

Societal collapse is underway and museums can be unlikely heroes, suggests expert

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Stressors like climate trauma, corporate deceit and political incompetence signal the threat of societal collapse, a new book asserts.

This claim lays the foundation for exploring arguments of "collapsology" in a new book by Robert R. Janes Ph.D., "[Museums and Societal Collapse: The Museum as Lifeboat](#)." The book also contends with the unique role that can be played by [museums](#) during a mounting climate crisis.

"Social ecology is an integral and moral dimension of the collapse and the crisis we face—that social and environmental issues are intertwined, and both must be considered simultaneously," Dr. Janes, a Visiting Research Fellow at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, explains.

"Our collective failure to honor this relationship lies at the core of our failure as species. It befits all museums, irrespective of their disciplinary focus and loyalties, to bridge the divide between nature and culture in all that they do."

The brink of collapse

Janes identifies six categories in which a number of key societal threats fall under, ranging from civilizational overshoot to ecomodernism.

The era of modernity, along with technological and industrial advancements, has also ushered in unsustainable economic growth, violence and warfare, dispossession and genocide. These interplay with other stressors like political incompetence and corporate deceit, as governments worldwide plan to produce more coal, gas and oil by 2030 than is allowable.

Janes, who is the Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of the journal *Museum Management and Curatorship*, examines these threats individually and in tandem as he calls attention to "the madness of humanity."

He questions, "Recognizing what we know about civilizational overshoot, ecological overshoot, climate trauma, political and corporate deceit and ecomodernism, is this not madness?"

"Madness that we in the Western world are failing to react with intelligence, courage, and dispatch to confront what is now being called an existential threat to our species, not to mention all we have created throughout prehistoric, oral, and written history."

Finding refuge in the museum

Museums, understood as keepers of bygone eras and bastions of preservation, occupy a unique space within society with untapped potential.

Janes suggests that their role remains largely unexplored. "Museums have a much more enduring role to play in society by clearly demonstrating that no one group or ideology possesses the sole truth about how society should conduct itself."

"A competent museum is testimony to the fact that a healthy society is a multitude of competing interests, aspirations, plans, and proposals that cannot be ignored in favor of economic utility."

Janes also argues that there are ethical obligations that museums are especially well-placed to embody and pursue. These include being open to influence and impact outside the museum, being responsive to citizens' interests and concerns, and being fully transparent in fulfilling these first two expectation.

The author explains, "Museums have the opportunity and obligation to provide the means of intellectual self-defense with which to both resist the status quo and question the way in which society is governed."

An urgent appeal for our shared futures

"Museums and Societal Collapse: The Museum as Lifeboat" unflinchingly examines the possibilities of societal collapse, resulting global scenarios and hopes for an evolving community-centered practice.

Concisely breaking down concepts and theories, Janes intentionally conducts this conversation beyond the field of museum and heritage practitioners, underscoring the necessity of a collaborative global response to the key threats he outlines.

Although he paints a grim picture, Janes—also the founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice—insists that hope is still central to the quest for solutions. "In thinking about the uncertain future of museums in a world beset by unprecedented challenges, it is clear that hope is an essential ingredient in any successful outcome for museums, yet it is insufficient on its own."

Janes invites his readers—whether museum practitioners or not—to contend with the threats facing us as a global community and consider the roles we can occupy in the face of the indicators of collapse.

He says, "There is no question that we are living through the intensification of global climate trauma, casting the shadow of collapse. The underlying premise of this book is that each of us has something valuable to offer. There is no correct approach. We cannot stop global warming, but we can confront the [threat](#) of collapse."

More information: Robert R. Janes, *Museums and Societal Collapse* (2023). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003344070](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003344070)

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