

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

The Gallery Has a Dance Floor Now

BY ALEX HANESWORTH
PROJECT DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL MEDIA,
THE CENTER FOR RESTORATIVE HISTORY



**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

A speculative fiction piece exploring a future in which right relationships between people, their objects, and the stewards of those objects have been rebuilt and a new kind of museum can emerge.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

Dar wakes up to birdsong and the light of early dawn. He rises out of bed, joints clicking and angry already. He throws on a robe and slippers and glides out of his little apartment and into the vaulted hallways of the old museum.

He loves being the first one up each morning. It reminds him of the days when he had to commute here in the mornings and would arrive each Monday to find the building slumbering: empty of visitors and docents, exhibit lights turned low.

In these moments of empty quiet, he says a few morning prayers before meandering to the communal kitchen—once the museum café—to make the first pot of coffee of the day.

He and his mug wander out to where there was once a sprawling and cavernous entryway with ticket booths and walls of brochures. There is still an air of grandeur to the space—still columns and molding and vaulted ceilings.

On and around these architectural details has accumulated all manner of profane junk. There is—of course—the community board: a stand-alone wall near the entrance covered in fragmented layers of posters, flyers, and other ephemera. Potted plants cordon off a dozen or so seating areas, each composed of lovingly mismatched couches and chairs. The room also acts as an informal lending library. A few of his neighbors keep the books organized—rather obsessively in his opinion—on the shelves that line each wall.

Dar sits in a purple floral armchair, just to the right of the community board, and waits for the rest of the museum to wake up.

He greets the neighbors and visitors that trickle in. They chat about projects, about the current crop of visitors, and about the gossip of the day. Sometimes they chat about the past and future. About what the point of it all is.

He ends the morning chatting with an older couple staying in one of the temporary apartments available to visitors.

The woman seems to vibrate with energy as she introduces herself: “My name’s Eliza May and this is Tom.” Tom nods stoically at Dar before looking back to Eliza May.

“I actually grew up right near here, but by the time the uprisings started back in the 2090s, we were living way out in the middle of nowhere Nebraska. We heard about the Repossession from friends out here in bits and pieces, and we’ve been daydreaming about it ever since. Tom and I have always wanted to see what became of this place. And now we’re really here!” she gushes.



“Oh I’m so curious to hear how the neighborhood has changed!” Dar exclaims. “Sadly, I need to go get ready for the open house. Will you two join my tour group when it starts?”

“We’ll find our way there.” Eliza May beams at Dar and later, when he has left, at Tom, at the neighbors, at the community board, at the columns, and at the familiar sidewalks all around the museum.

The strangers arrive just after noon. The rain follows them inside in a fine mist. They shake off their umbrellas and take off their boots by the door. Others, already inside the museum, filter in from the other direction.

By then, Dar is back. He is flanked by a crew of five other neighbors.



“Welcome in folks! Make yourselves at home,” he calls. “The six of us are looking forward to sharing this place, our homes, and our things with you today.”

Each of the six neighbors, including Dar, introduce themselves, the histories they know, and how many places to sit are available in their apartments.

Dar closes out the introductions. “Now that you know a little more about us, hopefully you can sort yourselves into groups and we can begin.”

After some shuffling and discussion, he ends up with the couple from earlier that morning, and a trio of children chaperoned by a stately woman in overalls. The children have sprawled themselves out on the floor in various curlicue shapes. The other groups shuffle away, out of the entryway.

Dar smiles at the assembled guests. “Well, welcome everyone. Since we’ve got some newcomers and some interested folk, let’s start with the history of this here living museum. Believe it or not, I was an archivist here way, way back before the Repossession.” He turns to look at the little ones. “Do you all know what museums used to be like?” Two of them nod vigorously, but in opposite directions, and the third stares blankly at him.

“I’ll generalize a bit and say that museums used to be these gleaming castles with perfectly white walls and little plaques next to each object. They were echoey and didn’t have any chairs to sit in. They contained all the world’s wonders in thick glass cases. Things you never imagined existing. They had millions of those things, with only a few hundred of them visible to visitors. There were guards in each room who kept watch, it was always strangely cold inside, and there was absolutely no touching.” The kids exchange glances.



