Discussion Guide
The Social Work of Museums

A Call to Action:

In the Preface to The Social Work of Museums, published in 2010 by Routledge, author Lois H. Silverman states, "the most important and essential work museums do is to use their unique resources to benefit human relationships and, ultimately, repair the world" (p. xi). The book then demonstrates how the field of social work helps empower museums globally to serve as "agents of well-being and as vehicles for social change" (p. 3). Although published over a decade ago, the concepts, approaches, and recommendations of this visionary book have grown in relevance and urgency. This Discussion Guide is both a call to action and a tool for museum workers, social workers, community members, students, board members, and others to come together, reflect upon, and further evolve the social work of museums. We hope the book and the questions below inspire your creativity and courage in equal measure.

Questions:

➢ With whom would you like to discuss these ideas, and why?
➢ How can you ensure honest, inclusive, and accessible gatherings?
➢ What does the phrase "the social work of museums" mean to you?
➢ In what ways, if any, has your institution engaged in "social" work to date?
➢ What ideas in this book, if any, have grown in relevance and urgency?
➢ What ideas and topics are missing that must be addressed?
➢ What do you consider to be today's most pressing social issues?
➢ What actions must museums take internally regarding these issues?
➢ What difference(*s), if any, could museums make relative to these issues?*

Background, Goals, and Format:

With generous support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services from 1997-1999, author Lois H. Silverman created a collaborative of museum staff, social service agency workers, community members who used social services, and students in Bloomington, Indiana, to explore and study the Therapeutic Potential of Museums. That project revealed many intersections of museums and social work, including ways these fields could enhance each other. Just as museums didn't create museum education theory and practice in a vacuum but instead drew from the broader education field, the group felt that museums could evolve their social service theory and practice by learning from and collaborating with social work. The field is defined by the International Federation of Social Workers as "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being." (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

After further study, Lois found that social work offered new lenses for understanding the worldwide proliferation of museums' social service going on around the globe at the time. She wrote *The Social Work of Museums* to provide the field with "a theoretical framework to organize, integrate, and inspire expanding practice and provide a foundation on which to build" (p. xii). To this end, the book presents key social work perspectives as a framework for synthesizing relevant visitor studies, trends in international practice, and compelling examples to demonstrate how museums are using their unique resources to benefit human relationships and repair the world.

The Social Work of Museums aims to answer five guiding questions (pp. 4-5):

1. Why are so many museums embracing social service? What has led to this moment?
2. What theoretical perspectives are useful for understanding and organizing this work? What framework can illuminate its collective significance?
3. What exactly are museums doing in the name of social service, how, for whom, in what circumstances, and to what effect?
4. To what extent have museums reached their potential as agents of well-being and social change? What challenges and possibilities have yet to be addressed?
5. What is social work, and how do social work perspectives, methods, and practitioners bring museums to their potential?

The book comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1, "In the service of society," describes how museum history and museum theory have shaped museums' social service. Chapter 2, "Social work perspectives," examines the history and theory of the social work field and presents a framework for synthesizing relevant museum research, practice trends, and cases. Chapters 3-6 apply that framework to survey museum work in service to four types of relationships: Chapter 3, "From body to soul," explores the self; Chapter 4, "Solve et coagula," examines close pairs; Chapter 5, "Treasures of home," looks at families; and Chapter 6, "Birds in flight," addresses groups. Chapter 7, "Toward the next age," presents five summary conclusions and four recommendations for the future.

Questions:

➢ What are the commonalities and key differences between the museum field and the social work field?
➢ In what ways has each field been rooted in and/or continued to be complicit in structural violence and oppression, including but not limited to racism, colonialism, ableism, and genderism?
➢ How, if at all, are museums and social work today effectively reckoning with their difficult pasts and practices?
➢ In what ways might each field benefit from further interdisciplinary collaboration?
➢ What current challenges or barriers do museums face in their efforts to evolve the social work of museums, and how can they be addressed?
➢ In what new ways can museums "engage people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being"?
➢ What evidence exists today that museums can be therapeutic? How, and for whom?

Social Work Perspectives:

As described in Chapter 2, "social work serves relationships, the vehicles of well-being and social change" (p. 25). And "[s]ocial work is usefully viewed as a process of planned change – an intentional

effort by a social worker and client(s) to influence some specific condition, pattern of behavior, or set of circumstances that affects social functioning" (Sheafor et al. 2000:119)" (p. 31). To these ends, social work sometimes aims to foster change in individuals, known as micro practice, or in relationships, known as mezzo practice. Social work also recognizes that "people and relationships are clearly affected by the broader social environment" in which we live (p. 33), including social attitudes, laws, and government policies. Hence, change in life challenges and well-being often requires change in social conditions and social structures, known as macro practice, or community work, social and political action, policy practice, and/or community activism.

With these and other foundational social work principles in mind, Chapter 2 presents a framework of three key questions used to organize research and case studies in subsequent Chapters 3-6:

1. Relationships: How does social work understand self, pair, family, and group relationships, the key vehicles of well-being and social change? What needs are fundamental to these relationships?
2. Relationship Needs and Museums: What relationship needs, if any, are museums serving, through what interventions, for whom, where, and in what circumstances?
3. Museums and Society: How, if at all, are museums intervening at the societal or macro level to address social factors and conditions that affect relationship needs and social functioning?

