The Current Status of Art Museums as Possible Downtown CSF Foundation Stones

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Abstract. Our large downtowns, with a few exceptions, are facing shrinking office clusters and a need to become much more functionally diverse. AI threatens to further diminish these office clusters. Strengthening a downtown's Central Social Functions (CSFs) is a way that these downtowns can maintain their activation, magnetism, social centrality of place, safety, business attraction, and property values. Housing is currently cited most often as a way to add such diversity. Which other CSF functions can help assure adequate visitation is an increasingly important strategic question. The arts and entertainment are cited as possibilities. This article looks at art museums' ability to play a CSF foundation stone role by providing the downtowns they are in or near with, at a minimum, a steady flow of a significant amount of visitors, with a possibility of future growth. Since these museums share a number of challenges in maintaining and growing their audiences with many other types of arts venues, the findings of this article may have wider applications.

Introduction.

The focus of this article is on arts museums in our larger downtown, those that are likely to have large office clusters and looking to become more functionally diverse. Art museums were selected because dealing with all of the arts sectors would be a project requiring unaffordable amounts of time, staff and money, while the museums are in at least 23 of our 27 largest downtowns,[1] and their audience retention and growth challenges are shared with many other arts sectors.

The article's objective is to investigate the ability of arts museums to be Central Social Function foundation stones. As our larger downtowns aim to become more functionally diverse by growing their Central Social Functions (CSFs) , the question of which of them besides housing can support or lead that growth becomes germane. Our downtowns will need CSF foundation stones that have a solid, reliable ability to attract lots of visitors, lengthen visit dwell times, provide customers for downtown merchants, and have positive impacts on property values. Hopefully, they also will have the potential for future growth or their presence being leveraged for the growth of other nearby attractions. Minimally, they should provide a steady significant flow of visitors.

[1] Paul Levy in his research on rebounding downtowns looks at the 26 largest. I have added the Upper East Side in Manhattan to his list of the largest downtowns. In this paper when there are only data for the 26 downtowns I will use that number; when there is also data for the 27th I will use 27. N. David Milder, "Using different models to understand downtowns in the US." JURR forthcoming Summer 2026. Levy, P. (2023), 'Downtowns Rebound: The Data Driven Path to Recovery', Center City District (CCD), available at https://centercityphila.org/downtownsreport

One reason for the selection of downtown art museums is that several of them attract 800,000+ visitors a year even though they have not fully rebounded to their 2019 levels. Another is simply the availability of useful data. That is not to say that the available data meet the most rigorous standards for validity, reliability and saliency, but that they are good enough to paint an informative picture of the current strengths and weakness of art museums in and near their downtowns. In turn, that will enable a reasonable assessment of their ability to be CSF foundation stones.

Museums in General. According to research done for the American Alliance of Museums, by 2024: "Over half (55%) of U.S. museums have not returned to pre-pandemic attendance" and 81% is the " median pre-pandemic attendance levels for those 55% of museums."[2] That means that 45% had fully rebounded. About 60% had recovered 90%+ of the 2019 admissions level, and about 73% had recovered to an 80%+ level. See table on left. Museums with mid-sized operating expenses between $125,001and $1 million report higher attendance rates than those of the museums with smaller and larger budgets. While 2023 saw 51% of the museums reporting that their audiences had recovered or surpassed their 2019 levels, 2024 saw that fall back to the 45% level. Of considerable concern is that 29% of museums reported their attendance fell in 2024 because of changes to travel and tourism and/or economic uncertainty. This downturn seems independent of the causal nexus associated with the Covid19 crisis or the one that has caused concern about arts audience shrinkage since 2008. The decline in tourism is no longer based on disease threats and responses, but on domestic economic issues, and national policies towards foreign nations such as tariffs and visa availability.

Audience and Financial Recoveries of US Museums in 2022-2024 Compared to 2019

Museum Audience Recovery From 2019 to...					
Report Yr	Data Yr	N=	100% or +	>90%	>80%
2023	2022	340	33.0%	44.2%	59.2%
2024	2023	464	51.0%	66.1%	79.4%
2025	2024	511	45.0%	60.7%	73.4%
Change in Museum Net Operating Performance from 2019 to ...					
Report Yr	Data Yr	N=	Decrease	No Change	Increase
2023	2022	340	30%	31%	39%
2024	2023	464	19%	24%	57%
2025	2024*	511	26%	21%	52%
*SMU DataArts analysis found an inflation factor of 36% between 2019 and 2024					
Sources: National Snapshot of United States Museums for 2023, 2024 and 2025					

Financially, museums also took another hit in 2024. Finances have an important tie to recovering past visitation levels. Free admissions and more attractive offerings are key tactics for increasing visitation, and they are hard to do if the museum is in financial trouble.

In 2023, 57% percent of museums reported their net operating performance had improved compared to 2019, higher than the 52% in 2024. Reports of declining performance rose

[2] Wilkening Consulting. " Museum Visitation: Demographics of U.S. Museum-Goers: A 2025 Annual Survey Of Museum-Goers Data Story Update" https://wilkeningconsulting.com/demographics-2025/

from 19% in 2023 to 26% in 2024. This indicates that 2024 was a more financially stressful year for museums than 2023, though still better than 2022.

In comparison, attendance at 74% of the nation's opera companies – once the attendance basket case of the arts industry -- had rebounded by the 2022-2023 season to their 2019 levels, and the attendance for Broadway shows during the 2024-2025 season equaled 99.6% of the record breaking 2018-2019 season. Symphony orchestras last year sold tickets at roughly prepandemic levels. In contrast, regional theaters have been facing tough times. There were some initial signs of recovery from Covid but from 2023 to 2024, regional theater attendance fell again, by 19%, and incomes fell by 37%.[3] That both the museums and the regional theaters had declining audiences and incomes suggests that by 2024 non-Covid related factors were adversely affecting many arts organizations large and small.

Going to a movie theaters was once a weekly habit for most Americans, but they have been under threat ever since TVs became a household necessity. Shifting showings to TV and computer screens from theaters has been on the table since at least 2008. Covid-19 did not initiate the severe problems the movie production industry and its theaters faced but it sure accentuated them. Today there are fewer big screens in the United States, 35,481, than before the pandemic 41,172. Admissions last year were off 2019 numbers by 38%, and box office receipts dropped by 23%.

Number of Identified Art Museums in Our 27 Largest Downtowns With Attendance Data Examples When Available

Downtown	Art Museums*	Attendance Examples	Downtown	Art Museums	Attendance Examples
Atlanta	0	ND	Memphis	0	ND
Austin**	3	<60k , 250K	Midtown	1	2.6 mil
Boston	2	988k	Nashville	1	140k ,359k
Charlotte**	3	ND	Philadelphia**	4	427k .793K
Chicago	2	1.3 mil	Phoenix	2	250K , 300K
Columbus	1	ND	Portland, OR	1	40K
Dallas	2	ND	San Antonio	2	40K
Denver	2	ND	San Diego	2	250K,500K
Ft Worth**	3	50k, 240K 320k	San Francisco	1	500K
Houston	0	ND	San Jose	1	100K
Indianapolis	0	ND	Seattle**	3	75K, 100K, 300K+
Jacksonville	1	ND	Washington, DC**	3	1.2 mil to 3.9 mil
Los angeles**	4	300K , 846K	Upper East Side**	10	30K, to 5.7 mil
Lower Manhattan	1	ND			

*Museums were deemed in a downtown if they were in its Greater Downtown area as indicated by the maps provided in Paul Levy. DOWNTOWNS REBOUND: THE DATA DRIVEN PATH TO RECOVERY. 2023. City Center District of Philadelphia. Identifying the art museums was often difficult. The table probably under counts them a bit

**Have a cluster of 3 or more. Artb museums within core or greater downtown

Importantly, across the spectrum of arts venues, even when audiences are returning, observers report things are just different from the prepandemic days. That may include soaring production costs, changing audience tastes, shorter performance schedules, etc.

