

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE SPECTRUM OF PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOUTHWEST MUSEUM SITE

This report summarizes qualitative findings from 75 confidential interviews with 87 individuals about the future of the Southwest Museum Site.¹ Interviews were conducted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust) in the spring and summer of 2015 as a critical first stage of their planning work on the Southwest Museum Site National Treasure. The primary goal of these interviews was to gather baseline information directly from stakeholders by carefully listening to their opinions and perspectives, and summarize their responses to help inform how the Southwest Museum Site could be revitalized in the future.

The National Trust's extensive planning process (see Appendix F) will evaluate existing reports, plans, and surveys that were completed for this site, and that historical information will be supplemented with public input and new, current data—the stakeholder interview results, an online survey (e-survey), a market analysis, a small series of test events at the site, and an architectural analysis. Together this information will guide the development of a long-range vision and potential business model. A 15-person Steering Committee representing a broad spectrum of expertise and interests across Los Angeles will play a pivotal role in the planning process by critically assessing the data from this report and many other sources, developing informed recommendations, and steering the creation of a financially-sustainable business model that will be presented to the Board of Trustees of the site's owner, the Autry Museum of the American West (Autry).²

The National Trust's planning process will identify and emphasize areas of agreement as the basis for consensus on viable and financially sustainable roles and functions for the site in the future. Towards that end, the interview responses are aggregated into areas where some consensus already exists and areas where there are clear differences of opinion that need to be further explored and resolved.

It is important to note that these interview findings do not establish specific priorities. The inclusion of an observation or comment in this report does not constitute an endorsement by the National Trust for a specific use.

We need to respect the past, but we shouldn't be stuck in the past.

-- Cathi Milligan, Owner,
The Glass Studio

We need to end the "us versus them" mentality. Can we find a way to melt our swords into plowshares?

-- Gideon Kracov, Attorney

Change is difficult. In part, people fear change less in terms of what they imagine is possible, and more in terms of what they think they may lose. Change is at the heart of our hopes, aspirations, and fears.

--Omar Brownson,
Executive Director, LA River
Revitalization Corporation

¹ A small number of interviews were conducted as group interviews with 2 or more individuals from related organizations or interests groups.

² In the fall of 2015 the formal name of the organization changed from the Autry National Center of the American West to the Autry Museum of the American West. The updated name reflects the Autry's principal activities as a museum dedicated to exploring and sharing the diverse stories of the American West. (See: <https://theautry.org/about-us/what-is-the-autry> for additional information.)

While the interviews generated a wide range of opinions, ideas, and suggestions, some broad themes emerged quite clearly:

- All interviewees agreed that **this site is a significant, beloved, and iconic landmark** that deserves special attention and national recognition.
- Even though the site has been privately owned by a non-profit for over a century, it was always open and accessible to the public. As a result there is a strong sense among many local neighborhood stakeholders that **the buildings and the grounds are a valued and shared community asset**. The passion with which some community members have fiercely advocated for this place is a strong indication of the significance it holds in the hearts and minds of many residents in surrounding neighborhoods.
- There is weariness over the protracted struggle surrounding the Southwest Museum Site and the Southwest Museum of the American Indian Collection (the collection). Many of the interviewees, however, were cautiously optimistic about the **apparent willingness on all sides to move towards a shared solution** after years of disagreement and deadlock.
- A majority of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude about the participation of the National Trust as a neutral, outside facilitator, viewing the **National Treasure designation as an opportunity to find a positive resolution for the site**.

Many of the interviewees shared a preference for arts or cultural uses that include educational functions and allow for public access and use. Functions associated with museum uses were mentioned frequently by local neighborhood stakeholders and the interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of individual views on the potential role(s) of the collection at the site, along with the identification of various complementary or appropriate uses that interviewees would like to experience at the site. Interviewees' long-range visions for the Southwest Museum Site generally aligned with one or more of the following concepts:

- an improved and greatly **expanded version of the historic Southwest Museum**, with a primary focus on the display of the Southwest Museum Collection. This could include restored historic buildings and complementary new construction to provide expanded galleries and other spaces for programming;
- a more **modest museum use within the footprint of the existing historic buildings**. This would have more limited exhibits from the collection but also incorporate other exhibits and programming;
- **mixed-use concepts** that add complementary retail and dining uses or community-serving cultural uses to make the site a destination for locals as well as visitors;
- **alternative uses** such as galleries, a different kind of museum, or arts spaces that could draw on the collection in some way; and
- **non-museum uses** such as a community center, a cultural center, office space, a charter school, day care or after-school program center, a library, or lodging (including artist-in-residence or scholar-in-residence programs).

