

REFLECT

DESIGN^{TO} DISRUPT

Framing exhibition designers
as *catalysts for change*

CULTIVATE

REIMAGINE

A thesis submitted to The University of the Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Museum Exhibition Planning + Design.

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as catalysts for change

Chaya Arabia

Master of Fine Arts Thesis
The University of the Arts
Museum Exhibition Planning & Design
Spring 2021

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and authentic
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WAY OF KNOWING

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COMMUNITY

VALUE

How do my identities
influence my work?

What is
your

What ways of knowing
am I uplifting?

define
do you see
s relationship to
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unities

OF KNOWING

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Abstract

Museums are in a critical moment of recalibration —reimagining how they can be socially inclusive spaces that reflect and can be reflected in the communities they serve. As historically exclusive institutions, museums are sites of pain for many communities. This thesis explores how exhibition designers can be active agents in disrupting the reproduction of oppression in the process of creating exhibitions. It examines design frameworks that center equity, justice, and liberation in the design process and advocates for integrating critical race theory, trauma informed lenses, ecology, and critical reflexivity to museum praxis. This thesis argues that reflection and reimagination of the self and institution are the first steps towards the path of transformative change. It provides an inquiry-based toolkit that cultivates a practice of acknowledging and dismantling power constructs, understanding institutional history, prioritizing values, and letting go of best practices that no longer serve us.

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Personal Statement

I am first and foremost a biologist. I became a biologist because of science museums where there was no question that this place wanted me here, and wanted me to explore and touch and do and be. Be myself, my very curious, authentic self. Questions here are good, in fact, they are encouraged. In this space, I was already a scientist - I was asking questions, formulating hypotheses, and experimenting. These early experiences actively participating in museums planted a little scientist in me that led to a lifelong curiosity for the world around me.

I studied biology and neuroscience at Lewis & Clark College, where I more formally practiced asking questions, critical thinking, and testing my ideas. The field of biology allowed me to know and understand the world around me, and see the interconnectedness of all things. During this time, I also found museums again. I arrived at my first internship as a Science Educator at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry where I observed and witnessed the impact of exhibitions on visitors. I saw firsthand the power of exhibitions to inspire people to care. It ignited a passion for getting others interested in our world. This background in museum education foregrounds my desire as a designer to prioritize impact in my work.

Through this project, I am cultivating an intentional practice of designing with care for humanity. I often return to a single question: How do I want to be in this world? This is the beginning of nurturing a critically reflexive practice within myself first and foremost, and I hope it is of use to others.

This thesis project offers the museum field a toolkit for disruption as a first step in the path towards justice. It emerges out of research and conversations with folks deeply engaged and actively participating in change work in and outside of the museum field. It builds on a collective conversation that has been going on since the 60's. I hope it inspires us to move past dialogue in order to catalyze the change we want to see.

IDENTITY

In what ways
do I question
and challenge
the norms and
practices
established at
my museum?

1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the area of inquiry and scope of the problem, and presents the thesis questions. It also defines key language referenced throughout the thesis.

Issues of race, representation, and inclusion **manifest in many different ways** within the exhibition world that we can **no longer afford to ignore** that facet of the industry most responsible for the visual language of our public-facing spaces.

——→ *STACEY MANN*

Museums are experiencing a long overdue reckoning of the **entrenched white supremacy culture** that lingers within these institutions. While museums have come a long way from the 16th century galleries and cabinets of curiosities, they are still **products of colonization**.¹ As part of recent decolonization initiatives, museums have employed different interventions that address diversity, equity, and inclusion, and accessibility; however, the **one-off solutions** to decolonize museums have not made significant changes in museum culture. Despite these efforts, many museums today continue to be unwelcoming spaces and sites of exclusion, erasure, othering, exoticism, and misrepresentation for Black, Indigenous, and visitors and staff of color in particular.

This moment is an opportunity for radical re-evaluation and recalibration, in which we locate a path forward, **how to ‘unmuseum’ the patriarchal and white supremacist practices that museums were founded upon in a long-term, sustainable way**. It raises much larger and structural questions that must be addressed by all museum professionals, regardless of department; however, the main focus of this thesis will be on exhibitions in America, with the understanding that this is a global conversation.

Exhibitions are one of the most public facing aspects of museums, and yet, the exhibition staff (e.g. interpretative planners, designers, etc.) are the least likely to feel or observe their impact on the public.² This thesis builds on the work of educators who see firsthand how an exhibition’s design and content impact visitors. **Exhibitions teams have an important role to play in challenging and disrupting bias**, which is the unconscious and ingrained ways of thinking that influence our decision making. This includes how and what is interpreted, the language we use, the stories we tell, and whose voices we include in exhibitions.

White supremacy culture is inherited and deeply ingrained in us. It is the status quo. If we are not actively resisting, it is more likely than not to continue to be reinforced and replicated, even despite the best of intentions. Thus, **how can exhibitions be catalysts of change so that design processes and practices become tools for liberation instead of tools of harm?**

Museums, including exhibition teams, are still figuring out how to do better. If museums strive to be at the centers of their communities, we must approach our work through equity and justice lenses. This research offers a tool to help individuals and teams move through this current moment as a way to create **a bridge between how things have been done and a future state that we collectively are still defining**.

Thesis Overview

How can exhibition designers be active agents in disrupting the reproduction of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and colonialism in the process of creating exhibitions?

How can museums utilize design justice, liberatory design, equity-centered community design, and speculative design as guiding frameworks?

This thesis will address the following question: How can exhibition designers be active agents in disrupting the reproduction of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and colonialism in the process of creating exhibitions?

It also asks, what is to be gleaned from looking outside of the museum field? What can we learn from organizations, activists, and other design fields that are also working towards change? This thesis identifies previously existing frameworks, principles, and approaches outside of the museum field that address disrupting the status quo within many different contexts. It explores how museums can utilize design justice, liberatory design, equity-centered community design, and speculative design as guiding frameworks in this process of creating exhibitions.

The organizational structure to this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 acknowledges our history as a field, and documents the more recent calls to action. Chapter 3 analyzes design frameworks that center equity, justice, and liberation. Towards the end of these chapters are case studies that synthesize approaches museums have taken to apply disruption. Chapter 4 shares insights from interviews conducted with people working towards change in the museum field. Chapter 5 provides a creative solution and toolkit so that exhibition designers can apply the findings of this thesis. Chapter 6 presents conclusions for the thesis question, as well as future directions for research on this topic.

The primary goal of this thesis is to identify ways in which exhibition designers can be catalysts for change within their institutions. **It considers the role of the individual, team, and institution in disruption.** The ideas presented in this thesis will shape the way museum professionals create exhibitions. It will provide an approachable toolkit in the form of a card deck which can be used fluidly throughout the exhibit design process. **It will cultivate a critically reflexive practice, involving self-awareness and reflection of one's own positionality, biases, and assumptions.** It aims to help address barriers and limitations by guiding users with questions, as a way to challenge the status quo and prompt users to prioritize values.

This thesis argues that **turning inwards and reflecting, individually, and within your institution, are necessary precursors for change behavior.** This will help museum practitioners as they continue an ongoing process of learning and unlearning. The toolkit offered is not limited to a single type of institution, and it extends the role of design to any person making decisions. It is my hope that it has a broad impact on museum professionals in a variety of institutions and roles. The issues and questions raised in this thesis are present in all museums to varying degrees because all museums experience challenges that stem from histories steeped in colonialism and white supremacy.

Glossary

ableism

discrimination and social prejudice for people with disabilities, in favor of able-bodied people.³

best practice

generally accepted in the field as a reliable method for achieving a desired result.⁴

better practice

shifting practice and pushing for change through relinquishing how things have always been done.

colonialism

a process of occupation, control, and extraction with the aim of dominance.⁵

community

a group of people in a shared space or with a shared interest, identity, or goal.⁶

critically reflexive praxis

a transformative practice of attending to the root - the assumptions, underlying our actions.⁷

disruption

strategically interrupting the daily instances of oppression that maintain the status quo.⁸

equity

the state of being just and fair by means of addressing structural and systemic issues.⁹

heteropatriarchy

a construct defining gender in narrow ways to maintain a binary distinction between male and female, dominant and subordinate.¹⁰

inclusion

leveraging difference by integrating diverse perspectives to create a better outcome for all.¹¹

intersectionality

considering overlapping and interdependent identities.¹²

institutional body language

messages museums convey through unspoken and unwritten manifestations of their being.¹³

liberation

the freedom from limits on thoughts and behavior, and systems of oppression.¹⁴

neutrality

the state of being impartial and objective, and the unwillingness to take a stance.

positionality

how personal values, views, and identities influence our understanding of the world.¹⁵

power

the ability to use one's sphere of influence to act or produce an effect.¹⁶

pluralism

a diversity of beliefs, ideas, concepts rather than a single approach or method.¹⁷

third place

a social place where people spend time, exchange ideas, and build relationships.¹⁸

value

principles relating to what is deemed important and demonstrated by actions.¹⁹

white supremacy culture

a culture that upholds a legacy of superiority of whiteness as the dominant culture.²⁰

Endnotes

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BODY LANGUAGE

What role does
my museum
play in its
neighborhood?

2

RATIONALE

This chapter will trace the early forms of museums as a way to understand the landscape in which museums were formed and continue to operate under. In the last decade, museum professionals have come together to collectively organize and call for change. What is preventing us from pushing for change beyond incremental shifts? What must we let go in order to bridge a future in which museums are *palaces for the people*?¹

Understanding Our History

Museums have been **complicit** in the construction of physical and cultural **hierarchies that underpinned racist thought** from the enlightenment until well into the twentieth century, in **marked contrast to the inclusionary role** that many now seek to fulfill.

—————→ *BERNADETTE LYNCH and SAMUEL ALBERTI*

Museums have always been institutions entrusted to safeguard collections of significant cultural and historical artifacts. They are spaces and keepers of knowledge for the betterment of society and considered repositories of truth. Elaine Huemann Gurian wrote, “museums, historic sites, and other institutions of memory are the tangible evidence of the spirit of a civilized society.”¹

The earliest structures of museums started out as private collections containing artworks, artifacts, and natural history specimens. Many museum collections emerged during the colonial era, when colonizers pillaged lands and looted objects (the tangible) and knowledge (the intangible) from cultures and peoples they saw as “inferior”. Displaying “exotic” objects through a cabinet of curiosities allowed rulers to showcase conquests and were an expression of imperialism and elitism. Aspects of other cultures were presented as “curios” or “trophies”, which further dehumanized people and reinforced a dominance and hierarchy. Many museums in the United States were created during the Bicentennial era, which looked back on the colonial and settler era with fondness and nostalgia.²

Initially created to be enjoyed and experienced by the select few - wealthy, White, elite males - museums were founded on the idea of exclusion. The earlier museums defined who belonged in these spaces and limited access to their collections, which were reserved for the elite, the church, and aristocrats. The exclusion we see today has been a structural way in which museums were formed and for what purpose as a way to demonstrate power and status.³ David Flemming states that museums have excluded marginalized groups of people in its staff and its visitors “not by accident, but by design.”⁴

The legacy of white supremacy exists in many different, often covert forms and as a culture.⁵ It appears in the lack of representation and diversity in collections, staff, and boards. It shows up in the language used in labels, whose stories are told and through what lens, how we expect people to behave when they enter museums,⁶ the myth and veil of neutrality,⁷ and the prioritization of only few ways of knowing. Johnnetta Cole describes how exhibitions reflect the “three W’s: Western places and ideas, the tastes of White folk, and womanless exhibitions.”⁸

On the Limits of Care and Knowledge: 15 Points Museums Must Understand to Dismantle Structural Injustice

The list on the following page is directly quoted from Yesomi Umoli's article for ArtNet dated June 25, 2020.⁹

1. Museums are built on the ideological foundation of being repositories of knowledge and spaces of care in service of civic society in the Western world.
2. The history of museums is tied to the colonial impulse to collect and amass objects (and therefore cultural knowledge) from the world over, charging specialist caretakers and scientists with their interpretation.
3. The conditions of collecting upon which museums were founded are inextricably linked to colonial violence enacted on the other—non-western bodies, spaces, and societies.
4. Museums have obscured this violence in their missions of knowledge formation and caring for objects. Museums have long positioned their values and activities as apolitical acts of civic benevolence without probing their own proximity to power.
5. Care in museums has expanded from a focus on safeguarding things and building western art history in the 19th century to the reification of audience engagement in the 21st century.
6. Museums have always been exclusionary, and for the privileged. They were built for the betterment of the western subject and society at the expense of the other.
7. This is further complicated by the fiction of the emancipatory power of the cultural/art object—museums deem themselves to be spaces of respite away from real politics and societal injustices.
8. Museums have therefore set themselves in a double bind, presuming to be at the service of civic society on the one hand, while setting themselves apart from it on the other hand.
9. If museums amass knowledge and care for things, then we must ask ourselves, in the midst of the social upheavals and global health pandemic of recent days, months, and years, for whom do they do this?
10. The answer is obvious. The statements from museum leaders in recent days starkly reveal this in so far as they have identified the need to better serve communities of color through all aspects of their work all the while educating their (yet to be diverse) boards, staff and audiences on the importance of anti-racism.
11. To acknowledge the limits of your knowing and caretaking is an important step.
12. But before moving forward, it is important to understand that to seek to make amends, repair, reconcile, and build for the future on broken foundations is a difficult and dangerous path.
13. The task of the moment is not to seek to welcome the other and the excluded into these fragile spaces, i.e. filling quotas and exacting hastened inclusion policies without making any other changes to institutional culture or structure. For the violence will only worsen.
14. The task is to commit to practices of knowing and care that critically interrogate the fraught history of museums and their contemporary form, uprooting weak foundations and rebuilding upon new, healthy ones.
15. Let us know and care for the other, ourselves, and society at large in equal measure, without prejudice. Let us know and care about bodies and their politics.

Mining the Museum

A CASE STUDY



Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in 1993. Photograph by Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the MHS.



By hygienically separating history into clean compartments, museum classification creates **a tidy structure of institutional denial.**

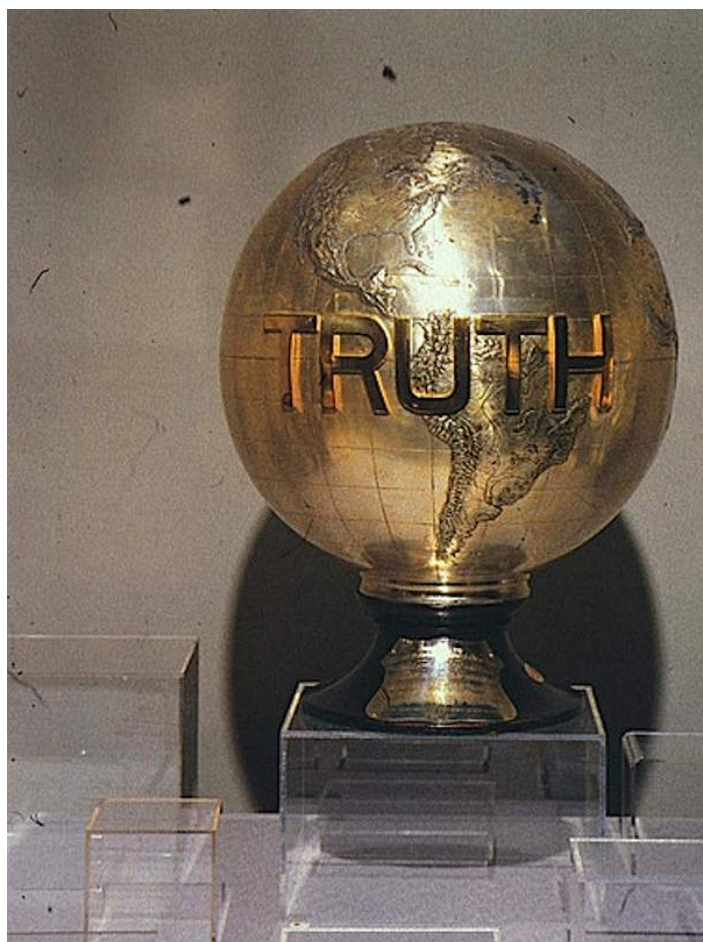
"Metalwork" juxtaposes silver with iron slave shackles, making the point that a luxury economy was built on the system of slavery.

——→ *LISA CORRIN*

Mining the Museum shook up the museum field. Opening April 2, 1992 through February 23, 1993, it was a groundbreaking exhibition by artist Fred Wilson in collaboration with two museums in Baltimore: the Contemporary and the Maryland Historical Society.

