

# Hamilton

## CIVIC MUSEUM STRATEGY



---

# Contents

---

INTRODUCTION	I
THE HAMILTON CIVIC MUSEUMS	2
COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS	5
ALIGNMENT WITH EXISTING MUNICIPAL PLANS AND POLICIES	8
ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF THE MUSEUM AND HERITAGE SECTOR	II
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HAMILTON CIVIC MUSEUMS	19
HAMILTON CIVIC MUSEUM STRATEGY	20
REFERENCES	28



## INTRODUCTION

The Civic Museum Strategy is a transformative plan that guides the work of the Hamilton's Civic Museums from 2022 to 2030. Building on past success in operating stand-alone museums, it dramatically broadens their scope of engagement by articulating a new vision grounded in a whole-city approach to heritage. Envisioning an expanded scope of programming and engagement beyond the existing sites and museums, it empowers residents and community members as collaborators and co-creators in bringing untold stories to light.

The strategy is a made-in-Hamilton approach to heritage presentation and community engagement that is informed by best practices from leading organizations and thought leaders in the museum sector. It will be realized by taking six key actions:

- Embrace the City;
- Rethink Collecting;
- Embed the Shift to Digital;
- Collaborate and Co-Create;
- Develop the Workforce; and
- Develop Additional Revenue Streams.

While work had begun on developing a long-term strategy for the Hamilton Civic Museums before the start of the pandemic in early 2020, the challenges of dealing with COVID-19 underscored the need for changes to museum and heritage services. The pandemic has imposed a stress test on the culture and heritage sector. This has highlighted the fragility of current revenue streams and the shortcomings of a visitor experience model centered around in-person visitation.

COVID-19 has also exposed structural disparities in accessibility to programs and services as well as equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility challenges.

Over the last 18 months the museum and heritage sector has repeatedly adapted to rapidly-changing and challenging circumstances. Through this time the Civic Museums have built capacity to sustain frequent and radical changes in operating scenarios while meeting public health restrictions and visitor expectations. However, these successful crisis responses should not be allowed to mask the need for fundamental structural changes in how the City's museums operate, the audiences they serve and the ways in which they engage with their communities.

The Civic Museum Strategy offers a new vision not only for the Hamilton Civic Museums but also for how the Heritage Resource Management section as a whole fosters community engagement and collaboration. The new strategy is aligned with existing municipal plans, strategies and priorities. Implementing it will help achieve City priorities such as the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion policy, Term of Council Priorities and the Urban Indigenous Strategy.

In the near term, the strategy will guide the Civic Museums successfully through COVID and position them to succeed and thrive in a post-pandemic world. In the longer term, it will establish the Hamilton Civic Museums as leaders in the field of municipal heritage. The museums will have an impact both in the city and beyond, and they will become known for offering sustainable, accessible, equitable, inclusive and engaging visitor experiences.

## THE HAMILTON CIVIC MUSEUMS

The Heritage Resource Management Section of the Tourism and Culture Division operates nine civic museums: five historic houses (Dundurn National Historic Site, Fieldcote Memorial Park and Museum, Battlefield House Museum & Park National Historic Site, Whitehern Historic House and Garden National Historic Site, Griffin House National Historic Site); three gallery-style museums (The Hamilton Military Museum, The Hamilton Museum of Steam and Technology National Historic Site, Hamilton Children's Museum) and an underwater archaeology site (*Hamilton* and *Scourge* National Historic Site).

### DUNDURN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- Known as Dundurn Castle, this 40-room Italianate-style villa was built in the 1830s on Burlington Heights, also the site of a fortified military encampment established by the British during the War of 1812. It was home to Sir Allan Napier MacNab, railway magnate, lawyer and Premier of the United Canadas from 1854 to 1856. Today Dundurn Castle tells the story of the MacNab family and the servants who lived and worked in the house.

### BATTLEFIELD HOUSE MUSEUM & PARK NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- Battlefield Park and the 1876 Gage house occupy land traditionally used by Indigenous peoples. This National Historic Site is home to the 2020 art installation "Eagles Among Us." Created by Indigenous artist David General, it is dedicated to peace and reconciliation after war. In the early 19th century, the Gage family farmhouse was a community hub for farmers, itinerant

preachers and Indigenous peoples who came to meet and trade at James Gage's store. A monument built in 1913 commemorates a War of 1812 battle on the site. It was commissioned by the Women's Wentworth Historical Society, one of the first all-women's historical societies in Canada.

### FIELDCOTE MEMORIAL PARK AND MUSEUM

- Fieldcote is a cultural heritage centre that collects and exhibits local history and promotes fine arts in Ancaster. The Tudor-revival house is set in three hectares (7 acres) of park and woodlands featuring walking trails, public art and award-winning gardens.

