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# Tools and Approaches for Transforming Museum Experience

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HEWITT  
INTERACTION LAB**

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# Introduction

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**Process of collective thought  
and collaboration**

**How to Use this Toolkit**

# Introduction

Museums can be vital spaces that manifest knowledge, dialogue, human creativity, history, and learning through their architecture, collections, programming, and organizational structure. But critical examination reveals many barriers challenging museums' ability to become relevant participants within our communities, often due to legacy approaches and systemic structures that provision how we collect, present, and fund our organizations.

The practical, financial, and social impacts of the coronavirus alongside a national reckoning with racial injustice has increased the urgency to address why, how, and for whom museums exist in the 21st century. For museum professionals, this pivotal question raises another: how might we transform our collective approach to designing museum experiences to better reflect the diverse communities we serve? To explore this critically important conversation, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum's Interaction Lab convened a series of workshops inviting fifteen museum professionals doing groundbreaking work across visitor experience-related roles, representing: curatorial, education, audience research, programming and public engagement, visitor services, exhibition design, digital, and accessibility.

Thanks to the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the *Transforming Museum Experience* workshops united these connected areas of practice to interrogate how museums interact with audiences today; explore how we want them to interact in the future; and share ideas, tools, and tactics to help us bridge those gaps in our individual institutions and across the sector. The series also included a public program to solicit wider input about the insights surfaced from our small group discussions.

The contents of this toolkit are drawn from discussions that emerged during all workshop sessions, some by design and some organically. It contains thoughts and ideas on why transforming museum experience is necessary, questions to help leaders and practitioners move toward designing transformative museum experiences, and tactics to help drive this work forward for our audiences and communities, including useful tools and approaches from our areas of practice.

# Process of collective thought and collaboration

The Interaction Lab is an embedded research and development program driving the reimagining of Cooper Hewitt's audience experience across digital, physical, and human interactions. Since its fall 2019 launch, the Lab has injected new ideas into the museum's work through internal workshopping and strategy, a public program series merging interactive design and museum practice, and a commissioning program that engages the design community as creative collaborators in creating the next wave of the Cooper Hewitt experience. Driving all of the Lab's work is an ethos of transparency, radical collaboration, empathy for internal and external audiences, and cross-disciplinary thinking.

The process of inviting people into this working group followed those same values. We sought to include a diverse group of professionals from across visitor-experience-related roles whose work is interactive, participatory, and intentionally positioned to challenge experiential norms in the museum sector.

The co-authors convened as a group for six four-and-a-half-hour sessions from late October through early December 2020. The sessions were designed and facilitated by Rachel Ginsberg, Director of the Interaction Lab at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, with the support of Katherine Miller, Senior Visitor Experience Associate, who has shifted her role into supporting the work of the Interaction Lab during Cooper Hewitt's COVID-19 related closure. During the workshop sessions, we divided our time between lightly facilitated discussion and presentations from each workshop member on tools related to our personal practice. Discussions followed an arc designed to move the workshop members through the process of getting to know each other as people and professionals while collaboratively documenting the contents of our discussions in a shared online space. Though we've intended to create the toolkit as an output since the beginning, we aimed to avoid the design of our sessions being constrained by the expectations of the writing.

To expand the scope of our explorations beyond our small working group, the Interaction Lab hosted an online public program that focused on some of the questions we raised during our workshops. Program participants included museum practitioners from all over the country and the U.K. engaging in dialogue and small group brainstorming around the broad question of *How might we transform museum experience?* Further exchange probed specific lines of questioning about the role of the museum, the roles and relationships of

audiences, and museum workplace culture. Ideas generated in this program have informed the creation of this toolkit but have not been explicitly integrated into its contents to ensure credit and transparent authorship of the ideas contained within, and are available online in [original](#) and [transcribed](#) formats.

Throughout the collective multi-workshop process, one of the primary goals was to explore the methods, benefits of, and challenges to working together in an international, cross-institutional, and transdisciplinary group. All decisions about the contents, structure, and distribution of this document were made collectively. The document itself was produced by the entire group as a result of collaborative decision-making, writing, and editing.

## How to Use this Toolkit

This toolkit is a synthesis of the specific and collective values of our authors. It is an invitation that is incomplete by design. You, the reader, are a necessary addition to this mix. We invite you to use these ideas to meet your needs and the specific needs of your organizations, hopefully in unexpected ways. This toolkit contains as many questions and provocations as it does tools and tactics. This was a choice based on the understanding that interrogating norms and starting conversations are essential steps toward making change. It is, and is meant to be, a living document. We've created a [shared online space](#) for you to help it and us evolve by sharing your own practices, movements, progress, and approaches.

This toolkit is designed into three main content sections: Call to Action, Tools for Thinking, and Tools for Doing.

We begin with a statement of collective values followed by the co-authors' individual points of view about how and why museum experiences should transform. Next we offer tools for thinking in the form of design questions to provoke thought and consideration about various areas of museum practice, including discussions on what design questions are and suggestions on how they might be used. Finally, a section on tools for doing presents a range of tactics useful for practitioners and leaders interested in reframing the relationship between how we do our work and what we create followed by additional resources in the Appendix. We have also provided references and suggestions for Further Insights throughout.

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# Call to Action

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**Why now? Making the case for  
meaningful transformation**

**Statement of Values**



## Why now? Making the case for meaningful transformation

Prior to the tumultuous events of 2020, the museum world was already in line for major reimagination. Thanks to shifts in cultural consumption trends, the rise of the experience economy, and increasing dependency on major philanthropic gifting, museums find themselves competing for visitors' time and attention with galleries, kunsthallen, digital and virtual experiences, fairs, experiential pop-ups, and even permanent attractions that use museology as a design tactic—like the Museum of Ice Cream, for example.

The rapidly shifting conditions of this past year have disrupted the sense of safety and familiarity offered by the creation and re-creation of formulaic museum experiences, but have not yet resulted in the kind of self-aware examination necessary for museums to break out of the hierarchical paradigms reinforced by those formulas. How might we interrogate the idea that expertise should be seated squarely in the hands of museum experts, or that audiences should learn from us instead of the other way around? Meanwhile, the sector continues to experience extraordinary turbulence, such that thousands of museums are not expected to survive, while others reckon with dramatic budget cuts as frontline staff waits anxiously for change to begin at the top and make its way down.

In our view, transforming museum experience means transforming the way the museum interacts and builds relationships with staff, audiences, and communities. Thus, transforming the way people experience the museum has the potential to transform the museum itself, from the ground up.

# Statement of Values

As a collective of museum workers and thinkers with different perspectives and concerns, utilizing different methodologies, and connected to different institutions and areas of practice, we thought it essential to begin this toolkit with a statement of shared values. The following eight statements offer a clear and transparent declaration of our position on the role and purpose of museums and change work inside museums. Throughout this toolkit we reference and evoke these values in myriad ways. We encourage you to explore the abundance of possibilities they provoke for you.

## 1. MUSEUMS CAN AND MUST CHANGE.

Fueled by exclusionary, elitist histories and funding models that favor the status quo, there is valid debate about whether museums are inherently and irredeemably flawed. For the purposes of this toolkit, we contend that museums should endeavor to overcome their systematic oppression through critical examination and immediate and rigorous action.

## 2. PEOPLE, NOT OBJECTS, ARE THE VITAL SPIRIT OF MUSEUMS.

Collecting museums have long upheld their important mission of caring for and studying the objects in collections and exhibitions. But what are the relationships of these objects to people in the past, present, and future? Staff and visitors provide essential context to these objects and artworks. Rigid, formulaic approaches to museum work often over-essentialize objects and draw very narrow definitions of “research” and “scholarship,” thereby limiting the museum’s potential as a site of innovation, inspiration, play, and community engagement beyond a highly conventional museum experience. Museums and their collections are made valuable by engaging audiences of visitors and non-visiting members of the local community, alike.

Instead of asking, “How do we get more people to see our collections?”, we should be asking:

- *Why* do we have visitors?
- *How* should we tend to our relationships with visitors?
- What is our *responsibility* to non-visitors in our region and beyond?

## 3. MUSEUMS NEED RADICAL LEADERSHIP.

When we say “radical” we mean leadership that is willing to consider approaches that break with the status quo of museum practice. Museums have

struggled for decades to understand and embrace the need to change in response to changing circumstances. Now, museums find themselves at risk of social and cultural irrelevance beyond their (dwindling) already devoted audiences.

Radical leadership means embracing the need to create space for different kinds of approaches and expertise, not only in the director's office, but also on the board and throughout senior leadership – speeding up the pace of change to be able to respond in the present, with enough flexibility to acknowledge that decisions today may need continued attention tomorrow. That might mean rethinking traditional approaches to audience engagement. That might mean reexamining collections and being open to deaccessioning some works to make room for others that help us tell different stories. It might mean redefining the role of museum boards so that they can better support the ability of the institutions they serve to move forward.

#### **4. MUSEUMS ARE INCOMPLETE, AND THAT'S A GOOD THING!**

As the needs of visitors and non-visitors shift, so should the museum's priorities. Instead of providing ironclad answers and information, we have real opportunities to inspire questions, create space for curiosity, and encourage close examination of complex topics and ideas. Museums are an ever-evolving experience of relationships. Though museums cannot control the outcome of all individual experience, we can continuously build upon shared trust and values, as in any healthy relationship, while creating space for meaningful contributions from outside audiences. The constant pursuit of definitive perfection to the exclusion of multiple narratives and ideas is symptomatic of a culture that limits our ability to explore beyond a canonical view that is too often white, Western, and patriarchal.

#### **5. MUSEUMS ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO COMMUNITIES.**

Museums continue to report high levels of trust from the public and have public-serving missions that make all levels of our work accountable to the communities in which we serve. Therefore, we must build strong relationships with these communities based on recognition of and authentic responsiveness to challenges in the community, whether caused or exacerbated by the institution or not.

Existing in public space, and contributing to historic and contemporary records, museums operate in an intimate relationship with people, some of whom are visitors and some not. But as institutions that exist in the public trust, it is incumbent on museums to guarantee equal and fair treatment to all citizens.

While it is not possible to be everything to everyone, museums can be better at serving the needs of more people; creating relevance to contemporary events, from local to global; and reaching beyond relationships with donors and only the most enthusiastic visitors.

## **6. MUSEUMS MUST ADDRESS AND REVISE OUR PROBLEMATIC HISTORIES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH POWER.**

By exalting narratives of privileged, elite, white, male, able-bodied, capitalist, and predominantly Western cultures to the detriment of the marginalized, museums have historically operated as a tool of white supremacy.<sup>1</sup> This legacy of upholding systems of oppression and inequity leads most museums to continue to function this way today. We recognize that not every museum worker and leader intentionally furthers harmful systems such as these. However, as long as we operate within the legacy we've inherited, we continue to do harm, whether intentional or not.

Our institutional hierarchies, staffing, and definitions of expertise require as much equity-driven transformation as our homogenous collections; elitist, mono-cultural interpretation strategies; white-centered spaces; and imperial histories. Gross power imbalances have dictated every aspect of museum work to date, and they must be reckoned with. Now is the time to reevaluate and transform our relationships with the power we hold and the systems we reinforce through our work.

## **7. MUSEUMS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING ALL ASPECTS OF THE EXPERIENCE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE.**

By thinking through the relationship between community and museum, and assuming the broadest range of people in the makeup of staff, visitors, and non-visitors, museums have the potential to create a foundation in which all can be included. Thoughtful practice in everything from pre-visit information through entry to exit means identifying and removing barriers that interfere with the ability or opportunity to participate, engage, and enjoy. These barriers can be physical, communication-based, economic, technological, attitudinal, and/or due to other kinds of inflexibility.