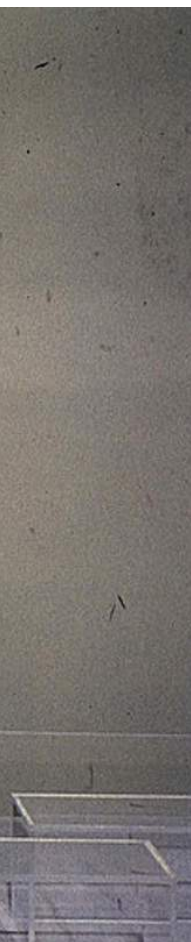
Wilson was commissioned by the Contemporary curator, Lisa Corrin, and director, George Ciscle with the goal of working with an institution of Wilson's choice to create a site-specific installation that would **draw attention to the reinforcement of an "official history" that omits marginalized groups and suppresses histories of People of Color**. Wilson chose to work with the Maryland Historical Society because as a Black man, he "felt really uncomfortable there".¹⁰ Charles Lyle, who was at the time director of the Maryland Historical Society, recognized that his institution had little to no exhibitions or artifacts that were about the Black experience in Maryland. Further, the museum's audiences did not reflect the diversity of Baltimore, where African Americans are the majority of the city's population.¹¹

As part of his process developing the exhibition, Wilson spent time "mining" the Maryland Historical Society's collection and uncovered artifacts that could speak to African-American and Indigenous histories, realities, and truths that were overlooked and not well represented in the museum during that time. His work and observations highlighted institutional white supremacy in museums, and also **shed light on how we as individuals are complicit in our ways of thinking and understanding the world**.¹²



Above: Truth Trophy on a pedestal. Right: A whipping post raised on a platform surrounded by period chairs. Images courtesy of The Contemporary.

Wilson's juxtapositions of artifacts remains a powerful way to explore history. Wilson paired ornate silver vessels dating 1830 -1880 in a case with rusted slave shackles made in Baltimore circa 1793 - 1872.¹³ Writer Laura Raicovich states, "the very materiality of these objects in proximity to one another, each object identified with its museological data, trace back to the same geography, and the brutal conditions of enslavement that enabled the acquisition of wealth represented by the silver".¹⁴ Through uncovering and contrasting objects from the Maryland Historical Society's collection, Wilson revealed "how museums frame a community's history by what they choose to display and what they omit."¹⁵



These stark juxtapositions forced people to confront institutional and societal history in a way that disrupts traditional narratives and sparks dialogue. Nina Simon wrote that “*Mining the Museum* was the most well-attended Maryland Historical Society exhibition to date, and it fundamentally reoriented the institution with respect to its collection and relationship with community.”¹⁶ It received a variety of reactions from the public, both positive and negative. The transparency and vulnerability demonstrated by this collaboration foregrounded a new beginning for the museum and their audiences.

Calls to Action

There is a need for a summit of the best minds, for a pan-profession, **interdisciplinary examination** of the challenges of diversity that confront American museums. This conclave of leaders, would do more than simply sound the alarm. It would be tasked to ultimately **generate a blueprint for successful change.**

——→ *LONNIE G. BUNCH III*

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

We can trace conversations about equity in the museum space back to the landmark 1992 publication “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums”. It states, “Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society’s pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs.”¹⁷ The report outlines ten recommendations that in summary prescribe broadening the educational role of museums, asserting its public domain, and diversifying staff.

In “Flies in the Buttermilk”, Lonnie Bunch points out that nearly a decade after the “Excellence and Equity” publication, little has changed.¹⁸ He urged the field to **address change in a meaningful way, beyond what he refers to as cosmetic changes.** Since the publication of “Excellence and Equity”, there have been several reports that demonstrate a widespread lack of diversity in museums. Results from the Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey conducted in 2015 by the Mellon Foundation showed that the levels of diversity represented in museum staff in the United States do not reflect the diversity of our society.¹⁸

It is no surprise then, that historically, museums have been visited by White, well-educated people. The 2008 Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums illustrates the racial and ethnic disparities in cultural participation, with an over representation of White Americans attending art museums (79% of visitors were White, while they make up 69% of the U.S. population). The authors of the report provide several reasons for the disparities, including “historically grounded cultural barriers to participation that makes museums feel intimidating and exclusionary to many people”.²⁰ Many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have reported not feeling comfortable in museums and they continue to be underrepresented as visitors to and staff in museums.²¹



MASS Action organizers at the convening in 2017. Image courtesy of MASS Action.



MASS ACTION

After the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, a group of museum bloggers urged museums to respond to what was unfolding nationally. They created the hashtag #museumsrespondtoFerguson in order to have conversations about “the role and responsibility of museums in confronting social injustices”.²²

In October 2016, a group of 50 museum practitioners gathered over the course of three days to discuss “**issues of institutional transformation, creating an inclusive culture, widening interpretation, sharing authority, decolonizing collections and the museum.**”²³

The group, titled Museum As Site for Social Action (MASS Action), was a gathering of folks representing a diversity of and types of museums. Elisabeth Callihan described MASS Action as “a group of educators, curators, facilitators, interpreters, researchers, writers, scholars, artists, activists, and agitators”.²⁴

What emerged from the convening was a toolkit that provides strategies, resources, and writings that embed equity and inclusion at the foundation of museum practice. It recognizes that it is not enough to just want museums to be socially inclusive spaces, that it takes ongoing work. As they outline, **the work begins on an individual level and spreads to the team level.** MASS Action posed an important question we should continue to ask ourselves: **What does it mean for a museum to be a site for social action?**

MASS Action is not a project anymore. It is a **network of people**, individuals committed to seeing the museum field change, **connecting in solidarity**, and recognizing there is strength in numbers. That, **like fractals**, if we all individually commit to do our part on a small scale, we will start to see **change on a large scale**. That with enough voices, we can make change.

——→ *ELISABETH CALLIHAN*



MASS Action banner at the
convening in 2017. Image
courtesy of MASS Action.

MUSEUMS ARE NOT NEUTRAL

Museums are not and have never been neutral spaces. Many have pushed back against the notion that museums are neutral because people that work in museums are not impartial - they bring values, biases, opinions, perspectives and intentions into the work that they do.²⁵

Their perspectives are encoded into what stories should be told, what information and objects should be safeguarded, ultimately making these decisions political. Through their exhibitions, museums either show support for the existing social and political issues, or they actively demonstrate their position against them. **Choosing to avoid a difficult topic or take a stance is not being objective, because silence is complicity.**

In 2017, museum educators LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski started Museums Are Not Neutral, a movement that draws attention to the misconception that museums are neutral spaces. The hashtag #MuseumsAreNotNeutral created a platform for museum professionals to speak out against instances of “veiled neutrality,” share resources and practices, and hold museums accountable.²⁶ It is an example of building a community of practice online to have these conversations with colleagues across the country experiencing nationwide, deeply rooted problems in museums.



La Tanya S. Autry (she/her)
@artstuffmatters



I've never encountered white museum folks addressing these questions

"What are the ways I have benefited from being white?
In what ways do I support and uphold a system that is structurally racist?
How do my race, class, and gender affect my perspective?"

[#MuseumsAreNotNeutral](#)

5:19 PM · Mar 21, 2021 · Twitter for Android

33 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 149 Likes



Mike Murawski
@murawski27



I'm so sick & tired of seeing museums hoard money, power & objects while they shed their staff, post fake messages of antiracism, & re-open amidst the worst spike in COVID cases we've seen yet (in some areas, 1000% more cases than when museums closed) 🙄

[#MuseumsAreNotNeutral](#)

10:44 AM · Jul 3, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

50 Retweets 5 Quote Tweets 310 Likes

Recent tweets on the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral
feed by LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski.

Collective Visions

Museums have always been a platform where the past, present, and future converge. Rather than only allowing the collapsing of these timelines to occur on subconscious levels, we seek **transformative inclusion** and a reality in which everyone is truly welcome to actively engage with these timelines and all the voices present in each. This means **centering marginalized groups**, while recognizing and challenging the systems that marginalize them. We who believe in freedom must **fervently and joyously manifest realities** in which we are all affirmed and whole.

——→ *SARA DAISE*

Museums can be thought of as organisms.

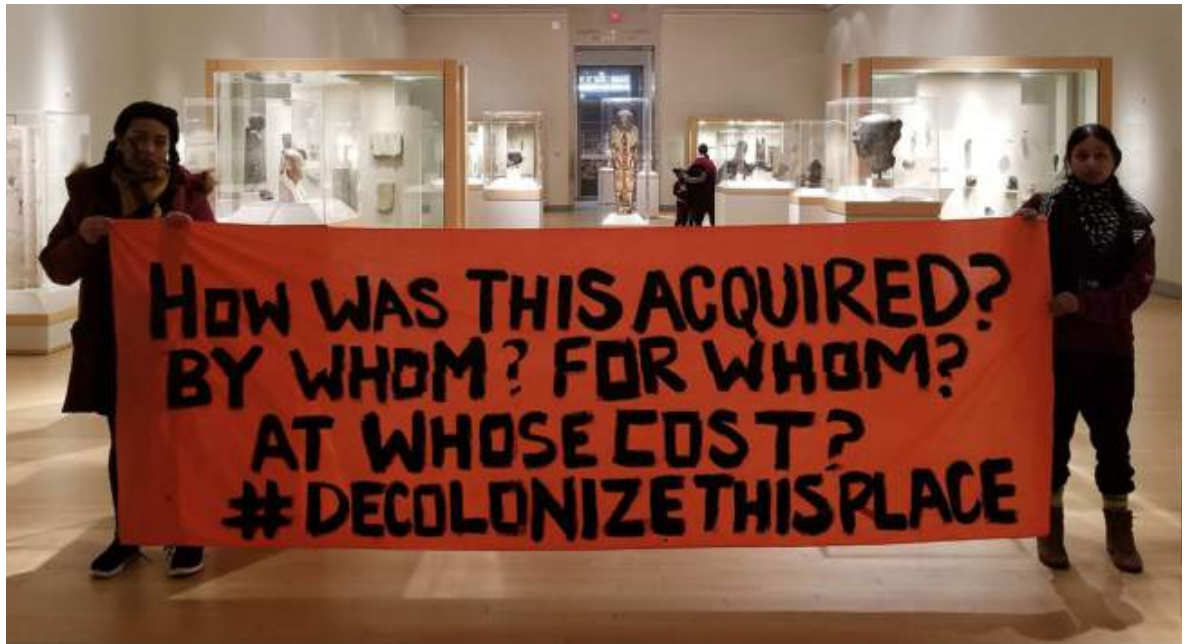
At the same time, they are also ecosystems with many systems working in concert for these organisms to thrive. There is value to employing **an ecological perspective to consider museums and their futures through relationality**. What are museum's relationships to their neighborhoods in which they are situated? If we think about the relationality between, and the interconnectedness and interdependence through which everything operates, we can begin to understand a museum's role in its ecosystem, and why this ecosystem may not be thriving. This perspective allows us to more easily consider museums' evolution, adaptation, and thriving.

If museums have a place in the future, they must first consider their death. In her talk at the inaugural Death to Museums Conference, Dr. Porchia Moore, Department Head and Assistant Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Florida, described this current moment in history as **"an ashes moment"**.²⁷ Ashes are nourishing, in that they include nutrients that help us grow. It is time for us to come up with a new framework and **let go of the vestiges that are no longer serving us**. What will emerge from our ashes when we rebuild?

The following excerpts are quotes from 2020 survey by the Death to Museums which asked, in your wildest dreams, what would museums look like in five years.²⁸

Museums will be free of charge, stake their **value in their communities** and create exhibitions/programs that are by and for them. Staff would be **paid fairly** and equitably, and there would be **no board of trustees** dictating the finances and direction of the institution. Rather than collecting everything that comes their way, museums should **(re-)evaluate what already exists** in their collections.

———→ *DEATH TO MUSEUMS SURVEY RESPONDENT*



Decolonize This Place protest at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Image courtesy of Hyperallergic.

Museums will be **spaces for healing** and learning with and from each other. This includes the internal community of the museum (staff & volunteers) as well the external communities/audience. They are **accountable to the communities they serve**, rather than a board that is often white and of a higher socio-economic class. Redistribution of pay/salary so that folks on the front line are equitably paid and executive salaries are decreased.

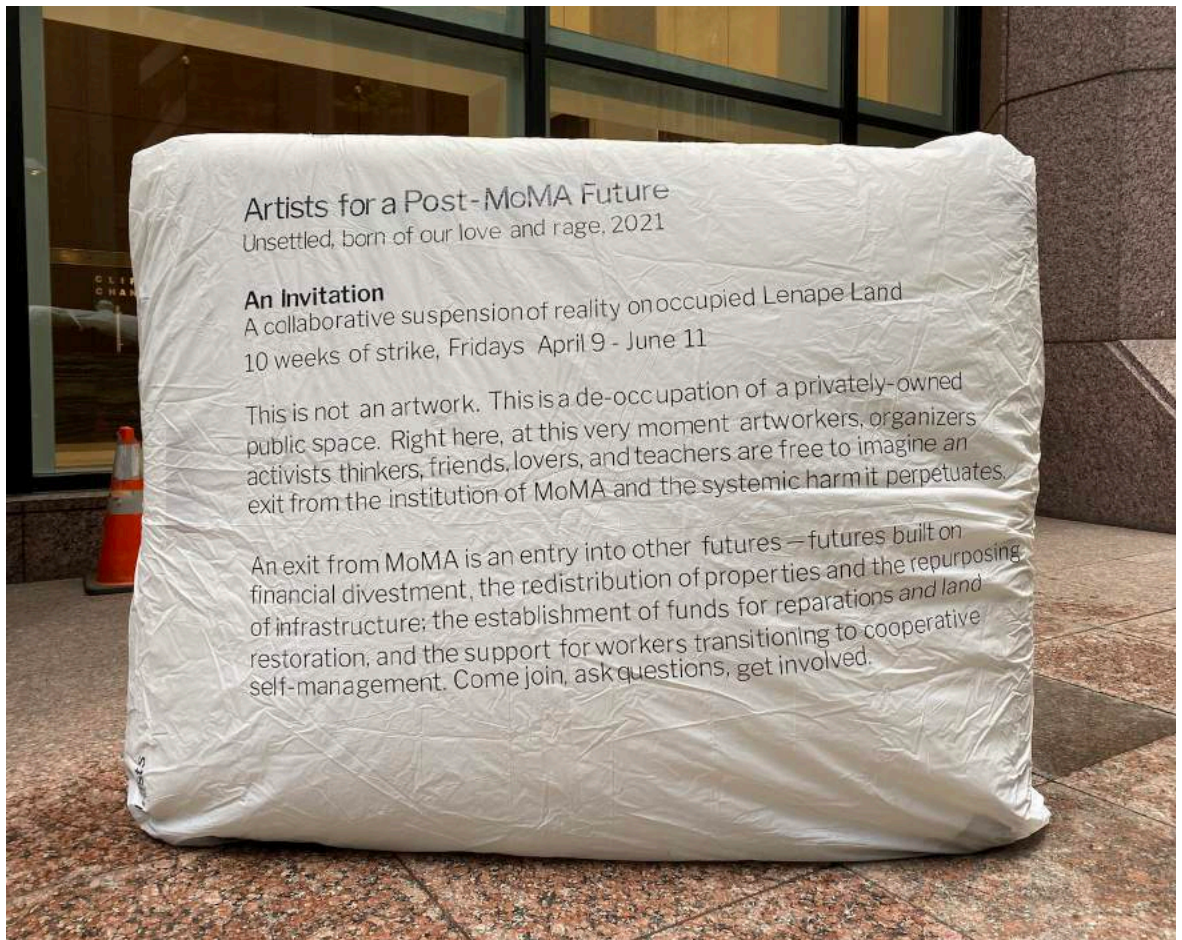
———→ *DEATH TO MUSEUMS SURVEY RESPONDENT*



Decolonize This Place protest at
the Whitney Museum.
Image courtesy of Hyperallergic.

In my absolute pie-in-the-sky utopian dreams, I would love to see a museum model pop up that is based on **community ownership and cooperative management**. Imagine if collections were collectively owned and shared between publicly owned institutions—curators, educators, and everyday visitors could have access to the combined collections of major museums across the country, **without the institutional barriers** and financial wheeling and dealing that goes on behind closed doors. This could allow scholarship and **public access to flourish**.

——→ *DEATH TO MUSEUMS SURVEY RESPONDENT*



Artists for a Post-Moma Future.
Image courtesy of Hyperallergic.

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ARCHETYPE

visionary

The visionary
illuminates the unseen
paths forward even when
others cannot easily
make sense of them.

3

DESIGN FRAMEWORKS

There is much to be learned from looking outside of ourselves. This chapter explores design frameworks that exist outside of the museum field that have overlap in many ways. These frameworks recognize that good intentions are not enough, and that we must prioritize the impact of our choices. They have all created communities of practice and networks that emerge from shared principles that center equity, justice, and liberation.