“I was an archivist, which meant that I collected things for the museum’s basement. I had been here only a few years when everything really started to go to shit. The storms, the heat, the mass panic. Everyone lost someone and even more lost their homes. Millions of people without any place to live and more and more were being displaced every day. Soon people looked to all those gleaming buildings in the city centers. And when people came knocking at the museum’s door, I kept on doing my job. The first thing I collected was from the sleep-in back in ’95.”

He leads them into the next room, where a large pinstriped bedsheet is tacked to the wall. The black stenciled lettering on its surface shouts *No more display without couches! No more storage without beds! No more programs without soup!*

“That was the very first action of the movement: hundreds of people showed up on the steps with pillows, blankets, and mattresses. It felt like crossing a picket line going to work. That sleep-in was disbanded by police eventually, but they came back, this time with thousands of people who had been displaced by greedy landlords or floods or no AC on the thirteenth floor in 110-degree weather. They built this incredible encampment.

“It wasn’t long before I thought about joining them. My rent was astronomical already, barely covered by my non-profit salary. And I wasn’t the only one who felt tempted. It was the security guards who switched sides first. Like many museums, this one did not pay them well but expected them to keep all these protesters out—the same protesters offering them hot coffee, bagged lunch, and even-keeled respect. And that’s where this uniform comes from.” He motions to the navy slacks and white shirt he has on, which are covered all over with painted houses, chairs, and figures.

“My friend Sam was one of the first to put down her walkie-talkie and nap with the people. And boy was she an amazing artist. She started painting uniforms for anyone who switched sides. She painted this one for me. It was such an honor—she’d sit with you and ask you about the important objects in your life, about the buildings you’d lived in, about what ideas from the movement resonated with you and then she’d paint all of it on your uniform.”

He peels open a pocket to show a hand-painted note just inside the lining that reads: *Forgetting is not the enemy. Transformation and release are necessary for heralding the future.*

“Those days in the encampment weren’t exactly easy—the riot police made sure of that. But after a few weeks we were able to keep them away from where people were living and supporting each other. There was a front line of very brave people who used



whatever they could find as shields to fend them off. Within that barrier, it was a space for people to take care of each other and also a space for learning and developing a clear political theory.

“Of course, the core of the movement was about taking over buildings that were supposedly created for the people. They initially set their sights on this museum because of the optics: it was a space that talked a lot about working with community, but there were all these archaic, twisty systems that held up the resources from ever making it directly to communities. People wanted to take direct ownership of both the space and the resources, to allocate them in accordance with the desperate needs of humankind.

“We were always talking about how many objects were in the museum’s collection and calculating the cost of all that maintenance. We wanted the world to understand that care is not an infinite resource, and that record-keeping uses an immense amount of energy and assets. We were at a point where the reality of economic and ecological devastation made that kind of resource allotment feel like a cruelty. That’s what we were fighting for: we cannot be more invested in the survival of objects than we are in the survival of people.

“It wasn’t long before we were having all kinds of discussions about how objects themselves should be cared for. Our detractors were always trying to paint us as Nazi book-burners and the destroyers of civilization, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. So many of us who had worked at the museum were a part of the movement by that point, and so were all manner of amateur historians. We just stopped believing that we needed to sacrifice the possibilities of the future in order to preserve a memory of the past.

“It was a really deep ideological shift for me in many ways, but it unlocked something I had always felt on a human level but couldn’t put words to. I was used to thinking about how to keep objects pristine for as long as possible, but sometimes it felt like I was keeping them locked in a golden cage. We couldn’t expose a wood carving to any kind of humidity—even if it was originally carved on a humid beach! I thought the collections deserved a better life than the one they had—locked in those grey metal cabinets.

“When we finally wore them down and got into the building, my comrades followed me into the archives. I had spent nearly every day in the archives for two years before joining the movement, but in that moment, it looked so different. We were chanting and dancing and playing music. We were laughing, and when I threw open the doors to the archives, suddenly I was crying. I felt like, *why can’t these things dance too?*”



THE LIVING MUSEUM MANIFESTO CIRCA 2094

*Issued by the Political Education
Committee at the Living
Museum Encampment*

Dar answers questions and points out the things that bring back the strongest memories for him. Eventually, he and the tour group are talking about other histories. Eventually, they wind their way back to his apartment. The one with walls the color of an early tomato.

