep dive with staff into issues of concern to your museum.
- ❖ Use the critical questions to guide discussions.
- ❖ Document how your museum contributes to the five pillars of community infrastructure explored in this report and use these metrics in reports to your members and the community in support of your advocacy efforts.

DON'T leave this report to languish on a digital shelf. Think of it as a museum PFD (Personal Futurist Device)—it can't help you stay afloat if it's left in the closet at home.

I look forward to connecting with you in the coming year to explore these topics more deeply. Please share your thoughts and questions by:

- ❖ Tagging [@futureofmuseums](#) on Twitter.
- ❖ Posting to the Alliance discussion forum [Museum Junction](#). (Directors are welcome to join the CEO Forum on Museum Junction.)
- ❖ [Submitting guest posts](#) to the [CFM blog](#).
- ❖ Emailing CFM at emerritt@aam-us.org.

My colleagues and I are available to support your work via speaking engagements, workshops, moderating discussions, and consulting. For more information on those services and to request our help, visit [Alliance Advisors and Speakers Bureau](#) on the AAM website.

Five Pillars of Community Infrastructure





Pillar One:

Education for Our Children

Twenty years into the new millennium, the US is still struggling to create a P-12 education system that provides each child with the support they need to become a healthy, well-balanced, self-sustaining adult. [Copious research](#) suggests that the system we inherited from the last century, with its focus on age-based cohorts and standardized curricula, is poorly suited to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, synthesis, innovation, creativity, teamwork, and collaboration—skills widely seen as essential for thriving in the twenty-first century. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to these challenges by exposing the fragility of our educational infrastructure, widening existing educational disparities and demonstrating that alternate forms of learning can be better, more effective, and more accessible for some. Museums have been living the educational future for decades, providing the kind of self-directed, experiential, social, and distributed learning that is proving to be both effective and resilient. Building on these strengths, the museum sector can play a vital role in rebuilding and transforming P-12 education to be better, stronger, and more equitable for all of America's children.

The Challenge

Like so many US systems, from finance to justice to government, the existing education system is structurally inequitable in its design. As currently constituted, our public and private systems of education reinforce and perpetuate advantages based on race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ability, and socioeconomic status. This structural inequity exists not only because of zip-code-based allocation of resources (which could theoretically be fixed by giving more and better access to historically marginalized groups), but because the system is fundamentally designed to favor a specific, narrow range of abilities and learning styles. To paraphrase education critic Sir Ken Robinson, the whole system of public education has been created in the image of higher

“Given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed — it needs to be transformed.”

—Sir Ken Robinson, author, speaker, and international advisor on education

Critical Questions for Museums

- Working with traditional schools (public and private), how might museums help create better educational experiences for all students?
- How can museums provide alternative educational pathways for learners who aren't well served by the current system, including homeschooled students?
- How can museums capitalize on their expertise in fostering twenty-first century skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, synthesis, innovation, creativity, teamwork, and collaboration?
- How can museums ensure they are recognized, valued, and supported for the essential roles they play in education?



Solar ovens at the Little Scholars Program, Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. Photo credit: Nadia Fuentes.

education, and treats primary and secondary school as a protracted university entrance exam. “The consequence,” he explains in a [TED talk](#), is that “many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they’re not [brilliant and talented], because the thing they were good at at school wasn’t valued, or was actually stigmatized.”

In the past decade, top-down educational reform has largely focused on creating a common set of standards and doubling down on standardized testing. These efforts have been, at best, unsuccessful, and may have actually made things worse for both students and teachers. The Common Core standards, introduced in 2010, have cost billions of dollars without resulting in [any measurable improvement in results](#). Many critics feel that the emphasis on testing has disempowered and demoralized teachers, helping fuel a chronic shortage of qualified, skilled educators, especially in low-income communities and hard-to-staff roles.

We already knew that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work for many children, and the COVID-19 pandemic threw that into stark relief. While prolonged disruption set back student learning overall, the effect was especially severe for [Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities](#). Low-income families were less likely to be able to provide the internet access, devices, and dedicated, quiet study space needed for successful online learning. [As of spring 2021](#), nearly one-fifth of households with school-age children did not have consistent access to the internet for education, and this lack of access was highest for Latinx, Black, and mixed-race households, with predictable results. A [study](#) by the consulting firm McKinsey suggested that students of color lost three to five months of math learning over the 2019-2020 school year, compared to one to three months lost by white students. A metadata analysis by the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights found that pandemic learning disruptions

were also particularly severe for students learning English as a second language, students with [disabilities](#), LGBTQ+ students, and students who are caregivers for their families.

The pandemic was devastating for educators as well, placing them in the role of front-line emergency responders with limited training or support. Teachers found themselves working even longer hours, learning how to teach online, and in many cases juggling both in-person and online teaching simultaneously. While [teacher turnover](#) actually declined in 2020 (because, heroes), the pandemic took a heavy toll on morale, with one-third of teachers saying it has made them more likely to leave teaching or retire early. [Almost twenty-five thousand people quit](#) the public education sector in August 2021, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics [forecasts](#) that the annual turnover rate for experienced educators and school principals will rise to 42 percent.

But the pandemic also surfaced important signals of potential positive change. While distance education was a disaster for some children who thrived in traditional schools, it proved to be a superior option for some kids disadvantaged by the established system. A number of students, including some with [ADHD, autism, or other neurodivergent conditions](#), found it easier to concentrate when they were not around classmates. Teachers who work with the online learning platform Edutopia reported that some [“shy kids, hyperactive kids, and highly creative kids”](#) are doing better with remote learning than they did

Student at the Great Lakes Science Center’s Learning Lab. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Great Lakes Science Center.



Second-grade student from Butler Elementary School engaged in a scavenger hunt at the Kidzeum as part of the STEAM Residency Program, December 2021. Photo credit: Kari Bedford.

in physical classrooms. Others noted that some students who have been the victims of physical or verbal bullying at school found home to be a safer space for learning. (Some of these beneficial aspects of remote learning mirror strategies that promote [health and wellbeing in the workplace](#) as well, including being flexible about where, when, and how work gets done, and revisiting what constitutes a reasonable workload.)

How can we take what we learned from pandemic-era innovations and use it to improve education long-term? How can we use this disruption as an opportunity to build back better and stronger, transforming the systems we know to be damaging to so many young people?

The Response

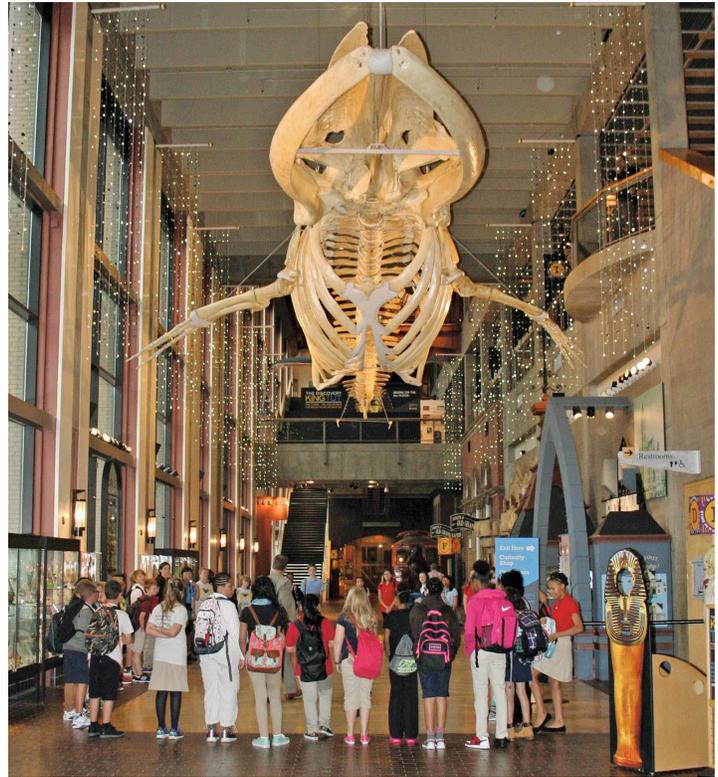
In Society

Pre-pandemic, the US was already shifting away from the top-down, federally driven reform efforts characterized by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Guided by the 2015 successor to NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act, states began promoting flexibility in setting goals, making improvements, and supporting students through a wide range of approaches. As the KnowledgeWorks Foundation observed in a [2018 report](#), “These shifts, some of which have been gaining ground for several years, are creating a more decentralized environment in which changemakers of every stripe have increasing ability to influence public education—and in more ways than before.”

A Framework for Action

To embed themselves in the educational infrastructure of their communities, museums may want to:

- Invest in their capacity to work with schools: for example, by dedicating one or more full-time staff positions to developing and sustaining museum-school partnerships.
- Develop resources that help educators, parents, and students integrate museum assets into school curricula (with particular attention to research documenting [what educators want from digital museum resources](#)).
- Build learning networks that connect diverse educational nodes: museums, libraries, after-school programs, and schools. These learning organizations can work together to reinforce each other's efforts, meet the needs of all learners, and provide formal credit for learning that occurs across the community.
- Double down on digital. Museums can help bridge the digital divide in education by providing internet access and teaching digital skills as well as enriching education with their own digital learning materials and experiences.
- Create permanent “learning labs” to serve diverse learners, including public school, charter school, or homeschool students needing internet access, equipment, quiet, and mentoring to support successful online learning, as well as home-based learners looking for classroom space.
- Consider joining the growing number of “museum schools,” whether by offering a home for an independent school in museum space, helping a school create its own student-run museum, or starting their own schools run by museum staff.



At the Grand Rapids Public Museum School, students use the museum's exhibits—and the city of Grand Rapids—as their campus. Photo credit: Grand Rapids Public Schools.

The disruptions created by COVID-19 demanded innovation and flexibility, and it is widely recognized that education will not simply reset to pre-pandemic norms. Having been essentially drop-kicked into the future, schools have begun to build the infrastructure they need to support distance learning and online instruction. These efforts were given a boost by funding from the [Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and the American Rescue Plan](#) to improve broadband access and close the digital divide. The extended pandemic educational experiment bolstered teachers' confidence in trying out new ideas for how to teach, collaborate with their colleagues, communicate with families, and use technology to engage with students. Now more than two-thirds of teachers [surveyed in 2021](#) say they intend to incorporate tools they adopted during the pandemic into their ongoing teaching repertoire.

This extended, forced experiment in remote learning accelerated some shifts in education policy that were already underway. In 2012, [thirty-six states](#) had already disconnected “seat time” (time spent in the classroom) from the awarding of educational credit. States are waiving seat time in [many different ways](#) (including basing credits on mastery of material and allowing for individual seat-time waivers) and for students with many different needs (including those who have fallen behind, those

who excel, those who don't do well in traditional academic environments, etc.) Asynchronous distance learning can be used to reinforce this trend, empowering students to spend as little or as much time as they need to master the material, and to be evaluated on outcomes rather than facetime.

The pandemic also accelerated parents' search for educational alternatives. Prior to 2020, the US had already seen a slow but steady growth in homeschooling and in the number of students attending charter schools. The COVID-19 pandemic supercharged this trend. [Homeschooling](#) is projected to increase by at least 10 percent, and [charter school](#) enrollment rose by over 7 percent. Non-charter public school enrollment dropped 3.3 percent, representing 1.5 million students. As school funding follows students, such shifts in enrollment will create a sizeable drain on the public education system.

In Museums

The seminal AAM report [Building the Future of Education: Museums and the Learning Ecosystem](#) (2014) chronicled the steady evolution of museums from "informal" educational extras to critical players in mainstream education.

In addition to supporting schools, teachers, and learners with content, field trips, and after-school programs, museums are experimenting with ways to be the primary education provider for some children. The past two decades have seen the creation of a growing number of museum schools of various forms, including schools that operate museums or use museums in their community as classrooms and learning locations, schools co-locating in museum space, and museums founding and operating schools. As we point out in the *Building the Future* report, museums are preadapted for the next era of education, as they are already expert in the kind of self-directed, experiential, distributed learning that fosters the twenty-first century skills of critical thinking, synthesis of information, innovation, creativity, teamwork, and collaboration. They bring these strengths to museum-school partnerships of all types.

The pandemic gave museums the opportunity to demonstrate their educational expertise by stepping in to fill many of the gaps created by the fragility of traditional education systems. Over the past two years, many students lacked critical resources for successful online learning: quiet space, good internet connectivity at home,

During the pandemic, this sixth-grade class from Woodstock Elementary School used a restored barn at Billings Farm & Museum as its classroom. Photo credit: Courtesy of Billings Farm & Museum.



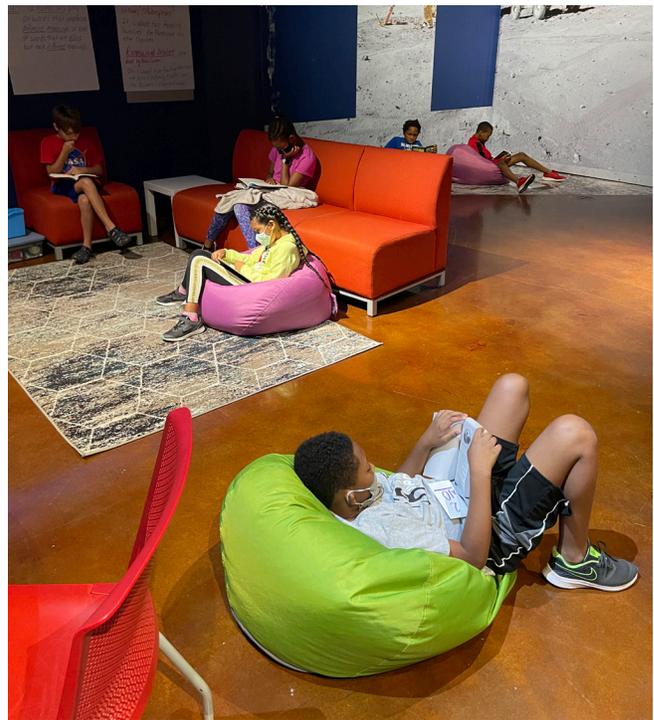
mentors to help with technology and assignments. Many museums responded by creating study halls and providing learning mentors. When some schools needed more room to practice safe physical distancing, local museums, closed to the public, made their buildings and grounds available as classroom space for months on end. Museum educators turned their time and talent to creating virtual field trips, online classes, curricula, and lesson plans to support teachers and parents who were trying to provide a rich learning experience for children cut off from normal schooling. These efforts introduced many teachers to the wealth of digital resources provided by museums, and taught museums that they can serve educators and students across the country, not just in their geographic communities.

