# The Ideal Museum: Art and the Audience of Museums, Real and Imagined

THESIS

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## Abstract

The aim of this project is to examine the impulse to create community gathering space within the museum. This work has been undertaken by museum staff who are aware of the museum’s various points of inaccessibility, though continue to struggle with ways to engage historically excluded publics. I find that three main factors inhibit this type of community gathering: the hierarchical structure of the museum profession, the spatial politics and layout of museum, and the location of art museums. I then synthesize my findings, proposing a new mode of institutional collaboration to ground a community-based practice that promotes the broadest public access to the arts.

## Acknowledgments

**Land acknowledgement:** This research and writing occurred in central Ohio which I acknowledge as the ancestral and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe and Cherokee peoples. I want to honor the resiliency of these tribal nations and recognize the historical contexts that has and continues to affect the Indigenous peoples of this land.

I would like to thank my advisors, Dr. Martinez and Dr. Fletcher, who have guided me in this final project of my undergraduate years, and without whom I would be lost. Special thanks to Alexandra Adcock, Zenta Enomoto, and Mary McCarthy who read drafts and gave much needed notes. I must thank my mother who has done the important work of art education for almost 30 years now, and my fiancé, Will Bennett who has been so supportive through this process. Finally, I'd like to extend gratitude to the artists and museum professional who are undertaking the work to create the ideal museum of the future.

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## INTRODUCTION

A critique of art museums has existed as long as these institutions have. In recent years museum scholarship has revealed the various ways in which art museums as collections of material culture emerged as tools of nation building, classist elitism, colonial exhibitionism, racial othering, among myriad other issues. Art historian Kenneth Clark writes in the 1954 essay (from which this project gets its name), *The Ideal Museum*, that,

> *A more respectable form of justification (for art museums), and one which seems to prevail in the United States, is connected with the word education. But the relationship of works of art with the concept of education remains vague. No doubt that in a large sense of the word the appreciation of art is educative. It gives us a fuller understanding of the human spirit; it greatly enlarges our capacity for life: and this, I suppose, is what education sets out to do.*[1]

Thus, the hope for a better museum that is accessible through education, more public and diverse, coupled with the immense potential of the art experience to transform one's life drives the contemporary efforts of museum professionals to "common the museum,"—that is, to change museum structures, programming, curation, pedagogical tactics, and even architectures in an attempt to create a museum that is available for anyone to use as secular gathering place. This "anyone" as it occurs in the mind of the museum professional is a community that is *imagined* in opposition to their own identities. The communities they seek are working class, disadvantaged, uneducated, and of racial and ethnic identities that that have been historically excluded from the history of art and its institutions.

As a 2010 report by the American Association of Museums reads, "I think the vision of the museum field, our 'preferred future,' is one in which our users reflect our communities. It is a future in which the scientific, historic, artistic and cultural resources that museums care for

[1] K. Clark, "The Ideal Museum," *ArtNews*, 1954.

benefit all segments of society."[2] Museum professionals are generally responsive to the critique of their institutions and desire to make museums accessible for all. However, there is much debate over which inclusive practices are the most effective and which uphold social exclusion.

I argue that there are three barriers to an inclusive museum that must be addressed in order to allow for the kind of organic gathering and diversity of museum use that is desired. The barriers are staff and departmental hierarchies within the museum profession; the spatial politics, design, and restrictions of museum galleries; and the location in which museums are situated. I begin with the structure of staffing which is the easiest to change, though I find that the engrained elitism of the profession is resistant to change. Space is harder to alter in terms of architecture, though I find that the way space is activated has a significant impact on the way it is used. Finally, location is the most difficult barrier to contend with, as it entangles with other numerous issues of city planning and urbanization. However, there exist a variety of case studies that demonstrate how hierarchical, spatial, and locational constraints can be dealt with to promote broader public access.

**Research Questions and Literature Review**

The research questions of my first chapter are: How do museum professionals imagine the community that they seek to engage, and why does this imagined community not align with the surrounding neighborhoods of the museum? To answer this, I examine museum staff structures and demographics from the Association of Art Museum Directors, in addition to statements from museum websites. Miwon Kwon's chapter on community-based art, "The (Un)sitings of Community," proved most helpful in my thinking about community/art

[2] B. Farrell & M. Medvedeva, "Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums," 2010, page 5.

interactions. I also include anecdotal evidence that demonstrates the workplace culture of museum offices. Finally, I use the case study of Free Space at the Wexner Center for the Arts to illustrate the disconnect between community-based exhibitions and the needs of communities. The research questions of my second chapter are: What kind of spaces are museums and how does space limit the way people can move and gather? I deploy Carol Duncan's seminal survey of museums *Civilizing Rituals*, Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum*, and a case study of the Brooklyn Museum, in addition to personal accounts of guard work and museum space to answer these questions. The research questions of my third and final chapter are: Where are museums located, why does this limit who can access them, and what alternatives exist? To answer these questions, I turn to the history of public libraries, and case studies of community-based galleries to demonstrate how place-based engagement is much better suited to contend with local issues of the neighborhoods that these institutions serve. Drawing from diverse source material has allowed me to expand my critique from one of art museums to the treatment of art and community under neoliberal civil institutions at large.

**Positionality**

Much of my thinking on these issues has emerged first and foremost from having worked in various capacities in several art museums in Ohio for the last three years. I am a white person from a socioeconomic background that has allowed me to be socialized into the museum's function from a young age and to have the economic liberty to pursue the academic qualifications needed to work in the field. Therefore, as a worker from a traditional museum background, I am subject to the cultural assumptions that have sustained exclusionary practice in American art museum. I have also engaged most recently with the notion of "the commons," a thread of scholarship that began in the 1990's as a reaction against the increased "privatization of

everything"[3] that has so characterized the neoliberal present. To common (the verb of commons) is, according to On the Commons, "a new way to express a very old idea—that some forms of wealth belong to all of us, and that these community resources must be actively protected and managed for the good of all."[4] This sentiment, which is indeed not new, can be found both in Henri Lefebvre's *The Right to the City*[5] written in 1968, which proposes dignified access to urban activity, and in recent exhibition making trends and practices.

The true commons is found in localized action against the neoliberal city today, and is best exemplified by community gardens. These sites are entirely neighborhood oriented and centered, though this does not obviously absolve them from conflict. In her study on community gardens and gentrification, Miranda Martinez writes in *Power at the Roots* that,

> *The generally understood ideology of community gardening seems to promise that "good people" have only to work together, and community will be achieved; but the ideological force of the term "community" can obscure critical attention to the less obvious ways that class privilege is operating, such as where questions of deliberation, process, and moral authority are concerned.*[6]

The term community is overused and full of assumptions, especially as it is employed in the museum context. Like community gardens, art is a decisive instrument of local praxis and urban revitalization but also runs great risk of being a primer for gentrification; thus, art institutions are subject to similar conflicts as gardens when made common. My research inquiry draws from the way in which the concept of "community" plays out in the imaginations of artists and museum professionals. This includes the way that imagined community space is designed, the forms it takes, and the alternatives that are possible.

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[3] N. Klein, "Reclaiming the Commons," 2001.
[4] "About the Commons." *On the Commons*.
[5] H. Lefebvre, *The Right to the City*, 1968.
[6] M. Martinez, *Power at the Roots*, 2010, page 64.

## Significance and Scope

I am writing on and researching this topic of communities and art institutions in a time when access to public space is limited due to the health regulations of a global pandemic. Above all, this moment has reemphasized a need for tertiary space and public interaction. Due to economic downturn, museums have been forced to restructure and reconsider how they operate. As spaces start to reopen, travel is still ill-advised, and a slow recovery proceeds, museum professionals must consider their local publics (rather than tourist audiences) in order to survive. The National Endowment for the Arts notes that art can have an immense impact on community uplift. They define this practice as,

> *Creative placemaking is when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work - placing arts at the table with land-use, transportation, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure, and public safety strategies. Creative placemaking supports local efforts to enhance quality of life and opportunity for existing residents, increase creative activity, and create a distinct sense of place.*[7]

The most effective and accessible museums practice creative placemaking in order to engage their target audiences; rather than drawing people in, they look outward into their communities.

