

# REFLECTION

By Sonnet Takahisa



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES



American  
Alliance of  
Museums

**“Reopenings” is a special series of reports that aims to capture the long-term lessons, mindsets, and practices museums can learn from their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

In part two of our series, titled *Reflection*, we look at how the pandemic forced museums to reconsider how they approach their role as community anchors at a moment of crisis. Through case studies, data, and multimedia, we highlight those museums whose pivots used the crisis as an opportunity to enable them to be in better conversation with their communities and be a reflection of the neighborhoods and the people they serve.

We thank the **National Endowment for the Humanities** for its support of this project through its Sustaining Humanities through the American Rescue Plan (SHARP) program.

— American Alliance of Museums



*Cover Art: Peace on the Hilltop is a mural painted by Columbus, Ohio-based artist **Shelbi Toone**. The mural was commissioned by the Columbus Metropolitan Library for the reconstruction and reopening of its Hilltop Branch as part of the system’s multi-year revitalization of its decades-old libraries that are inadequate to meet the needs of a 21st century community. Recognizing that libraries are vital community assets that reflect the unique characteristics of the neighborhoods they serve—a fact made even more evident in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic—the city selected Toone because of her artistic direction of multiple projects, neighborhood murals, and art panels that are grassroots and community-based.*

*Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report, do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

# Do museums have the power to change the world?

Many people who work in the field believe so—that their institutions improve people’s wellbeing and strengthen, or at the very least contribute to, the social fabric of their communities.

Yet, as widespread as this belief is, doubts about the relevance of museums to society have plagued the sector for centuries. In the 1990s, after decades of scattered calls to become more responsive to communities, the field began to collectively recognize this need through efforts like the American Alliance of Museums’ *Excellence and Equity* report. As the century turned, these efforts evolved into initiatives to measure the “social impact” of museums.

However, it was not until the multiple crises of 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, a reckoning over systemic racism, the breakdown of civil and political discourse, and increasingly frequent environmental disasters—that this concept of social impact truly hit home. Although museums were confronting internal challenges like closures, financial losses, and layoffs, none of these compared with the external crisis the pandemic revealed: How could museums be relevant at a time when people were preoccupied with concerns related to health, employment, and safety? Was there a role for them in such a moment, and if not, what did that mean?

This created an opportunity for reflection, a “pandemic pause” if you will, to ask: “What do museums exist for?” and “Whom do museums exist for?”

Museums have long been powerful spaces for exploring knowledge and finding inspiration, but these purposes alone may not make them essential in society. Our communities are looking for tangible solutions to real problems, and museums can contribute to those solutions by changing how they think about their work. They can use their considerable resources, and the functions they excel at, to aid social goods like physical and mental health, economic equity, and inclusive attitudes. This report is designed to help museums make these shifts in their culture and practice and find ways to create measurable impact with and within their communities.

# Emerging Metrics of Social Impact

Framing museum impact around society and communities is a profound pivot for the sector. Individual museums have traditionally assessed their impact via metrics that are relatively simple to measure, such as attendance, program participation, and economic benefits that visitors generate for a region or neighborhood. But as museum professionals acknowledge the need for new metrics of accountability and success, they must create new systems of measurement, building upon a slim body of existing research.

One notable pioneer in this area is John Falk, who studies the value and impact of museum experiences for individual visitors. He describes visitor satisfaction as “**immediate feedback**” that leads, over time, to a sense of wellbeing. He believes that by instilling this sense of wellbeing in visitors, museums can do “good” *and* do well from a financial sustainability perspective, creating positive ripple effects in society while benefitting themselves through increased visitation. Although he cautions museum workers to resist “overinflating expectations for what can be accomplished through the medium of exhibits or museum experiences,” his research has helped museums focus their efforts on improving visitor satisfaction, a worthy achievement in its own right.

Museums in the United Kingdom have taken the lead on measuring their social impact, largely to build the case for government funding. In response to the global financial crisis of 2008, the British government instituted stringent and sweeping funding cuts in 2010 that radically decreased support for UK museums (most of which, to that point, had been reliant on the government for the majority of their support). To persuade the government to renew its support, in 2013 the UK Museums Association launched the **Museums Change Lives campaign** to “encourage museums to improve their socially engaged practice and deliver a positive social impact on the communities in which they function.” The resulting study and toolkit focus on creating better places to live or work, enhancing health and wellbeing, and inspiring engagement, debate, and reflection.

Though it has been slower to embrace these ideas, the US museum sector is beginning to make progress as well. AAM named social and community impact the first of four priorities in its **2022-2025 Strategic Framework**, vowing to help museums explore new roles in their communities over the next few years. In 2021, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) issued ***Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums***, which illuminates how cultural institutions are partnering with other community groups to enhance education and public health. The **Measurement of Museum Social Impact (MOMSI)** project is working to define how museums strengthen their communities and then create a reliable tool for measuring that impact. In ongoing research at thirty-eight museums around the country, the study will demonstrate how museums contribute to enhancing health and wellbeing, valuing diverse cultures and ways of life, continuing education and engagement for people of all ages, and strengthening relationships.



# Case Studies

While quantitative research is vital to documenting the overall social impact of museums, qualitative research brings this work to life. The case studies in this section illustrate what museum social impact looks like in practice, suggest replicable or adaptable best practices, and provide models for future work.