“You can sit on the couch over there if you like,” Dar instructs. The adults oblige, while the kids opt, again, to arrange themselves haphazardly on the floor. Dar seems to lean back, out of the center of the conversation, and the visitors lean in to fill the vacuum. They ask about this book and that poster, offering memories and stories of their own.

Over the course of the afternoon, the children get increasingly antsy. When they start babbling to each other in the middle of a discussion about folk carving in the Midwest, Rebecca decides it is time to go. She whisks them away to the afternoon’s paper-making workshop, leaving Dar with Tom and Eliza May.

The trio trade stories about the neighborhood and the museum and the couples’ travel plans. Dar makes them tea. Eliza May and Tom slightly overstay their welcome and then realize all at once, awkwardly, that Dar wants to get some rest. They wash their mugs, despite Dar’s insisting that they leave them for him to wash, and rush out the door.

The time has come to strip bare the idea of a museum. If we get rid of the donor galas, the stark white walls, the don't touch that, the admission fee, the marble pillars, the feeling of trespassing, the dense curatorial wall panels and the climate control glass, what is left? The promise of a space for meaning-making; a commons built around the exchange of memory, knowledge, and imagination.

Archiving is an act of care for the future. We protect the things we deem most important so that someone, somewhere in the future can see the truths and stories these objects hold. That future might be tomorrow; it might be hundreds of years hence.

Yet this life-giving ideal has acquired a corporate sheen. Museum hierarchies and structures replicate those of commercial companies. Museum work is often consigned by corporations that profit from war, mass addiction, and activities that poison the earth. How can we trust meaning built from wealth that was grown from the destruction of life, memory and imagination all around the world? What kind of future are we archiving for if we are not actively engaged in care for one another in the present?

We are calling for a museum that never forgets the cost of space; that understands that care is not an infinite resource. In practical terms, this visionary museum would not be able to keep up the illusion of being an infinite storeroom of perfect objects. Things would need to be gotten rid of, rehomed, repurposed, perhaps even allowed to decay. The boogymen of the pillaged collection and the burnt library are often invoked to make us forget that destruction is not always an act of hate and domination. Sometimes, destruction itself arises from the desire to preserve without assessing the unintended consequences of that act. Spring cleaning is a prioritization of care, space, and effort around the things that matter to us. Re-purposing is a way of utilizing the past to create the future.

We are calling for a museum that avoids neither wear nor repair; that understands that endurance is not always the highest virtue; that believes that the loss of joy, connection, and engagement with an object are too high a price to pay for the protection of an abstract future. We believe that it is dangerous to build our meaning-making institutions on the fearful avoidance of the natural processes of death, decomposition, and re-composition. What is required to keep up the illusion of immortality? Could a museum acknowledge decay's natural place in the life of objects? Could a museum give up the fantasy of leaving things unchanged by their stewards?

Could a museum hold space for the lives of people and objects both?

We are reprocessing the museum so that we may turn archiving back into life work, into care work.

No display without couches!
No storage without beds!
No programs without soup!
No belongings without life!

Alone once more, Dar carefully strips out of the painted uniform and folds it carefully into its special box. He wonders if Tom and Eliza May would have been friends of his if they had all met in another time and place. In a fresh pair of jeans, he sinks into the armchair by the window. He listens to the rain fall outside and hopes there will be soup tonight for dinner, something warm and flavorful to counterbalance the cold. And there will be soup tonight.

ILLUSTRATION TEXT

COMMUNITY BOARD (PAGE 4):

A bright orange poster reads: Weekly Lunch Sign-ups: Responsibilities include harvesting fresh ingredients from the roof garden, cooking, and serving. Dishes are washed communally. On the weekends we prepare double lunch to hand out in Aspect Park.

MONDAY MAY 20th Matilda and Yu	TUESDAY MAY 21st Tony, Isa, and Jo	WEDNESDAY MAY 22nd Juan and Lou	THURSDAY MAY 23rd Isaiah and Adi	FRIDAY MAY 24th Raphael and Soyoon	SATURDAY MAY 25th Bettina and Jai Eliza May and Tom	SUNDAY MAY 26th Hal and Pri lan S and Wanda
---	---	---------------------------------------	--	---	--	---

Please reach out to Jai or Pamela if you need soup delivered to you for any reason!