Like teachers, museums may make long-term changes based on what they learned during the pandemic. Many museums found that their digital offerings reached people who were unlikely to visit the museum even in normal times, because of time, distance, or other barriers to accessibility. (These anecdotal reports are bolstered by data from the [Culture and Community in a Time of Crisis](#) project, which found museums of all types reached significant numbers of non-museum-goers through digital experiences.) Museums may also decide to continue some of the place-based learning innovations sparked by the pandemic. For example, the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, which provided space for students engaged in virtual learning, has decided to launch a new museum charter school focusing on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Classroom teachers have told the [Pacific Science Center](#) that they want virtual field trips implemented during the pandemic to stay, because it is an efficient use of class time, simplifies logistics, and can more easily be customized to teacher and student needs.

Museum Examples

Museums Supporting Pandemic Education

During the pandemic, some museums, closed to the public, have hosted schools needing more space. [The Children's Museum of Fond du Lac](#) housed students from Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind, a public charter school that “seeks to teach to children’s individual strengths



Children reading at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History’s Little Scholars Program. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History.

and emphasizes experiential learning.” The [Louisiana Children’s Museum](#) in New Orleans gave exclusive access to its building and grounds to pre-K and kindergarten classes from the Langston Hughes Academy, a FirstLine charter school whose students are 98 percent Black and 74 percent eligible for free lunch. Sixth graders from Woodstock Elementary in Vermont found themselves studying at [Billings Farm and Museum](#), in close proximity to the museum’s exhibits and award-winning herd of Jersey cows.

Many schools went virtual, leaving students in need of quiet spaces with good internet connections to support successful virtual learning. Many museums responded by adapting some of their space as in-person learning labs. The [Great Lakes Science Center](#) hosted learning camps during the summer of 2020, with museum staff leading STEM-based activities as well as helping students complete online work assigned by their schools. [The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History](#)’s Little Scholars program allowed first- through fifth-graders to do their virtual classes from inside the exhibit halls. The museum provided laptops and Wi-Fi, and museum facilitators were on hand to answer children’s questions and help them get online. The [Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science](#) in Miami created the Pods Program to host kindergarten through fifth-grade students accessing virtual school, with museum educators providing homework

assistance and technical support.

Museums Providing Formal, Credentialed Learning Experiences

Futures-oriented organizations such as KnowledgeWorks, Big Picture Learning, and Ashoka envision the [future of education](#) as being distributed across the community, with learning taking place in a variety of organizations that are empowered to grant formal credit to students. In 2013, Vermont launched the Flexible Pathways Initiative (Act 77), giving secondary school students the right to create personalized learning plans that include educational experiences outside the formal school setting. Now some museums in that state, including [Shelburne Farms](#) and the [Lake Champlain Maritime Museum](#), are marketing programs as place-based learning that can integrate into personalized learning plans and meet proficiency-based graduation requirements. During the pandemic, [The Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan](#) worked with teachers and homeschool parents to award extra credits for free, independent field trips to the museum's planetarium programs.

Four Kinds of Museum Schools

Schools Using Local Museums as Classrooms

Some examples include the [New York City Museum School](#) (a magnet school in Manhattan for grades nine through twelve), [Normal Park Museum Magnet School](#)

Junior Curators work with collections at the John Early Museum Magnet Middle School. Photo credit: Becky Verner.



(a magnet school in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for kindergarten through eighth grade), and [The Museum School of Avondale Estates](#) (a public charter school in Decatur, Georgia, for kindergarten through eighth grade). These schools build their curricula around “learning expeditions,” using their local museums as extensions of classroom learning, enabling students (either as a full grade level or a single class) to structure learning around in-depth interactions with exhibits and artifacts.

Schools Creating Museums

The [John Early Museum Magnet Middle School](#) (a magnet school in Nashville, Tennessee, for grades five through eight) and The Webb Schools (a private school in Claremont, California, for grades nine through twelve) have created full-fledged museums that engage students in the process of creating exhibits, curating collections, and conducting research. The Webb Schools' [Raymond M. Alf Museum of Paleontology](#) is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.

Schools Hosted on Museum Campuses

The [Manchester Academic Charter School](#) middle school is sited on the campus of the **Pittsburgh Children's Museum** and makes extensive use of its Museum Lab. The [Dr. Charles R. Drew Science Magnet Museum Site](#) houses grades three through eight at the **Buffalo Museum of Science**. The [Lincoln Nursery School](#) is integrated into the **deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum**, and the [Wonder School](#) preschool collaboration uses the **Columbus Museum of Art** as one of its campuses.

Museums Creating or Co-Creating a School

At the [Grand Rapids Public Museum High School](#) (GRPMHS), students work with staff of the **Grand Rapids Public Museum** to catalog and research collections and curate exhibits while using the museum exhibits for place-based learning. GRPMHS, which was one of ten schools internationally to receive the XQ Super School grant in 2016, is an ongoing collaboration between the Grand Rapids Public Museum, Grand Rapids Public Schools, Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, the City of Grand Rapids, Downtown Grand Rapids, Inc., [XQ Super School](#), and the Parent Teacher Community Council.

[The Henry Ford Academy](#) is a public, tuition-free charter high school hosted by **The Henry Ford**. Founded in 1997 and developed in partnership with The Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Co., it serves five hundred students grades 9-12 split between The Henry Ford's **Museum of American Innovation** and historic [Greenfield Village](#).

For a map identifying museum schools across the US, visit the website of the [National Association of Museum Schools](#).

Explore the Future

Signal of Change:

A “signal of change” is a recent news story, report, or event describing a local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scope and scale. Use this signal to spark your thinking about how museums might engage with the education system in the future.

[Are Microschools the Future of Online Learning?](#)

WGBH, June 28, 2021

The coronavirus pandemic dramatically changed the way tens of millions of kindergarten through twelfth-grade students “do school,” and for some families, it was the push they needed to find alternative educational models tailored to their students’ unique needs and interests. An Arizona-based company called Prenda is helping parents to set up “microschools” in their homes for small groups of students. During the pandemic, Prenda’s enrollment multiplied by four times, and the company now supports more than four hundred microschools. Starting this fall, the New Hampshire Department of Education will partner with Prenda to provide learning pods, in multi-age small-group settings, to help up to five hundred students who struggled with setbacks during the pandemic.

Explore the implications of this signal:

Ask yourself, what if there was more of this in the future? What if it became the dominant paradigm? Write and discuss three potential implications of this signal:

1. For yourself, your family, or friends
2. For your museum
3. For the United States



Students in the ten-day residential Junior Scholars Summer Paleontology Program at the Raymond M. Alf Museum of Paleontology at The Webb Schools. Photo credit: Nancy Newman/The Webb Schools.

Additional Resources

- [Shaping the Future of American Public Education: What's Next for Changemakers?](#), Katie King and Katherine Prince (KnowledgeWorks Foundation, 2018). This paper presents four scenarios of educational changemaking to explore how and why education changemakers might influence American public education over the next decade.
- [Building the Future of Education: Museums and the Learning Ecosystem](#) (American Alliance of Museums, 2014). This white paper summarizes the content and ideas coming out of a 2013 assembly of over four dozen educational policy experts, practitioners, funders, education innovators, reformers, student activists, and others shaping the conversation about US education, convened by the American Alliance of Museums and hosted by the National Building Museum in Washington, DC.



Pillar Two: Livable Communities for Our Elders

By 2030, one in five Americans will be over the age of sixty-five, and in some states that figure will top one-quarter. By 2034, older adults will outnumber children in the US population. As the AARP has pointed out, in the past seventy years our primary focus, as a society, has been on meeting the needs of families with children. This focus has shaped every aspect of our lives, from the design of buildings, transportation systems, and neighborhoods to the policies behind zoning and human resources. The unintended result has been the creation of physical and social systems that isolate and marginalize people as they age. This separation is unhealthy for people of all ages. Younger people are deprived of valuable wisdom and expertise, as well as role models for their future selves. Isolating older people from society creates grave risks to their mental and physical health. Museums can play a vital role in creating “age-friendly” communities that support physical activity, social connection, and intellectual stimulation, as well as providing pathways for elders to contribute to their communities and to following generations.

The Challenge

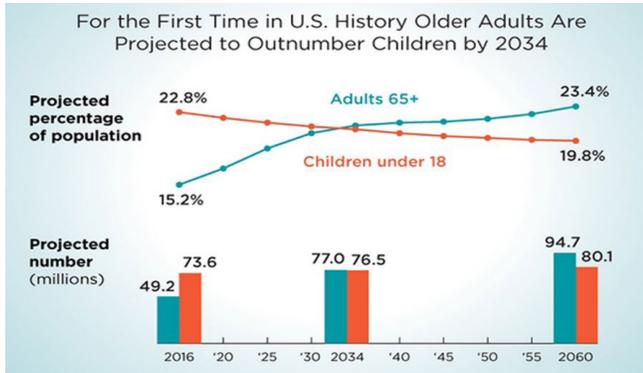
A woman born today in the US can expect to live to be eighty-one years old, a man seventy-six, and those averages are rising with time. Though Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) have long expressed their intent to work until age sixty-eight, the COVID-19 pandemic has impelled a wave of early retirements, meaning many people face a decade or more of “post-work” life, while continuing to want opportunities for meaningful engagement and to give back to their communities. This stage of life is not without challenges. Even though the [Age Discrimination in Employment Act](#) protects

“Ageism is a prejudice against our own future selves and takes root in denial of the fact that we’re going to get old.”

—Ashton Applewhite, author and age-activist

Critical Questions for Museums

- What aspects of conventional museum design and operation pose barriers to access for older audiences?
- How can museums elevate the power, voice, and status of older individuals, helping to create a culture that honors, values, and empowers elders?
- How can museums promote the creation of age-friendly communities and integrate themselves into a seamless network of support?
- How can museums make volunteer opportunities accessible to a broad diversity of older individuals?
- How can museums address ageism in the steps they take to promote diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in their own work cultures?
- How can museums shift older adults from the group least likely to use museums to one of their biggest audiences?
- How might museums bolster their own sustainability by serving older adult audiences better?



Data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

people age forty or older, those who want to remain in or rejoin the workforce often face discrimination in hiring and on the job. [Forty percent](#) of people over the age of sixty-five have some kind of disability—whether that involves mobility, cognition, hearing, vision, or barriers to independent living. About [20 to 25 percent](#) of older adults have mild cognitive impairment, and about 10 percent experience dementia (though that rate seems to be [falling over time](#)).

Regardless of underlying health or ability, everyone who lives to grow old in the US at some point joins the ranks

of people subject to the pervasive, corrosive bias of [ageism](#), a form of discrimination that itself contributes to depression, cognitive decline, ill health, and (perverse-ly) a shorter life span. And [ageism combines](#) with other “isms”—racism, sexism, homophobia, and class prejudices—to create a toxic brew of intersectional damage.

It is increasingly common for older Americans to face these challenges without a network of family or social support. In the US, 27 percent of adults over the age of sixty [live alone](#) (more than double the figure for adults age twenty-five to sixty), and social isolation has a negative impact on health as severe as [smoking up to fifteen cigarettes a day](#). Older Americans are also much less likely than their counterparts elsewhere in the world to live in a household without young children, which contributes to generational isolation as well, denying children access to the care, mentoring, and role modeling that can be provided by older adults. The safety net woven by family relationships will fray even more in coming decades, as the US birthrate drops. In 2010, there were, [on average](#), seven potential caregivers for every senior. The AARP



At the Speed Art Museum, Toya Northington led workshops on making art from memories. Photo credit: Courtesy Speed Art Museum.

A Framework for Action

To help create age-friendly communities, museums can:

- Inventory barriers to access or use. This might include physical barriers (including stairs, ramps, handrails, and restrooms), comfort (including seating, acoustics, lighting, and readability of signage), cultural or social barriers (including attitudes and behavior of staff and ageism reflected in marketing, exhibits, and programming), and transportation (including availability and location of parking and access to public transportation). Ensure that digital design is age-friendly as well.
- Provide age-equitable opportunities for employment and volunteering. Consider training managers and human resources staff on how to avoid ageism in hiring and employment, establishing a working group of paid and volunteer staff to identify how to value and support older volunteers, including age and ageism in the museum's DEAI plans and policies, and addressing age-related stereotypes and assumptions in DEAI training.
- Assess how older adults are represented in your content, from exhibits to marketing, and work to ensure that elders are both seen and valued.
- Identify older adults in your community who are "culture-bearers" and give them platform, power, and authority to transmit the knowledge, experience, skills, and stories that they care for.
- Design programs and services that actively foster intergenerational connections: In addition to creating rewarding relationships, dialogue between older adults and youth has been shown to be an [effective tool](#) to reduce ageist attitudes and behaviors.



Teaching artist Baba Luther Gray leads a course on the influences and rhythms of New Orleans music at the Louisiana State Museum. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum.

expects this number to drop to four by 2030, and to fewer than three by 2050. Nearly 90 percent of Americans over the age of fifty want to "[age in place](#)." However, the lack of family caregivers, and the absence of any nationally funded and organized substitute, will make it difficult for people to remain in their own homes rather than moving to assisted living facilities. In any case, by the end of this decade, 54 percent of seniors will [not be able to afford either assisted care or independent living](#), precipitating crises in both housing and health.

Meanwhile, we've created communities and environments both online and in real life that seem almost intentionally designed to make it hard for elders to remain actively engaged with the world. Only 1 percent of [housing stock](#) in the US features universal design elements such as no-step entrances, single-floor layout, and space designed to accommodate wheelchairs. Some developers create "senior communities" for people over a given age, ranging from housing co-ops to entire suburbs. Though these environments may address challenges of physical accessibility and social isolation, they can become "age bubbles" that isolate residents from a richer spectrum of community assets. The internet can, theoretically, connect the housebound to the world, but it comes with its own set of challenges, as digital design often features illegible text, tiny icons, and other [age-unfriendly features](#).

Museums have room for progress in becoming age-friendly as well. Though there is a widespread assumption that older individuals are among the most frequent visitors to museums, research shows the opposite to be true. In the US, [fewer than a quarter](#) of people age sixty or older visit a museum in any given year. (Older adults may



Similarly, in the broader population, adults over 50 are the *least* likely to visit museums.