Identified Art Museums in our 27 Largest Downtowns. The nearby table provides some data on the number of art museums in each of our 27 largest downtowns, along with some found examples of reported visitation stats. It should be treated as having heuristic value rather than being definitive

[3] The New York Times. "5 Years After Covid Closed the Theaters, Audiences Are Returning." https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/arts/covid-five-year-anniversary-theater-music-art.html#:~:text=

since some smaller museums may have been missed, and those with just some arts holdings were not included. In several instances the data on visitation are from pre-Covid years. They are included because they still give a general indication of the visitation level: 30K to 100K are not likely to soon be 1 million plus. 30,000 is the visitation level of the art museum in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a city with a population of about 137,000. Those low visitation numbers can be usefully thought of as an ordinal measurement such as "low" or "modest." Readers can convert the other numbers into their own ordinal measures.

A very important point: there are several art museums that were counted for the above table that have middling attendance numbers in the 250K to 800,000 range, but are widely well regarded for their outstanding holdings. That and their prestige are valuable growth assets. However, the appealing character of some of these museums, such as the Frick and Neue Galerie in Manhattan, and the Barnes in Philadelphia, are tied to their buildings and the limited but prized holdings they have. That probably constrains their potential for in person audience growth.

AUDIENCE RECOVERY RATES OF THE US ART MUSEUMS IN 2024 WITH THE LARGEST ATTENDANCE*

CITY	Museum	2024 Attendance	World Ranking	% Change from 2019
NYC	Metropolitan Museum of Art	5,727,258	4	17%
DC	National Gallery	3,936,543	7	3%
NYC	MoMA	2,657,377	20	33%
DC	Nat Museum of Afro American History	1,600,000	43	-20%
Chicago	Art Institute of Chicago	1,324,241	57	-20%
LA	Getty Museum	1,301,332	59	-10%
DC	National Portrait Gallery	1,273,450	61	-25%
DC	Smithsonian Art Museum	1,273,450	62	-25%
Boston	Museum of Fine Arts	988,911	83	-22%
NYC	Whitney NYC	888,816	90	-14%
LA	LACMA	873,825	91	-10%
Houston	Museum of Fine Arts	854,684	93	-32%
LA	The Broad	846,500	96	-8%
NYC	The Guggenheim	760,000	NA**	-33%

DATA SOURCE: Lee Cheshire and Elena Goukassian. " Exclusive | The world's most-visited museums 2024: normality returns—for some." THE ART NEWSPAPER. APRIL 2, 2025. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/04/01/the-worlds-most-visited-museums-2024-

U.S. museums have not returned to pre-pandemic attendance" and 81% is the " median pre-pandemic attendance levels for those 55% of museums. " See: https://wilkeningconsulting.com/visitation-trends/ https://wilkeningconsulting.com/visitation-trends/

**CUF Creative NY Report 2025 https://nycfuture.org/pdf/surveying-nycs-arts-after-covid

Our search found art museums in 23 of the 27 largest downtowns, either in their core areas or in the greater downtown areas. In some instances, such as Houston, there are numerous art museums in the city but in distant arts/cultural districts.

A total of 55 art museums were identified. In Austin, Charlotte, Ft Worth, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Seattle, Washington DC and the Upper East Side three or more art museums are clustered within a reasonable walking distance of

each other.[4] In Ft Worth and LA they are in culture districts. In Charlotte they all are in the Levine Center for the Arts. In DC, they are all affiliated with the Smithsonian.

Art Museums With the Largest attendance. The table above shows the audience recovery rates for the art museums in the US with the largest attendance. They are among the 100 most visited in the world. They are our most magnetic art museums. Many of them are in large downtowns – e.g., MoMA, The Broad, The Art Institute of Chicago, the National Portrait Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art -- or in their Greater Downtown areas, e.g., the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the National Gallery and Smithsonian museums.[5] These museums have a lot of influence on what other art museums across the nation do. They have the magnetism to play a downtown CSF foundation stone role.

Their audience recovery seems to be weaker than that of all museums. Just three, or 23% of them, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA in NYC and the National Gallery in DC, reported attendance that surpassed their 2019 levels. About 46% were between -20% and -32% off of their 2019 visitation rates. Four, about 30%, were off by -8% to -14%. They tended to be in non-downtown locations: The Getty, LACMA and the Whitney.

The three art museums with the largest attendance were the only ones with rebound rates that surpassed their 2019 levels. Strong magnetism apparently matters a lot.

All three were also in or near downtowns, with two that had other current or past high attendance museums that had not fully rebounded. The three averaged 4,107,059 visits in 2024. When we look, however, at all the large audience art museums in these three downtowns, their average attendance in 2024 was considerably less 2,461,125. The four other high admission art museums located in or near a downtown only averaged 1,003,584 admissions. That suggests that often a downtown location may not matter as much as other factors such as what the museum offers and how it is managed.

Several high performers are in museum or arts clusters: e.g.: The Met, the National Gallery, and the Broad. Such clusters are also found in Houston's Museum District, that includes its Museum of Fine Arts, about 3 miles from the downtown, and in Center City's Museum District in Philadelphia. The recoveries in these clusters can vary. The Met has more than recovered, but the nearby Guggenheim has not; the National Gallery has recovered, but the nearby Smithsonian museums have not.

The Upper East Side (UES)[6] has numerous museums, art galleries and arts auction houses. Among the museums are the Neue Galerie, the Frick Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Asia Society, Cooper–Hewitt, National Design Museum, Jewish Museum of

[4] I recognize that I may have missed some art museums and welcome additions and corrections. For instance, I decided that the Whitney was too far from the Lower Manhattan downtown to be associated with it, but I am far from certain about that decision.

[5] The Guggenheim Museum in NYC is noted separately because pre-Covid it had a far larger attendance placing it among the world's top 100 museums, and its presence enables a useful comparison with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[6] N. David Milder. "Using Different Models to Understand Downtowns in the US". Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal. Forthcoming February 2026.

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, , Museum of the City of New York, National Academy of Design, El Museo del Barrio, and the Society of Illustrators. Together they probably attract about eight to nine million visitors a year, with the Met attracting most of them. Both Christies and Sotheby's are in the area. Among the very numerous art galleries are Gagosian, Mnuchin, David Zwirner, and Hauser & Wirth.

While the Met has a +17% recovery rate , the Guggenheim, about 6 blocks away, lags far behind with a -33% recovery rate. While not conclusive, that suggests what the museums offer and how they are managed can influence their recoveries more than the environments in which they operate. The Guggenheim's financial problems, for example, probably have hindered its ability to offer a very large number of free admissions as the Met has done for visitors from its tri-state area.

