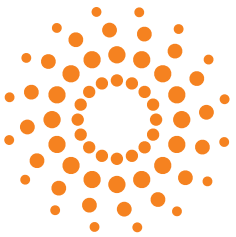# OUR
BRIGHT

IDEALISTS AND PRAGMATISTS
WORK TOGETHER TO BUILD
A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

FUTURE

Introduction to This Scenario

Our Bright Future is a story based on hopes and aspirations shared by museum people when we asked, "what is the best future you can imagine?" While it is unlikely that all these happy events will combine to form one blindingly bright future, each single event falls somewhere in the range of plausibility. (See "signals," below, for current trends and events that support that case.)
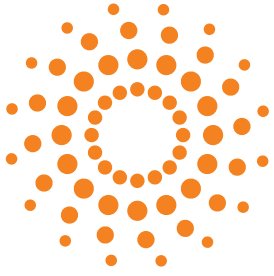
Our Bright Future

A best case scenario like this is not just an exercise in wishful thinking. Exploring optimistic outcomes helps organizations test their assumptions, build alignment among stakeholders, and identify actions they can take to make elements of their own vision of a bright future come true. Discussing this scenario can help members of the museums leadership and key stakeholders:

» Compare their individual hopes for the future, and arrive at an organizational consensus about aspirational goals for the community and for the museum itself. One person's version of success (booming local development, rising property values, expansion of the museum's footprint and staff) might strike someone else as a nightmare scenario that paves the way for gentrification, displacement, and loss of the organization's core identity.

» In the process, take a critical look at what they *think* they wish comes true. People are actually very bad at anticipating what will make them happy. In fact achieving long-desired goals, like getting tenure, or a raise, or buying a house, as often as not leaves a person's baseline happiness unchanged. Similarly, organizations sometimes make unquestioned assumptions about success. Are more visitors, bigger collections, or a new building the best markers of achievement?

» Prepare for the best. On a personal scale, happy life events like marriage, the arrival of a baby, moving, and taking a new job can be pretty traumatic. The same holds true for organizations. Many highly anticipated events in the lifecycle of a museum—a successful capital campaign, expansion of staff, opening of a new building—come with challenges that can derail previously successful organizations. By asking "and then what?" about elements in your best case scenario, your museum can prepare to respond to the opportunities afforded by these story, if they come to pass.

» Once you've created a consensus version of your bright future, this scenario will challenge your planning team to explore "how could we help this come true?" Then you can ensure that as you write your organizational plan you allocate time and resources to incremental steps that will take you in the right direction. At the same time, this exercise can help you recognize and take advantage of serendipitous opportunities that a narrow focus on "the plan" might otherwise lead you to ignore.

A Snapshot of This Future:

This synopsis provides a high-level description of this version of the year 2040 with respect to culture, technology, the economy, ecology, and technology.

America in 2040 is more tolerant, less divisive, and more equitable—socially and economically—than it was early in the century. The civil rights activism of the 2010s paved the way for major investments by government, philanthropy and big business in efforts to eliminate racial disparities in health, education, incarceration, and employment. A robust business case for the broad economic benefits of dismantling systemic equities helped build partisan support for these efforts. Younger Americans, born into a majority-minority age cohort, take diversity and multiculturalism for granted. A large segment of the population is over the age of 65 (20% in 2040, compared to 16% in 2020) and these "perennials" are heavily dependent on first-generation immigrants for home care and personal assistance. The ubiquity of these arrangements, with the social bonds and inter-cultural exposure they afford, has led to a significant rise in tolerance and reduction in bias among older Americans as well.
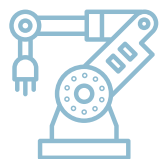
Automation, fueled by robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) has increased productivity and profits for many industries, including domestic manufacturing, e-commerce, data services and health care. As was predicted at the turn of the century, this AI revolution has caused massive disruptions to many professions, from white-collar bastions such as law and medicine to blue collar stalwarts like telemarketing and long haul trucking. While the immense profits generated by AI have gone disproportionately to the top one percent of individuals and companies, government and private philanthropy has channeled much of that wealth back into public infrastructure and the creation of a strong public safety net in the interest of economic and social stability. Universal basic income (UBI) provides an unconditional stipend sufficient to meet every individual's basic needs. Universal health care (UHC) covers drug rehabilitation, mental health services, and comprehensive support for people with disabilities. Taken together, UBI and UHC have resulted in the flowering of private enterprise, small businesses, and creative endeavors. While there is still great wealth inequality in the US, these opportunities have rebuilt a new, robust "middle class" with the assets they need for self-fulfillment and civic participation.
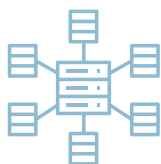
The promise of AI and big data has come to fruition in the past two decades in large part because companies and regulatory agencies worked together to address valid public concerns about privacy and surveillance. The public played a direct role in "leashing the data beast" by becoming highly selective about what online services they used, what terms they agreed to, and how they controlled their own personal data. Revenue models based on harvesting and selling personal data have been largely discredited, and social media has fragmented into a plethora of platforms, some of them supported by subscription while others, modeled on Wikipedia, are open-source, community-run, and donation-supported. The Algorithmic Transparency Act of 2025 helped minimize bias in the AI programs that have become essential to our educational systems, to law enforcement and to job recruitment and hiring.