### WHITEHERN HISTORIC HOUSE AND GARDEN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- Located in downtown Hamilton, the house known as Whitehern was home to three generations of the McQuesten family. In 1959, the three surviving members of the family bequeathed the home to the City together with its original contents. The house and gardens opened as a museum in 1971. The McQuesten family's history includes several distinguished members who were responsible for the development of industry in Hamilton as well as parks, highways, bridges and landmarks throughout the Golden Horseshoe and Niagara and other parts of Ontario.

#### GRIFFIN HOUSE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- Eneral and Pricilla Griffin, fleeing enslavement in the US and seeking a better life for themselves and their children, settled in Ancaster and purchased Griffin House in 1834. The Griffin family lived on this 20-hectare (50 acre) site for 150 years as prosperous farmers and active members of both white and Black communities in Hamilton and Ancaster. Today Griffin House stands as a testament to the determination and accomplishments of African American/ Canadian men and women who broke the colour barrier to become prominent community figures.

#### THE HAMILTON MILITARY MUSEUM

- The Hamilton Military Museum preserves and shares the military history of Hamilton and area through exhibits, programs and events. The building that houses it was originally constructed as a gate house for Dundurn Castle by Sir Allan MacNab in the late 1830s. It was first known as Battery Lodge as it is located on the site of a War of 1812 artillery emplacement.

#### THE HAMILTON MUSEUM OF STEAM AND TECHNOLOGY NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- The Hamilton Museum of Steam & Technology is located in the 1859 Hamilton Waterworks building. Constructed with limestone and dolomite quarried in nearby Stoney Creek, the building still houses the two massive rotative beam engines which originally pumped water from Lake Ontario to a reservoir above the city.

The Museum preserves and interprets the original waterworks complex and through it the social and mechanical life of Canada's early industrial revolution. The Hamilton Waterworks has been designated a Canadian Civil and Power Engineering Landmark.

#### HAMILTON CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

- Housed in an 1875 farmhouse in Gage Park, the Hamilton Children's Museum invites young visitors to stretch their imagination as they touch, build and experiment in a friendly, child-focused setting. Home to interactive, hands-on galleries, the museum encourages learning through self-directed play and offers a range of engaging programs and experiences to children and their families.

#### HAMILTON AND SCOURGE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

- The wrecks of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* are a designated Historic Site of Canada. Designed as merchant schooners, both vessels were converted into American warships when the War of 1812 began and each played a role in the capture of Fort George on May 27, 1813. While stationed off Port Dalhousie, they capsized and sank with a loss of over 50 lives during a sudden squall in the early morning of August 8, 1813. Discovered 90 metres below the surface of Lake Ontario in 1973, these remarkably preserved wrecks are outstanding archaeological records of shipbuilding and naval warfare of their time.

The primary visitor experience of the Hamilton Civic Museums is through in-person guided tours. A smaller portion of the total audience takes part in workshops, lectures and other site-based programs and events. A percentage of the total audience is also engaged online, primarily through social media channels and YouTube.

Pre-pandemic attendance at the Hamilton Civic Museums was strong. In 2019 Hamilton Civic Museums had 204,567 visits, a slight decrease from 207,702 visits in 2018. Revenues had increased year over year and accessibility had been increased through a partnership with the Hamilton Public Libraries that offers free admission to holders of library cards.

The Hamilton Civic Museums have until this point been operated semi-independently, with each one led by a Curator who directed the development of exhibits and programs and supervised research. The artifact collections are similarly focused on furnishing and interpreting each of the sites.

While this operating model has produced strong programming at individual museums and a high level of subject area knowledge among site staff, it has precluded section-wide planning and consideration of the city's history beyond the existing civic museums.





## COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

The new Civic Museum Strategy grows out of *Reimagining Our Museums*, an extensive community consultation carried out in 2019. The project utilized multiple engagement methods over a six-month period to consult with three main groups: stakeholders, patrons and residents. Consultations were conducted by means of workshops for external stakeholders, surveys, community events, onsite visitor surveys, exit interviews and focus groups. Responses from the more than 1700 engagement participants can be summarized in three categories:

### Presentation and Exhibits

- More interactive exhibits
- Increased exhibit rotation
- More flexibility on how to experience museums
- Exhibits and tours designed for all ages
- Buildings and grounds recognized as part of the museum experience
- Strong appreciation for existing presentations and exhibits and support for the good work of existing interpreters and tour guides

### Stories and Narratives

- Broader representation in the stories told
- A greater breadth of story subjects
- Use stories to make connections between the museums
- Strong appreciation for existing stories and narratives

### Accessibility and Community Connections

- Stronger social connections and community partnerships
- More community events at museums and sites
- Improved physical accessibility for sites and exhibits
- Increased promotion, marketing and communications



The consultants concluded their report by noting a high degree of satisfaction with the existing Hamilton Civic Museums and pride in what they provide. Study participants saw the Museums as key venues to better communicate the story of the city and its communities, but also noted many opportunities for improvements to the existing museums and their exhibits, programs and for expanding the audiences they serve.