The initiatives described were developed carefully, with consideration of the responsibility museums have as institutions entrusted with stewarding resources on behalf of the public, belief in the importance of facilitating public access to those resources, and ongoing and responsible assessments of institutional capacity for care and wellbeing. The people involved acted nimbly and creatively, rather than defaulting to past institutional norms and behaviors. They took risks and worked outside the box to invent innovative systems, strategies, and accountability measures that made a difference to their community partners and constituents.

Though they represent only a fraction of the areas museums stand to impact, the cases studies demonstrate social benefit on an impressive range of issues:

**Climate Change** (The Environment and Regenerative Thinking; Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens; Pittsburgh, PA)

**Decolonization** (Taking Care: Cultural Resources and Community; The Museum of Us; San Diego, CA)

**Healing** (Art, Healing-Centered Engagement, and Social Justice; Speed Art Museum; Louisville, KY)

**Empathy** (Complicating History; the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum; New York, NY)

**Education** (Rethinking Teaching and Learning; Museum School; Fort Worth Museum of Science and History; Fort Worth, TX)

## The Environment and Regenerative Thinking

### Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens—Pittsburgh, PA

#### The context

Climate change is having profound impacts on the environment and people. More frequent and severe storms, extreme temperatures, and intense droughts and floods are accelerating the loss of species, creating greater food insecurity, exacerbating human health risks, and intensifying poverty and displacement.

Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens is part of a growing group of organizations, including [several networks of museums and museum professionals](#), calling for a paradigm shift on the issue. To make progress, these organizations believe we must acknowledge that our use of resources is unsustainable and change the way

we live our lives. Rather than focusing on ways to mitigate damage, we must move to regenerative thinking and look for ways to positively impact the interconnected systems of all people and the planet. At Phipps, the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests accelerated staff's resolve to take this regenerative approach to the organization's buildings, operations, and programs.

This work originally started in the late 1990s, with renovations to the 1893 glass conservatory itself. Challenged by the maintenance needs of this hundred-year-old building *and* mindful that built environments are responsible for massive energy and water use and pollution, the Phipps team worked to find solutions that were both



All images courtesy of ©Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens

economically and environmentally sustainable. In their master planning, which included renovations, remodeling, and new buildings, they committed to the **Living Building Challenge**, which uses a holistic design protocol for healthy facilities that can operate cleanly, beautifully, efficiently, and harmoniously with their natural surroundings.

Opened in 2012, Phipps' Center for Sustainable Landscapes meets four of the highest green certifications: **Living Building Challenge**, **LEED® Platinum**, **Sustainable SITES™ Platinum**, and **WELL Platinum**. The center leads by example as an environmental education center with a net-positive energy approach that contributes to the environment and supports living healthier and closer to nature. The building incorporates solar panels, natural lighting, and ventilation and uses 70 percent less energy than a conventional office building. All materials are salvaged and recycled, and 82 percent are sourced regionally. All water is captured and treated for later use. Plants and other biophilic design elements appear throughout the offices.

With their own campus in order, in 2017, Richard Piacentini, President and CEO, and the Phipps staff began to focus on helping communities adopt more sustainable lifestyles. Phipps's programming, both for adults and school groups, focuses on assisting individuals in seeing themselves as part of an interconnected system of nature and humanity. It emphasizes a regenerative approach; rather than aiming for less damage, the focus is on improving things. From flower shows to art installations to horticulture and school programs, all center on showing visitors how to contribute to human and environmental wellbeing.

In one program, Phipps partnered with an electric power company to lead a Green Power Drive, helping more than sixty-three hundred visitors switch to renewable energy sources. It assisted participants in selecting a plan and offered incentives in the form of free or extended memberships. Phipps also leads an initiative to address childhood obesity called Let's Move Pittsburgh, partnering with early childhood



centers, schools, healthcare providers, out-of-school and community programs, and the food, restaurant, and beverage industry to emphasize a holistic approach to changing the food system and fostering better health and wellness habits at an early age. Through the Homegrown outreach program, it also helps people living in communities considered food deserts install backyard vegetable gardens to provide healthy, affordable food choices. By providing raised beds and clean soil, the program helps remediate the damage of living on land contaminated by industrial waste, as many residents of Pittsburgh do—particularly those who are BIPOC and lower-income. It also promotes wellbeing by providing a connection to nature. As **one participant said**: “If you don’t know about earth, you’re missing a whole part of life.”

### The pivot

At Phipps, the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests were an opportunity to accelerate this regenerative thinking and understand its implications on all aspects of the organization's work. During its pandemic closure, Piacentini used regenerative thinking to find ways to ensure that all five of Phipps' Living System Stakeholders—the investors (donors), the customers (users), the co-creators (staff, volunteers, and vendors), the





Photo by Kitoko Chargois

community, and the planet—were kept whole and engaged. Staff whose everyday work was on pause were reassigned to backburner projects. They updated the standard operating procedures manual and collections and membership databases, completed their AAM Accreditation application in record time, designed future exhibitions and programs in advance, and switched many programs to online platforms. No one was laid off, and when Phipps re-opened, the completion of this work backlog left the organization in a stronger position.

The murder of George Floyd led to deep reflection about Phipps' role and complicity in systemic racism. As a result, leadership created a new senior staff position to address diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) issues through a regenerative lens. Looking beyond issues of the environment, this person's responsibility is to ask how Phipps can add value to a world that is interconnected with different groups and communities, and with the nature we are all part of.

