



International Coalition of  
**SITES of CONSCIENCE**  
Europe

Memory. Truth. Justice.



European Symposium

# Challenging Narratives, Fostering Empowerment and Collaborative Practice

Liverpool, England, June 20–21, 2024

Cover: Photo of the Walker Art Gallery – Into the Light: An intervention by Nahem Shoa



# INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions are being called to renegotiate their role in society. As both bearers of societies' history and vectors of social transformation, they are best placed to address past wrongdoings, counter historical narratives that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination, and build new inclusive narratives that empower citizens, foster shared understanding, and contribute to rebuilding the social fabric.

However, museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions are facing important challenges: How do we acknowledge and address the wrongs of the past and its legacies, and collectively identify ways to correct those wrongs, especially in profoundly polarized societies when confronting the past raises strong resistance? How do we dismantle the entrenched systemic inequities and biases that have historically shaped museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions worldwide? How do we engage in institutional transformation and make space for historically discriminated groups that have been left out for so long? How do we adapt to the changing needs of societies and create safe spaces for difficult conversations and dialogue on contested pasts?

There is a need to support museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions as they adapt to today's societies, including reassessing their missions and social roles and developing programming that activates the learning of the past and the power of their sites to address the changing needs of their societies.

As a part its efforts to support Sites of Conscience and like-minded organizations to achieve this goal, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience-Europe (ICSC-Europe) partnered with its member the National Museums Liverpool (NML) and the Transatlantic Slavery and Legacies in Museums Forum (TSLMF) to hold the **European Symposium: Challenging Narratives, Fostering Empowerment and Collaborative Practice** in June 2024 in Liverpool, England.

This report provides a summary of the presentations and conversations held during the symposium and presents main learnings from the group discussions.

## **The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience – Europe (ICSC-Europe)**

ICSC-Europe was launched in 2015 as a subsidiary regional entity of the U.S.-based International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) to expand the work of Sites of Conscience in Europe and around the world.

Building on ICSC's 20+ years of experience, ICSC-Europe works to activate the power of memory to address legacies of the past and advance human rights in the present. This European network is made up of 55 museums and heritage and memory initiatives in 23 countries ranging from museums and former sites of human rights violations fostering democratic values to civil society organizations using memory for peacebuilding. Through the exchange of experiences, capacity-building training, connections and partnerships, and co-creation of innovative methodologies grounded in its work, ICSC-Europe assists European members in building inclusive and complex narratives, creating programs that foster critical thinking and civic engagement on social justice issues, and engaging in dialogue on contested pasts.

## **National Museums Liverpool (NML)**

NML is a group of eight museums and galleries sharing important stories from ancient times to today through collections consisting of four million objects of global importance. The venues are Lady Lever Art Gallery, Walker Art Gallery, Sudley House, World Museum, International Slavery Museum, Maritime Museum, Seized, and the Museum of Liverpool. NML is undertaking a decade of change both within the city and further afield. Liverpool's iconic waterfront is changing, and as part of NML's 10-year masterplan, this landmark project will be transforming the area between the Royal Albert Dock and Mann Island, as well as revitalizing all waterfront facilities. NML wants to re-engage local communities and empower individuals to bring this significant and important part of the waterfront to life.

## **The Transatlantic Slavery and Legacies in Museums Forum (TSLMF)**

TSLMF is a pressing initiative born in response to public demand to fundamentally change how narratives on transatlantic slavery and its legacies are understood and help combat ongoing racism and bias. Led by NML in partnership with Museum of London, Black Cultural Archives (BCA), Bristol Culture, Hull Museums, and Glasgow Museums, the forum aims to create a space for sharing best practice, offer support through regular workshops and events, and amplify the work being done across the UK. Taking an approach that is centered on support and care, the forum seeks to help museums fulfill their moral obligation to correct overlooked narratives, expand their practice, and help society heal and grow together.



*International Slavery Museum, National Museums Liverpool, UK*

# THE SYMPOSIUM

Professionals from museums and heritage sites along with community activists from across Europe came together to discuss their role in fostering new understandings of the past, combating historical discrimination and its legacies today, and contributing to healing and reconciliation. They looked into challenges, shared good practices, and explored new opportunities.

