

AFTER THE PANDEMIC:

THINKING AHEAD



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This article originated as a series of posts on the AASLH blog responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more, visit aaslh.org/blog.

IN LIFE, WORKING—AND PLAYING—WITH OTHERS IS HOW WE LEARN. THIS IS TRUE OF ORGANIZATIONS AS WELL, MAYBE EVEN MORE SO. PARTNERSHIPS NECESSARILY CHANGE THE PARTNERS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE COMMON OBJECTIVES; THEY'RE WORTH DOING, IF ONLY FOR THAT REASON.



In the midst of the pandemic, our museums, sites, and organizations are preoccupied with loss of income, layoffs, and the need to send up a few online flares to remind our stakeholders and patrons that we are still here (or perhaps that we are sinking fast?). The condition of stasis that has been imposed on us and our institutions raises fundamental, existential questions about what we will be and how we will cope once the plague has passed.

This is—or should be—a moment for reflection within the field. Instead, much energy is being put into placing markers on the internet. What little energy is left seems to be focused on how our institutions can recover financially. Both efforts are understandable and sensible, but neither comes to grips with how the world is changing and what it will look like after the pandemic. Will our institutions survive in anything like their previous forms? Will our former visitors seek a different kind of experience from what we used to offer? What if the burst of online programming were to displace altogether the community- and visitor-focused activities developed and tested over time?

We need to consider these questions now, when we can already begin to glimpse how the culture will change and what people are likely to seek and need in post-pandemic America. Other media are already exploring this. Waiting

until the situation ends risks putting us behind the curve and finding us frozen in pre-plague modes or preoccupied with virtual experiences and unable to address our new realities.

It is best to start now, even if our sense of how things will play out is off the mark. At least we will have begun to ponder the imponderable, to open our minds to new kinds of ideas, and to start practicing the arts of imagination and improvisation. One thing is almost certain: we will need to provide our traditional users with new kinds of programming and experience. Changing our programs will be even more important for attracting new audiences: if what we offer stays the same as before the pandemic, why would audiences who have avoided the museum previously bother to come now?

If we think of museums as the present's best guess as to what the future will need to know, what will that mean in a new and different landscape? We probably need to reconstitute our organizations as think tanks. This can be done at a distance, using the wide range of social media at our disposal. Brainstorming can be done remotely and safely. Sharing of scenarios, options, instincts, and ideas will help us to affirm our intentionality and agency. While we are living and laboring under the cloud of coronavirus is an optimal time to engage in blue-sky thinking about our subject matter, our modes of presentation, and our practice.

It is likely that we and our institutions will need to take more, rather than fewer risks than formerly. We will probably have to be much more nimble and flexible to stay relevant and keep up with sudden sweeping changes. We may need to give less attention to long-term planning and more attention to a continuous process of strategic thinking. The harsh reality is that we cannot know for sure how things are going to play out, but we need to begin preparing ourselves for a very different future. We need to start finding ways to adjust to and be comfortable with that future, and we need to start now.

Dreams and Possibilities

Much of the trouble in the world right now has to do with uncertainty about and a lack of preparedness for whatever happens. It's too early to say whether the pandemic crisis marks a radical change in the world or will accelerate changes already underway. Whichever turns out to be the case, the ecosystem our organizations will swim in when the plague is over will be different in both degree and kind. Whatever we hope for, it's not too soon to start thinking now about the nature of those changes and their implications for our operations and practice. That thinking could address three levels of concern:

1. **What is necessary?**
2. **What is possible?**
3. **What can be dreamed of?**

Most urgent would be **financial capacity**. At present, museums and cultural organizations generally are preoccupied with the immediate financial impacts of the pandemic. In the mid-term, national, state, and local governments will focus on the hardships of unemployment and lost business; in the long-term, governments will be saddled with tremendous debt and growing debt service. This means a major source of support for the cultural sector will enter a steep and prolonged decline. Few institutions will be immune to this. Meanwhile, private philanthropy will need to respond to the humanitarian and health care crises, leading to reduced funding for the cultural sector from individuals and foundations.

Urgent, too, is **re-tooling for renewal**. Disruptive change brings what Ronald Heifetz terms "adaptive challenges," changes for which there are no established solutions, no clear ways forward, no consultant to offer tried-and-tested remedies. This leaves cultural organizations in need of new kinds of leadership: visionary, experimental, risk-taking. It also means abandoning long-term strategic planning for a continuous process of strategic thinking. It means re-thinking the balance between managing our collections and engaging our communities. It means not just reconstituting our staffs, but restructuring them. It means expanding our capacity for imagination and innovation and repressing

our instinct to return to normal. All of us in the world of arts and culture are going to have to move out of our comfort zones—we need to adapt to novelty.