In 2021, Phipps started the Youth Climate Advisory Committee. Initially seen as a way to encourage young people to voice their concerns about the environment and provide tools for implementing solutions, it has evolved into a program for teaching regenerative thinking as an alternative view of the world. It emphasizes the shortcomings of measuring success in individual projects and short-term measures (e.g., profit/

loss, return on investment, or projects with finite goals). Instead, the first cohort of youth leaders is learning to create projects that change behaviors and aim for long-term rewards that build upon the interconnectedness of human and natural systems. This cohort will then fan out to work with teams from some of the seventy institutions in the US, Canada, England, India, and Israel that are part of Phipps's **Climate Toolkit** project, a collaborative network of museums, gardens, and zoos that share resources and discuss ways to work with their communities on climate change.

### Impact and accountability

Phipps staff have accumulated experience and tangible strategies to change attitudes and behaviors that impact climate change. They have taken actions that have a proven impact on building design and energy use, healthier lifestyles, and reconnecting people with nature and the environ-



Photo by Kitoko Chargois

ment. Programs such as Homegrown and Let's Move continue to grow as new family members, neighbors, and community groups sign on. Youth Climate Advisory Committee students describe their projects as parts of a larger, global movement to address environmental injustice.



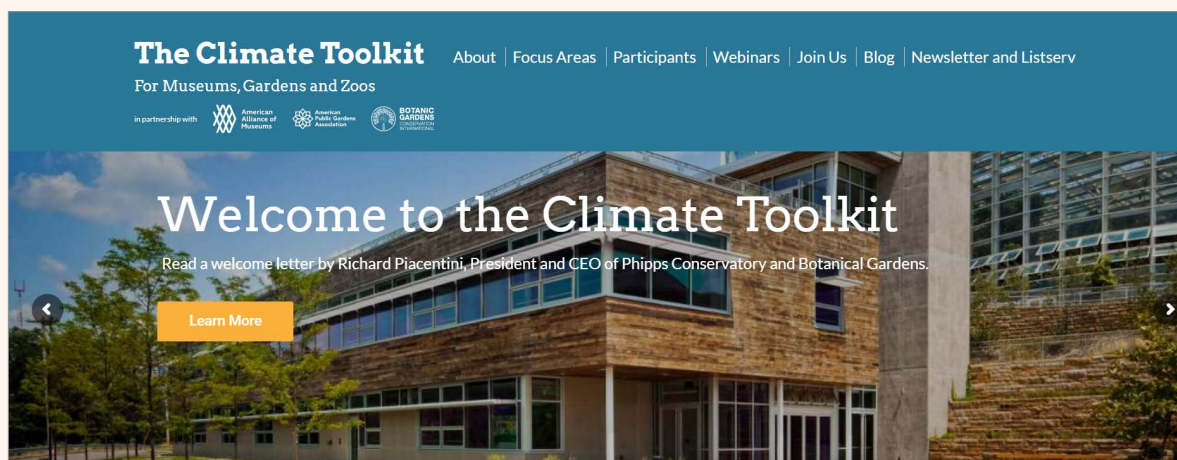


tour them through Phipps and explain “how each thing we do has a ripple effect on everything else around us.” Phipps staff have learned to see their interactions with visitors as “an opportunity to change their day,” and to consider more carefully how each department’s work affects the others, Chief of Staff Ashley Dean says.

**What’s next**

Measuring attitudinal and behavioral changes to gauge the impact on Phipps’ communities will take persistent attention and innovative techniques. In the meantime, Piacentini and other staff are incorporating the practice of asking hard questions: How do they know that regenerative thinking is changing their individual practices? How will they know that it has transformed the tenor and effects of work with their communities—staff, contractors, neighbors, and visitors? What metrics can they develop to track how colleagues in other museums and botanic gardens learn from their experiences? All staff will participate in the next round of regenerative thinking training, and the circles of impact will continue to widen.

When asked how he measures success, Piacentini spoke about looking for evidence of “regenerative thinking” at all institution levels and within all programming. Changes such as ridding the café of junk food and water bottles are ways that Phipps is “walking the talk.” Senior directors and mid-level managers have all participated in workshops on regenerative thinking, which have changed their approaches to their work. Director of Facilities Pete Thompson, for example, now asks contractors more questions about their environmental approaches, and takes the time to



## Taking Care: Cultural Resources and Community

### The Museum of Us—San Diego, CA

#### The context

Collections—objects, specimens, works of art, documents, archives, etc.—are central to most museums. But many of these collections are rooted in legacies of colonialism, with disreputable provenance and acquisition history, and traditions of stewardship, exhibitions, and interpretation steeped in the perspective of the dominant, white cultural group. If museums want to live up to their roles as public institutions with public charters, and mission or value statements that claim to respect diversity, they must include the voices of the people connected to their collections and around them, a process known as decolonizing.

For Brandie Macdonald, Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us (MoU), this work begins with respecting the authority of the communities represented in the collections and incorporating their perspectives for proper stewardship and honest presentations. As she focuses on aligning theory and practice to center truth-telling, accountability, and actionable change, the ongoing work of decolonizing the institution flows across museum departments and activities.

