



MUSEUM
LEADERSHIP
HOUSE

SUMMARY

Reimagining the Value of Museums

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NICE



MUSEUM BOOSTER

The **Museum Leadership House** is a non-profit platform dedicated to professionals from the museum sector and academia, as well as policymakers.

Our goal is to shape the role of museums and enable them to stay relevant within a social and cultural milieu in transformation.

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SUMMARY

In September 2023, museum professionals from 11 countries came together in southern Europe for a "*Museum Leadership House: Reimagining the Value of Museums*." Hosted by MUSEUM BOOSTER in partnership with the Institute for Digital Culture of the University of Leicester and ICOM (International Council of Museums) INTERCOM, the two-day event in Nice, France, explored strategies for supporting resilient and sustainable institutions.

25 international museum leaders convened alongside experts from politics and technology to discuss how cultural organisations can take proactive steps to address risks emerging from the ongoing economic, social, environmental, and technological challenges facing society, as outlined by [the Global Risks Report 2023](#) published by the World Economic Forum. The program focused on identifying practical and usable actions that can be taken today, allowing museums to achieve longer-term stability in the face of crises and disruptions. By bringing diverse global perspectives together, the gathering sparked conversations about the relevance of cultural institutions and created the possibility for a more comprehensive understanding of the important role they can play in addressing these challenges together with their communities.

The morning of the first full day of activity opened with a provocation by author and museum researcher **John Falk**, advocating the need for museums to focus on their value for diverse audiences in an uncertain world. This provocation is built upon Dr Falk's internationally recognised expertise on free-choice learning, the learning that occurs while visiting museums, zoos, aquariums, libraries, and other cultural destinations.

Group members reflected upon how their organisations might frame and articulate a new value proposition - one based on well-being. The essence of the museum's **VALUE** was explored deeply during the two-day introspection. The group recognized that organizations were at various points in their journey, with some still identifying their core values and others actively implementing them. One of the perspectives proposed was to draw from the evolutionary trajectory of libraries, particularly in terms of their shifting value propositions over the years and how they are working with members and organisations in their communities to reimagine and reframe value.

This introspection led to the contemplation of inclusivity. The discussion quickly extended beyond practices of welcoming everyone into the museum and questions of who might feel excluded or 'othered' in these spaces. Instead, the focus turned to the need to evolve museums into civic spaces, with participants considering how organisations might embrace their public roles, as well as the trust that society places in them. Including what this might mean for the voice of the museum, whether (and how) it might sound more like its users, and emote more openly. However, a challenge was acknowledged: not everyone finds museums accessible or welcoming. But only digitizing collections or offering virtual tours without the connection to the visitor's needs, the group realized, was a partial solution. The human element, the stories behind exhibits, and the emotional interaction

between visitors and artefacts are crucial. When considering value, participants considered the holistic experience of the museum visit.

The urgency to redefine and reinvent the museum experience was palpable. How can we reinvent museums to serve as tranquil sanctuaries that foster rest, community engagement, and social interaction, while simultaneously stimulating intellectual growth and critical thinking through constructive debates, challenges, and inquiries? Engaging visitors with innovative ideas was essential by introducing shared ownership and reinterpretation mechanisms. And how might all of this be understood in a way that acknowledged not just the diversity of visitors (and non-visitors or potential visitors) to museums, but the variety of organisations themselves - their location, their spaces, their governance, their visions, their collections. The group acknowledged a desire to identify the time and space required to delve deeper into our collective memory, understand shared pasts, and measure impact - especially through diverse community engagements.

In the first afternoon, a modified Delphi Method was used to structure an expert discussion on how museums might identify and consider alternative futures. An initial questionnaire was sent before the meeting to gather all participants' diverse perspectives on challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Participants discussed these questions and their responses in more detail in person, covering key topics addressing funding gaps, operational changes, collection priorities, community roles, environmental and accessibility issues, emerging technologies, and strategic partnerships. The second round of discussion introduced scaled questions to identify any consensus on how museums might address the complexities outlined in the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2023.

During the Delphi discussion, several shared challenges were illuminated, revealing the profound impact the post-COVID world has had on the museum sector. Resilience became a central theme, prioritizing **staff well-being** and **reenvisioning workplace dynamics**. While the pandemic's toll was undeniable, it also served as a wake-up call, urging institutions to take an active role in shaping their destinies rather than merely reacting to the circumstances.

The potential of **PARTNERSHIPS** was highlighted as a transformative force for the future. Museums have long had strong partnerships with artists and specific community organisations, however, libraries, with their vast, efficient, and well-established international networks, emerged as ideal models to emulate. Discussions explored the breadth of collaboration opportunities, from the health sector and universities to social agencies. These collaborations challenged participants to envision partnerships as profound, intertwined relationships geared toward creating a meaningful social impact. Alongside this, the importance of **ADVOCACY** and **COLLABORATION** within the museum sector became evident. Despite the sector's inherent diversity, the need for unified efforts was underscored, particularly in demonstrating museums' collective value and educating governing bodies.