Implications for leadership in pursuing a fully accessible and inclusive museum run from shifting funding and allocation models to exploring new approaches to

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<sup>1</sup> When we say “white supremacy,” we refer to legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley’s broader definition of the term: a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

decision-making and control. It is likely, given the great diversity of human beings, that a more collaborative model of decision-making at the highest levels will achieve a more inclusive and community-representative environment more quickly. To achieve this transformation from the top down, museum boards will need to let go of wealth and power as primary factors in their membership, and role-based hierarchies will have to be leveled out within the organization.

## **8. MUSEUMS SHOULD BE RELEVANT.**

Museums should be relevant to contemporary life, providing context for current events and the experiences of their communities and constituents, just as they are relevant to historical, artistic, and scientific events. In recent years museums have collectively demonstrated difficulty in embracing socio-cultural relevance as a point of view. Museums, and collections themselves, exist thanks to an often unacknowledged, privileged socio-economic position, potentially setting museums up for a crisis-level reckoning.

As institutions and collections in the public trust, museums must not operate adjacent to contemporary experience. Rather they should be lively, active contributors to diverse narratives, synthesizing connections between the past, the present, and a rich tapestry of possible futures.

## **We invite you to join us.**

These statements calling for transformation are meant as a warm, welcoming invitation to explore the endless possibilities that museums offer. We think museums are great, and we bet you agree. Museums can at the same time be great and also need to change. Great things often become great thanks to the work of devoted communities whose members have honest conversations about what we can do better or differently.

We aspire to help museums achieve their values in practice as well as in statements. We commit to ongoing, sustained change-making as a necessary process in the work of creating equity and relevance. We encourage museum leaders and practitioners to embrace change as a necessary component of growth and progress.

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# Who We Are

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**How and why (we believe) museum experiences should transform**

## How and why (we believe) museum experiences should transform.

Following are the individual points of view of each workshop member in response to this prompt: How and why do you believe museum experiences should transform?

### **SHANITA BRACKETT**

Museum experiences should inspire everyone to leave with the curiosity to learn more and share with others. Museums should offer inclusive tools to make it easy to do so. Museums commit to storytelling, but should understand that the rest of the story unfolds with their audience and their personal experiences. When an individual views an object, engages with an interactive, or attends a program, he or she should gain a new perspective and urgency to accept the perspectives of others. Conversation, content and data supported by artificial intelligence are key components to realizing this ultimate experience, and museums are the responsible party. That means museums must commit their staff, budget, planning and programming to enable this kind of conversation and provide access to content and data related to it.

Museums must shift their focus to understanding and meeting the needs of the diverse audiences in attendance, whether in-person or virtually, as well as accepting that audience needs and expectations change over time. Therefore, agility is an important factor too. This new approach requires flexibility, support and acceptance that new ideas and space for creativity are just as important as proven processes and research.

### **ISABELLA BRUNO**

This past year I've heard some say, "This is not America." Do they realize that this rhetoric blindsides us to America as she is and how she needs to change? How many times have we in the museum field said, "This is not a museum," "This is not what we do"? Museums are sites of pain and trauma, containing the loss and grief of ancestors, humans, and other species. What if museums became sites of healing and recovery? Museums must prioritize truth, reconciliation, justice, and healing. Imagine we accomplish this by creating our offerings with affect and behavior in mind. What if we design exhibitions for sheer joy? What if we mourn alongside our community? What if we center volunteering and giving back for collective resilience? What if we walk toward healing instead of fearing it and walking away, leaving healing for other organizations and other people?



Museums connect us to the future, too. As we contemplate those gone before us, we are closer to our impact on the future — which is our shared future. What if a museum experience always included how human decisions impact future generations, building futures literacy via sense-making and multiple possibilities? Contemporary life is complex — and ever increasing. Museums have an opportunity to embrace complexity, convey interdependence, and remind humanity of more than human perspectives.

TL;DR. Why do museum experiences need to change? What if they don't? I don't need to answer for you; we already know where outdated, outmoded technologies go.

### **KAYLEIGH BRYANT-GREENWELL**

Why do we need to transform museum experience? Because museums themselves are an outdated, colonial design that perpetuate White supremacist norms that cause harm to audiences. It is our cultural imperative to reimagine new ways to engage audiences, be spaces for critical thinking, and develop flexible structures that can evolve and remain relevant.

### **ALEXANDRA CUNNINGHAM-CAMERON**

Museums should compete to be of service to their communities through constant innovation and evaluation.

Museums should “detonate” rather than transmit ideas, organizing programming with the intention of creating a starting point rather than an endpoint.

The notion of expertise in museums needs to expand beyond scholarship into the realm of lived experience.

Museum experiences could become informal and imprecise, allowing for opposition, surprise, vulnerability, and tension to alleviate the pressure to perform the motions of a studied encounter with culture.

### **SILVIA FILIPPINI FANTONI**

Museums are the product of an elitist, patriarchal, and colonialist society, and, as such, many of them still present these characteristics in the way they operate today (e.g., lack of diversity; white, euro-centric and monolithic perspectives, object-centricity; academic focus; unpaid and underpaid staff, revenue model heavily relying on donations). These models are dated, out of

touch, and, in some cases, indefensible. In order to become more relevant, especially to younger generations, and to survive the current financial downturn, museums need to change. They need to:

- Be primarily about people and their stories and less about objects;
- Aim to create memorable experiences rather than focusing on factual learning;
- Be more community-driven and less academic;
- Better reflect the communities they serve; and
- Treat their staff with empathy and respect.

## MARIE FOULSTON

My route into curation was not traditional. My interests lay in videogames, and my practice began by throwing parties to showcase independent videogames — raucous and playful events that sat somewhere between a club night and an arcade. The work I undertook and the creative communities I was inspired by were not things I felt fit within the definition of the word “museum.”

Even now, years later, with the role “V&A Curator of Videogames” on my CV, I still feel like an outsider, unsure if museums are spaces where I am, or my practice is, “allowed to be.” I feel the burden of responsibility lies with me to change or to conform to feel welcomed.

I know I’m far from alone in feeling this way. I also know how these feelings have their roots in the very foundations of many institutions. Sites that aspired to exhibit “culture” and learning as a “civilising” influence on a population. A one-way flow of transformation entwined with colonialist, patriarchal, and classist values. A monologue, not a conversation.

I don’t know if the traditional concept of a “museum” whose values, models, and hierarchies are built on foundations such as these can ever truly be free of them. But I do know there are many inspiring people working within this field who care fiercely about the potential of creating radically different public spaces that can excite and inspire. Spaces within which we can understand and critique the world around us; spaces where people and communities can share their work and ideas; spaces where these values are more than just words, but actions and active practice.

Ultimately I believe museums must transform in the collective hands of people such as these, but if not, then the resources, value, and trust we place into such institutions need to be redistributed to instead allow us to build something new together.

## RACHEL GINSBERG

Throughout my childhood I was extremely fortunate to have my personal expectations of museum experiences formed by highly interactive and unconventional museums alongside world-renowned traditional institutions. I grew up in a privileged area outside Philadelphia, with regular school and family trips to the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Franklin Institute, the Please Touch Museum and even a medical museum—the Mutter Museum at the College of Physicians.

I believe that museum experiences should be more dynamic than they currently are. Right now, most museums are designed for people to look and read with their eyes as they move through spaces full of things. Personally, I have a hard time absorbing a lot of material by reading in that kind of environment. My attention span isn't terribly good, and, as a result, establishing goals for museum visits often feels overwhelming, leaving me with the sensation that I could have or should have done/seen/learned/absorbed more. Because of this, my typical museum visit is either planned around a single exhibition or a *dérive*-like wander – i.e. the most straightforward goal possible, or no goal at all. My desire to not create that same feeling of overwhelm for visitors has given rise to the following principles.

- Multi-modal should be the rule.
- Interpretation happens through experience, not just content.
- Channels and environments should be used for what they're good for (e.g., digital is endless and physical is limited).
- People/visitors should be offered opportunities to connect and learn from each other.
- Audience input should play a more prominent role in the creation and planning of exhibitions and programming.
- Interactions should be distributed across channels, environments, and geographies.
- Content and experiences should be free or freemium; everyone should be able to engage without paying.
- We should be talking about why objects matter, not just what they are and who made them.
- We need to prioritize meaning-making supported by experiential and learning goals.
- No more experience design by neglect.

## **HANNAH GOODWIN**

I believe museums need to transform in order to be open and welcoming to all and to live up to their potential as public spaces. Museums have, and have had, a big role in deciding what is perceived to be important. In deciding what is on view, how it is presented, who gets to experience it, and how they experience it, institutions have influence that extends beyond their walls. Too narrow a lens creates barriers and limits community connections, flexibility, and choice. Barriers of all types have to be identified and removed to allow everyone to participate as they choose.

To really transform, museums need to hold humans — the whole spectrum of people — at the heart of their "everything." People would then be at the center rather than objects or collections. Rather than in some way diminishing either objects or collections, I believe this would bring more relevance, insight, and discussion and would help in developing interconnectedness that would be profoundly meaningful. To get there will require flexibility, listening, creativity, multi-sensory engagement, and moving away from hierarchical staffing models. It will require thinking outside the box, possibly creating new definitions of success, and taking risks.

Self-assessment, education, and good working conditions will be necessary to move forward. Essential staff — those required to make the place function and to welcome visitors — should be celebrated and given responsibilities that allow them to engage on all levels. Staff throughout the museum should represent the communities around them, to allow for a great diversity of staff whose individual life experiences are respected as assets. All aspects of museum involvement should have accessibility built in as an integral and non-negotiable part of the experience.

I think we need systems changes, collaborative leadership, and more flexibility in how people interact with museums and participate in programs.

## **ANDREA JONES**

The Museum field has reached a critical moment. Change or die.

We must be:

LESS elitist

LESS academic

MORE inclusive

MORE experiential

MORE responsive to actual needs of our audiences.

The jig is up. People (even non-museum people) have noticed how colonial our collections are, how white our boards are, how dependent we are on old ways.

This time during the pandemic has solidified my determination to turn away from work that does not create change in this field.

### **ADAM MARTIN**

Museums committed to continuously adding value to their communities need to transform to differentiate themselves from increasing competition. Competition for visitors' attention, for finite resources from the public and private sectors, and for relevance in a world where demand for innovation is constant. Transformation is needed because this moment requires immediate action and a more radical response. A response to the expectations for how we work with, and in service to, our communities. A response to the demands for creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces that reflect our shared histories and amplify our unique experiences.

Museums able to transform will need to further commit to an ongoing process for evolution, a responsiveness to the changes and challenges that follow any transformation.

How museums transform in this moment is a question everyone engaged in this work will need to consider; there is no one prescription. While there may be a shared sense among practitioners for what museums can and should be, the path to successful transformation requires introspection and outreach unique to each institution and individual. Start by looking inward, then (quickly) engage new perspectives outside your institution. Invite those within your community to do the same. Keep reaching further out; when you begin to feel “uncomfortable” with the perspectives and experiences being shared, reach further. As you continue to broaden and deepen the perspectives you engage with, find ways to compensate everyone who chooses to help you along your journey — well.

### **KATHERINE MILLER**

There is this underlying mythos that museums are for everyone! This ideology becomes problematic when institutions try to define their “audience.” Who visits most frequently? Who gives the most money? As a business model, museums have historically catered to the elite class, which consequently results in systemic assumptions and expectations of the “primary audience.” The “primary audience” should know how to navigate galleries in a silent and passive manner. The “primary audience” should be able to recognize and revere the generous donations from corporations and millionaires/billionaires. How can

museum workers expect everyone to feel welcomed and comfortable when the buildings are traditionally designed to be palaces or temples meant to intimidate and inspire awe?

Museums can be more inclusive, more accessible, and less intimidatingly academic. Many first-time visitors have a "threshold fear" because they are worried they do not belong in the space. If museum professionals really believe "museums are for everyone" then we need to unlearn the oppression built within all areas of our institutions: museum staff structure, board of directors, and the physical museum space.