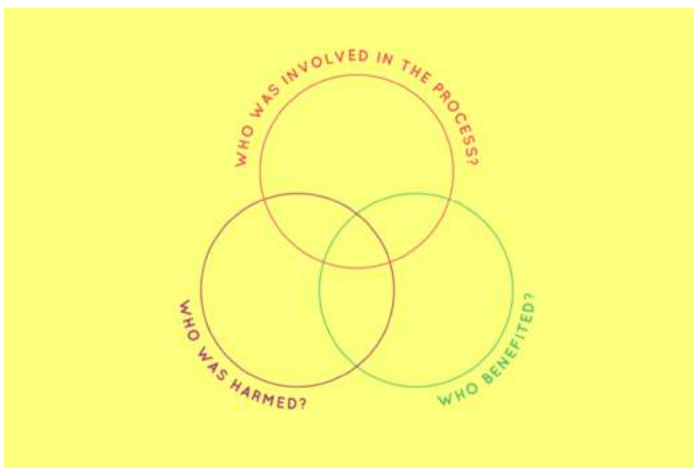
Design Justice

Design justice is a practice that both **critically analyzes how design perpetuates existing power structures** and looks for alternative ways to make it more equitable and inclusive.

——→ *SASHA COSTANZA-CHOCK*



Above: Design Justice Network meeting at the allied Media Conference in 2015.



Left: Visual of power analysis. Images courtesy of Design Justice.

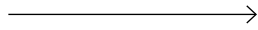
Design justice is an approach that emerged from a community of design practitioners that work with activists and community-based organizations called the Design Justice Network (DJN). They first convened as a group of 30 people at the Allied Media Conference in 2015, when they generated a shared vision and set of principles for Design Justice.¹

In Sasha Costanza-Chock's book, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, Costanza-Chock argues that "the values of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and settler colonialism are often reproduced in the affordances and disaffordances of the objects, processes, and systems we design."²

At the core of the DJN is the goal to challenge designers to **move past good intentions** and recognize that good intentions are not always enough to "ensure that design processes and practices become tools for liberation and to develop principles that might help design practitioners avoid **the (often unwitting) reproduction of existing inequalities**."³

Design justice insists on going beyond community participation and advocates for community leadership and accountability in the design process. The main questions that design justice asks are: **What values do we infuse and reproduce in what we design?** Who gets to participate in design and how do we make design more accessible to those in particular who will be most impacted by the design process? Who is privileged in the design process?⁴

Design Justice Principles



1. We use design to sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems.
2. We center the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process.
3. We prioritize design's impact on the community over intentions.
4. We view change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process.
5. We see the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert.
6. We believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience.
7. We share design knowledge and tools with our communities.
8. We work towards sustainable, community-led and controlled outcomes.
9. We work towards non-exploitative solutions that reconnect us to the earth and to each other.
10. Before seeking new design solutions, we look for what is already looking at the community level. We honor and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge and practices.⁵

Liberatory Design

Liberatory design is a way of being and working that facilitates change towards equity. It's an innovation practice rooted in **sharing power, recognizing oppression, and centering those most impacted by inequity.**

——→ *TANIA ANAISSIE*



Top: Co-creators of Liberatory Design brainstorm session in 2016. Images courtesy of Liberatory Design.



Left: Liberatory Design Card Deck.

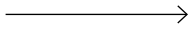
Liberatory design is a way to reexamine and build upon the design thinking process with the goal of centering and promoting equity. It was created by Tania Anaissie, Victor Cary, David Clifford, Tom Malarkey and Susie Wise during a collaboration in 2016 with the National Equity Project and the K12 Lab at the Stanford d.school.⁶

What sets liberatory design apart from the traditional design thinking process are two additions: Notice and Reflect, both to be implemented between and within steps of the design process. They are intended to stimulate **self-awareness and reflection as critical pieces of the design process as a way to further align the designer's intentions with the impact of the work.** User experience designer, David Pinedo says “the end results allow designers to make authentic connections between who they are, who they’re designing with, and who they are designing for.”⁷

Notice puts the focus on the designer as a human with individual experience, identity, values, biases, and assumptions. **If designers are not aware of the biases that we bring to every context and relationship, then we can unintentionally reproduce systems of oppression.** It recognizes that in order to empathize, designers must be true to one’s authentic self. Key questions to ask oneself are: Who am I? How am I positioned relative to power?⁸

Reflect is an important piece that continues throughout the design thinking process and allows structured time for designers to reflect both individually and as a team. Reflection is helpful because it helps design teams consider what have been the emotions, privileges, insights, dynamics, and the impact thus far.⁹

Liberatory Design Approach



1. Self-reflection and awareness
2. Focusing on the humanity in everyone
3. Recognizing oppression
4. Embracing complexity
5. Building relational trust
6. Seeking liberatory collaboration
7. Taking risks and experimenting
8. Being transparent and sharing knowledge, tools, resources¹⁰

Equity-Centered Community Design

Equity-Centered Community Design is a unique creative problem solving process based on equity, humility-building, integrating history and healing practices, addressing power dynamics, and co-creating with the community.

——→ *ANTIONETTE CARROLL*



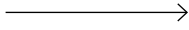
Creative Reaction Lab with Community Design Apprentices exploring: "What would public transit do to improve your life?"

Equity-centered community design (ECCD) was created by Creative Reaction Lab, a St. Louis based organization that supports Black and Latinx youth to become leaders in designing healthy and racially equitable communities.¹¹ Creative Reaction Lab created an inquiry-based field guide to apply equity-centered community design practices to other industries.

Like liberatory design, equity-centered community design pushes human-centered design and design thinking further to address inequities and injustices with **intentional acts**. This process acknowledges and utilizes the role of people, systems, power when developing solutions or approaches that impact different communities. It differs from traditional design thinking because it doesn't frame the steps in the process as linear, but **encourages fluidity to address the complexity** and nuances of each project.¹²

Equity-centered community design aims to democratize design and make it accessible to all. It frames the role of "designer" more broadly as **"anyone who has agency to make a decision, however small, that will impact a group of people or the environment"**.¹³ In doing so, it empowers people to think of themselves as designers that can have a positive impact.

Equity-Centered Community Design Approach

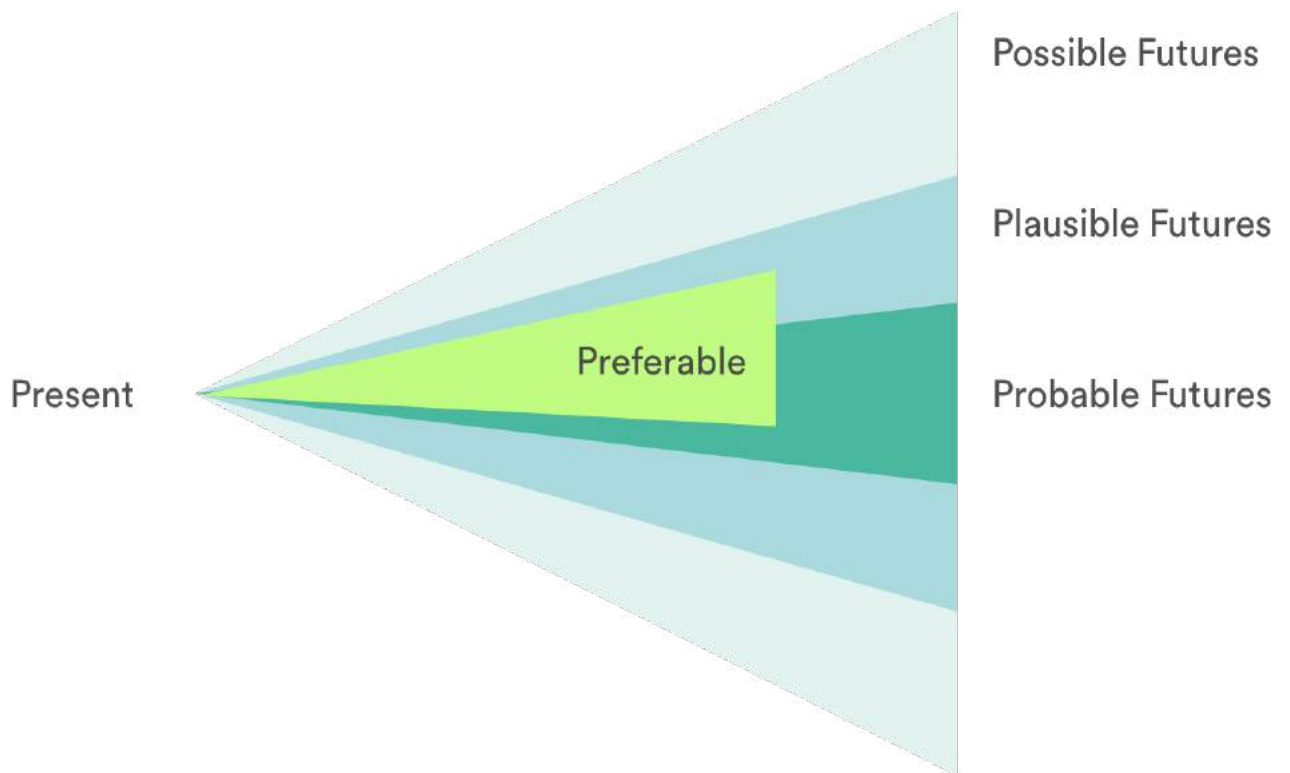


1. Inviting diverse co-creators
2. Building humility and empathy
3. Attending to history and healing
4. Acknowledging and power constructs
5. Defining and assessing community needs
6. Ideating approaches
7. Rapid prototyping
8. Testing and learning¹⁴

Speculative Design

It's not problem solving (prototyping), it's not trying to predict the future (forecasting), and it's not pure criticism. It's concerned with possibilities, not probabilities, pushing us to consider our preferences over a set of possible futures and the ways in which the **objects we design help or hinder our attempts to build those futures.**

————→ *ERIN PEARCE*



Above: Cone of Possibility featured in
Speculative Everything.

Speculative design, also known as design fiction or futures thinking, is the process of addressing big societal issues with design processes and systems. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in their book, *Speculative Everything: Design, Dreaming, and Social Dreaming* state, **speculative design creates space that allows for the pluriverse, a world in which there are many alternative ways of being.**¹⁵

Design training is traditionally focused on the constraints, the existing limits of our realities. Speculative design says, **put constraints aside and instead, design for the world in you want to live in.** Similar to the aforementioned design frameworks, speculative design focus on the consequences and the impact of our designs.¹⁶

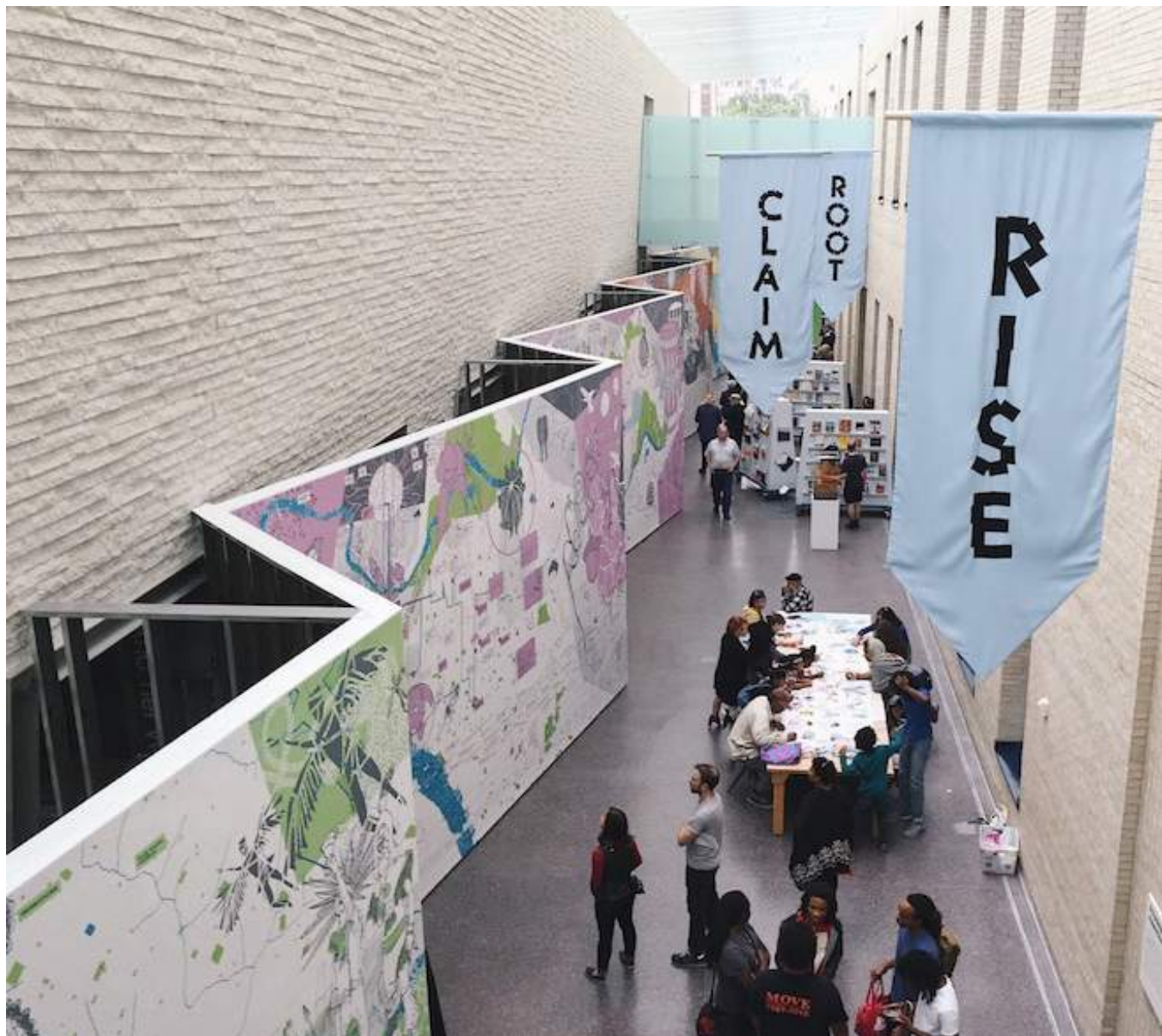
Speculative design **harnesses the power of imagination to design alternative futures** to discover what might emerge from that. If our values are encoded in our designs, then how might we use design to reprogram and rethink our priorities so that once we begin to change those, new behaviors might emerge and from that new kinds of realities. By imagining our future we can reflect on how our current reality is similar or different from that future. It then forces us to **consider the social inequalities and power dynamics we currently exist in.** We can use a futurist framework to provide a path so that we may collectively shape a future.¹⁷

Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality.

————→ *ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN*

Philadelphia Assembled

A CASE STUDY



Philadelphia Assembled City Panorama in the Perelman Building. Image courtesy of Philadelphia Assembled.



My hope is that the Perelman has been nurtured beyond the point of no return. The richness and value of all these laboring, loving, at times even agonizing, hands has made an impact celebrated through continued support. The building does not fall now, it is revived with rejuvenating hard work - that harkens back to the museum's first bricks.

——→ *GEN ROLLINS*

Philadelphia Assembled was a major collaborative exhibition project that began in 2013 after a series of conversations and opened in 2017 at many sites around the city, including the Perelman Building at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.¹⁸

INVITING DIVERSE CO-CREATORS TO UPLIFT LOCAL KNOWLEDGES

The Contemporary Art Department of the PMA invited artist Jeanne van Heeswijk “to consider the ways in which the city relates to the Museum and the Museum, the city”. Van Heeswijk put together a collective of local community activists, artists, storytellers, gardeners, healers, and curators to explore place based acts of resistance and resilience, and world building. What came out of these conversations was an exhibition surrounding the question, “How can we collectively shape our futures?”¹⁹

USING DESIGN TO SUSTAIN, HEAL, AND EMPOWER

The collective identified five principles that would serve as project themes:

1. Reconstructions: How do we write histories?
2. Sovereignty: How do we define self-determination and unity?
3. Sanctuary: How do we create and maintain safe spaces?
4. Futures: How do we reimagine our tomorrow?
5. Movement: How can we share knowledge and form new networks?²⁰



Above: Event held inside Framework for An Affordable House in the Perelman Gallery. Right: Events held in the Toward Sanctuary Dome at the Lupert Plaza. Images courtesy of Jeffrey Stockbridge.