So do the math. We are actually under-served, and with our growing population there are a lot more of us that could be museum-goers.

15% of population today are 65 or older

22% will be 65 or older by 2040



You've already got us. To get to all of them, you have to address their needs, and their concerns.



Such as:

- Multi-generational places for family time
- Places that encourage health and well-being
- Increasing social needs
- And more research with non-visitors to learn more about their needs and interests



(BTW, YOU NEED TO DO THAT TRANSFORMATIONAL STUFF TOO!)

Otherwise, you are missing a big opportunity to serve us and our communities more effectively. To really matter.



Data Stories are created for *The Data Museum*, where research conducted by Wilkening Consulting is released. Sources include:

- 2016 Wilkening Consulting broader population sampling
- 2017 Wilkening Consulting Annual Survey of Museum-Goers
- AAM's Museums and America 2017 (in partnership with Wilkening Consulting)
- US Census Bureau

*Data Stories are about regular museum-goers, who visit multiple museums each year and who responded to a survey about museum-goers. They do not represent casual museum visitors.

Visit The Data Museum at wilkeningconsulting.com/datamuseum for supporting context and data.

Data Story courtesy Wilkening Consulting. Graphics courtesy of Longnamedgirl Design.

seem to make up a larger share of the audience because those that do go to museums tend to be frequent visitors.) Many aspects of traditional museum design are [age-hostile](#), including the [lack of seating](#), sensory overload, and barriers to physical accessibility. Even museum programming can add to generational segregation, if older people are funneled only towards offerings (like passive lectures) that museum staff believe they will want.

More than [60 percent](#) of people over the age of fifty-five engage in some sort of volunteer activity, formal or informal, and the opportunity to volunteer is one of the major benefits nonprofits provide to society. Copious research [documents](#) that volunteering helps individuals expand their connections, feel good about themselves, improve their physical well-being, combat social isolation, reduce stress, and learn new skills—benefits that are particularly helpful in supporting healthy aging. [In museums](#), volunteers typically outnumber staff by a factor of six to one, performing a wide range of work including stocking the gift store, preparing research specimens, working as greeters, planning and running fundraising events, and giving tours. However, the benefits afforded by volunteering are often not equitably shared with a museum's community. Historically, the corps of museum volunteers have skewed towards older adults with the time, inclination, and financial resources that enable them to volunteer. As a result, their demographics typically mirror that of museum personnel (both staff and board)—which is often disproportionately white, well-educated, and relatively well-off. Volunteerism can exacerbate inequality if, as in many museums, it is only accessible to people who are already comparatively privileged.

The Response

In Society

There is growing consensus that the most robust solution to the isolation of aging is to bake better design into the landscape and infrastructure of towns and cities. In 2006, the World Health Organization introduced a [framework for age-friendly cities](#) that encompasses eight domains: health care, transportation, housing, social participation, outdoor space, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, and communications and

information. As of 2017, over five hundred cities around the world had signed on, pledging to make their communities better places to grow older, and AARP has worked with WHO to extend this practice to 207 communities in the US. As is invariably true of inclusive design, creating age-friendly communities is good for everyone—increasing access to employment, arts and culture, critical services, community participation, and affordable housing. As [AARP points out](#), “Age-friendly communities foster economic growth, and make for happier, healthier residents of all ages.”

In Museums

Museums play many roles in making communities age-friendly as places of social connection, employment,

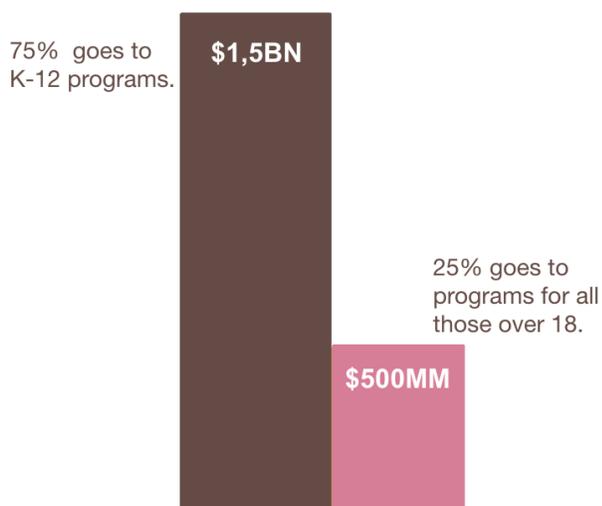
mental and physical engagement, and as influential forces in combatting ageist stereotypes. Since the early 2000s, museums have helped fuel the creative aging movement—using the power of arts engagement to foster healthy, active aging and improve the lives of older people. [Research](#) from the Seeding Vitality Arts initiative of Aroha Philanthropies documents that sustained, meaningful arts engagement supports healthy aging, increases the self-confidence and mental engagement of participants, and fosters social connections.

Museums also step in to meet the needs of the many people experiencing health-related challenges as they age. Programming specifically designed for [people with dementia](#) and their caregivers has been shown to reduce

Richard Walter, PhD, MIM’s curator for United States/Canada and Europe, takes participants through some of the popular instruments and musical styles of Ireland. Photo credit: © 2021 Musical Instrument Museum.



AMERICAN MUSEUMS SPEND \$2 BILLION A YEAR ON EDUCATION PROGRAMS, BUT...



Source: *Building the Future of Education* (AAM, 2014).

levels of depression and improve cognitive functioning and overall quality of life. Engaging with art through viewing, making, and movement can help people coping with Parkinson's disease or other debilitating illnesses to maintain their mobility and social connections.

Museums are also an important component of age-friendly communities regardless of the specific programs they offer. [Recent research](#) shows living in a community with various cultural resources confers a five-year advantage in cognitive age, with museums and similar cultural organizations providing the biggest boost to cognitive health. (However, that benefit is skewed by race, with Black populations experiencing less protective benefit from museums, pointing to the need to improve equitable access to museum space.)

The museum sector is still searching for a good model to reconcile the tensions that sometimes arise between volunteers (often older individuals) and paid staff. Some of the approaches being tried include creating a long runway (even a decade or more) to implement structural changes in volunteer programs, and including volunteers in the process of addressing DEAI and social justice goals. Others focus on creating an organizational culture,

backed up by appropriate procedures, that foster a volunteer corps that is diverse with respect to age, race, and other elements of personal identity.

Museum Examples

Fostering Age-Friendly Design

Recently, the [Design Museum](#) and the [Design Age Institute](#) launched a project to establish a new infrastructure for collaboration and co-creation around design and aging. [Designing a World for Everyone](#) will bring together researchers, designers, innovators, and policymakers to share the latest research and insights into how design can be used to transform public spaces, cities, and communities to support the aging population. Associated programming includes [The Wisdom Hour](#), a creative storytelling space celebrating positive stories of aging, facilitated by [This Age Thing](#). Over the course of a year, the project will place local community groups at the heart of the decision-making process, respond to the needs and concerns of underrepresented groups, and create social impact by removing and reducing barriers to participation.

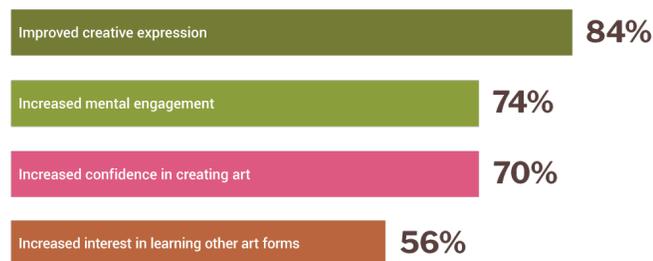
Cultivating Social Connection

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the [Musical Instrument Museum](#) (MIM) in Phoenix partnered with Arizona State University to create virtual programming for senior communities who could not visit the museum in person. The initiative produced two Senior Wellness video series, one for active seniors and one for people in memory care. Teams of music therapy students from ASU developed music therapy interventions that complement virtual tours of MIM's galleries, with a focus on physical skills (drumming, dancing, and other movement), cognitive skills such as attention and memory, and psychosocial components related to self-expression through music.

Creating Intergenerational Connections

The [Museum of Contemporary Art in Tucson's](#) Stay Gold program supports the intergenerational LGBTQ+ community, connecting generations through creativity and making and using contemporary art to explore relevance and meaning in the lives of the participants. In 2018, older adults from Stay Gold proposed creating an intergenerational version of the teen School of Drag performance. Local drag performers taught the workshops

Increased Creativity + Mental Engagement



Data from post-program surveys of participants in Seeding Vitality Arts programs between 2017 and 2019.

and a youth drag performer emceed the show. During the pandemic, museum staff adapted the Stay Gold programming to an [online format](#), offering artmaking prompts inspired by LGBTQ+ artists to maintain the connection so badly needed during this time of heightened isolation. This work was supported by a Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums grant from Aroha Philanthropies.

Cultivating Creative Aging

In 2016, Aroha Philanthropies launched a major multi-year initiative, Seeding Vitality Arts, to foster creative aging programs in a variety of settings, including museums. In 2018, the American Alliance of Museums partnered with Aroha Philanthropies to support a museum-specific cohort through [Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums](#) (SVA), providing twenty organizations with training and resources to develop and implement high-quality, intensive arts learning opportunities for older adults. The resulting programs included an Expressive Movement workshop at the [Anchorage Museum](#) building on Indigenous knowledge and lifeways; “Viva la Vida” artmaking at the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#); and traditional drumming and Mardi Gras beading at the [Louisiana State Museum](#). When the COVID-19 pandemic forced museums to close their doors, leaving elders at even greater risk of isolation, the SVA museums reinvented their work to engage with

participants over remote platforms. The [Olana State Historic Site](#), for example, remastered its plans for a place-based eight-session playwriting workshop. Kicking off with a virtual tour of the historic house, participants spent more time on research using digital documents, and seven professional actors read the finished student scripts over Zoom.

Meeting the Needs of Older Audiences

In 2014, noting that only 3 percent of older adults in New York City visit senior centers, the [Museum of Modern Art](#) created the [Prime Time Collective](#), a diverse group of adults ranging from sixty-one to ninety-four years old, to help identify and address financial, physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers to participation in museum programs. In the past decade, the museum has partnered with community organizations to offer specialized programming for LGBTQ+ older adults, individuals and caregivers coping with Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s disease, and for teens and older adults to come together (for example, the 2016 program Act Your Age). In collaboration with the Martha Stewart Center for Living, the museum launched a “social prescription” program, in which physicians and social workers can write a prescription for art programming at MoMA. For housebound seniors, the museum offers online programming in partnership with the [Virtual Senior Center](#).

Supporting Older Adults with Dementia

Since 2010, the [Frye Art Museum](#) has partnered with the Alzheimer’s Association and the Seattle nonprofit Elderwise to develop and implement participatory arts experiences for people living with dementia and their care partners. In the ensuing decade, the museum has fostered a large community of practice by offering professional development to individuals engaged in similar work, and conducting research that adds to the growing body of literature documenting the contribution of arts engagements to healthy aging. One of the signature programs of this effort is the annual [Creative Aging Conference](#), an interdisciplinary exploration of topics related to art, creativity, and aging.

Explore This Future

Signal of Change:

A “signal of change” is a recent news story, report, or event describing a local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scope and scale. Use this signal to spark your thinking about how museums might support age-friendly communities in the future.

Creating an Age-friendly City

In 2021, the [Purposeful Aging Los Angeles Initiative](#) (PALA) issued [recommendations](#) to advance its goal of making the Los Angeles region “the most age-friendly in the world.” One of the recommendations is to make all tourist attractions and buildings in the Los Angeles region age-friendly. “As new building construction occurs (and buildings are updated over time), it is critical that they provide welcoming, functional environments for all generations. This is especially important for stadiums, **museums**, studios, convention centers, major public facilities, and other tourist attractions that draw a high-volume of visitors, including older adults. The County and City will partner with these institutions/facilities, as well as the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board, USC School of Gerontology, and other partners to develop a **ranking system for major regional tourist attractions**. We anticipate generating awareness of, and attention around tourist facilities that have taken steps to become age-friendly.” (Emphasis added.)

Explore the implications of this signal:

Ask yourself, what if there was more of this in the future? What if it became the dominant paradigm? Write and discuss three potential implications of this signal:

1. For yourself, your family, or friends
2. For your museum
3. For the United States



Retirees donate thousands of hours every year to museums to give back to their communities. Photo credit: Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California / Odell Hussey Photography.

Additional Resources

- [Museums and Creative Aging: A Healthful Partnership](#) (AAM, 2021). This report, authored by Marjorie Schwarzer, opens with an overview of aging and ageism in our country, documents actions being taken to foster positive aging, profiles the work of museums providing creative aging programming, and shares lessons learned from the Seeding Vitality Arts in Museums initiative, funded by Aroha Philanthropies, now known as E.A. Michelson Philanthropy.
- [Age-Friendly Standards for Cultural Organizations](#) (The Family Arts Campaign, 2017). These standards are designed to help cultural organizations provide a welcoming and positive experience for everyone, regardless of their age, and to facilitate intergenerational interactions.
- [Global report on ageism](#) (World Health Organization, 2021). This report outlines a framework for action to reduce ageism for use by governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations, and includes a toolkit for the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism.
- The [Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse](#) is an online compendium of free resources to educate people about ageism and help dismantle it. It includes information about and links to blogs, books, articles, videos, speakers, and other tools (workshops, handouts, curricula, etc.) accessible to the general public.



Pillar Three: Mental Health for All

The United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#) identify “good health and well-being” as critical elements in creating a peaceful and prosperous future. Within that broad mandate, the need to foster mental health is particularly acute. The stigma attached to mental illness inflicts additional damage through bias and exclusion, and if people do seek help, they may face financial, geographic, or social barriers to accessing care. COVID-19 may amplify this challenge in the coming decades, with long-term impacts including increased rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. A deep body of research has already documented the role museums can play in a resilient and equitable infrastructure of health writ large. The stress test of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that museums can be essential partners in a network of support for mental health as well.

The Challenge

In Western society, the theory and practice of mental health has been shaped by history, philosophy, and traditions that view the mind and body as separate entities. Only recently have we begun to recognize the duality of body and mind as false, and to acknowledge that people experiencing mental illnesses should receive the same respect, compassion, and access to care as people coping with physical challenges.

