

Communities and our Post-Pandemic Future



This autumn has seen us struggling with a pandemic that is spreading quickly. People are tired, stressed, and nervous.

So it seems odd to ask about community gathering places and post-pandemic behaviors. It seems odd because it is odd. Yet if museums are going to serve audiences effectively while also helping their communities rebuild, we need to start planning now to address those needs.



Most of our panelists agreed that community gathering spots (i.e., "third places") are struggling. The restaurants, coffee shops, community centers, libraries, and other places that people meet are no longer places we linger and chat. And with that comes a disintegration of connection and community ties ... as well as individual wellbeing.

"Third Places are critical for building community, far beyond just providing services or goods. They bring people together and build a community's culture."

"I think the third places are a need to create community. We as a society are finding Zoom to be those places and I don't have to tell you how those are a poor substitute for the real thing. Whether it's conscious or not, I think people crave those spaces for social and personal wellbeing."

While parks have become community and neighborhood gathering spots this summer, much of the country will lose that as an option as the seasons change.

"PARKS! Oh my gosh, I live across the street from a park, and I used to only see people out there on very nice days. Now? As long as it isn't actively raining, it's generally filled with people. We'll see what happens as it continues to get cooler, but yeah, the parks are definitely a third space now ..."

Some panelists, however, thought these pandemic shifts could be an opportunity for museums to expand their reach:

"I'd like to see museums offer more mobile/traveling exhibits - come to us. Set up in our community centers, bring your experts & goods to places where we already congregate & that don't require us to plan a big day away to the city or a remote locale. Be visitors in our environment & see how what you have to offer fits in with the lives we lead."

"Now, I feel museums should support outdoor exhibits that can be visited safely."

It is, admittedly, harder to predict how people will behave in our post-pandemic normal, whenever that is. Many panelists hesitated to project with confidence, and realized their return to public spaces was likely going to be a gradual process.

Some panelists suggested that the experience of the pandemic will make them, and others, more eager to go out and engage in the world:

"When the pandemic is over, I will go out even more. It has made me realize all the more how important going out and exploring is to me as a person, for my identity and for my happiness."

"I find myself wanting to engage more with my community."

"Post pandemic, I think my wife and I will have a pent up desire to do things we've minimized the past eight months. Definitely travel, as we are getting older, our health is still good ... Definitely not as much of a homebody."

Others felt our post-pandemic world will be different.

There was hope that our new normal would more thoughtfully combine the best of real-life and virtual activities.



"I don't want to see virtual museum exhibits -- I want to go and see those in person. I don't want to look at a bunch of street scenes on video and pretend I've taken a walking tour of a new neighborhood. Not the same, not as good. But, I don't care if I never again attend a live lecture-type program, or public meeting on some local issue I want to learn more about -- including things like the meetings of my condo board, that I can now view virtually and still know what's going on. It is going to be a different world, for sure."

But some felt that the pandemic exposed societal challenges in ways that affect how they experience their communities ... exposing safety concerns and inequities that we, as a society, have been and will continue to be grappling with for some time.

"I think I'll be much more cautious after the pandemic. I've learned about which establishments and businesses have prioritized folks' physical safety. With the death of George Floyd, I've also felt unsafe going to places I used to think were safe. Folks could be wearing masks, but they could also physically threaten me based on my race. There could be social distancing, but I also could be called a racial slur ... I think what I thought was safe pre-pandemic may have been just an illusion."

"I have a new perspective on this whole pandemic. It has shown me the disparity in classes, the unfairness in healthcare, the self-centeredness, the rampant racism, and selfishness of people, but also how generous and kind other people can be. A person's true character is exposed. And, that lesson has been invaluable to me."

This pandemic is not something that our communities, or each of us, will get over easily. And we still have more months of fear, grief, and uncertainty ahead of us. In the meantime, we'll continue to field research with audiences so that museums have the most comprehensive, up-to-date insights about our audiences ... so that museums can be as effective and relevant as possible in the uncertain future ahead of us.



Museums and the Pandemic Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums.

Sources include:
 • 2020 Online Panel of Museum-Goers (ongoing)
 • 2020 Broader Population Sampling
 • 2020 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers

*Data Stories share research about both museum-goers (who visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums).

The entire series of Museums and the Pandemic Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.



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