## PANEL 1:

### Challenging Exclusive, Discriminatory, and Divisive Narratives

The first panel of the Symposium explored the potential of museums, heritage sites, and memory initiatives to challenge exclusive, discriminatory, and divisive narratives by building inclusive narratives that correct historical records, empower marginalized groups, and foster peace and racial and social justice today. It included presentations by Lisa Anderson from the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in the UK, Amina Krvavac from the War Childhood Museum (WCM) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tomas Baum from Kazerne Dossin in Belgium, and Elisabeth Jolys-Shimells from the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (MNHI) in France.

#### Repairing Past Wrongoings and Promoting Equity and Justice Today

Lisa Anderson, Managing Director of [Black Cultural Archives](#) (UK)

BCA is an archive with educational and exhibition programming that seeks to provide evidence and paint a more comprehensive picture of Black presence in Britain. For Lisa Anderson, BCA director, "what was needed was a space where members of the community, especially young people, could come and find positive representations of themselves in history and culture."

BCA collects, preserves, and celebrates the histories of people of African and Caribbean descents in the UK. It serves as a repository of stories, objects, and documents that people



*The Black Cultural Archives (BCA), United Kingdom.*

provide and also develops specific interventions and programming to reach out to communities and gather histories that are overlooked. Correcting historical records and acknowledging these stories is an important part of reparation. As Lisa affirms, “This living monument provides a space for cultural, emotional and intellectual repair.”

BCA prioritizes education and develops schools and public programs to celebrate and champion marginalized voices and empower them. For Lisa, rediscovering, reinterpreting, and reasserting the stories, experiences, and contributions of Black people in Britain is critical to countering exclusion and discrimination in UK society today because, as she put it, “our institutions are perpetuating absences.”

Doing so requires getting out of the walls of the museum and supporting its community demands for equity and justice in the present. “Values don’t mean a thing if they are not lived or put into action [...] we want to be in the conversation with the community and standing up in public with them, not being a building behind a gate.”

*“Values don’t mean a thing if they are not lived or put into action [...] we want to be in the conversation with the community and standing up in public with them, not being a building behind a gate.”*

## Creating a Space for Empowerment, Healing, and Fostering Peace

Amina Kravac, Director of [War Childhood Museum](#) (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Initiated by young people who were children during the war in Bosnia, WCM was established to document and preserve the experience of growing up during the war. The museum holds a comprehensive collection of personal belongings, documents, photographs, letters, and audio-visual testimonies of children who survived bombardments, genocide, displacement, and sexual violence in the Balkans and other regions of the world. The museum’s role is critical to empower children, give them agency over their own stories, and provide them with a platform to voice their needs and reclaim their rights.

In a context where little has been done to heal a population deeply traumatized by war, the museum has provided Bosnians of all ages with a rare opportunity to confront the traumas of their recent past. WCM’s team uses a trauma-sensitive approach in all aspects of its work, from adequately communicating the sensitive issues to adopting empowering storytelling methods and facilitating discussions with its visitors. “The Museum is a space where people sometimes share their stories for the first time [...] parents whose childhood was affected by war use the stories displayed in the museum to talk about difficult topics they had never spoken of to their children before.”

Children’s stories also have the potential to advance mutual understanding in the wake of conflict and violence. Through those stories of childhood collected across the country, the museum contributes to building an inclusive and complex narrative of the war in Bosnia and acknowledges the validity of different groups’ grievances, thereby allowing trust to be rebuilt and fostering reconciliation.



*War Childhood Museum, permanent exhibit, Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

Over the last few years, WCM has expanded its activities, collecting stories of children in different war-affected areas such as in Ukraine and Palestine and works to champion peace and reconciliation in other parts of the world.



War Childhood Museum, permanent exhibit, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

#### A Dress for Eid

*"On the first day of Eid in 2014, I got up at 7 o'clock. It was the day that I long anticipated because I was about to put on my special Eid dress. Just few hours later, I heard the sounds of an explosion. My parents and siblings ran to the windows to see what was happening. There was a lot of smoke in the skies. Gaza was being bombed even though they announced a truce. It was Eid but there was no celebration.*

*I took off my dress and I never wore it again. I spent a lot of time trying to get rid of the feeling that Eid is a bloody day.*

*This is a dress that was given to me by a family member. The dress is 80 years old and it used to belong to my great grandmother who wore it for her own Eid celebrations as a young girl. It reminds me of my own dress that I planned to wear for Eid in 2014 and that is why I want the Museum to keep it safe."*

Reem, b. 2008

## Remembering the Persecution of Jews, Sinti, and Roma and Promoting Human Rights Today

Tomas Baum, Director of [Kazerne Dossin](#) (Belgium)

Some 25,490 Jews and 353 Roma were deported from the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, Belgium, to Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1942 and 1944. Most never returned. In this 'waiting-room of Auschwitz,' Jews and Roma were robbed of their freedom and forced to live in degrading conditions. At Kazerne Dossin, the history of the persecution of Jews, Sinti, and Roma during World War II is preserved, researched, displayed, and shared in a memorial, museum, and archive and research center.



