



Research Question & Sources

Primary Question

What are the best practices, common pitfalls, and potential innovations for a museum undergoing a major building closure?

Within the research question, we address several sub-topics. These include how museums in similar situations have...

- Managed the collection during the time of closure
- Taken advantage of digital technologies
- Maintained current and prospective audiences
- Engaged donors and foundations
- Kept staff engaged and motivated when roles may look different
- Communicated publicly to build understanding, excitement, and a positive vision for the renovations
- Avoided any operational and strategic pitfalls

To investigate these questions, we incorporate several information sources:

- ABA proprietary research, including:
 - *Strategies Around Naming Rights*
 - *Capturing the Digital Opportunity*
- Secondary research on museum closures
- In-depth interviews with 9 comparable, global art museums and performing arts institutions who have undergone closures

Research Interview Participants

Belgium

MUSÉE
D'IXELLES
MUSEUM
VAN ELSENE

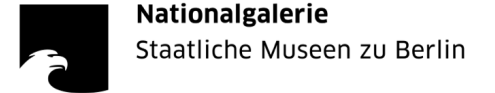
Canada



France



Germany



United Kingdom



The Courtauld

United States

THE FRICK
COLLECTION

DENVER
art
MUSEUM

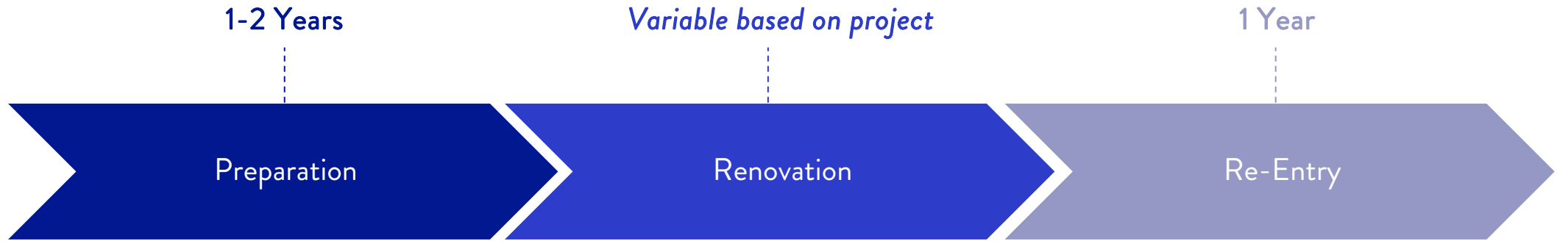
m c a s d
Museum of
Contemporary Art
San Diego

Key Takeaways

- **Set a vision:** a clear strategic vision of what your museum will “stand for” after the renovation is complete will act as a guiding principle throughout the project, ensuring that decisions are made with a consistent goal in mind.
- **Have a dedicated project manager:** while renovations will touch every area of the institution and all departments should be involved to some degree, most institutions agreed that having one person whose full job is dedicated solely to the renovation project is crucial to ensure that timelines are met and decisions are made effectively.
- **Identify long-term strategic partners:** there are many opportunities to engage external partners in this type of project, and a renovation is a moment to think strategically about the partner portfolio and align it with your long-term vision.
- **Maintain transparent communications with everyone:** communication with visitors, staff, and donors will need to be more honest and more frequent than you may expect to accurately manage expectations for the renovation.
- **Be cautious in digital investment:** most institutions interviewed did not overly invest in digital during this time; in fact, many digital investments were more due to the new virtual arena of the pandemic, rather than the renovation. Pick one area of focus for digital to avoid over-investment and resource drain.
- **Allow for flexibility in workload:** every research participant shared that the amount of renovation-specific work for all staff members exceeded their expectations. Clear ownership of capital projects and frequent check-ins to allow for adaptability will be crucial.
- **Use renovation as a moment of celebration:** while closing off part of your collection can be seen as a period of loss, there is much to celebrate about this moment of transformation! This excitement can draw in visitors and other strategic partners, so be sure to capitalize on this positive disruption.

No Standard Timeline, But Some Consistent Guidelines

Your design plans have most likely commenced several years in advance of the concrete planning stages of the project



- In the 1-2 years before breaking ground, it is important to clearly establish and announce your internal **project team and working parameters**.
- Typically, 1 year will be necessary to **safely move artworks into temporary storage**.
- **External communications** about the closure details should be shared at least 6 months in advance.