### **LIZ NEELY**

I am drawn to museums for their potential for personal reflection and creativity, and, through those two things, their potential for perpetual reinvention and growth. But for this to occur, museums have to be places that challenge themselves, change and host complicated dialogues, and allow for reflection on the complexity of life through art, history, and science. These are institutions built on exclusionary backgrounds that still exist, with outdated business models and allegiances to these exclusionary practices. A whole heck of a lot needs to fundamentally change for museums to be that place of dialogue, inclusion, complexity, creativity, social good, and, ultimately, humanity.

### **CAROLYN ROYSTON**

We are in a transformative moment that is requiring us to respond in the moment and to plan for a changed future. This future will look different for every museum, but how can we create the conditions for change that are sustainable and managed at a pace that is right for each institution? How might we develop a change management agenda that supports an entire museum ecosystem at every level, from the board and leadership through to more junior staff?

I want to see a different type of leadership emerge that can embrace managed change; one that is woven into a museum's strategic thinking and plans and opens up opportunities for change as part of everyday practice, supporting and empowering staff to lead from anywhere in an organization. And we need more diversity and expanded thinking on our boards to work with us to help meet the critical challenges facing our museums today.

### **CASEY SCOTT-SONGIN**

I believe that museums should be story-led rather than object-led, providing contexts and personal stories related to the objects they hold. They should be starting points for conversations about the past, present, and future and be a

safe space for people to come together in dialogue or action. Objects would become supporting elements of larger, diverse narratives driven in collaboration by experts and communities. They could be a place where people can go to contest the accepted historical narratives and find an outlet to contribute to history.

I think the value of museums is their ability to bring people together to create and document collective narratives in a way that allows individuals to have agency over their own histories for future generations.

## **LAUREN VARGAS**

I would like to see greater integration and (dare I say) synergy between the physical and digital experiences. For example, how might we develop intentional online communities (not affiliated with or situated within Big Social platforms) to have more in-depth discussion about what we and our audiences see and feel in museums? Rather than cultivating transactions, how might museums move toward interactions that, over time, develop into relationships?

These two questions require us to consider even more questions before we can undertake any solutions. How might we intentionally gather data through open and transparent relationship building? How might we create more purposeful gatherings to match all energy and accessibility levels? How might these online communities be a safe space for marginalized voices and people who would never step into a museum or feel comfortable engaging with museum staff and community? How might we cultivate spaces that encourage choice, connection, purpose, and progress? Meaning, how might museums measure their success based on the learning, growth, and progress of the communities nested within the museum community and hyper-local community?

To address these questions, we must discuss how museums:

- Develop and cultivate digital citizenship;
- Model digital civility;
- Bridge and bond the physical with the digital;
- Cultivate consistent internal/external communication and collaboration rhythm;
- Architect empathetic spaces; and
- Establish human-centered experiences.

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# Tools for Thinking

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**Framing problems and opportunities with design questions**

**Core design questions and further insights by practice area**

**How might design questions be used as tools of transformation?**



# Framing problems and opportunities with design questions

Design questions are a device that practitioners use to help frame a problem inside of a speculative space to discover possible solutions. Though popularized through the Stanford d.School and related design consultancy IDEO, this question construction can be traced back to the work of an academic named Sidney J. Parnes, PhD<sup>2</sup>, in his 1967 *Creative Behavior Guidebook*, who called them “invitation stems” or “how might we.”

The structure of the “how might we” question is important in its specificity. The “how” refers to the idea that in asking these questions, our aim is to seek solutions to the problems they frame. The “might” indicates the space of speculation we’re creating. Different from “how can we” or “how could we,” which point to statements about viability, or “how will we,” which asks what *will* happen, “how might we” maintains a vast space of possibility. Lastly, the “we” indicates that the people who pose these kinds of questions are not seeking individual solutions on behalf of “I” or “you” or collective solutions from others, like “you” or “they.” Rather, the “we” emphasizes the shared responsibility and collaborative effort. This specific construction places the asker inside the problem space, alongside collaborators, relieving some of the stress that might come along with more individualist notions of problem solving and creative work.

In our exploration of design questions during our workshops, we identified five different categories within which to explore transforming museum experience— institutional process; objects, interpretation, and storytelling; audience focus and participation; access, inclusion, and social impact; and learning from the pandemic and current events impacting global communities.

The sections that follow address each category with a definition, a set of core design questions related to the category, and a selection of tools and resources that offer further insights. The design questions alternate between two constructions: “how might we,” and “how might museums” to distinguish between questions directed to museum leaders and practitioners and questions that we ask more broadly about the design of museum experiences and museums themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Parnes was the cofounder of the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State University and an internationally renowned expert on creative practice.

# Core Design Questions and further insights by practice area

## Institutional process

- Refers to the way “things are done” in a museum, including organizational structure, staff experiences, common practices, modes of collaboration, and the construction of culture.
- Decision-making related to institutional process reflects institutional priorities, culture, and the pace of change.

### Core design questions:

- How might we create museum cultures that embrace imperfection and failure?
- How might we (re)design organizational structures to promote a healthy cadence of responsive change?
- How might we redefine the boundaries of our institutions to include those who are traditionally excluded?
- How might the staff experience also reflect the mission of an organization, similar to our current emphasis on the visitor experience?
- How might we liberate museum planning from deficit-thinking and the grip of funding models that leave little to no space for iteration or responsiveness?
- How might we recognize and break down barriers in our own institutions to create more transparent leadership and organizational structures and encourage effective cross-departmental collaboration?
- How might we feel like we are doing meaningful, purposeful work?
- How might we embed change into the institutional fabric of our museums in ongoing cycles as opposed to one-off efforts?
- How might we problematize the nature of “research” in museums and model new methods that help expand colleagues’ understanding of what research and evaluation could be?
- How might we consider prototyping, testing, and evaluation to be tools of culture creation and process design, in addition to their more common uses for product and service development?

## FURTHER INSIGHTS

[Social Change Library](#), The Commons

[What is Design Thinking?](#), IDEO

[Developing a Toolkit for Emotion in Museums](#), Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale

[Death to Museums](#)

[Museums are Not Neutral](#), LaTanya S. Autry, Mike Murawski  
[Slow Change](#), Isabella Bruno and Clare Brown

## Objects, interpretation, and storytelling

- Refers to how museums prioritize and interpret objects and tell stories.
- Decision-making around objects, interpretation, and storytelling reflects interpretive priorities, approaches to storytelling, and influences or directs the design of exhibitions, programs, products, services, and experiences.

### Core design questions:

- How might we design museum experiences that empower and encourage visitors to challenge the notion of a single truth?
- How might museums contextualize objects and scholarship to help people create meaning in their everyday lives?
- How might we design museum experiences that promote emotional connection?
- How might we liberate museum experience from the constraint of objects?
- How might museums become keepers and sharers of life experience with objects optional?
- How might museums connect people to compelling stories that relate to their interests?
- How might museum experiences emphasize intangibles instead of the more tangible aspects, like place and objects?
- How might the design of museum experiences be led by content and story first?

## FURTHER INSIGHTS

[Free the Museum](#)

[Radical Museum Futures](#)

[Odyssey Works](#)

[Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death, and Survival in the 21st Century](#)

[Mindsets for Museums of the Future](#)

[The Future of Storytelling](#)

## Audience focus and participation

- Refers to the level of audience focus museums have and the tools we use to include audiences in the development of museum programming.
- Decision-making around audience focus and participation reflects the degree of control granted to museum experts over the content and narratives we present and a willingness or unwillingness to make space for participation and co-creation, such that control and influence might be shared.

### Core design questions:

- How might museums bring inclusiveness and co-design with communities into regular practice?
- How might we involve visitor feedback in the development of new museum experiences?
- How might we make audiences the center of the museum?
- How might museum experiences forge connections among different communities with different experiences?
- How might we design for visitor experience first, content second?
- How might we co-create museum experiences with members of the communities we serve?
- How might we design experiences that build emotional intelligence and decrease divisiveness?
- How might we learn to listen more?
- How might museums make prototyping, testing, and evaluation instruments of discovery and equity rather than of reinforcement?

### **FURTHER INSIGHTS**

[Game Creation Systems](#), Wikipedia

[Best Agile Practices in Game Development](#), Starloopstudios.com

[Evaluation Toolkit for Museum Practitioners](#), East of England Museum Hub

[Museums, Data, and Stories](#), IMLS blog by Paula Gangopadhyay

[How Psychology Contributes to Museum Visitor Studies](#), Annamaria Recupero, et. al.

[Strangers, Guests, or Clients?](#), Zahava D. Doering

## Access, inclusion, and social impact

- Refers to a need to expand access to museum collections and programming; increase inclusionary measures for people of all abilities, cultures, identities, socio-economic statuses and more; and take a point of view on museums as a site of social impact.
- Decision-making around access, inclusion, and social impact reflects a museum's commitment to the ongoing project of increasing diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion within our organizations and in the design of exhibitions, programs, products, services and experiences that we offer.

### Core design questions:

- How might we create equitable experiences and engagement opportunities for audiences of all abilities and throughout their lives?
- How might museums embrace flexibility as an asset in creating equitable experiences?
- How might museums lead without self-interest and without defending their own importance and the importance of their points of view?
- How might museums treat visitors' lived experiences and contributions with as much respect as traditional scholarship?
- How might museum spaces and programs be instilled with a sense of shared authority and ownership?
- How might museums be community gathering places?
- How might museums build a foundation that supports all staff, volunteers, visitors, and potential visitors?
- How might museums become places where everyone feels welcome and relevant?
- How might we design museum experiences that acknowledge exclusionary historical norms and behaviors and break them down?

## **FURTHER INSIGHTS**

[Public by Default](#), Sergio Nouvel

[Theory of Change](#), Wikipedia

Getting Started with Accessibility, Appendix C

Guidelines for Image Description, CHSDM, Appendix D.

[Using Front Line Staff to Build the Best Visitor Experience](#), AASLH

[Welcoming the Widest Possible Audience](#), Sina Bahram

[Inclusive Digital Interactives: Best Practices and Research](#), Access

Smithsonian, Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD), MuseWeb

*See Museums are Not Neutral*

## Learning from the pandemic and current events impacting global communities

- Refers to the opportunity to take a mandate for learning and growth from current events, including the covid-19 pandemic, the cultural sector business model collapse, and the current reckoning with systemic racial and social injustice.
- Reflects a desire to respond to the mandate of this time by taking away learnings around short-, medium-, and long-term approaches designed to function during ambiguous circumstances.

### Core design questions:

- How might we leverage the crises of this moment to transform the way museums interact with audiences?
- How might we take advantage of this opportunity to learn more about the needs of our visitors and deliver programming and experiences that meet those needs in new ways?
- How might we take lessons in responsiveness from this moment to facilitate the creation of a more responsive culture?
- How might we re-evaluate our staff skills and competencies to be able to better manage to this moment and move toward a more accessible and inclusive future?
- How might we reimagine the role of museums to meet the needs of the present moment?
- How might we redefine the visitor experience to support participation and play in a way that is safe for visitors?

### **FURTHER INSIGHTS**

[Empathetic Audience Engagement During the Apocalypse](#), Andrea Jones, Peak Experience Lab

[Designing for Now](#): The Implications of “Going Online,” Rachel Ginsberg, Interaction Lab

[The Year of Remote Culture](#), Matt Locke

[The pandemic is a portal](#), Arundhati Roy

*See Free the Museum*

*See Theory of Change*

## How might design questions be used as tools of transformation?

A good question creates an opening, a small crack, or a fissure in a well-worn belief. Flavored with just the right amount of provocation, a good question can put you on a path of exploration, expand your imagination, or even piss you off. Above all, a good question allows you to consider different futures.

Given our group's goal of transforming the museum experience, the importance of crafting good questions to get our field beyond business as usual was an important exercise.