Kazerne Dossin, Belgium.

From this Holocaust memorial site, it reflects on the past and questions the current meaning of human dignity and human rights, having developed specific interventions to promote respect for human rights today. Initiatives such as the "Learning Trajectories" project aim to assist the Belgium justice department and the football (soccer) world to react to hate speech. The museum provides training to police officers and prison guards to increase their awareness of human rights. It also displays different temporary expositions dedicated to human rights.

In commemoration, the organization also wants to establish a link with the future. The "Every Name Matters" project aims to perpetuate the memory of each of those 25,843 unique individuals for generations to come. Participants reflect on what happened to them and by reading the names of the victims out loud, they create a monument that will resonate in the memorial.

*"In the context of a history of extreme suffering and intergenerational trauma, the challenge for the museum is to create a safe space to open up difficult conversations – to remain a place of remembrance and healing while promoting respect for human rights today."*

While the past is preserved within these walls, the work of Kazerne Dossin extends beyond remembrance. Activating the power of a site of memory related to the Holocaust to tackle human rights issues today is a delicate endeavor. “In the context of a history of extreme suffering and intergenerational trauma, the challenge for the museum is to create a safe space to open up difficult conversations – to remain a place of remembrance and healing while promoting respect for human rights today.”

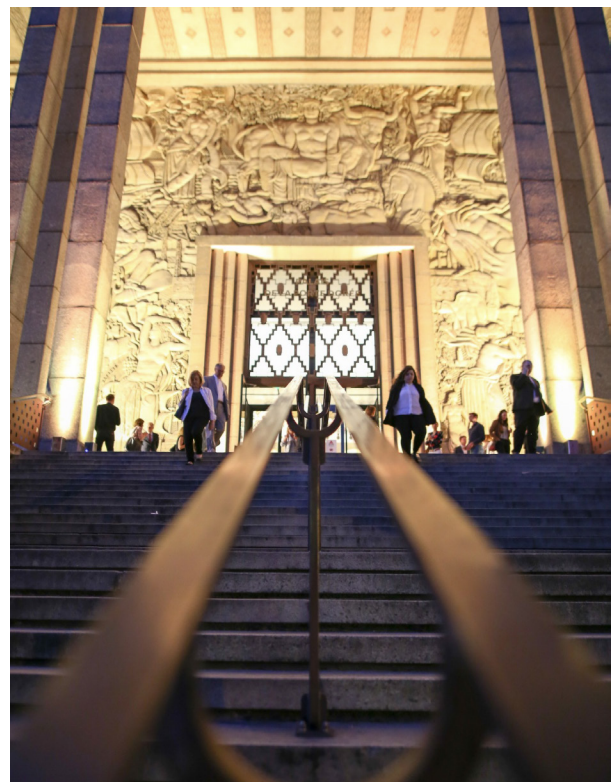
## **Building a New National Narrative That Recognizes and Celebrates Immigrants' Contribution**

Elisabeth Jolys-Shimells, Chief Heritage Curator, [Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration](#) (France)

MNHI aims to collect, safeguard, and highlight the history of immigration and promote and acknowledge its role in France in both the past and the present. It is a multidisciplinary cultural, scientific, and educational institution that provides a space for exhibitions, artistic performances, reflection, and debate. Visitors can learn about the history of immigration, deconstruct preconceived ideas and representations of migration, and deepen their understanding of the contributions of people from elsewhere to French society and the realities of migration today.

Hosted in a building constructed for the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 and a symbol of colonial domination, the museum addresses the complex relationship between migration and colonization and explores how colonialism lives on today in the forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance. The museum's work is essential at a time when the French far Right and its nationalist ideology, which contests history and stigmatizes migrants, is gaining more and more ground. In this context, the museum is a trustworthy safe space, a space to express and explore contemporary social issues without aggression.