“A clear message from respondents across the engagement was that there is high satisfaction with Hamilton Civic Museums and strong pride in what they provide. . .this manifests in local pride that positions museums as key venues to better communicate the story of the city and its various people and communities. Further, this is demonstrated in the desire to see improvements to the existing museums.”

Reimagine Our Museums

## HAMILTON 175

In 2021 a project was launched to commemorate the 175th anniversary of Hamilton’s founding as a city in 1846. This will be accomplished by creating a digital storytelling platform featuring exhibits and information developed in collaboration with many of the city’s communities.

These community heritage projects are being carried out in consultation with an Advisory Group composed of citizens, City staff and representatives of other heritage-related organizations. This pilot project embodies the collaborative and community-based approach to heritage proposed in the new strategy.

## CITYLAB AND HAMILTON’S BUILT HERITAGE INVENTORY

In the fall of 2021, staff submitted a project challenge titled “Hamilton’s History, Today” to CityLAB. The purpose of the project was to assist with the City’s ongoing Built Heritage Inventory. In particular, students responding to the challenge would help develop strategies for community engagement and education on the subject of heritage preservation. In Winter 2021, students from Redeemer University took up the challenge and focused on gathering information on Stinson Neighbourhood, one of Downtown Hamilton’s earliest and historic neighbourhoods. The students prepared a high-level overview of the history and characteristics of the neighbourhood and presented it in a user-friendly infographic.



For the Fall 2021 term, McMaster University students will focus on how the City can engage a more diverse and representative sample of the community when conducting Built Heritage Inventory work, while being mindful of the restrictions and barriers with COVID-19 and beyond. This work will be used by the City in the engagement of Dundas residents in the development of a Historic Context Statement for the area as part of the upcoming Downtown Dundas Built Heritage Inventory project

## STAFF ENGAGEMENT

In early 2020, five staff working groups were created to prepare for the civic museum strategy by researching heritage sector trends and best practices. Research was carried out in five areas:

1. interpretive planning
2. collections planning
3. digital engagement
4. exhibit development
5. business processes/organizational structure.

The working groups came back together at intervals during the year to share results and identify common issues. Four of the working group reports (on interpretive planning, digital engagement, exhibit development and business planning/organizational structure) have been incorporated into the development of this strategy.

In a workshop session held in September 2021, Heritage Resource Management staff were asked to consider programming offered by the Hamilton Civic Museums through three lenses:

### Stories Currently Being Told

- These are centred on the history of the site itself and the lives of the people who lived and/or worked there. Related topics include settlement of Hamilton and surrounding areas, food history as it pertains to the site and relevant historical events such as the War of 1812.

### Stories Not Currently Being Told

- These include stories of the larger-scale history of the city around the museums, such as immigration, pre-colonial history, environmental and landscape history. Together with these broad themes, it was noted that there was a lack of stories relating to people not represented at the site itself. These include persons of colour, Indigenous peoples, those living with mental illness or disability, queer history and stories about people of non-European origin.

### Stories That Could Be Told to Enhance Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

- Participants noted significant scope for expansion of story subjects and topics, including stories originating directly from communities, difficult or controversial histories, Black experience in Hamilton, stories embracing multiple perspectives and stories highlighting unique aspects of Hamilton's history.

## ALIGNMENT WITH EXISTING MUNICIPAL PLANS AND POLICIES

### 1. Term of Council Priorities 2018-2022

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: The City is committed to creating and nurturing a city that is welcoming and inclusive,

Goal: Equity-seeking communities will feel safe, supported and have an enhanced sense of belonging through strengthening community capacity, City responsiveness and creating inclusive engagement opportunities.

### 2. Transforming Hamilton Through Culture: The Cultural Plan 2012

Goal: Quality of Life and Place

Recommendation: Celebrate and preserve Hamilton's cultural asset.

- Action 7.7: Steward our civic-owned national historic sites and heritage facilities.
- Action 7.8: Develop a Civic Museum Strategy and related plans to guide the long-term development and sustainability of Hamilton's museums and associated collections and resources.

Goal: Encourage Welcoming Communities

Recommendation: Develop and facilitate cultural programming.

- Action 10.1: Develop and provide museum services and programs that respond to a shared cultural legacy in Hamilton.
- Action 10.4: Connecting with existing community groups and networks to facilitate cultural programs directed at social issues and inclusion.