## Outro

At their best, art museums provide space to learn, interact, engage, to be creative and curious. At their worst, they uphold cultural hegemony, colonialism, and elitism, in addition to the commodification of these experiences and of art. The ideal museum does exist despite the barriers of staff, space, and location; in case studies, in local imaginations, and in the minds of community-oriented museum professionals, another museum is possible.

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[7] *Creative Placemaking*, National Endowment for the Arts.

# ONE: HIERARCHICAL

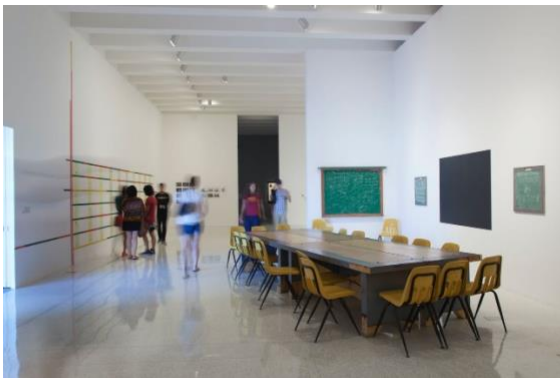
## Overview

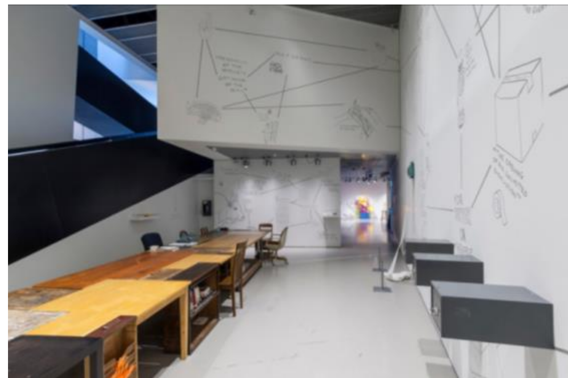
The staff of art museums inadvertently prevent the use of museum space by excluded groups of people. Leadership are particularly subject to cultural imaginings in which the non-user of the museum is of an identity in opposition to their own. The imagined community of museums are low income and people of color. Since most staff do not come from these demographics, they attempt to create exhibitions for a community that doesn't exist. In the past, the blockbuster was an exhibition style that attempted to appeal to a broader audience. An alternative to this dissonance is for museum staff to have dialogue with local artists and activists to best determine what is needed, and to relinquish their singular control in art history's presentation.

## How Do Museums Run?

Museums are privatized collections of objects that have previously claimed a disinterested objectivity through their scholarship. There are a multitude of ways in which museums affirm hierarchy through this claimed objective approach. The material hierarchies put forth by museums have long distinguished between art, artifact, and craft—classist insider/outsider distinctions that have brought out much debate and criticism. These value judgements are a result of the exhibitionary complex, a term coined by museum theorist Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum* that describes the mode of classification inherent to the museum's function—that is, to turn cultural material into a spectacle to be gazed upon. The claim of imperial knowledge and singular history has made universal survey museums a particular target for scrutiny: the museum presents itself as a unified entity to assert its own cultural authority. Museum are made of people, and the most common hierarchy at play in art museums are of hierarchies among staff and between departments; though underanalyzed, they have major influence on museum politics and practice.These hierarchies perpetuate the internalized structures and insular nature of America's art museums, maintaining their enclosure.

If the goal of recent exhibition trends, such as the table-in-a-gallery phenomenon, has been to create a community gathering space within the museum, then the definition of community, and indeed *which* definition of community, is important to consider. The museum's community is a concept that is imagined by museum staff to mean a group of people united in their disenfranchisement. Rather than view groups of people as they naturally occur and interact, museum professionals conflate neighborhoods with communities. Not everyone knows and maintains community with all of their neighbors, after all. In their task to engage community(ies), some museum professionals make decisions based on their own cultural assumptions rather than inviting dialogue with the groups they are attempting to invite into the museum. For example, curators have staged exhibitions of Star Wars memorabilia, hip-hop history through photography, and shows about video games or car culture. This "blockbuster" style of exhibition making succeeds only in drawing large groups of people out to the museum. However, this interaction is fleeting and unsustained. A new mode of exhibition as seen in *Radical Presence*, a travelling exhibition of Black performance art that ran from 2012-2014 in various institutions (left installation view below), and at the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati in 2017 saw the placement of a large table in the gallery (right installation view).





This method attempts to activate gallery space and transition it into a place for collaboration and community gathering. However, the public response to this strategy is not overwhelming access or sustained museum attendance. Instead, these exhibitions are only available for common use when specifically activated through programming and outreach. For community-minded art spaces, the desire should be to create a space that is self-activated by and among museum visitors, rather than by staff. Additionally, museums with the intention of becoming community-minded spaces and practitioners of creative placemaking must consider their internal hierarchies, from internships to leadership and between departments, to adequately work toward this goal.

**Museum Staff and their Imagined Community**

In 1992, the American Association of Museums redefined museums as institutions of public service, urging museums to actively seek diverse audiences.[8] Museum professionals have been receptive to this, and museums have adopted language of inclusivity when expressing their mission. However, museum leadership from the traditional academic and socioeconomic backgrounds that have always staffed museums are full of assumptions about the social groups they seek to engage for the purpose of inclusive practice. As museum scholar Stephen Weil writes,

> *While American art museums have always been public in one sense - from their beginning they were open to the public and operated not for profit - in another sense most of them were profoundly private at their start: private in the sources of their funds, private in their control, and private even in the sense that their senior staff was drawn from a privileged social class.*[9]

Although Weil invokes museum in the past tense, I would argue that this is the present state of museums. Per a 2018 Mellon Foundation report, 72% of museum staff are white, and among

[8] C. Genshaft, "Symphonic Poem: A case study in museum education," 2007, page 5.
[9] S. Weil, "Beauty and the Beasts," 1983.

intellectual leadership roles, 80% are white. Museum internships are still largely unpaid or underpaid, and starting level salaries are exceptionally low for positions that generally require candidates with masters' degrees. The implication is that a museum professional has access to generational wealth. Because I am from this socioeconomic background, I have been able to accept and complete an unpaid internship at an institution where the director makes around $260,000 annually.[10]

Within the hyper-professionalized museum field, leadership attain their positions by completing years of graduate school and by being willing to relocate for limited employment. This is especially common of directors—those at the very top of the hierarchy who often have a complete lack of connection to place. William Cleveland, director of the Center for the Study of Art & Community, said the arts community in the United States has historically "both isolated itself and been isolated from the working of the broader community."[11] The intent to engage disenfranchised and socially excluded groups is work largely undertaken by professionals who have no ties to the "communities" they are seeking. Often in the minds of museum elite, "community" is a group of people united by genetic traits, social concerns, or mere geographic association. Because museum professionals do not derive from these commonalities, they imagine an identity (working class, uneducated, POC) in opposition to their own (upper middle class, wealthy, educated, white). Therefore, museum leadership is unable to ground their work resulting in great liberties taken in their attempts to engage previously excluded groups. As curator Miwon Kwon writes in "The (Un)Sitings of Community,"

> *Without doubt, artists, critics, curators, art institutions, and funding organizations are pressured today to think and act as if communities exist as coherent social entities*

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[10] For the sake of anonymity, this shall remain uncited. I will say though, this director took a pay cut due to the economic fallout of the pandemic and *only* makes $158,000 now.

[11] R. Chew, "Community-Based Arts Organizations: A New Center of Gravity," 2009.

> *awaiting outreach. The field continues to covet images of coherence, unity, and wholeness as the ideal representation of a community. (In a sense, the shift in focus from public spaces to local cultures has not displaced the ideology of unity that has prevailed in [public] art over the past three decades.) While such an outlook contributes to some expansion of art audiences, strengthening the tie between elite cultural institutions and local constituencies normally disengaged from their activities, its effects also include the reification and colonization of marginal, disenfranchised social groups, as well as the concomitant reification and commodification of local cultures.*[12]

At the very least, most museum leaders are up to date on the discourse of museum access and community, especially due to the promotion of inclusive practice by the Association of Art Museum Directors and other such advisory boards. However, the concept of what a community as defined by the museum professional is misguided and cannibalized for use in grant materials and to demonstrate social justice work. Social groups are then subject to the exhibitionary complex, at risk of becoming a spectacle for the largely white, middle class audience of the current museum.