- While each renovation project is different in terms of time needed to complete, we consistently heard that **timelines will often shift**. It is important to be prepared for potential unexpected changes.

- Most institutions shared that 1 year was a comfortable amount of time to **move back into the renovated space**.
- When testing new climatization technology, make sure you **experience several seasons** before fully moving back in.
- Architects will likely want to publicize their completion date — it is crucial to own communication of **your opening date** to avoid confusion among visitors.

Report Outline



Phase 1: Setting The Vision

- Determining a clear purpose for your renovation that will tie to your mission once reopened
- Engaging strategic partners during closure to create long-term bonds



Phase 2: Preparing To Renovate

- Structuring transparent communication with visitors, donors, and staff
- Touring and storing your collection
- Using the moment of closure as a time to celebrate the institution



Phase 3: Navigating Renovation & Closure

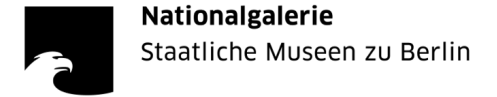
- Managing increased workload
- Investing in digital appropriately based on your priorities and capabilities
- Tactics to manage auxiliary services and scaffolding during closure
- Engaging donors and local constituents

Who Will You Be When You Reopen?

A renovation project is a fundamental opportunity to question who you are as an institution, and to transform accordingly. The existing disruption in your “normal” operations leads to a chance to creatively disrupt all aspects of how you operate – visitors, donors, and staff are all already primed for change.

It is important to identify your priority early so it can act as the guiding principle of the many choices you can make during closure and renovation.

Across our calls, we spoke to several organizations who used this moment of renovation to redefine who they are as institutions:



New Vision:

A museum dedicated to accessibility for all visitors

An institution that reflects the modern community and culture of New York City

A core part of the revitalization of Calgary, accessible to people of all backgrounds

A conservation effort of a building that is in itself a work of art

Project Implications:

- Renovation partners must have deep knowledge of accessibility
- Design choices must prioritize accessibility for all

- Communication and feedback with visitors and various cultural groups in the city must inform changes to the museum’s future priorities and offerings

- The city government and public stakeholders must have deep engagement with the capital project
- Design choices must prioritize accessibility for all

- When conflicts arise in the design and construction process, in most cases the architects will prioritize what is best for the building

Deep Dive: Clarity of Purpose Drives Transformation

The Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery had a clear vision of how the building’s renovation would act as a transformation moment for the entire institution, making it a more inclusive organization that reflected the culture and community of its home city. This clarity of purpose allowed the museum to make purposeful decisions throughout the renovation process — even when faced with unexpected changes.

Renovation Focus:

Becoming a true reflection and community pillar of the city of Birmingham

Communicating Closure

BMAG relied on their partner organizations in the community to disseminate information about the museum’s activities during closure so the information would more effectively reach constituents in a way that would authentically speak to them.

 Birmingham Community Matters (BC... @brummatt... · Aug 6, 2020 ...
@BM_AG are collecting memories of life in lockdown to celebrate the energy and diversity of our city. Take part! You can send your images by email or twitter, or as audio or video recordings of memories. Full details: birminghammuseums.org.uk/blog/posts/lif... @BMTEngage



7 8

Pop-Up Museum

With the Commonwealth Games coming to Birmingham, the museum took the historic moment to reopen as a “pop up,” inviting young people to curate using the permanent collection or bringing works themselves. Exhibits highlighted the history and culture of Birmingham.



Ongoing Digital Content

During periods around the pop-up, when the museum remained fully closed, their online content centered around sharing stories from the Birmingham community and highlighting partners in the city, continuing to cement their role.



**Our Green City:
Birmingham Open
Spaces Forum**

Engaging Strategic Partners: Key Lessons

There are many opportunities for developing strategic partnerships during a renovation process, from design firms to touring partners. When identifying potential collaborations, thinking long-term can lead to more innovative, lasting partnerships.