A flyer covered in what look like neon dancing jellybeans details: Join the dance committee for a night of disco history! Learn how disco broke traditional partnered dancing and allowed dancers of all genders and configurations to move freely to the music. Reginald will show some historic photos of early disco clubs and give us some dancing lessons from 6:30-8pm. Borrow an outfit from the communal costume closet and boogie the night away! Thursday May 23rd 6pm-5am in the main hall. Libations provided.”

A light blue poster outlines: Upcoming Rehousing Trips: Gee’s Bend Quilting Exchange. June 13-18th.

All of the quilts from our collection of Gee’s Bend quilts are traveling back to Alabama where some descendants of the quilters are opening a museum and learning collective: Our Mamas’ Song (after a quilt made by Mary Lee Bendolph). They have generously offered to lead a quilt making workshop with any of our interested residents so that we may take a piece of their work back home with us. They request that we bring any fabric materials that no longer serve their original purpose but which hold great significance to us. There will be an interest meeting on May 4th in room 325. Contact Joan for more information.

A light blue poster reads: Chair Dissemination

After years of deliberation, we have decided to rehouse 70% of our historic chair collection. The chairs will be relocated to the New Growth School just down the block to make up the seating in their new auditorium. The rehousing committee believes that offering our youth the chance to engage firsthand with design history by sitting on, learning from, and repairing these historic chairs suits the needs of the students and the chairs equally.

Each Tuesday from May 7th to August 13th, we will be working to create informational materials about each chair and figure out the best way to package those stories so that they may be accessed by visitors to the auditorium. Our ongoing education committee has also committed to leading furniture repair workshops at the school every spring.

Preparation: Every Tuesday from now until August 14th in the workshop

Rehousing Ceremony: On August 14th, starting at noon in the main hall, all interested residents will carry a chair over to the New Growth School just down the block. For more information, contact Dar.”

A lavender flyer with removable tags at the bottom shouts: “The ongoing education committee invites you to learn about book restoration and care! Join our resident paper goddess, Soyoon, for a hands-on workshop about what our books and documents are made of and how we can best care for and protect them. Bring a book, zine, printed photo or document that’s in need of a little extra love. Sunday June 9th, 10:30am to 4pm, lunch provided.”

OPEN HOUSE FLYER (PAGE 5):

“Join the Living Museum for our Thursday open houses from noon until dinner time, year-round. Our residents open their doors and their storerooms* to your curious eyes. Come hungry and hungry to learn! Food and beverages are, as always, provided.

*Note: Some belongings in our collections do require initiation, a right mindset, or a certain depth of engagement / reverence. Such belongings require formal appointments. Thank you for understanding!”



MANIFESTO (PAGE 8):

The Living Museum Manifesto circa 2094

Issued by the Political Education Committee at the Living Museum Encampment

The time has come to strip bare the idea of a museum. If we get rid of the donor galas, the stark white walls, the don't touch that, the admission fee, the marble pillars, the feeling of trespassing, the dense curatorial wall panels and the climate control glass, what is left? The promise of a space for meaning-making; a commons built around the exchange of memory, knowledge, and imagination.

Archiving is an act of care for the future. We protect the things we deem most important so that someone, somewhere in the future can see the truths and stories these objects hold. That future might be tomorrow; it might be hundreds of years hence.

Yet this life-giving ideal has acquired a corporate sheen. Museum hierarchies and structures replicate those of commercial companies. Museum work is often cosigned by corporations that profit from war, mass addiction, and activities that poison the earth. How can we trust meaning built from wealth that was grown from the destruction of life, memory and imagination all around the world? What kind of future are we archiving for if we are not actively engaged in care for one another in the present?

We are calling for a museum that never forgets the cost of space; that understands that care is not an infinite resource. In practical terms, this visionary museum would not be able to keep up the illusion of being an infinite storeroom of perfect objects. Things would need to be gotten rid of, rehoused, repurposed, perhaps even allowed to decay. The boogeymen of the pillaged collection and the burnt library are often invoked to make us forget that destruction is not always an act of hate and domination. Sometimes, destruction itself arises from the desire to preserve without assessing the unintended consequences of that act. Spring cleaning is a prioritization of care, space, and effort around the things that matter to us. Re-purposing is a way of utilizing the past to create the future.

