Guide To { }

{Visitor Experience}

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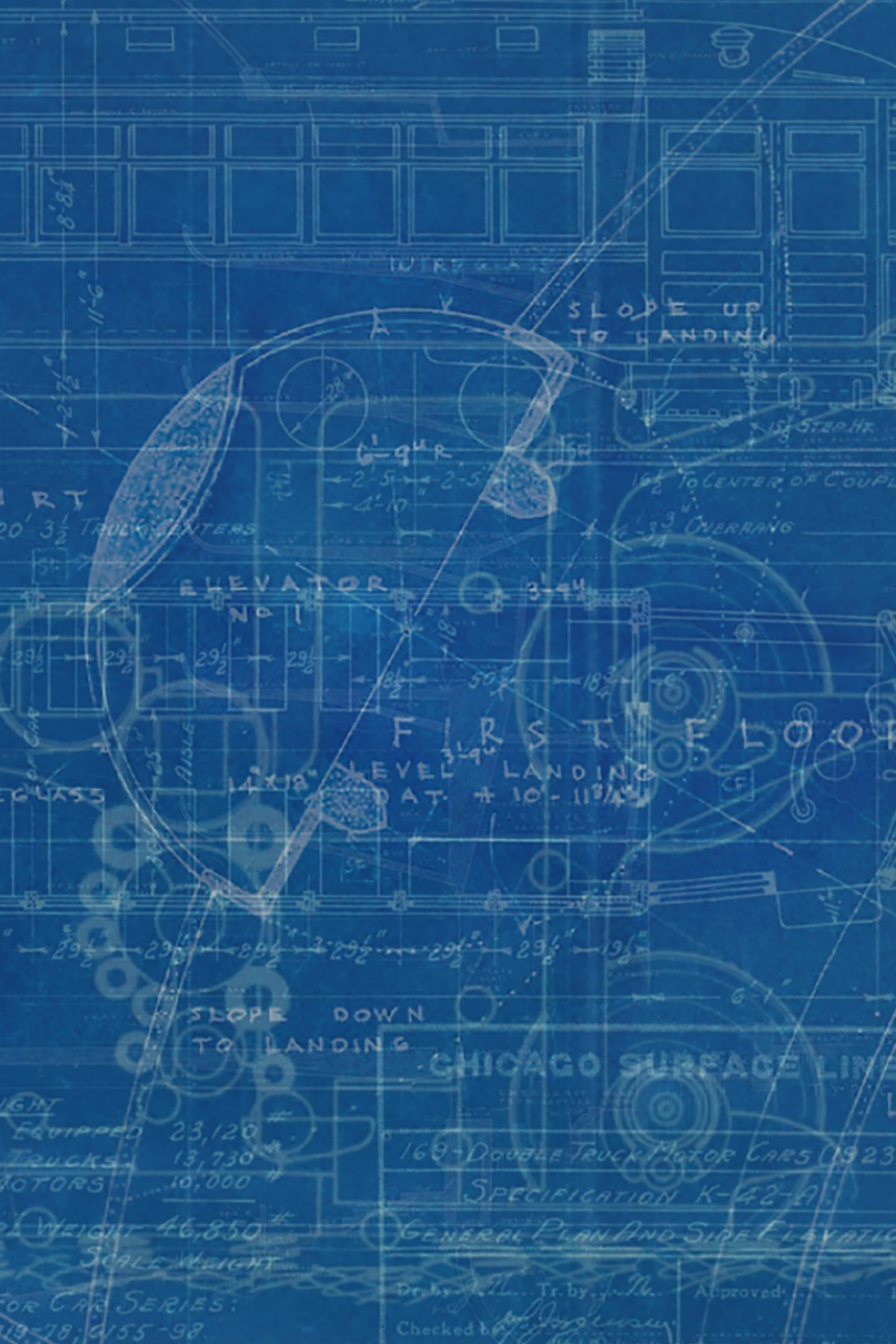
Edited by
Molly Fulop &
Therese Quinn

2025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Guide To { ... } is separated into five sections. Each section is organized by theme. If you'd like to read submissions that address certain fields, see the Profession Index. We've also worked with the submission authors to provide a playlist you might listen to while reading. Find both in the Table of Contents.

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Guide To { ... }

Fwd: Museums Journal
Issue No. 10
2025

Edited by

Molly Fulop & Therese Quinn

{Acknowledgments}

This issue of *Fwd: Museums*, our 10th, responds to museums as colonial institutions and to the ongoing struggles for liberation within and about these and related cultural sites.