The museum has the ambition to collect and preserve a national heritage about migrations and migrants in both their singularity and diversity. For this purpose, it has initiated a wide national dialogue with civil society actors to work together toward more inclusive narratives. But as a national museum dependent on state funding, adopting a participatory approach and centering the voice of migrants is an important challenge, especially in a context where immigration is increasingly seen as the reason for all society's ills.



*Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, France*

## Building Empowering and Equitable Engagement with Communities

The second panel focused on how museums, heritage sites, and memory initiatives can proactively address inequalities and discrimination in their societies by building empowering and equitable engagement with their communities, especially with those who have been historically marginalized. Through the interventions of Nelson Cummins from Slavery, Empire and Legacies, Emily Miller from Migration Network (UK), Erdogan Aykac from the Wereldmuseum and Gloria Daniels from the Transatlantic Trafficked Enslaved African Corrective Historical (TTEACH) Plaque Project, the panel examined co-creation practices and the profound transformation required in the approaches and practices of museums, heritage sites, and memory initiatives.

### Transforming Museums Into an Anti-racist Place

Nelson Cummins, Curator for Slavery, Empire and Legacies, [Glasgow Life](#) (UK)

Museum collections have been shaped by slavery and colonialism in a range of ways. Whether it's artworks that were donated to museums by enslavers, treasures looted during colonial wars, or artifacts acquired by merchants who made fortunes from an oppressive and unequal system of colonialism, there are many objects within museum collections that connect to slavery and empire. Glasgow Museums is no different here. Its



*Glasgow Life, permanent exhibit, Scotland.*

collection bears testimony to the British Empire and transatlantic slavery. Through its collection, Glasgow Life Museums aims to explore Scotland's relationship to slavery and imperialism and their complex legacies.

Because slavery and empire have left pervasive legacies around the world and marginalized many voices, the museums encourage community participation to reframe the narrative. Beyond looking at how Glasgow benefited from slavery and empire in the past and outlining how those histories have shaped Glasgow's present, Glasgow Museums exposes how modern-day racism is a direct consequence of histories of slavery and empire that relied on white-supremacy ideology to justify systems of colonial oppression and chattel slavery. Sharing this history and making those connections is part of the role museums must play in anti-racist work and striving for a more equal



society. Since museums are not isolated from the rest of society and are therefore heavily impacted by structural racism, this requires doing an honest assessment of museums' work, recognizing institutional knowledge biases and operating an institutional transformation. One example of the many ways in which racism shapes museum spaces is the lack of access to career opportunities in the sector for minority ethnic people.

It involves museums acting as community spaces that are welcoming to diversity and sites of education and outreach. Community engagement is key to re-address the power dynamic and restructure the institution and help Glasgow become an anti-racist space. It also includes museums needing to have what can be uncomfortable conversations about how they have benefitted from histories of slavery and empire.

### Reflecting on the Central Role of Migration by Centering Communities

Emily Miller, Partnerships Director and Lead of Migration Network UK, [Migration Museum](#) (UK)

The Migration Museum explores how the movement of people to and from the UK across the ages has shaped who we are – as individuals, as communities, and as nations. Since 2020, the Migration Museum has been based in a venue in the heart of Lewisham Shopping Centre in South London. As a free museum in the middle of a busy shopping center, the museum has welcomed around 70,000 visitors a year from across London and beyond.

Community engagement is embedded from the start of the Migration Museum. It is a “museum of stories” that aims to center the experience of migrants and engage the community in all aspects of its work. In 2022, the museum established the “People’s Panel and Network” to create a grassroots community engagement strategy centering the lived experiences of local people in shaping the community engagement practices of the museum.

The goal is to fully embed community engagement across the museum’s approaches and work – including in the co-production of the Migration Museum’s values. The museum has made sure to enable a broad and inclusive membership and encourage a diverse group of people to get involved in influencing the overall approach of the Migration Museum in relation to co-produced community engagement.