Goal: Creativity for All

Recommendation: Facilitate access to and increase participation in cultural activities.

- Action 11.3: Examine the feasibility of providing free admission opportunities to Hamilton's Civic Museums.
- Action 11.4: Increase awareness and access to Hamilton's heritage through programming such as completion and offering of visual tours, digital walking tours, community history research projects and oral history documentation.
- Action 11.7: Increase access to the City's artifact collections through the Artifact Digitization Project.

### 3. Urban Hamilton Official Plan (2013)

Our challenge lies in implementing change and transforming the City while balancing and respecting the sense of place, history and culture that makes Hamilton a special place to live, visit and experience.

- Action: Sustainable community goals, strategies and targets are achieved by committing resources and acting decisively. (Vision 2020)
- Access: People have the ability to contribute and participate in community life regardless of physical and mental ability, income, age, gender, spiritual or cultural background or geographic location. (Vision 2020)

### 4. Hamilton Tourism Strategy 2015-2020

#### Goal

- Deliver authentic experiences

#### Underlying principle

- Celebration of Hamilton's authentic legacies and people

#### Demand Generator

- Nature-based tourism, heritage and the waterfront – sites and related attractions

### 5. Our Future Hamilton Community Vision (2017)

#### Key Direction: Community Pride

- Celebrate Hamilton's history, people and achievements

#### Key Direction: Celebrate Culture

- Host year-round local events that celebrate Hamilton's diverse cultures and unique heritage.



## 6. Urban Indigenous Strategy (2019)

### Land theme action 6:

- Work with the Indigenous community to establish and maintain a piece of land that the community can use for ceremonial, spiritual and other activities.

### Land theme action 7:

- Work with Indigenous communities to provide education to staff and residents about acknowledging traditional territories in Hamilton.

### Spirit key directions:

- Indigenous stories and languages need to be seen as part of Hamilton's heritage.
- More can be done to celebrate National Indigenous History Month in Hamilton.

### Spirit theme action 11:

- Incorporate more Indigenous stories and voices into the City of Hamilton's culture and heritage plans.

### Spirit theme action 12:

- Use markers and signs to restore Indigenous names and identify significant Indigenous landmarks in Hamilton. This could include street names, trails, and parks.

### Spirit theme action 18:

- Ensure that Indigenous stories and local Indigenous history are included in official archives across Hamilton.

### People theme action 23:

- Bring together partners to offer public education to all residents about the history of Indigenous people and current topics that will contribute to reconciliation. This public education program should include highlighting local Indigenous resources and museums and promote awareness of national holidays such as National Indigenous Peoples Day and the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

### People theme action 24:

- Enable City staff to deliver City services in a culturally-appropriate way.

### People theme action 29

- Provide education to all City staff about Indigenous people, Indigenous-settler history, treaties, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This education should also cover the urban Indigenous community in Hamilton and the history of traditional territory in the Hamilton area.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF THE MUSEUM AND HERITAGE SECTOR

The pace of change in the museum and heritage sector has increased over the last decade as institutions around the world have come to terms with issues ranging from the definition of what a museum is to heightened expectations on the part of audiences and communities for social engagement and institutional responsibility.

This section summarizes the results of an environmental scan of current trends that are relevant to the Hamilton Civic Museums and the proposed strategy. This research yielded insights into areas of critical importance: the definition of a museum, collections and collecting, audience engagement, museums as a community asset, participatory museums, civic museums, empathetic museums, museum transformation, museums and public history and museums as community citizens.

### A NEW DEFINITION OF “MUSEUM”

Since 1974, the most widely-accepted definition of a museum has been that of the International Council on Museums (ICOM), in which:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

In January 2019, ICOM invited its members, committees and other interested parties to take

part in creating an updated definition. Following a period of active listening, collecting and collating alternative definitions through its standing committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials, the Executive Board of ICOM, at its 139<sup>th</sup> session in Paris on 21-22 July 2019, selected a new alternative museum definition:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

The proposed definition generated controversy when it was presented at the ICOM General Conference that year. A final vote on the issue was deferred and a new consultation process launched.

The 1974 definition is function-based and it speaks mainly to what museums do (acquire, conserve,

research, communicate and exhibit). The proposed definition still includes those aspects (to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings) but it goes beyond to address not just what museums do but also the manner in which they do it and the outcomes that result.

Through this process a strictly functional definition has been expanded into one in which museums are understood to have both significant power to effect social change and the responsibility to use that power for purposes beyond their own immediate institutional needs.

