



## Ten Steps to Starting A Private Museum

By Mark Walhimer, [Museum Planning, LLC](https://www.museumplanning.com)



*C.O. Polk Interactive Museum created by [Museum Planning, LLC](https://www.museumplanning.com)*

### Introduction

I just got off the phone with a woman who lives in New Mexico. She is seventy-eight years old, with no children, and is in the process of her estate planning. She has decided that she would like to use her estate to create a museum / arts center to give back to the community she loves.

I'm fifty-seven years old. I grew up in Woodbridge, Connecticut, where we had a local library and a community center. The community center had activities for preteens and teenagers, and a nursery school. Almost every afternoon or evening, I would go to the community center, and there would be something to do: I could take art classes, or play ping pong and board games with other kids my age. It was a charming way to grow up.

It seems that those days are gone. Cities are cutting back on activities for teens and preteens, and are trimming Parks and Recreation budgets. However, the woman in Arizona wanted to shore up her community. I'm sure there are thousands of people in the United States in a similar situation, who could give back to their local community with gifts of a million dollars and above.

I told the woman during the phone call that the best use of her funding would be to create arts programming for preteens, teens, young adults, and seniors, and concentrate on the programming. The building is less important; it's more about delivering the programs and the community outreach. The program-driven approach resonated with the woman, and she seemed excited about assisting her community.

Below is my outline of how to create a private museum. My firm, Museum Planning, LLC, is a museum planning and exhibition design firm that provides turnkey museum services. The firm's expertise is interactive exhibits.

### **Ten Steps to Starting A Private Museum Process**

The description below assumes that you are interested in personally funding the creation of a community-based museum and can contribute more than \$1 million in personal funding.

1. **One-Page Description.** As museum founder, write a one-page description of the museum. What type of museum are you creating? Science center? Art museum? Local history? Be descriptive. Try to think fifty years into the future. What changes might affect your museum? What could hamper your museum's ability to thrive?
2. **Social Engagements.** Share your vision with other people who would be capable of gifting \$1 million. Gauge the guests' interest at dinner parties, cocktail parties, and other social engagements. Can you find three or four people interested in funding the creation of the museum? After two or three such social engagements, you will know if (1) there is funding capacity in the area, and (2) there is community support for your vision. If the answer to both of those is yes, move to item number three.
3. **Nonprofit.** Register the nonprofit organization and form the 501(c)3. Grow the board of directors to about twelve to twenty members, including three or four donors qualified for \$1 million-plus gifts. Also include artists, teachers, students, school superintendents, and principals on the board of directors.
4. **Programming.** Create and deliver programming in schools and in borrowed and rented facilities.
5. **Community Meetings.** Organize a community meeting. Invite politicians, parents, teachers, school superintendents, and real estate developers. Share your vision and ask for feedback. Collect the names and email addresses of participants and ask if they would be willing to attend future meetings.
6. **Preview Facility.** Create a preview facility, which is essentially a small version of your planned museum. The preview facility is great for showing to potential donors.
7. **Create collateral materials.** Hire a firm to do a feasibility study, museum master plan, building design, exhibition design, exhibition renderings, audience research, and visitor experience evaluation.
8. **Raise Money.** With approximately half the funding in hand, announce your plans for a capital campaign and start to ask individuals, foundations, and businesses for gifts to fund the remainder of the project.
9. **Deliver Programs and Build the Facility.** It is essential to continue delivering community programming while simultaneously designing and building the facility and visitor experience. Hire an architect, general contractor, and executive director.
10. **Museum Opening.** Receive community feedback, improve operations and facility, and receive and evaluate audience feedback.

### **Conclusion**

Starting a museum is a complex, multiyear process. More than ever, individuals are stepping in to fill a vital role in communities, providing critical civic engagement. Send me an email or give me a call if we can be of assistance with your museum planning.

## Ten Steps to Starting A Private Museum Resources

### Starting a Museum

1. [ICOM Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook](#)
2. [AAM Starting a Museum](#)
3. [AIM Museums Setting Up a New Museum](#)
4. [Thinking About Starting a Museum?](#)
5. [New Museum Toolkit](#)
6. [NPS Museum Handbook](#)

### Museum Board of Directors Development

7. [AAM Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report](#)
8. [Building an Effective Board of Directors: Association of Fundraising Professionals](#)
9. [Roles and Responsibilities of Museum Board of Trustees](#)
10. [Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices](#)

### Museum Strategic Planning

11. [AAM Developing a Strategic Institutional Plan](#)
12. [AASLH DIY Strategic Planning for Small Museums](#)
13. [Te Papa Developing a Strategic Plan](#)
14. [Museums Australia's Strategic Planning Manual \(1998\)](#)
15. [Example: A Strategic Vision for the Philadelphia Museum of Art](#)
16. [Example: Carnegie Museum of Natural History](#)

### Museum Community Engagement

17. [New Approaches NOW Pedaali 2016](#)
18. [Community + Museums, Guidelines for Collaboration](#)
19. [UNESCO Community-Based Approach to Museum Development in Asia and the Pacific for Culture and Sustainable Development](#)
20. [MAPC Community Engagement Guide 2016](#)

### Placemaking

21. [Creative Placemaking: What If Cities Were Built Around Places?](#)
22. [NEA Creative Placemaking](#)

### Event Driven Museum

23. [The Event-Driven Museum?](#)
24. [The Event-Driven Museum? Reconsidering the Role of Exhibitions in Tough Economic Times](#)

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