Toolkit for museums in times of climate crisis

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I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science, we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy. And to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation—and we scientists don't know how to do that.

Gus Speth, environmental activist and lawyer

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This resource contains a number of different tools drawn from climate psychology and environmental communication that can be used in museums' work with programming, communication, and exhibitions.

With the help of the toolbox, you can position, refine, and reflect on the museum's activities in relation to the environmental crisis. The focus is on museums' unique opportunity to address existential issues.

Under the heading *Online Resources*, you will also find tips on websites that provide climate calculators, facts about smart recycling, and other information on how museums can reduce their own climate footprint.

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THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS

What is the role of museums in the climate crisis? How can we harness the potential of museums as places of knowledge, dialogue, and change? There is much that museums can do to combat the climate crisis. Part of this involves reducing the carbon footprint of practical activities such as exhibition production and object handling. But another factor—and perhaps a more decisive one in the long run—is museums' ability to generate momentum for collective change.

Museums are places for art, cultural history, and science. Their collections are filled with collective memories and stories that can provide new perspectives on history, the present, and the future. Exhibitions and collections not only increase visitors' knowledge but also influence their emotions, which is exactly what is needed for change to happen. In art, in the broadest sense, we explore what is important in life and how we can bring about change. This is fundamental when we are faced with a crisis. The questions raised by art and culture lead to the transformation of societies.

WORKING FOR CHANGE

Change begins from within. If museums are serious about actively working with climate and environmental issues, leadership is needed that incorporates climate and environmental issues into the vision for the organization, or (if the organization is governed by regulatory letters or other governing documents from higher authorities) into the museum's identity or backbone. The vision must be shared between managers and employees so that they all become motivated, and managers ensure that there is sufficient expertise and resources allocated so that there are concrete opportunities to implement the changes. In addition, a long-term plan is needed for how the work will be carried out.

If any of these elements are missing, it will be more difficult to implement the change, and the risk of confusion, anxiety, frustration, inefficiency, and limited results will increase. In such cases, it is of course necessary to navigate around the problems and find solutions despite everything, but if there is clear leadership on the issue, the journey becomes significantly easier.

Museums' internal environmental work is important for creating legitimacy and presence in the issue. A museum that does not review its own environmental work while offering visitors programs, exhibitions, or spaces for reflection on the environmental crisis lack credibility. But limiting ambition to one's own internal environmental work would mean missing out on the true potential museums have.

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CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY

There are psychological explanations for why we humans find it so difficult to switch to sustainable lifestyles. Here are some concepts that may be useful to know.

- *Habituation* – We are becoming accustomed to disaster news and politicians who fail to act. Reaching people requires more than just repeating information and facts. We need stories that touch us deeply.
- *Negative spillover effect* – We tend to negotiate with ourselves and view our individual climate actions in terms of deposits and withdrawals. I sort my waste (deposit), so I can treat myself to driving to work (withdrawal), because I've earned it. The result is often that the climate account becomes unbalanced, with withdrawals exceeding deposits.

CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY

- *Unhealthy persistence* – Once we have invested (time, commitment, or money) in an idea or a process, we find it difficult to let go. An unsustainable lifestyle can therefore be difficult to break, precisely because we do not want to give up what we have already invested in.
- *Loss aversion* – People hate losing things and privileges. That's why the focus needs to be on what you gain rather than what you have to give up. Above all, we need visions and stories about where we are headed and how we are going to live in a sustainable society.
- *Cognitive dissonance* – When we fail to live in accordance with our values, something called dissonance arises. It is an unpleasant feeling, and we can deal with it in two ways: either by trying to change our behavior so that it better aligns with our values, or (which is more common) by rationalizing the behavior by saying that the issue is not that important to us or by blaming others.

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THINK ABOUT

∞ Focus on behavioral changes that have a significant impact. The energy consumption for an individual decision with relatively little impact (I'll buy the organic cucumber!) is the same as for decisions with relatively large impact (I suggest we order organic food for all our upcoming Christmas parties). The greatest effect is achieved by decisions that affect many people and are long-term.

∞ Do not reduce museum visitors to mere individual consumers. See them also as active citizens with opportunities to influence beyond what they choose to buy and choose not to buy.

∞ Do not repeat the same narrative over and over again. Question the imagery used in exhibitions and other communications.

∞ Offer environments where visitors can feel a sense of community and hope and can recharge their batteries. Create space for reflection and engage visitors emotionally.

KEYWORDS

- *Hope* – Research in environmental communication highlights hope as something central to our ability to transition to a sustainable future. But the narrative of hope must not prevent us from daring to be critical of our stories or from avoiding the more difficult questions about, for example, priorities, actions, and responsibility. Hope is not the same as blind faith, but rather an openness to the possibility of change. There is also research showing that hope should be seen as a verb, because people experience hope precisely when they are involved in working toward a more hopeful future.
- *Courage* – Museums need to dare to stick their necks out, write opinion pieces, and embrace different opinions. We gain courage when we meet others and allow our feelings to exist and give us the strength to act.
- *Right-Sizing* – Adapt operations to opportunities. How often is it reasonable to change exhibitions? For whose benefit do we do this? Instead of changing the museum's exhibitions at a rapid pace, visitors can return to something familiar and reflect on how they themselves have changed since their last visit.