In recognizing the harmful impact of colonial structures in museums, Macdonald sees decolonizing initiatives as collective practices that must be directed by the communities they affect. “Our connection to community [the past, present,



All images courtesy of The Museum of Us

and future generations] is why we continue to navigate and dismantle colonial hostility, fragility, and historical trauma in museums and education,” she says.

#### The pivot

Decolonizing practices require more pauses than is typical in museum work, and MoU’s decolonizing initiatives team used the pandemic to honor this. They took the opportunity to slow down, focus, and converse with others, questioning the best ways to shift longstanding paradigms about collections care. They continued their work with Indigenous communities, relying on participation and oversight through online conferences

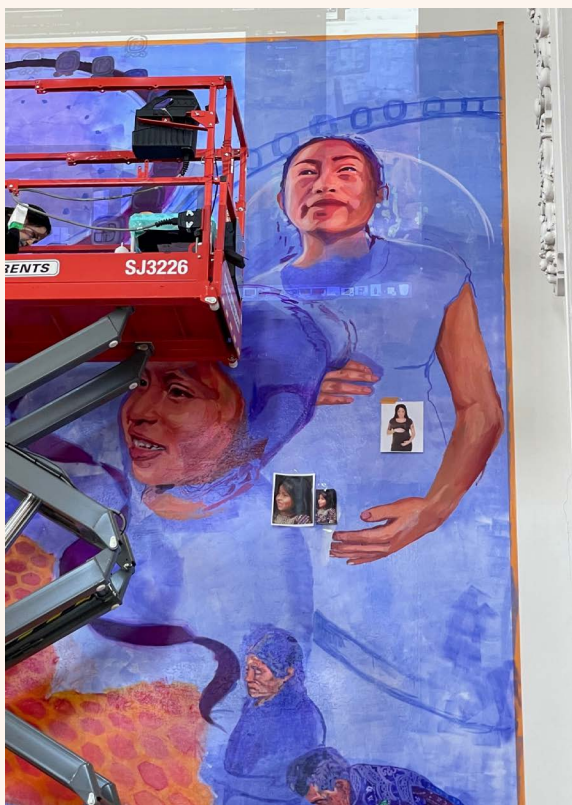


to understand how to steward cultural resources following community traditions and, in conversation, find ways to balance those with traditional museum standards. Part of this required museum experts to assume a learning posture and respect community traditions about decisions like storage practices, who can handle cultural objects, and the language and syntax that can be used in a collections database.

As the one-hundred-year-old anthropology institution formerly known as the San Diego Museum of Man adopted a new identity as the Museum of Us, two interpretive projects during this period demonstrated the change in direction it would take. The first was *Colonial Legacy: The Museum's Façade*, an online exhibition on Google Arts and Culture designed to address Indigenous communities' requests for truth-telling and accountability around the colonial history of the men prominently depicted on the front of the museum. The other, *Colonial Pathways*, involved creating a

series of interpretive panels for objects that provide greater transparency about their history and how the museum acquired them. The panels discuss the impact of colonial practices like inequitable trade; removal without consultation or consent; acquisition through expedition, exploration, or exploitation; and maintaining ownership when cultural revitalization is dependent upon repatriation. Both *Colonial Legacy* and *Colonial Pathways* are about more than the objects or artifacts; they consider the effects of hidden policies and unacknowledged colonial frameworks on visitors and community observers.

"Pausing gave us space to reflect on our place in the world and to counter the ways we perpetuate the colonial myth of the universal truth," Macdonald says. Interrupting the typical cycle of chasing revenue and sitting in back-to-back meetings allowed the museum to "pause with intentionality, reflection, and action, and ask: is it the community that we serve, or organizational systems of racism, white supremacy, and colonial legacy?"



### Impact and accountability

The Museum of Us is creating a new model of what it means to be ethical stewards of collections. Rather than enacting wholesale repatriation and deaccessioning, it is practicing a form of collections care based on shared stewardship. Rather than adhering to a colonial framework of ownership, it is caring for the wisdom and wishes of knowledge-bearers. Rather than exclusively relying on academic and professional standards of expertise, it is connecting with community and respecting culturally based protocols for nourishing resources. And rather than depending upon dominant data management systems and language that distort or misinterpret meaning, it is listening to and trusting the understandings of descendant and diasporic communities.

Macdonald says *Colonial Legacy* and *Colonial Pathways* are just at the beginning of an extensive Decolonizing Initiatives Strategic Plan. She and her team are looking to measure the impact of these two initiatives on guest experiences and the





public's understanding of the museum's culture of coloniality. With the benefit of online platforms to connect her to international museum colleagues, she sees a paradigm shift happening in the field, from the colonial to the decolonial. While the work can be painful, and even traumatic, she finds hope in hearing stories of visitors who change their perspectives and come to see the impact of expunging voices.

### What's next

The first *Colonial Pathways* exhibition focused on reinterpreting the Mayan collections at MoJ. The next phase will reflect work with advisors representing the Kumeyaay people who have lived throughout the southwestern US and northwestern Mexico for thousands of years. Using the consultation and collaborative decision-making protocols they've developed in these projects, the team will next contribute to the museum's exhibition on the concept of race.

Macdonald is working with her colleagues on the final drafts of the long-term Decolonizing Initiatives Strategic Plan. Given the complexity of measuring changing behaviors, mindsets, and perceptions of

many different stakeholders and various museum functions, she hopes to identify specific progress points that will map a more extensive system of impact.