To demonstrate their own cultural inclusivity, art museums outsource community-based artists to do the work of community engagement. The topic of Kwon's chapter (which has been instrumental in my thinking on the topic of community) is community-based art and its critique of artist-practitioners as exploitative to local groups. As she writes, "The kind of reductive and equalizing association drawn between an artist and a community group is not always the work of a self-aggrandizing, pseudo-altruistic artist but rather a fashioning of the artist by *institutional* forces."[13] Museum staff attempt to orchestrate collaborations between non-local artists and the communities they appear to share commonalities with, according to the museum staff's imagination of community. The effect is a mismatch between the interests of the artists and the communities they are assigned. Rather than being self-determined, according to the specific

[12] M. Kwon, "The (Un)Sitings of Community." *One Place after Another*, 2002, page 153.
[13] M. Kwon, page 140.

artist's practice, institutional direction creates inorganic collaborations. Such was the case with Sculpture Chicago, artist Renee Green, and the Southside described by Kwon that ended with Green's decision not to do the project. The curator taking Green on a city tour took her only to Black neighborhood based on the assumption that Green is Black, she'd want to do a project with them. These community projects, in their varying outcomes are used as a demonstration of the museum's inclusion efforts, or per Kwon, "the conversion of attempts at a participatory model of art practice, engaging local concerns and people, into yet another form of acquiescence to the powers of capital and the state."[14]

My own experience within museums, specifically in arts advocacy, tells me that this evocation of community engagement is generally advantageous for the museum elite. The cultural elite finds the power of art to be a bandage for social inequalities and a tool for social uplift, as Kwon writes,

> *The cultural mobilization of the social "usefulness" of art and the rhetoric that accompanies it need to be understood within the "moral economy of capitalism" and the history of liberal urban reform. "This outpouring of compassion and concern over 'community'"—imagined by many critical cultural practitioners as a means to greater social justice and inclusive political and cultural processes—"must be understood in relation to the successful assimilation in the U.S. of conservative arguments about the underlying causes of poverty, social and cultural inequality, and disenfranchisement."* [15]

While there are significant benefits of community-based art that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, the language of arts impact and community rhetoric used by museum professionals frequently overplay the museum's reach into its surrounding areas.

**How is Community Measured?**

Community features often in museum mission statements, such as the following:

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[14] M. Kwon, page 152.
[15] M. Kwon, page 152.

*Through the power of art, we contribute to a more vibrant Cincinnati by inspiring its people and connecting our communities.[16]*
*Through our collection and programs, we strive to integrate art into the lives of people.[17]*
*The Cleveland Museum of Art creates transformative experiences through art, "for the benefit of all the people forever."[18]*
*The Dayton Art Institute is committed to enriching the community by creating meaningful experiences with art that are available to all.[19]*

One possible reason that community and accessibility (the principle of 'open for all') have become such buzzwords within museum discourse is that these concepts are difficult to measure. Among varying definitions of accessibility, there are barriers to access at financial, physical, and cultural levels. As I have illustrated, the concept of community and its construction varies widely within museum leadership. Museums are institutions of the state and, thus, adhere to the State's determinations of cultural groups. As critic Josie Appleton writes,

*The People [rather than the public] is made up of many different categories of people, all well-defined (by the state). Diversity is the great buzzword among supporters of The People. Because of the talk of diversity and difference it appears more individualistic. But this individual does not make himself, he is always created from above, by authority."[20]*

Favorable changes in diversity measurements then become a stand-in for demonstrations of institutional progress and social inclusivity. Therefore, as instruments of the state, museums designate their own demographics; the differentiation and generalization involved necessitate the alienation and commodification of local identities.

Oftentimes in my development work I was called on to use statistics at the intersection of race and economic disadvantage for the schools involved in educational programs. These statistics were combined with testimonials to gain grants for the institution's work. With the

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[16] "About the Cincinnati Art Museum."
[17] "About," The Toledo Museum of Art.
[18] T. Barnard, "Mission, Vision, Promise." Cleveland Museum of Art.
[19] "About," Dayton Art Institute.
[20] J. Appleton "Museums for 'The People.'" 2007, Page 123

changed nature of museum funding structures, personal philanthropy and federal funding have been replaced by corporate giving. Corporations donate to museums as nonprofits to demonstrate their own commitment to creativity, community, and access. Too, they endorse the ideology of urban liberal reform that Kwon touches on: that arts access is cure-all for social inequity. Employed through this logic, art has become available as a tool for either revitalization or gentrification. The line between these two urban processes is quite blurred and will be discussed in the subsequent chapter on location.

While working in museum offices that have been comprised of all white employees, I have found that the phrase "the Black community" was frequently used to talk about all Black citizens of the particular city. This practice has stopped only recently due to what is termed by some museum staff as "the racial reckoning," or alternatively, the protests calling for racial justice that occurred following the murder of George Floyd. Museums have responded to this cultural moment by increasing DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion) efforts internally, and advertising these new policies to demonstrate "progress." As curator Maurice Berger noted in a relevant 1990 essay "Are Art Museums Racist?"

> *But in an art world that remains what Judith Wilson has called "one of the last bastions of white supremacy-by-exclusion," most art museums offer little more than lip service to the concept of racial inclusion. Art that demonstrates its "difference" from the mainstream or that challenges dominant values is rarely acceptable to white curators, administrators, and patrons. This cultural elite bases its selections on arbitrary, Eurocentric standards of "taste" and "quality"—the code words of racial indifference and exclusion.*[21]

DEAI efforts, especially when inorganically imposed, are only a bandage on the wound that is institutional white supremacy. Museums are seldom overt in their demonstration of racist policies, work cultures, and foundations; not even the most conservative museum leader

[21] M. Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?" *Art in America*, 1990

outwardly advocates for exclusion and inaccessibility. A recent controversy at the Newfields Museum of Indianapolis directly illustrates the internal hierarchies that perpetuate exclusion. Charles Venable, president of the Board of Trustees, resigned after posting a job listing that sought a director to maintain Newfields' "core, white audience." [22] The institution has since promised to develop DEAI policies and has made a promise to "do better," the lip service that is the typical response to institutional dog whistles when they are caught.

Diversity policies often result in tokenism and quotas, which fail to mitigate the larger issues of institutional racism, and subject BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) staff to exploitation. For example, Chaédria LaBouvier, the first Black curator in the 80-year history of the Guggenheim, described her workplace experience on Twitter,

> *Some of you have asked about my experience at the Guggenheim as the first Black curator, woman & creator of the Basquiat exhibition. I'm still super proud of it. Working at the Guggenheim with Nancy Spector & the leadership was the most racist professional experience of my life.*

Throughout her experience of working on *Basquiat's Defacement: The Untold Story*, she faced the erasure of her scholarship and work on the exhibition. She wrote, "I was met with constant retaliation for essentially refusing to give up ownership of my work." Additionally, she was left off of the panel that was assembled to talk about the exhibition. Spector, despite her internally enacted erasure campaign, was cleared of racial bias accusations by an independent investigation, which found that LaBouvier was not "subject to adverse treatment on the basis of her race."[23] LaBouvier tweeted, "I was never interviewed for the Guggenheim's Basquiat investigation/did not participate. It was not safe to do so—a Board member threatened me in May 2019: 'I would not go up against the Guggenheim if I were you,' and did not trust an

[22] N. Kenney. "Indianapolis Museum Apologises for Posted Job Description Describing a 'Core, White Art Audience'." February 2021.
[23] Kinsella, Eileen. "Veteran Guggenheim Curator Nancy Spector Has Been Cleared of Racial Bias Allegations."

investigation instigated by said Board." Needless to say, by her own account, LaBouvier suffered immense workplace violence that would likely have been unaffected by the newly adopted DEAI measures. As long as museum leadership holds out in their politics of disinterested scholarship, they will continue to uphold white supremacy and continue to perpetuate a definition of diversity that is reductive and tokenistic.

