

# The Museum of Tomorrow

Often we think of the future as a destination. A journey is required to reach it, fueled by a need or instinct to control our own destiny, to make discoveries, unravel mysteries, adapt to the unexpected in order to survive and prosper. But in a universe of infinite possibility—the universe that museums represent—the future is an aspiration, and not always a destination. And taking meaningful action in the present will help to shape the future.

On museums' fast-moving journey, what are some of the forces we encounter? Seismic shifts in the demographic landscape lead to a new racial-ethnic majority in the U.S. Concerns about environmental sustainability offer opportunities for entrepreneurial innovation and creative education strategies. A new era of global freedom and understanding fueled by Cyberspace exploration creates infinite opportunities to connect with global citizens.

Museums help us connect. Connection in its myriad forms—processes, places, ideas, objects, tools and people—are vital to a museum's relevance. Connection transforms a static museum experience into one that is participatory, personal, and immersive. Connection aligns formal and informal learning, helping sustain an educational ecosystem that nourishes hungry minds. Connection unites people of all ages and origins around the promise of infinite possibility.

Creativity, communication, technological literacy, global awareness, critical and cross-disciplinary thinking—all are skills that will be vital in navigating an increasingly interdependent future. As the process of learning continues to evolve how will museums adapt to champion these skills?

Enter Houston. The fourth largest city in the U.S. An urban center that defies expectations. In the space of a few generations, Houston has transformed itself from a sleepy backwater bayou of cattle ranchers and oil prospectors into an electrifying technological and entrepreneurial metropolis. Today it is home to 18 Fortune 500 companies, the world's largest medical complex, over 40 colleges and universities, and 500 cultural, visual, and performing arts organizations, many devoted to multicultural arts. More than 80 different languages are spoken here. There is no longer any racial or ethnic majority, and the Hispanic population is one of the largest in the nation. Thirty-seven percent of the population is under the age of 24. Houston is the ideal testing ground to investigate our future.

In fact, the future may have already arrived in Houston. It's waiting there for us to explore.

Can museums help shape a future in which learners are more self-directed in their life long journeys? In what ways will the future, in turn, shape our institutions, our programs and goals? Let's summon a vision of the museum of the future. Will it be a laboratory for the germination of ideas...a kaleidoscope that melds all the jeweled colors of imagination...the engine that harnesses the energy of human potential to fuel change? Can museums help create the future of our collective aspirations? Can museums change the world? Yes, we can!

In 2011 we invite colleagues to invent a new vocabulary for the future, a common language about the notion of museums—what they are and what they can become—by proposing visionary answers to the age-old questions. And, coming up with some new and visionary questions that require new and unexpected answers. In addition to addressing the nuts and bolts of the profession, proposals are encouraged to investigate the following topics:

- Changing demographics: a 50% jump in the number of Americans over the age of 65 in the next quarter century, with attendant implications for health, mobility, retirement, volunteerism and leisure time; a multi-ethnic America that will be majority-minority in the

- next half-century; and the influence of changing gender roles as women overtake men in education and pay.
- Globalization: the effects of energy price volatility on all aspects of society, including building and travel; and the growing divide in wealth between the rich and the poor.
  - Environmental sustainability: the growing awareness of the need to re-examine the effect of our culture and lifestyles on the earth.
  - Revolution in communications: the changing habits of consuming news and entertainment, the diffusion of authority, and the loss of a single common cultural reference. Also the challenge of the widespread expectation that “digital” equals “free.”
  - The trend AAM’s Museums & Society 2034 report dubbed “myCulture”: a creative renaissance fueled by new technological tools and the prevalence of on-line distribution; the shifting concept of narrative placing the individual at the center of all stories; and a growing desire for respite and retreat in a world where people are “plugged in” 24 hours a day.
  - The transformation of education: envisioning the future of learning, formal and informal, and the central role museums can play in a new educational landscape.