

Decolonization Commission

1. Territorial acknowledgement of Indigenous land occupied by this building and giving material effect to such an acknowledgment in curatorial practices, programming, exhibitions, and day-to-day operations.
2. The deep diversification of curatorial staff and executive leadership whereby the lived experience of oppressions — including patriarchy, white supremacy, and poverty — are valued and factored in.
3. A decolonial inventory of colonial-era objects of both African and Indigenous people with a view to settling the long-pursued claims of reparations and repatriation.
4. An upgrade of working conditions and pay of ground staff — who are disproportionately employees of color — in security, food service, and janitorial divisions.
5. The replacement of board president David Berliner and other trustees who are real estate tycoons with a broad cross-section of artists and community organizers.
6. The undertaking of a de-gentrification initiative to examine and mitigate the museum's role in boosting land value and rents in the borough.
7. An institutional commitment to address the issues raised by the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (bds) movement in recognition of Brooklynites' role in the settler movement in Palestine.



Decolonize
This Museum

Last month, the Brooklyn Museum hired a white woman to curate the African Art collection, and a white man to curate the photography department. People were angry, but not surprised, even at a museum that prides itself on its multicultural profile. "Not a good look," many said, whatever the academic qualifications of the curators in question. But the conversation evolved quickly. It has moved far beyond any particular hires to focus on systemic injustices involving The Museum, as well as other major cultural institutions in the area including the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

On April 3, our coalition of nineteen community groups issued a letter urging the Brooklyn Museum to participate in the formation of a Decolonization Commission that would respond to these deeply rooted injustices. This Commission would address, among other things, the colonial history of The Museum's non-western holdings, the lack of diversity among its curatorial staff and executive leadership, the working conditions of its entire staff, the fact that The Museum sits on stolen indigenous land, and especially The Museum's role in the gentrification of Brooklyn.

So far, The Museum's leadership has flatly ignored our call, in hopes that the controversy will blow over. The continuing silence about the Decolonization Commission shows that the institution is out of touch with the communities at its own doorstep.

We are gathered here today to make our presence felt and our voices heard. We refuse to be ignored. We demand accountability from The Museum that claims to serve our borough while being complicit with the forces that are damaging, displacing, and dispossessing our communities. To paraphrase the poet Jayne Cortez, The Museum wants our art, our culture, our visitor demographic...but not our people.

The grievances we express today are long in the making, and are connected to the well-documented role that urban museums play in the process of gentrification. In 2015, numerous protests erupted when we learned that The Museum hosted the Brooklyn Real Estate Summit, at which leading property corporations strategized about how to best identify new frontiers of investment in the borough. Among our demands at the time was that David Berliner be removed from the board. At the time, Berliner was the Treasurer of the Board. In the year following the protests, he was promoted to President and Chief Operating Officer of The Museum itself.

Until 2016, Berliner was the top executive at Forest Ratner, notorious for the Atlantic Yards project which kicked off the intensive gentrification of downtown Brooklyn in the early 2000s. Berliner is also a board member of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, directly adjacent to The Museum. Plans for the Garden's perimeter include a 42-story luxury condo—the largest residential complex in Brooklyn—currently being pursued by another billionaire developer, Bruce Eichner. While adding to the pattern of rent-boosting and displacement in the area, this colossus will have a detrimental effect on the sunlight needs of the Garden itself (which, lamentably is itself not accessible to many Brooklynites due to the expensive Spring and Summer entrance fees that have been charged since city budget-cuts in 1996).

In other words, both The Museum and the Garden are caught up in the profit-driven interests of real-estate industry, the "permanent government" of the city that is hell-bent on evicting and dispossessing long-term residents of these neighborhoods.

We belong to communities that are engaged in day-to-day struggles against settler-colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchal violence, police terror, mass incarceration, population displacement, deportation, economic precarity, and climate disaster. As Audre Lorde put it, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." That is why we embrace an intersectional approach and it is reflected in the proposal we have put before The Museum for the Decolonization Commission.

