

Excerpt

Engaging Visitors

AMERICAN SPACES

Idea Book



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Under Secretary

Message from the
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Smithsonian
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Tara D. Sonenshine

*Under Secretary for Public
Diplomacy and Public Affairs*

In a rapidly changing world, powered by social media and instant information, the United States must continue to be part of the world's vibrant conversations. At a time when so many of our embassies are forced by necessity to protect our diplomats, it's critical that we can go outside our compounds to engage in what Edward R. Murrow called "the last three feet—one person talking to another."

I have prioritized American Spaces as one of the most effective and vibrant forums for our public diplomacy outreach. Since the beginning of my tenure as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs I have seen exciting learning taking place in Information Resource Centers, American Centers, Bi-national Centers, and Corners where foreign audiences come to engage with us on matters of common interest.

Just as traditional libraries are evolving into dynamic community spaces, our American Spaces must be dynamic as well. Over the course of the last year many people have come together, from all over the world, to work on this idea of creating Model American spaces to showcase the types of dynamic learning centers we hope all our spaces will become.

Since we began this project our vision has been clear: to further develop American Spaces that engage audiences with compelling learning environments that reflect the dynamic nature of the United States and welcome spontaneous interaction, shared ideas and warm conversations. We have

made it our goal to provide what I call CARE for every Space: Content, Access, Resources, Evaluation and robust connectivity.

Working with experts from the Smithsonian, we have created an exciting partnership to realize that vision—and take it to the next level: advancing the role of American Spaces as symbols of meaningful relationships and commitments between the U.S. and host communities.

Through this Idea Book we will provide Posts the means to improve and standardize the quality of American Spaces and their core programs. Our aim is to provide the best multifunctional platform for public diplomacy programs to promote open dialogue, counteract negative preconceptions and build bridges of understanding. Bringing our partners and Smithsonian experts together we anticipated an explosion of ideas and practical solutions, and we had just that.

We hope you will use this Idea Book as a resource to invigorate your Spaces which are, now more than ever, one of our key platforms for advancing U.S. foreign policy through the lively sharing of information and ideas. Flexible spaces, welcoming environments and state-of-the-art technology can help create opportunities for learning about America, through participatory experience, casual exchanges, and social media, breaking down barriers around the world.



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Message from the Under Secretary



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*Photo Credit: James DiLoreto,
Smithsonian Institution*

The Smithsonian is pleased to submit this Idea Book as the final deliverable of our American Spaces Assessment and Redesign Project. We hope it will serve as a guide for all American Spaces eager to refresh their facilities with a new look and new content for use by their visitors. The Idea Book contains design concepts, finishes and furnishings, and programming and IT/social media recommendations, supported by narratives explaining how our recommendations might be implemented in different types of American Spaces.

American Spaces, from my perspective, are terrific assets for this country and offer enormous opportunity. It is a great privilege for the Smithsonian to work with all of you on this important and vital project, particularly because our mission is the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” We are passionate about engaging our visitors and our role in the world of cultural diplomacy.