Due to the internalized nature of staff politics, museums can only be reformed from the inside out. Museum staff must examine the hierarchical structures that they work within before taking on the vague task of "community inclusion." Although visitor diversity remains a telling statistic, staff diversification should be the focal point of museum work. Per an AAMD report, "Interrogating Institutional Practices in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion"

> *At the Studio Museum, one interviewee contrasted her professional experience at the museum with another institution where she viewed the efforts towards diversifying staff as inauthentic. As she described, the multicultural movement of the 1990s was about ticking boxes; institutions were not actually interested in the different perspectives and lived experiences of historically excluded communities—they simply wanted to change the numbers. Under the leadership of director Thelma Golden, Studio Museum has generated a culture of inclusion and equity, in which diversity of thought and experience is valued and embraced.*[24]

True diversity is not just the reduction of race to percentages, but rather a multiplicity of voice, experience, and background that allows for the museum to be diverse spaces. However, to dismantle the hierarchical structure of the museum requires not only to examine positions of leadership and diversity, but also the dynamic between different departments.

[24] Sweeney, Liam and Roger Schonfeld. "Interrogating Institutional Practices in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" S+R Ithaka, 2018.

## Departmental Hierarchy

Roles within the museum are also subject to internal hierarchy. Historically, museum practice has always privileged the curatorial (and registrar) department as the most esteemed and highly educated stewards of a museum collection. Directors still are promoted overwhelmingly from this department. Conservation also requires years of training and school, comparable to curation and, depending on the size of the institution, is either embedded or outsourced. The transition to visitor-centered museum practice required the creation of new departments. Development departments gather the funding required to run the institution via solicitation, membership, and corporate giving. Marketing advertises exhibitions and events, increasingly turning to social media and trends such as #museumselfie to promote the spectacle and *experience* of a trip to the museum. Museum education as a field has greatly expanded beyond docent tours and field trips to incorporate the practice of creativity into programming and outreach in the past few decades. Depending on the size of the institution, there can be other associated departments, such as those specifically dedicated to outreach, performance programming, and administrative work. Smaller institutions tend to collapse roles and departmental distinctions, and therefore are less subject to departmental hierarchy.

In the past, there was an intellectual conflict between curators and educators on the role of interpretative text for works of art. Curators preferred a method of display in which the object "speaks for itself," privileging visitors already familiar with art historical knowledge.[25] If artwork had labels at all it was just the "tombstone," meaning title, date, and artist. Educators were "responsible for communicating the curators' views to the public through tours, lectures, and exhibition brochures, and for providing programs for children and families and students and

[25] R. Chew, *Museums and Civic Dialogue,* 2005.

teachers," as curator of education Carole Genshaft writes in her account of working in the Columbus Museum of Art. The 1992 AAMD report that redefined museums as institutions of public service also urged museums to place education at the core of their missions.[26] Since then, curatorial and education departments have become much more collaborative on the creation of interpretive materials. However, between the two departments, curators are still given much more decision-making power within the museum structure. Generally, museum educators come from arts education programs and the profession requires fewer academic qualifications. Therefore, education work is a more accessible type of museum work that is open to more artists and people from non-traditional museum backgrounds. Meanwhile, curators hail from art historical and academically dense backgrounds, programs that communicate a continued sense of cultural elitism through career barriers such as masters' degrees and years of experience. As a graduating student with the hope of working in the curatorial field, I have become disheartened by perusing job postings for curatorial assistantships (the entry level position) that require many more years of experience and school than I have. Every museum's departmental interactions are different. Even in cases where curators and educators are working completely collaboratively to stage exhibitions, external hierarchy is imposed on the team by giving scholarly weight to curatorial work. As an Indigenous educator noted in a recent conversation, "Thank you for reaching out to the education team. People assume the curators are the best people to ask about an exhibition, but educators are working right alongside them and also have a hand in the scholarship."[27]

[26] C. Genshaft, "Symphonic Poem: A case study in museum education," 2007, page 5.
[27] This is not verbatim. I tried to maintain the spirit of the educator's words.

Per a 2018 AAMD report,[28] staff diversity is on the rise but still very far from reflecting the diversity of urban populations that museums seek. Educational departments, as a more accessible field, are more diverse (26% POC) than curatorial departments and leadership (16% and 12% respectively), and therefore have a grounded expectation for "community." Meanwhile, overwhelmingly white curators and leadership are still apt to make cultural assumptions about the underrepresented low income and BIPOC publics, especially in consideration of what people get out of visiting museums. According to Genshaft, "Museum theorist George Hein maintains that those who view art construct their own narratives about it that are personal and based on their own prior knowledge and experience. These narratives are often different from the narratives intended by exhibition makers."[29] Curators, at times, fall into a singular vision about the way their exhibitions will be engaged. Educators, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of art as site for conversation. Rather than privileging one way to view an exhibition or one interpretation of a work, educational tactics encourage visitors to use their own narratives to relate to art. Museum scholar Jay Rounds writes,

> *Visitors come to museums for their own reasons, and those reasons are not necessarily congruent with the goals of the museum. No doubt their browsing through exhibits is suboptimal when compared against the museum's goal that visitors "engage in systematic study or exploration." But the same behavior may prove to be an intelligent response to the situation when measured against the goals of the visitors themselves. In other words, it is possible that visitors are in fact doing a good job of using the exhibits, but that the job they are doing is something other than "systematic study" of some domain of knowledge.*[30]

The way that visitors use and move through the space of the museum, in addition to the narrative that they draw from looking at works of art, are entirely individual. With respect to inclusivity,

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[28] M. Westermann,et al. *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018*. American Art Museum Directors, 2019.
[29] C. Genshaft. "Symphonic Poem: A case study in museum education," 2007, page 5.
[30] J. Rounds. "Doing Identity Work in Museums." 2006, page 134.

museum professionals must recognize that different people will use the museum in different ways. Families, teens, groups of friends, and seniors can find something for themselves in museums that are designed for multiple uses. As long as curators stick to exhibition-making that is based on an imagined community's interests and designed only to be used in one way, certain groups of people will still be excluded by the museum. If the goal of the museum is to be *the town square of our community, a gathering place for everybody,* which is the mission of the Detroit Institute of Art, internal hierarchies must be dismantled, and conversations must be opened between museum professionals and real people who have not been included in the museum.[31] Rather than based on assumption, the resulting collaboration will be more grounded in inclusive community practice than the current trends.

**Case Study: Free Space**

A recent exhibition at the university-sited Wexner Center for the Arts (the Wex) attempted to decenter the departmental hierarchy between the curatorial and education teams and open up a space for public use. Organized by the newly minted department of Learning and Public Practice (the former education department), Free Space aimed to open the Wex for inclusive community practice. In its own description:

> *Located in the first gallery off the lower lobby, this multiuse space is intended to support the needs of the university and greater Columbus communities by offering timely short film programs, creative and practical tools, and an accommodating environment for conversation and connection.*[32]

Films shown in the space were curated by a local artist group, No Evil Eye, and the back wall of the gallery was a collaborative community collage. The gallery contained tables and chairs,

[31] "About the DIA," Detroit Institute of Arts.
[32] "Free Space," Wexner Center for the Arts, 2020.

sewing kits and other materials, flyers for local and social justice resources such as Food Not Bombs, and even voter registration cards (the exhibition opened in the months leading up to the 2020 election). The space was made available for small group meetings by reservation on the website and also was used to host programs. Additionally, the admission fee to the Wex, usually $8 for adults, was waived for this gallery to promote financial accessibility.