Regardless of their vision, many interviewees acknowledged that a variety of functions, activities, and programming will be needed to make the site financially sustainable. For the purposes of this report, "financially sustainable" means having reliable and sufficient sources of earned and contributed revenue to offset operating expenses. Interviewees consistently expressed a desire for exhibits and displays, educational programming, restaurants or cafes, and retail options. In addition to these, a range of

creative programming and use alternatives were suggested during the interviews that deserve further examination:

- connecting the site to a larger **network of historic, cultural, and natural sites** and attractions, either along the Arroyo Seco, across Los Angeles, or across Route 66;
- creating a **welcoming and desirable destination** that attracts visitors and can serve as a community gathering place;
- providing **complementary services** such as a variety of events, places to eat and drink, and shopping opportunities that will draw people to return on a regular basis;
- **celebrating the legacy of Charles Lummis**, his vision, and his role in shaping the culture and history of early Los Angeles. This could be manifest as a broader focus on the cultural diversity of Los Angeles, Native American arts and culture, Latino arts and culture, and the history of the Southwest;
- incorporating a **strong arts or cultural component**, which could connect to contemporary visual and performing arts, or programming with local Los Angeles artists, modern art, opera, theater, puppet shows, etc.; and
- incorporating **educational functions**, such as programs serving local youth to supplement the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) public educational system.

One notable area of disagreement among the interviewees is whether it is sufficient to preserve and reactivate the site itself, or whether the original use also must be retained with the buildings and the collection.³ Views on the role of the collection were divided largely, but not exclusively, along geographic lines. A group of interviewees from the Northeast Los Angeles neighborhoods felt strongly that the use must continue as the previous Southwest Museum of the American Indian, with its primary focus being displays of the collection. Other interviewees expressed support for a range of additional uses, which included but were not limited to:

- **arts, cultural, and educational opportunities** for the public;
- uses that could meet other **community needs**; and
- **revenue-generating activities** that can offset operational expenses.

Another point of contention is the financial viability of the site as a museum, particularly the amount of funding that could be raised to underwrite the large capital needs for rehabilitation of the property, in addition to ongoing operational costs. Some local neighborhood residents firmly believe it is possible for a new, expanded version of the historic Southwest Museum to support itself financially, and they reference studies that have been commissioned to demonstrate this point. Other interviewees cited other studies that show a range of physical, logistical, and financial challenges that could hamper continued use as a museum devoted to the collection. Interviewees in the museum profession and representatives from philanthropic organizations expressed the most skepticism about some museum uses.

³ Although there is some disagreement about the total number of objects contained in the collection, the website of the Autry Museum of the American West describes the Southwest Museum of the American Indian Collection as “a collection of 238,000 Native American art and artifacts that is one of the most significant and representative of its kind in the United States, second only to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian.” Source: <http://theautry.org/collections/collections-home>.

Despite disagreements over the museum function and the collection, the interviews revealed a growing willingness to work collaboratively toward a shared vision, which could include variations of museum uses as well as arts, cultural, educational, and community uses. The Southwest Museum Site is a very special place that inspires deep feelings and strong passions, and many are adamant that this site is simply too important to remain largely empty and underutilized.



Photo courtesy of the Autry Museum of the American West.

While the primary focus of this report is to share the diverse opinions of interviewees without any prioritization or judgment, the National Trust compiled some key observations from the interviews that should be considered during planning process. Specifically:

- While almost all interviewees agree that the care of the collection today is an improvement over the condition prior to 2003, views on the role of the collection remain deeply felt. **Continuing disagreement over the collection has the potential to prevent from reaching consensus and could keep the future of the Southwest Museum in limbo.**
- Given the disagreement over the viability of securing funds for different concepts, **a fundraising feasibility study will be a critical and necessary step in the future** to determine the amount of funding that could realistically be raised to support capital and on-going annual operating expenses.
- Reaching a solution that satisfies the priorities for different stakeholder groups **will require compromise from all sides.**

Building from the common desire to reinvigorate this landmark as a resource for all of Los Angeles, the National Trust requests that all stakeholders approach the planning process with an open mind and a willingness to work together towards a shared vision that can be embraced by everyone. For the purposes of this report, “stakeholders” are defined broadly to include anyone with an interest in the future of the Southwest Museum Site. Careful consideration of the many creative ideas and perspectives generated by the interviews can direct the Steering Committee toward a viable, vibrant vision and a solid business model to guide its implementation.