This welcome step toward a rational and caring approach to mental illness comes none too soon. Mental health has been [declining in the US](#) since the early twentieth century. Some research suggests one culprit is a cultural shift from intrinsic to extrinsic goals. Other contributing factors include the cumulative effects of racism and discrimination, the rising number of people living alone, and (especially for teens) the dark side of social media, including

“What mental health needs is more sunlight, more candor, and more unashamed conversation.”

—Glenn Close, actress

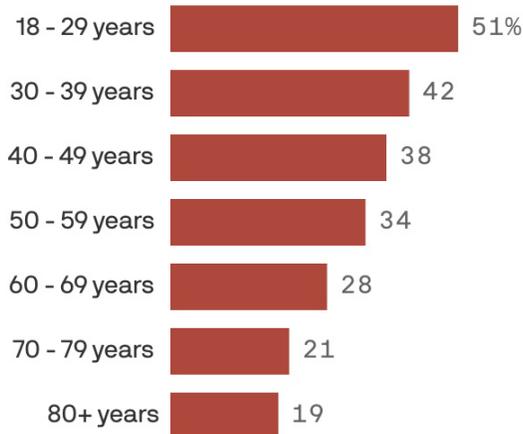
Critical Questions for Museums

- What groups, on the museum’s staff and in its communities, are at high risk from stress, isolation, and other factors that can damage mental health?
- How can museums combat the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination attached to mental illness?
- How can museums foster mental health among their own staff and volunteers, create a healthy work culture, and support people in managing mental illness for themselves and their families?
- How can museums equip their staffs with the training, tools, and support they need to address the topic of mental health safely and effectively?
- How can museums play a meaningful role in the network of support and services that address mental health in their community?

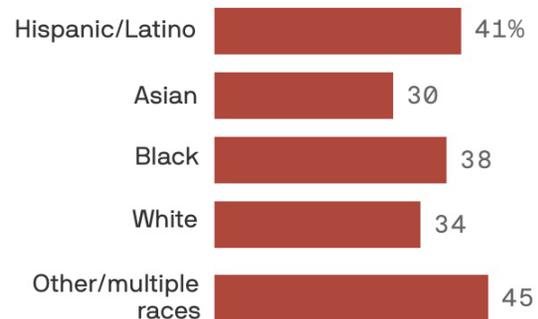
Percentage of population who have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder

Survey of U.S. adults conducted between April 23, 2020, and October 11, 2021

By age group



By race/ethnicity



Data: CDC; Note: Asian, Black, and white respondents identified as non-Hispanic, and are of a single race. Chart: Jacque Schrag/Axios.

bullying and body-shaming. Whatever the cause, by 2018, one in five Americans were experiencing challenges to their mental health, and one in twenty faced serious mental illness.

Then came the additional stress, isolation, and fear induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, one in every three Americans reported they were [suffering from depression](#), and [anxiety and depression severity scores](#) were one and a half to two times higher than they were in 2019. The pandemic's effects on mental health were particularly severe for people disadvantaged by or excluded from existing networks of support, including [women](#); people who are unmarried; low-income households; children age eleven to seventeen; LGBTQ+ youth; people who identify as Black, Native American, and Asian or Pacific Islander; and people already experiencing mental illness. Medical historians tracking mental health in the wake of [other large-scale disasters](#), including the Chernobyl nuclear accident in Ukraine (1986), the SARS pandemic (2003), and Hurricane Katrina (2005) have found long-term increases in the rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and other mental health problems. The COVID-19 pandemic will likely have a

similar long-term impact on mental health. This damage to individuals translates into damage for critical systems as well. The past two years have been particularly hard on front-line workers, with one result being that many essential personnel, including [health care workers](#) and [teachers](#), may leave their professions, further weakening our ability to support community needs.

Over the course of the pandemic, as museums were forced to close their doors to the public, many museum workers experienced layoffs, furloughs, and financial stress. Others scrambled to move their work online or fill different roles. Reopening brought its own challenges, including increased workloads and the stress of enforcing safety policies with occasionally hostile or combative patrons. The results of a [survey](#) conducted by the Alliance in March 2021 reflected the toll this has taken on people working in the museum sector, with respondents rating the pandemic's effect on their mental health and well-being at an average of 6.6 on a scale of zero to ten (ten being the worst). Fifty-seven percent of respondents were worried about burnout, and, perhaps in consequence, fewer than half were confident they would be working in the sector in three years.

The Response

In Society

Pre-pandemic, America was making slow but measurable progress in improving attitudes towards and support for people experiencing mental illness. Many businesses are making voluntary improvements to policies, procedures, and benefits, for example, by offering mental health days or explicitly defining “sick leave” to include time taken to tend to mental health. Increasingly, employees are encouraged or required to use all their vacation time. And human resources staff have learned that it isn’t enough to simply offer mental health support through an employee assistance program; it’s critical to actively cultivate the use of these services by, for example, educating staff on the benefits, simplifying the enrollment process, and providing assurance that personal information is kept private.

We are making progress at the federal level as well. The Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 required large-group employer insurance plans to cover mental health services at the same level as medical and surgical interventions. Still, many people fell through the holes of existing safety nets. When the [Affordable Care Act](#) (ACA) passed in 2010, more than forty-eight million people in the US were uninsured, and many individual and small-group plans did not cover mental health treatment at all. ACA has expanded coverage and access to mental health care and seems to be improving outcomes.

But ACA cannot address some fundamental barriers to mental health treatment, including the stigma attached to mental illness and lack of accessible treatment in some communities. Paradoxically, by making things worse, the COVID-19 pandemic may have sparked progress on those fronts, in particular by accelerating the [adoption of telemedicine](#) by practitioners and the public. Between January 2020 and February 2021, mental health televisits [increased by 6,500 percent](#). (That is not a typo.) In addition to connecting to a medical practitioner for a traditional visit over the internet, people in need of counseling can now choose from a burgeoning number of [mental health apps](#) to access therapy and cope with stress, anxiety, addiction, eating disorders, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Early assessment suggests



Sit, Stay, Heal brings therapy dogs to the museum setting.
Photo credit: Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

these digital interventions can be effective and reach people without access to traditional care.

The pandemic may provoke a profound cultural shift as well. The past two years have brought conversations about mental illness out into the open in daily conversation, the press, and social media, as people struggled with their own mental health or to support friends and family facing similar challenges. It is possible that this mass shared experience will have a long-term effect for the better, helping reduce the shame, ostracism, discrimination, and marginalization attached to mental illness. Our national challenge is to build on these advances, making permanent changes that support remote access to appropriate care, elevating the importance of mental health, and destigmatizing mental illness.

In Museums

A large body of research documents that engaging with art (through viewing, making, or museum visits) has tangible psychological benefits, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as reducing social isolation and loneliness. Building on this work, any museum can find ways to explore and illuminate the experience of mental health in ways consonant with their missions.

Science museums often tackle the topic head-on, as the [Museum of Science, Boston](#), and the [Science Museum of Minnesota](#) did in recent major exhibitions. Historic houses and sites, of which there are an estimated eighteen thousand in the US, also have a compelling opportunity to address the topic, because many of the people they memorialize and interpret faced mental health

challenges. (To name just a few from what would be a very long list: Abraham and Mary Lincoln, Nikola Tesla, Eugene O'Neill, and Winston Churchill). This provides an opportunity to surface and normalize the experience of mental illness, even though that conversation may not be the content visitors expect. Staff may need to navigate public expectations as they reframe how a site interprets the history and current impact of mental health.

Any museum can use the human element behind its topic—art, science, music, literature, natural history, or other—to address mental health in some part of its interpretation. Simply acknowledging the fact of mental illness as an important component in the lives of notable people can help to destigmatize the topic and recognize a range of conditions as part of the human experience.

A Framework for Action

Inward Action

To create a healthy work environment inside the museum, museums may want to:

- Create a [work culture](#) that does not stigmatize mental illness. This includes paying attention to the language used in the workplace, training people to recognize and avoid inappropriate or disrespectful terminology.
- Teach managers how to provide appropriate support and assist the people they supervise in accessing help.
- Have leadership set an example by being open and honest about any challenges they themselves face, and by creating a safe space for others to speak up about their needs.
- Use regularly scheduled surveys to gauge levels of stress among staff and detect early warning signs of burnout.
- Offer staff training around mental health, helping everyone to recognize signals of colleagues who may be in distress, offer appropriate non-judgmental support, and help people to access assistance.
- Implement employment practices that foster stability and resilience. Review the security of employment, e.g., the use of short-term contracts or part-time work that does not include benefits, which can add significantly to employee stress and disproportionately impact front-line workers.

Outward Action

To foster mental health, support people experiencing mental illness, and combat stigma, museums may want to:

- Develop relationships with community resources and agencies, such as health and counseling centers, hospitals, and academic research programs, to explore how the museum can learn from and contribute to their work.
- Familiarize themselves with the research on how arts engagement can foster mental health and assess how to integrate such engagement into their exhibits and programming.
- Provide training for staff and volunteers to support their engagement in the topic of mental health, including how to interface with the public around sensitive and potentially triggering issues and how to manage the personal impact of this work.
- Design safe spaces for the public to explore challenging and potentially uncomfortable or disturbing subject matters. This might include warning visitors about content, providing them with choices to engage or not engage, and providing places designed to support reflection and processing of difficult emotions.
- Consider how the museum will continue to support communities and individuals who collaborate with your organization around mental health. Think about what any given project will produce—information, resources, relationships, etc.—that will continue to benefit these groups after an exhibit or program concludes.



Visitors on a Mood Tour at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg. Richard Hall, 1860-1942, *Gathering at Church Entrance, 1884*, Oil on canvas, Gift of Simon Rosen. Photo credit: Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

Sometimes museums can also help with struggles that are not just individual, but traumas shared by a community. Many museums have stepped forward to take on this role in the wake of disasters, for example, by fielding teams for rapid response collecting to help the community remember and process what has happened. Some museums are specifically created to help communities memorialize, contextualize, and process the impact of tragic events. These museums often take a trauma-informed approach to their exhibit design and offer programming to support the healing of their communities.

While museums contribute unique strengths to the infrastructure of mental health, they rarely have staff who are experts in dealing with mental illness or in communicating around a topic that can be very sensitive and upsetting. For this reason, museums that address mental health skillfully and powerfully often draw on the expertise of hospitals, university research departments, and social service organizations.

During the pandemic, museums had to look to the safety and wellbeing of their own staffs to create a stable base from which to help their communities. The same AAM research referenced above that explored the damage inflicted by the pandemic on people working in the museum sector also documented what museums were doing to care for their employees. Some of the actions most appreciated by staff included providing clear communications about information and decisions, offering a flexible work schedule, and including staff in decision-making. These lessons can help museums lay the foundation for a healthy work culture in post-pandemic times as well.

During the COVID crisis, museums also looked beyond their walls to support the mental health of their communities in many creative and generous ways. Some created outdoor art installations to boost the spirits of people in nursing homes and hospitals. Others provided online art therapy programs or used their collections and connections to offer mindfulness and meditation experiences online or via podcasts. The success of these programs may ensure they continue to be offered even as the pandemic fades.

Museum Examples

Helping Communities Process Shared Trauma

After the Champlain Towers collapse in 2021, [HistoryMiami](#) staff gathered and preserved hundreds of letters, artworks, and personal items placed by friends and families of victims on an impromptu “Wall of Hope” near the site of the disaster. The [Orange County Regional History Center](#) (OCRHC) filled a similar role after the Pulse Nightclub mass murders in 2016, creating the One Orlando Collection from thousands of objects left at public memorials or donated to the museum. The [Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum](#), the [9/11 Memorial and Museum](#), and—picking up on the work begun by OCRHC—the [National Pulse Memorial & Museum](#) are all dedicated to the long-term work of helping their communities memorialize and process the impact of local tragedies.

Creating Networks of Collaboration

The [National Museum of Mental Health](#) project is a “museum without walls” that works with artists, curators, mental health professionals, and people with lived

experience of mental illness to create touring exhibits, as well as collaborating with community, local, and national not-for-profit, for-profit, governmental, and educational entities interested in creating positive mental health outcomes.

Making Art Therapy Accessible Online

During COVID lockdowns in Ontario, the [Art Gallery of Windsor](#) partnered with the local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association to offer online art therapy programs to support mental health and wellbeing. The [National Museum of Qatar](#) worked with art psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and physicians to create and pilot a telehealth art therapy program for children to counteract the effects of social distancing and isolation. [The Tampa Museum of Art](#) provides both virtual and in-person sessions for Connections, its free mental healthcare community art engagement program.

Partnering with Community Health Organizations

In 2015, the [Tate Modern](#) collaborated with a range of mental health organizations, including arts networks, art



The travelling exhibit *Mental Health: Mind Matters* creates a safe space for important conversations about mental illness. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Science Museum of Minnesota.

studios, and community service providers, to produce workshops and installations celebrating positive mental health to mark World Mental Health Day. In 2017, [Utica Children’s Museum](#) merged with the ICAN Family Resource Center, a nonprofit dedicated to providing “individualized and non-traditional services and care to the highest risk individuals and families with social, emotional, mental health and behavioral challenges.” ICAN is in the process of building a new facility that will house the museum together with family services, using trauma-informed approaches to design exhibits and programs to create a welcoming space for all children. Some of the staff at the newly reopened museum will have degrees in social work and will draw on ICAN’s clinicians and social workers for additional training.