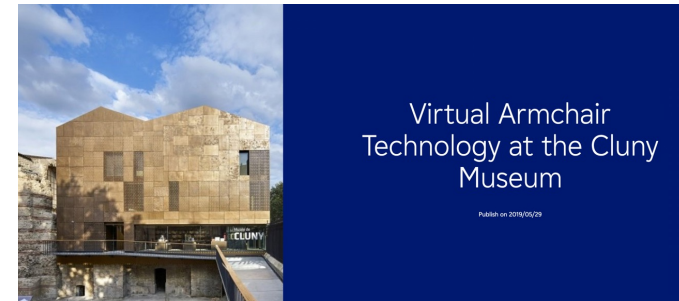


Touring Partners

Key Lesson: think creatively about touring your collection and the doors it could open for future corporate sponsorships or institutional collaborations.

Case Example: The Courtauld Gallery

Alongside loaning and exhibiting works with a number of regional and international museums and galleries including the National Gallery, The Courtauld partnered with Fondation Lois Vuitton to exhibit their Impressionist collection. The gallery specifically identified a values match between the luxury, high-end LVMH brand and the Courtauld's reputation of excellence. The tour has now resulted in the opening of the LVMH Great Room at the gallery, and an ongoing partnership between the brand and the museum.



Design Partners

Key Lesson : use this moment of disruption to commit to your organization's values in new, public ways through partnership.

Case Example: Musée de Cluny

Musée de Cluny worked with Fondation EDF (Electricité de France), to implement "virtual armchair technology" in their renovation project. This VR system simulates wheelchair usage to design the best paths through the historic buildings for visitors with limited mobility. This partnership allowed the museum to be at the forefront of accessibility technology, as the system was designed specifically for them.

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Phase 2: Preparing To Renovate

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Transparency Is Crucial For All Constituents

The most consistent theme heard across calls was the need for as much transparency as possible — and as early as possible for internal stakeholders. Even if you do not have all the answers, sharing the process will prevent individuals from assuming negative outcomes.



Visitors & Public

“Our initial strategy was to focus more on the positive aspects of the renovation and to speak less about what visitors might not be able to see.

But looking back, we might have changed our communications strategy to be more transparent in order to manage better expectations and avoid disappointment — especially from our regular visitors who feel close to our art.”



Donors & Members

“We’re always so careful when communicating with donors, because we don’t want to tell them something wrong. But it’s not about wrong, it’s about bringing people along.

Early in the pre-renovation period, we showed donors visuals of designs that were subject to change — this really helped us secure funding and get them excited.”



Staff

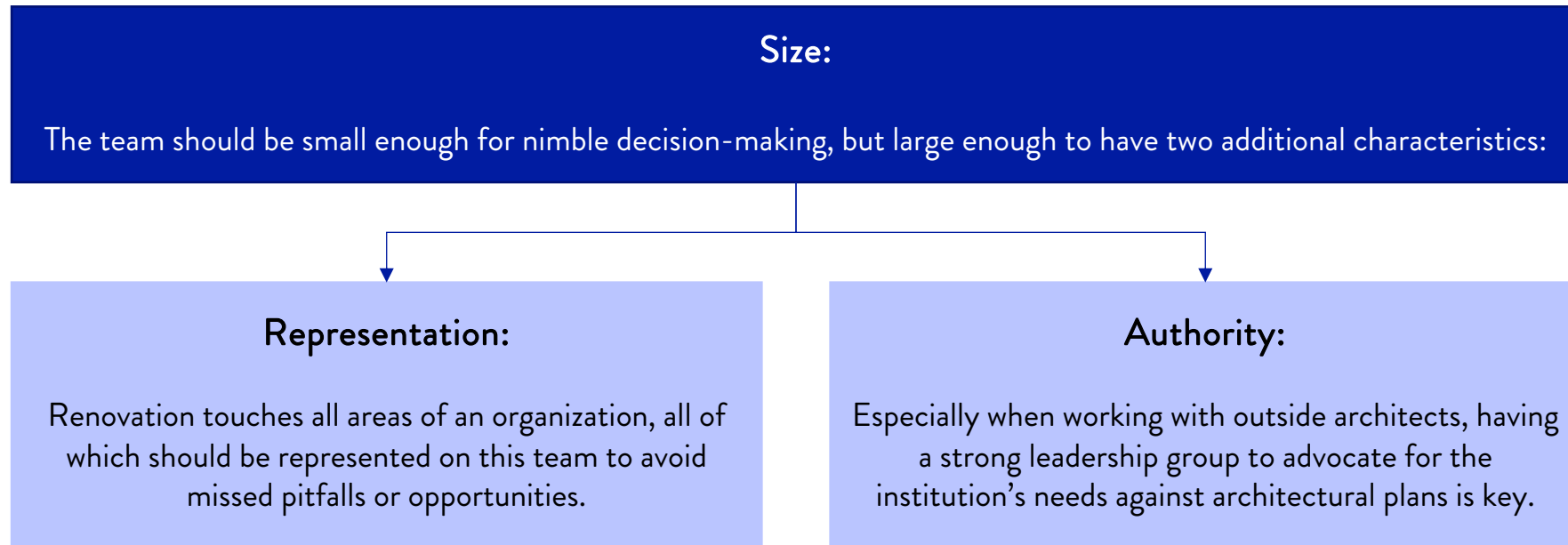
“Everyone on the staff needs to be up to speed on the renovation project. Staff need to see physically see what’s happening to get a better sense of the process. This is the best way to ensure that they are invested.”