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KEYWORDS

- *The virtue of slowness* – Offer opportunities for reflection. Create programs around a single work or object. Focus on a radically deepened presence instead of a constant flow of news.
- *Walk the talk* – Actions must match words, otherwise it easily becomes a case of greenwashing. But the reverse is also true. Communicate what is being done in the area and let it serve as inspiration for visitors and colleagues. Otherwise, it becomes a case of green hushing.
- *Sit with the shit* – A variation of Donna Haraway's Staying with the trouble. In other words, be open to facing difficulties with acceptance and courage instead of denial and numbness.
- *Make complexity visible* – Making things visible is often more important than providing ready-made explanations. Don't be afraid to raise questions, even if there are no easy answers.
- *Be both a delivery room and a hospice* – Museums can be both a delivery room for innovation and new perspectives and a hospice for what we must leave behind and give up. We need to mourn certain things that the transition brings with it.
- *The future has not yet happened* – therefore, it can be influenced. Create connections between history, the present, and the future.

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KEYWORDS

- *Harness the specific potential of museums* – Cultural history museums, for example, have knowledge about how people lived in a climate-smart way in the past, art museums display objects that tell us what it means to be human, and natural science museums can illustrate what is happening to our living environments in the wake of climate change.
- *Act collectively* – Neighbouring museums can collaborate, for example by working on a common theme, based on their specific collections and conditions. Invite colleagues from other museums and disciplines to discussions. Refer to each other and be each other's resources.
- *Generosity* – It is liberating to admit mistakes. Share what is not going according to plan with colleagues at different institutions, and sometimes even with visitors. We can learn from each other's successes and setbacks. Generosity builds trust.
- *Embrace the unmanageable* – The climate crisis affects virtually every aspect of human experience. This can create a feeling of unmanageability that can lead to frustration and confusion. If you turn the perspective around and see the unmanageable itself as a constructive learning process, a lot can happen. Instead of striving for a perfect narrative, strive for the power of feeling a sense of community in vulnerability and elusiveness.

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THE COMPASS

The compass is a tool for keeping track of a few important parameters. There are no right answers, and the idea is not that all exhibitions and programs should be fully aligned in a certain direction. By checking plans against the compass, conscious decisions can be made. If, for example, a planned exhibition dealing with issues such as biodiversity, climate, or the environment is based on an established visual language out of old habit, it may be time to think again. The same applies if all communication efforts remain within the museum walls. Is there a way to reach people who do not visit the museum? See the compass as a tool for raising awareness of where you are and ensuring that you are heading in the right direction.

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UTOPIAN ← Is the story presented one of a perfect future or a catastrophic doomsday? → DYSTOPIAN

HOPE ← How does the message strike a balance between belief in solutions and resignation and concern? Is there room for both? → DESPAIR

ESTABLISHED VISUAL LANGUAGE ← Do we need images and visualizations that we are familiar with from the media and popular culture – or is it, on the contrary, something new and unexpected that creates power? Or both? → EXPLORATIVE IMAGERY

ESTABLISHED RHETORIC ← Are the words, arguments, and narrative styles familiar to us, or is a different way of explaining things being tried out? → EXPLORATIVE RHETORIC

INSTRUMENTAL THEMATICS ← Is the focus on concrete and practical measures, or on more emotionally charged issues about life, worldview, and mental impact? → EXISTENTIAL THEMES

LINEAR NARRATIVE ← Is there a clear chronology or timeline with a rational explanatory model – or is it a more open, ambivalent and repetitive approach? → CIRCULAR NARRATIVE

POLARIZING ← Does the message lead to clearer and more rigid positions, or does it open up more complex and inviting ways of relating? → INCLUSIVE

WITHIN THE MUSEUM ← Where is the greatest impact created – as an internal development project or as a space for public dialogue? → OUTSIDE THE MUSEUM

INDIVIDUAL ← Is the message directed at visitors as individuals or as part of a larger collective? → COLLECTIVE

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Julie's Bicycle, www.juliesbicycle.com
- Ki Culture, www.kiculture.org
- The World Culture Museums' website on sustainable museums, www.varldskulturmuseerna.se
- The Swedish National Heritage Board's website on museums and sustainability, www.raa.se
- Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, www.naturvardsverket.se
- Museums for Climate Action, www.museumsforclimateaction.org

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

- Jenny Andersson, Erik Westholm, *Slaget om framtiden: Forskningens roll i konflikten mellan tillväxt och miljö* (Santérus Förlag, 2019)
- Kali Andersson, Frida Hylander, Kata Nylén, *Klimatpsykologi* (Natur och Kultur, 2019)
- Jonna Bornemark, *Det omätbaras renässans* (Volante, 2018) and *Horisonten finns alltid kvar* (Volante, 2020)
- Klas Grinell, *Eudaimonia: Om det goda livet i klimatomställningens tid,* (Fri Tanke, 2021)
- Kimberly Nicholas, *Under the Sky We Make* (Bantam USA, 2021)
- Göran Sundqvist, *Vem bryr sig? Om klimatforskning och klimatpolitik* (Daidalos, 2021)

This toolbox is the result of the workshop series Museums and the Climate Crisis, which Moderna Museet and SLU organized in 2022 as part of the Mistra Environmental Communication research program. Developed by Ylva Hillström, Svante Helmbaek Tirén, Hanna Bergeå.

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