*I was picked  
I came  
I saw  
I spoke  
I was heard  
I heard  
I gave  
I received  
I left a mark  
I received a mark  
I saw me in others  
I saw others in me  
I saw me better  
I was changed  
I am thankful*

Priscilla Okoye, 2023

**A poem created by one of the “People’s Panel and Network” member. It is a signal to the power, value, and impact of keeping the community at the heart of everything we do.**

## Decolonising Museums by Engaging with Diasporic Communities

Erdogan Aykac, Curator Collections, Migration, and the City at [The Wereldmuseum](#)  
(The Netherlands)

The Wereldmuseum (previously Dutch National Museum of World Cultures) was founded in 2014 by a merger of the [Tropenmuseum](#) in Amsterdam, the [Museum Volkenkunde](#) in Leiden, and the [Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal](#). It also collaborates with the [Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam](#), whose collection belongs to that municipality. These museums were established within colonial contexts and reflect and reproduce the colonial mindset and practices in different ways. The Wereldmuseum is actively engaged and participates in debates on how to challenge these colonial histories and legacies – in other words, how to “decolonize” the museum – including provenance research and discussions regarding restitution of collections.



*The Wereldmuseum, Workshop, The Netherlands*

This exploration has been developed through creative collaboration with a wide range of groups, individuals, and communities that takes many forms, such as exhibitions, educational podcasts, and artistic workshops focused on creating artwork such as embroidery. If we want to talk about repair, recognition, bringing justice, and making amends to historical wrongdoings, then community engagement and needs should be at the core of our practices. The Wereldmuseum tries to see itself as a knowledge center and platform, producing knowledge through research and collaboration with communities. The museum also makes space for communities that are not reflected, per se, in collections but do challenge our practices and give us new insights for future collecting practices, such as with the role of hip-hop within the urban context.

At the core of this work is community interest, at all levels – the objects they want to see in the museums and the conversations they want to have. It's important to avoid assumptions, to be honest about the challenges and limitations, and to adopt a holistic approach to ensure that this collaborative approach is seen throughout the institution.

## Descendants of the Enslaved Lead Effort to Expose and Redress UK Enslavement Legacy

Gloria Daniel, Director of [The Transatlantic Trafficked Enslaved African Corrective Historical \(TTEACH\) Plaques Project](#) (UK)

TTEACH Plaque Project was founded in 2020 by descendants of the enslaved in response to the resurgence of Black Lives Matter after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, and by the injustices exposed by the UK's "Hostile Environment" policy and the "Windrush Scandal." TTEACH calls for interventions and reparative action, advocating for corrective plaques on buildings and institutions that honor those who profited from the trafficking and enslavement of African people and urging these institutions to truthfully contextualize their histories.

Using records from University College London's Legacies of British Slave-ownership project, TTEACH plaques materially highlight receivers of compensation under the 1833 Abolition Act. Through critical discussions, TTEACH has engaged with organizations including Bristol Cathedral, the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Museum of the Bank of England, and Lloyds of London. Additionally, TTEACH has challenged the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to require organizations seeking funding to acknowledge their histories of profiting from enslavement, though this policy has not yet been adopted.

TTEACH Plaque project uses those corrective historical plaques to bring multiple voices – artists, poets, and descendants of the enslaved – to bring untold stories of injustice and resistance into public consciousness. This project is "a significant step toward rectifying historical injustices and ensuring that the narratives of those who endured unimaginable terror are acknowledged and remembered." By empowering descendants of the enslaved across the UK and the Caribbean, and by creating spaces for dialogue around those difficult truths, the project encourages all to reflect on ongoing struggles for equality and racial justice and aims to embody "black lives matter yesterday, today, tomorrow."



*The Transatlantic Trafficked Enslaved African Corrective Historical (TTEACH) Plaques Project, United Kingdom.*

## Engaging with Communities on Traumatic and Contested Histories

Panel three focused on the challenges of putting community engagement into practice in heritage settings when dealing with traumatic and contested histories. Panelists discussed how to restore trust with historically discriminated communities, engaging deeply traumatized communities, responding to community demands, and building inclusive and multifaceted narratives in divided societies. Panelists included Rebecca Lavery from the National Museums NI, Anke Hoffsten from the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, and Brenda Malone, Donna Rose, and Catherine Coffey O'Brien from the National Museum of Ireland (NMI).

### Engaging Diverse Communities in a Post-conflict Setting

Rebecca Lavery, Curator of modern History at the [National Museums NI](#) (Northern Ireland)

National Museums NI looks after four museum sites in Northern Ireland, including the Ulster Museum, which explores the past, present, and future and champions diverse voices and new perspectives to promote positive change in society. The Ulster Museum's permanent exhibition, *The Troubles and Beyond*, aims to build an inclusive space to address the legacy of the conflict by engaging communities to share their stories and reflect on the different experiences displayed.