“We did a big charrette at the beginning with the conservation team so they could get all their hopes and dreams out, then had two more meetings over the next three months to hone and discuss what was and was not possible.”

Overall, the consensus among interviewees was that all communication channels are useful in unique ways — what is most important is to have a mix. Working through partners (community organizations, government, etc.) can be an effective way to engage local constituents who may miss your own messaging.

A Well-Structured Working Group Is Key

Across all of our interviews, organizations who created a **small working group of cross-departmental leaders** reported that it was one of the most important factors in their successful renovations. When establishing a working group of your own, consider the following qualities.



While having a general working group for the full capital project is helpful, it can also be productive to create smaller catalyst teams for particular elements of a renovation. On the next slide, we'll outline a case example of one such group.

Case Example: Digital Content Working Group

Having working groups for specific aspects of a capital project can help create organizational cohesion during a disruptive time. At The Frick Collection, formalization and support of an already existing digital content working group, along with internal infrastructure reorganization, helped to unify all the content development and messaging in advance of the museum's closure period. This allowed the museum to maximize outreach during the time between the museum's closure and the opening of its temporary location, Frick Madison.



Pre-Renovation (1-2 years in advance)

- Developed a formal Marketing department within the Communications department.
- Hired additional staff to support with increased content creation needs during closure and beyond.
- Consolidated and streamlined email marketing and social media programs under Marketing.
- Implemented new standards and focus on the content distributed to maintain overall messaging and maximize impact.
- Formalized a cross-departmental working group to support ongoing content development looking ahead to a period of closure and enhanced outreach once reopened at the museum's temporary space and beyond.

Early Renovation (1-2 years into project)

- Working group meets monthly to discuss what is happening across each department and to brainstorm ways to create public-facing content around these all-museum initiatives (not just related to renovation project).
- Meetings are led by the Manager of Digital Content and Marketing, and include representatives from every department at the museum.

Mid-Renovation (2+ years into project)

- Monthly check-in meetings have now become quarterly working meetings.
- Marketing department now meets individually with representatives from each department on a regular basis to discuss specific content ideas/strategy and KPIs.

As the renovation period progresses, it is important to be comfortable adapting work structures where needed based on the current state of the capital project. Once Frick Madison opened, the cadence of working group meetings could be adjusted to match the priorities of getting visitors to visit the temporary location.

Keeping Staff Engaged

Disruptions can be challenging moments for staff engagement. Keeping employees actively looped into the progress of the renovation is the best way to maintain positive energy around the project. During their renovation, the Denver Art Museum found two key ways to structure staff engagement into the process.



Design Input Opportunities

Throughout the initial design process, the renovation project manager held regular meetings with all departments to gain input into various aspects of the project, including:

- Building requirements for their work
- Opportunities to engage various stakeholders (visitors, donors, etc.) during the period of closure
- Potential challenges they foresaw

This created a strong sense of ownership throughout the museum and helped avoid potential pitfalls that the architects might have missed.