PRIORITIZING VALUES

The collective prioritized three values that guided them in the exhibition’s development: transparency (defined as “building towards the collective process in relation to power, budget, and capacity”), collaborative learning (defined as “participating in listening and speaking as an active practice in which everyone has a voice with a willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations”), and radical inclusivity (defined as “unpacking layers of oppression and privilege by honoring differences and commonalities”).²¹



A SITE FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Philadelphia Assembled gave rise to the PMA as a site for social action. Teach-ins in and outside of the museum's gallery spaces provided a platform to discuss the city's most pressing issues like gentrification and incarceration. It created space to process what it means to resist and imagine a city in which we all thrive. All situated within a museum that continues to rebuild relationships with marginalized communities who have historically been left out of the narrative.²²

ACKNOWLEDGING HISTORY

Holding space to confront the traumas associated with the realities of what it means to be Black or Indigenous, a sex worker, or trans - what it means to be at the margins - led to "a pain one might equate with sickness when there is a great deal for the body to process, discard, and renew in order to return to viable health."²³ *Philadelphia Assembled* is a model of a project that decentralized the museum, to let go of its authority, acknowledge history in a collective and transparent way, and celebrate joy, sanctuary, health and togetherness. While today, *Philadelphia Assembled* no longer manifests itself in a physical exhibition form, the experience continues in those that co-created and participated in the project.



The PHLA Kitchen assembles twelve Philadelphia cooks and storytellers to share their culinary interpretations of survival, resistance, and victory.

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COMMUNITY

ability

4

INTERVIEWS

This chapter contains a sampling of interviews with six people that are actively trying to work towards change in the museum field. These introductions highlight insights into why and how the idea of disruption is needed in museum spaces, as well as the barriers people face within themselves, leadership, colleagues, and museums as institutions. Based on their experiences, they share their take on the complex situation we are in as a field, in which systems change and a full scale reimagination of museums are needed.

The following pages in this chapter contain direct quotes around themes of how we might prioritize and align the values that promote equity in our work, let go of the best practices that are no longer serving us, and hold ourselves accountable to our intentions as individuals, teams, and institutions.

Elena Gonzalez

Author and Curator

Exhibitions for Social Justice

People are loath to **let go of privileges**. At the individual level, one of the main things that prevents people from thinking in these ways is precisely the **possessive investment in whiteness**.

DISRUPTION

Museums need a structure to start to wrap their heads around some DEI issues as they pertain to the big structures in the museum. They need marching orders to create plans that are specific to the institution, to make the institution more inclusive and equitable, both for staff and visitors.

BARRIERS TO EQUITY

Exhibition teams are struggling to create exhibitions for social justice. There is little support from leadership or other governance structures throughout the museum. In this way, swimming upstream is arduous and less effective. It makes it much harder to achieve anything bottom to top, as opposed to top to bottom where everyone is on the same page about the goals.

LETTING GO

When it comes to individuals, there is a perennial problem of the possessive investment in whiteness. People are loath to let go of the privileges that come along with it. It is a combination of a deep belief that they are neither racist nor the cause of the problem. There is a deep desire to protect oneself.

VALUES

What values are needed in order to challenge or disrupt white supremacy culture and help further shift our institutions. What is and is not okay with people? What is non negotiable?

FINAL THOUGHTS

People who are designing exhibitions should feel, understand, explore, and share their power with other people in a meaningful way.¹

Chris Taylor

Chief Inclusion Officer
State of Minnesota

Change has to happen **across the entire system** so that it will mutually reinforce each other. Only then will you see museums evolve. **We need a fundamental reinventing of museums at its core.**

DISRUPTION

We need to ask “why?” five times to get at the actual issue or the cause of the problem. What is the reason for resistance to change? Is it because it is uncomfortable? It messes with our process? Asking “why” is a way to get at some deeper causes and it should be done with all aspects of museum work to a point where best practices dissolve. We have to move away from how we have always done it. It is disruption of the status quo, but we need to be ready to intervene with solution. If we are not ready to fill in that gap created with something new, we will revert to the status quo because museums seek out the easy answer.

BARRIERS

Equity work takes a lot of resources, because it's time intensive, it's built on trust and relationships. We don't have the money because equity, diversity, inclusion, justice has really been something that's been gaining a lot of emphasis over the last five to 10 years. Our budgets have been allocated in the same way for 40 years. We cannot just attach equity work to how we currently operate. It won't ever really become a core function of what we do. Try a zero budgeting process to redistribute power. That's about intentionality, setting aside the resources to make that happen. Show me a museum that carves it out in their budget.

It is challenging for leaders to recognize that they too are part of perpetuating the status quo. We need leaders who understand how to shift systems.

LETTING GO

Museums should let go of assumed constraints, which are the boundaries we put around ourselves. We tell ourselves we are not able to do an exhibit differently this is the way we have always done it.

PRIORITIZING VALUES

Reflect on behaviors tied to values. Do you live your values based on your behaviors? If you have a value around equity or social justice, how do you exhibit that? What might I need to do to be more in alignment with my established values?

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability often comes from something external like a performance review. How do you hold yourself accountable? It could be having a conversation with a trusted colleague to ask them to provide feedback.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Change has to happen across the entire system so that it will mutually reinforce each other. Only then will you see museums evolve. We need a fundamental reinventing of museums at their very core.²

Rose Paquet Kinsley

Co-Director
The Inluseum

Whether or not museums have a place in that future is questionable.
If museums die, it would be the death of something greater.

DISRUPTION

The self is an unavoidable locus of change. It is transformational work that is not about bringing people in or doing something for people. It is about engaging in a dynamic reciprocal relationship where everyone is changed. Think about yourself in this whole scheme. Questions are generous because they are not prescriptive, Questions invite people into reflection and the mental work hopefully leads to tangible action.

BARRIERS

Not having an understanding of the place and the institutional legacies related to a particular organization's history in the community. Did your museum exclude people during Jim Crow? Things of that nature completely shape people's lived memories to this day about whether this is a place for them or not.

LETTING GO

What museums and society need are more people who might be less tethered to or indoctrinated in doing things based on how it has been done. Maybe you don't know how it has been done, but you have a sense of how it could be better done based on your generational positionality. Better practices means they are one step along the way. We should center thinking about things in terms an iterative process instead of maintaining the old ways of doing things.

PRIORITIZING VALUES

Our values need to be reflected in our way of compensating people for their labor and expertise, the same way you would a museum professional being compensated for their expertise.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Who is benefiting from community engagements and who gets to decide what constitutes benefiting? Who is the one that is defining value? Who sets that tone?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether or not museums have a place in that future is questionable. If museums die, it would be the death of something greater. Patriarchy bred capitalism which then bred white supremacy. They are intertwined. We cannot dismantle white supremacy in isolation.

We need our museums to be supporting society and the transitions that we're going to be witnessing and going through. We need our museums to be educating people about the effects of climate change and about community resilience. What are we going to do when we have to come together and work differently? I want to see more community gardens and museums turn their lawns into a food forest to sustain us, the animals and birds. We need to be thinking relationally, beyond just ourselves, and more as a human community.³

Gabrielle Graham

Community Partnerships & Adult Programs Manager
Buffalo Museum of Science

Treat people as valuable, distinct
human beings with lived experiences
that are not rooted in the oppression
that they have overcome, but rather
rooted in the ways that their identities
have informed them.

DISRUPTION

Museums want toolkits. They are very focused on checking off boxes, but it is not about ticking boxes. We need something that can make it palatable to the people who have successfully upheld museum practice up into this point, and acts as a framework or a method of delivery that conservative museum people are comfortable with and can understand.

BARRIERS

You have equity-minded individuals and people who have not thought about it. There is a big gap and to have a conversation between those two mindsets is frustrating.

There are people who are unable to understand the world in terms other than capitalism. It is the least rewarding to have to frame it in a way that they have something to grab onto until the end, but the most impactful for equity work.

LETTING GO

Museums should let go of that desire to have closure. Sometimes an exhibition will not answer all of the questions you have. The process of developing an exhibition often leads to more questions, which is ultimately a positive thing.

PRIORITIZING VALUES

People are bypassing the actual work by making a statement. It is okay to focus on aspirations, but it is important to break apart aspirations from reality. Who does the museum really serve? What values are demonstrated in the output?

ACCOUNTABILITY

How might we model accountability? How can we demonstrate to other people the process of being accountable. If you're asking people how they can model accountability for other people or other agencies, then you're not only asking them how they can measure it, but how they can demonstrate that measurement. It would help us with our own process and also be an example to others to get them thinking about how they can do it on their own.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Treat people as valuable, distinct human beings with lived experiences that are not rooted in the oppression that they have overcome, but rather rooted in the ways that their identities have informed them.⁴

Antionette Carroll

Founder, President, and CEO
Creative Reaction Lab

That is where a lot of folks are missing when they're trying to work towards equity and liberation. They seem to think they can use the same resources as before. That is not possible. **You're going to have to invest a lot more.**

DISRUPTION

Design was and has been the invisible disrupter since the beginning of time. By nature of design we are constantly iterating and making improvements on interventions. We are constantly hitting in at different lever points and building out the idea of possibility and growth. We imagine a world that does not yet exist and design it so it can come to fruition. Individuals that have benefited from the status quo, do not want to see disruption. What are we willing to yield and wield that actually provide more of a space of equity and inclusivity?

BARRIERS

Many museums are White. White as in the leaders behind the scenes, White as in the people that attend. Museums are products of White Supremacy and built on the backs of historically under invested communities. They have taken cultural assets and materials as a way to look at history, but do not typically allow the folks who actually were a part of that history and connected to that ancestry to have power in that space.

LETTING GO

I see the same thing across most museums, which is a voyeuristic and paternalistic approach. It amazes me how exclusionary museums are when they are supposed to be spaces of cultural understanding and cultural development.

PRIORITIZING VALUES

What resources are you going to put towards making sure that your values can be lived? Put it in the budget. That is where a lot of folks are missing when they are trying to work towards equity and liberation. They seem to think they can use the same resources that they have had before to get to that space. That is not possible. We have to invest a lot more because equity is individualized. You can have individual liberation, but you also can have collective liberation. It is not just one or the other. That is the key piece.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is another form of love, in that it contributes to healing. When we think about accountability, it is the mirror up to yourself. It is having those hard conversations with yourself and others, and also recognizing that everyone is on their own journey. It is getting the work done, and unpacking one's trauma and recognizing that there needs to be individual work in addition to collective work.

FINAL THOUGHTS

People need to understand that when we say "community" it is human centered. Reflect on the different communities we are all a part of because there is this us and them mentality. When people say "we need to work with the community" it is as if they are not a part of a community themselves and not part of the museum's community.⁵

Joanne Jones-Rizzi

Vice President of Science, Equity, and Education
Science Museum of Minnesota

Define community because particularly in museums, there is **coded language** that people assign to community.

When people are using it, they're talking about communities of color. People separate us and the community. **We are situated within a community. It is not a separate thing.**

DISRUPTION

White supremacy is a culture and we are all a part of perpetuating it. Every institution is affected by white supremacy culture, even culturally specific organizations (e.g., African American museums, Islamic museums, Japanese American museums) The normative is White. No matter how subtle, it elevates whiteness as the norm. This normative impacts all of us. I understand that I am part of this too and I have to push myself all of the time.

Normalize naming and challenging White supremacy. There are a lot of museums who are pushing and actually changing. It is slow and people are impatient. This whole idea of challenging and disrupting White supremacy is really uncomfortable for people. Asking questions in exhibits is a way you can disrupt people's thinking in small ways.

LETTING GO

Disruption of the singular museum voice.
We all have memories or interpretations or how we see things.

BARRIERS

Language is important. Even the word "community". The idea of community is very fluid and it means a lot of different things to different people. Particularly in museums, there is a lot of coded language that people assign to community. When people use it, they mean communities of color. People separate us and community, but we are all situated within communities. It is not a separate thing.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There are many layers as to why people do not feel welcome in museums, like the architecture and design of a museum, and seeing label copy in your language. Another thing connected to white supremacy culture is how to behave. Do you have to modify your voice? Do you have to get your children dressed up? All these kinds of things are part of challenging or disrupting white supremacy culture and will help further shift our institutions.⁶

Endnotes

1. Elena Gonzalez, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, February 2, 2021.
2. Chris Taylor, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, February 11, 2021.
3. Rose Paquet, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, February 11, 2021.
4. Gabrielle Graham, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, February 24, 2021.
5. Antionette Carroll, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, March 3, 2021.
6. Joanne Jones-Rizzi, interviewed by Chaya Arabia, March 19, 2021.

WAY OF KNOWING

**lived
experience**

5

DESIGN TO DISRUPT

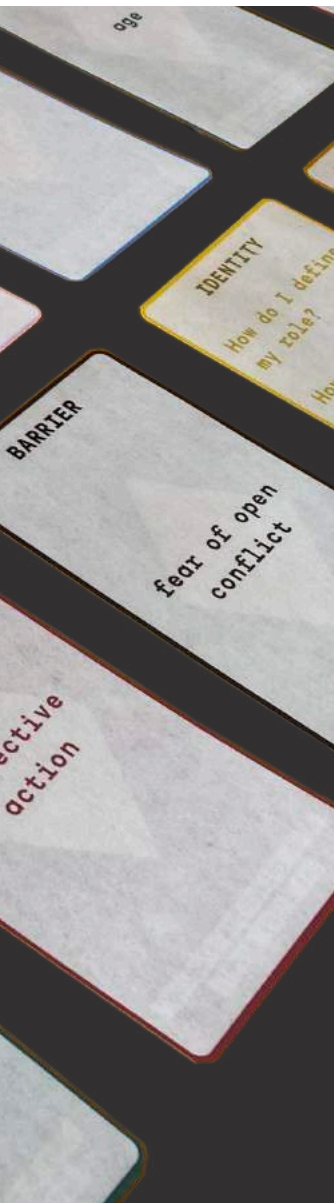
This chapter details a toolkit that builds off of the work of MASS Action, Museums Are Not Neutral, the Empathetic Museum and many others. It emerged out of a series of conversations with 40 people in and outside of the museum field also draws heavily from design frameworks that embed equity, justice, and liberation, into design processes.

This chapter provides an overview of the project, the process of developing the toolkit, and findings from prototyping.

Project Overview



Design to Disrupt cards



Design to Disrupt is an inquiry based toolkit for **critically reflexive practice** in museums. In the form of a **card deck and guidebook**, it is designed to cultivate an ongoing process of **attending to the root** - the assumptions, biases, and values underlying our actions.

I often say jokingly that some of **this work requires a couch**. There is a lack of self knowledge in the museum field. What you are doing could be at the end of the day, the **first step of the how**, which is, first you have to examine yourself. **Know thyself, then your public.**

————→ *RANDI KORN*

PREMISE →

Design to Disrupt begins with the premise that **museums are sites of pain**. Museums are rooted and still implicated in systems of oppression including but not limited to white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ableism. Regardless of our intentions or relationship to oppression, the very nature of it is systemic - it is **replicated in structures and decision-making** processes in museums.

Thus, this project acknowledges our complicity as museum practitioners and argues that **we all have a role** to play in transforming the museum space. It puts forth the need for **disrupting business as usual**, as a prerequisite to move us towards a future that is pluralistic and inclusive, in which **community care** is at the center of museums.

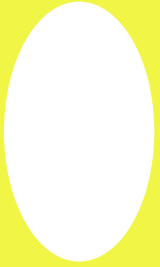
GOALS →

This project intends to locate a starting point to actively **challenge the status quo**. Its main objective is to create a toolkit that applies design frameworks that center **equity, justice, and liberation**, and synthesizes insights from change agents in and outside of the museum field. Ultimately, it aims to provide tools that help museum practitioners become **catalysts for change**.

AUDIENCE →

This toolkit was initially developed specifically for **exhibition designers** embedded in a variety of museum institutions (e.g., science, art, history, etc.). It was intended to be relevant for exhibition designers who **seek an alternative path** and recognize the current path museums are on is not sustainable.

IDENTITY



How do my identities
influence my work?

BODY LANGUAGE



What is my museum's
body language?

SPIRIT



How might my museum
embody the spirit of...?

ARCHETYPE



How might I apply this
archetype to my work?

COMMUNITY



Which communities am I
centering and why?

WAY OF KNOWING



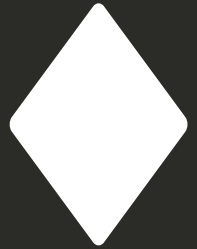
What ways of knowing
am I uplifting?

VALUE



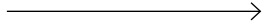
What values are showing
up in my work?

BARRIER



What am I willing to let
go of in order to
prioritize equity?









STRUCTURE



Design to Disrupt contains 62 unique cards divided into 8 categories, shown on the previous page. The card deck is further organized into three practices that emerge from the Design to Disrupt approach: Reflect, Reimagine, and Cultivate.

The front side of the cards include the title of the category, the practice it is associated with, and the overarching question that frames all cards within that specific category.

See cards and guidebook located in the Appendix.