*National Museums NI, permanent exhibit, Northern Ireland.*

But engaging with communities and portraying multiple perspectives within a still-divided society is very challenging. One of the key questions is how to build trust with all sides, especially as a national museum that can be perceived by some as representing middle-class or “British” views. The Ulster Museum, along with other local museums and heritage organizations, is part of the Conflict and Legacy Network, which works to address the legacy of the conflict with the purpose of nurturing a range of views and perspectives on the recent conflict and inform the debate on legacy and reconciliation.

Building that trustful relationship takes time. It requires managing expectations of what the museum can achieve and giving time and space for people to heal and be ready to contribute. The museum has placed a couch next to *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition where people are invited to take time for reflection. Sometimes this can result in

people sharing a personal story of the conflict. It is also crucial to sustain the relationship with the community in the long term and find ways for these projects and relationships to exist after funding runs out.

The museum embraces criticism and welcomes open conversation. "In a society where divides are still felt so strongly, the museum aims to create a space for people to come to reasonable disagreement." The museum has embedded integrating feedback and criticism and continually evolving the exhibition in its strategic approach.

*"In a society where divides are still felt so strongly, the museum aims to create a space for people to come to reasonable disagreement."*

## Engaging with Victims and Building Trust

Anke Hoffsten, Curator and Deputy Director of [The Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism](#) (Germany)

The Munich Documentation Center, located on the site where the "[Brown House](#)" – the former Nazi Party headquarters – once stood, is dedicated to addressing the history of National Socialism and far-Right violence since 1945. As part of its efforts to document and expose how extremist ideology permeates today's society and results in persecution and violence against minorities, the Munich Documentation Center collaborates with relatives of the far-Right terrorist attack

at the Munich Olympia Shopping Center (July 22, 2016), where nine people were killed because of their assumed migrant background. Initially classified by the Munich police investigators as a shooting spree without a political motive, it took four years before the crime was finally requalified as a terrorist attack with racist motives. The Munich Documentation Center aims to support the relatives of the victims to keep alive the memory of the terrorist attack in Munich's collective consciousness and integrate their stories into the Center's narrative.

Building trust with the victims' relatives and communities deeply traumatized by the attack and by years of official denial has been very challenging, especially because the Munich Documentation Center has been associated with the city's mistakes. The center has had to find ways to break down these barriers. Within its team, the center has created a taskforce dedicated to building a relationship with the community and setting up a co-creation process. The taskforce has established clear communication, participated in the community's events, listened to members of that community, and provided them with a platform to voice their needs. As a "traditional" documentation center, engaging with communities who have had a number of requests, including one for a memorial, has been a long process that has required listening, institutional transformation, and honest conversation about how the center could



*The Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism, Germany.*

address their needs without fully meeting their demands. “Taking the time needed to build this relationship, without having a specific agenda and timeline, has been essential to building co-creation projects.”

By realizing a smaller-scale project together ([#telltheirstories](#)), the center and the families have begun building a working relationship, finding common ground, and building mutual trust. At the same time, the center supports a long-term project by the photographer Orla Connolly who, a few years before the terror attack, had volunteered to take photo [portraits of Munich high school children](#) for them to use in trainee and job applications. In 2016, she learned that two of the children had been killed in the attack and decided to interview some of the victims' former classmates and learn more about their perspective on the traumatic event and their life experiences. It is yet unclear in what direction the project will grow. In Connolly's endeavor, the center sees a chance to find new and positive ways of learning from this violent event of the recent past – but it can only be reached by leaving the outcome open and giving it the time it needs.

*“Taking the time needed to build this relationship, without having a specific agenda and timeline, has been essential to building co-creation projects.”*

### **Transforming Institutional Practices to Give Agency to the Survivors –**

Brenda Malone, curator, Donna Rose, PhD scholar, and Catherine Coffey O'Brien, member of the Cork Survivors and Supporters Alliance [National Museum of Ireland](#) (Ireland)

NMI explores the story of Ireland and its place in the world today. As part of its work, NMI addresses the phenomenon of historical institutional harm and examines the widespread incarceration of women and children in Ireland from the 1700s through the decades following independence in 1922, with the last institution closing in 1996. During this period, thousands of women and children were confined in a network of sites including Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Institutions, industrial schools, and reformatory schools.