Strong privacy protection also helped fuel development of the huge, open, interoperable data sets that are shared between sectors (health, government, education). These data sets in turn enabled researchers to conduct large scale longitudinal studies that established the benefits of a variety of types of behavior, including cultural engagement. This research played a major role in the resurgence of government funding for the arts and humanities, as advocates made the case that such support not only was an intrinsic good, but made financial sense. As Senator Mather (R-Utah and Chair of the Senate Finance Committee) remarked when explaining his support for doubling the funding for the National Endowment for the Arts in 2032, "If the arts can help keep at-risk teens in school and out of jail, I'm all for it. I'd rather build museums than prisons."

Primary education has slowly pivoted away from "industrialized" learning, standardized tests and age-based classrooms. Indeed, it has to a large extent broken out of the four walls of the traditional school building, and now takes place in many locations, public and private, throughout the community. The new model of education emphasizes creativity, collaboration, social intelligence, and cross-disciplinary thinking. The mainstream approach is experiential and inquiry-based. Students work with mentors to create and execute personalized learning plans that build on their passions and learning styles. Two thirds of states have adopted pooled funding for public schools (first implemented by Vermont in 1997), sharing wealth between districts, and reducing inequalities of education and opportunity. A huge endowment created by tech billionaires Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Pierre Omidyar in 2025 ensures that every child is provided with an AI-enabled tutor that provides personalized content and connects their child with online and community-based learning opportunities that meet their needs.

Multi-sensory, immersive augmented and virtual reality tech is affordable and widely used in education, medicine, workplace applications and popular entertainment. However, while these technologies are deeply integrated into everyday life, public preference for leisure time has shifted to in real life face-to-face social experiences, and to place-based immersive experiences that may incorporate digital elements. Although 80 percent of adults access VR at least once a day, "digital fasting" has become increasingly popular, and many adults, especially parents, regularly take themselves and their families off-line for anywhere from a day to a week at a time.
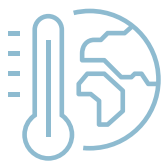
2021, now known as "Anthrogeddon," marked a turning point in the US's stance on climate change. That summer, every state capital city in the US experienced record high temperatures; twelve natural disasters (flood, fire, storm, drought) fueled by climate change displaced over 100,000 people from their homes; and five major coastal cities suffered destructive flooding. In the aftermath of this trauma, a national carbon tax was instituted with bipartisan support, and the US threw its considerable resources into support of the Paris Climate Accords. The subsequent global partnership between governments and NGOs has been characterized as "an effort on par with World War Two." The world economy has been converted to a low-carbon energy system and as a result, the earth is on track to meet the more ambitious goal of the accords, limiting the temperature increase to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels by mid-century. This has resulted in a global sea level rise of just under 3/4 foot/23 centimeters—which lies at the low end of the most optimist projections made in 2018.

Signals

A selection of real news stories and research from the present illustrating trends and events that could create this version of the future.