In the past, 30% to 40% of the Met's visitors were foreign tourists. It has apparently adjusted to the loss of foreign tourists, recently reporting that they now account for only about 15% of its visitors, while local visits from New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey residents grew by 109% compared to 2019 and accounted for 62% of all visitors in FY25. See table below. Domestic out-of-state visitors accounted for 23%.[7] This shift to its local market area providing most of its visitors is an important one.

Few of our largest 27 downtowns have museums in their cores with world class attendance and few are in a MSA with anywhere near the large amount of foreign visitors that NYC's attracts.

The UES downtown in which the Met is embedded also has a world class luxury retail cluster that is making a strong recovery, and the largest downtown healthcare cluster in the nation. Importantly the Met is surrounded on three sides by Central Park. Back in 2011, 752,893 CP visitors reported also visiting the Met. The attendance at the Met that year was 5.6 million, so an estimated 13.3 % also went to the park.[8]

[7] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. " The Metropolitan Museum of Art Welcomed Over 5.7 Million Visitors in Fiscal Year 2025". https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/fy25-pressrelease

[8] Central Park Conservancy. REPORT ON THE PUBLIC USE OF CENTRAL PARK. New York, NY. April 2011. https://assets.centralparknyc.org/pdfs/institute/p2p-upelp/3.002_Report+on+the+Public+Use+of+Central+Park.pdf

MoMA is located in the nation's strongest office district, Midtown Manhattan, and had the strongest art museum audience recovery rate in 2024 of +33%. Importantly, it is surrounded within an easy walking distance by a large number of hotels, while the nearby Broadway theaters had over 14.6 million admissions during its 2024-2025 season, just shy of the record breaking 14.7 million in its 2018-2019 season. Moreover the theaters drew more foreign tourist visits than ever before, 2.96 million! That would suggest that the foreign tourist market is not completely dead. Tourists overall accounted for 56.6% to 62.1% of the theaters' admissions in 2024-2025, providing an interesting contrast to the Met, where most admissions, 62% now come from the local area. It should be noted that it is on domestic tourism that they differ the most: it accounts for 37% to 42% of the theaters' audience, but only 23% of the Met's. Surprisingly, their difference on foreign tourists is relatively small, 20% of the theaters' audience and 15% for the Met's. On the other hand, the theaters did poorly in the suburbs, where the Met did well.

Where the Vistors to the Met Museum and Broadway Theaters Come From

Type of Visitor	Broadway Theaters**	Met Museum of Art***
Local*	37.7% to 42.5%	62%
Domestic Tourism*	37.3% to 42.1%	23%
Int'l Tourism	20%	15%

*The two venues us different ways of categorizing local visitors. The ranges presented include the original BL data and a number that is adjusted to make it more similar to the Met's coding.

** Data Source: Karen Houser. "The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2024–2025". The Broadway League. https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports/

*** Data Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. " The Metropolitan Museum of Art Welcomed Over 5.7 Million Visitors in Fiscal Year 2025". https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/fy25-pressrelease

However, when we look at their penetration of the foreign tourist market, we see a much larger difference due to the theaters' audience size being almost three times that of the Met Museum. The Met had an estimated 859,088 foreign tourist visitors while the Broadway theaters had an estimated 2,940,000. The theaters, of course, had many more venues.

Theater goers probably differ from museum visitors in their reported high household incomes of $276,465 that enables them to pay on average $145 per ticket[9] compared to admission to the Met that costs $30 at most, and for many is free.

Midtown also has very powerful public spaces that draw tens of millions of people each year such as Bryant Park, Rockefeller Center, and Times Square.

While Midtown has a few more museums, such as the JP Morgan Library -- annual attendance about 250,000 – it does not have a real museum cluster comparable to those in which the Met and the National Gallery are embedded. What it does have is several strongly rebounding sectors such as its offices, theaters and public spaces. This raises the

[9] Karen Houser. "The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2024–2025". The Broadway League. https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/research-reports/

question: is such multifunctionality, even among the district's arts assets, better for arts museums these days than being in a large museum cluster?

The National Gallery is located on the National Mall and has 10 Smithsonian museums[10] nearby. It has a +3% recovery rate, while the National Portrait Gallery, and the Smithsonian Art Museum in the downtown core have -25% rates. This, too, supports the importance of a museum's holdings and management for explaining its ability to bring attendance back to 2019 levels. The quality and magnetism of the use may be more important than the location. That may be the definition of a strong or true destination.

The DC museums were hard hit by a presidential executive order that forbid DEI policies and programs, and forced several leadership changes

The National Gallery is close to a downtown with a still depressed office sector. For example, its recovery of Non Resident Workers (NRWs) in 2023 at 58% was well below the average for the nation's 26 largest downtowns of 85%, and below that of the other six downtowns with high attendance arts museums. (See table below.) It's Visitors rebound rate in 2023 of 70% was also below the average for the 26 largest downtowns of 81%, and below that of the other larges downtown with high attendance art museums. This visitors category, composed of tourists, trade area residents, and others who do not live or work in the downtown, contains most of the people who visit the downtowns' art museums. Notable about the low downtown Visitor recovery is that tourism in DC had rebounded to 97% of its 2019 level. The downtown's visitation rate does not seem to have been impacted by the strong recovery of tourists in the city, while it seems probable that the National Gallery did. Given all of these negative factors that influence its surrounding area, and the lagging rebounds of the numerous nearby museums, one might reasonably hypothesize that its organization's legal structure, artistic holdings, exhibitions, ambience, visitor amenities, and ease of access combined with how it is managed and marketed has enabled it to recover to a degree that its local peers have not matched.

[10] The National Gallery of Art is a legally a part of the Smithsonian Institution, but is administratively independent, and has its own board, staff, and budget.

Do the Museum Visitation Recoveries Influence That of Their Downtowns? In healthy downtowns one might expect that museum visitation and downtown visitation are symbiotic and help each other, though the strength in one direction is probably stronger than the other, and can vary over time.

It should be clear that having venues in your downtown that can bring in between 846,500 and 5,727,258 visitors a year is good for any downtown even if the museums have not yet reached prior higher attendance levels.

Data from Placer.ai is available for the seven downtowns that have one of the most visited art museums on the recovery of visits made by downtown residents, non-resident workers (NRWs) and visitors who neither live or work in the downtown in 2023 for most, and 2025 for the UES. These data allow us to see if museum attendance may have recovered more

Visitation Rebounds in Six Downtowns Compared to Audience Recoveries of Their High Attendance Art Museums

Downtowns	High Attendance Museums*	2024 Admissions	2024 World Rank	% Change from 2019	2023 NRW Visit Rebound Rate**	2023 Visitors Rebound	2023 Residential Rebound
Downtowns With Rebounded Large Audience Museums							
UES	Met Museum	5,727,258	4	117%	85%	81%	91%
DC	Nat Gallery	3,936,543	7	103%	58%	70%	113%
	Nat Portrait	1,273,450	61	75%			
	Smith. Art	1,273,250	62	75%			
	NMAAHC	1,600,000	43	80%			
Midtown	MoMA	2,657,377	20	133%	78%	84%	121%
	Averages	2,744,646	33	97%	74%	78%	108%
Only Rebounding Museums							
Chicago	Art Institute	1,324,241	57	80%	61%	76%	119%
Boston	Fine Arts	988,911	83	78%	65%	96%	82%
LA	The Broad	846,500	96	92%	66%	81%	120%
	Averages	1,053,217	79	83%	64%	84%	107%
UES	Guggenheim***	760,000		67%	85%	81%	91%
Museum with attendance above 2019 level							

*Data Source: Lee Cheshire and Elena Goukassian. " Exclusive | The world's most-visited museums 2024: normality returns—for some." THE ART NEWSPAPER. APRIL 2, 2025.