Until recently, the NMI contemporary collections had very little input from survivors of institutional violence. To build an inclusive narrative, it started changing its collection policy to collect items and testimonies from survivors in Ireland and the diaspora and combined oral histories with objects. The NMI team must also ensure that it will have the skills and capacity to engage with communities of survivors and affected people, sustain long-term trusting relationships, not “let them down,” and avoid re-traumatization. This requires taking time and moving slowly, especially in a context where trust between people and the state has been broken.

At the same time, NMI is facing the urgency of collecting and preserving testimonies from survivors, many of whom are in an advanced age. Former institutional buildings are decaying, and artifacts of history are being lost. The survivors of institutional violence in Ireland come from different communities and backgrounds, and their experiences have impacted their lives in different ways. It is essential to embrace the diversity of the stories and adapt engagement processes to their specific needs and expertise.

As much as this work is about representing the past, the museum also has a role in representing the impact of institutions in the present and the contemporary experiences of survivors and affected people. This includes documenting survivor memorialization and activism and supporting engagement with local museums.

# GUIDELINES

Below are guidelines that emerged from the Symposium to adopt a holistic approach to addressing historical injustices, promoting social justice, and fostering reconciliation and peace.

## Correcting Historical Records

- **Expose historical injustices and their legacies:** Museums and heritage sites should expose past wrongdoings and historical injustices that have shaped modern-day inequalities and continue to endanger lasting peace in societies. This includes showing how the legacies of slavery and empire are directly linked to current racial discrimination and xenophobia.
- **Amplify and champion marginalized stories:** Museums and heritage sites should reassess and amplify the overlooked or erased stories of marginalized communities, emphasizing their experiences, contributions, and agency. Doing so could help communities reclaim their histories and provide them with a platform to raise their voices.
- **Play an active role in addressing current human rights violations and inequalities:** Museums and heritage sites should go beyond remembrance and take active steps to engage with and address contemporary issues related to human rights and social justice. Doing so requires them to be proactive and continuously engaged in confronting ongoing injustices. They should not remain confined to their physical spaces, but rather extend their influence beyond their walls by supporting their communities' demands for equity and justice in the present.

## Building Inclusive and Complex Narratives

- **Inclusive representation:** To avoid perpetuating one-sided or exclusionary narratives, museums and heritage sites should build complex and inclusive narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of their society. This involves portraying multiple perspectives and ensuring that no one is excluded, particularly in divided societies.
- **Vibrant and inclusive space:** Museums and heritage sites should be spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, safe, and valued, allowing trust to be rebuilt and fostering mutual understanding and reconciliation.
- **Adapt to evolving needs of societies:** As societies evolve, new communities may face silencing and discrimination. Museums and heritage sites should continuously analyze the context in which they work and regularly assess how well all communities are represented.

## Embracing Institutional Transformation

- **Assess institutional silences and biases:** Addressing historical silences starts by changing museums and cultural institutions from within. Museums and heritage sites should engage in an honest assessment of their own histories and practices, recognizing the entrenched systemic inequities and biases that have historically shaped museums, heritage sites, and cultural institutions worldwide.
- **Proactive institutional transformation:** Addressing these silences requires a profound institutional transformation that dismantles entrenched biases and inequities. Change should be seen as an ongoing, intentional process that involves questioning existing norms, reassessing practices, and engaging in deep reflection on the role of museums in society.
- **Overcoming resistance:** Transforming museums and heritage sites can be difficult, particularly in institutions dependent on state funding. Resistance may arise internally from staff or externally from political pressures. Museums must be resilient in challenging these forces to create more inclusive and equitable spaces.

### The Correcting the Record Methodology:

As part of ICSC's long trajectory supporting museums, heritage sites, and memory initiatives around the world to expand their social role, in 2023, ICSC launched the "Correcting the Record" methodology. This methodology helps museums, heritage sites, and memory initiatives identify gaps in terms of representation and engagement of their communities internally as well in their repository, programming, and collection. There, you can access the [toolkit](#), a step-by-step guide for filling those gaps and engaging with communities in more meaningful ways.