Hard-Hat Tours

Several museums shared that offering hard-hat tours of ongoing construction efforts was one of the best ways to keep staff engaged. The Denver Art Museum took extra steps to create structure around this initiative:

- Each tour had 15 spots with an online sign-up, and efforts were made to ensure members of all departments had the chance to attend
- Curators were given special tours when planning their reopening exhibits so they could visualize the future of the space

Tours add to the excitement of the project, which is crucial to counteract the challenges of renovation.



Touring & Storing Your Collection – Beyond The Basics

Deciding on temporary storage space for the collection is a decision that is highly unique to each institution. Below, we have gathered questions to ask yourself based on some hidden challenges other museums reported using when selecting a storage option.

- ❑ **Travel requirements:** what is the necessary proximity to other museum buildings and/or staff who will need to access works in storage during your time of renovations?
- ❑ **Ease of access to art:** which artworks may leave storage for touring, conservation work, or temporary exhibitions? Which artworks do you know will be some of the first you wish to put back on display once open? Make sure that these pieces are the most easily accessible in the storage facility.
- ❑ **Space trade-offs:** will your facility have space for various types of work (i.e., storage of artwork, conservation workshops, visitor viewing)? If so, what are the priorities that will help you decide where to make trade-offs? For instance, if your plans for restoration work are limited, is having extra storage space more important than having a robust conservation workshop?
- ❑ **Financial and personnel resources:** if you are considering leasing your own storage space, will it be financially feasible to manage, and renovate a space that meets your storage needs (including climate control)?
- ❑ **Technical systems:** what digital or physical cataloguing capabilities does the space have, and does this match with your existing systems? Or will this provide an opportunity to update your system?

Touring Opportunities

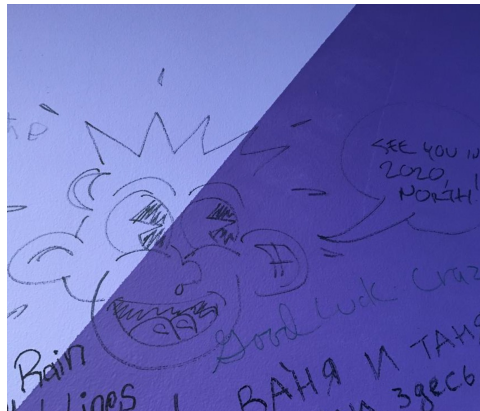
Most organizations we interviewed shared that closure was an important moment to scale up touring of their collections. Tours of the collection can have a variety of emotional and functional opportunities.

- **Emotional opportunity:** The Courtauld decided to tour its Impressionist collection in Paris, in effect "sending it home" for a period of time.
- **Functional opportunity:** for many institutions, closure (when masterpieces are already out of view) was an ideal time to send works on longer tours in farther away locations, such as Japan and Australia.

NOTE: if touring scales up, ensure you are maintaining policies to not overwhelm staff. For instance, the Denver Museum of Art was clear with partners that a loan request must be made 6 months in advance.

“Celebrating” Closure

The moment of closure can be a moment of celebration of your institution and excitement for visitors and donors. With a thoughtful event that ties into your vision, you can set the tone for your museum’s future even before renovation starts.



Just before its closure, the Denver Art Museum hosted a “See You Later, North Building” party that was open to the public. It acted as an accessible celebration for the next phase of the museum.

Activities included:

- Waived admissions fees for all visitors.
- Arts & crafts activities for children and adults — including the opportunity to write farewell messages on the walls of the emptied galleries.
- The opening of the 7th floor rooftop for a view of the city (a space that museum visitors are typically not allowed access).
- Live music and dancing.