## RETHINKING MUSEUM COLLECTIONS AND COLLECTING

Since 2012, the Active Collections Project has urged museums to critically examine, and in many cases reform, long-established collections policies and collections practices. They point to the steady growth in the size of museum collections and show how unfettered collecting can adversely affect the institution's core operations and even survival if left unchecked.

Adopting a functional approach to assessing collections, they suggest that museums should interrogate artifacts and ask hard questions about whether the benefits they convey to the institution

and its audiences are worth the costs incurred. They recommend against taking an "if we don't save this object, who will?" approach and argue in favour of only acquiring artifacts that directly support the institution's mission.

One example of this approach is a Collection Development Plan adopted by History Nebraska in 2021. The Executive Summary notes that the

plan is based on "an active collections" approach which moves beyond the idea that something should be collected and preserved 'just in case' to the idea that if something doesn't advance the agency's mission, it doesn't belong in the collection." The plan calls for enhancing collecting initiatives related to contemporary issues including the state's LGBTQ+

population; modern Native Americans living in Nebraska and collecting covering current events, including Covid-19 and racial injustice.

In order to free up resources to support this new approach, the plan recommends a moratorium on collecting items "with limited historical value related to Nebraska" and deaccessioning items that do not support the mission and are already represented in other collections. History Nebraska aims to build a collection that:

tells the stories of the people (past and present) that have called Nebraska

"...work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world"

Proposed ICOM Definition



home. History Nebraska's collection tells stories of innovation, resilience, and community; but also challenges, hardship, and division. Stories that show that history is complex, messy, and sometimes ugly. Stories that are multifaceted, and represent the diverse voices and experiences of all Nebraskans.

## AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Without an audience, a museum is just an assemblage of objects. Museum administrators readily acknowledge the importance of audiences, but they typically mean only a certain kind of importance. Museums need their audiences for many things: to visit, to buy a membership, to make donations, to volunteer and to shop and eat at the museum.

Those are all good for business, but they are purely transactional. What if museums were to develop deeper relationships with their audiences that went beyond the business? What if their interactions with the community were relational as well? What would a relational museum look like? It might look like the Toronto Ward Museum. In their own words,

The Toronto Ward Museum is a community-engaged museum that facilitates the preservation and sharing of personal stories of migrants in Toronto's history. We utilize collaborative processes to identify community needs and opportunities, then use those insights to create

programming that promotes empathy and curiosity between storytellers, community members and the larger public.

The museum also creates forums for dialogue from arts and/or history-based programming that is relevant to migration, citizenship and pluralism within an urban context. Finally, we act as a catalyst in community initiatives and forge partnerships between individuals, communities, and organizations toward our collective empowerment.

Several years ago, The Toronto Ward Museum created Block by Block, a participatory, multimedia project that engages young people and newcomers in the collection and interpretation of local oral histories. By training young adults to interview community members about their lived experiences, the project preserves and animates stories of migration, settlement and civic life in Canadian immigrant neighbourhoods. Block by Block is focused on four Toronto neighbourhoods: Agincourt, Victoria Park, Regent Park and Parkdale.

Key project activities include offering participants training in oral history research; preserving 30 oral histories collectively curating annual exhibitions, and hosting annual block parties with interactive programming. The goal of Block by Block is to deepen relationships in and between Toronto communities through the exchange of personal stories, reflections and resources. Block by Block also hopes to contribute to better public understanding of immigrant settlement experiences.

## MUSEUMS AS A COMMUNITY ASSET

In the late 1980s, sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term “third place” in his book *The Great Good Place, subtitled Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Oldenburg calls one’s “first place” the home and those that one lives with. The “second place” is the workplace, where people may actually

“...these institutions can become must-haves for people seeking places for community and participation.”

The Participatory Museum

spend most of their time. Third places are anchors of community life and facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction. In other words, “your third place is where you relax in public, where you encounter familiar faces and make new acquaintances.” Could museums that aspire to be relational and to exemplify the characteristics outlined in the proposed ICOM definition become third places in their city?

## THE PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM

In her ground-breaking 2010 book *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon suggested that opening a museum to more participation could not only enrich the visitor experience but also transform

its fundamental approach. Her vision of a wholly participatory institution is of a place where

visitors and staff members share their personal interests and skills with each other. A place where each person’s actions are networked with those of others into cumulative and shifting content for display, sharing, and remix. A place where people discuss the objects on display with friends and strangers, sharing diverse stories and interpretations. A place where people are invited on an ongoing basis to contribute, to collaborate, to co-create, and to co-opt the experiences and content in a designed, intentional environment. A place where communities and staff members measure impact together.