The challenge of an exhibition promoting public gathering and opening during the COVID-19 pandemic is certainly obvious. As I am writing, we are still in a global health crisis, and as such, interaction with public space is fraught. However, in addition to the restrictions of the pandemic, this exhibition exposed the way that museum professionals imagine their publics. The typical visitor to the Wex is not economically disadvantaged nor in need of local resources, despite the institution's proximity to and attempt to engage Weinland Park, a neighborhood with high rates of poverty and unemployment. Though it is nestled within Ohio State University's campus, the Wex also does not attract a large percentage of Ohio State's 60,000 students—those who might benefit from voter registration forms, despite outreach efforts. More broadly, it is uncommon to host a gathering within a gallery space or museum. Despite the name "Free Space" and the fee elimination, the Wex is known as a space that is not free, beginning admission charges in 2008. I am not implying this approach was entirely unsuccessful. The style of collaboration invoked by the exhibition is admirable and should be strived for. In addition, the decentering of the curatorial team and inclusion of Wex educators is indicative of the kind of anti-hierarchical collaboration that the museums need in order to expand their function. Unfortunately, the space of the gallery itself is not designed for multiuse or community gathering, and as the next chapter examines, spatial barriers are another significant factor that prevent complete public access to art museums.

## TWO: SPATIAL

### Overview

The spatial politics of galleries prevent their use as sites of community gathering. Museum architecture creates ritual, guarded, and commodified space which impacts visitor behavior and limited the type of engagement that is possible between art and people. Different types of space-making are possible and allow for multiple uses and more importantly, self-determined activation of the space.

### What Kind of Space is a Museum?

At the opening of the Boston Museum of Fine Art, director Charles Callahan Perkins remarked that "it was not the building which makes the Museum, but the works of art you place in it."[33] However, the architecture, expectations, and the spatial politics in which art is viewed does have a significant effect, not just in the way that art is perceived but as a limiting factor on the way art and people can engage and interact. Of equal or greater importance is the activation of the gallery space through programming, beyond the art objects themselves, which creates meaningful experiences for art museum visitors. For museums attempting to invite community gathering and engagement, the space of the gallery presents a significant barrier to universal public use. In *The Production of Public Space*, Henri Lefebvre writes, "Social space is a (social) product ... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action ... in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power."[34] Museums produce social spaces that is designed for the act of viewing art, an activity that has historically been made into a ritual for the tradition, bourgeois museum audience. Gallery architecture in its temple-like construction sacralizes art, elevating physical objects to incur

[33] A. Wallach, "A Brief History of Museums," *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum,* 2015, page 25.
[34] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Public Space*, 1991, page 26.

spiritual (and monetary) value. Therefore, the space demands certain behaviors as art writer Kirsten Geekie so beautifully writes, “Interior architecture is rife with assumed values–spaces become charged with expectations of the content and services it should provide for the bodies that move within it.”[35] Art museum space is ritualized, guarded, and commodified through its architectures, politics, and design. Museums have dealt with their space in various ways, some so elaborate as to alter their exterior architectures or guarding programs. The spatial limitations of a gallery continue to impede the goal of community gathering.

**Ritualized Space**

An art museum’s architecture creates space that is ritualized. In her seminal work, *Civilizing Rituals,* Carol Duncan implicates art museum architecture into a larger discussion of the institutions, their histories, and their critiques. She traces the history of museums from palaces of princely excess, *Wunderkammer* and *kunstkammer,* through the modern concept of art museum. Not only does she find the juxtapositions of encyclopedic museum curation to be an exercise in nation-building and cultural positioning,[36] she also maintains that the gallery is a liminal space in which behavior is controlled. It was thought that encounters with the materials of culture serve to civilize and refine the populations that regard them, though that was usually reserved for the bourgeois, or in her words, “those who are best prepared to perform its [the museum’s] ritual–those who are most able to respond to its various cues–are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.”[37] These

[35] K. Geekie, “Art in Dialogue with Architecture and the Human Body.” *FRAME,* 2018.
[36] Here, pulling from Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book *Cultural Roots*, Duncan expands from the idea of the imagined community, an arbitrary, socially constructed national unity, gained through encounters with symbols of statehood.
[37] C. Duncan, “Introduction,” Civilizing Rituals. Page 6.

participants of the ritual are the current upper class, educated, and wealthy audiences that make up museum attendance statistics.

Duncan's description of the museum as a ritual emerges from a sociological consideration of the effect of architecture on the body. To the historically excluded subjects of the museum, the architecture of 19th and 20th century survey museums is particularly imposing by design. Neoclassical columned façades and raised, exalted steps on the exterior borrow the visual language of a temple, making it implicitly clear who is permitted inside. Internally, high ceilings and vast wings recall the auratic space of a palace. The ritual has acted as a civilizing instrument, or as Tony Bennett writes, "Museums, galleries, and exhibitions played a pivotal role in the formation of the modern state and are fundamental to its conception as, among other things, a set of educative and civilizing agents."[38] Now, temple-like museum architecture is no longer in fashion. Modern art museums generally use natural glass and less grandiose white cube style galleries that aren't imposing; instead the ceilings and rooms are scaled to the body. In the case of the Wex,

> *The Wexner Center for the Arts complex was designed by architects Peter Eisenman of New York in association with Richard Trott of Columbus, along with landscape architect Laurie Olin from Philadelphia. The design for the center emerged from a 1982–'83 competition held by The Ohio State University calling for a bold building to house its ambitious new multidisciplinary contemporary arts center. Eisenman's design for the Wexner Center deliberately draws on history while invoking the future. The prominent brick arch on the building's southern façade and the tower-like structures that cluster around the entrances to the building are fragments meant to reference and recollect the Armory, a campus landmark formerly located on this site, which was torn down in 1959 after a fire. The distinctive white scaffold-like spine that runs along the entire east façade of the building points toward the future, evoking the impression of something continually evolving—like contemporary art itself.*[39]

[38] T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum,* page 66.
[39] "History and Architecture," Wexner Center for the Arts.

The Wex's modern architecture is famously challenging to work with. Many Ohio State students I have talked to find it difficult to even find the entrance door. In addition, the entire building interior is designed to force the body into consciousness of its position in space. Throughout the galleries, a visitor is constantly made aware of their body through the fluid scale and ramps. In this way, the ritual remains and continues to inform the way social space in made through museum architecture. The gallery space still demands certain conduct based on the expectations of viewing art. Put another way, art is made sacred through its spatial context, which removes the possibility of a gallery as a multiuse space. Museum space, rather than being palace-like, is now designed to entertain. The control of visitor behavior has been so engrained within museum practice that interactivity has become an engagement dilemma. New museum pedagogy, such as the so-called Connectors at the Columbus Museum of Art, increasingly deploys interactive tools such as post-it note discussion boards or games within the gallery that attempt to engage viewers in art activities and discussion. With the historic expectation that nothing in a gallery can be touched, gallery based tools open up the use of gallery space, though not entirely. One other side-effect of this history is on engagement with interactive contemporary art that is meant to be handled rather than looked at, especially without didactic indicators, visitors are unsure of how to act.

The goal of community-based exhibitions such as Free Space is to open up the use of museum space for more than just the singular act of viewing art. Unfortunately, the space of the gallery is not designed for the kind of organic gathering that the museum seeks to inspire by putting a table within the space. Instead, natural congregation occurs in studio style education rooms that resemble the space of classrooms, in the lobby if spaces to sit are provided, or outside in the museum garden (if available and weather permitting). The architecture of a gallery space is

not the only limiting factor to community gathering. As Bennett writes, “These, however, form only one aspect of the museum’s organization of the relations between space and vision which, in affording the public a position of self-inspection, has allowed it to function as an agent for both establishing and policing norms of public conduct.”[40] Another way that museums police behavior and remain a space of surveillance is more obvious than architecture: the public is monitored by security staff.

**Guarded space**

The way in which guards stalk through gallery space informs the experience a visitor has and the level of comfort they feel in the space. Older guards tend to follow around louder crowds and larger groups of young people. Historically, guard training used to emphasize lack of engagement with visitors and there is still a holdover of this guarding practice in modern museum security. This practice exacerbates visitor discomfort in gallery space because the embodied sense of surveillance is a hyperawareness of the body in space. However, some museums have adopted a more experimental approach in order to alter the dynamic of guarded space in museums. Where previously, the following of specific cultural rules were unspoken expectations and where miscommunications and divergent behaviors were harshly reprimanded, a focus is now placed on educating the non-museum-going publics and classes of the rules, as well as loosening the expected ritual and quiet of gallery space to spark conversation.