IDENTITY In what ways do I question and challenge the norms and practices established at my museum?	IDENTITY Where is my sphere of influence?	BODY LANGUAGE To whom or what do we hold ourselves accountable as an institution? How do we hold ourselves accountable?	BODY LANGUAGE Who holds ultimate decision making power about exhibitions?	SPIRIT  soup kitchen	SPIRIT  community garden	ARCHETYPE builder The builder plans, organizes, and strategizes to achieve the shared vision.	ARCHETYPE weaver The weaver sees connections between people, places, ideas, and experiences.
IDENTITY What are my beliefs and assumptions about the exhibition content? How did I come to these?	IDENTITY How do I hold myself accountable to my intentions?	BODY LANGUAGE How does my museum measure impact and define success? Who or what defines this?	BODY LANGUAGE What approaches are in place to (re)build sustainable and authentic relationships with communities we have harmed?	SPIRIT  library	SPIRIT  maker space	ARCHETYPE advocate The advocate employs empathy and care to consider perspectives not at the table.	ARCHETYPE disruptor The disruptor takes uncomfortable and risky actions to challenge the status quo, to raise awareness, and realign.
IDENTITY How are my identities sources of power and privilege, or disadvantage?	IDENTITY What are the communities I am a part of?	BODY LANGUAGE What role does my museum play in its neighborhood?	BODY LANGUAGE In what ways have we, as an institution, harmed others? How do we know?	SPIRIT  vaccine site	SPIRIT  social change lab	ARCHETYPE visionary The visionary illuminates the unseen paths forward even when others cannot easily make sense of them.	ARCHETYPE healer The healer acknowledges and tends to traumas caused by oppressive systems and practices.
IDENTITY In what ways do I hold power? Are there spaces where I can share or give up power?	IDENTITY How do I define my role? How do you see this role in relationship to your team, and the communities you aim to engage?	BODY LANGUAGE Who does my museum benefit? Who does my museum really serve? Who does my museum prioritize?	BODY LANGUAGE How does my museum define experts?	SPIRIT  day care	SPIRIT  place of worship	ARCHETYPE designer The designer makes choices, solves problems, and turns ideas into reality.	ARCHETYPE researcher The researcher is inquisitive and knows how to ask questions, including why.

62 cards in the Design to Disrupt Deck

VALUE moving at the speed of trust	VALUE collective action	BARRIER sense of urgency	BARRIER scarcity mindset	COMMUNITY age	COMMUNITY religion	WAY OF KNOWING spirituality	WAY OF KNOWING ancestral wisdom
VALUE vulnerability	VALUE transparency	BARRIER gatekeeping	BARRIER individualism	COMMUNITY gender	COMMUNITY race	WAY OF KNOWING lived experience	WAY OF KNOWING academic scholarship
VALUE continuous learning	VALUE differences	BARRIER power hoarding	BARRIER closure	COMMUNITY affinity	COMMUNITY ability	WAY OF KNOWING cultural knowledge	WAY OF KNOWING nature
VALUE accountability	VALUE humility	BARRIER perfectionism	BARRIER neutrality	COMMUNITY location	COMMUNITY experience	WAY OF KNOWING language	WAY OF KNOWING dialogue

Design to Disrupt has three practices:
Reflect, Reimagine, and Cultivate

REFLECT

Reflection Practice prompts users with questions that stimulate awareness of oneself and one's institution.



REIMAGINE

Reimagination Practice prompts users to look outside of their specific role as an individual and an institution.



→ CULTIVATE ←

Cultivation Practice asks questions about a specific exhibition, and encourages users to prioritize equity and inclusion and embed it into their practice.



IDENTITY

How are my identities sources of power and privilege, or disadvantage?

IDENTITY

How do I define my role?

How do you see this role in relationship to your team, and the communities you aim to engage?

What sphere of influence?

IDENTITY

In what ways do I hold power?

Are there spaces where I can share and give up?

IDENTITY

How do I hold myself accountable to my intentions?

IDENTITY

How do my intentions and actions align with the mission? How do I come to these?

IDENTITY —————>

The “Identity” category is all about self-reflection. Identity cards ask the following questions about your identities and how they influence the way you approach your work:

- What are my beliefs and assumptions about the exhibition content? How did I come to these?
- In what ways do I question and challenge the norms and practices established at my museum?
- In what ways do I hold power? Are there spaces where I can share or give up power?
- How are my identities sources of power and privilege, or marginalization and disadvantage?
- How do I hold myself accountable to my intentions?
- Where is my sphere of influence?
- How do I define my role? How do I see this role in relationship to my team, and the communities I aim to engage?
- What are the communities I am a part of?

Sample cards from the
“Identity” category

BODY LANGUAGE

Who holds
ultimate
decision making
power about
exhibitions?

BODY LANGUAGE

What role does
my museum
play in its
neighborhood?

BODY LANGUAGE

How does my
museum measure
impact and
define success?

Who or what
defines this?

BODY LANGUAGE

Who does my
museum benefit?

Who does my
museum really
serve?

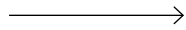
Who does
my museum
prioritize?

BODY LANGUAGE

In what ways
have we, as an
institution,
harmed others?

How do we know?

BODY LANGUAGE



Body language refers “to the powerful messages museums convey through unspoken and unwritten manifestations of their being: the design of their buildings, the demographics of their staff and boards, the choices they make in their collections, exhibitions, and programs.”¹ The “Body Language” cards ask the following questions:

- How does my museum measure impact and define success? Who or what defines this?
- To whom or what do we hold ourselves accountable as an institution? How do we hold ourselves accountable?
- Who does my museum benefit? Who does my museum really serve? Who does my museum prioritize?
- What role does my museum play in its neighborhood?
- In what ways have we, as an institution, harmed others? How do we know?
- What approaches are in place to (re)build sustainable and authentic relationships with communities we have harmed?
- Who holds ultimate decision making power about exhibitions?
- How does my museum define experts?

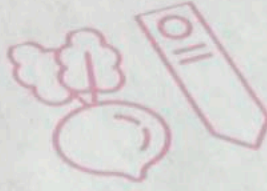
Sample cards from the
“Body Language” category

SPIRIT



vaccine
site

SPIRIT



community
garden

SPIRIT



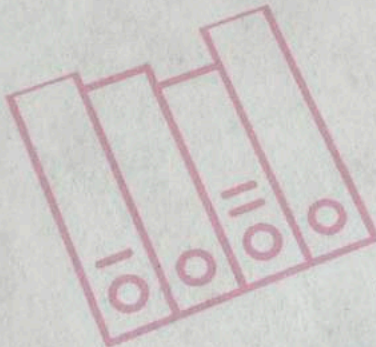
maker space

SPIRIT



social
change

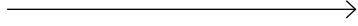
SPIRIT



library

ship
of

SPIRIT



The purpose of the “Spirit” cards is to consider the specific role of your museum and reimagine how it might transform to fulfill the needs of its communities in resourceful ways. These cards contain examples of social hubs that play vital roles in communities:

- Library
- Community garden
- Vaccine site
- Maker space
- Social change lab
- Place of worship
- Soup kitchen
- Day care

Sample cards from the
“Spirit” category

ARCHETYPE

disruptor

The disruptor takes uncomfortable and risky actions to challenge the status quo, to raise awareness, and realign.

ARCHETYPE

healer

The healer acknowledges and tends to traumas caused by oppressive systems and practices.

ARCHETYPE

designer

The designer makes choices, solves problems, and turns ideas into reality.

ARCHETYPE

weaver

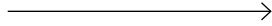
The weaver sees connections between people, places, ideas, and experiences.

ARCHETYPE

advocate

The advocate employs empathy and care to consider perspectives not at the table.

ARCHETYPE



The “Archetype” cards are intended to help you see outside of your designated title or position. Inspired by the Social Change Ecosystem,² these cards contain archetypes to harness as you consider a problem or situation.

- The weaver sees connections between people, places, ideas, and experiences.
- The disruptor takes uncomfortable and risky actions to challenge the status quo, to raise awareness, and realign.
- The healer acknowledges and tends to traumas caused by oppressive systems and practices.
- The designer makes choices, solves problems, and turns ideas into reality.
- The visionary illuminates the unseen paths forward even when others cannot easily make sense of them.
- The builder plans, organizes, and strategizes to achieve the shared vision.
- The advocate employs empathy and care to consider perspectives not at the table.
- The researcher is inquisitive and knows how to ask questions, including why.

Sample cards from the
“Archetype” category

VALUE

collective
action

VALUE

accountability

vulnerability

VALUE

pluralism

VALUE

moving at the
speed of trust

ive
gle

VALUE

→ The “Value” category asks, which values are showing up in this exhibition? These cards contain the following values that promote equity:

- Vulnerability
- Trust
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Collective action
- Humility
- Differences
- Continuous learning

Sample cards from the
“Value” category

BARRIER

scarcity
mindset

BARRIER

either or
thinking

gatekeeping

BARRIER

individualism

BARRIER

power hoarding

losure

BARRIER →

The “Barrier” category asks, what am I willing to let go of in order to prioritize equity? These cards contain the following potential obstacles to achieving equity. Some are not inherently problematic, but this category asks to what extent do these show up as barriers in your work? Many barriers presented are characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in the museum field.³

- Sense of urgency
- Perfectionism
- Fear of failure
- Gatekeeping
- Either/or thinking
- Power hoarding
- Neutrality
- Scarcity mindset

Sample cards from the
“Barrier” category

COMMUNITY

race

COMMUNITY

religion

location

COMMUNITY

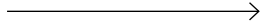
gender

COMMUNITY

ability

cy

COMMUNITY



The “Community” category asks, which communities am I centering for this exhibition and why? Here, *communities* refers to groups of people with shared experiences, identities, and interests. Each card contains a lens through which we can think intersectionally about our audiences. Intersectionality considers overlapping identities “to see the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other”.⁴ It offers a lens to think about the complexities of human experiences.

- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Location
- Religion
- Experience
- Affinity
- Ability

Sample cards from the
“Community” category

WAY OF KNOWING

cultural
knowledge

WAY OF KNOWING

spirituality

language

WAY OF KNOWING

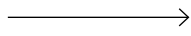
lived
experience

WAY OF KNOWING

ancestral
wisdom

WAY

WAY OF KNOWING



The “Way of Knowing” category asks, which ways of knowing am I honoring and uplifting for this exhibition? These cards contain different ways to know, understand, and engage with the world. The purpose is to identify ways of knowing that have been overlooked in museum spaces.

- Lived experience
- Spirituality
- Academic scholarship
- Language
- Cultural knowledge
- Ancestral wisdom
- Dialogue
- Nature

Sample cards from the
“Way of Knowing ” category

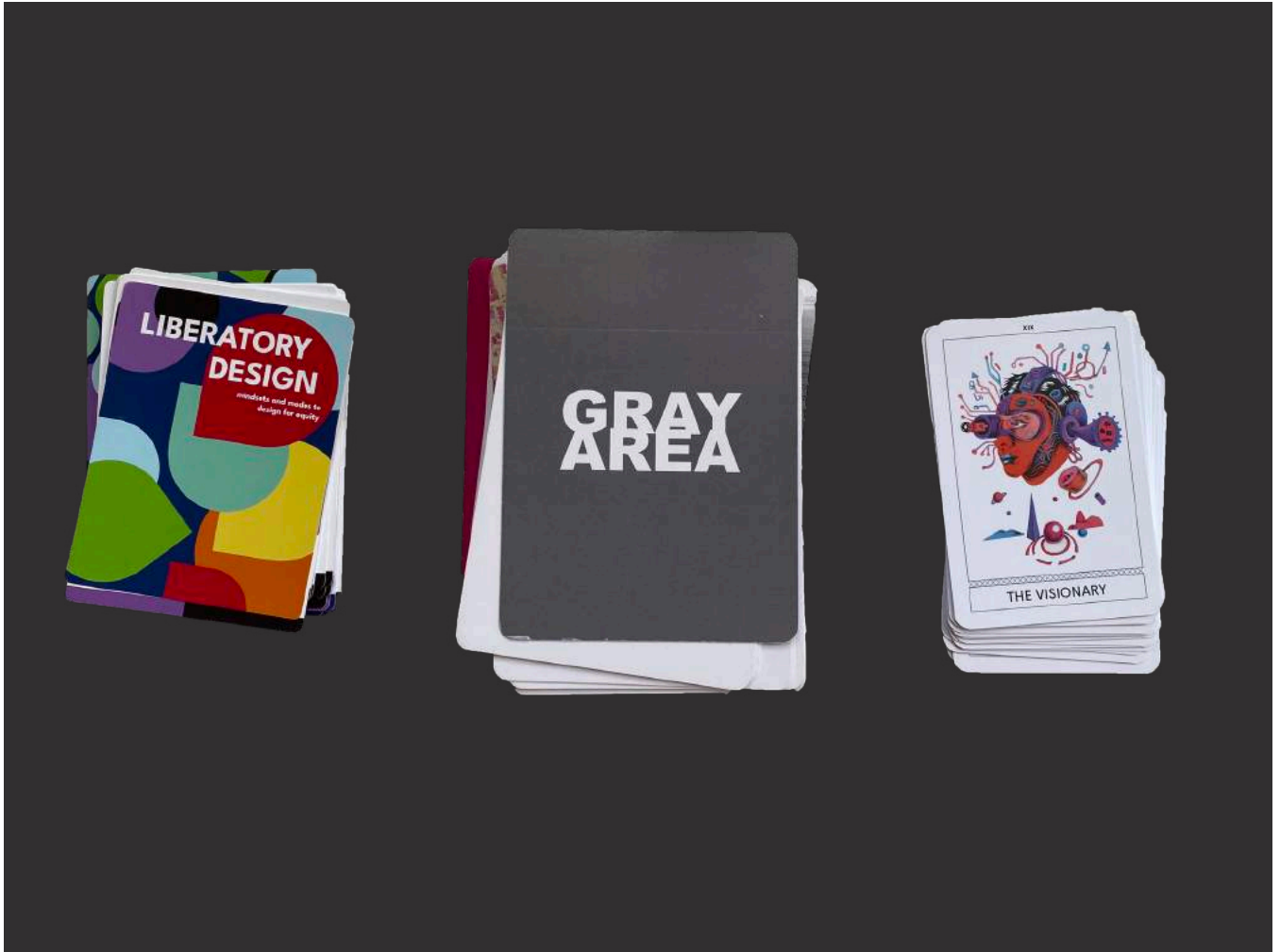
Process



The Design to Disrupt cards scattered.



The card deck was designed to be used fluidly in many different ways that are continuing to unfold. Ultimately how you use this deck is up to what feels right to you and your team's process.



Examples of card decks that I researched:
Liberatory Design, Gray Area, and
Instant Archetypes.

TOOLKIT

→ A toolkit is defined as “a set of tools designed to be used together or for a particular purpose.”⁵

I had an initial conversation with my professor and colleague, Bill Adair, back in October 2020 to discuss some potential toolkit ideas. During this conversation, I shared that I wanted to take a creative approach to the notion of a traditional toolkit. At this time, I knew I wanted it to be interactive, playful, and inquiry based. Bill suggested that I explore card decks, and it ultimately became the platform that I landed upon.

I chose the medium of a card deck for its inherent approachability. People generally have positive associations with cards because it stems back to memories of playing games as a child. I was searching for a toolkit that was disarming by design as a way to make some of the concepts a bit less intimidating. The playful aspect of the medium could allow for greater entrypoint and accessibility. In addition, the size of each card makes the content digestable.

The physicality of the cards is another important aspect of the toolkit. In her book, *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, Elena Gonzalez writes about the importance of touch in exhibitions to not only around create memory, but also to empower visitors and give them agency.² The same idea could be applied to these cards, which are about getting museum practitioners to understand, explore, and share their power in meaningful ways. The tactile and hands on quality of cards could serve a critical role in generating interest to return to the toolkit, pick it up, shuffle them, and hand a card to their colleague.

To learn from their strategies, I researched many different types of card decks. My main area of research surrounded card decks aimed at shifting mindsets, using inquiry, and ones that were based in tarot.

What is my museum's institutional body language

What is the museum's mission and why?

What are your museum's distinct qualities?

How do we hold ourselves accountable as an institution?

What are my museum's institutional values and how are they showing up?

What role does your museum play in the neighborhood it is located?

Who does the museum REALLY serve?

How are mistakes treated?

Are you paying living experts for their time?

How does your museum measure impact and define success?

Who is defining this?

Who is on the board?

How does your museum handle unintended impacts?

Does your museum reflect the complex and intersectional demographics within its community?

What longterm plans are in place towards building authentic and sustainable relationships with communities historically underserved?

What have we acknowledged and ignored as part of our history?

How does my museum define experts?

Why does my museum exist?

Who holds ultimate decision making power about exhibition content and design?

What is important to my museum?

What if my museum did not exist? Who would that impact and how?

How does my museum see itself in relationship to it's audiences?

What actions does the museums take that demonstrate its values?

MAPPING —————>

After researching card decks and design frameworks, I dove into a process of synthesis. I quickly started mind mapping the structure and organization of how I imagined the card deck to function.

