Museums 2040
Scenario Synopsis: A New Equilibrium
Center for the Future of Museums

This scenario, set in the year 2040, describes a future that might result from existing limits and challenges as they play out in coming decades. Navigating these sometimes conflicting forces, museums have achieved stability by adopting practices that are significantly different from business-as-usual in 2017. While this new equilibrium is far from utopia, museums generally are satisfied with resulting situation.

New Equilibrium is one of a set of scenarios to be published by the Alliance in TrendsWatch 2018. Other scenarios in the set may include Growth (a future of expanded resources and opportunities), Collapse (in which our darkest museum fears come true), and Transformation (in which dramatic changes in the world spark revolutions in museum practice).

The November/December issue of the American Alliance of Museum's magazine Museum *will be set in the future outlined by the New Equilibrium scenario. The following synopsis frames the scenario by presenting a few major challenges characterizing this future; notes a few implications of these challenges for museums; and suggests some ways museums may have adapted to these challenges in order to arrive at a "new equilibrium."*

It's 2040, and…

The US population is older and more diverse than it was in 2017. The Latino population has grown to comprise 25% of the population and within 10 years no one racial group will make up a majority of the country. The population continues to age: twenty-two percent of the population is over the age of sixty five. Advances in healthy aging have been offset by the increase in diabetes, heart disease, and related illnesses, but overall, the ratio of retired people to people of working age (so-called "old-age dependency") has climbed to 38% from 25% in 2017. One in four Americans have never married, up from one in five in 2012.

Economic stratification has continued to grow in the past few decades. The top 10% of families now hold 85% of the wealth in the US, while the bottom 60% hold 1%. (See comparable figures for 2017). Automation and the applications of advanced artificial intelligence have massively displaced workers from jobs such as driving (including trucking), warehouse employees, cashiers, medical technicians, translators, receptionists, security guards, and sales and service jobs. Jobs requiring empathy and social skills, such as therapists, personal trainers, and home care attendants remained solid, though low-paying, and there has been a surge in demand for highly skilled labor in programming and data analytics. Total labor participation stands at about 58% (compared to 63% in 2017). About 45% of workers are primarily employed in the so-called "gig economy," characterized by alternative working arrangements such as on-call, temporary help, contract work, independent contractors or freelance.

In education, public schools have continued to emphasize standardized testing, though the brief consensus on curricula (the "Common Core" of the early 2000s) has fragmented, and only 12 states currently participate in a shared standards initiative. There has been significant growth in the number of private schools, and charter schools now serve 15 percent of the public school population (triple the number in 2014). While some of these charter schools outperform their public counterparts, many have done so through selective admission and expulsion. Public schools serve a disproportionate number of students from low income families and students with special needs. While a college degree is now, more than ever, a prerequisite for employment and well-paid work, a large number of high-school graduates go on to two or three year community college programs, supplemented by online short-courses and other forms of "micro-credentialing" in order to avoid the crushing burden of student loan debt.

Leisure time. Forms of delivering complex digital content continue to proliferate: for example, immersive, multi-sensory Virtual Reality rigs are as affordable and common in 2040 as large screen televisions were in 2017. The latest American Time Use Survey documents robust consumption of streaming content on a variety of platforms for entertainment, socializing and gaming, but contrary to some predictions, screen time in all its forms leveled off in the early 2020s. Demand for physical, place-based experienced IRL (In Real Life) experiences has grown in the past two decades.

Transportation. Self-driving technologies have matured, leading to a massive drop in private car ownership, a decrease in traffic fatalities and congestion, and revitalization of urban areas recapturing space previously devoted to parking facilities. These technologies have also increased the mobility of people with disabilities, the very old, and the very young—though that freedom of movement challenges businesses and public facilities to appropriately serve these populations once they have arrived.

