

STRATEGIC PLAN 2020-2030



February 2021

MISSION

Empowering people to create a just and compassionate future by exploring, preserving, and sharing the complexity of our past.

VISION

As the nation's history museum, we challenge ourselves to become the country's most accessible, inclusive, relevant, and sustainable public history institution. To fulfill that role, by 2030 we will serve an audience that reflects the full racial, class, gender, ethnic, and geographic demographics of the United States.

THE NATION'S HISTORY MUSEUM

The National Museum of American History is the steward of the national collections and is honored to hold the public's trust. At the heart of the museum are the dedicated professionals who care for its audiences, collections, resources, messages, buildings, and scholarship, all in service to the people of the United States. From our nearly 800,000-square-foot home on the National Mall and through our numerous online channels, the museum welcomes millions of people every year from across the country and around the world, free of charge. We are also much larger than ourselves: we are honored to benefit from the passion, advice, and support of our National Board and thousands of generous donors and volunteers. The museum also contributes to and benefits from its place in the remarkable Smithsonian Institution—the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, thanks to a unique public-private partnership. With the critical support of the federal government, together we enact the country's highest educational aspiration: the increase and diffusion of knowledge. We are honored to be an essential part of a rich network that serves the public together through conversation, collaboration, and partnership.

We have a unique and cherished role as the only museum in the country dedicated to telling the full history of the United States. Knowledge of the past is not a luxury: it is a necessity for civic health. Learning history helps people understand that today's world is not inevitable, but the result of myriad choices and actions made by individuals and communities. People see the range of creativity and cruelty, insight and indifference, innovation and injustice of which humans are capable. With this knowledge, they can take more informed, just, and compassionate actions to forge a shared future.

The National Museum of American History is a forum where people engage with one another and with stories of the United States' history that can inspire and challenge them. In our galleries and online, we have connected generations of Americans to deeply researched history via an exceptionally broad range of primary sources and material culture. In the coming decade, the museum will focus more on supporting preK–12 learners. We will use our resources to help these rising generations be inspired by the past, as well as share, debate, learn, and make sense of the contemporary world, so that we can together create a better future.

OUR CHALLENGES

The National Museum of American History is devoted to studying and understanding the past. However, the museum does not stand separate from the tumult of the contemporary world. Like our audiences, we are affected by the goodness and creativity of humanity as well as the forces of racism, xenophobia, climate change, and now in the Spring of 2020, a global pandemic. History can play a pivotal role in helping people grapple with these enormous challenges and see personal and communal opportunities for change. As a forum, the museum is a place for people to confront the complexity of our shared history, in order to make sense of the world around them.

The discipline of history itself is ever evolving and broadening as scholars ask new questions of the past. The museum field continues to change, responding to the new ways visitors encounter museums and the new expectations audiences have for these institutions.

To be meaningful and relevant to this changing world, we must build on our legacy of research and expertise while increasing our financial sustainability and the resilience of our physical infrastructure.

Over the past year, we have assessed our performance, consulted experts throughout the museum and history fields, invited critical response from staff, and conducted a large public survey to better define our role in today's museum landscape. Through these conversations, we have identified why we must and how we can evolve to become the most accessible, inclusive, relevant, and sustainable history museum in the nation.

In the process, we identified the values, goals, and priorities that will guide our decision-making and fundraising. These are defined within this strategic plan and will inform our tactical decisions as we move forward together.

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VALUES

Our work will be guided and governed by our core values:

Accountability

We are responsible for our work and for its outcomes. Our work is grounded in rigorous scholarship, research, and best practices, and it adheres to the highest standards of ethics. We pledge to be disciplined about sticking to the priorities we set and about ensuring that our priorities are well-resourced and well-staffed. We are committed to a culture of rigorous evaluation to understand and demonstrate the impact of what we do.

Care

Care is the value around which all our work is centered. We care for our national collections. We care for our audiences, both physical and digital, throughout their journey with us. And we care for one another, creating a community culture that values honest, supportive communication and honors our unique strengths and diverse experiences.

Collaboration

We are all connected, and we succeed together, reaching across internal barriers and developing strong and mutually beneficial external partnerships. Everything we do is in collaboration with our publics, who bring their own expertise and experiences.

Courage

The work ahead of us won't be easy. Change requires creativity and takes courage. We will need to have challenging conversations with our visitors, supporters, colleagues—and ourselves. We will uphold our values even when it's hard.

GOAL 1: ACCESSIBILITY

Become the most accessible history museum in the country.