She is also eager to publicly share the letters of commitment developed with members of the museum's various advisory councils. She sees this as way to publicly commit to a process of truth-telling, non-binary thinking, reciprocity, and paying cultural experts for sharing their expertise.

Now that pandemic restrictions have receded, the museum is rebuilding a team to monitor and track audience responses and learning. Macdonald is also looking forward to more exchanges with colleagues in other museums and cultural institutions about how this work has changed professional behaviors. She recognizes that at each site, decolonizing work is disruptive and sometimes feels risky for those leading the challenge. All the more reason to continue to build networks with others who will help recognize incremental victories and continue to ask the hard questions about accountability and change.

## Art, Healing-Centered Engagement, and Social Justice

### Speed Art Museum—Louisville, KY



© Amy Sherald. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

#### The context

On the same day in 2020 that museums all over the country closed their doors in response to COVID-19, police killed Breonna Taylor in her home in Louisville, Kentucky. Stephen Reily, then the Director of the city's Speed Art Museum, wondered: "What could an art museum do to serve our community at a time like this?"

Later that year, *Vanity Fair* commissioned Amy Sherald to paint a portrait of Taylor for its September cover, which the artist described as "keep[ing] Breonna alive forever." Seeing the portrait, staff at the Speed were moved to ask to borrow the painting and launch a rapid-response exhibition around it called *Promise Witness Remembrance*, which came together in only four months. "An art museum can't end a global pandemic, bring people back to life, reform policing, or end a surge in gun violence," the exhibition's catalogue says, "But it can offer art."

#### The pivot

The Speed used "great art to help people process one of the hardest years of our lives and possibly find a way forward together." This was new territory, and there were no existing models for success. Emotions were raw, and the community was dealing with anger, grief, sadness, urgency, and outrage. Conventional roles and hierarchies were no longer relevant. In an unusual leadership structure, responsibilities for the exhibitions were shared by the museum's director, guest curator Allison Glenn, and Community Engagement Strategist Toya Northington. The team considered Tamika Palmer, Taylor's mother, an equal partner as well. Other stakeholders were invited to the table, including well-known contemporary Black artists, a national advisory panel, local artists, and community leaders. Among this broad mix of people, there were disagreements, but there was a shared commitment to use these conflicts to generate better results.

In considering the content of the exhibition, Northington established two external committees: the Community Engagement Steering Committee, a diverse group of BIPOC from various backgrounds and disciplines, and a Research Committee, with colleagues from the University of Louisville School of Public Health and Social Work and Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work. She also called on the voices of protesters, academics, organizational leaders, mental health practitioners, and community activists to suggest ways to process the "heavy" content. Her authority came from her ability to listen to and balance the priorities of the multiple stakeholders she answered to: the community, Taylor's family, and the museum. She forced them to share privilege and autonomy.

"This exhibition has been a way to make the invisible recognizable and the intangible real. It is an emotional exhibition that was bold and direct in its delivery of the truth, very much rooted in

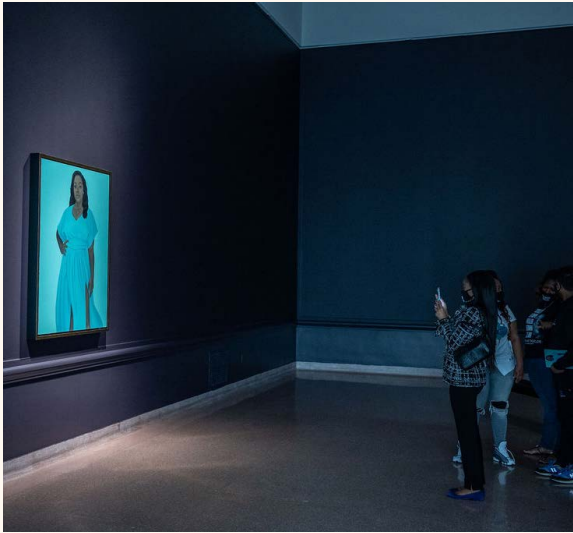


Image courtesy of Jon Cherry

the Black perspective,” Northington wrote in the catalogue. She believes that looking at art and seeing how others have used it to process feelings is the beginning of a pathway to healing for the traumas of racism, violence, and inequity.

### Impact and accountability

This experience showed the museum and the community new ways to collaborate and create new models of possibility. Northington has since been elevated to Director of Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, and is eager to build upon the robust response to *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* and imagine the implications for change across the entire museum. “When I first started at the Speed, we had a reputation of being this elite country club that catered to wealthy collectors and donors. Now, when you come to the museum for our Community Days it feels more like a community center. We had over 900 people at Día de Los Muertos and 600 at the Self-Care Day. That is a direct result of *Power, Witness, Remembrance*. My role allowed me to create events and inform programs. I tested new ideas and broke out of the old formats,” she says. While there has been some resistance to change, many more people now see what is possible and know there are many ways an art museum can serve the community.

### What’s next

Northington spends a good deal of time supporting her team, acknowledging that the work of trying to change how the Speed works and is perceived is challenging. She hires risk-takers like herself who hold themselves to high standards of achievement and accountability, and who want to continue to build upon the new relationships and opportunities created by the *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* exhibition and programs. Her work at the Speed has, for now, subsumed her former work as an artist, non-profit founder and community-based arts educator. She is determined, therefore, to make the work she does at the Speed continue to be meaningful for herself and, by extension, those she works with.