** Data Source: Paul Levy, Ienter City District. "Downtowns Rebound: The Data Driven Path To Recovery." Oct 5, 2023. https://centercityphila.org/downtownsreport . NRW= Non Resident Worker

***CUF Creative NY Report 2025 https://nycfuture.org/pdf/surveying-nycs-arts-after-covid. Included to provide contrast with Met Museum. Formerly one of the world's 100 most visited museums.

than the recovering downtown visitation flows. Such strength suggests they provide their downtown with a valuable strongly magnetic venue, that the museums are indeed playing a foundation stone role. Where the visitation is lower suggests that the museum's attendance is benefiting from its downtown's stronger recovery. This type of analysis indicates causal direction, but does not precisely measure impacts since a proper analysis of the visits to the museums and the downtowns requires a multivariate analysis.

This analysis, however, can help establish that these entities should be variables in those analyses.

For the three downtowns with rebounded large audience museums the average rebound for their six museums is 97%, while the average rebound of their downtown's Visitors' visits was 78%, an 19% difference. If we look at just the three strongest museums, MoMA, the Met and the National Gallery their differences are far greater: 49%, 36% and 33%. If we look at the downtowns with no rebounding large audience museums, we find that the Art Institute in Chicago had a 4% higher rebound rate than downtown Chicago's Visitors, and The Broad had an 11% higher rate than Downtown LA's visitors. That suggests that even if they had not fully recovered, they still were important magnets drawing some visitors to their downtowns. That is exactly what we need CSF foundation stones to do.

The. positive rebound rates of the Met, National Gallery and MoMA were, with the exception DC's residential rebound, all higher than those of their downtown's three visitor segments.

Residential visits had the strongest rebound in these seven downtowns with five of the seven having rates in the 113% to 133% range. However, three of their museums had not rebounded to 2019 levels. The Met presents an interesting situation. Though it is located in a downtown with the largest residential population – about 245,000 -- the downtown's residential visits have only recovered to the 91% level, yet the Met's attendance grew by 17% over its 2019 level. The return of vibrancy and activation in and around the Met probably helped send positive signals to some residents who had left during Covid and encouraged them to return home. Midtown also has a relatively large residential population 92,438. Its residents had a high rebound rate of 121%, but MoMA's rate was even higher at 133%. The fact that the area's Broadway theaters had almost record breaking attendance probably reinforced MoMA's influence on residential downtown visits.

The three downtowns with fully recovered large audience art museums had a higher recovery of NRW visits averaging 74% over the three downtowns without such recovered large audience museums, 64%. Strong downtown art museums may encourage stronger return to office rates (RTOs).

The visitor recoveries of the Met, MoMA and Broadway theaters exemplify arts venues playing the CSF foundation stone role.

Sound Audience Growth Strategies Target Viable and Rewarding Market Segments and Offer Attractive Products That Mesh with Their Preferences and Behaviors

Audience Growth Needs to Be Compatible With Maintaining High Quality User Experiences. While it may be good for the downtowns these art museums are in or near if they grow their audiences, as the scenes at the Louvre and Vatican Museums demonstrate, too much of it can badly damage the user experiences they provide. The hugely overcrowded situation around the Mona Lisa[11] has made the Louvre a laughingstock, destructive of its image. Is this how the aspiring world's best museum treats its art, artists and visitors? Is this really the best way art museums can or should operate? The answer is obviously no.



So you want to see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre?
Photo by Gagan Kaur

That said, art museums can structure admissions and how visitors pass through their existing exhibition spaces in ways that maintain a positive viewing experience. Also, many still have room to grow their audiences before their visit experience problem becomes an issue that must be dealt with, and then, the solutions may provide some potential for additional audience growth. Expansion is another way to grow visitation while maintaining the quality of visitor experiences. Nevertheless, these art museums should establish upper limits for daily general admissions and admittance to special exhibitions.

The Market Segments 1: Tourism vs Local Markets; Domestic vs Foreign Tourists. Flawed strategies can be improved by getting a better handle on the market segments to target. Often this requires a subtlety that is easily overlooked. Tourists, a large and important segment for both art museums and their downtowns, is one where this need is now apparent.

Visits to the websites of the art museums with the largest audiences in 2024 plus a number of others that are highly regarded, such as the Cleveland Museum of Art, indicated an unsurprising recognition of the need to pivot away from tourism and to attract more local visitors, as well as to generate more admissions from current visitors.

Much has also been made about the loss of foreign tourists in the media. However, there is considerable variation in the ability of our cities and their downtowns to attract tourists and foreign tourists. In 2024, NYC attracted roughly 65 million tourists, of which about 13 million were from other lands. The Cleveland area attracted about 18.1 million tourists that

[11] The author can personally attest that this level of crowding near the Mona Lisa has existed at least since 1965.

year. San Antonio attracted about 38 million tourists in 2023, of which about 2 million were from other nations.

The Importance of Tourists to Attendance at Some Major NYC Entertainment Venues in 2014

Est. Number of Tourists	Percent Tourist	Venues
18,900	14%	Joyce Theater
121,000	22%	Brooklyn Academy of Music
8,052,000	66%	Broadway League
1,587,000	46%	Lincoln Center
4,650,000	75%	Metropolitan Museum of Art*
2,250,000	75%	Museum of Modern Art
957,000	87%	Guggenheim Museum
12,000,000	30%	Central Park
1,200,000 to 2,400,000	20% to 40%	Bryant Park
Data obtained from documents issued by these organizations, media reports about attendance or interviews with organization employees.		
*36% were international tourists.in 2014, 40% in 2010.		

Around 2016, DANTH, Inc, did some research on how many of the visitors to a number of arts venues and public spaces in NYC were tourists. The vast majority of the visitors – 75% to 87%-- at MoMA, the Met and the Guggenheim were tourists. (See nearby table.) For the Broadway League theaters it was 66%, and 46% for the Lincoln Center venues. The smaller performance theaters outside of the Midtown core – the Joyce and BAM – were far less dependent on tourists who only accounted for 14% and 22% respectively of their audiences. For Central and Bryant Parks those stats were 14% and 22% respectively. Of the Met's 75% in 2014, about half, 36%, were foreign tourists. The dependence at that time of these large museums on tourists stands out.