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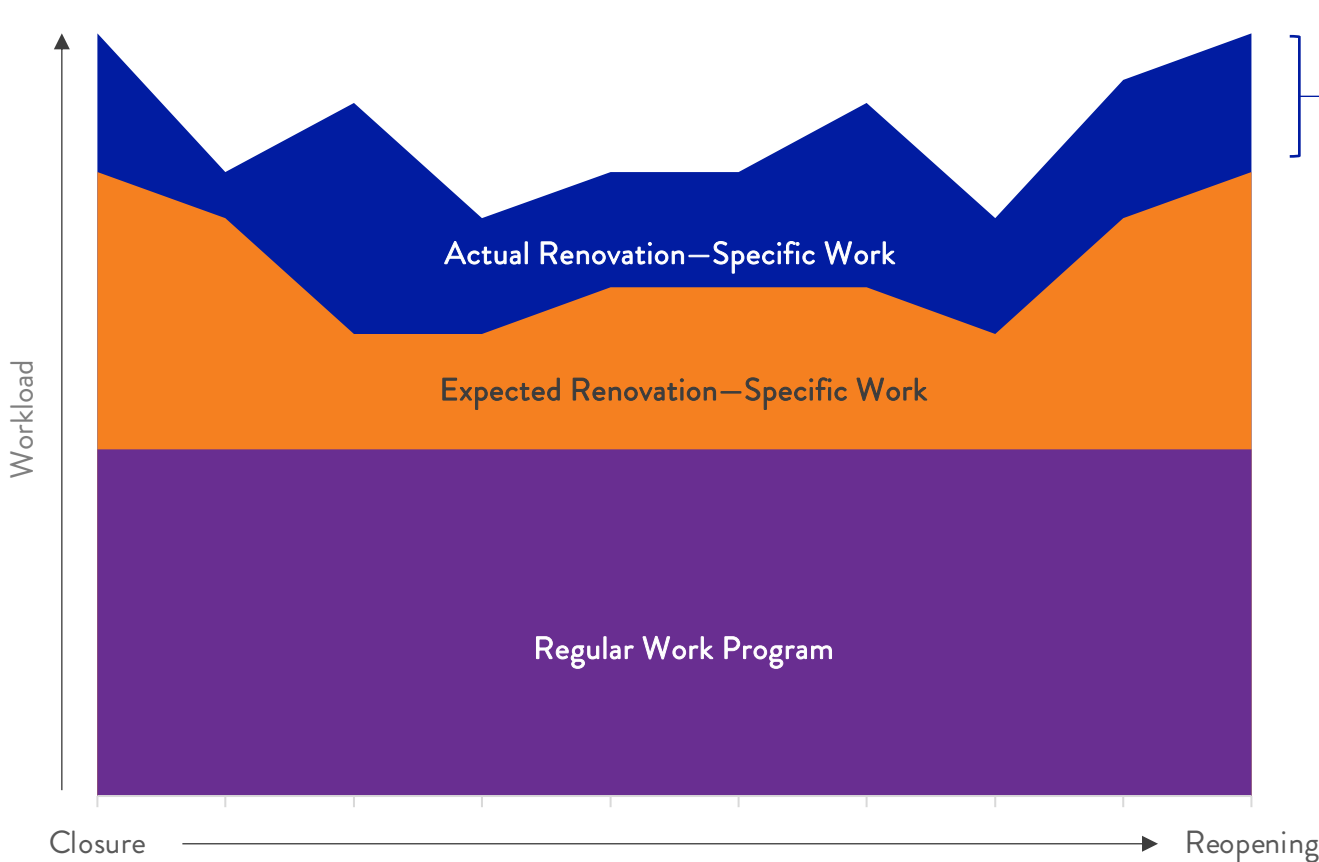


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- Managing increased workload
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Managing Increased Workload

We asked all participants about the amount of work that arose above the normal program. While all anticipated extra work, the reality is that renovations create even more additional work than expected if your organization is to truly take advantage of the opportunity — and this work will ebb and flow.



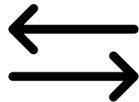
Tactics for Managing Increased & Variable Workload



Project Manager: one of the top recommendations from several institutions was to have a member of the staff whose full job is project managing the renovation. This can be achieved via an external hire or adjusting the role responsibilities of a member of the existing team.



Regular Check-Ins: the project manager should conduct quarterly or monthly check-ins with each team, bringing his or her holistic view of the project and aligning with which teams have capacity to support capital projects.



New Opportunities: at one institution, the in-house object photographer, whose workload diminished, became the official documenter of the renovation project. Identify areas where work will lessen to shift to reno-specific work.