As she thinks about how she measures impact, she knows that there is more to it than “chasing demographics—capturing income, race and ethnicity, age, gender, or similar data,” and asks, “If we were looking for shifts in people and shifts in community, how would that become apparent? ... Are we looking for people, or are we looking for some positive benefit that we can bring to our community?”

In the short term, Northington and her colleagues demonstrated that they could do business differently, and she is looking to translate these practices into policies that impact the staff. In the mid-term, she is looking to measure the lasting impact of external relationships and programs regarding mental health, social practice, and social justice. In the long term, she is looking to see how this work can be infused into work with external partners and colleagues in hospitals, libraries, and social services.

On a personal note, she believes her work at the Speed will inspire and fuel her studio art practice, when she eventually returns to it. “Everything that I’m doing for that institution, my community, and other artists somehow leads me back to my art,” she says. “That’s my long-term plan. To retire to my studio.”



## Complicating History

### Dyckman Farmhouse Museum—New York, NY

#### The context

The Dyckman Farmhouse Museum (DFM) in Upper Manhattan, built circa 1784, was once the center of a thriving farm with fields and orchards. It opened as a museum in 1916, and because it was the last farmhouse in Manhattan and a historic site, people began to come, sit on the porch, walk the gardens, and visit the house. In the Inwood community where it is situated, at least 50 percent of the population is now Latinx, including the highest concentration of residents of Dominican descent in the city.

In March 2020, the pandemic forced the small staff at Dyckman to hone in on their institutional priorities and mission. Like so many of their colleagues, they quickly sought ways to remain a relevant and dynamic resource to their neighbors.

#### The pivot

Witnessing how the pandemic exacerbated food insecurity in Inwood, DFM decided to build upon its agrarian roots to launch Growing Uptown. Partnering with the NY Common Pantry and the local farmers' market, the museum has since empowered two hundred families to grow food in their urban apartments. Participants receive kits with pots, soil, and seedlings, as well as instructions in English and Spanish, recipes, and information about healthy, pesticide-free diets.

Later in 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, the museum's diverse community, like so many others, was filled with social unrest. "Race has always been an important conversation at DFM," Executive Director Meredith Horsford says. Hence, she and Melissa Kiewiet, Director of Development and Community Engagement, created a space for calm and respectful online conversations. Structured like on-the-porch conversations, the "Race Matters: Join Our Conversation" series invited a rich mix of academics, artists, and activists to spark weekly discussions. Originally, the museum's goal was to convene a cross-section of its local



All images courtesy of Dyckman Farmhouse Museum

community for dialogue, but thanks to the online platform, participants ended up coming from all across the US, and even the Netherlands. Two years later, the conversations continue in person and online, with a growing audience, and recordings of past editions continue to receive views on YouTube.

The pandemic also impacted existing programs to powerful results. One of these was DyckmanDISCOVERED, a grant-funded project begun in 2019 to tell the story of six Black people enslaved by the Dyckmans. In addition to new educational materials and public programs, the project involves commissioning artists to create site-specific installations. One of these artists was Reggie Black, who before the pandemic had planned to create an indoor multi-media installation in the DFM kitchen. But when the shutdown came, he instead designed a glowing projection for the house's outdoor wooden siding. The projection, which he titled *No Records*, displayed the words "Slaves Lived Here" and "Esclavos Vivieron Aqui" on an alternating loop. "We walk around New York City every day and see buildings and streets named after slave owners," **he explained**. "But typically, we only kind of connect that story back to the South."



Placing the work outside meant that not only those in the know about the museum encountered it, but also anyone who happened to be passing by. The artist spoke with some of these people on the street, and their comments, along with social media responses, indicated that for some, it was the first time they even noticed the farmhouse. One of the Dyckman descendants, who serves on the board of the museum, commented that this spotlight on an ugly part of history was “exactly what DFM should be doing!”

With the success of DyckmanDISCOVERED, the museum decided to team up with other institutions interested in telling the story of slavery in the north. Based on conversations which began in February 2020, and have continued regularly on online platforms, DFM agreed in 2021 to house the Northern Slavery Collective. Among other things, the collective plans to create resources for retraining staff, volunteers, teachers, and students, some of whom are encountering inclusive narratives for the first time.

### Impact and accountability

Horsford and Kiewiet, their one other DFM staff member, and the board continue to explore the intersection of the many diverse stories of DFM

from its past and present. To those who question change, Horsford says: “Yes, it was in the past. But we talk about the history of the Dyckmans, and we have historically done so for years, and that’s not the whole story. So, it’s time for us to lift up the narratives that have been completely ignored for hundreds of years and talk about them.”

To understand what is going on in their community and inform their decisions about programming, the DFM team participates in local social media groups, and they regularly schedule English- and Spanish-language community conversations, both in person and online. When asked how they measure success, both Horsford and Kiewiet talked about the ways the surrounding community expresses a sense not only of belonging in the museum, but the museum belonging to them.

### What’s next

Inwood is a small neighborhood, and the staff and board are truly part of the community, welcomed into local online groups, recognized in the local bodega, and often approached on their way to and from work with feedback and suggestions. As DFM continues to grapple with how to uncover the complicated history of the area, they are open to any suggestions they get. One participant in a recent Spanish-language community conversation asked if they would ever consider flying a Dominican flag. If this would signal a message of welcoming and belonging for their immediate neighbors, the answer was a resounding, “Why not?”