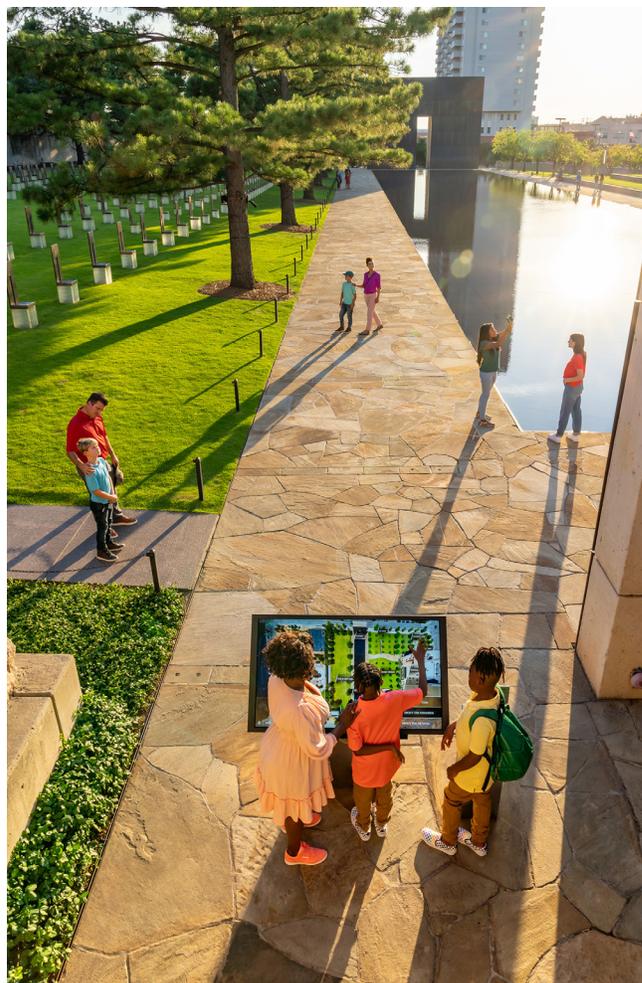
Addressing Mental Illness Through the Lens of Mission

In 2017, the **National Building Museum** opened [Architecture of an Asylum](#), an exhibition exploring the evolution of the theory and practice of caring for the mentally ill through an examination of the history of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC. The exhibit traced how reformers such as Dorothea Dix helped foster the development of a more humane and compassionate approach towards caring for people with mental illness. In 2020, **Kew Palace** opened [George III: The Mind Behind the Myth](#), an exhibit that used historic and contemporary displays to challenge contemporary attitudes towards mental ill health. Members of the public contributed objects and recorded videos documenting their own personal mental health stories. Working with the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), a suicide prevention charity, Kew staff provided items, including beer coasters and postcards, designed to support public conversation, and trained staff on how to talk about mental health and suicide in a museum setting.

Explore the Future

Signal of Change:

A “signal of change” is a recent news story, report, or



“We come here to remember those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever. May all who leave here know the impact of violence. May this memorial offer comfort, strength, peace, hope and serenity.” — Mission statement of the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum.

event describing a local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scope and scale. Use this signal to catalyze your thinking about how museums might support mental health in the future.

[Brussels doctors to prescribe museum visits for Covid stress](#)

The Guardian, September 2, 2021

Doctors in Brussels will be able to prescribe museum visits as part of a three-month trial designed to rebuild mental health amid the COVID pandemic. Patients being treated for stress at Brugmann hospital, one of the largest in the Belgian capital, will be offered free visits to five public museums in the city, covering subjects from

fashion to sewage. The results of the pilot will be published next year, with the intention that the initiative can be rolled out further if successful in alleviating symptoms of burnout and other forms of psychiatric distress. The alderman responsible for culture in Brussels said she had been inspired by a scheme in Quebec, Canada, where doctors can prescribe up to fifty museum visits a year to patients. In the Brussels pilot, accompanied visits will be prescribed to individuals and groups of in-patients at Brugmann hospital.

Implications:

Ask yourself, what if there was more of this in the future? What if it became the dominant paradigm? Write and discuss three potential implications of this signal:

1. For yourself and your family and friends
2. For your museum
3. For your community



In the years since the 2016 mass shooting at Pulse nightclub, the site has become an informal memorial to the lives lost. Now, it will become a permanent memorial and museum, following a long process of community consensus-building. Image credit: Coldefy & Associés with RDAI, Courtesy of onePULSE Foundation.

Additional Resources

- [The Recovery Room](#), created by Rachel Mackay, Manager of the History Royal Palaces properties within the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, shares resources related to working with staff and the public around mental health. These include [Our Stories, Our Visitors, Our Selves: a model for looking after front-facing teams when telling challenging stories](#), [10 Tools for Supporting Front of House \[Staff\]](#), and a video on [mental health and front-of-house staff](#).
- [The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance](#), a free membership organization based in the UK, provides information, training, and peer support. Its resources include toolkits, fact sheets, case studies, research, and evaluation.
- [Contemporary Collecting: and ethical toolkit for museum practitioners](#) (London Transport Museum, 2020). This toolkit explores some of the ethical judgments that contemporary collectors make and offers case studies, reflection, guides, and further information. One of the chapters addresses the issues inherent in collecting around topics that might prompt or relate to a person's experience with trauma or distress.



Pillar Four:

Emergency Response in the Face of Disasters

America's communities face a multitude of threats in coming decades, including severe storms, cold and heat emergencies, power outages, civil unrest, and resulting disruptions to essential services and supply chains. The systems we've created to respond to these emergencies are fragmented and fragile, and often prioritize the protection and repair of privileged communities. It will take a "[whole-of-society](#)" approach, integrating for-profit, nonprofit, and government entities, to create a robust and equitable system to prepare for and respond to disasters and take steps to reduce future risk. Many of these risks are driven by climate change, and museums can use their nonpartisan credibility and their communications skills to build consensus on climate policy. Through how they do their work and deploy their resources, museums can be an integral part of a collective approach to minimizing the risk of disasters and aiding their communities when disaster does strike.

The Challenge

Communities have always been at risk from natural and man-made disasters, but we are entering an era in which many of these risks will be radically amplified. Much of this shift is being driven by climate change, which is intensifying temperature extremes, thereby causing flood and drought and making severe weather events more frequent. Heat waves are already the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the US, and extreme heat events could increase substantially by the end of the century. Warmer, drier conditions and a longer fire season are projected to result in a 30 percent increase in the areas burned by lightning-sparked [wildfires](#) between 2011 and 2060. Climate change also brings climate instability, with some states experiencing extreme precipitation

"There's nothing like a jolly good disaster to get people to start doing something."

—Prince Charles

Critical Questions for Museums

- How can museums prepare themselves for an era of rising risk?
- How can museums, having secured their own safety in the face of these threats, extend this protection to their community, particularly groups that are neglected by current systems of disaster management?
- How can museums combat climate change and reduce its effect as a [threat multiplier](#) before, during, and after disasters?
- How can museums weave themselves into an integrated network of resilience and response?
- What role can museums play in helping their communities understand the changing landscape of risk and create long-term plans for adaptation?

while others bake in drought. Given the global lack of progress in slowing the climate crisis, climate risk is going to continue to rise in the coming century.

Because climate change is driven by anthropogenic forces, it seems misleading to call flood, storm, and fire “natural,” in contrast to “man-made,” disasters. Be that as it may, the US is experiencing a rise in civil disruptions as well, with 2020 marking [record levels](#) of violent mass demonstrations and rioting. Given our country’s level of political polarization, and the fact that a third or more of citizens regardless of political identity believe that [violence is justified](#) to achieve political goals, this trend is unlikely to slow or reverse anytime soon.

In fact, the rising risks of climate events and civil violence are intertwined. The damage from climate disasters falls disproportionately on poor communities and communities of color, while federal disaster spending [favors the wealthy and white](#). (Indeed, disasters have been shown to [exacerbate wealth inequality](#).) Cities are notorious heat islands, which in turn contributes to heat-related illness and death. [Communities of color](#) experience the highest temperatures because they have fewer public amenities that lower temperatures, such as trees, landscaped medians, and parks, and are less likely to have air conditioning. The correlation between race and temperature is so strong that historic maps of [redlined neighborhoods](#) mirror contemporary urban heat maps. These inequities, the social movements they spark, and the backlash

against calls for reform add fuel to cultural and political tensions that can lead to violence.

Over the next century, climate change will threaten the very existence of some communities. The residents of [Isle de Jean Charles](#), a largely Native American community in the bayous of Louisiana, were tagged as the “first US climate refugees” when the tribe lost 98 percent of its land to rising sea levels. They will not be the last. Climatologists project that, due to flooding and extreme heat, some major cities, including Miami, New Orleans, and Chicago, may become [“unbearable for humans”](#) by 2100. That doesn’t mean humans, being both resilient and stubborn, will abandon their homes, but it does dramatize the level of risk communities face, especially vulnerable communities without sufficient access to protection, relief, or ability to evacuate.

The Response

In Society

In 2020, the US experienced [twenty-two separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters](#), shattering previous annual records. This roster of destruction included seven disasters linked to tropical cyclones, thirteen linked to severe storms, one linked to drought, and one linked to wildfires. Together, these events inflicted \$95 billion in damages. We don’t, and arguably can’t, maintain a large enough cadre of government workers devoted to disaster response to cope with this level of impact. Instead,

As the country strengthens its disaster response, we also need to reduce inequity and address some of the concerns that underlie social unrest. Some strategies for mustering emergency responders create their own harm. For instance, many states depend on prisoners to supplement their professional firefighting crews, paying them nominal wages and, because Black people are incarcerated in disproportionate numbers, adding to the racial inequity of climate-related risk. (In California, pre-pandemic, inmates made up a third of the wildfire-fighting personnel.) Nationally, we’ve created a perverse system of incentives that lead agencies charged with protecting property and providing relief to maximize their economic impact by prioritizing high-value properties. The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) National Advisory Council has [called on the agency to reform programs that favor victims who are wealthy and own property \(and are more likely to be white\)](#). However, FEMA has yet to implement any of the council’s recommendations.



In February 2021, the International Museum of Art & Science converted itself into a daytime warming center for residents of McAllen, Texas, who lost heat, power, and water during Winter Storm Uri. Photo credit: Courtesy of Vanessa Vasquez, @homeschoolme.

the US relies on networks of response, using reservoirs of paid and volunteer labor to supplement the standing workforce of emergency responders. The [American Red Cross](#) draws on a network of three hundred thousand volunteers to respond to more than sixty thousand disasters every year. In California, which ranks second in the list of [states most likely to experience natural disasters](#), all state employees can be called up and reassigned for emergency response.

Planners increasingly look to systems-level efforts to buffer the risks of climate disasters, integrating protection into the design of neighborhoods and cities. Over time the focus of flood control has expanded from hard engineering (i.e., levees, dams, and reservoirs) to encompass “soft” strategies such as zoning, forestation, and controlled flooding. Cities are setting goals for [tree canopy coverage](#) and [green space](#), including parks and gardens, to lower city temperatures. State and local governments are encouraging or mandating xeriscaping (landscaping

with plants that need little or no water), even paying residents to [rip out their lawns](#), to adapt to drought. More and more often, mitigation is being seamlessly integrated into urban design, for example, in the form of a [skate-park-cum-urban-sculpture](#) in Denver that doubles as a “bioswale” that soaks up stormwater and prevents flooding.

The sheer cost, both human and financial, of responding to climate disasters underscores the wisdom of investing in the largest scale of prevention—slowing the pace of climate change and hopefully staving off the worst-case projections. The US [recently committed](#) to cutting its greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent or more (compared to 2005 levels) by 2030, and reaching a net-zero emissions economy no later than 2050. While federal action lagged under the previous administration, [state and tribal governments](#) stepped in to take action. Currently fifteen states and territories are implementing plans for a 100 percent clean energy future, and more

A Framework for Action

Inward Action

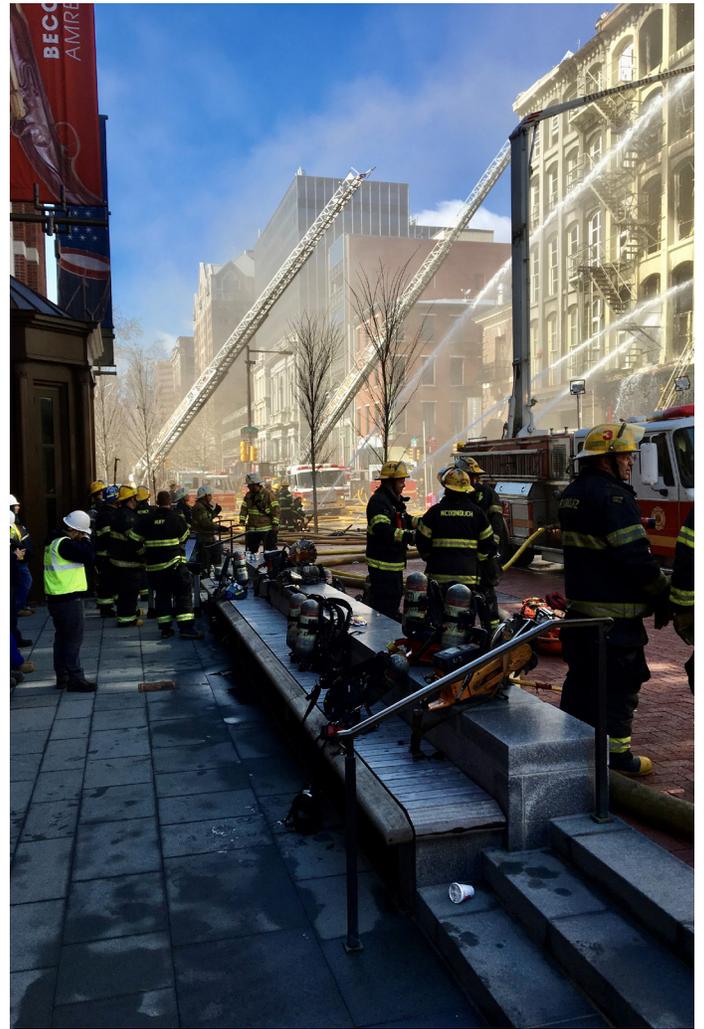
To incorporate community risk mitigation and disaster response into their internal planning, museums can:

- Identify existing assessments of local climate risk, or if there are none, advocate for their development.
- Create risk management and disaster response relationships before the next disaster strikes and maintain them between crises.
- Incorporate design elements into renovations or master planning that help the museum's property buffer the community against risks such as flood, heat, and fire.
- Include community needs in disaster planning and emergency response plans.
- Create policies and procedures for deploying staff as needed (at the level of community, city, or state) as part of larger relief and response efforts.

Outward Action

To become a formal part of our infrastructure of disaster response, museums can:

- Integrate the museum into a larger network of responders, for example by connecting with local and state emergency managers to incorporate the museum and its resources into government or agency response plans.
- Identify the biggest risks to the museum's community and assess how the museum can help with mitigation and relief. In particular, consider how the museum might make disaster preparedness and response more equitable by addressing the needs of communities marginalized by current systems.
- Create and disseminate educational materials that raise public awareness of risk and train people on how to prepare for disasters.
- Help community leaders and residents engage in long-term thinking about how they will respond to a changing landscape of risk. Collaborate with city planners, architects, artists, scientists, and policy-makers to create scenarios, bring them to life via design charrettes and exhibits, and invite the public to use these designs to help envision the future they want to build for their community.