I can speak here from my experience as a guard at the Columbus Museum of Art. The training program provided guards with bound packets of studies that recommended a new guarding style based in museum education. We were trained to be welcoming and act more as a

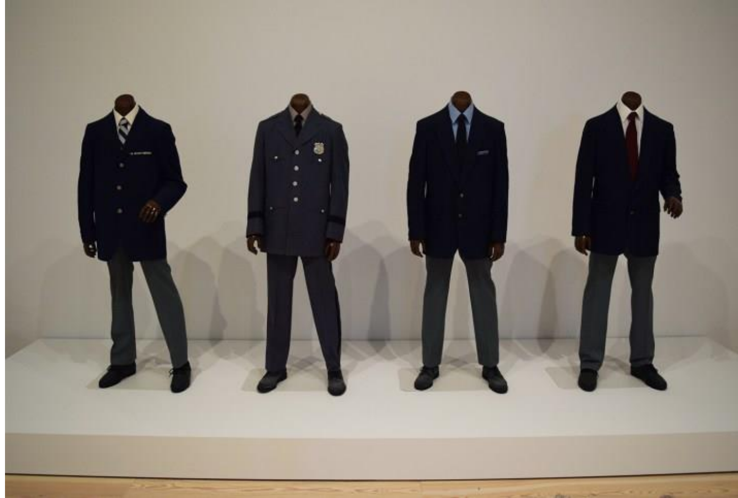
[40] T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum,* page 101.

facilitator to an art experience than a stern and silent guard. The idea was to reduce the feeling of surveillance and to replace it with a friendly encounter; our position was deformalized, and our uniforms were t-shirts that read, “Here to Help.” However, the labor is grueling and requires standing for hours at a time with minimal breaks. On days when I was especially tired, being a practitioner of museum pedagogy was a difficult task. In addition, many of my fellow guards only had the minimal guard training and had no other background in art history or arts education. My salary was $9.50 an hour—a low wage for being the front facing staff to visitors. Despite being the staff that most interacted with museum goers, our input was rarely solicited by upper-level museum staff. This factors into the previous chapter on the hierarchical staff structure of museums but is also relevant here.

Guards are reduced to the invisible; they are employees who defend against art damage or theft—rather, who ensure the artwork’s worth—with their bodies. Fred Wilson’s “Guarded View” in the Whitney Biennial takes on the staffing inequity in addition to taking on the issue of staff diversity in leadership roles. On the project, Wilson, who worked as a museum guard, writes,

> *When you’re a guard, you are, kind of, on display like everything else. You’re standing there, you’re silent, people walk by you, but unlike the artwork, you are invisible. And that tension between the two is what really intrigued me and really made me want to make the work. I’ve had museum guards tell me that the people in the professional staff who worked side-by-side with them for thirty years, would walk in the in morning and not even say hello. And so, this piece was not only to make them visible for the visiting public, but also for the museum professionals as well.*[41]

[41] “Invisible Man: At the Whitney, Fred Wilson Comments on Status of Museum Guards.” *Arts Observer*, 2014.



Wilson speaks to an aspect of space that is also informed by staff hierarchy: guards have the most interaction with the public while the offices of curators are buried within the belly of the museum, away from gallery space. Thus, museum scholarship is mystified behind closed doors. The public only has access to the knowledge produced rather than the process of knowledge-making.

Guarded space in the museum is perpetuated either by the continuation of historic museum guarding practice or by the ill-equipped staff who are deployed as educators. Thus, the opening of space and the self-determination of behavior within it is impeded by lingering structures of surveillance. A discussion of the Brooklyn Museum's recent history may better illustrate the intersection of spatial design and guarding practices, though it does open up more questions of how space is made and what other factors determine spatial accessibility.

**The Brooklyn Museum**

Founded in 1870, the Brooklyn Museum's architecture is the epitome of temple-like museum design with a marble neoclassical façade and high steps. In 2002, an architectural intervention was staged by cutting a street level, glass entryway into the marble steps. Per a New York Magazine review at the time, the redesign "is an imaginative leap beyond the predictable

that will help capture a generation of patrons who have largely ignored these institutions, having found them elitist and, worse, forbidding."[42] This is a clear assumption about the excluded Brooklyn population who have been ignored by the museum as much as the converse. Along with an architectural change, museum staff have been more focused on creating community engagement with the museum.

Free First Saturday community events were conceived of to bring in more diverse visitors and neighborhoods within the vicinity of the museum. The museum stays open on the first Saturday of every month and hosts a variety of free programs including music, performance, and film screenings. These events are successful in that they do draw out large crowds and generate excitement. However, they fail to create lifelong members or to inspire visitors to comes back more than once. Museum expectation are only suspended for one night. The crowds are expected to get rowdy and be loud on First Saturdays. However, every other day of the month that the museum is open is still subject to the rules and surveillance of typical gallery space. The guarding practice of the Brooklyn Museum has been altered in addition to the architecture. In a diversity study by the Mellon Foundation, director Arnold Lehman said, "I kind of reordered the guards that they had to be really hospitable. I mean, no one could be on top of a painting with a ballpoint pen, but they weren't to shush or ask them to step away; it was their neighbors who were there."[43] In my experience, this cultural shift in guarding practice does not render a great impact on the public. Due to the historic expectations of guarding and spatial exclusion, getting people in the door is continually a challenge based on the implicit and explicit communications of who is allowed in. I make a habit of talking to people I meet about museums

[42] J. Giovannini. "Brooklyn Museum of Art's New Entryway." 2004.
[43] Schonfeld, Roger, and Liam Sweeney. "'I Recommend Dancing': Brooklyn Museum's History of Inclusion and Moment of Transition." Mellon Foundation Study.

and the general perception remains that art museums are quiet, inaccessible, elite, and do not offer art or programs that interest them. Despite the fact that contemporary art takes on a multitude of topics and ideas, the majority of the public is unaware of what the museum offers them and has not been swayed by small shifts in museum space and practice.

Nonetheless, the pressures that have rendered the Brooklyn Museum's alterations necessary are indicative of a larger cultural shift, towards attention and experience marketing that draw the public in. Museums are tasked with offering the spectacle of entertainment in order to gain the revenue necessary to function.

**Commodified Space**

Museums increasingly must rely on their visitors for financial support via ticket sales, special admission, membership, parking, and purchases. In medium to large institutions, a café and a store are almost always part of the lobby space, providing various avenues of revenue generation that appeal especially to the bourgeois public that has always enjoyed the art museum. In addition to the ticket sales desk that is generally positioned to block the entrance, the lobby of a museum thus becomes commodified, with every available activity under the pretense of purchase. This is a spatial design that is particularly common in museums of contemporary art that have been built within the past few decades and influenced by the neoliberal methods of revenue generation that are now required of museums. As Grodach writes,

> *When public space is approached primarily for its economic potential, places tend to be uninviting, disconnected, and, often, socially exclusive. Indeed, attempts to reproduce such environments to promote consumption and economic development in business improvement districts and festival marketplaces frequently regulate access through physical impediments or security personnel and technology intended to remove people considered undesirable by management.*[44]

[44] C. Grodach. "Art Spaces, Public Space, and the Link to Community Development." 2009, page 477.

While Grodach is writing about types of space that are more public than art museums, his critique of the interference of revenue potential with spatial design is applicable to the museum space as it tries to be public. He concludes, “A public space sends signals as to who belongs and may even serve to normalize and make social differences and inequalities more visible.”[45]

In 2015, the Whitney Museum of American Art moved locations in Manhattan and underwent a massive redesign. I was involved in a museum seminar over the summer of 2020 that introduced students to the Whitney in lieu of an internship, and I also had a chance to experience the space of the new Whitney before the pandemic. The director spoke at length about architectural accessibility, confirming that the discourse of spatial access did inform the use of large windows for natural light, a streetlevel entrance, and design that doesn’t privilege one view, angle, or façade. However, as I moved through the lobby of the Whitney, I realized that there were only three places to be: in line at the ticket desk, browsing the open shelf store, or eating within the glass-enclosed, expensive restaurant. In my memory, there wasn’t even a bench where I could sit and wait for a friend I was meeting there. Even while promoting the language of spatial access, the Whitney provides a space that is stinted in its ability for common use. However, one design element that I was impressed by is the fact that their offices are embedded throughout the building and require walking through the open galleries to get to. Though the offices are still closed off and positions are mystified, staff is forced to interact with the public as they walk through the museum for meetings or other tasks.