We recognize that our questions are not new. We and other practitioners have been asking and addressing these questions for many years, and they came up again in our workshops. We see returning to these questions as a necessary part of ongoing dialogue and discussion, and we feel them valuable to reflect on with regard to the moment in history we're currently facing.

See what you think about the questions we've designed. Edit them to fit your purposes or write your own. We hope they create necessary cracks in our long-held assumptions about what a museum does and should do.

Here are a few ways you can use our questions:

- Host a transformation workshop at your museum. Invite other museums.
- Discuss one question at each staff meeting.
- Journal your answers; challenge your own thinking.
- Write one question on colorful paper to put above your workspace.
- Use a question to frame an exhibit or program. Ask your audiences!
- Write a blog post addressing one of the questions.
- Vote on one question your museum will address in the next year.
- Vote on one question for which your museum has an innovative answer. Publicize it.
- Figure out which question or questions your unique skills and talents are best suited to tackle. Make an action plan.

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# Tools for Doing

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**Embedding research and  
development into museum practice**

**A Transformative Framework for  
Museum Work**

**Tools of Our Transformative Praxis**



# Embedding research and development into museum practice:

## Tactics for driving responsive change and transformation

As research and academic institutions, museums can get stuck in limited definitions of research — most often defining it as scholarship related to collections, focused almost entirely on conservation, curatorial, and historical concerns.

The explosion of digital practice in the museum sector in recent decades has brought with it new research and development approaches. The design ethos of cyclical processes of prototyping, testing, and evaluation as critical to the successful development of products, experiences, and services has become well established in the parts of museum practice most closely connected to digital. Slowly but surely this ethos is beginning to creep into other areas of our work.

In fact, design as a practice is well-suited to address the vast majority of the work that museums create for public consumption, as well as the workflows and internal processes necessary to design and execute those public offerings. Perhaps most importantly, an organization's working culture is also an output of a design of sorts. Whether intentional or not, the ways museum departments and staff collaborate with each other has a direct effect on the way the work is done and, thus, the product of that work, no matter what it is.

The iterative nature of design-based research can make it challenging to prove value upfront in organizations where assessments of success depend on a transactional approach driven by metrics that appear easier to measure, like a quantitative survey, for example. But the seeming ambiguity of iterative or design-based research is also where its benefits can be found most directly. Compared to conventional research methods that rely on a singular organizational viewpoint and rarely, if ever, involve co-creation with audiences, the value of iterative research is in the iteration itself and the impacts of that iteration on the culture surrounding the work.

Reframing research as an instrument of discovery and equity, rather than for the sake of reinforcing existing ideas, can support museums in developing processes, products, services, programs, and experiences that speak to the future of our organizations and the audiences we serve.

# A Transformative Framework for Museum Work:

## Mapping relationships between interventions > workflow > culture

Though it may not seem immediately apparent, the work of creating products, services, experiences, and programming — interventions, for short — can have a direct and meaningful effect on every aspect of an organization. Those of us who design these kinds of interventions in museums have a personal and intimate understanding of their transformative potential. We see it happen in front of us in the programs we create, the products we put in the hands of users, and the services and experiences we design and deliver every day. For colleagues who are less directly involved in the work, this connection might be less apparent. The tension here is one of the foundational purposes of this toolkit, and of the foundational idea driving it — that the design of museum experiences, which transform the way audiences interact with museums, *can* transform the museum as a whole, from the ground up. Let's explore what this means.

The design of a specific intervention should begin with a specific objective for a specific audience. Based on that objective, decisions are made around the shape, tone, platform, and delivery of the intervention being designed. Once decisions are made, the intervention is finalized, the work is executed, and the intervention is brought into the world. Sometimes the process stops there.

But what if we recognize the potential to learn from that intervention, and for those learnings to have an impact on *how* we do things? What then? The next step is to design processes and workflows to surface the learnings from that intervention and bring those learnings to the right audience *inside* the museum. This could happen in any number of ways, such as regular reporting or meetings, or even a cadence of informal conversations with the right people to ensure the information moves efficiently throughout the organization and lands in the right hands.

And what if museum leadership wants to create space for that learning opportunity to change the museum's *entire approach* to engaging audiences at the strategic level? The final piece to be influenced here is the culture of the museum as a whole.

To that end, in the following subsections we offer a variety of “tools for doing” beginning with those focused on creating products, services, programming, and experiences, then moving into process and workflow, and finally arriving at tools for the creation and transformation of organizational culture.

# Products, Services, Programming, and Experiences (Interventions)

Prototyping, testing, and evaluation throughout the process of developing products, services, and experiences is intrinsically valuable. It can be a critical steppingstone for organizations that are just beginning to think about transformation, as well as those well on their way.

Development and evaluation are intrinsically linked. How can one build something effective if unsure whether what’s being developed is solving a user problem, or even delivering on user needs at all? While museum professionals are experts in their fields, they very often are not representative of their audiences. As such, it would be unreasonable to assume that they can adequately advocate for audiences’ needs without additional input. With easier access to audiences than ever, not engaging target audiences of a product, service, program, or experience in the design process is a huge missed opportunity.

So why is it important to build testing and evaluation into the development process?

- It helps mitigate risk. By testing early and often, we can have confidence that what we are developing is something that is going to work for and be interesting to our audiences.
- It helps with inclusivity. A wider range of voices within the development process helps catch potential issues around inclusivity earlier, which can help avoid even bigger mistakes further down the development path.
- It brings in new ideas. As museum professionals, we often feel like we have to have all the answers, and it puts a lot of undue pressure on practitioners. But museum professionals shouldn’t be expected to know everything about and for their visitors; we should be allowed to act as the facilitators that we are. For museum professionals are facilitators, not owners, of museum experiences. Understanding this allows for new voices to bring in new ideas.

The following tools are drawn from a variety of sources and disciplines to support the design of many kinds of interventions, including products, services, experiences, and programming.

- **Collaborative ideation and co-creation:** These processes bring a group of people you're designing for into the design process by giving them the opportunity to directly participate. Co-creation as a central part of a design process transforms the dynamic at hand from "designing for" an audience to "designing with and for" that audience. In addition to opening the process to a greater range of ideas, collaborative ideation is also particularly effective at minimizing gaps in the design process, when the identities and lived experiences of the design team do not reflect the community for whom they are designing.
- **A Designer's Critical Alphabet:** This colorful deck of cards was designed by Lesley-Ann Noel, PhD, to introduce designers and design students to critical theory with a tool that also helps them reflect on their design process. The deck contains a theory for every letter along with a definition of that theory and a question or comment to connect that theory directly to design practice. Dr. Noel is Associate Director for Design Thinking for Social Impact and Professor of Practice at the Taylor Center for Design Thinking and Social Innovation at Tulane University. Also of note, the co-authors of this toolkit used A Designer's Critical Alphabet during our workshop sessions as well.
- **Embodied Design Techniques (e.g., role play; body storming):** Design teams act out scenarios to test ideas by physically experiencing them. Embodied design can be as simple as talking through a script or process or as involved as designing skits and detailed role play experiences to explore how a particular design decision might feel to a participant or end user once executed.
- **Public programs as sites of prototyping and testing:** Public experiences contained in specific time and space are safe positions in which to experiment because they offer immediate data and lessons without the high cost of newly invested infrastructures. Moreover, the opportunity for museums to reconceive of public programs as sites of innovation means promoting a culture of test and try that allows practitioners to use what they have to experiment while designing "with and for."
- **Sacrificial concepts:** "Sacrificial concepts are early, raw, potentially flawed concepts made visual/physical and used as a medium for creating reaction, response, and discussion among users and design teams."<sup>3</sup> The value of using sacrificial concepts is primarily tied to the culture of making within the organization, as sacrificial concepts are

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<sup>3</sup> <https://medium.com/design-principles-and-practice/sacrificial-concepts-200993246364#:~:text=%E2%80%9CSacrificial%20concepts%20are%20early%2C%20raw,a%20specific%20group%20of%20people>

meant to offer thought experiments able to challenge cultures of perfectionism and constraint.

- **Think, feel, do:** This is an embodied cognition approach used most often for experience design or interpretation design that incorporates elements of thinking, feeling, and doing. Seeking to remove ill-conceived barriers between body and mind, think, feel, do creates opportunities to jointly experience all three phenomena holistically, as well as to experience the influence and relationships of one phenomenon (like feeling) with another (like doing).
- **MDA Design Framework:** MDA is a design approach that closely considers the relationship between those who design a game and those who play it. Standing for “mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics,” respectively, MDA proposes that the way players experience a game is first by encountering the instructions (mechanics), which inform what they do to play (dynamics) and leads them to experience a feeling or set of feelings (aesthetics). The designer of said game would begin with a desired emotional outcome, or the aesthetic they’re designing for, then identify what actions users/players need to engage in to feel the desired feeling(s), and finally write the instructions to get them to do just that.
- **User experience design (UX design):** This is a “process of designing (digital or physical) products that are useful, easy to use, and delightful to interact with.”<sup>4</sup> UX techniques can be used for everything museums design, including programs, exhibitions, publications, and services, not just for technology-based tools like interactives and websites.
- **Personas:** Personas are short stories used to help build empathy with intended audiences by describing who a user is and what they need, often including demographic and psychographic information.
- **Scenarios:** Scenarios are short stories used to describe an end user’s motivations for engaging with any kind of intervention (commonly a product or service, but not always) or to describe the problem that said intervention is meant to address. Scenarios can also help map different motivations between different user groups and even how those motivations might change before, during, and after an individual end user’s interaction with the intervention being designed.
- **User journeys:** Journeys offer a visual representation of end user interactions across multiple channels or through various touch points they may have with a specific intervention when completing a task or engaging in a series of interactions. In addition to helping with the design of entirely new user interactions, user journeys can also be highly effective when designing new features or enhancements to existing products and services.
- **User testing:** Actual end users test various components of a product or service during the product development process to make sure the final version meets with the actual needs and expectations of end

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usertesting.com/blog/what-is-ux-design-15-user-experience-experts-weigh-in>

users. This process usually includes specific steps for **usability testing**, which is meant to gauge how easy it is to use the thing being developed.

- **Design thinking:** Design thinking is a human-centered, non-linear, and iterative process used to design products, services, experiences, programs, and more. Though there are many adaptations of design thinking methods, it generally includes five steps: 1) empathize; 2) define; 3) ideate; 4) prototype; and 5) test. Across these five steps are necessary phases of divergent and convergent thinking, which allow for the creation of a wide possibility space, before narrowing down the field to prototype and test specific ideas.
- **Agile development process:** A development process that divides up a project into short bursts called sprints to iteratively design, build, and release a project in pieces. Instead of a more conventional “waterfall” process, which divides work into linear phases, agile development allows for building, learning, and revising with each launch, thus building more information into the work of subsequent steps. This approach comes directly from software development but can be effectively applied to the creation of services, programs, and even exhibitions under the right circumstances.

## FURTHER INSIGHTS

[Recapping Pandemic as Portal](#), Cooper Hewitt Interaction Lab

[Interpretation design: Think, feel, do](#), FlowExperiences.org

[The Effectiveness of Sacrificial Concepts](#), Ford Labs

[MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research](#), Hunicke, Leblanc, Zubeck

A [5-Point Checklist for Complex Challenges](#), IDEO

[The First Penguin Award](#), Edwin van der Geest

How I Almost Won [the “Penguin Award,”](#) NPR

[Happy Accidents](#), NPR

## Process and workflow

While museum experience is conventionally considered an apparatus of museum outputs — exhibitions, programs, educational materials, publications — a transformative museum experience considers how these outputs are influenced by internal engagements and experiences of staff and departments. Just like a body, the quality of museum experience is greatly impacted by what is put *into* the ecosystem. Put simply, *how we work* is equally as important as *what we produce*. Taken in reverse, the design of workflow and process can also help bring insights from visitor-facing interventions through the organization and into the hands, hearts, and minds of leadership.