## Rethinking Teaching and Learning

### Museum School, Fort Worth Museum of Science and History— Fort Worth, TX

#### The context

Almost seventy-five years ago, fourteen educators started the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History (FWMSH) to provide students with enrichment. Today, the institution's facilities are home to two museums, several special exhibits and inter-actives, a planetarium, a theater, and a full-fledged Museum School with offerings for children from preschool through elementary age. Amber Shive, Vice President of Education at FWMSH, can attest to the impact of these programs, having started as a Museum School student herself, then becoming a Museum School parent, and along the way working as a member of the floor staff, a Museum School teacher, a curriculum writer, director of the Museum School, and now a member of the FWMSH executive leadership team, overseeing all educational programming for all lifelong learners.

Generations of children have benefitted from being in FWMSH's unique learning environment. The scientific specimens and historical artifacts, the developmentally appropriate experiences, and the care and expertise of trained on-site museum teachers have nurtured their curiosity, enhanced their skills, and inspired their confidence as learners. Museum School has its own space and a staff that develops long-lasting relationships with children and families. Individual students attend weekly enrichment after-school programs or all-day preschool classes, each with a rigorous curriculum of science concepts and participatory learning activities. More recently, through a

partnership with the Fort Worth Independent School District, school classes enjoy multiple visits to the museum and classroom visits by museum teachers.

#### The pivot

When the pandemic shuttered the museum, the devoted Museum School teachers switched to online teaching. They adapted existing curricula, with well-developed practices and hands-on lessons, into portable science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) kits. The kits included online videos, student activity directions, and all the required supplies. They were delivered weekly to teachers, who shared them with in-person students and through their Google Classroom pages. Versions of the kits were also distributed to families at local food centers.

In Fall 2020, FWMSH partnered with Fort Worth Independent School District and eight other local school districts to respond to frustrated families. FWMSH's empty galleries and classroom spaces, and the Museum School teachers who could not serve their regular students and school groups, proved to be valuable resources. FWMSH provided safe, supervised learning spaces, offering children Chromebooks and reliable Wi-Fi. They expanded their network by reaching out to local shelters in English and Spanish. And they quickly realized that in addition to preschool and elementary students, they could effectively support middle and high school teens as well.



All images courtesy of the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History



At any given time, FWMSH offered sixty-plus students in pods of ten, grouped by age range, a way to catch up on their assignments and deepen their learning by exploring the museum's exhibitions and learning activities. Parents and school administrators commented on how the students who engaged in online learning at the museum, even the preschoolers, maintained better focus and levels of participation. Museum teachers noticed students becoming increasingly confident, social, and curious about the museum's exhibits. For example, as so many museum educators have found, an interactive on plate tectonics helped lead students to far more complex questions and understandings about the geology and implications of what had previously just been an abstract concept.

### Impact and accountability

Shive talks about the “innovation that came out of a dark time” and how students “taking over the museum” impacted and affected the FWMSH staff. For example, scientists, content specialists, and exhibition preparators got direct feedback on gallery content and interactives from the students. They were impressed by their questions and found themselves accountable to a thoughtful and engaged audience. Eventually, they used the students to test exhibition ideas and prototypes.

According to the students' regular teachers and their families, the supervised time in the museum setting kept learning on track, helped ensure that assignments were completed, and, as demonstrated when testing data was shared, helped “make sure kids do not fall behind, that they are learning and progressing with standards established from a state perspective,” as the local superintendent wrote in a letter of support. The Managing Director of the Research and Learning Center at FWMSH continued to monitor the different programs, capturing positive data about students' neurodevelopmental constructs—including surprisingly high scores for collaboration around the museum's activities, given the impact of physical distancing and online learning.



### What's next

After these experiences, the museum and the Fort Worth Independent School District began to explore the idea of co-creating a charter school. While recent leadership changes have put this planning on hold, given the long-term commitment of time and resources it would require, Shive intends to revisit the idea in the future. In the meantime, she and her team are processing the lessons they have learned about working with older students, introducing more complex content to younger children, and involving staff beyond the museum teachers in regular programming.

During the pandemic shutdown, many museums opted to offer online field trips and share hands-on lessons and activities to do at home. But as FWMSH's experiences demonstrate, there is much more museums can do to support local learning. Their environments are intentionally designed to support the development of key competencies and skills understood as hallmarks of student success, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity, and connect to the core content and knowledge taught in schools.

The disruptions of the pandemic and demands for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice gave both museums and the P-12 education system another opportunity to pause, reflect, take risks, and experiment with new models. With public education newly challenged by politics, book bans, and restrictions on teaching across disciplines, museums must build upon experiences like those at FWMSH and reimagine what we bring as teaching and learning institutions to a robust educational ecosystem. As we rethink “what is a school?” and “what is a museum?”, we should also ask, “what is a museum school?”

# Lessons and Takeaways

The case studies shared in this report represent five ways that people in museums worked with their communities to develop initiatives that addressed concerns that mattered. They are all over the map regarding how they defined community, how they set about their work, and how they measured success. But there are basic lessons about museums and social impact that appeared throughout. In conclusion, here are some of those lessons and some takeaways museums might consider as they strive to adopt social impact mindsets and practices:

## **Become part of your communities.**

Museums operate within multiple communities as defined by geographic location, ethnic and culturally-based affiliations, generational demographics, and visitor motivations and reasons for coming to the museum. And, of course, the people on staff, the volunteers, and the board are parts of a museum's community. Current audience studies are doing an excellent job of helping museums to think more expansively about how to define the breadth and depth of the communities they currently serve and might serve in the future.