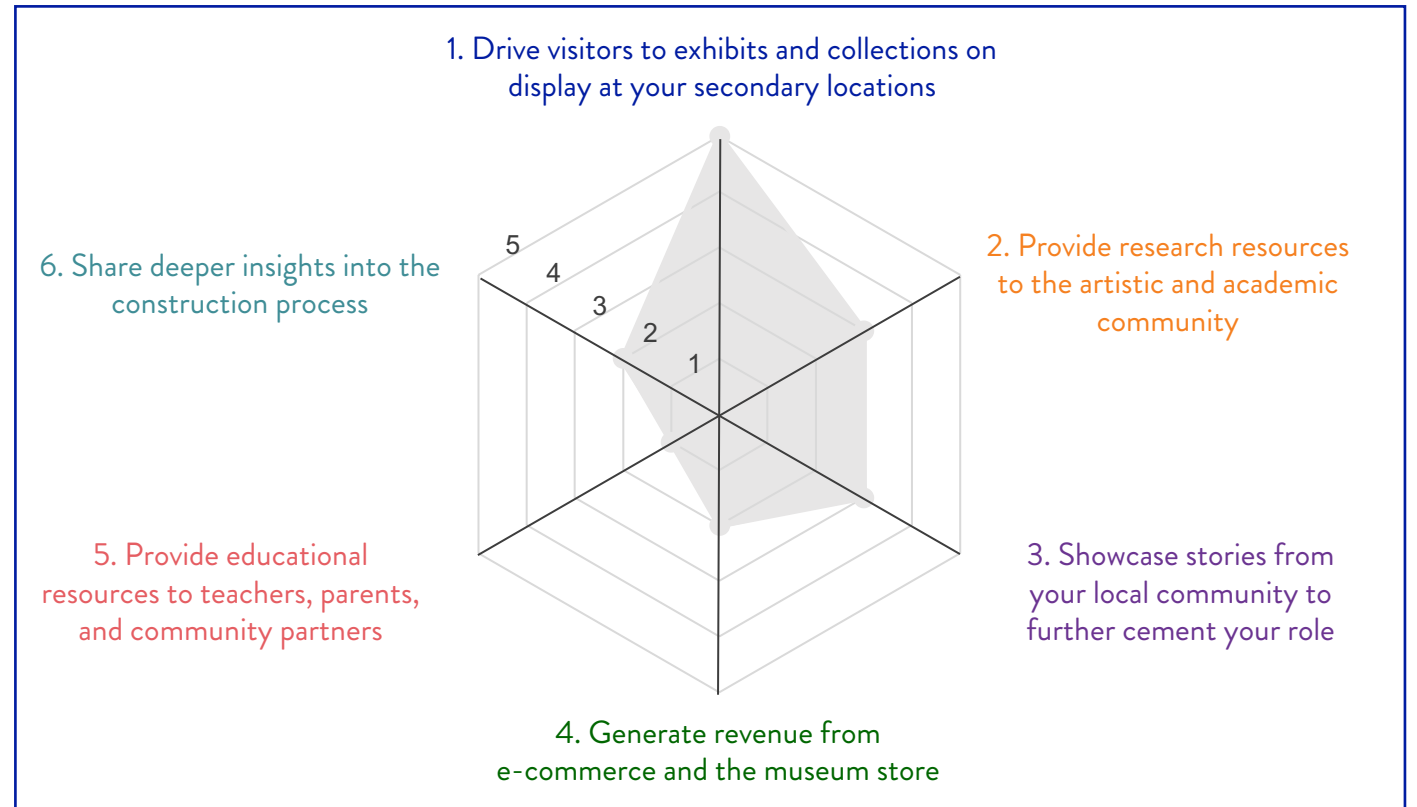
Investing in Digital Appropriately

Most interviewees did not identify digital as a primary strategy area during their renovation, using it primarily as a communication tool. There are, however, opportunities within the digital space, but it is important to understand your own resource limitations and where to prioritize.

Given that many closures for building transformations overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, many digital initiatives were more focused on maintaining relevancy in the virtual space of the arts during the pandemic.

Given that normal workloads will continue alongside renovation-specific work, it will be important to prioritize limited resources around 1-2 strategic aims for your digital efforts. A **spider diagram** can be a useful tool to visualize possible areas of focus in digital, and to indicate how much of your time and funds you will dedicate to each.

On the right is an example that includes six priority areas we identified from our calls where digital can be of strategic importance during closure.