Supporting and nurturing ways of working that encourage learning and iteration can create a museum practice that is flexible, adaptable, and agile in its ability to respond to and create change within its environment, allowing the organization to learn from the work we do. Following are tools that will help museums design workflows and processes that contribute positively to work product and contribute learnings and insight back into the organization.

- **Build communities of practice:** Create internal communities of practice that connect practitioners who do similar kinds of work across an organization. These communities allow ideas, best practices, lessons learned, strategies, methodologies, and ways of creating to be freely exchanged, co-developed, shared, and expressed in the open for the betterment of collective well-being and transformation.
- **Narrate work as it's happening – work out loud:** Modern leaders empower people to make their own decisions, invite two-way conversation using language everyone can understand, and are curious about learning new things. These traits all make up what is called [Working Out Loud™](#) (WOL), which can be adapted for use across your intranet or digital communication channels (i.e., Microsoft Teams or Yammer, Slack, and Trello) to cultivate transparent and connected information exchange.
- **Build external partnerships:** Bring in partners from outside your museum and outside the museum sector. In order to achieve a diversity of perspectives and create a multiplicity of approaches, museums need to collaborate with and utilize expertise from those outside the field. Cross-industry partnerships allow for greater diversity of thought, perspective, and ability to collaboratively develop museum projects.
- **Integrate evaluation from the start:** Write feedback and evaluation into work plans from the very beginning of any project. All too often we see evaluation added to projects after the project has begun or near its end. In this way we determine every project a success with metrics designed to uphold whatever results emerged. As we've discussed throughout this toolkit, we need to embrace failure as a tool for learning, adapting, ideation, and progress.
- **Swap staff roles:** Building on embodied design techniques, role swapping identifies specific opportunities to place individuals in different roles for a period of time, allowing them to better empathize with colleagues, collaborators, and even audience members. This practice can be particularly good to bridge gaps in understanding between adjacent teams, particularly those between leadership and frontline staff.
- **Use Liberating Structures:** Liberating Structures is a set of frameworks based on the idea that it's the structures of the way we meet, plan, decide, and relate to one another that limits or supports the work we do. By introducing shifts in the structure of how we

gather, Liberating Structures puts innovative power once reserved for experts into the hands of everyone.

- **Explore Lego Serious Play:** LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® is a process designed to enhance innovation and business performance by unlocking employee and community engagement. Based on research that shows that hands-on, minds-on learning produces a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the world and its possibilities, LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® deepens the reflection process and supports effective dialogue across and throughout organizations.

## FURTHER INSIGHTS

[What Is Working Out Loud?](#), One by One UK

[How to work out loud in a digital space](#), Dr. Lauren Vargas

Learn more about [Liberating Structures](#)

[LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®](#)

# Culture

Though culture is not conventionally understood as a thing to be “designed,” it very much is that. An organization’s culture has a direct effect on the work being done within that organization, as well as the work that *can be done*. For example, an organizational culture that does not create space for learning and mistakes limits the range of possibilities that the organization’s staff would feel comfortable even considering, let alone executing.

In considering which tactics to share in this section, our decision-making was led by the following priorities:

- Ensure work and decision-making are transparent and visible.
- Embrace clarity and not certainty.
- Acknowledge your own expertise.
- Identify and highlight pockets of good practice for others inside and outside the organization.
- Creatively combine and/or layer qualitative and quantitative data.
- Promote emotional skills building.
- Emphasize inclusion in all aspects of museum practice.
- Ensure accessibility in all aspects of museum practice.
- Enable leadership at all levels of the organization.
- Create a clear time frame around your work and communicate it up front.

Creating a culture of relevance in museums is about more than delivering products, services, and experiences that meaningfully address and engage current and future generations. Maintaining relevance requires embracing change and transformation as a constant, something embedded into all organizational practice such that the culture itself becomes better able to respond to a constantly changing context.



- **Rituals:** What actions and behaviors do you regularly follow with your team or organization to promote employee or community engagement? Workplace and community rituals are ideal to celebrate success, build relationships, and promote growth. For stronger community relationships, consider how strong your workplace relationships are.
- **Employee experience mapping:** Employee experience journey mapping documents the highs and lows of the employee journey from the time a staff member applies for a role through their departure from the organization. Mapping that journey provides a comprehensive view of the experience, offering opportunities for your organization to create positive employee experiences along the way and helping to improve satisfaction and retention.
- **Retrospectives:** Consider scheduling consistent retrospective meetings to evaluate work while it is happening. Make this reflection a ritualistic practice. Discuss what went well, what problems or obstacles were encountered, and how those problems were (or were not) solved or addressed.
- **Train as teams:** One unfortunate side effect of hierarchical workplace structures in museums is the siloing of individuals from collective interaction and discovery. More and more we see projects presenting the work of a single individual, reflecting a single point of view. Training as teams strengthens the connections between staff made weak by silos and reinforces the value of collective ingenuity and shared experiences. Regardless of the content of the training, though, we recommend trainings that encourage creative and critical thinking and experimentation; museum work is made better through collective practices.
- **Pulse surveys:** A staff pulse survey is a short, quick survey that is sent out to employees on a regular basis (daily, monthly, quarterly, etc.). This survey is essentially a check-in, providing a pulse check on topics such as employee satisfaction, job role, communication, relationships, and work environment.
- **RULER framework:** RULER is a systemic approach to social and emotional learning (SEL) developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence<sup>5</sup> for preK-12 schools, informing how leaders lead, teachers teach, students learn, and families support students. RULER is an acronym for the five skills of emotional intelligence: recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating. This framework is useful for museum practitioners navigating organizational change in the workplace and when engaging or developing content for external communities.
- **Safe spaces for staff:** Empower chronically underrepresented or excluded staff to create and control safe spaces for discussion and

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<sup>5</sup> In 2021 Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence Assistant Director Dena Simmons, a Black woman who co-developed the RULER framework, resigned from her work at Yale [citing racism and discriminatory harm](#) in her departure.

exploration and provide mechanisms for learnings and outcomes from these groups to effect real institutional impact. Often museum staff who embody marginalized identities and/or service-based roles are left out of the creative and leadership processes. Thus, staff and museum priorities continue to be influenced by homogenous perspectives. Creating pathways for new leadership in affiliate spaces, staff discussions and forums, and other mechanisms will help museums' internal operations become more inclusive.

- **Forums for sharing:** Again, we're advocating for stronger connections within museum staff. In a workplace culture that encourages the ongoing sharing of ideas and practices, creativity, ingenuity, and innovation flow freely. Excessively capitalist expectations of work, work, work, produce, produce, produce have eliminated the necessary time and space for staff sharing. Embracing a culture with regular forums for sharing increases the potential for innovation and relevance.
- **Cross-departmental teams:** Cross-departmental teams and training provide a similar foundation to work from and measure against, ensuring closer strategic alignment and better understanding of adjacent roles and responsibilities. This practice can also support more effective integration of input from affinity groups or focus groups designed to improve work process and culture.
- **Liberation theories and practices:** Liberation theories are a complex and nuanced philosophy of change. But in short, liberation is the comprehensive dismantling of oppression and its hierarchies, structures, norms, and belief systems. A liberated world embraces multiple narratives and collective ways of behaving that encourage instead of limit the expression of all peoples. A liberated workplace embraces the fullness of humanity within its workers. A liberated museum reduces harm by actively eliminating oppressive behaviors, norms, and structures. Liberation theories are often positioned as ongoing endeavors. Liberation is commonly believed to be the act or journey of bettering oneself and one's environment, not a totalizing destination or utopia to be obtained. Liberative cultures inspire constant and ongoing experiences of transformation.

### FURTHER INSIGHTS

Rituals for Work: 50 Ways to Create Engagement, Shared Purpose, and a Culture that *Can Adapt to Change* by Kursat Ozenc and Margaret Hagan

[Employee Journey Mapping](#), DigitalHRTech.com

[RULER](#) framework, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

[Collective Liberation](#), Center for Racial Justice in Education

## In Closing

It is important to recognize these design-based research practices as valid and useful within a museum workplace culture context. Deviating from conventional research methods and HR-generated approaches to workplace culture transformation and moving toward design-centered practices offers entirely new areas of investigation and evaluation.

Combined with the holistic shift from *conventional* research norms to *experimental* design-based research norms, the practices, tactics, workflows, and processes suggested here open new possibilities and pathways toward transformative museum experiences.

These practices do not dismiss traditional research methods as invalid. Rather, developing iterative prototyping and testing models alongside more conventional research methods within institutions allows practitioners to build on the knowledge base of those who came before while acknowledging that museums exist in a context that is constantly evolving. Museums can then create an organizational culture that embraces change and transformation, which is critical to our future relevancy. Here, less traditional research methods can provide the most value for organizations.

We believe that testing, prototyping, evaluation, and findings integration are critically important practices to deploy across any institution, no matter its size, structure, or focus. This approach helps create a working culture of continuous learning and improvement that is more likely to embrace transformation as a healthy and necessary response to a continuously changing context.

# Tools of Our Transformative Praxis

“Praxis” is the active **union of theory and practice**. “Transformative praxis” is the catalyzing intersection where the dynamic energies of transformational theory and practice coalesce to usher in new possibilities.

As a collective of museum thinkers and workers with different perspectives, we use different tactics and **strategies to drive transformation**. What connects us is our individual and shared dedication to a transformative praxis. Each contributor presented to this collective on their praxis, and how they have implemented the following approaches in their individual areas of practice, and what follows is a summary of each. We encourage you to consider these ideas and integrate them however and wherever they might contribute to the creation or evolution of your own transformative praxis.

## **SHANITA BRACKETT, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Understanding and driving the far-reaching change described in the work of this group requires transformational leadership. Critical to one’s ability to become a transformational leader, is the process of understanding yourself, your values and the continuous process of responding to major life shifts, losses and failures that test those values. I was inspired to explore this topic when asked to present best practices to our working group.

For the last three years, I have explored a path to consistent self-discovery and self-management to improve my ability to lead in challenging, fast-paced scenarios. The process has required a unique learning pattern as a result of answering the following three questions:

- Who are you?
- What do you value and why?
- How do you determine when those values are being compromised; and how are you impacted?

The process required me to tap into experiences and transitions of childhood, family, adulting, the workplace, relationships and coping.

## **ISABELLA BRUNO, FUTURES THINKING**

I introduced this group to some rapid future thinking activities, and I think all museum workers deserve to have imagination and futures thinking at their disposal. This was my motivation to start a community of practice for futures thinking last year. Radical Museum Futures is a convener and platform for museum workers to nurture creativity and imagination within our field. We do

this by imagining museum futures through writing, drawing, and other narrative mediums. We expand upon worlds written by our predecessors in radical imagination. We ask: What would a museum's purpose be in this world? For these beings? By these beings? What impact would the nature of this world be on a museum, and the nature of a museum on this world? When we create our own stories — you might call them fan-fic — we generate alternate histories, art periods, forms of science and experimentation, museum practice and operations, museum sites and experiences. As we create and share within our collective, we define museology in an alternate world. Slowly and steadily, our radical visions will redefine our current one.

Here's an activity for you to try.

### **Sudden Fiction for Radical Museums**

Find widely divergent possibilities through training your imagination.

If you've ever heard the famous short story "For sale, baby shoes, never worn," you've been introduced to sudden fiction without even realizing it. Sudden fiction are stories of 100 words or less. There is so much to learn from combining these delightful amuse-bouche stories with the radical transformation of museums we hope to see in our lifetime. I invite you to try this exercise with a project team and enjoy the diversity of ideas and protopian vision\* you can create. Return to it over the course of a project and see how you can open to new possibilities once you begin to use your imagination with regularity. Or try it solo as a daily practice over a week or two. What purpose can an imaginative, silly exercise like this play in your museum practice? I dare you to find out.