In her view, such a space could be truly civic and contribute to the overall good of its communities:

When people have safe, welcoming places in their local communities to meet new people, engage with complex ideas, and be creative, they can make significant civic and cultural impact. The cumulative effort of thousands of participatory institutions could change the world. Rather than being “nice to have,” these institutions can become must-haves for people seeking places for community and participation.

## THE CIVIC MUSEUM

In a 2019 report for the English Civic Museums Network entitled *The Future of Civic Museums: A Think Piece*, author Peter Latchford asks “what are civic museums for?” Noting that “...a civic museum is surely more than just a museum that undertakes some civic activities,” he identifies the main characteristics of this kind of institution:

A typical civic museum has a large and eclectic collection, often including natural history, geology, art, social history, and archaeology. Care for the collection, and for the venerable buildings in which the museum is housed, can seem like the core task. . . . They are part of the civic infrastructure, where “civic” means relating to a town, especially its administration; but they are also specifically civil in nature, where “civil” means relating to ordinary citizens and their concerns.

He identifies significant issues that prevent many civic museums from realizing their full institutional potential and adequately “relating to ordinary citizens and their concerns.” The most telling of these is what he terms “collections defensiveness:”

For some in the museum sector . . . collections have an almost mystical status: they are seen as a unique selling point of museums (true); as the entire point of museums (not

true); and more important than the visitors (a false dichotomy). This perspective ignores the subtle truth of the civic museum proposition: that the collection may give the museum its authenticity and legitimacy, but the community gives it its purpose.

“...the collection may give the museum its authenticity and legitimacy, but the community gives it its purpose.”

*The Future of Civic Museums: A Think Piece*

## THE EMPATHETIC MUSEUM

The Empathetic Museum is a working group of educators, exhibit designers, interpretive planners and administrators with a common interest in a more inclusive future for museums and a particular focus on museums’ relationships with their communities. They define empathy in a museum context as “the intention of the museum to be, and be perceived as, deeply connected with its community.” In order to achieve this, “the empathetic museum must have a clear vision of its role as a public institution within its community. From this vision flow process and policy decisions about every aspect of the museum- audience, staffing, collections, exhibitions and programming,



social media, emergency responses - all the ways in which a museum engages with its community(ies)."

They have developed an evaluation tool called the Empathetic Museum Maturity Model to help institutions understand their current level of achievement and set goals for increasing their institutional empathy. With this tool, museums can determine their position within four stages (Regressive/Lowest Maturity; Emergent/Low Maturity; Planned/Medium Maturity and Proactive/Advanced Maturity) across five characteristics (Civic Vision, Institutional Body Language, Community Resonance, Timeliness & Sustainability and Performance Measures).

"...the empathetic museum must have a clear vision of its role as a public institution within its community"

The Empathetic Museum

## TRANSFORMING THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

In 2019, The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum's Interaction Lab convened a series of workshops with museum professionals to explore why museums need to be transformed and how that could be brought about. They note that:

The practical, financial, and social impacts of the coronavirus alongside a national reckoning with racial injustice has increased the urgency to address why, how, and for whom museums exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For museum professionals, this pivotal question raises another: how might we transform our collective approach to designing museum experiences to better reflect the diverse communities we serve?

The rapidly shifting conditions of this past year have disrupted the sense of safety and familiarity offered by the creation and re-creation of formulaic museum experiences, but have not yet resulted in the kind of self-aware examination necessary for museums to break out of the hierarchical paradigms. In our view, transforming museum experience means transforming the way the museum interacts and builds relationships with staff, audiences, and communities. Thus, transforming the way people experience the museum has the potential to transform the museum itself, from the ground up.

Workshop participants collectively created eight statements that define their views on the importance of change in museum practices:

1. Museums can and must change.
2. People, not objects, are the vital spirit of museums.
3. Museums need radical leadership.

4. Museums are incomplete, and that's a good thing.
5. Museums are accountable to communities.
6. Museums must address and revise our problematic histories and relationships with power.
7. Museums must take responsibility for making all aspects of the experience accessible and inclusive.
8. Museums should be relevant.

These statements are followed by a series of detailed questions about how the necessary transformation can be effected in museums. Based in the design-thinking methodology, these questions address areas of museum practice such as institutional process, objects, interpretation and storytelling, audience focus and participation, access, inclusion and social impact and learning from the pandemic and current events impacting global communities.

“...how might we transform our collective approach to designing museum experiences to better reflect the diverse communities we serve?”