Priorities:

- Invest in Our Digital Future
- Center the Visitor Experience

Strategies

We commit to:

- Applying inclusive design principles in all our work in order to make everything we do in our physical and virtual spaces accessible to the broadest range of people. We will apply these principles to improvements in long-term exhibitions, and we will establish products, resources, and solutions to remove barriers to participation with our museum. We will meet and exceed current guidelines specified by the Americans with Disabilities Act to become the most physically and intellectually accessible museum in the country.
- Furthering language justice, the idea that everyone has the right to communicate in the language in which they feel most comfortable to understand and to be understood. All our initiatives will include a proactive multilingual strategy to support language justice that best serves our diverse audiences.
- Providing a welcoming experience for all audiences. We will implement best practices from the museum field to ensure that everyone feels welcome and safe. We will prioritize funding a stable and robust visitor services staff to become the most welcoming museum on the National Mall.
- Making collections widely available for our global audiences, both in person and online, and using technology to enhance their value. We will develop structures and workflows to support best practices for cataloging and describing objects. We will create and implement thoughtful collecting plans to address deaccessioning, standardization, diversity, and decolonization of collections.
- Incorporating digital access to all our work as an essential component of every project. We will increase our staff capacity and set standards to make our work available beyond our walls. We will prioritize digital and physical projects that make our collections and resources more accessible to preK–12 audiences, building on our existing outreach to teachers and students.

GOAL 2: INCLUSION

Become the most inclusive history museum in the country.

Priorities:

- Focus on Diversity and Inclusion at all Levels
- Strive for Operational Excellence

Strategies

We commit to:

- Examining the complex histories of the United States and of our own museum, recognizing that diversity, equity, and inclusion undergird excellence in scholarship and collections stewardship.
- Ensuring that audiences reflect the country we serve. By 2030 the racial, class, gender, ethnic, and geographic profile of our audiences will match the demographic profile of the United States.
- Fostering engaged relationships with our communities and partners, in collecting, co-curating, and collaborating on programs, generously sharing our resources—especially with audiences who face barriers to using our museum and its offerings.
- Supporting a culture of open communication, support, mutual respect, and empathy for all who work in and with the museum.
- Building administrative, staffing, hiring, and governance practices that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion for volunteers, interns, fellows, staff, and the museum's National Board.
- Creating and implementing two museum-wide comprehensive plans, one to promote and activate inclusivity practices and one to promote and activate decolonization practices. These plans will address the ways in which the museum's structures and practices further structural racism, sexism, and other forms of bias and will provide a framework for an intentional, active, and ongoing practice that rebuilds museum structures based on principles of equity and justice.

GOAL 3: RELEVANCE

Become the most relevant history museum in the country.

Priorities:

- Engage Learners in PreK–12
- Explore Contemporary Connections to History

Strategies

We commit to:

- Valuing the production of research and scholarship, including work co-created with our publics, as an essential element of our role as a public history institution.
- Crafting a museum-wide interpretive plan that provides direction, focus, and priorities for our work and integrates visitors' experiences within the museum, in classrooms, and on digital channels.
- Creating opportunities for young people (preK–12) to develop their civic identity by engaging in conversations about the relationship of history to the present and the future.
- Encouraging creative and inventive methods of storytelling and engagement. We will use thoughtful, inclusive, and dynamic interpretation and design to create experiences that deeply connect with audiences.
- Examining the historical context of contemporary life and developing a realistic and sustainable plan for responsive engagement with contemporary issues and current events.
- Adopting an assertive, transparent approach to how we share our messages with our audiences. We will do our work “in public” and share our processes, decisions, collections, and intellectual content with our constituencies.
- Developing and sustaining the infrastructure to collect, exhibit, and preserve the born-digital materials essential to documenting the 21st century.

GOAL 4: SUSTAINABILITY

Become the most sustainable history museum in the country.

Priorities:

- **Center Collections Stewardship**
- **Build Resiliency in Our Facilities and Operations**

Strategies

We commit to:

- Implementing best practices for government and nonprofit administration to manage resources, planning funding strategies to support authorized short- and long-term priorities and making funding and budget decisions transparent to staff.
- Realizing the 2018 Smithsonian Master Plan and capital projects to support a resilient infrastructure for new programs, audiences, and capacity, ensuring the longevity of the museum building and grounds, offsite storage, collections, and digital assets.
- Developing a strategic budgeting and fundraising plan that aligns our resources to our priorities and goals and explores new approaches, new sources, and new partnerships to achieve them.
- Sharing space, functions, and collections internally, across the Smithsonian, and with other partners. We will be generous with our collective resources and make green choices whenever possible in all aspects of our work.
- Focusing on staff sustainability—including shared knowledge environments, succession planning, retention, training, human resources support, onboarding, growth opportunities, and internal recruiting.
- Deepening and expanding our reach by developing clear and responsible approaches to audience development and nurturing long-term relationships with our visitors, partners, and communities.
- Creating a culture of transparency and standardization in processes, decision-making, and documentation, to promote equity and streamline effective communication.
- Managing and evaluating our collections based on the stories they tell and a rigorous understanding of stewardship as the foundation for collections and storage improvement projects.
- Evaluating projects, initiatives, and programs so they have clear goals and, as appropriate, end dates. We will treat plans as living documents that are constantly referenced and updated, with compulsory and regular check-ins, and consistently measure progress against milestones to share with staff, stakeholders, and the public.