We are calling for a museum that avoids neither wear nor repair; that understands that endurance is not always the highest virtue; that believes that the loss of joy, connection, and engagement with an object are too high a price to pay for the protection of an abstract future. We believe that it is dangerous to build our meaning-making institutions on the fearful avoidance of the natural processes of death, decomposition, and re-composition. What is required to keep up the illusion of immortality? Could a museum acknowledge decay's natural place in the life of objects? Could a museum give up the fantasy of leaving things unchanged by their stewards?





Could a museum hold space for the lives of people and objects both?

We are repossessing the museum so that we may turn archiving back into life work, into care work.

No display without couches.

No storage without beds.

No programs without soup.

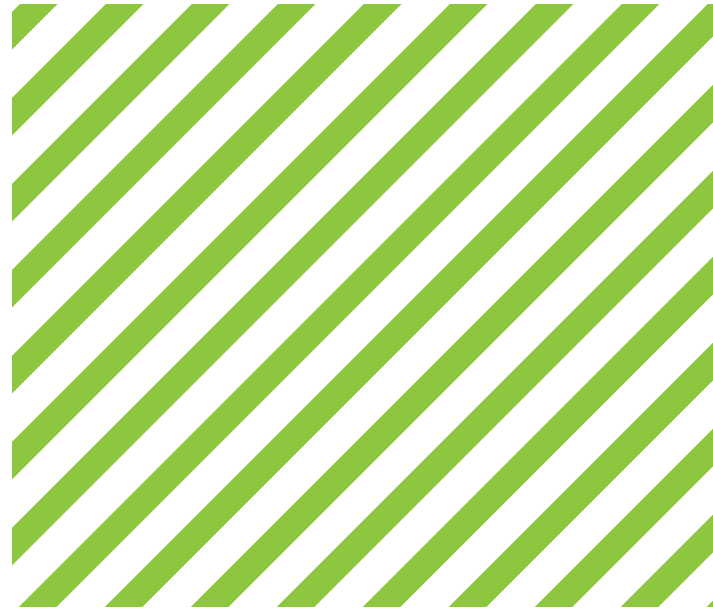
No belongings without life.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Hanesworth is a memory worker and audio storyteller. They are currently the Project Director of Digital Media for the Center for Restorative History. Alex is invested in community oral history, place-based storytelling, oral history, queer history, and community archives. In the past, they made audio tours for the RISD Museum, and gave tours for the Wharton Esherick Museum. They have also taught radio production and oral history at Blue Stoop, the Providence Public Library, and Brown University. They earned a bachelor's degree in Radio Documentary from Brown University and are currently based in West Philadelphia.





Center for the Future of Museums

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS

The American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) helps museums explore the cultural, political, and economic challenges facing society and devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. CFM is a think tank and R&D lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways. Find research, reports, blog content and foresight tools at aam-us.org/programs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/.



American Alliance of Museums

ABOUT THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) is the only organization representing the entire museum field, from art and history museums to science centers and zoos. Since 1906, we have been championing museums through advocacy and providing museum professionals with the resources, knowledge, inspiration, and connections they need to move the field forward. Learn more at aam-us.org.



This report was generously supported by

DAVID BERG FOUNDATION



“The Gallery Has a Dance Floor Now” © 2024 by Alex Hanesworth is licensed under Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Attribute to Alex Hanesworth and the American Alliance of Museums, and include the URL aam-us.org. To view a copy of this license, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Report design by [Brevity & Wit](#)

HELP US KEEP AN EYE ON THE FUTURE

Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) projects and reports are supported by American Alliance of Museums member dues and donations. If this report sparked your thinking and you would like to see CFM's work prosper, please consider supporting the Alliance by joining or making a tax-deductible contribution. For over a decade, CFM has been helping museums explore today's challenges and shape a better tomorrow. We welcome your investment in our shared future.

Support CFM today and help create a better future for museums. Visit aam-us.org/membership or aam-us.org/donate.

Foundation and corporate support are also welcome. To learn more, contact Eileen Goldspiel at egoldspiel@aam-us.org.



**American
Alliance of
Museums**