Transforming the Museum Experience

## KEY PRACTICES FOR PUBLIC HISTORY

Parks Canada's 2019 "Framework for History and Commemoration: National Historic Sites System Plan" outlines ten key practices for engaging and connecting with audiences, capturing their imaginations and sparking their curiosity:

1. Craft big stories.
2. Address conflict and controversy.
3. Seek opportunities for Indigenous peoples to share and communicate their history, on their own terms.
4. Realize that history is written from a worldview.
5. Share authority.
6. Emphasize a full range of voices, perspectives and experiences.
7. Acknowledge that humans have touched all heritage places, including parks and natural areas.
8. Recognize that power dynamics affect understandings of heritage places.
9. Explore the spectrum of powerful memories and meanings attached to heritage places.
10. Appreciate that interpretations of the past are constantly evolving.

## MUSEUMS AS COMMUNITY CITIZENS

In her chapter “Catalyzing Inclusion: Steps Toward Sustainability in Museums” in the 2019 book *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion in Museums*, Natanya Khashan highlights the importance of transforming museum practice. “Museums risk perpetuating social exclusion and exacerbating social disadvantage and injustice,” she says, “if they continue to operate with the same framework they have been built upon.” She urges museums to become community citizens, and to move beyond their traditional assets of buildings and collections. In order to become institutionally relevant and sustainable, they “must focus on community involvement and provide active resources for all, not a chosen few.” She notes that museums need to use their status as city landmarks and mission-driven organizations to build trust in communities because this will create social capital.

Museums must reframe their relationship with their visitors and communities. No longer stagnant recipients of museums’ choices, patrons today expect their visits to be dynamic, engaging and shaped with consideration of what is important to them.

*Catalyzing Inclusion: Steps Toward Sustainability in Museums*

## EXPANDING THE NARRATIVE

The Ontario Heritage Trust has a province-wide mandate to conserve, interpret and share more than 10,000 years of Ontario’s heritage. Recognizing that “The stories of underrepresented communities should be heard in their own voices,” they have recently begun to broaden the scope of their understanding and interpretation. The introduction to their “Expanding the Narrative” project notes that:

In Canada and throughout North America, an important conversation is happening about the historical value of statues, memorials and place names, about who we honour in society for their contributions, and how we do it. This conversation has prompted some critical thinking about our history and heritage, discussions that have stretched beyond professional forums to more public debate about who or what should be commemorated and how those decisions are made.

This is part of a broader conversation about whose history is being told, about gender, people of colour and the economically disenfranchised, and others whose stories have been overlooked or intentionally omitted from the authorized discussion. It’s about what we conserve and how such choices are made, about decolonizing history, building bridges of reconciliation, and creating a sense of belonging.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HAMILTON CIVIC MUSEUMS

From the results of *Reimagine Our Museums*, it is clear that citizens are deeply supportive of the Hamilton Civic Museums. 96% of those surveyed said they were very satisfied or satisfied. At the same time, they also see many opportunities for expanding audience engagement, going beyond existing stories, working outside the walls of the museums, broadening the age range of audiences, changing exhibits more frequently and enriching the visitor experience through increased interactivity and opportunities for participation.

From consultations with staff and a survey of the current state of practice in the museum field, it is evident that museums are at critical inflection points in many areas of practice. A healthy debate about the very definition of a museum is taking place at the same time that long-held assumptions about the role of collecting are being questioned. Some of these discussions are prompted by simply physical necessity -- if there is no more room in your storage areas, your philosophy of collecting is for the most part irrelevant.

Other museums are creating space to pause and ask serious questions about what they collect, and why, and to what end. Collections are being viewed from the point of view of their interpretive return on investment -- does their continued ownership add value to the visitor experiences, and do the programs and exhibits that result from them justify the continued expense of housing and maintaining them?

Visitors want to be co-creators of experiences rather than simply consumers. Recognition of the museum's galleries as a complex social space that

supports any number of visitor motivations is leading museums to plan for visitor experiences before they plan exhibits or programs.

Museums are being asked if they are truly part of, and contributing to, their communities as well as being physically located there. Visitor participation is now understood much more widely than buying a ticket or attending a lecture. Museums can offer their communities significant civic spaces which represent much more than their particular institutional mission. Entire institutions are being questioned as to whether, and how, they are empathetic, and whether they create civic capital.

Hard questions are being asked about whether museums, unwittingly or otherwise, perpetuate structures of race, class and exclusion. They are abandoning the illusion of neutrality and taking positions on contemporary critical issues that affect the communities outside their walls. Museums are expected to check their assumptions, understand their power and privilege and work to better social conditions rather than simply documenting them. Taken together, these ideas, issues and challenges represent the new reality in which the Hamilton Civic Museums must make their way.

When fully implemented, the Civic Museum Strategy will result in a new vision not only for the operation of the Hamilton Civic Museums but also for how the Heritage Resource Management section as a whole fosters community engagement and collaboration outside the walls of the museums. It will take the Section and the Civic Museums successfully through COVID and position them to succeed and thrive in a post-pandemic world.