A pivotal conversation revolved around the public perception and role of museums. There is a growing concern about a potential disparity between how museums view their importance and their actual significance to the public. Museums are recognized as repositories and vibrant platforms for debate, fostering critical thought and broadening perspectives. This led to discussions on **MUSEUMS AND ACTIVISM**, emphasizing their potential roles in public dialogues and influencing policies. Museums are encouraged to become bastions of authenticity, actively countering misinformation. In impact assessment, there was a call to shift from traditional metrics towards more holistic

frameworks that genuinely encapsulate a museum's value, factoring in its dedicated workforce and the communities it serves.

When evaluating and ranking various questions about the primary areas of focus for museums, it became clear that there was a consensus on the need to **transform core museum operations**. Critical operations like **fundraising and programming** were identified as **vital areas requiring innovation** to ensure the museum's sustainability. The importance of a motivated and healthy staff was highlighted, with a strong **call for new leadership**. This fresh leadership was envisioned as one that could bring in contemporary perspectives by integrating expertise from sectors outside the traditional museum realm.

The conversation then shifted to the **strategic partnerships of museums** with the emphasis on collaborating with subject matter experts to gain clarity on various issues. A pivotal point of discussion revolved around how museums could enhance their services to better cater to underserved and underrepresented groups in the upcoming years. The physical infrastructure of the museums, including the buildings and their collections, was also a hot topic. While some participants suggested **repurposing** these **spaces** to serve local community needs, others focused on redistributing resources to ensure more organizations had access to what they required.

Participants engaged in an examination of the applicability of the market forces model in aligning museum offerings with market demands, questioning whether this should be considered a foundational principle for such discussions. There was a recognition that this approach might not be universally accepted or appropriate, as evident from dissenting views among participants and within various sectors and global communities. The need to reassess the value proposition of museums was a focal point, with emphasis on challenging not only the existing business-oriented assumptions and vocabulary but also considering their validity in different cultural and social contexts.

Conversations also revolved around the identity of the museum, scrutinizing the prevalent notion of museums attempting to exceed their inherent capabilities. This theme, although uncomfortable, was acknowledged as a necessary area of reflection, prompting a reevaluation of how museums perceive adaptation and their roles in society. Participants considered if and how museums should focus on recognizing and excelling in their existing strengths and core competencies, rather than expanding into new areas. This reiterative theme served as a crucial reminder for museums to stay true to their essence while navigating through changes and societal expectations.

Concerns were also raised about the growing digital divide, especially the gap between urban and rural regions, the role and significance of digital tools within the museum sector. Despite the undeniable strides made by AI, it was recognized that specific practical skills, such as conservation, couldn't be replaced. **Digital challenges** were acknowledged, including reduced travel and digital exclusivity. However, the group was optimistic about the potential of digital platforms to bridge these gaps. A consensus emerged: **while museums should work towards a harmonious blend of digital and physical experiences, the essence of human interaction and shared spaces should never be compromised.**

On the second day's morning, Rob Hopkins, the author of ["What is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want."](#) and imagination activist, addressed museum leaders. Drawing from his experience in promoting climate action, Rob underscored the importance of initiating audacious ideas without being bogged down by funding concerns. He expressed that support inevitably follows when projects are driven by passion and stakeholders are united behind a captivating vision.

The discussion then pivoted to the nuances of audience engagement. Rob accentuated the significance of comprehensively mapping stakeholders to discern potential allies and challenges. He championed manifesting priorities through visible, tangible actions, advocating for leadership through example. A culture of transparency, coupled with a receptiveness to evolve based on feedback, was deemed pivotal for fortifying initiatives. Rob also spotlighted the anticipatory thrill of unveiling future possibilities, suggesting that institutions can kindle enthusiasm within their communities by offering a sneak peek into forthcoming ventures. He emphasized the **museum's unique position as a convener**, facilitating collaborative endeavors toward solutions. Instead of fixating on conventional return-on-investment parameters, Rob proposed that objectives should pivot towards sculpting a sustainable future.