A warm thank you to each of the artists, activists, educators, and scholars who answered the call for submissions and collaborated with us throughout the journal-making process. The authors, artists, and organizers responding to the Call for Submissions make *Fwd: Museums* possible, and we are so grateful to partner with them. We would like to thank Michael Workman and all at Bridge Books for their continued support and guidance, as well as Annie Heckman and StepSister Press for their support as our first publisher. Thank you to Truman Chambers for returning as our copy editor.

We also thank the Museum and Exhibition Studies (MUSE) program at the University of Illinois Chicago, which supports interdisciplinary students who are working to redefine cultural institutions and advance justice for those who labor within them. A huge thank you to Dr. Therese Quinn, MUSE program director and *Fwd: Museums* advisor, for guidance and support during the publication process.

Thank you to Molly Fulop for taking a lead role in the facilitation and oversight of the journal. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to this year's publication team, who met weekly during the Spring

2025 semester, for working on this edition and advancing the *Fwd: Museums* mission of challenging, critiquing, and fostering new futures for cultural production.

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{Building a Museum for Justice: Interview with Lisa Lee on the National Public Housing Museum's Vision}

by Josephina Opsenica and Anna Talasniemi

After nearly 20 years as a "museum in the streets,"[1] the National Public Housing Museum (NPHM) has finally opened its doors to the public in Chicago's Little Italy. In this interview, we hear museum director Lisa Lee's thoughts a few weeks before the grand opening in April 2025. Lee (she/her) is a cultural worker and activist, an associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), the former director of both the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and the UIC School of Art and Art History, and the current director of the NPHM. She has worked with the museum in various capacities for 18 years—first as a board member, after residents asked for her help envisioning what a public housing museum could be, and then as executive director for around seven years. Equipped both with theoretical and practical insights about museums, we were eager to learn how a museum with its beginnings in the community and strong focus on social transformation had evolved. In an hour-long remote interview, we talked about the museum's origins as the vision of residents of public housing, and how the museum aims to challenge common narratives about public housing, homeownership, race, and gender in the United States.

The NPHM began as the fierce vision of public housing residents

1 As Lisa Lee describes it.

who witnessed many of their homes being demolished during the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) urban renewal effort, the "Plan for Transformation," which launched in 1999. The Plan was designed to address deteriorating buildings, racialized poverty, and create a new housing system in one of the most segregated cities in the US. At the time, it represented the largest net loss of affordable housing in the country. Public housing residents like Deverra Beverley realized that it was not just the buildings that would disappear, but the memory, the place, and the people of public housing. From a refusal to be erased, the idea of the NPHM was born.

Some of the buildings earmarked for demolition were the Jane Addams Homes in Chicago's Little Italy. Built in 1938, they were the city's first public housing site.[2] "Public housing residents who felt the shock of the Plan for Transformation said, 'We want to save one of the last remaining buildings to create a museum,'" says Lisa Lee. She continues, "They already knew it wasn't going to be a traditional museum focused solely on preserving artifacts. They wanted a museum

2 Mauricio Calderon, "Jane Addams Homes," SAH Archipedia, Accessed April 16, 2025, http://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/IL-01-031-0037.

that would serve as a site of conscience[3]—without necessarily using that term—and as an active community anchor. It would be a place where they would contribute to the narrative of public housing, the people of public housing, and serve as a site to not just preserve history but also propel the future of housing and our nation."

[ALT text: The photo shows a three-story brick building with tall windows on the first floor, seen from one corner of the building. The brick walls has a vertical text spanning the length of the entire building "Public Housing Museum."]

Figure 1. The National Public Housing Museum, which opened in Chicago in April 2025, is located in the Jane Addams Homes, Chicago's first public housing development, built in 1938. The activism of public housing residents saved the building when it was slated for demolition. Photo by Barry Brecheisen, courtesy of the National Public Housing Museum.

Over the years, the residents visited the Tenement Museum in New York and were inspired by the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, whose programs connect social change stories to the present.

3 The sites of conscience are places of memory such as historic sites, museums, or memorials which connect past struggles to today to prevent repeating the past injustices. See more at www.sitesofconscience.org. The NPHM is a member of The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

They negotiated for a building, raised funds, and operated museum exhibitions without a permanent location. Lisa Lee reflects on the evolution of their exhibits:

> In the beginning, it was almost like a history of exhibition studies. They thought there should be heroic, celebratory exhibits to challenge mainstream narratives about public housing residents. Many early exhibits featured facts like, "Did you know that Lloyd Blankfein and some of the other richest people in the world lived in public housing?" These exhibits were powerful because people would say, "Oh, I didn't know that."