1. Reflect on five major changes to current museum practice or structure or perception that you want to happen. Star your top three. Now just pick one. (5 mins)
2. Pick a tweet from <https://twitter.com/MuseumGenerator> to be the setting for your story.
  - a. For example: "Welcome to the Museum of the History of Storage! Announcement: we're looking to acquire an Indigo Horse for our collections. If anyone has one, please consider donating it to us for the betterment of the whole world." Think about the museum as an organization instead of a building. Who is on staff? How do people who work there make decisions? Who visits? What are they seeking?
3. Now that you have a museum setting and your transformation in mind, slam them together. Do not hold back in making this ridiculous, unbelievable, humorous, or moving. Go all the way. You can diagram,

bullet, draw, storyboard. You have three minutes to figure out how to combine these disparate elements. This is your scratch-pad time before we go into writing. (3 mins)

4. OK, now you can write your sudden fiction. Here are three pieces of advice from a flash author.
  - a. How to write flash fiction
    1. Start in the middle.
    2. Don't use too many characters.
    3. Make sure the ending isn't at the end.
  - b. Credit: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/14/how-to-write-flash-fiction>
5. Open wordcounter.com and start writing, 100 words or less. Please remember that this is strictly for imaginative purposes; there's no right or wrong story; there's no need or requirement to share what you write with anyone else. (5 mins)
  - a. Examples of sudden fiction. All combine a radical transformation with the fictional Museum of the History of Storage

Story 1: <sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>The Museum of the History of Storage, an object co-op, recently installed part of their collection in Central Park where it is enjoyed by anyone who wants to visit, including a variety of dogs and birds. <sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Story 2: The new exhibition at the Museum of Storage looks into how lack of space has affected different socio-economic groups. This looks into how storage companies have played a role in housing insecurity and loss of memories through auctioning practices. Back when we had a board with wealthy donors, we couldn't do this, we only did tours of large closets with shoes. This new exhibition dives into the dark world of what things mean to people, but also how consumerism puts collecting on display for those who have space, emphasizing large inequalities in our society. This takes place across the city. <sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Story 3: As I leave the most recent co-op meeting, I am as usual over the moon. Who could have imagined that after starting this museum 20 years ago that we would be collecting the art crates and storage specimens from all over the country? This would never have been possible without the unity of unions we formed in year 5: the BOXTRUCK union, the DOLLY commission, the UPSFEDEXUSPS logistics coalition all bought in with their union funds and made this museum possible. And thanks to them, we have rotating staff and traveling programs that emphasize the importance of sustainability.

Story 4: <sup>[P]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>I am the director of The History of Storage. Most of us don't know

what storage really means. Does storage offer protection, or does storage mean to hide? Storage can be found in our homes, buildings, brains, and computers. Storage isn't just four walls with a door and key to lock it. Our staff of 50 have put our minds together to present a variety of historical stories and facts to describe storage, how we use it and what we use for it. Our staff commit to share their own experiences with each object and those of visitors. <sup>P</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

### **KAYLEIGH BRYANT GREENWELL, THEORY OF CHANGE**

As practitioners we've been talking about transforming museums for decades. So why doesn't change stick? Our one-off efforts and sporadic alterations to the way we work have not been serving us well. If we want to be serious about transforming museum experience, we need to get serious about what change work is, how it operates, and defining our individual roles within it. Theory of Change is a construct that outlines what, how, and who in the process of creating transformation. There are many ways to approach a Theory of Change. The most common model begins by considering desired goals and working backwards to determine all of the necessary components to achieve those goals. Another way to develop a Theory of Change is over time through intentional practice. The way we work determines the outcomes of our work. If we continue to approach our work through a lens that reinforces the status quo, we will never achieve liberated outcomes. Activists have demonstrated and theorized for centuries that the key to liberated societies is liberated consciousness. I believe the next step in museum transformation is a strategic approach to change work.

### **ALEXANDRA CUNNINGHAM CAMERON, TRANSFORMING EVALUATION**

My background in critical theory has majorly influenced my work as a curator. I try to approach the spectrum of curatorial labor - exhibitions, publications, research, advocacy, and collection administration - as opportunities for social (and personal) transformation by underlining and undermining existing power structures. This work can take on a variety of shapes, from crowd-sourced digital archiving to commissioning public architecture that invites unexpected behavior from passersby.

My process has evolved over time to become more focused on context and consensus. Currently, I perform multidisciplinary research and seek wide-ranging feedback to evaluate a project or topic's contemporary relevance; use my resources to design a compatible response; and rely on collaboration with stakeholders, designers, and the public, to execute it.

My work has lost its tidiness as it increasingly accommodates contributed points of view. It's become more of a constellation than an index. It wants questions. Although a lack of precision may be taboo in my profession, this approach to interpretation that acknowledges multiple narrators and exposes the process of creation has felt like the most responsible way to represent the complexity, bias and beauty of storytelling.

### **SILVIA FILIPPINI FANTONI, TRANSFORMING WORKFLOWS**

Change is always difficult. This and this is especially true for museums, as they are founded on the idea of “preservation,” tied to traditional working methods, and siloed within different departments that have their own culture, limiting communication and collaboration among them. To introduce more effective and long-lasting transformation in these organizations, it is important to start by changing some of the ways in which people work. This includes fostering a more cross-departmental and interdisciplinary approach to project development (core team); developing a joint understanding of project objectives among all people involved (big idea); and involving the final user into the different steps of the development of the project.

### **MARIE FOULSTON, SOCIAL GAMING PLATFORMS**

For my toolkit presentation I decided to focus on something that brought inspiration and joy during 2020 (both things that were in rare supply that year), which was spending time with friends online exploring all that is weird and wonderful in [Roblox](#).

Roblox.com is a hugely successful tool and platform for creating and sharing online multiplayer games. It offers us the ability to explore the creative work, worlds, and games of people from around the world in a digitally embodied way, and to do so collectively alongside friends, peers, and strangers.

On the surface it might be easy to dismiss the platform, or the work shared thought it, as childish or insignificant, but there is real meaning, value, and insight to be found by spending time here. In this talk I provide a brief window into this world and highlight some of the key provocations it offers that might help us rethink what curation and exhibitions could be, both online and off.

### **RACHEL GINSBERG, EXPERIENTIAL PARADIGMS — MUSEUM AS...**

In thinking about transforming museum experience, my primary urge is to construct stories about what museums are that can then help us imagine what they might be. These stories, or narrative frameworks, are meant to function as provocations to help people reconceive of the museum as more than just a



space of display, but rather one of interaction. Conceiving of the museum as a knowledge system, an interface, a platform, and a prototype offers pathways into new ideas and interactions to help us transform.

**“Museum as knowledge system”** helps us consider all the various systems, people, tools, and interactions we use as parts of a whole designed system that itself is imbued with values and intent; thinking of the museum as a knowledge system frames it as a “system of systems.”

**“Museum as interface”** reminds us that connecting people to ideas, information, and meaning in the form of our collection, exhibitions, and the various outputs we create is a series of design activities; to be successful, we must choose which connections to make and design with intention.

**“Museum as platform”** recognizes the importance of the physical, digital, and theoretical space of the museum as a platform capable of elevating/legitimizing/launching/exhibiting the work and ideas of diverse groups of people and organizations.

**“Museum as prototype”** considers the entire museum a living laboratory, capable of supporting continuous research, insights, and exploration.

### **HANNAH GOODWIN, MULTIPLICITY AS A TOOL FOR ACCESS AND INCLUSION**

One of the things lacking in many museums, which can be crucial to accessible and inclusive spaces and experiences, is flexibility. Avoiding “one way” approaches through embracing the idea of multiplicity can help build flexibility throughout. Universal Design, human-centered design, inclusive design, Design for All, whatever terminology you choose, is a great starting point. Consider accessibility for people with disabilities (all types, whether they are visible, invisible, temporary, life-long, acquired), learning styles, preferences, cultural differences, language, experience, age. No one solution will work for everyone. Building in variation, flexibility, and multiple possibilities will be more effective.

A multiple-options-for-engagement approach is common in museums, which often offer gallery or exhibit experiences in a variety of ways — self-guided, wall text, apps or mobile devices, programs, talks, online materials, and so forth.

What about multiplicity within these areas? Some examples:

- Multiple entry points address the spectrum of ability and preferences and support creative response and individuality.

- Multi-sensory engagement can address the spectrum of ability, provide a point of access, be enjoyable, prompt language and memory, and build connection.
- Multiple perspectives can provide welcome, relevancy, connection, complexity, and truth.
- Multiple people: Team-led tours and programs (more than one tour guide, docent, instructor, etc.) can more flexibly respond to visitor needs, interests, and variation within the group.
- Multiple languages (including visual) can make the museum more inclusive.
- Multiple ways of learning, in and outside the museum, acknowledge the fact that how people learn is varied, and all ways are equally valid.

We should consistently ask ourselves “is anyone excluded?” and, if the answer is “yes,” embrace multiplicity in answering the question, “How might we include them?”

### **ANDREA JONES, FREE THE MUSEUM**

If there's one thing that the pandemic should have taught museums, it's to think beyond the walls of their buildings. Rather than expecting our audiences to come to us, we need to be going to them. For most museums in 2020 the solution was investing heavily in digital programming. But what about the physical world of experiences that we all miss and crave? What about the digital divide? There are so many possibilities for museums to activate the world around us and to repurpose everyday spaces as sites of learning, reflection, healing, expression, and storytelling.

The concept of public art is not new, but very few museum practitioners are employing their well-honed skills interpreting in public spaces. Could a science museum partner with a drug store to create a pop-up that helps people understand the science of vaccination? How about a history museum that partners with a community to interpret a borderline between two formerly segregated neighborhoods? Even without a museum, museum professionals can do this kind of work in their own communities.

Creating these kinds of environmental activations can not only catalyze community relationship building, but the impact on audiences can actually be more powerful when NOT in a museum.

This year, colleagues and I created an initiative we call Free The Museum (FreeTheMuseum.org). We aim to collect inspirational examples of these kinds of “outside the walls” activations and begin to formulate best practices. What

kinds of materials stand up to weather? When should you work with a community and when should you subvert the status quo? There is lots to learn, but with a prototyping mindset, you can begin right where you stand.

### **ADAM MARTIN, DEFAULT TO PUBLIC**

Successfully managing asynchronous, remote project teams, especially in this time of pandemic, has meant more fully embracing a “default to public” approach. This allows information to be easily accessible to all team members, collaborations to happen more organically, and informed decisions to be made more efficiently. But what would it mean for museums to “*default to public?*” How can museums engage the public to openly share ideas, co-create programs and experiences, and align decision-making with community values that prioritize people and the public good?

#### **Why default to public?**

A default to public approach for museums can lead to improved outcomes that deliver greater value to the community. Defaulting to public invites examination, gives space for feedback, and provides opportunities to engage with multiple perspectives. It can also lead to less friction in decision-making. When the community is engaged with decision-making from the beginning, and all those invested in a successful outcome have equal access and ability to offer feedback, better decisions can be made.

#### **What happens when we default to public?**

Museums that default to public make the information they hold more discoverable by and accessible to the community. Information made available in public spaces where communities gather is easier to engage with on multiple levels for different interests, ages, abilities, and needs. This allows for the formation of new ideas and increases opportunities for collaboration. It provides opportunities for community members to support and enhance the work of a museum in ways that match with their unique skills, experiences, and values. Defaulting to public allows museums to be more resilient by being more transparent. Acceptance and integration of feedback from an engaged community can lead to a more responsive museum that builds greater trust and delivers more value.

#### **How to default to public**

A default to public approach to community engagement is just one way museums can begin to transform internally. However, museums should not expect to create community. The first goal for museums choosing to default to public should be to help create spaces that provide support for existing communities to promote connection and dialogue. A museum should first build

pathways for community members to come together with museum leadership, staff, and stakeholders to develop a shared desire to invest in mutual success. This can help build trust and understanding of the community's expectations for the type of museum programs, experiences, and services that are most needed. By focusing on ways to support existing communities, museums can learn more about how they can best default to public, working with and for the communities they serve.