Questions:

➢ How well has your museum, or museums you know, served the needs of self, pairs, families, and/or groups? Which needs, and how?
➢ In what ways could your museum, or museums you know, better serve the needs of self, pairs, families, and/or groups? Which needs, and how?
➢ What are the main differences between micro, mezzo, and macro level practice?
➢ How has your museum, or museums you know, effectively engaged in micro, mezzo, and/or macro level practice? What examples inspire you?
➢ How could your museum, or museums you know, intervene at the societal or macro level to address pressing social issues?
➢ Since the book was published, more social work terms and concepts have been applied to museum practice, including "trauma-informed care," "structural competence," and "the strengths perspective," often with little reference to their origins in the social work field. What is the history of these ideas, and what is the potential harm of using them without deep understanding and training?
➢ Since the book was published, libraries in the United States have made significant inroads in collaboration with social work and social workers. How and why have libraries been successful, and what can museums learn from these efforts?
➢ Before, during, and since the Covid-19 pandemic, the museum field has reframed museums as agents of *health and well-being. As the International Federation of Social Workers' definition demonstrates, social work is defined by its focus on well-being. How do social work principles deepen and expand museums' well-being work?*

Conclusions:

The book's last chapter presents five summary conclusions. The first three explain what constitutes the social work of museums, while the next two describe how museums are engaging in social work, at the time of publication. What constitutes the social work of museums? The answer, as reflected in the first three passages below, is Service to Relationships, Common Human Ground, and Service Across Circumstances. How do museums engage in social work? The answer, as reflected in the remaining two passages below, is through Client-Centered Museum Relationships for Change and Social Work Interventions Using Museum Resources

Service to Relationships: "Museums are clearly serving selves, close pairs, families, and groups, four fundamental human relationships that constitute the building blocks of society…As they foster close relationships, museums bolster the social functioning of society, including our capacity to build new relationships across diverse circumstances." (p. 140)

Common Human Ground: "[T]his analysis suggests that museums can serve human relationships as they help to meet basic human needs shared across ages, places, and times. This focus on common human ground, rooted in social work theory and practice, can help museums respond to current criticism that they are too Western, elitist, and/or exclusionary. These common human needs for identity, understanding, empowerment, belonging, and social roles suggest shared human goals around which museums might build universal bridges, while at the same time appreciating, welcoming, and celebrating human diversity." (p. 141)

Service Across Circumstances: "The stories of practice presented here reveal that museums can serve human relationships across a range of circumstances, including those that challenge human well-being and social functioning. Whether serving those who experience loneliness, chronic illness, trauma, discrimination, poverty, violence, homelessness, or war, museums can be responsive to the social conditions that affect relationships." (p. 141)

Client-Centered Museum Relationships for Change: "Social work theory suggests that museums may be building the most effective helping relationships as they are client-centered and respond to expressed need. Such authentic connections can grow as museums acknowledge their own limitations and understand their roles as learners as well as helpers, addressing relationship needs alongside other community partners and services." (p. 142)

Social Work Interventions Using Museum Resources: "Museums can serve human relationships by applying their unique resources to the work of well-being and social change, through four types of social work interventions: helping relationships, emotional "holding" environments, creative work spaces, and resource networks." (p. 142)

To build upon these conclusions, the book presents four recommendations:

1. Research: "More systematic and widespread research on museums' social service practices is essential to fully understand the scope and effectiveness of this work, and its potential to contribute to social functioning and well-being." (p. 143)
2. Theory Development: "[M]useums are engaging in social service and addressing social issues, but they have been slower to theorize, test, and expand this role. More critical theory development is essential to bring together practice and research to promote deep understanding, growth, and innovation in this area." (p. 143)

3. Interdisciplinary Dialogue: "To expand and strengthen their service, museums can benefit from sharing knowledge and experiences with other fields engaged in social service. Toward this end, further dialogue with the social work field is essential, as well as dialogue with related fields such as health care, education, and the creative arts." (p. 144)
4. Engaging in Planned Change: "Museums can further contribute to well-being and social change by more intentionally engaging in planned change. Social work theory and practice suggests that museums may benefit from moving beyond general good will to actively applying social work principles and methods in their social service practice." (p. 144)

Questions:

➢ Which conclusions and recommendations, if any, have grown in relevance and urgency since the book was published? Why?
➢ Which conclusions and recommendations, if any, are missing? Why?
➢ How might the conclusions be expanded, clarified, or amended to better reflect today's social needs and museum practice?
➢ How well has your museum, or museums you know, engaged in authentic connections, applied their unique resources to well-being and social change, conducted systematic research, theorized practice, engaged in interdisciplinary dialogue, and/or applied principles and methods from the social work field? What can be improved, and how?
➢ Since the book was published, more museum organizations, conferences, journals, publications, and websites have included topics such as "therapeutic museums," "trauma-informed practice," "Museums for Health and Well-being," and "Museums as Sites for Social Action" (MASS Action). How do these topics, initiatives, and frameworks build on and expand the social work of museums? How might they be improved?
➢ If we believe that "the most important and essential work museums do is to use their unique resources *to benefit human relationships and, ultimately, repair the world" (p. xi), what must we do to evolve and improve this work today?*