

Editorial Op-Ed

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Museums Can Help

As we work towards more fulsome lives, while living with COVID-19, we will need safe, engaging places to be with others (including perfect strangers, please!).

Museums can help with that.

Where else can you find spacious, pristinely-maintained environments with sophisticated HVAC systems, closely monitored with both live and electronic surveillance? Where else can you find a richly educational setting in which we're routinely told, "don't touch", and "don't stand too close"? Museums are comfortable, stimulating places to be with fellow human beings, even if at a distance, and they have appropriate, well-understood codes of social engagement already in place.

In museums, we can gather — loosely — around acts of creativity that invigorate our minds and fulfill our spirit, while also stretching our legs. Museums are places of contemplation and quietude, of course, but also of neuro-optical spark.

We all know how art — and the remarkably generous energies of artists — have sustained us during these COVID days: streaming performances, inspired TV, gloriously DIY IG mash-ups, riveting podcasts, books(!), and — in my house — lots of 33rpm vinyl. Thank goodness for that cascade of art into our homes. But it all falls far, far short of a richly-lived experience, and everywhere you look, there are signs that we are climbing the walls.

As Governor Cuomo recently noted, cabin fever is itself a dangerous contagion. Marriage applications are plummeting. Domestic violence is on the rise, at alarming rates. Social isolation and economic stress are taking a heavy toll on healthy

minds, to say nothing of the devastation it wreaks upon those with impaired mental health.

Museums can offer a meaningful break from the physical and emotional constraints of COVID-19. But more than that, museums remind us what it is to be human, right when we need it most. As we ease into the next phase of living with COVID-19, museums can serve as our great congregation-less public commons. The contemporary artist Ann Hamilton once described museums as a place "we can gather and be alone, together...and that can change your whole day."

But exactly how could that work, this "being alone, together"?

Here are a few ideas, because the details will matter: Require all staff and visitors to be properly protected, with museums providing festive masks for free, or at affordable prices, at all entrances; timed entry, with touchless, line-free ticketing, with the same transactional spacing and plexi sneeze-shielding with which we're all now familiar; maintain proper social distancing through use of advance reservations, timed entry, gallery-by-gallery visitor counts, floor markings and other methods, including temporarily slashing building code occupancy rates by one half or more. (Subject to egress conditions, most public assembly certificates-of-occupancy are based on 15 square feet per person, whereas the 6' social distancing rule requires 30 square feet per person.)

Providing generous social distancing space is one thing, but helping museum visitors mind the rules is another. As museum-goers, we are already accustomed to security guards reminding us to "please stand back". That kind of gentle reinforcement can now be applied to person-to-person distances as well. There are many other techniques, including a profusion of hand sanitizer stations, the required use of gloves and/or sanitizers in all retail zones, adoption of COVID-19 OSHA guidelines for food service, elimination of as many "door handle" barriers as possible. There are a few things not to do, including no interactive displays, no "please touch" exhibits and no virtual reality headsets. Dedicated, and even more tightly controlled hours reserved for the elderly — who are likely to be living constrained lives for longer than others —

might be a good idea too...especially come winter, when they will need stimulating places to exercise safely indoors.

All of this becomes infinitely easier to manage with ubiquitous testing, of course, but for many museums, meeting these guidelines is possible even now. Space-constrained museums with intimate galleries in dense urban settings might not be among the first to re-open their doors in this next phase of living with COVID-19. But thousands of museums (and gardens, and historic properties) with enough space, in lower density settings, can meet these criteria with just a few weeks of careful planning. With lottery tickets or other visitor-metering systems, even our most popular museums in great cities could be places of equitable engagement with art, science, and history. Think of what comfort and excitement the vast and free network of museums that comprise the Smithsonian Institution could provide to those who have been holed up for months in confined domestic quarters. Imagine what we can learn about ourselves, and life during these strange times, by seeing COVID-19 relevant exhibitions by nimble curators and our most insightful living artists, scientists and historians.

On the last day that MASS MoCA — where I work — was open to the public, I joined our ticketing staff to help out, and to gauge our patrons' state of mind. Attendance was about 65% of what it might otherwise have been on a normal late winter weekend. Our visitors had clearly already begun taking precautions, and were making well-informed, risk-based visitation decisions of their own free will; for example, there was a notable lack of elderly visitors. But those who did visit — mostly younger patrons, and young families — were deeply appreciative of the chance to spend a blustery day inside vast, airy spaces, in the presence of great art ... and with other people, widely spread, with literally acres of social distancing space easily available. Even so, it felt right to close then. With plenty of space and proper protocols in place, it will also feel right to re-open, when the time comes.