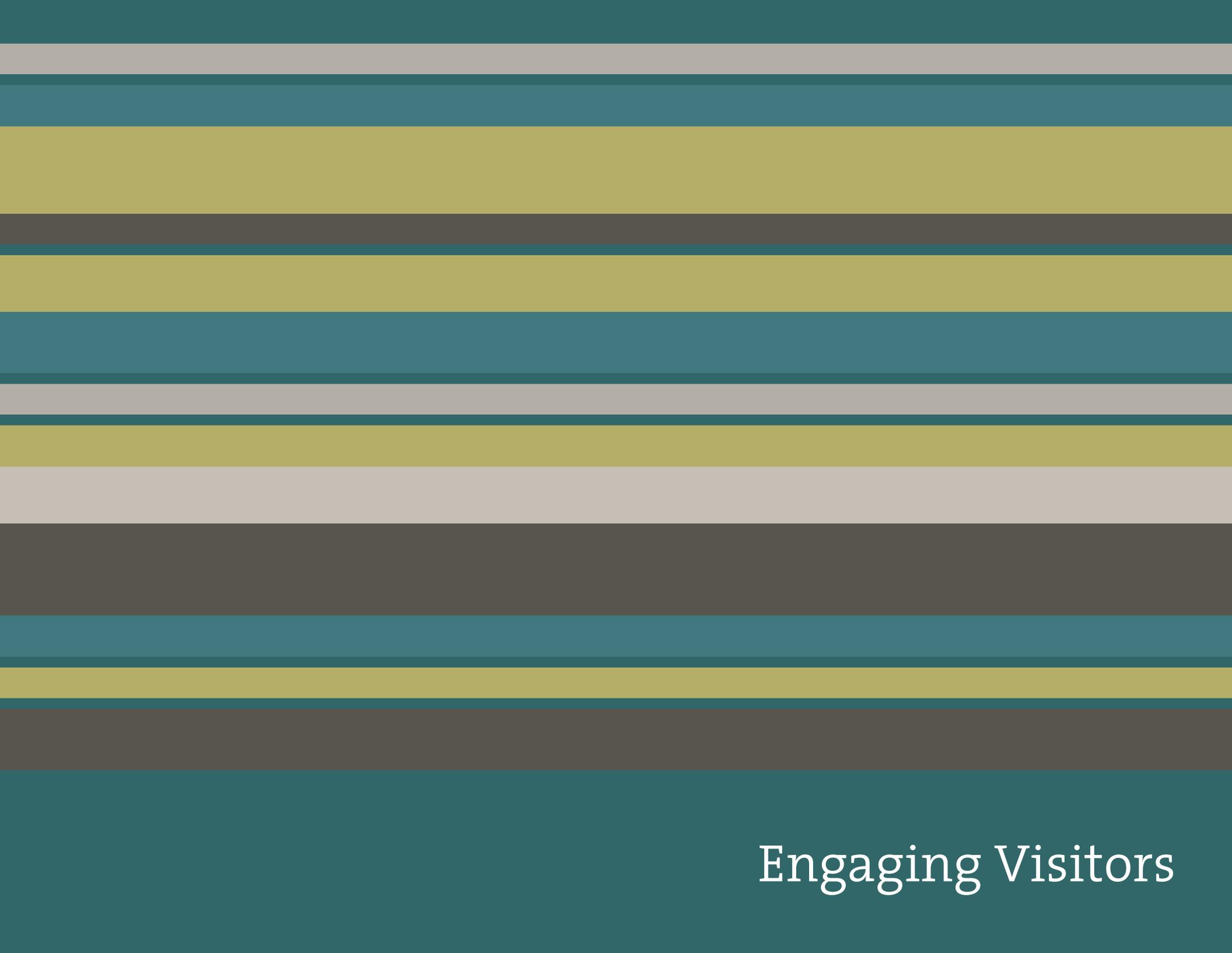
From the initial discussions with State to the team visits to the American Spaces, from the design efforts to the planning and convening of the project workshop, this has been a wonderful and rewarding partnership all around. Collaboration and shared commitment have been central to this project: when our delegations visited the American Spaces

and peer institutions around the world and met with Embassy and American Spaces staff, partners, and visitors, all were unstinting in their generous contributions to the project. All of these stakeholders are key to the success of this endeavor, and ownership of the final recommendations will be in the hands of the American Spaces themselves.

We have benefited greatly from the support of our State Department partners throughout. Our ideas have been strengthened through communication and feedback, and we have all learned so much from you. On behalf of the entire International Museum Professional Education Program team and the broader Smithsonian Institution, we want to thank the State Department—particularly the Bureau of International Information Programs—for the opportunity to work on this project. Members from several Smithsonian Institution units have enthusiastically participated in the program, drawing expertise from the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of American History, the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), and the Office of Facilities Engineering and Operations. We look forward to the possibilities ahead and to continuing this partnership and supporting you in any way we can.



Message from the Program Director



Engaging Visitors

People come to our spaces for many reasons. What makes people want to come back to your American Space? Perhaps it's the recognition that it is a safe, engaging place in which to spend time after school. Or maybe it's the resources on American culture, opportunities, and values that we provide. Though users of American Spaces vary, there are three categories of visitors we would like to focus on with our spaces and programs.

Information Seekers

Whether they are students or lifelong learners, people come to American Spaces to find information, conduct research, explore new ideas, or simply read. Maybe they want to use the library for its books or publication subscriptions, or perhaps they want to surf the Web. Maybe you're hosting a cooking class, screening a movie, or hosting a discussion group. The opportunity to learn and speak English and the materials and resources you provide are incredibly valuable.