In the realm of possibility, two major themes occur to us, both of which many organizations have already introduced and tested. One is **politics and civic engagement**. The relevance of civic life in its broadest and its narrowest dimensions is being brought home by economic dislocation, mass unemployment, loss of healthcare coverage, and inadequate means for retirement. Americans, however situated, will be more aware of and more concerned about the politics of everyday life. This suggests that all kinds of museums, sites, and historical organizations, if they hope to remain relevant, will need to focus greater attention to politics and civic life, to agency and activism, and to the responses of earlier generations to large-scale, disruptive crises.

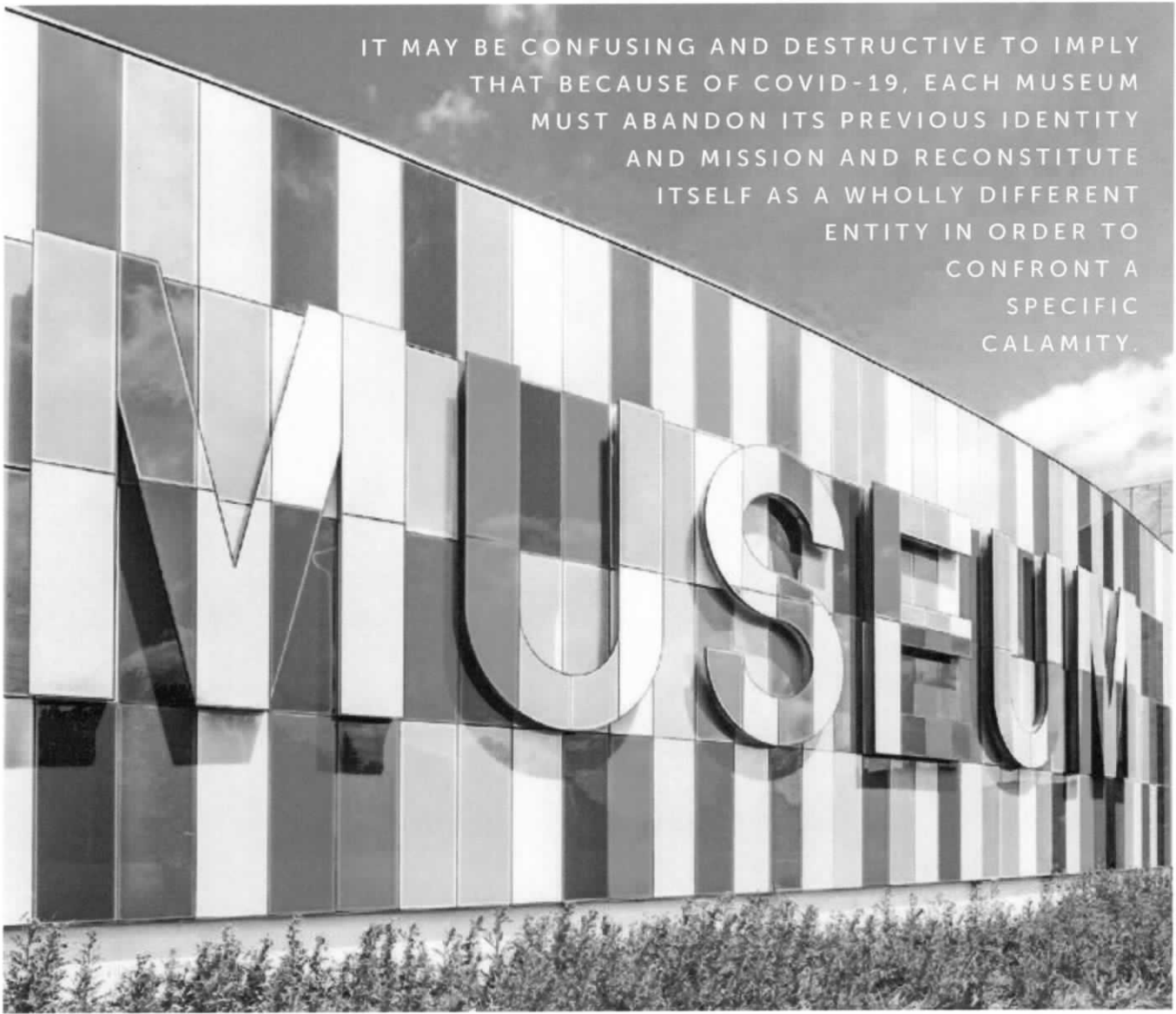
A second possibility is an increase in **global awareness** among our constituents. The pandemic has been a dramatic demonstration that like it or not, we live in a global system. In art museums and encyclopedic ones, this is likely to accelerate the shift from a Eurocentric focus to more of an emphasis on multicultural creativity. For culturally-specific organizations (ethnic, racial, or religious), greater global awareness may increase interest in the roots of specific sub-cultures and the journeys these groups have taken here in America. For science and natural history museums, global awareness will mean foregrounding the issue of climate change. For local historical organizations, the most numerous class of museums in North America, global awareness may call into question the basic content and interpretation of those sites. The re-imagination of their stories will be a critical need.