Post his enlightening talk, Rob orchestrated an exercise designed to shift the participants' mindset, urging them to operate from the standpoint of abundance rather than scarcity, particularly in climate change. Through imaginative activities, attendees were nudged to ponder the question, "What if?". The objective was clear: stimulating creativity and transitioning the attendees into a more hopeful frame of mind. Participants generated a wealth of ideas for museums in the future. Central to these suggestions was a strong emphasis on sustainability, both environmentally and community-oriented: transforming museum operations to be more green, like using shared services and servers, focusing on local and renewable energy sources, and even having museums act as local energy storage or "neighbourhood batteries." There was a notable push towards reducing the carbon footprint, with recommendations like banning work-related flights in favour of trains or boats, establishing vegan cafes, and repurposing rather than building new facilities. The role of museums as community hubs was also highlighted, with suggestions of transforming car parks into green spaces, promoting local arts and products, and even establishing organic farms.

The discussion went beyond just the environmental aspect. There was a clear emphasis on museums becoming more community-centric, with many ideas geared towards engaging with local communities more meaningfully. This included using museum spaces for community activities, sharing resources and expertise, and even rethinking the performance metrics for museums, focusing less on attendance and more on community impact. Concepts like localized collection and exhibition strategies, involving the community in cultural heritage responsibilities, and even radical reimagining of the museum's role in society were discussed. These ideas, ranging from the practical to the visionary, painted a picture of a future where museums are not just passive repositories of art and culture but active, sustainable, and community-driven entities. All ideas generated may be viewed [here](#).

The morning's sessions were geared towards equipping the participants with tools and perspectives to amplify their advocacy for climate solutions, approaching challenges from a vantage point of imagination, empowerment, and potential.

The second day was dedicated to focused discussions. Following a stimulating morning session, the participants were encouraged to harness their imagination and embark on a mental time travel journey. They delved into the potential risks highlighted previously, referencing the Global Risks Report of 2023. Forming pairs, they explored various aspects like the ecosystems they operated within, the boundaries of their discretion, potential actions that could be undertaken without additional resources, and potential allies in their endeavours.

Further, the pairs joined another team and in groups of four, expanded the conversation and enriched their perspectives by posing similar questions. This exercise broadened individual horizons and fostered a deeper understanding of the complex challenges ahead. When the entire group reconvened, a rich tapestry of insights emerged, echoing the urgent need for collaboration and resilience in the face of global challenges, as the World Economic Forum highlighted.



Team A, **MET ZERO**, envisioned a global network of museums operating as interconnected nodes. While sharing resources and practices, each node would have distinct local partnerships. They emphasized achieving carbon neutrality for digital and physical collections and the paramount importance of organizational health, suggesting a universal health framework. Team B, known as **BATTERY FOR THE COMMUNITY**, embraced the circular economy, viewing museums as vibrant ecosystems serving their communities. They introduced a novel museum credit system and saw art as a shared community asset, challenging the conventional museum ownership paradigm.

Team C, the **PLACEMAKERS**, passionately promoted inter-museum collaboration, re-utilization of resources, and shared collections, while also envisioning museums as aesthetic pioneers in urban development. They further highlighted grassroots initiatives and championed the idea of collections serving as community assets. **THE SINCERE MUSEUM** team delved into the intricate relationship between museums and governance, advocating for a symbiotic connection with governments and embracing themes like failure and conflict. They also questioned the ongoing need for artifact acquisition. Concluding the discussions, **THE MATISSE COLLECTIVE** presented a toolkit inspired by Europeana's values, emphasizing radical transparency, a revised social contract, and a systemic approach to museum operations.

The group consensus emphasized that the most impactful organizations often diverged from conventional approaches. Instead of merely managing crises, they capitalized on them, turning challenges into opportunities. A resonating theme was the role of communities in molding institutions to serve their needs better, with museums envisioned as integral cogs in the circular economy.

Conclusions

Over two days, participants considered museum relevance and value for varied audiences using a well-being framework, strategized on sustainability using a modified Delphi method, and fostered a positive and immediate approach to climate advocacy. They engaged in paired and group dialogues about professional ecosystems, discretion levels, and partnership avenues, aiming to communicate museums' value propositions, steer global sustainability actions, broaden climate advocacy, and collaborate optimistically across networks to address challenges highlighted by the World Economic Forum. As the discussions concluded, they identified uncharted territories, including the museum-government relationship, decolonization, repatriation, and AI's implications, marking them for deeper analysis in future sessions.

Participants articulated a future for the museum of **systematic re-prioritisation** – one focused on **sustainability (well-being of the planet)** and **care (well-being of people)**; **collective action** – moving with purpose, leveraging the power of joint advocacy as a sector globally; **rebalanced partnerships** – mobilising relationships for good, always in a context of equity and openness.

The participants of The Museum Leadership House together generated a new **VOCABULARY** (of societal 'pacts,' of embracing 'tomorrow,' on the 'return on a viable future'), a new set of **VALUES** (of balance and maturity, trust and sincerity, bravery and hope), as well as confidence in a new **VELOCITY** (of what can be achieved now, of where radical steps can be taken, and harnessing the power of being anticipatory).

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