While these exhibits highlighted important stories, they recognized that focusing on celebrities wasn't the most effective way to advance the future of housing. They began to focus on collecting and telling the stories of the residents themselves and exploring the narratives that needed to change.

Lee continues her analysis, discussing how the building and architecture became central to the narrative. In conversations with scholars, activists, and public housing residents, the mainstream narrative that high-rises were failures often came up. "We would meet with architects who would challenge us, saying, 'Well, New York City has high-rise housing, and it works perfectly. People live in the city in high-rises all the time, so you can't just blame the high-rises,'" Lee explains. This taught them that the story of architecture also needed to be told and that the museum's most significant artifact is the building itself. Just as the building was in danger of disappearing, many aspects of the material culture of people living in poverty, women, and people of color were at risk of being erased, as these histories had not been preserved in the same way as those of wealthy white men. This realization led to a wide range of efforts to preserve artifacts and oral histories.

The residents' strong vision and the museum's community-based, forward-thinking foundation have brought both of them a long way.

After years of being a museum "in the streets," the museum now aims to serve as an active place where community members can continue to contribute to the narrative of public housing. This means not only preserving history but also driving the future of housing across the nation. We wanted to learn what this means for the museum's activities and programs, and what kind of toolbelt was—and is—used to build the institution?

The NPHM narrative shift toolbelt: oral histories, experimentation, collaboration, and play

Challenging dominant narratives around public housing is central to the museum's mission. This means not only reshaping perceptions of entire communities but also rethinking the American Dream itself. "Changing the narrative around public housing has meant you're also changing major narratives about Black people in America, about what it means to be poor, and what it means to not be a homeowner," Lee explains. "Somehow, at this moment, the American Dream has become so narrow and myopic that, for many people, it would be just homeownership." In the US, wealth generation has historically been tied to homeownership, yet entire groups have been systematically excluded from this pathway.

"For us, deeply immersed in this history of housing, we also know that in order for housing to be a human right, it can't be viewed and treated like a commodity," Lee adds. This fundamental challenge—decoupling housing from its status as a financial asset—is at the heart of the museum's work. Changing the common narratives about public housing, homeownership, race, and gender in the United States is an ongoing struggle; "It's not like you're ever going to get to the point where you're done. It's just the work of justice."

To shift these narratives, the museum employs tools like oral histories, activist and community-based strategies, and solidarity-building efforts. One of its major initiatives is an oral history training program that teaches public housing residents how to document and share their stories. Named after Beauty Turner—a former resident who

led "GHETTO Bus Tours" of the Robert Taylor Homes—the program honors her belief that "GHETTO" stands for "Greatest History Ever, Told To Our People"— Lee explains, "The 'P' is silent, but the people are not."

On the museum's first floor, one of Lisa Lee's favorite exhibits, *History Lessons: Everyday Objects of Public Housing,* showcases personal artifacts that residents felt best represented their lives. The museum partnered with community organizers to identify participants, who then worked with poets and instructors to craft their own exhibition labels. The collection includes a dog collar from Houston, a telephone from New York, a high school graduation photo of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a handmade wedding gown, and a gold medal belt buckle from a boxing champion. As Lee notes, "Every single story opens up a new window and tells a different kind of story about public housing that a scholar or historian might not tell."

Another key exhibit, *Historic Apartments*, reflects the museum's approach to historical truth-telling and storytelling. The exhibit features three replica homes, allowing visitors to experience the textures and everyday environments of families who lived in the building between 1938 and 1975. The process of recreating these spaces was a collaboration between curators and former residents, carefully designed to highlight the most powerful elements of their oral histories. The curators also wrestle with questions of authenticity and interpretation, asking questions like "How does fiction help create more truth in museums? How do we triangulate history? How do we tell individual stories while making them more expansive?"

[ALT text: The picture shows an apartment from the 1960s. On the left wall, there is a coat rack with mostly children's clothes and a television. Under the rack, there is a shelf with books. On the right wall is a brown sofa, and next to the sofa a small table with a lamp, a landline telephone, and magazines. There is a window on the back wall.]