Financial climate. Government funding (federal, state and local) for cultural nonprofits has continued to decline, and currently constitutes an average of 12% of museum operating income (compared to ~18% in 2017). So-called "impact philanthropy" has become the dominant guiding principle of individual and foundation funding, and nonprofits are expected to provide concrete, measurable data of how they have improved the environment, or people's lives, in order to secure support.

Changes to US tax policies have resulted in a 20% decline in charitable giving over the past 3 decades. On the other hand, a growing number of people (and charitable foundations) choose engage in "impact investing," putting their money behind companies that deliver both financial and mission-related returns. This includes investment funds comprised of Benefit Corporation stocks, issued by companies that are legally accountable for creating measurable social and/or ecological benefits as well as providing a financial return.

The advantages of nonprofit status have continued to decline: many states require newly formed nonprofits to meet stringent criteria in order to even qualify for exemption from state and local taxes, and in any case a majority of municipalities now request or require payments in lieu of taxes. The growing number of companies, small and large, that voluntarily incorporate social or environmental impact into their work further blurs the boundary between nonprofit and for-profit business in the public eye.

Ecology/Environment.
In the wake of the comprehensive failure to implement the Paris climate agreement, by 2040 global temperatures have risen by an average of 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels. Globally, sea level has risen an average of ½ foot, but has been far worse in many places, including the US East Coast, where sea levels have risen a little over 1 foot. In some cities (e.g., Miami, New Orleans) geologic subsidence compounds the effects of sea level rise.

Rising temperatures have led to the disruption of many traditional agricultural crops (e.g., maple syrup in Vermont and peaches in Georgia), and depressed production of commodity crops such as soybeans and corn across the Midwest.
There has been a modest increase in the adoption of alternative energy technologies, but overall the US is still heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

2040: The New Museum Equilibrium

Attendance has gradually increased over the past two decades, after a long period of decline. In 2015 Reach Advisors reported that only 10% of the US population visited 3 or more museums a year, and almost half the population *never* visited museums. In 2040, 20% of the population visit 3 or more museums a year, and only 30% of the population has never visited. What drove this increase? Museums have increased audience share by expanding hours, locations, and joining their operations "at the hip" with other life functions such as education (many museums operate preschools), healthy aging, and work (ditto co-working and/or business incubator spaces. Here's another link).

The museum sector overall is **financially stable**. Many museums have diversified their income streams by creating business ventures tied to mission (such as the aforementioned preschools, business incubators and co-working spaces). The field has become better at measuring and reporting on the effect of the good they do in order to attract impact investors and satisfy foundations and individual philanthropists. And that impact is often targeted at fundamental needs such as increasing well-being, teaching parenting skills, improving educational outcomes, reducing recidivism, promoting healthy aging, and providing vital professional training. Some now-common practices, such as energy independence via on-site solar, wind and geothermal energy production, are a double win as they both save money and establish museums and good environmental citizens.

Part of the new financial model involves **new patterns of staffing**, including the widespread use of third-party service providers for functions such as human resources, finance, editing/publications, public relations and retail management. Other functions such as security, personal assistants, and marketing are largely performed by artificial intelligence. Museum work has entered the "gig economy" as well, with many museum professionals including curators, registrars, exhibit designers, and project managers working on short term contract or freelance, on-site or remotely.

Overall, **museum staff and boards reflect the demographics of the US population** more closely than they did in 2017. At the staff level, that has been achieved in part through the widespread practice of recruiting from the local community and from diverse, non-museum professional training programs, and supporting museum-specific training during the first years of employment. (The American Alliance of Museums' National Museum Training Program, founded in 2025, facilitates this new hiring strategy by matching employees with appropriate training, awards credentials for this work, and raises funds to subsidize such training at small museums.)

Climate change. Many museums in states suffering from sea level rise and increased storm severity have mitigated risk by creating and maintaining shared, collective storage repositories away from the coast. Other museums have relocated their main campus inland, serving their original (endangered) communities via satellite sites and mobile services. Twenty percent of US museums have been awarded LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, attesting to the sustainability of their building design and operations.