ENACTING THE PLAN

Reaching the ambitious goals outlined in the strategic plan will require an invigorated and transformed internal culture in which we value all who are a part of the museum and the Smithsonian, as well as create and strengthen collaborations with external partners and communities. Each step we take toward enacting the plan in the next ten years will require decisions and difficult choices about priorities, resources, timelines, and staffing. Some of our work will be new, some accelerated, and some revisited and reevaluated. Our decisions will be informed by engagement with our audiences and supported by rigorous research, data, and reflection. A tactical plan will be designed specifically to enact the strategic plan. It will include action items and steps to achieve the goals of the plan.

As we make decisions, we will focus on actions that support our priorities. By approaching our future choices through this new lens, we will be able to make best use of our remarkable resources and assets to become the most accessible, inclusive, relevant, and sustainable public history institution in the nation.

To ensure accountability, the museum will regularly assess this document and the resulting tactical plan. Circumstances, opportunities, and resources will inevitably change over the next decade and require subsequent changes in the tactical plan. Given the complexity of the museum, some decisions will have unforeseen consequences; to address those, our plans must be living documents, revisited and revised over time to best serve our evolving circumstances and those of our audiences.

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GLOSSARY

Accessibility

“Accessibility is giving equitable access to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience. Accessibility encompasses the broader meanings of compliance and refers to how organizations make space for the characteristics that each person brings.” (AAM, *Facing Change: Insights from AAM’s DEAI Working Group*, 2018)

Best Practices

“Best practices are commendable actions and philosophies that demonstrate an awareness of standards, solve problems and can be replicated.” (From AAM)

The determination of best practices will be revisited and updated at regular intervals to stay up-to-date and inclusive, and result from collaborations with professional organizations, field leaders, partners, and stakeholders.

Capital Projects and Master Plan

The Smithsonian Institution has a set of evolving master plans that direct and prioritize investments in capital projects for the resiliency, reconstruction, and renovation of buildings and spaces on the National Mall and offsite. Currently, the most pressing projects for the museum are the Public Space Renewal Project (PSRP) IV, the lower level mezzanine renovation, and the construction of Pod 6 in Suitland, Maryland.

PSRP IV will tackle the renovation of the museum’s East Wing, with significant implications for exhibit spaces and collections storage. The lower level mezzanine renovation will move staff into enhanced offices, freeing up space on the 4th and 5th floors for the subsequent improvement and decompression of collections storage spaces. Pod 6 will create an up-to-date collections storage space offsite, shared with other Smithsonian units and the National Gallery of Art. The timing for these projects is affected by a number of external variables, but Pod 6 would be first in line, as it could conceivably provide space for collections moved offsite to support PSRP IV.

Decolonization

“Decolonization is the long, slow, painful, and imperfect process of undoing some of the damage inflicted by colonial practices that remain deeply embedded in our culture, politics, and economies. . . . Museums, in their cultural roles of memory keeper, conscience, and healer, have an obligation to provoke reflection, rethinking, and rebalancing. Museums can help us deal with the dark side of history, not just emotionally and personally, but in a way that helps us build a just and equitable society despite our legacy of theft and violence.” (AAM/Center for the Future of Museums, 2019 *Trendwatch*, 22)

“Practices that actively and intentionally undo colonization. In other words . . . approaches to organizing life that are built on justice, equity, multiplicity, and shared authority distributed horizontally.” (NMAH Staff *Deep Dive on Decolonization*)

Demographics

When we refer to demographics in this document, we will use the most current data available, including but not exclusively relying on U.S. Census data, that reflects the U.S. population. We are particularly interested in race, class, ethnicity, geography, and gender as they relate to the makeup of our audiences.

Inclusion

Inclusion is “the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organizational work, including decision-making processes. It also refers to the ways that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community. While a truly ‘inclusive’ group is necessarily diverse, a ‘diverse’ group may or may not be ‘inclusive.’” (AAM, *Facing Change: Insights from AAM’s DEAI Working Group*, 2018)

Language Justice

Language justice is the tenet that all deserve to communicate in a way they feel most comfortable to understand and be understood. This term acknowledges that the museum must move away from using only English to communicate if we are to demonstrate respect to our visitors and to create a space, both in the museum and virtually, where our audiences are able to feel empowered by history.

Public History

“Public history describes the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world. In this sense, it is history that is applied to real-world issues. Public history institutions develop products (exhibitions, books, websites, main streets, archives, tours, concerts, and many more) through excellent scholarship and academic discovery, along with partnerships and shared authority with the publics with which they serve.” (National Council on Public History)

Relevance

Relevance is the extent to which museum activities and collections connect with the issues, concerns, and values that matter to our audiences, including personal meaning-making and practical usefulness. Relevance cannot be imposed and must be born from the needs, interests, and active participation of the publics. As a public history institution, the historical interpretation of primary sources we provide is essential to people’s understanding of themselves as historical actors.

Resilience

“The capacity of social, economic, and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event, trend, or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain systems’ essential function, identity, and structure while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning, and transformation.” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Glossary,” 2014: *Annex II*: 127

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/AR5_SYR_FINAL_Annexes.pdf)

Sustainability

All aspects of museum practice and policy should be sustainable: we look to the long term as we care for our collections, staff, environment, culture, collaborators and constituents. Sustainability is a function both of matching our goals to our resources and capacity, as well as planning responsibly and accountably as opportunities arise.