The dreamscape of the future remains murky, but we think that it is not just individual organizations that need to re-imagine their stories: the cultural community, however defined, must do that as well. We need a series of think tanks to serve as the nexus for such a project. Any new, aspirational vision will need to demonstrate—as



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libraries already have—that museums are not just socially useful, but indispensable. Perhaps we can take a cue from the New Deal: what might our organizations do to help put people to work who need work and to stitch up the tears, large and small, in the national fabric? That sounds like a dream worth having.

Sharing Authority

Watching the President, Vice President, and assorted scientists and governors awkwardly “sharing authority” daily, questions arise as to exactly what we mean by this resonant, if vague, term and what, if anything, it could possibly mean in the post-pandemic world.

In the museum world and more generally, we’ve seen a version of this before. In the aftermath of 9/11, the national narrative seemed to have become murkier, with little impetus toward clarifying or challenging it. There was, however, greater readiness to talk about whose narrative it is, who needs to be part of the conversation, and

how to make the process more open and transparent. In terms of “what just happened?” museums were demure, speaking in a sotto voce, comforting voice.

By the late 2000s, a growing discomfort with this reticence was bubbling up in professional ranks. In a 2011 article in *Museum*, “Let Us Now Praise Museum Authority,” Erik Ledbetter spoke of “museums’ growing discomfort with their own curatorial authority.” He cited P. Christiaan Klieger’s question of the day: “What training qualifies a curator to serve as the sole filter for the stories of 36 million living Californians? Who, among many possible gatekeepers, might be best qualified to decide which stories to feature in a museum?”

At the same time, if museums wanted to demonstrate that they were necessary, they had to define their role somehow. How that has played out is best expressed in their behavior over the past decade. The cultural landscape is peppered with museums committed to inclusiveness, collaboration, transparency, responsiveness, and relationships with community groups, civic organizations, colleges, and universities. These have

shaped and made possible a range of programs that have positioned them as forums, conveners, catalysts, cultural touchstones, good neighbors, and good citizens. What does this redistribution of agency mean in terms of the ambivalence museums feel toward the very notion of sharing authority? Have museums, by playing this role, exerted a different form of agency and, as a result, earned a different form of authority, that of the honest broker, the disinterested observer? Is that what we now need museums to do?

Maybe. Museums and the culture at large are at a crossroads, as many have noted. America has a lot of choices to make and that will take some time. In the interim, museums will likely need to temporize, manage crises, and seize opportunities as they can. Risk-taking is likely to be the default setting, but it shouldn't be the only setting.

But this is also a teaching moment and museums have something to say about what strategies might be available to organizations surrounded by a social and cultural climate entirely different from the prevailing circumstances of their creation. Museums are not the only entities who've had to deal with this, but there are a lot of them that have or soon will. Sharing authority is not the only strategy to think about in this way, but it might be one of the most interesting.

It may sound reductive, but authority and prestige have value and that value changes a conversation about support from supplication to parity. Museums are not alone in being able to do this.

It's important to be aware that sharing authority is not a binary choice set. Determining whose narrative it is, who needs to be part of the conversation, and how to structure the process are related but separate subjects and should be treated that way. We need to be prepared to articulate clearly what we mean by sharing authority, what it has to offer, and how it can be implemented. It is all too easy to think of sharing authority as a means of diluting content, but it can also enrich and deepen content.

Moving Forward

At a particularly bleak moment in December 1776, George Washington declared, "Desperate diseases require desperate remedies." Museums, historic sites, zoos, and arboreta, like all other cultural organizations, find themselves operating in desperate circumstances caused by the pandemic and the economic shutdown. The question before us is "Which measures will be critical to helping our organization thrive (again)?"

One thing is—or ought to be—perfectly clear: no one measure will work for all of our diverse institutions. In spite of outward similarities and general structures, most museums operate under unique conditions, with varied assets and highly individualized audiences. Each community is different and each museum, as part of those different communities, will likely have different concerns and different questions—based on the museum's distinct qualities, staff capacity and passions, and the community's situation. In fact, it may be confusing and destructive to imply that because of COVID-19, each museum must abandon its previous identity and mission and reconstitute itself as a wholly different entity in order to confront a specific calamity.

The current crisis may be a good time for museums to revisit values and purpose, but this exercise would be to rediscover, focus, and affirm their core and to build the confidence necessary to imagine and enact novel approaches to express that core. By core, we don't mean our habitual program outputs, formats, and ways of engaging audiences, but our (hopefully more profound) fundamental reasons for being.

