

Using the Past to Shape the Future: Addressing Civic Issues at Historic Sites, Museums, and Cultural Centers

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How can museums, historic sites, and cultural centers become centers of civic life in our communities? Learn from successful models a round the world about how your institution can address the issues most central to your community's life today.

The role of museums, historic sites, and cultural centers is changing day by day. No longer places of passive learning, every one of these institutions has the potential to be, as the American Association of Museums envisions, "a center where people gather to meet and converse... an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, a trusted incubator of change." How can we fulfill that vision? Museums, historic sites and cultural centers world wide are interpreting their histories from multiple perspectives, collaborating with communities, and fostering dialogue on the legacies of those histories today. As a result, they are transforming themselves into powerful forums for civic engagement and public dialogue.

"Using the Past" will present successful models of civic dialogue at museums, historic sites, and cultural centers. Participants will learn how their institutions can help individuals and communities address the issues most central to their lives today.

Why is civic dialogue important to the future of museums, historical sites, and cultural centers?

Civic dialogue is public conversation about civic issues, policies, or decisions of consequence to people's lives, communities, and society. These dialogues can engage multiple perspectives on an issue, including potentially conflicting and unpopular ones, rather than presenting a single point of view.¹ By being encouraged to challenge and refine their own perspectives, visitors and stakeholders are inspired to become active participants in shaping their own futures.

The power of place and the perspective of the past can be a new starting point for addressing contemporary issues. Historic places often inspire emotional connection and empathy for people's experiences and histories; they offer examples of how change was made or thwarted over time; and, they provide other catalysts for considering how our past affects our future.

What will participants gain from the conference?

Participants will share experiences and build skills in:

- Connecting your history or cultural resources to the issues that matter most to your community
- Training front line educators to connect the past with your community's present
- Forming effective partnerships with community organizations and educational institutions to incorporate multiple perspectives
- Promoting effective dialogue and engaging stakeholder groups, visitors and communities, even on sensitive issues
- Expanding your audience beyond your immediate community

Who should attend?

Directors and staff of museums, historic sites, and cultural centers; educators and program developers; community groups, advocates, and civic organizations interested in partnering with museums; representatives of communities surrounding historic sites or residents of historic districts; funders of humanities, democratic participation, landmark preservation, and museum education; historic preservation advocates, scholars of history and memory, professionals, and students.

¹ Adapted from the Animating Democracy Initiative's definition of civic dialogue (see www.americansforthearts.org/AnimatingDemocracy)