Once again, if the goal is for museums to become a community-oriented place to gather, space that is ritualized, guarded, and commodified prevents this goal by perpetuating implicit suggestions about who the space is for, and limits the way space can be used. In the community-

[45] C. Grodach, page 477.

minded museum, there need to be places to sit and gather that are neutral and not subject to surveillance. Additionally, the work of museum professionals must be integrated within the museum public so there is no illusion between the two entities; museum professionals know who they work for, and museum publics know who works for them. Finally, the ideal community-centered museum has a specific space for creative practice to occur, such as studio or other room.

## THREE: LOCATIONAL

### Overview

The location of art museums is another factor that gives excluded neighborhoods unsustained access. Museums, in addition to admission cost, have an associated cost of time. Location-based museums are much better positioned to act as a community gathering space. The history of libraries is similar to that of the museum; however, these civic institutions have been made more accessible and to serve a broader public through neighborhood-based community branches. A neighborhood-based museum is not a new invention. Museums can partner with neighborhood museums in addition to community-based arts organizations to increase access to their collections.

### Where are Museums?

Art is often used as a civic tool to demonstrate a particular city's richness in culture. This is observed in the rise of art districts, in the way developers capitalize on public art as a means of gentrification, and in the way cities attempt to retain the creative class through cultural districts and offerings. The sites of art and art institutions communicate who has access to these cultural locations. Older art museums are located in downtown city centers and on the edges of parks, while newer galleries and museums of contemporary art (MCA) are often sited in arts districts and on university campuses. In either case, these institutions are not typically situated within the minority and low-income neighborhoods they seek to engage. Museums seeking historically excluded groups often use outreach programs to access them or work in the public schools of low-income areas. Simultaneously, museums try to attract audiences into their inaccessible space, as the previous chapter discusses. In addition to space, the discussion of location as a factor in museum attendance couples with admission fees to form a larger cost of attendance. The debate over admission fees has thus far been avoided in this study because, though I do believe that all museums should be free for everyone, studies show that admission fees are just

one barrier to museum access. Colleen Dilenschneider, a museum data consultant, analyzed two studies on attendance barriers, writing,

> *The [survey of national museums in New Zealand] study revealed that for those persons who visit museums but are unable to visit more often, the main barriers are lack of time (54%), travel distance (30%), and a lack of transportation (15%). For those who had not visited at all, the main barriers were lack of time (49%), travel distance (29%), and a lack of transport (18%). In fact, for both visitors and non-visitors, cost was only cited as a factor 11% of the time. Similar results were found in the Visitors to Museums and Galleries Study published in the UK by The Council for Museums, Libraries, and Archives. 32% cited a lack of time as a primary barrier, 22% a lack of interest, 19% a lack of anything they want to see, and 11% noted difficulties simply getting to the site of the organization. Only 8% of those sampled cited admission charges as a negative factor.*[46]

Dilenschneider's implication is that these studies may also map onto the urban population of the United States. However, the United States' history and treatment of urban planning is different from the UK and New Zealand, and has created continually segregated urban districts. The history of racist urban planning in the United States is a long and complicated one. Using policies such as the Housing Act of 1949, the Federal Aid Highway Acts of 1956, and practices such as redlining, racial steering, eminent domain and condemnation,[47] cities have managed to keep certain urban neighborhoods segregated and cut off from resources such as cultural institutions and even effective public transportation. The average cost of art museum admission is $6 and 60% of museums have a charge.[48] A visit to a museum requires not only the cost of admission but also transit time and bus or parking costs. In addition, museum hours are typically 11-5 which benefit only a certain work schedule. Museums have attempted to ameliorate the time issue by having some days where the museum is open later. Nevertheless, to engage with a museum in its present location overwhelmingly presents barriers of access.

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[46] C. Dilenschneide. "How Free Admission Really Affects Museum Attendance," 2021.
[47] D. Budds. "How Urban Design Perpetuates Racial Inequality–And What We Can Do About It." 2018.
[48] A. Pekarik. "Going Free?" Smithsonian Institution, 2007.

**Libraries**

*At the core of the public library's mission is community access to its collections*.[49] This mission statement from the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) echoes many museum mission statements. Indeed, the goal and conception of public libraries parallels that of museums. Libraries are also Enlightenment devices based on collection, but they have managed to move beyond exclusionary practice and serve more than just bourgeois interests. The library branch became an important tool for place-based community engagement. According to the DPLA,

> *In the nineteenth century, local governments and philanthropists built public libraries centrally in cities, counties, and towns across the country, giving Americans previously unprecedented access to books and other educational materials. As this movement gained momentum, central libraries started thinking critically about how to best serve geographically broader communities. Beginning in the late 1890s, central libraries opened smaller branches in cities to accommodate the explosion of urban population growth. As immigrants set up their own communities away from the more expensive city centers, new branch libraries helped provide services to these new enclaves.*
> *These branch libraries made it possible for patrons to access library collections and services without needing to use public transportation, removing barriers to access like time and cost. Moreover, they brought programming and accessible meeting places to new parts of their growing urban constituency.*
> *The expansion of the branch libraries boomed again in 1962 with the Library Services and Construction Act, which helped fund new library spaces for underserved communities.*[50]

Per the 2018 Public Library Survey, 17% of library systems have branches; their expansion into neighborhoods and the decentralization of the collection has been instrumental in their use and accessibility. Libraries provide resources that mitigate structural urban inequality through classes, job training, after school programming, computer and printer access, and by providing a neutral meeting place. In essence, they fulfill the needs that Free Space was trying to address. At the same time, libraries do not impose programs and resources based on their imagined community. By working directly with library visitors, staff are aware of who visits and uses the

[49] "A History of US Public Libraries." *Community Services*, Digital Public Library of America.
[50] "A History of US Public Libraries."

library and therefore are not subject to the same cultural assumptions that museum staff are. If libraries branches can allow for community gathering under the context of collection, then this is also a possibility for museums who wish to promote broad public access.

**Neighborhood Museums**

Suggesting that museum collections expand to multiple locations is not nearly as far-fetched as it seems. There are many cases in current museum practice where this idea is being explored. For example, the Mattress Factory, a contemporary art center in Pittsburgh, has two annex locations that are sited within the surrounding neighborhood of the main building. The Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College has an art rental program in which Oberlin students can rent works from the collection for a semester for only $5. Educators at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have curated a gallery of museum works off-site, at the Charles White elementary school.[51] Libraries have commonly integrated into schools, serving as a directly accessible resource. Another example of location integration is the Sandy Spring Museum. Located in a small town in Maryland, the museum is sited across the street from Sandy Spring High School, a community church, and a car repair place. These place-based practices immensely increase access to museum collections by situating them within community-centered localities. For me, the pandemic has emphasized importance of tertiary space (space which is neither “work” nor “home”) as it allows people to associate and interact in ways that are not prescriptive by a job space or limited by the domestic space. Neighborhood museums especially if they are free, unregulated, and easy to get to, have the potential to be a public tertiary space, and a site of creative placemaking, as the NEA writes, “Creative placemaking is when artists,

[51] L. Sweeney, "Interrogating Institutional Practices in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” 2018.

arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work."[52]

Conversely, El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969 as a neighborhood museum and has since been removed from its community-based origins. Founded for the histories and people of East Harlem, and specifically for the New York Puerto Rican population of the surrounding neighborhoods, El Museo grew out of the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement. It was never funded by wealthy patrons and thus always has had a visitor- and education-centered focus above all. The humble origins match the original architecture; in scale, it was similar to a storefront that one could enter off the street and without an elite facade. However, in 1977, El Museo moved to what is known as museum mile in New York, the stretch of Central Park where many major museums are located. The new architecture retained the natural light, street-level glass entryway of the previous building. Despite this, the new location removed the aspect of community-orientation that made El Museo most accessible as a community gathering place—its proximity to its people. Fortunately, there are other cases where museums are still located and serve their neighborhoods today.