On the case for bipartisan support for social justice and universal basic income

In 2018: the W. K. Kellogg Foundation released *The Business Case for Racial Equity: a strategy for growth*, making the case that the US could realize an $8 trillion gain in gross domestic product (GDP) by closing the racial equity gap. A study by the Roosevelt Institute concluded that a universal basic income (UBI) of $12,000/adult/year would grow the economy by more than 12 percent over eight years, increasing the GDP by $2.48 trillion. A Gallup poll showed that almost half of Americans support a universal basic income program, up from 12 percent in 2008. Numerous tests of UBI are in process across the globe, including trials in Oakland and Stockton, California.

On the rise of data privacy

In 2018: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was called to testify before Senate and House committees regarding concerns about the fact that his company had allowed research firm Cambridge Analytica to access the personal data of as many as 87 million users. Escalating concerns has led the rise of data privacy regulations on the part of government, and exploration of "ethical social media" by entrepreneurs and activists. The European Union's sweeping new privacy law that went into effect in May was designed to protect its own people. But because the General Data Protection Regulation applies to any business that holds data on EU citizens, it's having a worldwide impact. Similarly, California is poised to vote on a ballot initiative that would enact one of the broadest privacy laws in the US. If the act passes, many companies may voluntarily adopt the same standards on a national level. Concerns about the data practices of large social media platforms has fueled interest in alternatives such as MeWe, which "challenges the status quo by making privacy the foundation of online social experiences"; the open source project Diaspora; Steemit and Minds, both of which reward contributors and community curators with cryptocurrency; and Ello, created and maintained by a global community of artists.

karanik yimpat / Shutterstock.com

On the potential for a global commitment to a carbon-neutral power supply

In 2017, the Climate Leadership Council, comprised of Republican elder statesmen, unveiled a "conservative climate solution" that would fight global warming by taxing greenhouse gas emissions and returning the money to taxpayers as a "climate dividend." Their premise is that making energy derived from fossil fuels more expensive will impel the free market to pivot towards renewable energy and other low-carbon solutions. Exxon Mobil, other oil companies and a number of other major corporations joined the Nature Conservancy and the World Resources Institute in backing the proposal. The European Union (EU) is already planning to generate 20% of its electricity by 2020 using only renewable sources. One of the major pressures driving the adoption of renewables is Europe's $38 billion-a-year carbon market.

Discussion Guide

Reality Check

Despite the signals listed above, you may feel that some of the elements in this story are implausible. If so, see if you can find recent stories or research that bolster your case for pushing these plot lines towards the edge of the Cone of Plausibility.

Agree/Disagree

You may love some parts of "Our Bright Future," and you may feel that certain elements of this scenario, as written, aren't desirable. That's great! Disagreement can spark discussion about values, and surface differences of opinion. Use this story as a starting point and edit, adapt and develop it to reflect your shared version of a bright future.

Museums in this Future

What are some of the implications of this future for museums?
Here are a few thoughts to get you started:

» The nurturing environment of this bright future leads to a boom in new cultural nonprofits. While funding is abundant, this proliferation leads to increased competition for time and attention, as well as philanthropic and government funding.

» With the security provided by UBI and UHC many people are pursuing their passions as full- or part-time citizen artists, citizen scientists, and citizen historians. These communities expect museum resources to be open and accessible, and want to partner with museums in conducting research and creating conent.

» Creators of VR and AR content see museums as premiere sources of high-quality digital content. At the same time, museums are popular destinations for those looking to unplug from the digital world.

FROM INSIGHT TO FORESIGHT

Exploring scenarios helps us futureproof plans by asking "how, in this future would I/my family/my community/my museum thrive?" By answering this question across several scenarios, you may identify actions that would be beneficial in a variety of circumstances.

In this future I might:

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In this future my organization might:

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FROM FORESIGHT TO ACTION

This story is built around trends and events we can see in the world today. But always remember the third force creating the future: the choices that we make as individuals and as organizations. The most important part of this exercise is discovering how you can help build the future you want to live. After you've tweaked this scenario to reflect a future you agree is both plausible, and preferable, work on the following questions.

To help create this future I might:

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To help create this future my organization might:

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Center for the Future of Museums