I wanted this card deck to be based in inquiry in order for it to reach museum practioners in different contexts. Every museum is going to be different and questions allow for contextualizing the approach based on the organization. As a starting point, I gathered some initial questions that I thought might provoke introspection, annd began organizing them into different categories.

INTERVIEWS —————>

As part of my process to develop the toolkit, I interviewed people in and outside of the museum field as a way to build in collaboration and get feedback on my toolkit as I was developing it in real time. I spoke with designers, curators, educators, content strategists, and activists over Zoom and over the phone (See Appendix). These conversations helped inform and guide the organization structure for the cards.

Previous page:
Testing out questions about
body language.



SKETCHING →

Design was an important piece to this project becoming an object someone would pick up more than once. I wanted the card deck to be colorful and simple, and incorporate visual iconography.

I started initially sketching on flashcards to test out how the front and back of the cards might function. I used colored paper to help organize and distinguish the cards by category. As I began to use more paper, I decided to tape 30 cards so that they could be reused.

This process was helpful to determine the size of the cards, which I landed on being 2.75" x 4.75" because it could fit in the palm of your hand and could still allow for brief content at a legible size.

Previous page:
Sketching out categories
on flashcards.

How do
my
Positionalities
influence
my work?

what are
you letting
go of?

In what ways
am I conscientiously
resisting /
disrupting the
constructs of my
positionality
through this
exhibition process?

What is
your relation-
ship to the
proposed
exhibition
content?

What
drives you
to do this
kind of
work?

neutrality

perfection

What
identities
do you
hold?

how do I
define my
role?
as a
designer

othering

power

How are your
positionalities
sources of power
and privilege
or, alternatively
marginalization
+ disadvantage?

in what
ways
could
you
relinquish
power?

in what
ways do
you hold
power?

fear of
failure

values

ways of knowing

intersectional communities

institutional body language

vulnerability

risk taking

spirituality

lived experience

Black community (NOT A MONOLITH)

SENNETT COMMUNITIES (NOT A MONOLITH)

Who does the museum really serve?

What is the museum's mission?

differences

continuous learning

working through dialogue

intuition

disabled community (NOT A MONOLITH)

LGBTQ community (NOT A MONOLITH)

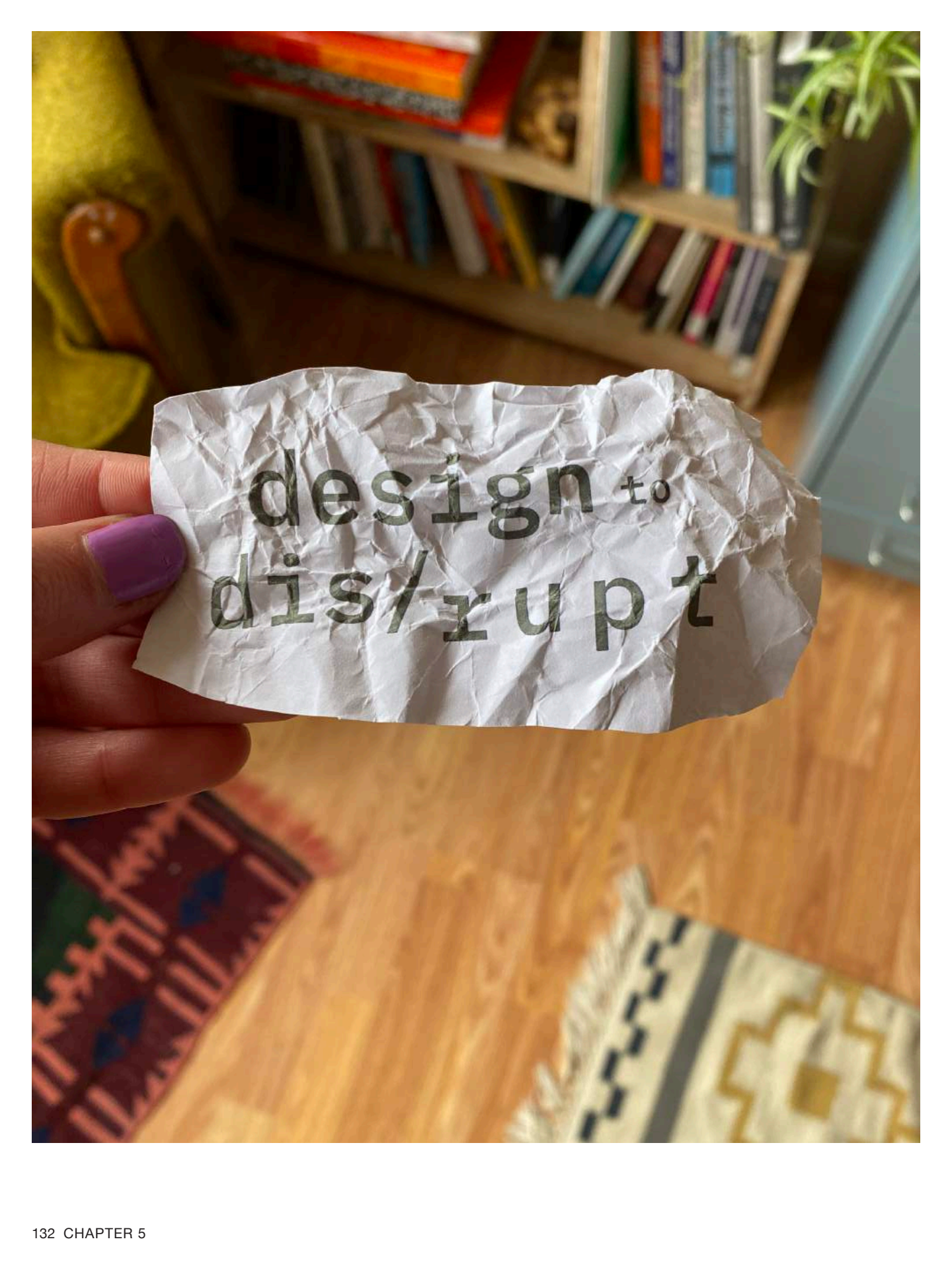
What are the museum's digital strategies?

emergency

Academic Scholarship

Indigenous community (NOT A MONOLITH)

Whose voices are we centering?



design to
dis/rupt

DESIGN
to DIS/RUPT

design
to dis/rup t

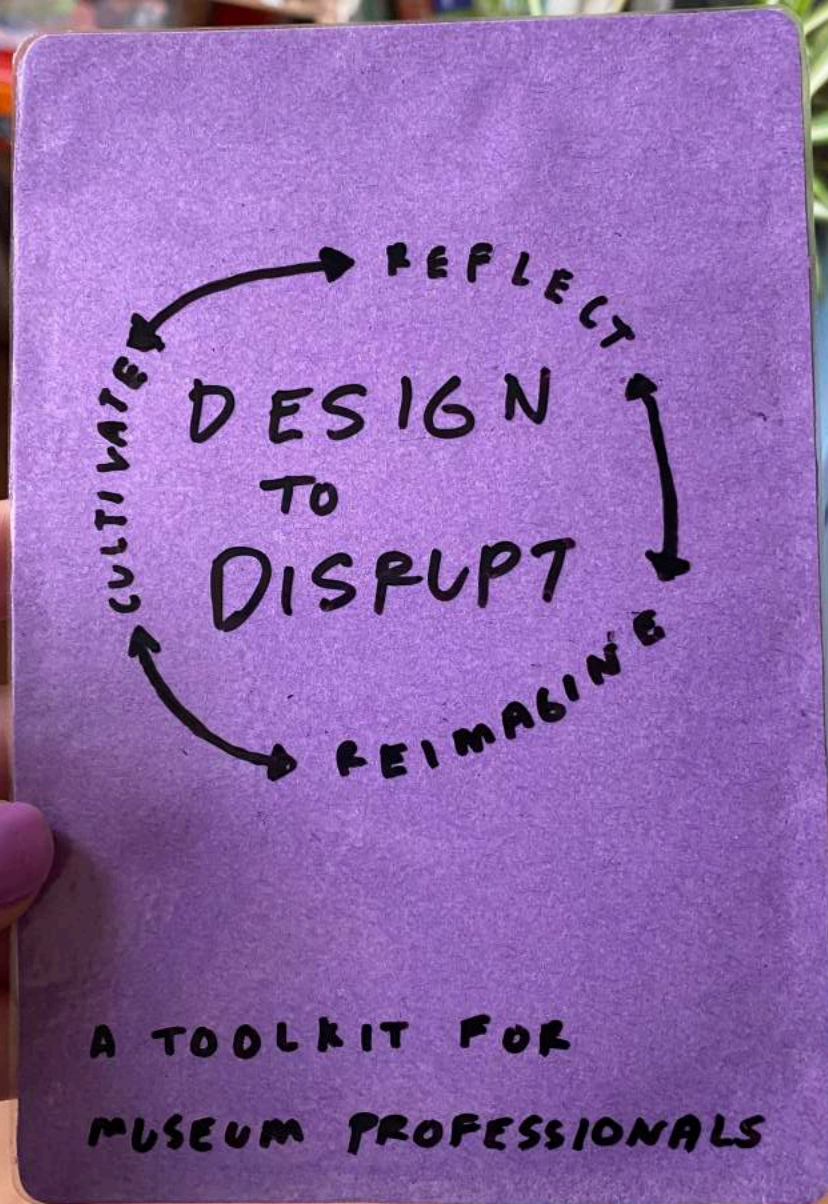
design
to dis/rup t

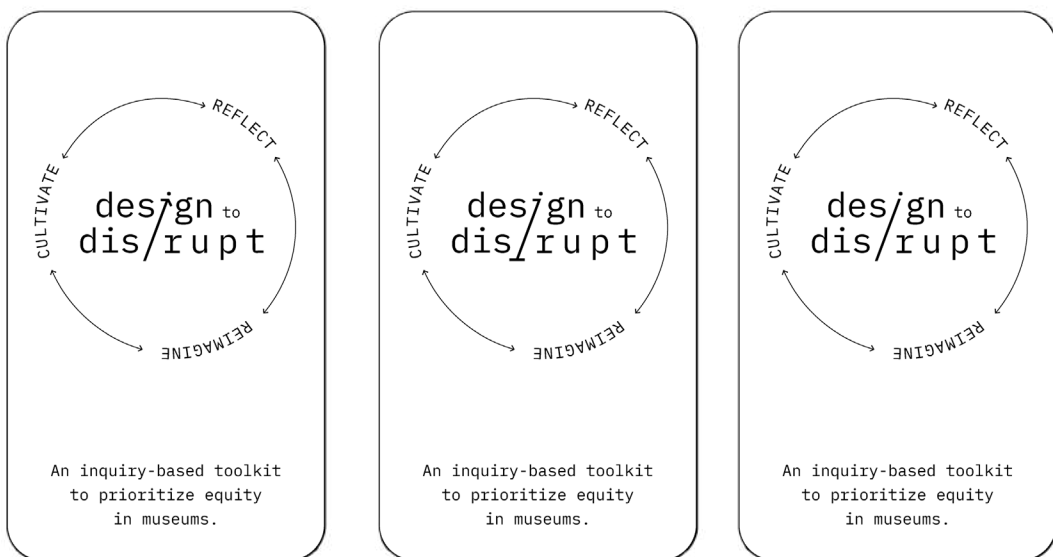
design
to dis/r p
st

design
to dis/rUp t

design
to dis/rup t

This page and previous page:
Logo explorations.





This page and previous page:
Sketching out the card deck cover.



PROTOTYPING



Once I figured out the card categories and content, I printed and laminated the cards to begin testing with people. This step was critical to understanding usability, how people naturally use them and how much facilitation people might need. I sought feedback on the effectiveness of questions, and whether the language was accessible.

I prototyped with the following individuals in person: Maya Hartmann, Curator of Exhibits at the Mercer Museum; and Jess Bicknell, Head of Exhibitions at the Penn Museum. I remotely prototyped with two exhibition teams at the following museums: LA Natural History Museum and the Buffalo Museum of Science.

I sent prototyping participants a follow-up survey on Google Forms that asked the following questions:

1. Did you find this exercise worthwhile/productive/informative?
2. Are the questions generative/stimulating thought provoking/ conversation starters?
3. What more information would you like on the cards? Was there anything about the cards that you found confusing or incomplete?
4. What have I missed? What should be added? What other ideas for disruption would you like to see included?
5. How might this be made more relevant to you and your museum?

Previous page:
Elaine Lopez, thesis
committee member,
giving feedback on the
content and design of the
prototype in her studio.

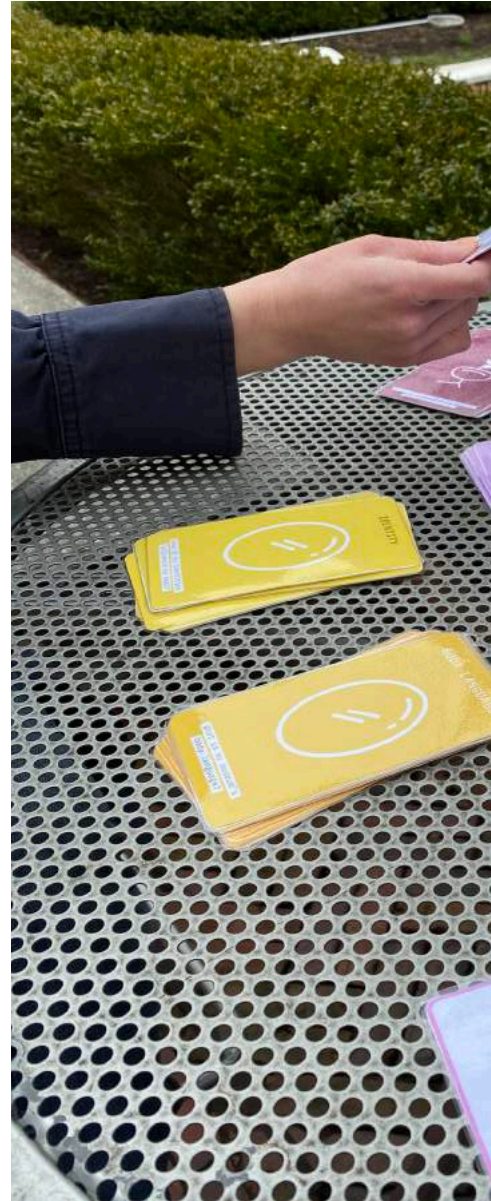
Following the prototyping sessions, I also asked participants to create a manifesto as a final reflection. See Manifesto in Appendix.



Left: Maya Hartmann prototyping the cards at the Mercer Museum.

Middle: Jess Bicknell providing suggestions about the cards at the Penn Museum

Right: Gabrielle Graham, at the Bufallo Museum of Science holding up four cards.







PROTOTYPING BRIEF

OVERVIEW

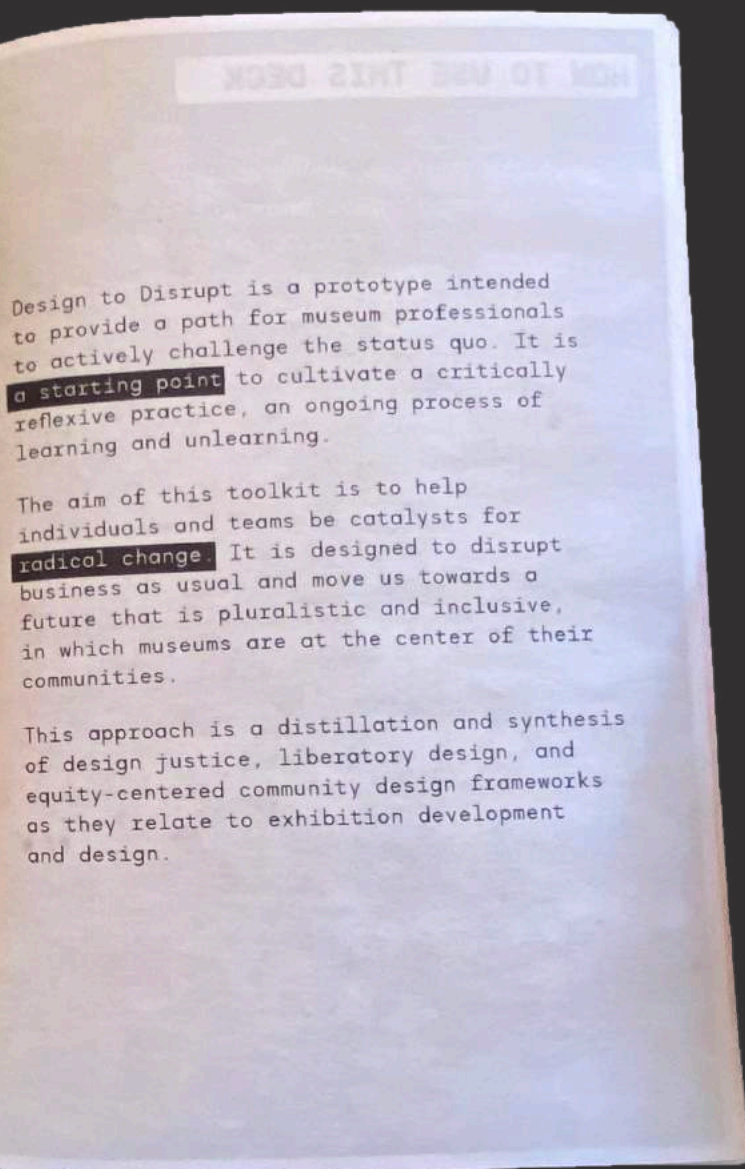
Design to Disrupt is a part of my thesis project, an exhibition designed to **disrupting** the reproduction of heteropatriarchy, obsolescence, the process of creating museums utilize existing design justice, liberatory centered community design

Design to Disrupt is a deck a toolkit for individuals challenge the status quo, questions to cultivate a practice, involving reflection of one's identity, role.