To build connections in your community, it is valuable to frequent local businesses, chat with people on the way to and from work, attend community events at other sites, or join neighborhood chat groups. When you spend time in the community and become a familiar face, people will develop a sense of trust. They will be more inclined to participate, contribute to, and collaborate on museum initiatives.

## **Cultivate relationships.**

By listening to what is being said by people in your museum's community, internally and externally, you learn about concerns and issues that are important to the community itself. And you will hear about how your institution is perceived, what positive experiences you can build upon, and what negative experiences need to be addressed and repaired.

Invite people into your museum, and after sharing examples of institutional resources and capacities, ask them for ideas and feedback: what is of interest, relevant, or valuable? Be prepared to see new perspectives and priorities.

## **Collaboratively define reciprocal expectations and goals.**

As part of the process, have honest conversations about the extent of institutional resources, capacities, and security limitations. As you collaboratively explore, brainstorm experiences that will benefit everyone involved and weigh the opportunities, concerns, and alternatives.

Agree to language that captures shared understandings and expresses common and distinct goals. Work together to settle on accountability indicators to monitor progress. Be creative in imagining what success might look like beyond attendance numbers and participation retention rates. What are other indicators of participants feeling that the museum belongs to the community and the community belongs in the museum? How might you track behaviors to get a sense of feelings of mutual respect, interest, and caring?

At the same time, what systems do you have in place, or might you add, to capture information about the repeat users, those who bring family and friends, and those who feel comfortable speaking up with new insights and suggestions?

### **Respect and embrace a diversity of voices.**

The complexity of layering and including stories adds to the knowledge and relevance of collections and other resources. This approach acknowledges that history and culture are messy. In addition, while different stories and perspectives will attract and resonate with different museum users, an array of perspectives provokes new insights and understandings.

Rearrange the decision-making tables and make room for different expertise and wisdom. Include internal, professional, and community colleagues who can offer truthful observations, ideas, feedback, and suggestions. It is important to incorporate different perspectives and points of view from a mix of scholars, culture-bearers, and artists.

The people for whom we hold our resources in trust must be made to feel welcome and encouraged to question, reflect, challenge, and contribute their stories as users and shared custodians of the museum and the collections.

### **Co-design programs for audience participation and engagement.**

Partner with others in your community to integrate the museum's resources with programming models and content areas that are successful at other local sites and institutions.

Go beyond shared marketing efforts and recognize the value of collaborations to learn strategies that engage and are meaningful to new audiences. Consider ways to share credit, ownership, and authority. Acknowledge and uplift the work of others.

### **Use the power of art and aesthetics.**

Art exhibitions and performances heighten emotional awareness and deepen connections between people. For inspiration, renewal, refuge, or as a reminder of the human condition, the arts make people feel. They can be healing and soothing, provocative and challenging, and sometimes they are both.

When art and other "making" activities are incorporated into museum experiences, they reinforce the rewards of creative expression.

### **Consider switching to a regenerative mindset.**

The breakdown of systems and structures in the environment, politics, and economy has resulted in disasters and crises wreaking havoc on our lives. Regenerative thinking offers a way to transform behaviors and address some of the underlying causes of these failures. It is based upon seeing the world as a network of reciprocal relationships where humans, other creatures, and our ecosystems are part of an interconnected whole. Paradigm shifts will happen only by rebalancing and restoring these relationships.

Rooted in various cultural traditions and indigenous wisdom from around the world, it calls upon individuals and communities to work together to recognize that our health relies upon the health of the larger system. Regenerative thinking can be applied to institutional systems and can, as it has in the work of some museums, transform the way individuals in institutions see themselves as part of teams and as part of a larger community that must work to address threats and challenges and create a more harmonious future.



### **Share the wealth of the museum's physical, intellectual, and cultural resources.**

Museums benefit from public support and, in return, must find ways to generously and responsibly share access to and use of museums' resources. In addition to our collections, our buildings and facilities, grounds and gardens, and systems of support and infrastructure might be valuable commodities in some communities that don't have access to essential or consistent services.

The intellectual and cultural knowledge in the collections, records, and archives and the people on our staff are valuable to individuals, families, and community groups. In addition, museums can share the skills to find, analyze, interpret, and evaluate information.

### **Define social impact with your communities.**

Ask your communities what is important to them and their perceptions about how the museum might address their desires or needs. Reach out to current partners, seek new community networks, invite different groups, and mix up participants. Present an overview of your relevant resources and be honest about the possible parameters and limitations.

Brainstorm in small group meetings and on local communication platforms, and entertain different ideas for initiatives, programs, and partnerships that will change how the museum and community work together.

Define short-term and long-term goals and define what success will look like. Determine how data will be gathered and analyzed and by whom.

Create presentations that capture the impact of the co-designed initiative and share the findings with all stakeholders.

## **Interested in continuing the conversation on museums and social impact?**

***Be a part of the 2023 AAM Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo  
May 19-22 in Denver.***

***[annualmeeting.aam-us.org](https://annualmeeting.aam-us.org)***



American  
Alliance of  
Museums