**Case Study: The Underground Museum**

The Underground Museum in Los Angeles was founded by artist Noah Davis in 2012, and is located on Washington Boulevard within a predominantly working-class and Black neighborhood. As a storefront-style gallery, the museum hosts "museum-quality" artworks from the collection of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, resulting from an institutional partnership. This anti-elite architecture and community-based location, according to art writer Robin Pogrebin,

[52] *Creative Placemaking*, National Endowment for the Arts.

*has become not only one of the most important destinations for Black art in the country but also a crucial gathering place for its working class Arlington Heights neighborhood — with a bookstore featuring works by Black writers, poetry readings in the wooden bar and events in its back garden including free meditation, yoga and movie screenings.*[53]

Davis was hyper-responsive to the needs of his surrounding community. Since he passed away in 2015, his wife and co-founder Karon Davis has upheld this responsibility to the neighborhood. Davis's role as an artist and community member allow her to curate shows that are interesting and accessible to the museum's core constituency. The Underground Museum is free and is therefore an organic place for the surrounding community to gather. This case illustrates the importance of community collaboration in exhibition making, once again relating to the hierarchy of museum staff. The willingness of staff to work in a way that initiates and sustains collaborative ways of knowledge-making *with* real communities rather than *for* imagined ones is crucial if museums are to become relevant for a broad public.

**Gentrification/Revitalization**

Gentrification is a process of urban renewal that results in the fundamental change of a historical disadvantaged neighborhoods. Commonly, this transition is characterized by the displacement of a neighborhood's original residents who can no longer afford the rising cost of living. On the other hand, revitalization is a very similar process of urban renewal but does not result in resident replacement. Art is tool that contributes to both of these urban processes. The history of artist involvement in gentrification has long been noted, though it is not the blame of artists alone. Artist presence can contribute to the uplift of neighborhoods by aesthetic change. Per urban planner Carl Grodach, "Because artistic networks tend to be concentrated and rooted

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[53] R. Pogrebin. "The Larger Costs of Closing a Local Museum During Coronavirus." *NYT,* 2020.

in place, these benefits tend to spill-over into the immediate area leading to neighborhood improvements." Unfortunately aided by neoliberal city policies, developers take advantage of artists as a primer to raise real estate value and force out current residents. When evaluating the effect of place-based community art museums, the insurmountable issue of neighborhood change must be considered. In the National Endowment for the Art commissioned study "Gentrification and the Artistic Dividend: The Role of the Arts in Neighborhood Change," Grodach and collaborators Nicole Foster and James Murdoch III find that commercial arts (like art districts) rather than fine art contribute significantly to gentrification. Nonetheless, within cutthroat neoliberal land development and city politics, art institutions must have the support of larger municipal entities to ensure that their presence does not contribute to the displacement of core residents. In Cincinnati, Over-the-Rhine is a neighborhood in the late stages of gentrification as a result of city-imposed tax abatements, income tax incentive, and loans to developers. It now resembles the Short North in Columbus and most other arts districts in cities across the country. Mwon summarizes Lucy Lippard's argument about space and culture, writing,

> *The rapacious growth and transformation of capitalism have subsumed the distinctions of local differences and cultures, and that the particularity of places is continually being homogenized, genericized, and commodified to better accommodate the expansion of capitalism via abstraction of space.*[54]

Culture is often used as a rationale for gentrification, and gentrification results in the commodification and homogenization of place. In "Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration," Joanne Sharp, Venda Pollock and Ronan Paddison write,

> *cultural planning immediately raises the question of 'culture for whom?' in which imposition and the favouring of particular interests are likely to engender reaction and resistance. To its practitioners, there may be a degree of inevitability here, particularly where the reimagineering of cities has become so focused around the winning of mega-*

[54] M. Kwon, page 154.

> *events; the focused nature of such events may be incompatible with the ability to address the diverse set of preferences represented in the city*[55]

One community-based art space in Cincinnati, Wavepool Gallery is located within the newly zoned Camp Washington neighborhood.[56] Cal Cullen, the founding artist, lives in the building with her family and also stays rooted within her immediate surroundings. Given Cincinnati's tendency toward gentrification, Wavepool's placement may serve to root a stronger resistance within the neighborhood through its fine arts approach rather than through rapid commercial change. Unfortunately, community-centered spaces are still subject to urban changes outside of their control.

**Case Study: Urban Cultural Arts Foundation**

In Columbus, the William H. Thomas Gallery or Urban Cultural Arts Foundation (UCAF) was founded in 1976 by Chief Shongo Obadina at 1270 Bryden Road. The surrounding neighborhood, Olde Town East was a historically Black neighborhood that underwent significant urban change beginning in the 1990's. The gallery was featured in the documentary *Flag Wars* (2003) and served as an informal gathering place for artists and that hosted youth art programs for the neighborhood. While Columbus, like many cities, advertises itself as a place that is rich in art and culture, it has not made any municipal attempt to slow the rate of gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood. As Martinez writes,

> *Today public creativity is far more programmed and corporatized than ever before. In many respects, access to public art has improved with public and private funding of concerts, open-air movie screenings, and other gatherings… Nevertheless, the willingness to provide for creative, pleasurable social gathering as part of the city's cultural cachet goes hand in hand with the foreclosure of spaces available for people who aren't renowned artists, without city and corporate sponsorship.*[57]

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[55] Sharp, Joanne, et al. "Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration." 2005.
[56] L. Smith. "Camp Washington 'Reinventing the Neighborhood' by Focusing More on Pedestrians." WCPO, 2019.
[57] M. Martinez. *Power at the Roots*, page 151.

The city of Columbus only promotes art institutions insomuch as they bring cultural prestige. The gentrification of Olde Town East persists, due to the continued promotion of development. This case study illustrates why this kind of neighborhood institution needs stronger municipal backing so as to adequately resist the displacement of the original inhabitants of the area. This is another reason for large, central museums to offer their resources, in addition to their collections, to smaller community organizations—museums typically having working relations with members of city council who could potentially intervene in resident displacement.

**Beyond the City**

Discourse of art access often completely ignores publics that live in places that are not near the urban centers that have always hosted the majority of cultural institutions. Rural population are rarely included in the museum and even in conversation about the museum. Due to the Culture Wars, the elitist assumption is that rural people are not interested in art or have no interest in culture. This is untrue. Rural populations are excluded by their distance from museums. With the museum branch model, rural populations may also become included. Museums may share works from their collections in small town galleries curated by and for the people of the surrounding towns. The location-based branch model of museums ensures that the majority of people, rural and urban, will be able to engage with artworks within the vicinity of their neighborhoods and with ease of access.

# CONCLUSION

In my examination of staff, space, and location, I have come to a vision of the ideal museum. The ideal museum is an institution that is situated within a specific neighborhood or area and draws its collection and resources from a larger museum in the same municipality. The ideal museum has quality works that are curated to best pique the interest of the neighborhood population by curators who live within the neighborhood in which they work. The ideal museum's space is designed to be accessible and is not imposing. The space is able to be accessed and activated by any visitor or group of visitors to the museum. Through programming, the museum is able to provide a venue that is walkable. The museum provides education that is generated through collaborative learning. Above all, the ideal museum is a free space from its conception. In this way, its use may be sustained by stay-at-home parents and young children, teens with time after school, and seniors who seek either solitude or conversation.

If conditions of wealth were not the way that they are, demanding the commodification and privatization of everything, this museum would be much more possible. To go up against the neoliberal art museum as it currently exists is also to go against the bourgeois class and its generational wealth, in addition to the interests of developers and city capitalists who view art only for its potential to be commodified. Nonetheless, there are spaces that echo the ideal museum that resists these financial systems and are instead funded through mutual aid networks. Just as the Civil Rights Era gave rise to the foundation of neighborhood museums, I am hoping that this moment of public shutdown, in combination with an activist zeitgeist that demands accountability for the legacy of exclusion in the country, will yield the ideal museum.

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