Event-Related Expenditures by Residentb and Non-Resident* Attendees at In-Person Activities to Arts and Culture Organizations in 373 AftA's Study Regions During 2022-23

	Resident Attendees		Non-Resident Attendees	
Expendiure Items	$s	Percent	$s	Percent
A .Food & Drink	$12.86	43%	$19.07	31.50%
B. Retail Shopping	$5.48	18%	$9.08	15.00%
C. Supplies & Groceries	$2.57	9%	$4.12	6.80%
D. Local Transport	$2.97	10%	$6.93	11.40%
E. Clothing & accessories	$2.98	10%	$3.66	6.00%
F. Childcare	$0.06	2%	$0.72	1.20%
G. Overnight Lodging	$1.07	4%	$14.83	24.50%
H. Misc	$1.23	4%	$2.16	3.60%
Avg Expenditure/person	$29.77	100%	$60.57	100.00%
Hospitality =A+G	$13.93	47%	$33.90	56%
Retail =B+C+E	$11.03	37%	$16.86	28%
Other=D+F+H	$4.26	16%	$9.81	16%

For businesses located close to these museums the visit related expenditures of their visitors are of obvious interest. The AEP6 project of Americans for the Arts , reported in 2023, has the best data on these expenditures. It covered 373 study regions and collected expenditure and attendance data from 16,399 arts and culture organizations and the event-related spending information from 224,667 of their attendees. At the national level it found that when people visit an arts venue they spend on average a total of $29.77 if they are a local resident, and $60.57 if they live outside the county in which the arts venue is located. (They are very likely day tourists at a minimum.) Most of their expenditures go for food and lodging, averaging $12.86 for residents and $19.07 for none residents. The total average amount for some sort of retail is $11.03 for residents, and $33 for non-residents. These national stats

point significantly toward tourist arts venue visitors being of much more interest to businesses near these arts venues than the local visitors because they spend more.

Culture Organizations' Audiences in 16 Communities With Large Populations and Seven Selected Arts/Cultural Districts During Fiscal Year 2022

Georgraphies	A. Resident Expenditures*	B. Non-Res Expenditures**	Ratio A/B
Population 500K-999k	$118,642,347	$101,509,071	1.2
Population 1 million+	$216,080,034	$157,261,265	1.4
Selected Arts/Cultural	$80,644,446	$64,600,700	1.3

SOURCE: Arts and Economic Prosperity 6, Americans for the Arts, 2023. For more information, www.AEP6.AmericansForTheArts.org.

The table on the left looks at the total expenditures of non-resident arts venue visitors in 16 large cities with populations over 500,000, with 12 having one of the nation's 27 largest downtowns. It also provides expenditure data for seven arts and cultural districts. They are of particular interest since, as was established above, a good number of our large downtowns have museum clusters some of which are formal districts, while others are de facto, organically developed arts districts. 2022 was an early recovery year. Foreign tourists was said to still be lagging 2019's numbers, if improving on those for 2020 and 2021.

Event-Related Expenditures by NON-Resident* Attendees at In-Person Activities to Arts and Culture Organizations in 23 Selected AftA's Study Regions* During 2022-23

Expenditure Type	Population 500K-999k* (9)	Population 1 million+ (7)	Selected Arts/Cultural Districts (7)	National Data
Hospitality	58%	57%	56%	56%
Retail	26%	25%	23%	28%
Other	16%	19%	20%	16%
Food & Drink	$20.00	$18.58	$19.30	$19.07
Retail Shopping	$9.23	$7.74	$6.26	$9.08
Clothing	$4.36	$3.41	$3.81	$3.66
Avg Total Exp	$64.23	$56.52	$55.16	$60.57

Source; Table 35 in Arts and Economic Prosperity 6, Americans for the Arts, 2023. www.AEP6.AmericansForTheArts.org

Note: The AEP6 project, on which his table is based, had 373 study regions and collected expenditure and attendance data from 16,399 arts and culture organizations and the event-related spending information from 224,667 of their attendees.

*City of Albuquerque (NM) , City of Milwaukee (WI), City of Louisville-Jefferson Cty (KY) , City of Las Vegas (NV), City of Portland (OR), City of Nashville-Davidson Cty (TN),City and County of Denver (CO), City of Indianapolis (IN), City of Fort Worth (TX), City of San José (CA), City of Dallas (TX), City of San Diego (CA), City of San Antonio (TX), City/County of Philadelphia (PA), City of Phoenix (AZ), City of Houston (TX), Salt Lake Cultural Core (Salt Lake City, UT), Grand Center Arts District (St. Louis, MO), Dallas Arts District (Dallas, TX), Balboa Pk Cultural District (San Diego), Houston Museum District (Houston, TX), Houston Theatre District (Houston, TX), Midtown Cultural District (Houston, TX)

The AEP6 research found that residents in the three geographic groups outspent, as an aggregate, nonresidents by multiples of 1.2 to 1.4. Their importance should not be overlooked.

Conversely, these data also show that even in relatively tough times, non-residents still spent, in aggregate, a serious amount of money in shops near the arts venues they visited.

The table on the left goes into some detail about the spending at the level of the individual non-resident visitor to arts venues. Following a general pattern established many years ago in prior AEP studies, across the board in 2022 in our large cities and in the arts and culture districts in them, hospitality expenditures account for most of the dollars spent when visiting an arts venue. The amounts spent on

food and drink, averaging roughly $18 to $20, are not high, about what it costs for a sandwhich and soda at lunctime in Manhattan these days. The average total spend for retail accounts for 23% to 28% of their arts visit related expenditures, or about $13 to $17. The average amount for clothing, $3.41 to $4.36, indicates that overall tourists are not big spenders for such items.

That said, we must remember that under statistical averages there can be consderable variation. Consequently it is not surprisng that the merchants on Madison Ave in Manhattan and Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills who have very high price points will tell you that tourists, and espceially foregn tourists, account for huge proportions of their sales. For both downtown art museums and the merchants who are located nearby it is important to identify which tourists the musesums attract so that the products they offer can match their preferences. Consequently, for example, if the Met grows its audience by drawing more average income visitors that is unlikely to have much impact on the sales revenues of many nearby merchants on Madison Ave, but it may ipmact those on E86th Street. Additionnally, to assure favorable user experiences, the Met probably will want to provide food at prices their average tourist visitor can afford.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that the AEP6 data are *for spending on days that survey respondnts went to an arts event/performance. They do not speak to their spending on the other days of their visit which might have much higher spending for retail if that shopping was the main goal on one or more of those days*. However, that shopping might take place elsewhere in the city.

In the decade preceding Covid it seemed that many art museums were committed to being recognized as world class attractions as proven by their high attendance, driven by a lot of international visitors, and very crowded exhibition spaces. They all seemed to want to replicate the situation around the Mona Lisa at the Louvre in their own halls. Their focus on attendance numbers seemed to then outweigh their concerns about the visitor's experience and relationship building with more local audiences.

More recently, both the Louvre and the Vatican Museums – they invariably rank in the top three in attendance in the world – have become concerned about the overcrowding in their exhibition halls and its impacts on visitor experiences, word of mouth reports, and repeat visits. Both also voice a desire to better serve local residents. These moves also fit in with a growing concern about overtourism in Europe.

One of the widely accepted strategic axioms in the museum field, and marketing in general, is that frequent visitors are very valuable and efforts should be made to maximize their numbers. People living within 40 to 60 minute travel times are far more likely to make several visits to a museum over a year's time than tourists whose return visits are usually spread out over one or more years. With local audiences there is also much more of an opportunity to build relationships that can result in more memberships and increased donations. Such a local focus not only fits with their DEI objectives, it is essential for their achievement.