### **KATHERINE MILLER, BRIDGE THE DIVIDE: STAFF VS. VISITOR**

If museums are to transform, we must abandon the polarizing and elitist “us” (museum professionals) vs. “them” (visitors) attitude. The behind-the-scenes mysteries of working within a cultural institution can give off an elitist or exclusive energy, especially to the general public. Working in visitor experience, I have learned that many visitors want to know institutional secrets. They want to know things like: what makes one museum distinct from others? What is the most valuable or unusual object in the collection? What viewing experience is only found at a specific museum? The standard museum visitation model is still very much a pilgrimage that reserves select behind-the-scenes experiences for high-level patrons. But the many visitors who are aware that there's more information hidden behind the walls of the galleries want to know why certain parts of the experience are inaccessible to them.

Now more than ever museumgoers want to know how museums operate. In fact, they demand transparency! Furthermore, the public is more conscious that they are being observed, especially now in this digital age of customer relationship management (CRM). This awareness of data collection tactics gives the general populace the ability and power to communicate what they candidly think of a museum experience. Visitors know that museums need them as much as visitors need experiences, inspiration, and outlets for learning.

Museum professionals need to regularly role-play as visitors. This means leaving the comfort and privacy of the office to interact directly with visitors in the galleries and other public spaces. Frontline staff do this every day as part of their jobs. Facilities staff, security guards, and visitor services associates witness visitor reactions firsthand. Although in-gallery museum experience is limited in this age of COVID-19, communication with frontliners is essential; their knowledge is an underutilized resource. Frontliners are the bridge between museum visitors and other departmental museum staff. Collaboration is possible, and there is so much that can be learned collectively from everyone.

## **LIZ NEELY, JUDICIOUS USE OF RIDICULOUSNESS**

To critically examine and disrupt historic museum practice, I propose a judicious use of ridiculousness to inspire new ways of looking at things and introduce flexible, less formal processes. Introduction of meaningfully placed improv and fun can mitigate the exclusionary impacts of hierarchy and the power structures of traditional work practices to allow for more exploration by a wider set of voices. Perhaps ironically, there are rules to adding ridiculousness into your practice, including:

### **Know that timing is everything.**

Ridiculousness should be intentional and serve to inspire and capture creativity in a meaningful way. The practice can be fun when completely irrelevant, but it will get old and seem like a waste of time. Ridiculousness is a tool, not a brand.

### **Be inclusive, not exclusive.**

Without proper intention and design, ridiculousness can seem like an inside joke for a small group of people. This would negate the benefits of opening idea generation to a broader set of voices. Always take great care to invite everyone into the ridiculousness in whatever way they feel comfortable participating.

### **Use sparingly.**

Ridiculousness loses some of its magic when used all of the time. Throw the curveball when it will have the greatest impact.

If these rules are not followed, instead of generating new ideas from a broad set of people, you may just seem ridiculous. Give it a try!

## **CAROLYN ROYSTON, STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION**

I have experienced two major “transformations” in my career. One that was a director-led, strategic change management program designed to transform the museum over the long term. The other is now and was catalyzed overnight by a triple crises of pandemic, social injustice, and major economic ramifications for the sector. This transformation requires an immediate response, is more reactive rather than strategic, and is being led by individuals driving a change agenda.

It has raised interesting questions for me that I am grappling with now, and thinking about how to address, as we emerge out of this immediate crisis state. For example:

- How might we create the right conditions for change in our museums that are sustainable and enable us to continually evolve?

- How might we embed a change culture in our organizations so that an openness to change is built into our everyday practice and does not have to be driven by either a huge, all-encompassing change management program or alternatively by dramatic crisis?
- How might we create a shared language about change and space to discuss what change might look like for our organizations?
- How might we better support our staff who are grappling with change or working in areas that are leading change (e.g., museum technologists, roles that sit in interstitial places, or new emerging roles in our museums)?

There are no definitive answers to these questions. Responses will depend on the organization — the leadership, the staff, financial situation, etc. What is important is the ability to ask the questions, at every level of the organization, and have the space and structure to be able to discuss them and decide on the best way forward.

### **CASEY SCOTT SONGIN, QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS FOR MUSEUM EVALUATION**

To move beyond audience evaluation as a tick-box exercise and instead make it a meaningful practice of experience development and evaluation, it is critical to think of how to mix methodological approaches to include both quantitative research methods (in order to understand what someone is doing) and qualitative research methods (to understand why someone is doing what they are doing). Current technology available for data collection has made it easier than ever to access and collect data, and as evaluators, we must embrace a multimodal approach to a research question. Layering qualitative and quantitative research methodologies when creating or evaluating audience experiences allows for a richer and more meaningful understanding of our audiences' experiences and needs. This approach becomes not only relevant, but necessary as museums work toward creating more meaningful and relevant experiences for their visitors.

### **LAUREN VARGAS, BUSINESS SKILLS + EMOTIONAL SKILLS = DIGITAL MATURITY**

Practicing a “CALM” approach to digital leadership in cultural organizations can help all staff feel more confident about how to adopt new ways of working as well as emerging technologies. CALM is an acronym for the key attributes needed when practicing digital in cultural organizations: Collaborative, Anticipatory, the need to Let go of command and control leadership, and Mindful. This not only enables a more connected and engaged workforce, but enhances consumer and visitor experiences. This approach considers how and

what skills we need to create more open and collaborative workplaces so that we may be aware of, acknowledge, and adapt workloads to ensure work is equally distributed and aligned to strategic goals and objectives.

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# Appendices

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- A. Recommended Reading**
- B. Additional Web Resources**
- C. Getting Started with Accessibility?**
- D. CHSDM Guidelines for Visual Description**
- E. Facilitation tools for Transforming Museum Experience**



# A. Recommended Reading

For further inspiration, agitation, and provocation, we recommend exploring the following books on society, power, changemaking, creativity, process, and critical thinking.

*On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, by Sara Ahmed

*Rules for Radicals*, by Saul Alinsky

*How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*, by Mia Birdsong

*Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, edited by Andrew Boyd

*Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids,*

*Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive*, by Marc Brackett

*Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown

*We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*, by

Adrienne Maree brown and Malkia Devich-Cyril

*The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*, by Alicia Garza

*Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality,*

*Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, by Eric Klinenberg

*The Universal Traveler: A Soft-Systems Guide to: Creativity, Problem-Solving, and the Process of Reaching Goals*, by Don Koberg

*How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning*, by George Lakey

*The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash A*

*Culture of Innovation*, by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless

*Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski

*Rituals for Work: 50 Ways to Create Engagement, Shared Purpose, and a*

*Culture that Can Adapt to Change*, by Kursat Ozenc and Margaret Hagan

*The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, by Priya Parker

*The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap

*How I Built This: The Unexpected Paths to Success from the World's Most Inspiring Entrepreneurs*, by Guy Raz

*Thrive: The Facilitator's Guide to Radically Inclusive Meetings*, by Mark Smutny

## B. Additional Web Resources

For even further inspiration, agitation, and provocation, we recommend exploring the following links to other organizations, individuals, and collectives pushing museums into transformative spaces.

[Art Beyond Sight](#): a museum education institute for accessibility and inclusion

[Accessible Exhibition Design](#), Smithsonian

[The Designer's Critical Alphabet](#): a tool “to introduce designers and design students to critical theory and concepts to help them reflect on their design process” created by Lesley-Ann Noel, PhD

[Empathetic Museum Maturity Model](#): a tool to measure institutional transformation

[Inclusive Interactive Design](#): a collection of essays on designing inclusive interactive experiences

[Museum 2.0 Blog](#): a blog of ever-growing content exploring the future of museum practice

[Museums & Race Report Card](#): a tool for evaluating values-driven action and racial equity alignment in museums

[Museum as Site for Social Action](#): a grassroots collective of museum practitioners pushing for racial equity and inclusive transformation in museums

[Museums Association's \(UK\) Learning & Engagement Manifesto](#): launched in late 2020, this manifesto aims to hold museum accountable to equitable and inclusive values

[Museum-iD](#): a growing network of museum practitioners sharing resources and ideas to transform museum futures

[Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Center's Culture Lab Manifesto](#):  
guidelines for inclusive and equitable partnership and presentation with  
culturally specific groups and individuals

## C. Getting Started with Accessibility

Is your museum accessible for people with all types of disabilities? Do you have inclusive practice and programming?

If not, here are some ways to get started.

First of all, embrace the goal of accessibility for people with all types of disabilities, invisible and visible, temporary and life-long, and across the lifespan. Creating a more accessible institution for people with disabilities will also make it more welcoming and inclusive for everyone.

**\*\*Please note that this document was created to share information and is not recommending one organization over another. The area of disability is very broad, and this is truly intended as a “getting started” document. It does not include absolutely everything.**

You may want to begin with an institutional self-assessment. Below is a link to a self-assessment tool for cultural organizations. Regional ADA centers or other organizations may also have self-assessment resources.

New Jersey Theatre Alliance

<https://njtheatrealliance.org/resources/self-assessment>

If you want to learn more about the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, look up something specific, or find your regional ADA center, try these links:

ADA section of the Department of Justice

<https://www.ada.gov>

Regional ADA centers

<https://adata.org/find-your-region>

While the above all refer to U.S. civil rights law, the information covers basic accessibility and could be applied to any institution or environment. However, if you are not in the U.S., you may want to explore local, regional, or national organizations, departments, or laws that support individuals with disabilities.

Organizations working nationally and internationally that can provide valuable resources:

Access Smithsonian

<https://access.si.edu/museum-professionals>

American Alliance of Museums (AAM)

<https://www.aam-us.org>

American Council of the Blind

<https://www.acb.org>

Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI)

<https://adiarts.ie>

Disability Rights Fund

<https://disabilityrightsfund.org>

Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD)

<https://www.humancentereddesign.org>

Kennedy Center's Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD®) program

<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/networks-conferences-and-research/research-and-resources/lead-research-and-resources/>

National Association of the Deaf

<https://www.nad.org>

National Endowment for the Arts

<https://www.arts.gov/impact/accessibility>

Universal Design Institute

<https://www.udinstitute.org>

Assessing your website and related resources are also important:

National Center for Accessible Media (NCAM)

<https://www.wgbh.org/foundation/what-we-do/ncam>

Knowbility

<https://knowbility.org>

WebAIM  
<https://webaim.org>

You may find resources from your regional museum associations:

Regional Museum Associations  
<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/council-of-regional-associations/>

## GO LOCAL

There may also be local cultural access consortiums that provide resources, education, and information. Try googling “Cultural Access Consortiums and Organizations” with your city, state, or region and see what comes up. Here are some, courtesy of Chicago Cultural Access.

### Local Access Knowledge Networks

Last updated: July 2018

Local access knowledge networks are informal and formal community-based groups that foster awareness, education, and resource-sharing all in the name of improved accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities in museums, theaters, and other cultural spaces.

Arizona: [artabilityaz.org](http://artabilityaz.org)

Boston, MA and Greater New England: [ca-ne.org](http://ca-ne.org)

Chicago, IL: [chicagoculturalaccess.org](http://chicagoculturalaccess.org)

Denver, CO: [artofaccessdenver.com](http://artofaccessdenver.com)

Florida: [faccess.org](http://faccess.org)

Indianapolis, IN: [facebook.com/AccessIndy](https://facebook.com/AccessIndy)

Louisville, KY: [louisvilleculturalaccessibility.yolasite.com](http://louisvilleculturalaccessibility.yolasite.com)

Michigan: [culturesource.org/resources/accessibility](http://culturesource.org/resources/accessibility)

Minnesota: [facebook.com/groups/mnaccessalliance](https://facebook.com/groups/mnaccessalliance)

Nashville, TN: [vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/vkc/triad/cei-INN/](http://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/vkc/triad/cei-INN/)

New Jersey: [njtheatrealliance.org/access](http://njtheatrealliance.org/access)

New York, NY: [museumaccessconsortium.org](http://museumaccessconsortium.org)

Pittsburgh, PA: [pittsburghartscouncil.org/accessibility](http://pittsburghartscouncil.org/accessibility)

Raleigh, NC: [raleighnc.gov/parks/content/Arts/Articles/UniversalAccess.html](http://raleighnc.gov/parks/content/Arts/Articles/UniversalAccess.html)

San Francisco, CA: [facebook.com/bayareaaccess](https://facebook.com/bayareaaccess)

Southern California Access Network: (no website)

Washington, DC: [www.dcaan.org](http://www.dcaan.org)

Email [ChicagoCulturalAccess@gmail.com](mailto:ChicagoCulturalAccess@gmail.com) to add your network to the list.