In February 2018, the Museum of the American Revolution sheltered and fed neighbors displaced by a four-alarm fire. Photo credit: ZeeAnn Mason, Museum of the American Revolution.

than fifty tribal climate action plans are in place in North America. Pushed by investors, consumers, employees, activists, and in some cases the courts, a growing number of for-profit companies have [pledged](#) to reduce their emissions (though it can be [difficult to parse](#) which commitments are real and which are “[carbonwashing](#)”). And while focusing on climate-friendly steps individuals can take diverts attention from the critical responsibility of government and industry, it is certainly true that individuals, companies, industry, and government need to be “[all-in](#)” [together](#) if we are to slow the pace of climate disaster.

Even if our united climate action does succeed in steering us towards the best outcome that is still possible, we need to plan for what we can't



Last year, **Brianna Correa**, a guest services cashier from the San Bernardino County Museum, found herself using her museum pro skills to provide support and morale boosts to overworked ICU nurses when California government museum workers were deployed into critical emergency roles. **She shares with us it what it was like.**



change in the face of escalating natural disasters, up to and including [managed retreat](#) from areas that are no longer habitable. States, cities, and communities are making plans for how to adapt to a future of drought, heat, and rising sea levels. Governments and insurance providers are reexamining the policies and subsidies that have masked the risk of living in floodplains and on seaside properties. Many coastal communities are using federal and state funding to raise homes up above flood level, buy out homeowners entirely, or swap public open spaces in the interior for private land on the shore. In the future, more communities may [follow the lead of Valmeyer, Illinois](#), which moved the whole town two miles farther away from the flood risk posed by the Mississippi River. The residents of Valmeyer were overwhelmingly white and well-off. How can we ensure that communities that are less white and less wealthy are able to “manage retreat” as well, while keeping their culture and identities intact?

In Museums

As public-facing organizations, many of which are devoted to the long-term care of heritage, museums are uniquely positioned to help the public in times of

emergency. By expanding their attention from inside the organization to the outside world, museums' disaster response can encompass their community as well. Most museums devote considerable resources to climate control, preadapting them to act as cooling stations for their neighbors during heat emergencies. Many museums in high-risk areas have armored their buildings and property to withstand earthquakes, fire, and flood. Through their own disaster planning, they may have formed connections with local emergency responders. These preparations put them in an excellent position to offer refuge and assistance to their community when disaster strikes—whether that takes the form of opening their galleries and classrooms to provide safe space, serving as a staging area for emergency responders, or helping to distribute relief.

Some museums are, by virtue of their governance, part of a larger network of response, for example, within a university or a state. Others voluntarily integrate themselves into local systems, sharing staff whose knowledge, training, and skills can be adapted to disaster response. Even more step in as need arises, in response to local disasters ranging from fire and flood to tragedies resulting from violence and hate.

A growing number of museums are reshaping their properties to function as part of a larger buffer of protection for their community's green infrastructure: creating plantings that slow runoff, cache water, and reduce flooding; designing green, cooling areas in urban landscapes; or xeriscaping their grounds to reduce water use. The impact of these efforts is magnified through museum education, showing individuals and other businesses how they can follow suit.

One of the most powerful things museums can do to help society tackle systems-level change is to foster public understanding about climate science and risk. As has been widely recognized at the international level, [museums are key sites for climate education, engagement, action, and research](#). Though climate change has become a highly partisan issue in the US, museums enjoy strong, nonpartisan trust on the part of the American public and can use that trust, together with their skills



Photo credit: Courtesy of the Louisiana Children's Museum.

at communicating science and fostering conversation, to create a common basis for a national consensus on climate policy.

Museum Examples

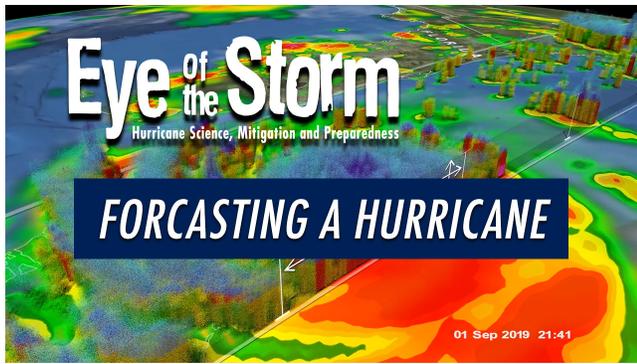
Responding to Immediate Needs

In the early morning hours of Sunday, February 18, 2018, a four-alarm fire broke out in an apartment building across the street from the newly opened [Museum of the American Revolution](#) in Philadelphia. As the blaze escalated, residents and guests from an adjacent hotel evacuated into freezing cold temperatures. At the request of the fire chief, the museum's operations team opened the museum to dozens of displaced neighbors, offering warmth, restrooms, and water. When it became clear the museum would be closed to the public that day, the catering team provided evacuees with a sumptuous brunch, prepared for a now-cancelled event. In the following weeks, the museum collected donations from visitors eager to provide aid, as well as supplying workspace for emergency personnel and staff of the shuttered hotel.

In February 2021, oscillating pressure patterns in the Arctic created a record-breaking “[deep freeze](#)” in Texas and plunged the state into darkness. As the power grid faltered, nearly three million families were left without heat, and as pipes burst, many lacked water as well. In McAllen, the [International Museum of Art and Culture](#) quickly turned itself into a daytime warming center, waiving admission for three days and setting up socially distanced stations for people to work, study, and charge their electronic devices. Staff treated visitors to hot cocoa, led tours, and trotted out the museum's Animal Ambassadors to entertain the children.

Resilient Design as Part of Community Buffering

Following Hurricane Katrina, [the Louisiana Children's Museum in New Orleans](#) reimagined its mission and purpose to meeting the needs of its recovering community. Its new campus, which opened in 2019, models resilient design and contributes to community flood control. The site includes a lagoon edged with native plantings that can retain up to three feet of water from a storm event, reducing flooding in the surrounding neighborhood.



Courtesy of the Museum of Discovery and Science, Ft. Lauderdale.

In 2018, the [Charles H. Wright Museum](#) of African American History in Detroit partnered with the **Michigan Science Center** to launch the [Ripple of Impact: Museum Stormwater Initiative](#) to manage stormwater diversion in the neighborhood that unites their campuses. Through the use of bioswales, urban garden space, and permeable paving, the project reduces runoff, mitigates flooding, and prevents pollution of the Detroit River.

Integrating with Networks of Response

In California, the state government code stipulates that all public employees—including staff of state or county museums—can be called up as disaster service workers in response to “natural, man-made, or war-caused emergencies.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the staff of the [San Bernardino County Museum](#) was reassigned to temporary roles in the community, while the museum itself was closed to the public. Their assignments included working at a regional medical center as contact tracers and supporting the November 2020 election as poll workers and drivers.

The [Wisconsin Historical Society](#) (WHS) set a voluntary goal of supporting agencies at the forefront of the state’s pandemic response. Together with employees of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Department of Health Services, more than fifty WHS staff—including archivists, registrars, curators, cartographers, and librarians—formed a joint COVID Response Team. One staff member applied her logistics skills to helping coordinate the distribution of supplies for

testing. The director of one WHS site co-led an Equity in Testing workgroup dedicated to ensuring that Indigenous communities had access to testing and support. WHS’s Cultural Cartographer used his training to build a data model and mapping system to track COVID hotspots for the state.

Public Education

Communities across Florida are at risk from hurricanes from June through November each year, and these storms are growing in frequency and intensity. In 2020, the state experienced a record high of thirty named storms. With a large proportion of the population at risk, it is essential to provide accurate, timely, and trusted information about how to prepare for hurricanes. The **Museum of Discovery and Science** in Ft. Lauderdale works with the International Hurricane Research Center at Florida International University, Broward County Emergency Management Division, and the City of Fort Lauderdale Domestic Preparedness and Emergency Management Bureau to present an annual “Eye of the Storm” hurricane preparedness program, free to the public. In 2020, during pandemic shutdown, the event went virtual, resulting in a twelve-episode [video series](#) available on YouTube, Facebook, and the museum’s own website.

Promoting Long-Term Thinking

From 2009 to 2010, **MoMA PS1** in New York City hosted an architects-in-residence program to [re-envision the coastlines surrounding New York Harbor](#), prioritizing “soft” resilient infrastructure to mitigate the risk from sea level rise. In 2010, the **Museum of Modern Art** presented the resulting designs from five interdisciplinary teams in an associated exhibition, *Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront*. The proposed solutions encompassed building spongelike sidewalks, suspending housing over the water, and turning the Gowanus canal into an oyster hatchery.

In 2016, [Catalyzing Newport](#), guided by cultural organizations including the **Newport Art Museum, Rhode Island Historical Society, the International Tennis Hall of Fame**, and the **Preservation Society of Newport County**, commissioned [Mayor’s Office 2061](#), a pop-up installation imagining what it might be like to live

and work in Newport, Rhode Island, in the future. Working from a scenario written by futurist Jake Dunagan, designers worked with local museum staff, artists, and students to help the public envision the effects of rising sea levels on their community.

Explore the Future

Signal of Change:

A “signal of change” is a recent news story, report, or event describing a local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scope and scale. Use this signal to catalyze your thinking about how museums might play a role in a whole-of-society approach to mitigating risk for their communities.

Phoenix establishes ‘heat office’

Santa Fe New Mexican, November 13, 2021

David Hondula recently got a job he never dreamed of—director of Phoenix’s Office of Heat Response and Mitigation, the first publicly funded municipal office of its kind. Heat is the No. 1 weather-related killer in the US, killing an average of 138 people a year from 1990 to 2019, and in 2020, heat killed 313 people in Arizona alone. Phoenix has committed to stopping that trend. The City Council in May approved a budget that included \$2.8 million focused on climate change and heat readiness. Hondula’s staff of four will collaborate with other city departments, such as Parks and Recreation and Street Transportation. One project will focus on increasing the tree canopy throughout Phoenix, with a goal of reaching 25 percent tree canopy cover in the city by 2030. Another will focus on built infrastructure—increasing shade structures and developing ways to cool structures and streets, particularly at night. Miami-Dade County (Florida); Athens, Greece; and Freetown, Sierra Leone, are the only other places with city officials in charge of managing heat. In Miami-Dade County, the position is funded by the Extreme Heat Resilience Alliance, which aims to reduce extreme heat risk for the most vulnerable populations.

Explore the implications of this signal:

Ask yourself, what if it became common for cities or regions to have dedicated departments tasked with creating an integrated response to heat risk? Or, more broadly, for city or state officials to work with a variety of government agencies and for-profit and nonprofit organizations to mitigate the impacts of climate stress? Discuss three potential implications of this signal:

1. For yourself, your family, or friends
2. For your museum
3. For the United States

Additional Resources

- The National Association of Counties’ [Resilient Counties Initiative](#) strengthens the ability of local government to prepare for and recover from hurricanes, wildfires, economic collapse, and other disasters, natural or man-made. Its reports and tool-kits include resources on public health, flood protection, national data on county emergency management, and use of technology in managing disasters.
- [The Role of Culture in Climate Resilient Development](#) (United Cities and Local Governments, 2021). This report documents the initiatives of cities and local or regional governments from all continents on cultural policies, sustainable cities, and climate resilient development. It includes a diverse pack of case studies from across the world and addressing the whole set of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals.
- The Environmental Protection Agency’s [Climate Change Adaptation Resource Center](#) (ARC-X) is an interactive resource to help local governments create integrated information packages tailored to their local needs: risks, adaptation strategies, and case studies. Users of the site can tailor their search for information by region, and by area of interest (air, water, waste, public health, or adaptation planning).



Pillar Five: Right-Sizing the World

One of the greatest threats facing society today is unsustainable growth: the inequities, damage, and instability created by systems fueled by a philosophy of “more is better.” To date, museums have largely shaped their behavior around for-profit values of power, productivity, and economic metrics of success. As a result, success is often measured by increasing attendance, growing collections, and expanding facilities. But as nonprofits, museums have the freedom to experiment with other models. How can they challenge the paradigm of perpetual growth and model what it looks like to build healthy, sustainable systems based on values of public service?

The Challenge

In the past half-century, as the global population broke record after record, the Western world began to grapple with the realization that unconstrained growth—whether of consumption, tourism, communities, or organizations—is unsustainable. This realization was captured in *Limits to Growth*, a 1972 report commissioned by the Club of Rome, based on computer modeling of five key resources: population, food production, industrialization, pollution, and consumption of non-renewable natural resources. The study’s mathematical models generated three scenarios, two of which foresaw civilization burning through all available resources, resulting in the collapse of civilization in the last half of the twenty-first century. Only the third, in which humanity significantly restricted its resource consumption, resulted in a stable state. Now it is becoming clear that the limiting factor to growth might not be any of the specific resources that *Limits to Growth* examined, but the cumulative effect of human activity on the climate.

“I don’t know why people feel unhappy when the curve of a graph fails to keep going up, but they do. Even when we find something we’d like to reduce, such as highway fatalities, it doesn’t always sound as though we had our heart in it.”

—E.B. White, author and editor

Critical Questions for Museums

- What are the limits of traditional metrics of museum success such as growth in attendance, collections, and endowment?
- What metrics would foster more equitable and sustainable outcomes?
- How can museums contribute to healthy, equitable economies through the jobs they create?
- How can museums help their communities foster sustainable tourism?
- How can museums in shrinking cities “right-size” in a way that prioritizes equity and preserves heritage?



Photo credit: Anonymous.

“It is troubling that only 11% of institutions have adequate storage facilities for all their collections.”

– Heritage Health Index (2005)

On an accounting sheet, growth often seems profitable because many of the underlying costs are offloaded onto ecosystems, vulnerable communities, or society in general. These costs, called “negative externalities,” may be environmental (i.e., waste, pollution, and degradation) or human (i.e., worsened public health and precarity of employment). This formula creates systems that may succeed in the short term as measured by narrow financial metrics, but are in the long term destined to fail, bequeathing the externalized damage they’ve done to future generations.

As the axiom states, you get what you measure, and if the primary measure of success is financial profit, companies are incentivized to minimize costs to improve the bottom line. One of the principal costs is labor, and left to themselves most businesses, particularly large publicly traded companies beholden to stockholders, will try to minimize

wages and maximize the flexibility of their workforce. But subpar wages and precarious work fuel profits while undermining the economy overall, and local communities in particular. In 2020, the Government Accountability Office [issued a study](#) showing that taxpayers effectively subsidize the low wages of major employers including McDonald’s, Amazon, Uber, and CVS through services like Medicaid and food stamps. These companies are in effect relying on society to cover the externalized costs of their labor.