An overarching question that many, if not all, of our organizations might elect to start asking is "To what end?". Clarifying why we do our work, an often-overlooked question, is vital. Why we did our work a year ago may not be the same today or tomorrow, but at the very least, museums owe it to themselves and their publics to take the time necessary to think deeply as they ponder that question.

The basis of "why" is most productively grounded in critical statements of identity and purpose. A museum (or any organization or individual, for that matter) needs a stable anchor of core values and purpose in order to act most effectively, and enduringly, with and for the world around us.

This is true in ordinary times and may be even more essential when new conditions dramatically disrupt our operational conditions, program outputs, and outcomes for those we serve. A theme of business literature (for profit or socially purposed) is how organizations with confident identities and core values have an advantage during times of operational and emotional stress, so long as their leaders maintain their curiosity about the world we inhabit and enlist the creative will of their staff and stakeholders to discover new ways of expressing the organization's identity and fulfilling its purpose. Crises often motivate critical examinations of an organization's soul.

The situation in which we find ourselves can become a great opportunity to identify our habitual behaviors and assumptions that may no longer hold true or relevant



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under new conditions. This kind of thoughtful reflection and reassessment of the status quo may set the stage for what we might term “the draft mindset.” The world is in a state of flux not only because of COVID-19, but because that is life—the worlds we inhabit are fluid and forever changing. So even as we revisit and reaffirm our core values and purpose, we will want to develop plans that are responsive and adaptable on an as-needed basis, empowering our museums to express their enduring missions under ever-changing circumstances.

Are We Stronger Together?

In a recent blog, Randi Korn and Paul Pearson underscored the importance of each museum or site, arboretum, or zoo clarifying its core purpose and value—and then planning accordingly. We agree that our organizations reside in distinct communities, have distinct identities, and respond to distinct imperatives. But this does not mean that our museums need to rely solely and exclusively on those qualities that make them unique and different; that is, to rely only on themselves.

In practice, many of our institutions, perhaps most, do engage in a variety of partnerships, alliances, and collaborations to further their particular institutional goals. Some of these networks are based on a common locality; others are grounded in the traditions and practices of an ethnic, racial, religious, or occupational group; and still others are based on the shared interests, ideas, or expertise of the institutions themselves.

Marsha Semmel, in her recent book *Partnership Power: Essential Museum Strategies for Today's Networked World* (2019), argues that partnering is a critical professional skill and an “essential strategy in this networked age.” She goes on to say that “Despite significant and increasing activity in this area, many museums have not built a partnership mindset into their ongoing work, and do not necessarily create resources or conditions for successful partnerships as part of the organizational chart, mission, vision, or overall infrastructure.”

It's worth asking why this is the case. Are such partnerships not budgeted for reasons of cost in staff time and other expenses? Do they fail to see any benefit to them from collaborating with other organizations, such as learning something, gaining access to certain resources, or creating something not possible alone? Do they feel their mission or focus or agenda constrains them? Is there something about the culture of museums that militates against working well with others?

Identifying the source of the resistance might be helpful. We know that going it alone is not always the best or the most efficient way to get things done, but is efficiency a goal? In many areas of communication, information sharing, engagement, and outreach, collective action is needed to achieve success, but is this a goal? Partnerships allow you to take on a project whose magnitude or complexity (such as the current pandemic) would not be doable alone, but is going bigger a goal?

In life, working—and playing—with others is how we learn. This is true of organizations as well, maybe even more so. Partnerships necessarily change the partners in order to achieve common objectives; they're worth doing, if only for that reason. Networks can bring diverse, often complementary, perspectives to bear on a problem; they're worth doing, if only for that reason. Moreover, productive partnerships can be developed that engage both for profit and nonprofit organizations in a mutual project or cause.

We are in a moment of scarcity such as the museum field has never experienced before. Most American museums are closed to public visitation, incomes are depleted, and layoffs are ravaging our institutional staffs. Museums are not alone in this; their supporters and also potential partners may be going through it, too. Now is a good time to ask ourselves what new skills, what new practices, what new modalities are likely to help us thrive during and after the pandemic and to meet the needs of our constituents.

An obvious starting point is partnerships of various kinds among community organizations with overlapping interests—museums and libraries, community centers and historical societies, schools, colleges, and universities, performing arts venues, archives, and other cultural organizations. These can be one-off arrangements focused on a specific goal, but they can also be long-term, multi-valent relationships. Eventually, some enduring alliances will create networks, processes, and systems that can operate for institutional and communal benefit.

But to get onto the partnership track requires that we ask ourselves what aspects of our institutional mission can best be realized by following that path. We should also ask what threat to organizational needs or values partnerships might pose—and how to respond when that fear is voiced.



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