Figure 2. The museum has three historic replica apartments, the development of which was strongly grounded in NPHM's active oral history work. The Hatch Family Apartment was the home of Reverend Elijah Hatch and Helen Holmes Hatch and their eight children, who moved into the Jane Addams Homes in 1960. Photo by Barry Brecheisen, courtesy of the National Public Housing Museum.

For Lee, one of the most exciting aspects of building a new kind of museum is the opportunity for experimentation. Passionate about exhibition studies and aesthetics, she finds real joy in testing different storytelling strategies. She references art historian Svetlana Alpers, who once said, "You can take anything and just put a thick vitrine and shine light on it. It can be beautiful." Lee adds, "I love that I get to try it out and see—like, is that actually true? Or is there a different way of representing something so it's not poverty porn? It's really fun to experiment and, sometimes, realize, 'Oh, I think we got something right.'"

The NPHM's approach is deeply informed by the history of museum studies, a commitment to experimentation, and a willingness to adapt. "We knew that we would make mistakes, and then we would learn from them," Lee explains. When listening to Lisa Lee, it is clear that the museum has been sharing its work with the community, embracing feedback and critiques as essential parts of the process.

Museums as civic spaces: radical democracy in action

Today, museums are often seen as the perpetrators and offspring of injustices and colonization. However, Lisa Lee also points out the aspects in the history of museums that she and her staff want to preserve:

> At different moments, museums have also been spaces for radical democracy, and I'm not willing to let go of the idea of the potential of museums. We can rebuild this institution as a space for justice, as a space for inclusivity, for diversity, and to make sure that everyone has access to preserving their objects and their stories and sharing them with the broadest group of people.

It is clear to Lee that a museum cannot be neutral, and while this does not call for conversion to a particular way of thinking, it does suggest the need for clarity in the museum's political mission. As Lee reflects, museums have evolved in their capacity to take political stances: "If you are an aquarium, at some point, it didn't seem like you could take a position on climate justice or global warming, and now every single aquarium is really advocating for the future of the oceans and the seas. That doesn't seem like a partisan issue. It's just a necessity." Museums are now embracing their role in advocacy around important issues—whether environmental or social—while still adhering to nonprofit regulations. Throughout all its different strategies, the National Public Housing Museum makes clear its political vision.

As a historical site of conscience, the NPHM connects the past with

the present, making urgent social justice issues relevant today. "You're not going to be able to solve any of the social problems that we have together as a society unless you go back in time and draw on the power of place and memory," Lee explains, "What have we not yet learned from history?" At a time when policymakers in the US and around the world are enacting policies that harm marginalized communities and threaten democratic decision-making, these questions are particularly urgent. "Museums don't happen in a vacuum," Lee reminds us. When NPHM prepares to open its doors, federal funding for housing programs has been slashed, and the state has become increasingly hostile to immigrants. Lee asks, "What is the fierce urgency of now? As American author and social activist Grace Lee Boggs used to ask, 'What is the time of the world on the clock right now?'"

One way the NPHM engages with contemporary issues is through its work with long-term prisoners at Stateville Prison. Lee draws a stark comparison between public housing and incarceration: "We now spend more money building prisons—which is a kind of form of public housing—than we do on affordable housing for other people. We feel like that's our issue as much as other kinds of issues around public housing."

The museum also recognizes the deep connections between public housing, mass incarceration, and gender and racial justice. The incarceration of men has led to the rise of powerful women leaders in public housing communities, shaping new forms of activism and governance. A more direct example of NPHM's engagement with contemporary justice issues was its programming around cannabis decriminalization. Many public housing residents had been incarcerated for cannabis-related offenses, only to see their convictions overturned as laws changed. The museum held public events to explore the implications of this shift and its impact on affected communities.

At its core, the NPHM's mission is "to really fight for places that everyone has a place to call home." Preserving the site for the Museum not only saved the part of the Jane Addams Homes where the Museum is located, but also saved 15 mixed-income apartments. The Plan for

Transformation was a paradigm shift in affordable housing, and, as in other locations, public housing sites were redeveloped into mixed-income housing. The goals of the 1999 plan have not been achieved. There is still a great need for affordable housing in Chicago and nationwide, and the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown.[4] What can a museum do?