Tourism Recoveries in Six Cities That Have Art Museums With the Highest Attendance in the US in 2024

CITY	2024Total Tourist Visits (mils)	% International 2024	2024 All % of 2019	2024 International as % of 2019	2024 Domestic % of 2019	International Tourist Forecasts 2025
NEW YORK	64.3	19% to 22%	97%	96%	97%	-800,000
WASHINGTON, DC	27.2	8%	108%	96%	110%	NED*
CHICAGO	55.3	3.7%	90%	92%	90%	NED
BOSTON	23.7	10%	105%	92%	106%	Decline
LOS ANGELES	49.5	ND**	90%	ND	ND	Strong decline
HOUSTON	53.9	2.4%	110%	ND	ND	NED

Data Sources: Based on many Google searches too numeroux to list here.

*NED= Not enough data. ** No data.

An increasingly important reason for arts venues to be less dependent on foreign tourists is the growing instability and risks associated with that market. *From a strategic viewpoint, this shift in focus away from foreign tourists is sound, but should not be complete! The way that art museums deal with foreign tourists needs to be changed, not shut off. They can still be a valuable market segment if*:

- Market conditions are again favorable. In 2024, their visits had recovered to 92+% of their 20219 levels in NYC, DC, Chicago and Boston, but available forecasts saw tougher times in 2025 (see above table).
- The objective is to keep their numbers to the equivalence of 15% to 20% of the museum's total attendance. The Broadway theaters and the Met seem to be doing well with those percentages.
- Their attendance and behaviors do not diminish the experiences of other museum visitors. Whether this will happen or not is substantially in the hands of museum managements. They must set providing high quality user experience as a top priority. It is the best way to have solid sustainable growth in attendance. It seems that they all have jumped on the great user experiences bandwagon since Covid, but past performance suggests we should see what they do and not just accept what they say.

For the downtowns these museums are in or near, the loss of foreign tourists means less money being spent in the hotels, eateries, bars and theaters. The museums need to be able to turn on and off their marketing to foreign tourists as conditions allow, remembering always the importance of great user experiences for all visitors.

Many art museums have built strong online presences and have many millions of visits to their websites and social media communications. This gives them strong communication tools they never had before that can reach foreign tourists and enables relationship building with them at a new level.

Domestic tourism also poses a "how much of them" question. For many of the art museums in our largest downtowns , e.g., San Antonio, domestic tourists are a very important market segment. Their cities do not attract lots of foreign tourists. They also often suffer from the problem of a lot of tourists eroding user experiences because of a combination of their large numbers and disruptive behaviors. However, their future presence now promises to be a lot steadier than that of the foreign tourists.

The Market Segments 2: The Young, The Old and The Less Affluent: Growth in Infrequent Visits

For decades now museums, opera, ballet, and theater companies, and symphony orchestras have been scolded for having grey haired audiences, and then admonished to attract far younger patrons lest their audiences die out. The results over time have been rather lackluster. Perhaps it is time to establish some realistic expectations about the kind of growth that better penetration of the young adult market segment might produce. Research suggests that for various arts forms, the result will be more occasional visitors to an arts venue, not frequent ones, and at a rate well above past levels.

For example, the Wallace Foundation study back in 2019 of millennials cited above found that admission costs and a diversified interest in the arts were among several factors that prevented them from being frequent patrons of any particular performance or exhibition art venue. Of course, millennials at that time were also doing far worse in terms of employment and earnings than previous generations at their ages. It remains to be seen if these infrequent visitors morph into regulars as they age.

A study done in 2024 for Opera America, "Understanding Opera's New Audiences", found that:

- "Ticket cost prevents audiences from returning more frequently — especially those who are New to Opera.
- New-to-Opera attenders are younger and more racially and ethnically diverse, have a broader range of income, and have fewer advanced degrees.
- New-to-Opera attenders also have different tastes in music and entertainment, and they attend performing arts events less frequently than Ongoing attenders".[12]

It appears that many art sectors have a real problem in recruiting younger audiences who will frequently visit them. The young have lower incomes and are more admission price sensitive. They are also interested in many types of arts. Consequently, there is a lot of competition among arts venues for their arts time and expenditures.

Art museums in or near a downtown with significant residential population may have an advantage if there are a lot of young creatives living nearby. They will probably have high paying jobs and the close proximity should spark significant frequent visitation. However, their impact on the museum will depend on how many of them there are, how often they visit the museum, and how large an audience the museum already has. For example, 55,000 visits to the Met would only account for 1% of its annual admissions; 10% would be 550,000, an amount well beyond what might be attracted from any Greater Downtown area in the US (not every resident is "young").

[12] SloveLinett at NORC. "UNDERSTANDING OPERA'S NEW AUDIENCES." Opera America. November 2024. https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2024/202411/understanding-opera-s-new-audiences-research-report

For many years major arts venues appeared to want to run away from the older adults who very often accounted for a very large proportion of their attendance. For example, very often the majority of the frequent visitors of art museums, history organizations and botanical gardens are over 60 years old. Yet "adults over 60 are the least likely segment of the population to visit museums. They are actually underserved."[13] Older adults do not generate a lot of infrequent visits. This offers a growth opportunity, though health issues may narrow down the real growth potential in this market segment. But the 70s are supposedly the new 50s for many of these folks. Additionally, Boomers now dominate this older adult group, but as they are replaced in the coming years the interest of older adults in visiting museums may also diminish.

DEI programs hold the promise of bringing in new visitors. However, given their probable ages, education and income levels they, too, are likely to be irregular rather than frequent visitors.

Art museums will have to work a lot harder and at greater cost if the visitors they attract will come just one or maybe two times a year rather than 4+ times.

Improving the Product 1: Free Admissions for Local Folks. Another important component of any viable audience growth strategy is to offer a very attractive museum "product."

An AMM survey found that:

> " Among the 78% of U.S. Adults who say they visit museums at least 'occasionally,' cost was the #1 barrier to visitation, with 41% citing it. Interestingly, there were no significant differences by age among these much-more occasional visitors."[14]

Cost is a far weaker factor for those who visit frequently. Unsurprisingly, the number of art museums with free admissions has been growing, although sometimes in the form of free general admissions with fees for special exhibitions or only for special groups such as local residents, children and students, or for specific time windows such as Friday afternoons.

An appreciable number of museums seem to be aware of and responding to the admission cost problem. That said, forgoing admission revenues can mean a substantial decrease in the museum's earned revenues. Given that the poor business model most arts nonprofits use usually results in too little earned income, this is not an outcome that they can easily shrug off. Some museums provide some sort of free admissions when they have sponsors making up for the lost revenues.

However, such reliance on sponsors can mean unstable free admission programs. There is a long-term conflict between the inherent need for many art museums to substantially

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[13] Jessica Strube, " Museum Visitation: Demographics of U.S. Museum-Goers: A 2025 Annual Survey Of Museum-Goers Data Story Update." Wilkening Consulting. https://wilkeningconsulting.com/demographics-2025/

[14] Susie Wilkening. "COST OF ADMISSIONS AND MUSEUM VISITATION. A 2024 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY." Wilkening Consulting. Oct 2024 https://www.aam-us.org/2024/10/11/cost-of-admissions-and-museum-visitation-a-2024-annual-survey-of-museum-goers-data-story/

increase their earned incomes and their need to offer free admissions to grow visitation. Those with endowments and strong fundraising networks will be less impacted, but most art museums do not have such financial security. Greater stability can be provided if the museums develop other sources of earned incomes besides admissions.