[ABA's full report on capturing the digital opportunity in museums can be found here.](#)

Reimagining Auxiliary Services

For some museums, the moment of renovation was a chance to better understand the role their auxiliary services — cafes, shops — play for their patrons. This moment of disruption can be a moment to experiment with new opportunities in earned revenue. **It is critical to have key stakeholder research early on in planning for changes to your restaurant and café spaces.**



The Frick Collection

- Before closure, the Frick did not have a café on site. Their temporary location has a café space, and they were able to see and analyze how customers used the space.
- In their new, renovated space, they will have a café that can act as the gathering and lingering space they saw emerge as a need during this time of closure.

Image credit: *The Sister Yard at Frick Madison*; Photo: Joe Coscia Jr.



Museum of Contemporary Art
San Diego

- The initial designs for the renovation of MCASD's café space were for a cafeteria style, fast takeout experience- but this was missing input from primary users in the museum as well as the eventual café operator.
- Upon conducting research to hear from these users, the museum was able to plan a dining space that best suited visitor and operator needs.

Image credit: [Sandiegoville](#)

Enhancing Your Scaffolding

Even when your building is closed, you have opportunities to use it strategically to engage with visitors (and potential future visitors). Two museums in Washington, DC used their scaffolding to generate buzz and actively engage audiences.



Highlight Your Values

The National Museum of Women in the Arts has launched a series called “Lookout,” which commissions women artists to design works for their scaffolding.

The second of these installations took a collaborative approach. Artists Katharina Cibulka polled 70 DC residents to select a feminist phrase for her to “stitch” on the museum exterior.



Make a Visual Impact

The Hirshhorn Museum, which focuses on modern and contemporary art, sits on the National Mall of Washington DC, which is home to many museums.

To stay prominent during its time of closure, the institution commissioned a large-scale artwork by Nicolas Party, which creates a major visual impact on passersby.

Bringing Art To Your Neighbors

Some institutions used building closures as an opportunity to think outside the gallery walls – literally. One museum developed a particularly innovative ways to showcase art that doubled as initiatives to build stronger relationships with their community.

Musée d'Ixelles: "Museum at Home"

In an unusual project, the Musée d'Ixelles invited 10 neighbors to host an artwork in their own home for a weekend. The structure was twofold:

- Saturday: limited viewing for host, friends of the host, and other project participants
- Sunday: open viewing for anyone in the city

Hosts learned about the pieces of art and chose how to display them, then acted as docents for the public visits.

While the project took significant work and coordination (especially to maintain safety of the artworks), the museum felt it was well worth it for the strong connections it formed with locals and the sense of accessibility it fostered.



An easier option...

Not every institution can manage an initiative that places artworks so directly in the hands of the public, especially where insurance may be concerned. Yet, there are still ways to achieve a similar effect.

The Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery invested in outdoor shadow boxes where they display pieces from their collection alongside commissioned artworks from local artists.

Not only does this provide access to the collection during closure, it also confirms the museum's commitment to their community by placing masterpieces and local artists' work on equal footing.

Engaging Your Donors

Capital projects are expensive undertakings — but, fortunately, can also be fantastic (and unique) opportunities to engage donors of all sizes to support your institution. From individual donors to corporate sponsors, The Courtauld demonstrates two methods for fostering philanthropy.

Individual Donors & Members

Major Donors & Corporate Sponsors



Member Staircase

To engage its membership base and support fundraising priorities, the Courtauld invited members to contribute funding for a “member staircase.”

In letters from the director, the history and importance of building alongside the creation of a new staircase to significantly enhance the visitor experience was emphasized.

Participants in the initiative were invited to an exclusive unveiling of the staircase and plaque with their names in advance of the public reopening.



LVMH Great Room

After Paris, the Courtauld continued their partnership with the Louis Vuitton Foundation by creating the LVMH Great Room. The luxury brand provided funding and continued partnership.

Naming rights for museum spaces were the most common form of securing large fundraising commitments across our conversations with all institutions — and renovations are a unique opportunity to engage new sponsors in this way.

Next Steps: Further Reading

Two of ABA's past reports, cited in this project, cover some additional strategies for two particular components of the renovation process:

How to leverage digital based on your priorities and capabilities:



How to engage donors and sponsors with naming opportunities:





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