## Engaging with Communities

- **Community-centered approach:** Building an empowering and equitable relationship with the community is crucial. Museums must actively listen to community needs, perspectives, and grievances and center them in their practices. This involves more than just consultation; it requires co-creation and deep collaboration with historically marginalized groups.
- **Time and flexibility:** Establishing trust and engaging communities meaningfully takes time. Museums should invest in long-term relationships with their communities, recognizing that the process of co-creation is gradual and requires flexibility. There should be space for communities to heal and for their voices to be heard without being rushed or pressured.
- **Shared power and accountability:** The museum's role should be to facilitate, not dominate, the conversation. This means sharing power with the community and ensuring that the community's needs are at the core of museum programming. Museums should provide opportunities for income and participation and also a platform for historically excluded groups to tell their stories on their own terms.
- **Long-term commitment:** Engaging communities is not a short-term project, but rather a long-term commitment that requires sustained efforts to maintain trust and ensure that relationships endure beyond temporary funding or initiatives.



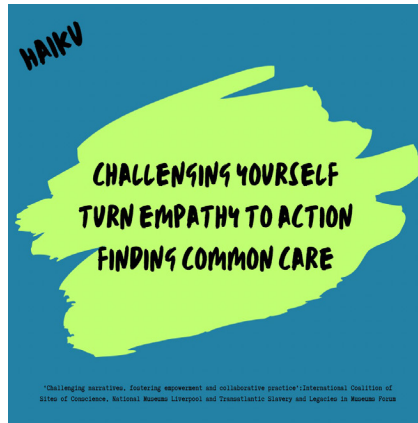
## Adopting Trauma-Informed Approaches

- **Sensitivity to trauma:** It is crucial to adopt trauma-informed approaches when engaging with communities affected by traumatic histories in order to avoid retraumatization. This means approaching sensitive subjects with care and understanding, allowing space for healing, and supporting communities in addressing past and present wounds. A trauma-sensitive approach should be integrated into all aspects of museum work, from communication to the handling of sensitive issues.
- **Support for survivors:** Museums and heritage sites need to ensure that they have the skills and capacity to engage with survivors and descendants of historical injustices in a way that is empathetic and supportive. This includes using empowering storytelling methods, creating an environment that encourages healing, and also prioritizing self-care for museum staff to avoid burnout.

## Creating Safe Spaces for Dialogue

- **Confronting contested histories:** Museums and heritage sites are powerful platforms for engaging with contested or difficult histories, particularly when communities have differing perspectives on traumatic events. Museums can also use the learnings of the past as a way to explore and address complex and divisive issues in the present. They should create safe spaces for open dialogue, where diverse viewpoints can be heard and discussed in a respectful, non-confrontational way.
- **Empathy and common ground:** Museums and heritage sites can foster empathy by connecting individuals through shared personal stories and objects. Facilitating conversations that start with common themes – such as shared experiences of suffering or resilience – can help bridge divides and promote understanding across different groups amid growing societal divides.
- **Engaging with different perspectives:** Museums' and heritage sites' role is to present multiple perspectives, provide historical context, and encourage constructive conversations about difficult issues. Museums should remain open to ongoing dialogue, reflecting the evolving needs of the community. They should “meet people where they are,” meaning they should engage with communities in their cultural spaces and contexts, rather than imposing external viewpoints.

# Haikus



*Challenging Narratives, Fostering Empowerment and Collaborative Practice Symposium, Haiku exercise. June 2024, UK.*

# CONCLUSION

Museums and heritage sites stand at a critical juncture, with the potential to play a transformative role in society, particularly at a time when the rise of nationalism and conservatism – accompanied by the exclusion of minority groups – is contributing to growing discrimination and division within societies. In this context, museums and heritage sites have a unique opportunity to challenge exclusionary narratives, foster inclusivity, and serve as spaces for dialogue and understanding, helping bridge divides and support social cohesion.

However, this work is not without its challenges. Museums and heritage sites face resistance – both internally as staff and stakeholders grapple with new ways of working and externally from forces opposed to the shifts happening in these cultural institutions.

In times of increased polarization, museums and heritage sites are called upon to engage with difficult and often uncomfortable conversations about contested histories and legacies of discrimination. This can be a daunting task, especially as these discussions often bring to the surface sensitive issues that may alienate certain groups.

At this pivotal moment, museums and heritage sites need spaces for open dialogue, shared learning, and collaboration. ICSC-Europe aims to provide this crucial platform for exchange, enabling museums and heritage sites to build a sense of community, learn from each other's successes and mistakes, and develop collective strategies to navigate the challenges they face.



*Challenging Narratives, Fostering Empowerment and Collaborative Practice Symposium, group discussions. June 2024, UK.*