Sponsorships often do not cover a large proportion of all general admissions and consequently will not have the needed impact on audience growth.

Because of the land on which it was built, The Met has had to allow all NYC residents free entry. In 2018, it expanded that policy to all residents in NY, NJ and CT. Others have to pay admission fees. The free admissions for local folks is something other museums might adopt. Perhaps the admission feed paid by tourists can be raised to help pay for the free admissions of local residents. Revenues from real estate and stock market investments, educational services, and conferencing fees might be more reliable long term sources.

Improving the Product 2: New Museums, New Buildings. Though real estate and construction costs in our largest downtowns can be very expensive, new museums and expansions still seem to happen. MoMA in Manhattan has had expansions in the 1950s, 1960s, 1980s, early 2000s, and 2019. The Broad has a new building in Downtown LA. The New Museum in Manhattan will open a 60,000 SF expansion building in March 2026. Calder Gardens opened in Philadelphia in 2025.

Their ability to find sufficient visitors will depend on the level of unmet demand in the local and tourist markets, and the competitive magnetism of their holdings and visitation experiences, as well as their ability to create new demand. In some instances, museums with visitor experience problems suffer from "over demand," they have too many visitors and are overcrowded. That overcrowding can be alleviated by providing new spaces for them to enjoyably traverse.

These new spaces can provide a new and/or better "product" that facilitates strong positive user experiences, and even provide a visually pleasing building that attracts visitors – e.g., as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum building in Bilbao, Spain, has done and as Wright's Guggenheim on Fifth Ave in NYC did decades before.

The expansion of art museums with modest annual attendance in one of our large. downtowns might provide viable growth opportunities if the expansion or new facility allows for better exhibition spaces and improved visitor amenities.

As noted above, magnetic art museums can serve their downtowns as CSF foundation stones drawing significant numbers of visitors, even in trying times. Consequently, downtown organizations should think seriously about the development of new art museums and the expansion of existing ones in their strategic planning. Of course, having a local multi-billionaire or two with a huge art collection might help, but the expansion of the New Museum in NYC and the creation of several Museums of Contemporary Art cross the nation between about 2000 and 2019 show this is not always a requirement for creating a substantial new art museum.

Improving the Product 3: Better Crowd Management. Viewing the art is just one part of the experience of visiting an art museum, if a very important one. Hassles getting to and fro, long admission, coat check, and WC lines, dirty WCs, and poor food and snack options can all mar a visit.

Then, of course, overly crowded exhibition spaces that make seeing the art like running a gauntlet can generate lots of frustration and negative feelings. If you really cannot see the art, the raison d'etre of your visit is defeated. There are ways to deal with this problem and more art museums should use them. Glenstone in Travilah, MD, limits entry to about 600 visitors per day. Not many major art museums would be satisfied with that number, but they may want to use something like Glenstone's algorithm to calculate the optimal number of visitors for the museum's size, which is used to give visitors time and space to explore and enjoy the museum.[15] The Louvre limits admissions to 30,000 per day, though how that number was determined is not public. Timed ticketing for general admissions is used by a good number of art museums such as The Morgan Library & Museum, NYC. Many others have long used it to control access and reduce crowding at special exhibitions.

As noted above more new spaces can also alleviate this problem.

Improving the Product 4: Better Community Engagement. Many art museums have shifted their marketing focus to their local market areas, and are targeting, overtly or implicitly, some specific market segments in them. To successfully get more visits from these segments the folks in them must know about the museum, find something about it that can spark a visit, and then have a positive experience at the museum. Community engagement is a way to get members of the targeted segment to have those three characteristics. It does this essentially by relationship building.

A key question in this relationship building is: do they come to us or do we go to them? Many museums have long had educational programs. Mostly they were done on site. They have had a substantial focus on educating children. Some have programs for the schools.

Today, some offer educational programs online, where e-visitors can also view substantial portions of the museums art objects: e.g., 106,000 of MoMA's 200,000,and 130,000 of the National gallery's 160,000 are accessible online.

In 2023, the Met created a new children's center, the 81st Street Studio. It attracted over 170,000 visitors in its first nine months. "The 3-to-11-year-old crowd can sample music, rest on scented pillows, make digital woodblock prints and study Met museum objects at this new drop-in center."[16] Where those children and caregiving adults come from is an interesting question. Central Park attracts a lot of local children in that age group along with their nannies or family caregivers.

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[15] "Glenstone." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glenstone

[16] Zachary Small. "The Met Museum Is Rebounding, but Not With International Visitors." New York Times. July 24, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/24/arts/design/met-museum-attendance.html#:~:text=As%20one%20of%20the%20largest,the%20museum%20attracted%20in%202019

The Cleveland Museum is establishing a multi-pronged community engagement effort with many elements that takes the Museum to the city's neighborhoods; The following elements are quoted from its website:

- "Strategic Growth Goal: Under its current strategic plan, the museum intends to increase in-person student visits from a pre-pandemic baseline of 37,500 to 100,000 by 2027.
- Distance Learning: The museum's virtual and distance learning programs reach tens of thousands of additional participants globally each year.
- Studio Go: This mobile art van initiative is designed to bring hands-on art experiences to over 10,000 people at various locations, including many schools.
- Art to Go The museum offers free in-person, virtual, and distance learning experiences for students from pre-K through grade 12, with programs such as Art to Go facilitating specialized classroom interactions.
- Community Arts Center, The newly opened Community Arts Center, in the Clark-Fulton neighborhood on Cleveland's near west side, offers opportunities for residents there and beyond to connect with the arts. The former awning factory has been transformed to include a variety of arts, culture, and service organizations.
- Transformer Station is a vibrant center for the visual and performing arts, where the Cleveland Museum of Art presents the work of emerging artists, time-based media, live music, and dynamic social experiences in Ohio City's Hingetown neighborhood."

By going to the neighborhoods, the Cleveland Museum can help spark interests in art that otherwise had low probabilities of happening, as well as establishing a relationship with many new potential visitors to its University Circle home.

Free admissions along with "take it to them" community engagement programs promise to be an effective combination of tools that will bring more visitors and visits to arts museums. One might argue that the real relationship building that "take it to them" programs can have enables the museums to have a good chance of creating frequent visitors, instead of occasional ones. It can build a sense of belonging, of place attachment, that the museum is their museum. The seriousness of the museum's intent is evidenced by its going to them. That is good for the art museums and the downtowns they are in or near. Such a sense of belonging might be cultivated by visits to the museum, but that requires the initial often difficult first step of getting them there.

The Implications for Our Downtowns

They Are Existing Destinations That Can Draw Lots of Visits

- Large art museums can attract millions of visitors per year even during very trying conditions. Save for crisis conditions that force their closures, they can serve as strong destinations providing a substantial base of visitation that is helpful to the

downtowns they are in or very close to. They can definitely contribute to a strong sense of activation in the areas immediately surrounding them and for substantial parts of the day. They have relatively few user frictions. They can produce many of the results we would want a CSF foundation stone to provide.

- Even art museums of moderate size can have meaningful impacts on downtown visitation and dwell times.
- They are present in or near most of our large downtowns

<u>However, They Have a Limited Potential for Audience Growth – and Often That May be a Good Thing</u>.