States, cities, and towns often have commissions or departments that oversee accessibility broadly, as well as those that support specific constituencies, such as residents who are blind or have low vision. Through these you may find:

- Training opportunities
- Assessment
- User expertise
- Local guidelines and resources
- Interpreter or other services
- Outreach

## **AGING AND DISABILITY**

Many countries across the globe are experiencing a steady increase in the number of people who are 65 and older, a population in which the percentage of people naturally acquiring disabilities through the process of aging increases dramatically. Don't forget these valuable members of the community! Check out local and national councils on aging in addition to those that address areas of disability that tend to be more prevalent among elders, such as hearing loss, changes in mobility, changes in vision, cognitive changes, and memory loss and dementia.

## **QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS**

Here are three great resources to learn directly from people with disabilities, gain awareness of current issues, and think about disability justice.

The Disability Visibility Project

<https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com>

The Invisible Disability Project

<https://www.invisibledisabilityproject.org>

Sins Invalid - An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility

<https://www.sinsinvalid.org>

## **DON'T FORGET THE SCHOOLS!**

If your museum gives school tours, remember that the classrooms will include students with disabilities. In addition, there may be schools in your area that serve specific populations, for example, schools for students who are blind or schools for students who are Deaf.

This resource list is not exhaustive; feel free to add organizations you know or learn about in the [shared online space](#) we've created for this purpose.

An easy way to remember key components of moving forward:

**Assess** your institution, from website to parking and all in-between.

**Consult** with the communities.

**Collaborate** cross-departmentally.

**Educate** staff and volunteers.

**Support** staff, members, visitors, and volunteers.

**Start now!**

## **D. Guidelines for Image Description, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum**

### **ON STRIVING FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION**

For visitors who use assistive technology, image descriptions allow for more equitable experiences in accessing digital content. Technologists, curators, communications staff, and other museum colleagues can all work to create more inclusive digital projects by using this document to author image descriptions.

Cooper Hewitt's Guidelines for Image Description is a living document that was produced by collaborators to provide an overview and fundamentals for cultural organizations that are creating descriptions for their digital content.

Organizations beginning this work must continue necessary conversations around institution-specific decisions that are influenced by voice and mission such as the intentional use of jargon and identity-based description. These guidelines are created to be comprehensive and responsive, to provide guidance in doing the work, while also maintaining enough fluidity to evolve with the work. Paramount to this is the recognition that language is deeply rooted and understood through the context of the culture and society of its time. This practice must continue to be engaged with contemporary dialogues as image description inherently intersects with questions of race, gender, and identity.

The guidelines were made through the dedicated work of Ruth Starr, Cooper Hewitt Accessibility Manager, Sina Bahram, President of Prime Access Consulting and Anna Chiaretta Lavatelli, accessibility advocate and museum professional, in conjunction with Freer|Sackler, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, with thanks to the Smithsonian Accessibility Program, and the Smithsonian Accessibility Innovation Fund, and with immense gratitude to the users, visitors, and cultural advocates who champion this work forward.

## INTRODUCTION

Image descriptions help visitors who are blind or have low vision access the information contained in images. Description also makes it easier to find images through the image's content as opposed to the caption or title of the object that it depicts. Cooper Hewitt's Guidelines for Image Description outlines types of descriptions, the structure of a description, and recommendations to help guide writing descriptions (with examples). The "Core aspects of description" can be used as a framework to write down all of your observations of an image, and the other sections can help you to enrich and refine your description. These guidelines are written for image description specifically, but the concepts outlined can be expanded upon, considering the context of an image or—moving beyond the image of an object—to describing real-world objects, providing tours of exhibitions, live description of performances, or audio description of the moving image.

For the full text of the Image Description Guidelines, visit [Cooper Hewitt's website](#).

## E. Facilitation Tools: Transforming Museum Experience Workshop Series

The contents of this document are derived from conversations that took place among the co-authors across three workshops split into six half-day sessions. As we were working across a range of time zones (US Mountain Time through Central European Time), the workshops ran from 10:30-3:00pm eastern, except for the first which began and ended thirty minutes earlier.

For all six sessions, the group met using Zoom, and documented all work in a shared online space, using digital whiteboarding tool, Miro. The Miro boards were set up to mirror session agendas in a map-like format that helped participants to navigate easily. We used Miro as a way to share the labor of



documentation in a shared space visible to all. That way, everyone saw everything that was being developed before it would make its way into the toolkit we knew we would be developing from it.

All session agendas were developed by Interaction Lab Director, Rachel Ginsberg, following a loose structure based on three parts: 1) exploring how and why museum experience should transform, 2) composing and synthesizing design questions to help frame challenges and opportunities and 3) sharing tools and approaches that the co-authors use in our regular practice. As the workshop design was meant to hold space for an intentionally emergent process, facilitation and timekeeping were loose and the agendas themselves changed quite a lot in the process. As such, strikethrough text in the below indicates a piece of the agenda that we pushed into a later session as needed.

# WORKSHOP ONE

## OCTOBER 22/26, 2020

10:00am-12:00pm EDT - BLOCK ONE		
5 minutes	Welcome from Carolyn	
15 minutes	Framing and housekeeping from Rachel	<p>Framing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transforming museum experience to transform museums</li> <li>• Connecting VX related roles</li> <li>• Explore what we're working on, and what we're using to do it</li> </ul> <p>Housekeeping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claim this time and space (airplane mode?)</li> <li>• Set up comfortably, physically and digitally</li> <li>• Normalize camera and mic behavior</li> <li>• Time structure of workshops and presentation blocks</li> <li>• Sign up if you haven't already</li> <li>• Plans for the toolkit, and public program</li> <li>• Self documentation, specific tactics to your comfort</li> <li>• Collaborative documentation in miro</li> </ul>
10 minutes	Miro onboarding	Rachel shows everyone how to use miro
60 minutes	Intro exercise	<p>20 minutes - appreciative inquiry Interview your partner about any of the following, personal, professional, artistic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the relationship between your current work and your life's work?</li> </ul> <p>40 minutes - group introductions (partners introduce their partners)</p>

30 minutes	Group discussion	
<b>12:30-2:30pm EDT - BLOCK TWO</b>		
10 minutes	Intro and check in	Feedback and thoughts on the morning Any housekeeping issues? Unpacking Transforming Museum Experience
10 minutes	Individual reflection and writing	How and why do you believe museum experiences (and perhaps even museums themselves should transform?) Write in the medium of your choice, put a summary into miro now or later.
35 minutes	Small group discussion	Bring your reflection into the small group to share and discuss Collectively document your discussion in miro, and by whatever other means you feel comfortable
5 minutes	Introducing "how might we"	<del>What is a design question?</del> <del>Frame a problem to effectively generate multiple solutions to that problem...</del> "How might we..."
20 minutes	Crafting design questions	Based on your group's thoughts on how and why museum experience should transform, craft a long list of design questions using "how might we..." Same small group
35 minutes	Group share of the hows, whys and the list of design questions.	
10 minutes	Check out	Reflective writing exercise - share whatever is appealing on miro

## WORKSHOP TWO NOVEMBER 12/13, 2020

<b>11/12 - 10:30am-12:30pm EST - BLOCK ONE</b>		
10 minutes	Hellos and individual written check in	Housekeeping! Event registration status

		Fill out honorarium forms by FRIDAY!  What stayed with us and what has happened since Review designer's critical alphabet
20 minutes	Share out	
30 minutes	Large group discussion - Toolkit distribution and plan for upcoming deadlines	November 20th- Museum Next proposal due November 30th- Museweb, AAM workshop proposals due December week 1 - Book proposal
20 minutes	Large group discussion	Designer's critical alphabet - select Review design questions - add and edit
45 minutes	Design of the public program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 200 participants</li> <li>• Use existing framework or design something new</li> <li>• Balance of active/passive participation</li> <li>• What do we want this to contribute to the toolkit?</li> </ul>
<b>11/12 - 1:00pm-3:00pm EST - BLOCK TWO</b>		
90 minutes	Practitioner presentations	Hannah Goodwin Isabella Bruno Katherine Miller Silvia Filippini Fantoni
30 minutes	Large group discussion and check out	

<b>11/13 -10:30am-12:30pm EST - BLOCK ONE</b>		
10 minutes	Hello and housekeeping	Toolkit distribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• November 20th- Museum Next proposal due</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>November 30th- Museweb, AAM workshop proposals due</li> <li>December week 1- Book proposal</li> </ul> Additional workshop?
60 minutes	Large group discussion	Public Program Design
50 minutes	Practitioner Presentations	Kayleigh Bryant Greenwell Andrea Jones
<b>11/13 - 1:00pm-3:00pm EST - BLOCK TWO</b>		
50 minutes	Practitioner presentations	Lauren Vargas Casey Scott Songin
60 minutes	Large group discussion and synthesis	Public program design cont OR Prototyping tactics
10 minutes	Check out	

## WORKSHOP THREE DECEMBER 4/8, 2020

<b>12/4 - 10:30am-12:30pm EST - BLOCK ONE</b>		
5 minutes	Hellos and housekeeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Book orders!</li> <li>Toolkit next steps               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draft</li> <li>Videos</li> <li>Manifesto</li> <li>Other reflective writing?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
15 minutes	Large group discussion	Debrief from public program
40 minutes	Small groups in breakout rooms  1: Andrea, Adam, Carolyn, Isabella 2: Silvia, Katherine, Marie, Shanita 3: Casey, Kayleigh, Liz, Rachel 4: Lauren, Alexandra, Hannah	Testing prototyping and evaluation tactics Generate a list in small groups of different kinds of tactics currently used in your work and things you'd like to try
40 minutes	Large group discussion	Share out and discuss

20 minutes	Large group discussion	Toolkit representation
<b>12/4 - 1:00pm-3:00pm EST - BLOCK TWO</b>		
90 minutes	Practitioner presentations	Adam Martin Shanita Brackett Carolyn Royston Alexandra Cunningham Cameron
30 minutes	Large group discussion and check out	

<b>12/8 - 10:30am-12:30pm EST - BLOCK ONE</b>		
5 minutes	Hellos and housekeeping	Book orders Book proposal still in the works
30 minutes	Practitioner presentation	Alexandra Cunningham Cameron
20 minutes	Large group discussion	Review toolkit draft
20 minutes	Individual writing and revisions	Revise POV on how/why museum experience should transform Draft a paragraph or so on individual presentations
5 minutes	Split into groups based on desired toolkit section	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Manifesto</li> <li>2. Design questions</li> <li>3. Testing, prototyping and evaluation</li> </ol>
40 minutes	Small group work on toolkit	
<b>12/8 - 1:00pm-3:00pm EST - BLOCK TWO</b>		
5 minutes	Large group	Introduce non-judgmental feedback
30 minutes	Large group discussion	All groups share and others provide non-judgmental feedback - 10 minutes each
25 minutes	Small group work on toolkit	Rotate and address questions
25 minutes	Small group work on toolkit	Rotate one last time
30 minutes	Closing and next steps	

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Cooper Hewitt is America's design museum. We welcome everyone to discover the importance of design and its power to change the world.

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