Nonprofits in general, with museums being no exception, generally buy into the dominant for-profit model of success. In the quest for appropriate “KPIs” (Key Performance Indicators), museums have become accustomed to reporting things that are relatively easy to measure: attendance, number of items added to the collections, dollars raised in a capital campaign, and square feet of new space. The assumption, stated or



Courtesy of [PlaceEconomics](#).

unstated, is that success means making these numbers go up. But museums are beginning to grapple with the realization that success lies not on an increasing trendline but somewhere on a numeric bell curve. There is actually such a thing as too much: Too many visitors—to the point the press of the crowds degrades the experience, puts undue stress on staff, and in some cases endangers the collection or the site. Too many collections—to the point that the number of objects exceeds the capacity of museums to care for or make use of them. Too big of a building—to the point that the cost, though a powerful lever for fundraising, does not justify the benefits it provides to the community.

Nonprofit museums are especially vulnerable to economic imperatives that favor outputs at the expense of labor. While there is a clear moral case to be made for prioritizing people over profit, low wages in the nonprofit sector can be framed as prioritizing mission, and the public good, above all. (This has been variously referred to as “[the systematic starvation of those who do good](#)” or the “[nonprofit culture of poverty](#).”) This attitude has been reinforced by a complex mix of history and funder expectations. The nonprofit workforce has long been predominantly female, so nonprofits inherit the gender inequities attached to compensation. For many decades, donors and funders were trained to see “overhead” (largely comprised of staff salaries) as wasteful spending, and to look for a low ratio of overhead to programmatic spending as a measure of a well-run nonprofit. The cumulative result has been pervasively low wages, burnout, and high turnover. Long term, the field is grappling with how to institute reforms that ensure museums cover the true cost of working in a museum, rather than expecting individuals, families, communities, and society to cover the gap.

The Response

In Society

Here is a brief round-up of some of the social and economic movements attempting to reframe American attitudes towards growth and develop sustainable measures of success:

Circular Economy

More industries are trying to create “circular economies”—systems of production and consumption that repair, reuse, and recycle materials to the greatest extent possible, in the interest of reducing the use of scarce resources and the generation of waste. A growing number of makers and vendors are using recycled or upcycled materials to produce their goods, and in turn to market their brand. In 2021, the UK passed a “[right to repair](#)” law that requires manufacturers to provide parts that support the repair of their products (rather than forcing consumers to discard old electronics and buy new). Almost every state in the US is considering similar legislation, and President Biden recently signed an executive order directing the Federal Trade Commission to make third-party product repair easier. Responding to pressure from shareholders, [Apple](#) recently reversed its long-term policies and will start selling replacement parts and tools to make it easier for consumers to make their digital devices last longer than the average four to five years.

Sustainable Tourism

In the past few years, major tourist destinations such as Venice, Barcelona, and Amsterdam have begun to grapple with the downsides of their popularity—overcrowding, unaffordable housing, environmental degradation, and a decline in the quality of life for local residents. In 2018, the mayor of [Dubrovnik](#) declared the city would

cap the number of cruise ships allowed to dock each day. [Venetians](#) have used the pandemic pause in tourism to envision how the city might join the “sustainable tourism” movement by encouraging fewer, longer stays that foster meaningful engagement with art and culture, promote and expand local universities, and build jobs untethered from tourism. In November 2021, the governor of [Yucatán](#) signed a collaborative agreement with UNESCO to develop tourism that protects, promotes, and safeguards the cultural and natural heritage of the state. These efforts may presage a larger cultural and economic shift toward thoughtful management of tourism that measures its full costs and benefits.

Right-Sizing Cities

At least eighty US cities are [shrinking in population](#), due to shifts in manufacturing, demographics, and economic decline. In some cities, this means demolishing thousands of buildings—in some cases buying out and shuttering entire neighborhoods. Others, such as [New Bedford, Massachusetts](#), are trying to compensate for the collapse of traditional industries by reinventing themselves as tourist destinations. For all these communities, the question is how to “right-size” in a way that minimizes damage to people and to heritage and results in a livable, equitable, sustainable urban landscape.

Reshaping For-Profit Culture

We are seeing a slow shift in the attitudes of corporations from a narrow focus on shareholders to a broader responsibility for “stakeholders.” In 2019, the Business Roundtable issued a [statement on “the purpose of a corporation”](#) that, overturning thirty years of precedent, argued that companies should be concerned not only about the profit of their shareholders but also the wellbeing of their employees, the state of the environment, and the ecology of suppliers who support their work. All this in the interest of creating “a more inclusive prosperity.” (The statement is a pointed refutation of the philosophy articulated by economist Milton Friedman in 1970 that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.”)

Employee Wellbeing as a Metric of Success

One important plank in the Business Roundtable statement is a commitment to the wellbeing of employees

through fair compensation, training, education, and fostering diversity, inclusion, dignity, and respect. That shift in philosophy may prove to be too little, too late to stave off what is being called the “[Great Resignation](#)”—the current swell of people leaving for better jobs, or, in some cases, quitting the workforce entirely. Some of this exodus is the result of people shopping for better wages in a tight labor market, or of stress and burnout during the pandemic, but the Great Resignation is also a rational response to systems that fail to provide workers with childcare, health care, elder care, and affordable housing within a decent commute range of their workplace. This response may accelerate a trend that existed before the pandemic as well—a reset away from “productivity” of work output being the be-all and end-all measure of a good life or a good worker. Even in [Japan](#), where work culture is so hardcore that “karoshi” (“death from overwork”) is an actual thing, reforms are beginning to germinate, with initiatives ranging from caps on excessive working hours to increased flexibility, as well as a requirement for employers to mandate at least five days off work for staff compiling at least ten days of unused leave.

Questioning “More is Better”

The movements described above tackle specific systems, but proponents of “[degrowth](#)” argue that we need a larger paradigm shift, from systems that rely on growth for continued success to more sustainable values, notably environmental sustainability and social justice. Proponents

Climate Central’s [Picturing Our Future](#) collection provides science-based videos and visualizations comparing potential outcomes of sea level rise for nearly two hundred landmarks and iconic neighborhoods around the world.





The [Active Collections](#) movement generates discussion and action across the museum field to develop a new approach to collections, one that is more effective and sustainable. Image credit: Ray Rieck.

envision a future in which people in wealthy countries will learn to “live well with less”: less travel, less consumption, and less impact overall on the environment. Degrowth has allied itself with several movements in which museums are already involved, including decoloniality, slow culture, and the “We Are Still In” initiative supporting the goals of the 2015 Paris Climate Accords.

In Museums

Museums, stressed by disruptions to conventional sources of income, are beginning to challenge their own traditional metrics of success, including attendance, size of collections, and new buildings or expansions fueled by capital campaigns, and to search for meaningful alternatives.

Attendance

Some museums have designed their buildings and experiences around limited attendance in order to provide smaller, more intimate experiences for the visitor. Others have experimented with the practice on an ad hoc basis. During pandemic-induced attendance caps, some museums found that visitor satisfaction rose as crowding declined. [Researchers in the attractions industry have suggested that](#), post-pandemic, visitors may retain a preference for lower density, social distancing measures, and even less interaction with museum staff. If this holds true, museums might follow the lead of cities adopting sustainable tourism: fostering fewer, deeper, longer interactions, providing exclusive experiences, and supplementing admissions revenue with a wider variety of secondary income streams, including digital programs and online merchandise.

A Framework for Action

Inward Action

To create systems that foster healthy, sustainable practice, museums can:

- Engage the governing authority and staff in a thoughtful exploration of what values the museum wants to embody in its work and what constitutes “success.”
- As part of this discussion, explicitly consider the “right size” for the museum in terms of optimizing benefits for the community, including both visitors and staff.
- Choose metrics that support these values and goals, and educate funders and donors about these measures.
- Create the capacity to collect the data needed to support these metrics, through staffing (in-house or contract), training, and integrating evaluation into program design.
- Examine the museum’s labor and compensation policies to ensure the museum is supporting the true costs of working for the organization.

Outward

To help their communities achieve the right size for success, museums can:

- As tourist destinations, help cities that are tackling “over-tourism” to craft strategies that benefit residents economically, preserve quality of life, and distribute tourism to underappreciated destinations.
- If located in communities that are shrinking due to economic and demographic forces, help create plans to manage that downsizing in a way that results in livable, right-sized communities, while preserving public heritage such as historic structures, districts, and public art.

Collections

The accretion of unpruned collections can become the museological equivalent of barnacles—a drag on the organizational ship. The museum sector is finally beginning to chip away at the barriers to deaccessioning, not as a source of financial relief, but to rationalize the allocation of resources to produce the greatest good for the public. Besides the logistical barriers (the time and money it takes to deaccession responsibly), this shift requires a cultural change in museums' measure of success. Acquisitions are a source of pride, while deaccessioning offers few rewards, either financial (due to ethical guidelines for use of the resulting funds) or professional. Some museums are tackling these hurdles and downsizing their holdings; others are slowing growth through joint acquisitions and collections-sharing. Technological advances in the last decade have added an interesting twist to this issue, as museum staff consider how the rapidly expanding universe of accessible digitized collections might influence choices about what to add to the physical collection or archive.

Use of Capital

The cultural sector as a whole is having a moment of reckoning regarding physical growth. In 2012, the University of Chicago's report [Set In Stone: building America's new generation of arts facilities, 1994-2008](#) confirmed what many had long suspected to be true: many of the major cultural facilities projects that marked the turn of the century were, in fact, overbuilt and unsustainable. The researchers found that many of the biggest projects (and notably, some of the least successful), were driven by the ambitions of leaders and donors, not by the needs of the community. But overbuilding is a natural result of museum economics. Traditionally it's been easier to attract gifts associated with naming rights on a beautiful building than for intangible social goods. Despite that handicap, some museums are beginning to ask how capital campaigns can fund improvements to the well-being of staff and the community. In the absence of such capital, programs are often dependent on grant funding, and even successful programs that produce measurable good are too often terminated when the grant ends.

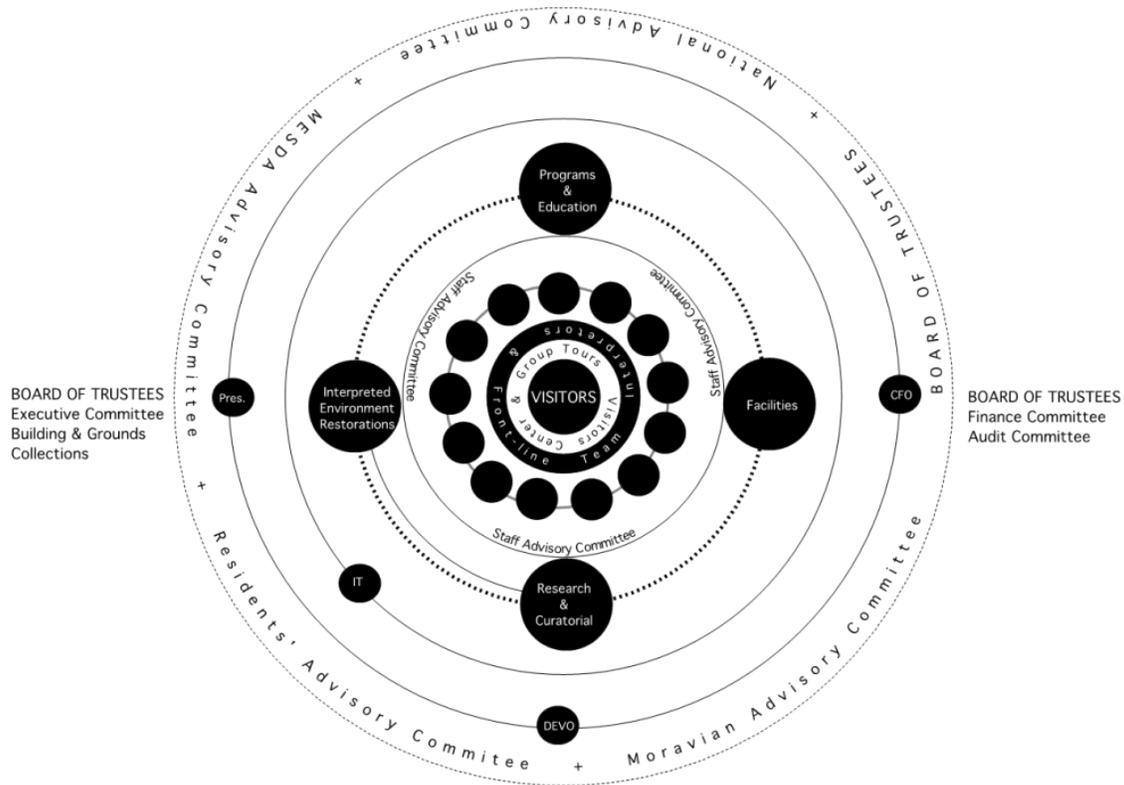
Labor

Even before the pandemic, labor conditions and low wages had contributed to the pressures leading to a rise in the number of museum staff seeking to join unions. COVID-19 dramatized the vulnerability of museum staff in the lowest paid, least stable positions. By [fall 2020](#), pandemic impact had led over half of US museums to lay off or furlough staff, with front-of-house positions being most at risk. At some museums, directors and leadership staff took pay cuts to mitigate the impact; at others staff banded together to create [mutual aid funds](#) to support out-of-work colleagues. Now we see museums that are factoring job security, wages, benefits, and equity into their plans to rebound and rebuild.

Systems-Level Change

Just as with society, real change for museums will require systemic reform, both of how museums define success for themselves and how they are judged by funders and donors. It seems likely that one reason museums uncritically adopt for-profit measures of success is that their boards of trustees are often dominated by people from the business world. Now there is a national effort, led by organizations that include the American Alliance of Museums and the Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums, to help museums recruit trustees who bring diverse experiences, perspectives, and values to the boardroom. Boards that reflect the community the museum serves may be more likely to value metrics that track the good a museum does for that community.