# Hamilton

## CIVIC MUSEUM STRATEGY

### VISION

The Hamilton Civic Museums will become museums of, by and for the city rather than just museums which are operated by the City. To do this they will preserve and present the many untold stories of Hamilton and Hamiltonians in a sustainable, accessible, inclusive and engaging manner.

The city itself, including its peoples, streetscapes, parks, theatres, neighborhoods, buildings and public spaces, will be treated as a museum that embodies its collective history. The Hamilton Civic Museums will become equal parts physical, mobile and virtual.

## Action One

# EMBRACE THE CITY

- i. Develop a city-wide interpretive master plan
- ii. Develop site and museum-specific interpretive plans guided by the city-wide interpretive master plan
- iii. Treat Hamilton as a museum of itself by reaching outside the walls of the existing Hamilton Civic Museums through community-based engagement and presentation.
- iv. Explore how the idea of a Museum of Hamilton could best be realized.

## Action Two

# RETHINK COLLECTING

- i. Shift the focus from caring for collections to caring about people by linking collecting with visitor experiences and interpretive plans.
- ii. Review the existing artifact collection
- iii. Develop a collections plan guided by the new interpretive plans. Refine the existing collection so that it supports the plan. Carry out future collecting in alignment with the collections plan and interpretive plans



## Action Three

### EMBED THE SHIFT TO DIGITAL

- i. Develop the website initially created for Hamilton 175 into a hub and gateway for all of Hamilton's heritage.
- ii. Use mobile engagement, social media and online exhibits to develop multi-platform visitor experiences which complement in-person offerings.
- iii. Develop an engaging online presence for each of the existing Hamilton Civic Museums.

## Action Four

# COLLABORATE AND CO-CREATE

- i. Adopt a section-wide operational model for museums and sites.
- ii. Establish a project-focused model of ongoing community engagement.
- iii. Enable and lift up the heritage-related work of community members by collaborating with them on content creation and presentation.
- iv. Establish and nurture a community of practice among local heritage organizations and agencies.

## Action Four

# COLLABORATE AND CO-CREATE

- v. Offer space on digital and other platforms for community-curated content.
- vi. Initiate a pilot project to create a street-level downtown storefront space that will present creative, flexible and community-engaged heritage experiences and serve as a learning laboratory for staff to explore new ways of engaging with and expressing the city's heritage.
- vii. Expand the scope of collaboration with the Hamilton Public Library to explore the use of library branches as sites for heritage-based exhibits, programming and community engagement.

## Action Five

### DEVELOP THE WORKFORCE

- i. Align staffing structure, roles and responsibilities with the vision and actions outlined in this strategy by harmonizing job descriptions across different sites and museums.
- ii. Encourage staff to actively participate in their professional fields by supporting them to research, publish, present at conferences and form communities of practice.

## Action Six

### DEVELOP ADDITIONAL REVENUE STREAMS

- i. Explore alternative business models for museum retail.
- ii. Develop a program to monetize collection assets through reproduction and retail.
- iii. Develop online retail for museum gift and reproduction items and explore partnership opportunities with local artists and artisans.
- iv. Develop “master class” adult programming to share expertise and enhance organizational credibility.
- v. Expand the scope of current adult and youth experiential programming at sites and museums.



---

## REFERENCES

The Hamilton/Scourge National Historic Site: [https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page\\_nhs\\_eng.aspx?id=411](https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=411)

ICOM Museum Definition (2007): <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20museum%20is%20a%20non,of%20education%2C%20study%20and%20enjoyment.>

ICOM Museum Definition 2019: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>

The Active Collections Project: <http://www.activecollections.org/>

History Nebraska Collections Development Plan: <https://history.nebraska.gov/sites/history.nebraska.gov/files/doc/CollectingPlan.pdf>

The Toronto Ward Museum: Block by Block: <https://wardmuseum.ca/blockbyblock/>

Third Place: Oldenburg, Ray (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House.

The Participatory Museum: <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>

*The Future of Civic Museums: A Think Piece*: [https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/civic\\_museums\\_think\\_piece.pdf](https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/civic_museums_think_piece.pdf)

The Empathetic Museum: <http://empatheticmuseum.weebly.com/>

*Tools and Approaches for Transforming Museum Experience*: <https://www.cooperhewitt.org/interaction-lab/tools-and-approaches-for-transforming-museum-experience/>

*Parks Canada Framework for History and Commemoration*: <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/plan>

Johnetta Betsch Cola and Laura L. Lott, eds. (2019) *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion in Museums*. American Alliance of Museums.

Ontario Heritage Trust. *Expanding the Narrative*: <https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/en/index.php/pages/our-stories/expanding-the-narrative>