Lee acknowledges the challenges of staying engaged in political struggles while managing the other work of a museum. She recalls a quote from writer Arundhati Roy: "Once you see it, you can't unsee it, and doing nothing is as political as doing something"[5] and continues: "For us, as a nonprofit with our mission, we have to be engaged in contemporary political issues as a civic space." When discussing the social role of museums, Lee also refers to Elaine Heumann Gurian's text *Museum as Soup Kitchen* (2010),[6] which describes the impossibility for museums to disengage from the political and social roles. For the NPHM, this work is an integral part of its mission, advocating for the right of all people to have access to affordable housing.

Building a museum through collective action: the role of community, staff, and funders in shaping NPHM

As the National Public Housing Museum prepares to open, we ask Lisa Lee what she considers most essential in the museum's long journey. What is the role of the community, staff, and funders in shaping the institution? In many ways, NPHM challenges and dismantles traditional hierarchies—not just in the narratives it shares, but also in how the museum itself is structured.

Lee tells us how, unlike conventional museums, the NPHM does not follow the traditional divisions between directors, curators, educators,

4 See for example Kenya Barbara, The Plan for Transformation: How a plan with lofty goals has underperformed and forever changed public housing in Chicago, *Public Interest Law Reporter* 24, no. 1 (2018): 101-108, https://lawecommons.luc.edu/pilr/vol24/iss1/13; Samuel Paler-Ponce, "Estimate of People Experiencing Homelessness in Chicago, IL (2023)," Chicago Coalition to end Homelessness, www.chicagohomeless.org/estimate.

5 Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (South End Press, 2001).

6 Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Museum as Soup Kitchen," *Curator: The Museum Journal,* 53 (2010):71–85, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2009.00009.

visitor services, and security staff. "All of us wear multiple hats," she explains. While this is not uncommon in small and mid-sized museums, where limited resources often demand versatility, NPHM takes an especially unique approach to security. The museum's education ambassadors, in addition to their work in creating vibrant educational outreach, also provide security. "We have a group committed to radical generosity and hospitality, based on a program that the Chicago Housing Authority had, which was self-organized. How do you create real safety? We learned a lot from the history of public housing, and we're trying to flip it into the museum field." The museum's diverse team includes individuals with and without formal museum experience, but all of them share a commitment to using the institution as a tool for democracy.

The museum's focus on storytelling also extends to its approach to fundraising. Rather than simply listing donor names, the museum's *What's in a Name?* initiative turns its donor wall into a storytelling space. "It's not just about transparency," Lee says, "It's about sharing the stories behind those who support us." Transparency is especially critical, given the ethical challenges museums have historically faced around funding sources—such as the recent controversy around donors implicated in the opioid crisis, as well as those with ties to the war industry. NPHM has raised approximately $16.5 million through a combination of foundation grants, public funding, and private donations, with corporate sponsorships anticipated in the next phase.

Given the Museum is opening during Trump's second term and amid widespread funding cuts, there is reason for concern about its future resources. For example, one of NPHM's inspirations, the award-winning Tenement Museum, faced a period when expansion and the pressures of fundraising caused it to drift from its core mission.[7] But, being rooted so deeply in its founding community, it is hard to imagine NPHM losing that touch, even in hard times.

7 Rebeccca Amato, "Crossing the Gentrification Frontier: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Blind Spots of Social History," in *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism*, ed. Denise D. Meringold (Amherst College Press, 2021), 455–82.

[ALT-text: In the center of the picture, two people are holding together a large pair of scissors with which they have just cut a red ribbon. They are surrounded by about ten people. Everyone is happy.]

Figure 3. The grand opening of the National Public Housing Museum in April, where Lisa Lee cuts the red ribbon with Sunny Fischer, Board Chair of the museum. Photo by Barry Brecheisen, courtesy of the National Public Housing Museum.

The NPHM's rootedness in collective work is echoed in Lisa Lee's advice to those planning to found a museum. She quotes activist Mariame Kaba: "Anything worth doing, nobody has ever done it alone. They've only done it with one another."[8] We have learned from experience that many museums are good at thinking in terms of communities and often follow the latest thinking in museum studies, but they still fall short of their goals in practice. NPHM's long history has given it the rare chance to develop through learning both from its own experiments and those of others. After speaking with Lee, we have become enthusiastic followers, even admiring fans, of this museum. At its core, NPHM isn't just a museum that seems to have absorbed the

8 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Haymarket Press, 2021).

brightest lessons of museum studies—it is a living testament to the power of collective action. For the Museum to thrive, that collective spirit must remain vital. We look forward to seeing how this museum, with home at its heart, evolves now that it finally has a home of its own.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Josephina Opsenica is a curator and interdisciplinary artist exploring memory, materiality, ecology, and interconnectivity through sculpture and installation. Working with museum theory, archival preservation, and exhibition design, she engages with discarded materials to uncover hidden narratives. She holds a bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Education in the Arts from the University of Illinois Chicago, minoring in Museum and Exhibition Studies and Fine Art.