The charitable funding sector is addressing the need for systemic change as well. In 2013, GuideStar, BBB Wise Giving Alliance, and Charity Navigator (all major players in the realm of scoring and reporting on nonprofit performance) launched the [Overhead Myth](#) campaign to combat the false conception that financial ratios in general, and overhead "efficiency" in particular, are an appropriate measure of overall nonprofit performance. Museums can accelerate this reform by preemptively adopting better metrics of success, adding to the yardstick of "service to mission" measures that challenge them to maximize community wellbeing.



Old Salem Museum and Gardens and The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, have inverted the traditional hierarchical organization chart, re-envisioning operational functions to place front-line staff and visitors at the center of everything they do.

Museum Examples

Attendance

Even after a major expansion in 2018, the **Glenstone** museum in Potomac, Maryland, uses timed ticketing to [limit attendance to about four hundred people](#) a day in order to provide a contemplative experience conducive to deep engagement with the art in its building and on its grounds. Starting in 2021, Old Salem Museums & Gardens and The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts began limiting school groups visits to three days a week, with a cap of three hundred students per day. The strategy is to spread out the school visitation over many days (with fewer students), which in turn will require less staff all while providing a better visitor experience. Extensive analysis of operational data convinced the museum’s leadership team that directing the visitor engagement to a manageable scale was a far better operations model than the previously held “bigger is better” and “be everything to everyone at all times” model.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic forced attendance limits on museums, the **Vatican** and the **Louvre** took steps to limit visitation because over-tourism was degrading the experience, stressing staff, and in some cases damaging historic structures. In 2021, [the Uffizi Galleries](#) in Florence, Italy, launched the “Uffizi Diffusi” (“Scattered Uffizi”) initiative to reduce overcrowding in their historic palaces and distribute tourism more broadly in their region by pushing treasures from their collections outside their galleries and into other parts of Tuscany.

Collections

The University of California, Irvine’s newly forming **Institute and Museum of California Art** (IMCA) is making collections-sharing a core aspect of its operation and mission. In support of this strategy, the museum plans to build a “technological, logistic, and collaborative platform” that will facilitate sharing across academic, municipal, and private art museums. IMCA is currently selecting peer institutions to participate in the design of the platform with the goal that, over time, more users and more collections will join the structure.

INCREASED HEALTH AND WELL BEING



INCREASED INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE



CONTINUED EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT



STRENGTHENED RELATIONSHIPS



People who visited museums participating in the [Utah Pilot Social Impact Study](#) reported statistically significant increases in the four major outcomes that the study measured. Image credit: Todd Anderson/Utah Department of Cultural and Community Engagement.

In 2015, the [Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields](#) embarked on the Collections Ranking Project initiative to assign letter grades to each of the fifty-four thousand items in its collections. Items receiving a rank of “D” (approximately 20 percent of the collection) were flagged for potential sale or donation to another institution. (The alternative would have been to spend about \$14 million to double the museum’s storage space.) As of 2019, the museum had deaccessioned 4,615 objects, the vast majority through sale, and transferred 124 objects to other institutions. In 2018, [History Colorado](#) embarked on a similar project to survey, assess, and refine (i.e., downsize) target areas in the museum’s 225-thousand-artifact collection.

Using Capital for Sustainable Good

In February 2021, the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) announced it had secured \$1.46 million in private gifts

to fund DEAI initiatives. \$110 thousand were dedicated to raising the base salary of fifty workers from 13.50 to fifteen dollars an hour, with a goal of raising base pay for guards and visitor service personnel to twenty dollars per hour by the end of 2023. In November, the [Toledo Museum of Art](#) announced it had received two bequests totaling \$2.5 million, dedicated to employee professional development and engagement.

In March 2020, the [Yale Peabody Museum](#) in New Haven, Connecticut, closed to the public for an extensive renovation of its building. The capital campaign for the project was seeded by a \$160 million lead gift from Yale alumnus Edward P. Bass. In November 2021, [the university announced](#) that some of the funds amassed through the campaign would be used to fund free admission for the public in perpetuity.



The 2020 capital campaign for the Yale Peabody Museum will fund free admission for the public in addition to building renovations. Photo credit: Jack Devlin.

Building Equity into Employment Practices

In 2017, [Old Salem Museums & Gardens](#) and [The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts](#) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, began to fundamentally reshape their operations to reverse a decades-long slide towards insolvency. They began by expanding their leadership team to represent every division in the organization, making it more diverse in terms of race, gender, and economic status, and flattening the organizational chart to reduce the distance between senior and front-line staff. They produced a new balanced application and review process that reduces basic requirements for positions and values lived experiences as well as traditional educational attainments. All pay and job discussions now go through a collaborative senior leadership team, and Old Salem has

launched an equity initiative that includes commitments to paying above a living wage for the area, implementing a cost-of-living raise for hourly staff, providing mental health benefits, and reducing the pay ratio of the CEO to lowest-paid exempt employees from seven-to-one to four-to-one.

New Metrics of Success

The national [Measurement of Museum Social Impact](#) (MOMSI) project is working with thirty-eight museums to measure museum impact on health and wellbeing, valuing diverse communities, continued education and engagement, and strengthened relationships. This work builds on a pilot project in 2017-2018 headed by the Utah Division of Arts & Museums in partnership with

the nonprofit museum complex **Thanksgiving Point** for a statewide social impact study, collecting data from almost four hundred visitors through eight participating museums. The [pilot evaluation](#) showed that 96 percent of the 104 indicators tracked by the project showed a statistically significant positive change. The results from the national MOMSI project will be released in 2022, followed in 2023 by the release of a free toolkit with resources to help museums measure their social impact.

Explore the Future

Signal of Change:

A “signal of change” is a recent news story, report, or event describing a local innovation or disruption that has the potential to grow in scope and scale. Use this signal to catalyze your thinking about how museums might help society create healthy and sustainable metrics of success.

[A King County nonprofit raised all staff salaries to \\$70,000 minimum. Will more organizations follow?](#)

The Seattle Times, November 15, 2021

In November 2021, Choose 180, a youth diversion nonprofit, raised all its staff salaries to a minimum of seventy thousand dollars a year. For some of the organization’s twenty-four staff, the pay hikes amounted to a twenty-thousand-dollar annual raise in an instant, using existing funds. (According to MIT’s [Living Wage Calculator](#), a parent would need to make just shy of seventy-six thousand dollars to live in King County.) The increases added about four hundred thousand dollars to Choose 180’s 2022 budget, an amount the board supported unanimously. Executive Director Sean Goode said that when staff first suggested changing the pay structure, he initially balked. But one director reminded him that the philosophy of Choose 180 was that the living conditions of the young people they worked with needed to change in order for them to have a fighting chance to live beyond what he called “the disease of violence and the stress of poverty.” Could it be that they were paying their own team members to live in the same conditions? Goode said the conversation was a “gut punch” that sparked a transformation, and that he is confident he can fundraise to support the change going forward.

Explore the implications of this signal:

Ask yourself, what if paying a living wage became the norm for American nonprofits (perhaps even a metric of excellence valued by donors and funders)? Discuss three potential implications of this signal:

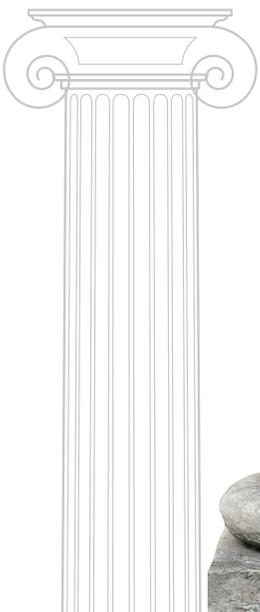
1. For yourself, your family, or friends
2. For your museum
3. For the United States

Additional Resources

- [Active Collections](#), edited by Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones (2017). This collection of essays critically examines traditional approaches to museum collections, and explores new paradigms of stewardship, including “quality over quantity.” The corresponding Active Collections website ([activecollections.org](#)) shares “A Manifesto for Active History Museum Collections” (which states “we believe collections must either advance the mission or they must go”), case studies on right-sizing collections, and a section on crazy ideas, including the creation of a “deaccession special ops” team, and creating a “usefulness meter” for collections.
- [Putting the Right In Right Sizing: A historic preservation case study](#) (Michigan Historic Preservation Network, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2021). This case study offers a number of observations for preservation and planning professionals about the role of preservation in cities undergoing right-sizing.



About this Report



Where to Find the Future

Most of the Center for the Future of Museums' content is available free over the web.

- ❖ [The CFM home page](http://bit.ly/futureofmuseums) on the Alliance website (<http://bit.ly/futureofmuseums>) includes links to all of our projects and reports, including past editions of *TrendsWatch*.
- ❖ [The CFM Blog](http://aam-us.org/category/future-of-museums) (aam-us.org/category/future-of-museums) features a mix of essays by CFM's Director, guest posts from people in and around the field, recommended reading and viewing, and commentary on current news. The trends featured in this report will be explored in more depth on the blog throughout 2022.
- ❖ CFM's weekly e-newsletter, "[Dispatches from the Future of Museums](http://bit.ly/dispatchesfromthefuture)," (<http://bit.ly/dispatchesfromthefuture>) contains summaries of and links to news items about trends, projections, museum innovations, and tools for the future.
- ❖ [The CFM Twitter \(@futureofmuseums\)](https://twitter.com/futureofmuseums) features links to news, research, opportunities, and current events.
- ❖ [CFM's Pinterest boards](https://pinterest.com/futureofmuseums/) (pinterest.com/futureofmuseums/) are devoted to images illustrating the trends we follow, recommended reading and viewing, and glimpses of potential futures.
- ❖ [CFM's Facebook page](https://facebook.com/futureofmuseums) (facebook.com/futureofmuseums) shares links and brief commentary on stories related to museums.
- ❖ [CFM's YouTube channel](https://youtube.com/futureofmuseums) (youtube.com/futureofmuseums) hosts interviews with museum professionals around the world as well as recordings and screencasts of talks by CFM staff, while our "Favorites" list is a compilation of futures-related videos from a wide variety of sources.
- ❖ [The Alliance Advisors and Speakers Bureau](http://aam-us.org/programs/alliance-advisors/) (aam-us.org/programs/alliance-advisors/) allows you to book lectures, workshops, and other engagements from CFM and other AAM staff.

About the Author

Elizabeth is the Vice President for Strategic Foresight and Founding Director of the Center for the Future of Museums at the American Alliance of Museums. She studied ecology and evolution as an undergraduate at Yale and received her master's degree in cell and molecular biology from Duke University. Her museum career has included working in a children's museum as well as natural history and history museums. She is a graduate of the Getty Leadership Institute's Museum Management Program and the Foresight Certificate program at the University of Houston.

Prior to starting CFM, Elizabeth literally wrote the book on museum standards and best practices, as Director of the Alliance's accreditation and excellence programs. She notes this was perfect preparation for her current role as agent provocateur—challenging museums to question assumptions about traditional practice and experiment with new ways of doing business. Elizabeth is the author of the Alliance's annual *TrendsWatch* report and works with museums around the world to help them build a better tomorrow.

About Us

The American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) helps museums explore the cultural, political, and economic challenges facing society and devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. CFM is a think tank and R&D lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways.

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) is the only organization representing the entire museum field, from art and history museums to science centers and zoos. Since 1906, we have been championing museums through advocacy and providing museum professionals with the resources, knowledge, inspiration, and connections they need to move the field forward.

Our Alliance of thirty-five thousand museums and museum professionals seeks to better our communities, and our world, through collaborative human-centered experiences, education, and connection to histories, cultures, the natural world, and one another. Our members spark curiosity and wonder, widen horizons and understanding, and create community connection through a shared commitment to equity and learning.

Learn more at aam-us.org.

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Cover

The building housing the Supreme Court of Poland in Warsaw features caryatids by sculptor Jerzy Juczkwicz symbolizing faith, hope, and love. Photo credit: Tan4ikk/Adobe Stock

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About Our Corporate Partners



“2021 proved to be another year of change and adaptation for all of us in the museum community. Elizabeth Merritt and our friends at AAM have delivered a thoughtful *TrendsWatch* report to anchor us around how to continue forging a path in the current landscape. We are honored to support this report every year, and our hope is that you are all buffered by the ideas and content within.”

—**Dale Strange**, President & GM, Blackbaud Arts & Cultural

With a focus on contactless experiences and digital enablement, **Blackbaud** is the technology backbone to support your organization and its mission. Blackbaud provides comprehensive, cloud-based software solutions to arts and cultural organizations seeking to optimize their operations, build and grow lifelong, loyal patron relationships, and maximize revenue.



“I always look forward to reading CFM’s annual *TrendsWatch* report as it provides a window into the world of what concerns museums most. The highlighted trends often provide a spotlight on current perils and exposures and thus potential helpful clues about how we need to modify risk management techniques to better serve the museum community.”

—**Joe Dunn**, President & CEO, Huntington T. Block Insurance Agency, Inc.

Huntington T. Block Insurance manages AAM-recognized insurance programs offering Museum Collections, Exhibitions & Temporary Loans/Fine Art; Property & Casualty; and Trustees/Directors & Officers Liability insurance. Each unique program strives to provide broad coverage at very competitive premiums with service from a knowledgeable and responsive team of risk professionals.



NEW from AAM's Center for the Future of Museums

This new resource is packed with worksheets, games, and exercises, providing a comprehensive introduction to strategic foresight—a vital skill set that enables individuals and organizations to anticipate change, craft effective plans, and shape the future they want to see.

Use this toolkit for:

- Professional development
- Staff enrichment
- Board education
- Strategic planning
- Creative brainstorming sessions
- Building connection within teams
- Livening up meetings

Strategic foresight provides a powerful assist to strategic planning, identifies critical risks and opportunities, and helps leaders avoid being blindsided by disruption. Develop “futures literacy” in yourself and your team to feed informed and thoughtful planning and decision-making.



Download your toolkit today

Nonmembers: \$60
AAM Members: \$50

[https://www.aam-us.org/programs/toolkits/
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**American
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TrendsWatch and other Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) activities are supported by American Alliance of Museums member dues and donations. If this report sparked your thinking and you would like to see *TrendsWatch* prosper, please consider supporting the Alliance by joining or making a tax-deductible contribution. For over a decade, CFM has been helping museums explore today's challenges and shape a better tomorrow. We welcome your investment in our shared future.

Support CFM today and help create a better future for museums.
Visit aam-us.org/membership or aam-us.org/donate.

Corporate or foundation support are also welcome. To learn more, contact Shelagh Grimshaw at sgrimshaw@aam-us.org.