



Addressing the Silences: Museums Reflect, Correct and Transform to Foster Social Cohesion

At present, the United States is reckoning with a range of divisive issues that have left the country profoundly polarized and on edge. An extraordinary confluence of trends – including the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable communities, heightened awareness of police violence against people of color, a devastating economic downturn, rising discrimination against immigrant communities, and the politicization of crucial public health and education issues – have spurred museums across the country to reflect on their historic role in perpetuating injustice and their role in fostering social cohesion today. It is in this questioning that museums have begun to ask: "Who is missing? Whose story is silent? Whose experience is absent?" With support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services through a Leadership Grant, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is partnering with ten museums across the country in a three-year project to engage with their communities in answering these questions with the goal of filling silences and addressing absences so that museums can leverage their extraordinary capacity to serve as spaces for reflection and centers for positive social change.

Starting September 2022, ICSC and ten participant institutions will engage in an intentional process moving from reflection to correction to transformation. The work done between ICSC and its partners will take place in phases:

Reflection: Museums will be equipped to systematically identify and develop a comprehensive understanding of the absences in their operations, collections and programs; they will work hand-in-hand with a cohort of like-minded museums to develop, exchange and document best practices for these efforts, ultimately sharing them with the wider museum field.

Correction: Museums, alongside community partners, will design and implement holistic strategies to address the absences in their operations, collections and public programs to support a more inclusive and equitable public record that can catalyze broad new community engagement.

Collaborative Transformation: Museums will be equipped to collect and create new narratives in collaboration with community members to fill silences and address absences, drawing on and bolstering civic partnerships through new programming and exhibitions that foster dialogue and social cohesion outside the walls of the museum.



"Diana Taylor and Alma Harris display a woven map of Texas counties during a fabric arts group meeting"
Photo credit: The Carver Museum and Cultural Center, TX, USA

ICSC will develop resources, tools and practices to address silences and absences in operations, collections, and programming, amplifying those voices and stories that have been erased historically from the public record and, in doing so, foster more inclusive, engaged communities. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience has seen in its two decades of collaborative capacity enhancement programming with museums across the globe that the roots of long-term success in endeavors are in fact grounded in the strength of the relationships developed during intentional reflective and corrective work. Each participating museum will strengthen relationships with community partners and in the final phase of the project produce updated or new policies and programming related to their work. For more information, email: Braden Paynter at bpaynter@sitesofconscience.org.

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