- Their number of daily admissions should not be large enough to erode visitor experiences and abilities to appreciate the art on display as the scene around the Mona Lisa at the Louvre so aptly illustrates. That may mean for some that their past visitation level highs have been too high.
- One way that the high visitation museums that border on visitor experience problems can solve this challenge is to expand and increase the amount of space visitors can traverse. Another is better crowd control
- They lack a market segment having a potential for generating a lot more visits. At best they will attract new visitors who show up once or twice a year, not the frequent visitors who come much more often. This also probably means that the cost of obtaining those new visits will be high.
- The search for more visits from new market segments suggests that the visitation potentials of the current segments they rely on have been tapped out. But that may not be the case with older adults and adults with school age children.[17]
- Many of these arts museums, responding to national and local conditions, have shifted their marketing efforts and growth aspirations away from tourists, especially those from abroad, to potential visitors in their local and regional market areas. This is in many ways a long needed shift in their marketing focus and understanding of who they are there to serve. Having too many tourist was tied in with severe overcrowding and the erosion of the visitors' experiences. During the Covid crisis many museums (e.g., the Columbus Museum of Art) undertook large renovations and/or created new strategic plans in which fashioning very positive visitor experiences was given top priority. Achieving this goal will undoubtedly help increase attendance across the board. Moreover, today it is probably very possible for museums to use algorithms that will allow them to control the number of entries to the museum and special exhibits in ways that maximizes the viewers' experiences.
- What was needed with the tourist visitors was a course correction in how they were valued and treated, not a cessation of interest and appreciation. The flow of foreign tourists has become unstable, but we cannot yet know with any certainty how long that may last. Even so, their visitation may just be reduced to a lower level, 15% to

[17] See Footnote 12

20% of all admissions. That would mean their presence in our arts venues will not be as disruptive as they have been in the past. It also means that 15% to 20% should be properly valued. Those numbers are probably conducive to quality visitor experiences. Getting the foreign tourist share of art museum visits down to this level probably would not have happened without the impacts of Covid and the recent actions of the Trump administration.

- The ability of art museums to spark visitation growth from other sources is iffy. For decades they have been told they should deal with their aging audiences. However, attracting younger visitors has been a continued challenge. The hopes of attracting more people of color via DIE programs has been blocked on many fronts by recent federal government actions.
- Their best chances for adding new visitors now will likely produce proportionally more irregulars than before, and relatively fewer of the more highly prized regulars who visit much more often. Such visitor growth pipelines are drippers, not gushers.
- The most viable paths for increasing attendance seems to be offering more free admissions and robust community engagement programs that have important components present off site in the city's neighborhoods. The free admissions mean a loss in earned incomes, unless sponsors or other sources of earned income are found to cover the losses. Off site community engagement programs can be costly if they reach the needed scale and involve the creation of museum physical locations in he neighborhoods. Here, again, grants from the private sector and other sources of earned income are needed to substantially cover their costs. For example, a grant from a local bank helped fund the capital costs of the off-site community engagement program of the Cleveland Museum of Art; UNIQLO sponsors the free Friday night admission program at MoMA in NYC, providing free access for New York State residents.
- Visitation levels even among the strongest of them have varied from year to year. Here are some stats for the Met Museum: :in 2011, 5,680,000 visits; in 2016, 6,700,000 visits; In 2018, 7,350,000 visits;[18] In 2019, 4,895,092 visits; In 2024, 5,727,258 visits.
- *It should be noted that the visitation to the Met in 2019 was low, so in many ways using it as a benchmark to judge its recovery is misleading*. The same is true for many other museums. Such comparisons avoid looking at the longer term audience erosion problem these art museums have and that really need to be addressed.

<u>The Impacts of Visitor Spending on Merchants Located Within Easy Walking Distance of Art Museums Depends on…</u>

- The expenditures of their audiences that are related to their museum visits are limited in range and low in dollars spent by individuals , but in aggregate still can be substantial. As has long been the case, they are mainly for food and lodgings, with about a third for various kinds of retail. Non-residents spend a lot more than

[18] This high attendance probably reflects the Met's use for some of it exhibitions of the famed Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue that was formerly the home of the Whitney Museum.

residents, even on non-lodging items. However the dollar amounts spent by individuals are nor particularly impressive. Their food expenditures, for example, are about $20, an amount many office workers in our large downtowns now pay for lunch. It is when the number of these visitors is large that their aggregate spending becomes significant.

- The ability of local merchants to benefit from these expenditures depends on how their offerings match with the spending power and consumer preferences of the various market segments that comprise the museum's audience.

Many Art Museums Need Greater Financial Stability and This Influences Their Ability to Grow Their Audiences

- Many art museums are financially challenged, but several of the largest have endowments to help them deal with hard times and special needs: The Getty ($7 to $8 billion); the Met ($3 to. $4 billion); MoMA in NYC; Houston's Museum of Fine Arts (about $1 billion); and The Art Institute of Chicago. They add investment revenues to the earned income parts of their ledgers. Increasing the number of museums with serious endowments would be a good thing.
- Some have substantial parts of their annual expenditures covered by support from local and state funds (e.g., The Brooklyn Museum). The Smithsonian's group of museums was receiving about $1 billion in federal funding until recent cuts by the current administration. Government funding can be reliable and sizeable – until it's not!
- Stable and adequate funding for CSF foundation stones is obviously very desirable, but the nature of the arts nonprofit beast is strongly influenced by a business model heavily dependent on various kinds of contributions. Admission fees usually account for a substantial portion of their earned incomes. Shops and eateries in the museums can add to these revenues. Some arts organizations have also earned fees for providing arts education classes for local school boards, while others have become involved in real estate deals that provided them with operational spaces they own, and sometimes earn incomes from renting out parts of such spaces.

The Relationships Between Art Museum Foundation Stones and Downtown Management Organizations Need to be Two-Way

- The above suggests that the relationships between CSF arts foundation stones and the organizations that manage the downtowns they are in or near need to be two-way in which both help and benefit from each other.
- The arts museums will benefit from a downtown's strong flow of visitors. For example, downtown organizations may continue their marketing to foreign tourists that will also benefit the art museums. They also will benefit from clean and safe programs near their locations.
- Many of these large downtowns need and are developing large multi-use buildings that have three or more uses occupying large amounts of space. A new or expanding museum could be one of those uses. The key is to provide the arts venue with their

own owned space through purchase at a reduced rate or their participation in project ownership. The presence of a museum would be an attractive amenity that increases the values of the other spaces in the building and thus worthy of the developer's/landlord's subsidies.

- Planning for downtown growth should not shy away from recommending the creation of new art museums or the expansion of others. The art museums in many of our larger downtowns are often pretty far from the downtown core, certainly not in easy walking distances. Perhaps they can be persuaded to open satellite galleries in the core area. Often in these large downtowns there are small art museums that only attract less than 100,000 visitors a year but may be looking to expand into new spaces. Then there is the possibility of attracting major museums with several branches in the same city or in different cities and countries. The Getty has two locations in LA. MoMA and the Met each have two in NYC. The Tate has three branches in different locations in England. The Guggenheim is in three countries. Sometimes it's worthwhile to think big.