Design to Disrupt is a process acknowledging power const institutional history, past and creating better practices designed to disrupt business towards a future that inclusive, in which museums of their communities.

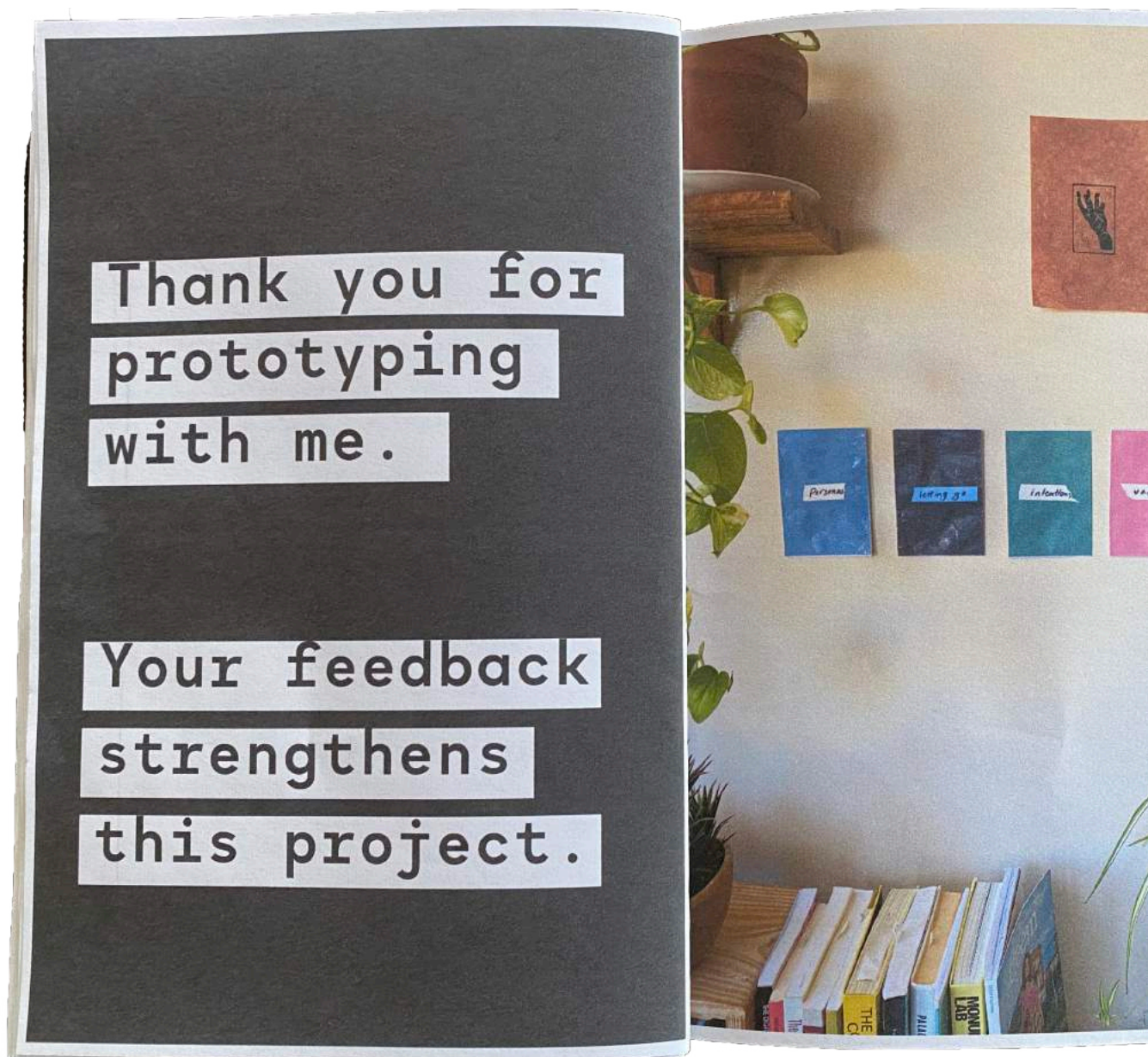
Chaya Arabia
MFA candidate
Museum Exhibition Planning
University of the Arts
ccarabia@uarts.edu

design to
disrupt



Prototyping package contents including the guidebook, deck of cards, and markers.

Analysis



Scan of a spread from the Prototyping Guidebook.



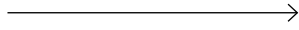
Design to Disrupt has great potential for integration into our project/team building exercises and keeps all of those points at the top of mind when developing exhibits and programs.

——→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

There is no meeting agenda that currently allows for this stepping back, pausing, and getting intentional. Our work culture at the museum is definitely focused on output, but rarely pauses to ask a deeper “why” = why are we doing this, and why are we doing it this way.

——→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

VALUABLE



Prototyping participants found the Design to Disrupt toolkit to be worthwhile and productive. In a follow-up survey participants responded that the reflection aspect was particularly valuable and is something that has been missing from their work. They shared that the questions generated insightful thoughts and that the Manifesto helped pull the various threads of thought together into a clear picture of direction and focus for their projects.

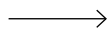
I appreciated the openness that this exercise promoted. It felt like a more vulnerable discussion that could encourage a more emotional response to our work within the museum. Oftentimes meetings are strictly about "business" and do not include time for reflection on intention and an exercise like this could help to break through that wall.

—————> *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

I appreciated the broadness of the questions. I think by not limiting through specifics, we were able to think “big picture” and think about a wider array of answers to each question.

————→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

THOUGHT PROVOKING



Prototyping participants found the Design to Disrupt toolkit to be generative and thought provoking. In a follow-up survey participants responded that they liked the broadness of the questions in general and the format of cards. They also highlighted the “Body Language” category as a useful exercise in teams.

I love working with the card format. Each card triggered an avalanche of ideas. It was almost too much. If I had this deck, I think I would more often than going through the whole process, simply select one card at a time to meditate on.

—————→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

I would like a bit more guidance on how to embed these cards into a work process. Should they come in during strategy conversations, or a bit further into the process? I find it hard to frame the outcome of these cards for teams.

————→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

TEAM CONSIDERATIONS



Prototyping participants would like additional guidance on how to use the Design to Disrupt toolkit as part of their process, particularly in team settings. Participants also wanted greater clarity on when these cards could be used and what the outcome of using the toolkit at different points might be. It was important for them to know whether it could be used for brainstorming and problem-solving, as well as who the target users were. Participants noted that this toolkit could be adapted for all teams at their museums because the questions were broad.

Several participants suggested using the toolkit to facilitate and set the tone for team meetings. They thought it might be helpful to reflect on one or two cards during regular team meetings as opposed to going through the whole deck.

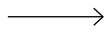
We know what's missing in project considerations, but it's hard to introduce them to the group without getting overridden by someone with more power in the room, or triggering defensiveness. How can the cards help us solve for that?

—————→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

This was extremely thought provoking and it created a sense of closeness and collaboration with colleagues. I felt like I learned a lot from what everyone shared, and had some aha moments about how I can better show up in my day-to-day responsibilities.

——→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

FUTURE EXPLORATIONS



Prototyping participants saw potential for this toolkit being used in their contexts to spark conversations and also encourage vulnerability and closeness with colleagues. Future explorations of this project will explore how the toolkit can help facilitate these conversations for less confident practitioners who may not feel comfortable engaging in a reflective space. As this project expands, it will further develop guidelines on setting the spirit to have these kinds of conversations in a professional setting. In addition, more prototyping is needed to understand and clarify how much time is needed to participate in the different practices.

I think this exercise is well done
and something that is desperately
needed in institutions like museums.
I am excited at the possibility of the
museum using this exercise to improve
its exhibitions, education program,
and beyond.

—————→ *PROTOTYPING PARTICIPANT*

Endnotes

1. "Maturity Model: A Metric for Institutional Transformation," Empathetic Museum. <http://empatheticmuseum.weebly.com/maturity-model.html>
2. Deepa Iyer, "Social Change Ecosystem Map," Building Movement Project. <https://buildingmovement.org/tools/social-change-ecosystem-map/>
3. Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, "The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture," Showing up for Racial Justice. <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>.
4. "Intersectional feminism: what it means and why it matters right now," Unwomen. July 1, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>.
5. "Toolkit" Dictionary. "<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/toolkit>:"

VALUE

collective
action

6

CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the thesis and reflects on the key insights gleaned through this exploration. It also proposes future directions for Design to Disrupt as a way to expand and build a community of practice.

The task is to commit to practices of knowing and care that critically interrogate the fraught history of museums and their contemporary form.

——→ *YESUMI UMOLO*

I envision a pluralistic and inclusive future in which community care is at the center of museums. We are at a critical moment, a crossroads, where we must choose the path towards change in order to achieve that vision. However, the path to change looks varied; there will not be a singular path to go about change. There will not be one solution for any institution because all institutions are unique in their own way. What they have in common are similar barriers to overcome.

The goal of this thesis was to explore how exhibition designers can be active agents in disrupting the reproduction of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and colonialism in the process of creating exhibitions. In order to tackle this question, this thesis examined a broad scope of research and practice into museum history, and design frameworks existing outside of the museum field.

This thesis argues that in order for museums to change, we need disruption of the status quo. If we want museums to be palaces for the people, we must first turn inward and reflect as individuals, teams, and institutions. By cultivating a critically reflexive practice to uncover the biases, assumptions, and values underlying our decision making processes in museums, we can begin to address the root, shift mindsets, and catalyze change within our spheres of influence.

We can use theory to make predictions, develop best practices, and guide new territories of exploration from research and observation. The systematic set of interrelated concepts, definitions, and explorations help us uncover how and why things work as they do. In the museum field, we tend to focus purely on accepted codes of conduct created through professionalization, established best practices, and hit-or-miss risk-taking.

——→ *PORCHIA MOORE*

This thesis argues that the following theories and lenses should be applied to museum praxis:

CRITICAL RACE THEORY	—————→	We can learn from critical race theory to understand and name institutional and intersectional forms of oppression, and create new structures centered around justice and equity.
TRAUMA INFORMED LENS	—————→	If museums are still sites of pain, we can learn from a trauma informed lens to understand, recognize, and respond to the effects of trauma.
ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	—————→	Museums can be thought of as living and breathing organisms. We can learn from employing an ecological lens as a way to understand museums in relationship to their environment and their communities.
CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY	—————→	Lastly, we can learn from critically reflexive praxis. In order for us to change as individuals, teams, as museums, we must first turn inward and interrogate our selves.

Emerging from this thesis are key insights about what we as a field should be letting go of and working towards to build a new future.

1. We should consider the extent to which our best practices hold us back. We are tethered to our best practices and we falsely present them as the finality. We should instead work towards *better practices*. Framing them this way creates a mindset of iteration and always wanting to do and be better.
2. We should consider the extent to which our constraints are assumed, meaning they are placed upon by ourselves and not based in reality. We should work towards understanding the root of these constraints, and reallocate resources through zero budgeting processes.
3. We should let go of our possessive investment in whiteness and consider the extent to which we each hoard our power. We should work towards understanding our own complicity in perpetuating oppression and being transparent about our institutional history. If museums cannot acknowledge the ways in which they have harmed communities, then we cannot trust museums will do better.
4. We should let go of our need to have closure, to have all the answers. Instead we should be embracing complexity and leaving things open-ended.
5. We should no longer be presenting the authoritative, one museum voice, and work towards creating pluralistic spaces engaging polyphonic representations of multiple realities.
6. We as museum professionals have good intentions, but we should work towards prioritizing the impact of our decisions and creating ways to hold ourselves accountable internally.
7. Lastly, we should let go of the way in which we separate community from museum. We should work towards holding community care at the center of museum practice, so that community is the DNA of the museum. Community informs everything we do.

LETTING GO

BEST PRACTICES

ASSUMED CONSTRAINTS

POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT
IN WHITENESS

CLOSURE

ONE MUSEUM VOICE

OVERRELIANCE ON
GOOD INTENTIONS

SEPARATION OF
MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY

WORKING TOWARDS

BETTER PRACTICES

UNCOVER THE ROOT AND
REALLOCATE RESOURCES

RECOGNIZE OUR OWN
COMPLICITY AND
INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

PLURALISM

ACCOUNTABILITY

COMMUNITY IS THE DNA
OF THE MUSEUM

Future Directions

This project reinforces the need for us all to be catalysts for change to collectively make museums more equitable and inclusive spaces. Design to Disrupt is a valuable approach that should be applied in the museum field. It will be most useful for people making decisions about exhibitions, but it can be applied to different settings within a museum. It is also a valuable tool for any type of museum and has the potential to be useful to similar disciplines.

I see this project as a beginning. I started this project with the intention to create a tool that would be of most use to individuals, specifically exhibition designers. Over the course of the project, my definition of exhibition designer expanded to be anyone making decisions about an exhibit (e.g., curators, educators, developers, designers). In addition, as a direct result of my conversations and prototyping sessions, it was clear that people not only wanted a tool that could be used on an individual level, but within their team settings as well. In response to this, I developed the first iteration of a guidebook that considered how a team might use this toolkit to facilitate conversations.

I believe there is still much to be learned through continued prototyping with museum practitioners in both individual and team settings. I would like to test the following assumptions as I move forward in this project:

1. The Design to Disrupt Toolkit is broad enough and relevant to anyone making decisions on an exhibition and any type of museum.
2. It can be used on an individual level and also with a group to stimulate conversation.
3. It is applicable at all stages of the exhibition development process and can be used fluidly.
4. The mental work of reflecting will lead to tangible action.

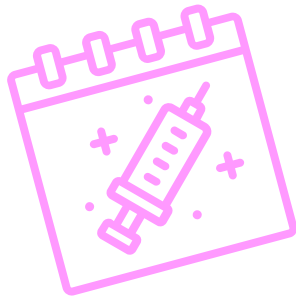
I have an expansive vision of Design to Disrupt beyond my graduate studies. I would like to build a community of practice around the cards, which could live online as an open source free download. In addition, the physical cards could be available for purchase. The Design to Disrupt website could be a place to share resources, ask questions, and connect with people using the deck from different avenues. This community of practice could share approaches and insights from their process as they use the cards.

Many people have already requested copies of the cards. It is my hope that I can send the card deck to people I have come to know and learn from through this process of interviewing and prototyping. They have graciously committed their time and energy towards this project and have strengthened it immensely.

In the year following completion of my MFA, I plan to apply for grant funding to support continuation of this project and have identified several sources of funds, including the University of the Arts President's Fund for Excellence. In addition, several museums including the Los Angeles Natural History Museum and the Science Museum in Minnesota have agreed to continue prototyping with me in this coming year. I have also accepted a year-long Design Fellowship at the J. Paul Getty Museum which will allow me to put this project into practice with my own projects.

One of the most important aspects of my project, is that emerging from this process, I have become a catalyst for change myself. No matter where my path leads me, it is my ultimate goal to model the change I would like to see in the field, and empower others to do so as well.

SPIRIT



vaccine
site

7

APPENDIX

Design to Disrupt Toolkit

This toolkit contains the first iteration of the Design to Disrupt cards and the prototyping guidebook for teams.

IDENTITY

What are my beliefs and assumptions about the exhibition content? How did I come to these?

IDENTITY

In what ways do I question and challenge the norms and practices established at my museum?

IDENTITY

In what ways do I hold power?

Are there spaces where I can share or give up power?

IDENTITY

How are my identities sources of power and privilege, or disadvantage?

IDENTITY

How do I
hold myself
accountable to
my intentions?

IDENTITY

Where is my
sphere of
influence?

IDENTITY

How do I define
my role?

How do you see
this role in
relationship to
your team, and
the communities
you aim to
engage?

IDENTITY

What are the
communities I
am a part of?