We know there are good people at work within the Brooklyn Museum who hear our call but whose voices are muffled by the institution's hierarchy. We see you, and we know that you see us. We offer you our support in speaking out, in spite of these institutional constraints. We ourselves have enthusiastically turned out for shows like Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-85, We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85, and Agitprop!, as well as the programming undertaken by The Museum's education department on themes of art, political struggle, and racial and gender justice.

It is for precisely this reason that we expect and demand more of the Brooklyn Museum when it comes to the actual governance and political economy of the institution. An innovative show here, a progressive event there, even the monthly celebration of First Saturdays (brought to you by the Target corporation) are not enough. This institution must be questioned in its very foundations, starting with the fact that it sits on occupied Lenape land and contains thousands of objects collected through imperial plunder. Why not make these the starting points for a discussion, rather than the question of who curates what department? What would it mean to liberate this institution from the structures of oppression that are built into its very basis?

Likewise, we find solace and beauty in the Botanical Garden and refuse to allow it to be overshadowed by yet another ultra-luxury tower for the 1%. But at the same time, we know the Garden itself has its own colonial history, both in the plants displayed there and the occupied soil in which they are planted.

Like the cherry blossom trees that are so alluring at the Garden at this time of year, a movement is now blossoming to reclaim and decolonize this place. In the spirit of a Spring Renewal, we urge The Museum's leadership to participate in the process of setting up a Decolonization Commission immediately.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We begin today by acknowledging that we are standing on the ancestral territory of the Lenni Lenape. This was, and is, their land—a reality that all of us who have come here must acknowledge. Our action today, at its most fundamental level, stands in solidarity with the Lenape, and all Indigenous peoples, whose land was stolen to create the settler states, and who continue to live under siege, surveillance, and colonial structural violence on their own occupied land. We stand with our comrades advancing Indigenous resurgence and decolonization through ongoing settler colonial oppression. We stand in support of the return of their lands. This is where we must begin.

East Drive in Prospect Park follows an Indigenous trail from pre-colonial time. After colonization, when the area became Kings County, it was the site of extensive plantations farmed by enslaved labor. At the time of the American Revolution, a third of the population of Kings County were enslaved Africans. Just a couple of miles away, the free African-American community of Weeksville was founded in 1838 and persists today. Rev. Rufus L. Perry, who escaped slavery in Tennessee, moved to Brooklyn and established the Messiah Baptist Church in Crown Heights, just a mile from where the Brooklyn Museum would be built.

Established in 1895, the Brooklyn Museum was built to spur the movement of gentry from Manhattan to Prospect Park. Urban elites who had seen Brooklyn as a rural backwater were lured by the borough's promise as a new, leafy location for real estate value. Institutions like the Museum and the Botanical Garden were designed to appeal to affluent Manhattanites who slowly but surely gravitated to the area, alongside waves of immigrant and non-white working-class people in subsequent decades. Among these new arrivals were migrant Mohawk ironworkers from Kahnawake reservation near Montreal, who lived in Boerum Hill, known as Little Caughnawaga, from the early 20th century until the early 2000s. This vital Indigenous enclave was dispersed by the forces of gentrification that began to overtake mid-Brooklyn at this time. Projects like the Atlantic Yards development (connected to the eventual construction of the Barclays Center) were presided over by Brooklyn Museum president David Berliner, setting in motion a more intensive wave of real-estate expansion. Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people from throughout the Americas currently live in Brooklyn, and are at the frontlines of anti-displacement struggles.

Decolonize This Place // American Indian Community House // Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network (BAN) // W.A.G.E. Flower Lovers Against Corruption (FLAC) // Equality for Flatbush (E4F) // Movement to Protect the People (MTOPP) Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Illumination Against Gentrification // NYC Stands with Standing Rock // Black Youth Project 100 Eagle & Condor Community Center // Bronx Social Center // Chinatown Art Brigade // Dancing for Justice // El Salón Free University-NYC // Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) // Occupy Museums // People's Cultural Plan // Take Back The Bronx

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How to Contribute to the Snapchat Story!

1. Snap throughout Decolonize Brooklyn Museum action
2. Publicly post snaps to the Snap Map by sending snaps to "Our Story" and/or "Our Story: Brooklyn Museum"
3. Wait. Snapchat will add all snaps to the Snap Map
4. After the tour, open Snap Map + enjoy!