Anna Talasniemi is a Finnish arts, culture, and foundations professional. With a particular passion for saunas and museums, Anna is interested in the role of heritage spaces as sites for dialogue, imagination, and social transformation. Anna is a doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and was a Fulbright Scholar in the Museum and Exhibition Studies program at the University of Illinois Chicago in the spring of 2025.

Call for Submissions 2026: AFTERLIVES

What does it mean to be alive?
To be dead?
To exist in a state beyond?

An afterlife can be a refusal, it can be the archive's inability to forget, the museum's struggle to unmake itself, the artifact that resists its own display. An afterlife can be a haunting, a presence that insists, a structure that lingers past its collapse. An afterlife can be a release, an object freed from the logic that once defined it, a collection finding life in new hands, a museum breaking apart to make space for something unimagined.

Our 11th issue will consider afterlives as sites of potential futures, of transformation, of uneasy continuities. What is the afterlife of a museum that has declared itself decolonized; does it free itself? How might it live against the notions that many histories cannot be undone? What does it mean for an archive to carry traces of what was never meant to be remembered? (What are the afterlives of looted objects: do they return, do they belong, do they remain displaced even when placed back?) What forms of autonomy emerge in ghostly persistence? How does something, once presumed dead, begin again?

We seek to explore the afterlives of museums, objects, and histories, and how they persist, transform, or dissolve after rupture. We invite contributions that interrogate the life that follows pillage, the legacies that outlive revolution, and the hauntings that shape the present. Produced and edited by University of Illinois Chicago undergraduate and graduate students and published by Chicago-based Bridge Books, *Fwd: Museums* strives to create a space for challenging, critiquing, and providing alternative modes of thinking and production within and outside of museums.

Fwd: Museums invites academic articles, artwork, essays, exhibition/book reviews, creative writing, interviews, poetry, love letters, and other experimental forms to analyze, critique, and make space for new thinking about museums and exhibitions. All submissions should follow the guidelines and relate to the journal's mission statement. We strongly encourage book and exhibition reviews on multiple topics, but require all other submissions to connect to the 11th issue's theme, "Afterlives."

Submit here: https://forms.gle/FWD8GsEqMkKEswEA6
Deadline: January 5, 2026, 11:59 PM (CST)
Questions? Email fwd.museums@gmail.com
Find us on Instagram @fwd_museums

Who Should Submit?
Anyone! You! Students, faculty, scholars, museum employees, artists and art handlers, volunteers, part-timers, activists, and other people with something to say about museums, exhibits, and cultural work are welcome to submit.

Guidelines
Written submissions (other than poetry and more artistic submissions) should be between 1,000 and 2,500 words and use Chicago Manual of Style formatting and citations, in a DOCX file. Broadly accessible language that a large audience can understand is preferred.

All images should be sent as separate files (not embedded in text) at 300+ dpi in tiff/TIF format. Note in-text where images should be inserted and include credit, caption, date of execution, materials used, and dimensions, as appropriate.

A Note on Reviews
Reviews need not directly engage an issue's theme but should relate to the journal's mission statement. We welcome long-form museum, exhibition, film, and book reviews with a point of view and connections to social, historical, political, and other contexts. Check our Instagram for books available for review.

Please see the **Manuscript and Style Guide** on our website **(fwdmuseumsjournal.weebly.com)** for information on how to format your submission.


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22'-8"R
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TOP OF FLOOR
16'-8"R
RAMP
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48'-11" OVER ALL
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How do museums respond to the urgency of the moment?

Can they be transformed to foster critical work in the humanities?

Fwd: Museums—an inclusive, cross-disciplinary publication—shares interventions, experiments, and creates community dialogues within and outside of museums. Our contributors re-examine, critique, and challenge museums as socially responsive spaces.

Guide To { ... } incorporates artworks, essays, poetry, manifestos, and other creative forms that explore various topics in order to develop a helpful resource for everyone to navigate humanities-based institutions. Exposing, redirecting, and taking apart institutional violence(s) are the core aims of our contributors, many of whom share their guides to surviving in these spaces.

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