BODY LANGUAGE

How does my
museum measure
impact and
define success?

Who or what
defines this?

BODY LANGUAGE

To whom or
what do we
hold ourselves
accountable as
an institution?

How do we hold
ourselves
accountable?

BODY LANGUAGE

Who does my
museum benefit?

Who does my
museum really
serve?

Who does
my museum
prioritize?

BODY LANGUAGE

What role does
my museum
play in its
neighborhood?

BODY LANGUAGE

What approaches
are in place to
(re)build
sustainable
and authentic
relationships
with
communities we
have harmed?

BODY LANGUAGE

Who holds
ultimate
decision making
power about
exhibitions?

BODY LANGUAGE

How does my
museum define
experts?

BODY LANGUAGE

In what ways
have we, as an
institution,
harmed others?

How do we know?

ARCHETYPE

advocate

The advocate employs empathy and care to consider perspectives not at the table.

ARCHETYPE

builder

The builder plans, organizes, and strategizes to achieve the shared vision.

ARCHETYPE

designer

The designer makes choices, solves problems, and turns ideas into reality.

ARCHETYPE

visionary

The visionary illuminates the unseen paths forward even when others cannot easily make sense of them.

ARCHETYPE

disruptor

The disruptor takes uncomfortable and risky actions to challenge the status quo, to raise awareness, and realign.

ARCHETYPE

weaver

The weaver sees connections between people, places, ideas, and experiences.

ARCHETYPE

researcher

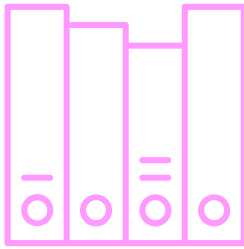
The researcher is inquisitive and knows how to ask questions, including why.

ARCHETYPE

healer

The healer acknowledges and tends to traumas caused by oppressive systems and practices.

SPIRIT



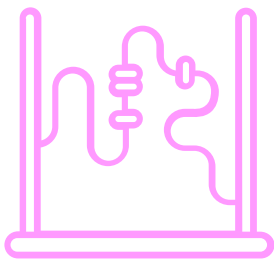
library

SPIRIT



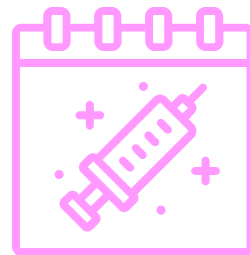
soup
kitchen

SPIRIT



day care

SPIRIT



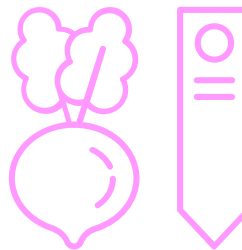
vaccine
site

SPIRIT



maker space

SPIRIT



community
garden

SPIRIT



place of
worship

SPIRIT



social
change lab

VALUE

BARRIER

COMMUNITY

WAY OF KNOWING

VALUE

vulnerability

VALUE

moving at the
speed of trust

VALUE

accountability

VALUE

continuous
learning

VALUE

transparency

VALUE

collective
action

VALUE

humility

VALUE

differences

BARRIER

individualism

BARRIER

**scarcity
mindset**

BARRIER

neutrality

BARRIER

closure

BARRIER

gatekeeping

BARRIER

**either or
thinking**

BARRIER

perfectionism

BARRIER

power hoarding

COMMUNITY

gender

COMMUNITY

age

COMMUNITY

location

COMMUNITY

affinity

COMMUNITY

race

COMMUNITY

religion

COMMUNITY

experience

COMMUNITY

ability

WAY OF KNOWING

academic
scholarship

WAY OF KNOWING

ancestral
wisdom

WAY OF KNOWING

dialogue

WAY OF KNOWING

nature

WAY OF KNOWING

lived
experience

WAY OF KNOWING

spirituality

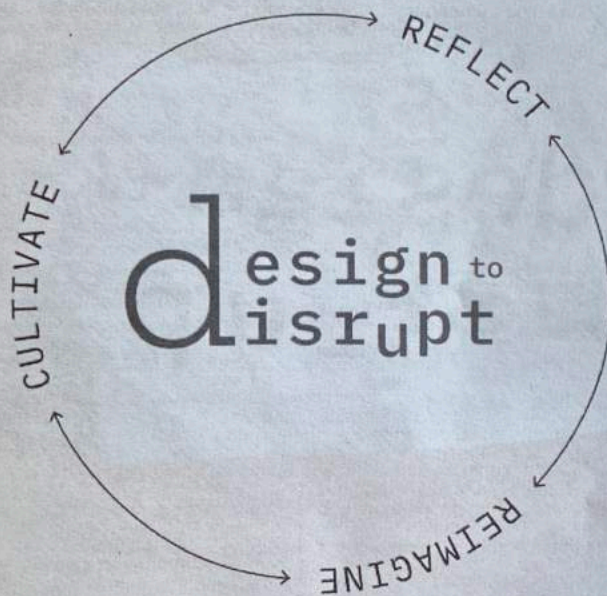
WAY OF KNOWING

language

WAY OF KNOWING

cultural
knowledge

PROTOTYPING GUIDEBOOK



An inquiry-based toolkit
for critically reflexive practice
in museums.

HOW TO USE THIS DECK

Design to Disrupt is a practice of acknowledging power constructs, understanding institutional history, prioritizing values, and letting go of best practices that no longer serve us.

Use these cards as a reflective discussion tool individually and/or in any collaborative contexts within your museum.

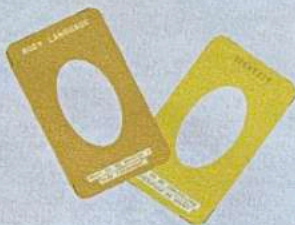
As a starting point, this guide provides a linear way to use the cards. However, the card deck was designed to be used fluidly in many different ways that are continuing to unfold.

Ultimately, how you use this deck is up to what feels right to you and your team's process.

In this toolkit, you will find cards organized into **eight categories** distinguishable by color.

Notice categories have similar icons. The icons correspond to **three practices** that emerge from the Design to Disrupt approach:

reflection



reimagination



cultivation



PROTOTYPING AS A GROUP



Choose one person from the group to act as a **facilitator**. This facilitator will be reading instructions from this guide book.

Begin each session with your collaborators with an **acknowledgement of mindsets**. How would you like to be in this group reflection space? Write down your community agreements.

Examples: actively listening, respecting differences, leaning into discomfort, embracing honesty and vulnerability, etc.

Encourage everyone to have a **place to write** reflections, questions, and any thoughts that may arise. Jot down whatever comes to mind and try not to filter yourself in this space.

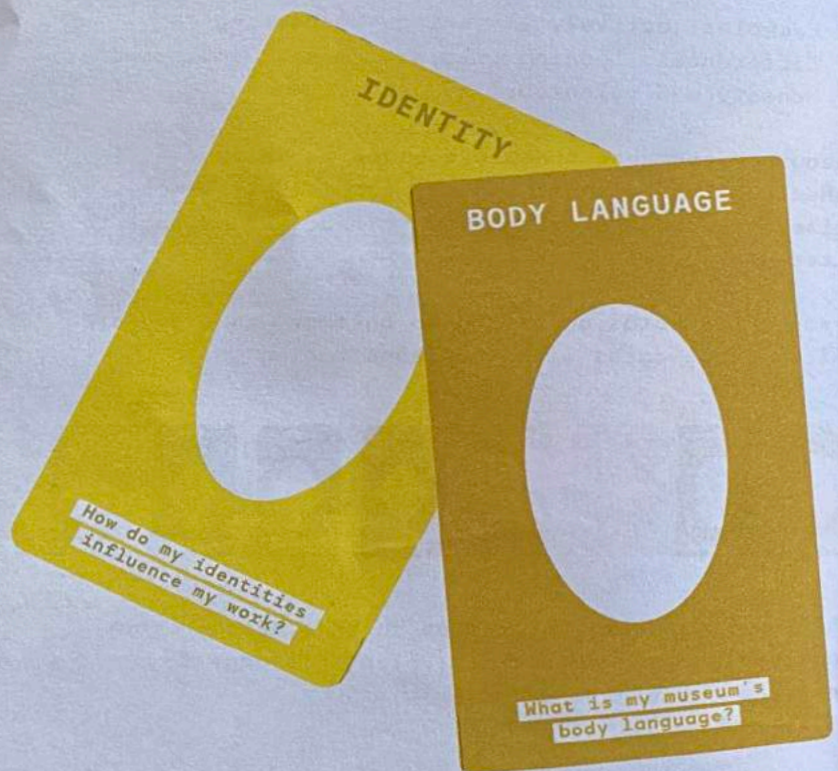
Arrange the cards **according to category** in a the order below. Place cards with the icons facing up.



There will be **three practices** in this session that engage all eight categories. Flip this page for instructions on how to begin.

REFLECTION PRACTICE prompts users with questions that stimulate awareness of oneself and one's institution.

This activity has two categories: *IDENTITY* and *BODY LANGUAGE*.



IDENTITY

Begin Reflection Practice with *IDENTITY* cards. These cards ask questions about **your identities**, and how they influence the way you approach your work.

1. Give each participant **one** *IDENTITY* card.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. After reading each question, be honest with yourself. **Notice how your understanding of yourself is shifting.** Write down anything you feel and save for later.
3. Come back together as a group to share cards and individual reflections.

BODY LANGUAGE

Next, explore *BODY LANGUAGE* cards. Here, *body language* refers "to the powerful messages museums convey through unspoken and unwritten manifestations of their being: the design of their buildings, the demographics of their staff and boards, the choices they make in their collections, exhibitions, and programs"*. These cards ask about a museum's body language historically and currently.

1. Give each participant **one** *BODY LANGUAGE*.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. After reading the question, be honest about your understanding of the museum. **Consider how your response to this question may speak to your museum's values.** Write down anything you feel and save for later.
3. Come back together as a group to share cards and individual reflections.

*Defined by the Empathetic Museum.

Before concluding this session, pause for a final moment

How might we hold ourselves accountable t

of reflection:

o our values?

REIMAGINATION PRACTICE prompts users to look outside of their specific role as an individual and an institution.

This activity has two categories: *ARCHETYPE* and *SPIRIT*.



ARCHETYPE

Begin Reimagination Practice with *ARCHETYPE* cards. These cards contain different **archetypes** to help you **see outside of your designated title or position.**

1. As a group, **consider a question or conundrum** in a exhibit that is in process. Give each participant **one ARCHETYPE** card. Use blank cards to write additional archetypes to consider.
2. Allow individual time for participants to **reposition themselves and approach the project from the new perspective.** Write down anything you feel and save for later.
3. Come back as a group to discuss the posed question or conundrum with your new role.

SPIRIT

Next, move on to *SPIRIT* cards. These cards contain examples of **social hubs that play vital roles in communities.** The purpose is to reimagine your museum.

1. Give each participant **one SPIRIT** card. Use blank cards to write additional roles if needed.
2. Allow time for individual reflection to consider how **your museum might embody the spirit of another social hub.** Write down anything you feel.
3. Come back together as a group to **discuss the specific role of your museum and how it fulfills the needs of its communities.**

Before moving to the next practice, pause for a moment

*Draw your museum in the future, what does
transform to fulfill the needs of its community
resourceful ways?*

of reflection:

it look like and how might it
nities in new, relevant and

CULTIVATION PRACTICE encourages users to put equity and inclusion into practice in the process of creating an exhibition.

This activity has four categories: *VALUE*, *BARRIER*, *COMMUNITY*, and *WAY OF KNOWING*.

To prepare, imagine you are working on a future exhibit, or apply these questions to an exhibit in process.



VALUE

Begin Cultivation Practice with **VALUE** cards. These cards contain **practices that promote inclusion**.

1. Give each participant **two VALUE** cards, one blank card and one with a predetermined value.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. **After reading the predetermined value, consider the extent to which this value shows up in your work.** Use the blank card to write a personal value. Write down anything you feel and save for later.
3. Come together as a group and determine **three to five core team values** that promote equity. Discuss how each value is being manifested in the exhibition.

BARRIER

Next, move on to **BARRIER** cards. These cards contain **potential obstacles to achieving equity**. Some are not inherently problematic, but be open to how they might show up as barriers in your work*.

1. Give each participant **two BARRIER** cards, one blank card and one with a predetermined value.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. After reading the card with the predetermined barrier, **consider how this card might present itself as an obstacle.** Use the blank card to write another barrier. Write down anything you feel and save for later.
3. Come together as a group and **commit to letting go of three to five barriers** as you work towards prioritizing equity in this exhibition.

*See the Characteristics of White Supremacy, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun.

COMMUNITY

Next, move on to the *COMMUNITY* cards. Here, *communities* refers to groups of people with shared experiences, identities, and interests. These cards contain lenses through which we can think intersectionally about our audiences. Intersectionality considers overlapping identities "to see the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other"*. It offers a lens to think about the complexities of human experiences*.

1. Give each participant three *COMMUNITY* cards.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. As you read each card consider:
 - What injustices are relevant to this exhibition?
 - Who have we typically centered?
 - Who have we ignored?
 - Who is at the margins and what barriers do they face?

Write any feelings and save for later.

3. Come together as a group to discuss potential communities to center for the exhibition and why. Use the blank cards to write down *communities* you aim to center in this exhibition. Be specific.

*Defined by the Kimberlé Crenshaw.

WAY OF KNOWING

Lastly, move on to the *WAY OF KNOWING* cards. These cards contain different **ways to know, understand, and engage with the world**. The purpose is to identify ways of knowing that have been overlooked in museum spaces.

1. Give each participant **two** *WAY OF KNOWING* cards: one blank card and one with a predetermined way of knowing.
2. Allow time for individual reflection. Read the card with the predetermined way of knowing. **Consider the extent to which this way of knowing is being honored and uplifted in this exhibition.** Use the blank card to write one way of knowing not usually amplified at the museum. Write thoughts down and save for later.
3. Come together as a group and share how you experienced these cards. **Discuss the ways of knowing that have been honored and uplifted in your past projects.** How might we amplify new ways of knowing in this exhibit?

Before concluding this session, pause for a final moment

How might we hold ourselves accountable t

of reflection:

o our values?

Thank you for
prototyping
with me.

Your feedback
strengthens
this project.



Design to Disrupt Manifesto

This manifesto was sent to prototyping participants to fill out as a final reflection and follow-up to the session.

Design to Disrupt Manifesto

After each time you use the Design to Disrupt deck in your practice, allow time to process your learning and crystalize your growth.

Write your own manifesto that emerges from this process. Use these statements as a starting point and post them on a wall where you can be reminded of your manifesto.

I/we have a new understanding of...

I/we value...

I/we envision...

I/we will work towards...

I/we am/are committed to...

Interviewees

The following people were interviewed by me during the months of July 2020 through May 2021.

Aaron Goldblatt. Zoom interview, February 12, 2021.

Andrea Ngan, Danita Reese, and Devika Menon. Zoom interviews, February 12, 2021; March 19, 2021.

Antionette Carroll. Zoom interview, March 3, 2021.

Ciara Cyst, Sam Mera, Kate Curto, and Stephanie Deach. Zoom interview. Online, March 17, 2021.

Chris Taylor. Phone interview, February 11, 2021.

Cynthia Lee and Mekala Krishnan. Zoom interview, September 16, 2020.

Cynthia Smith. Zoom interview, February 8, 2021.

Dan Spock. Zoom interview, July 29, 2020.

Elaine H. Gurian. Zoom interview, February 15, 2021.

Elaine Lopez. Zoom interview, July 27, 2021.

Elena Gonzalez. Phone interview, February 3, 2021.

Evan Schulman. Zoom interviews, February 10, 2021; March 3, 2021; March 21, 2021.

Gabrielle Graham. Zoom interview, February 24, 2021.

Jess Bicknell. Zoom interview, February 10, 2021.

Jess Sand. Zoom interviews, February 18, 2021; March 4, 2021; April 1, 2021.

Jheri Wills. Zoom interview, March 26, 2021.

Joanne Jones-Rizzi. Phone interviews, September 18, 2020; March 19, 2021.

Jonai Gibson-Selix. Zoom interview January 29, 2021.

Kate Raisz. Zoom interview, February 12, 2021.

Mariel Villeré. Zoom interview, March 14, 2021.

Nina Simon. Phone interview, May 2, 2021.

Oronde Wright. Zoom interview September 2, 2020.

Penny Jennings. Zoom interview, July 31, 2020.

Randi Korn. Phone interview, February 15, 2021.

Rose Paquet Kinsley. Zoom interview, February 11, 2021.

Sasha Costanza-Chock. Zoom interview, February 10, 2021.

Su Oh. Zoom interview, March 25, 2021.

Tania Anaissie. Zoom interview, October, 2020.

Tiya Gordon. Zoom interview, March 11, 2021.

Victoria Edwards. Zoom interview January 31, 2021.

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