Location Seekers

Chairs, tables, quiet corners, computer carrels. This is just a small sample of what American Spaces provide. We frequently hear that people—often students—just want a safe place to spend time with friends. Programs and resources are important, but we must also remember that the physical place we offer should remain a safe, welcoming harbor with areas to relax, comfortable spots to sit, and clear areas to work.

Community Seekers

American Spaces can be the connective tissue for people interested in communal experiences. Sometimes people want to find others with similar interests, sometimes they wish to be challenged. We can help bridge “the last three feet,” engaging with people ourselves and fostering interaction between others. We can help people find community locally, regionally, and internationally.

American Spaces should serve and engage visitors within their walls, but we can also meet many of their needs and interests and maintain relationships with users when they are elsewhere. American Spaces have an active online presence, and we encourage exploration of means to use multi-media to promote conversation and exchange.

Information, Location and Community Seekers

How do we maximize for success when creating programs in American Spaces? What kind of experiences help sustain the “exploration,” “collaboration,” and “surprises” that American Spaces provide?

The answer likely falls between what you perceive to be of interest to your audience and what your audience asks for. We have identified the following characteristics as being most closely associated with successful spaces and effective programs for American Spaces visitors:

Spaces that

- Are open and welcoming
- Provide for different kinds of experiences—places for informal as well as formal activities, social as well as solitary, noisy as well as quiet, comfortable opportunities just to relax
- Provide access to technology (Wifi, internet, air conditioning where necessary)

Programming that

- Brings the U.S. to the Space, but invites and encourages local or regional ties (a conversation/ meeting of cultures)
- Incorporates U.S. popular culture and media (e.g., films, music, games, sports)
- Invites active participation and “doing,” not just listening and sitting in an audience
- Provides opportunities for users to be involved in deciding, planning and/or implementing activities, giving them a sense of ownership and control (which can also help develop your volunteer corps)
- Takes advantage both of users who have been to U.S. as well as the U.S. expatriates in the local community
- Offers a form of “membership,” creating a sense of affiliation and belonging, perhaps even a reward system for frequent visits

Each American Space knows its audience best, and we know many of you have instituted perennial events and activities that are very successful. Based on our observations, workshop discussions, and meetings with field officers, embassy staff, and partner organization staff, we offer here some additional specific ideas for programs that can be adapted to suit your needs.

Activities & Games

- Cooking classes and demonstrations that highlight different cultures. Make sure you have the right playlist to accompany your event! Topics can also include healthy cooking tips, “30-minute meals,” or be specific to a U.S. region.
- “Plan a visit to the United States”: Have users create an itinerary for a trip they would like to take. Help them research what they would need to do to plan such a trip and guide them when applicable.
- Theme night: Have users submit ideas for a theme night related to American culture. Hold a vote, and work with a team of users to plan the evening.
- Host a monthly art contest. Exhibit the winning works around the space and ask the artists to write (in English!) about what he or she has made.

Entrepreneurship & Business

- Offer software and computer program classes. Perhaps a local university professor (or student) would volunteer to lead this.
- Offer a resume-writing class. Use peer editing as a method to encourage community building. Instructor can pay attention to grammar and writing concisely.
- Host a social networking workshop or class with a special focus on how people can leverage the Web as an effective tool for marketing a business. Class can examine Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or local equivalents. Discussion can include how to write newsletters or blog entries aimed at promoting a small business.
- Offer a “How to write a business plan” course. Ask local entrepreneurs or business people to come speak. Explore ways to connect virtually to American business owners.

Literature & Art

- Feature an American author or artist each month. Encourage space users to learn about him/her and have a discussion night at the end of the month when people can present what they’ve found.
- Host a poetry writing contest. It can be a great way to practice English and motivate students. Perhaps someone from the Smithsonian could be a guest judge.
- Assign students an American museum to research. Consider having them present on their favorite work of art or artist in the collection. If possible, include a trip to a local museum as a culminating field trip.

We recognize the challenges of having small staff resources and offer the following suggestions for growing your volunteer staff corps:

- Create appropriate incentive systems for your location, such as offering professional development training or access to online courses, special access to visitors/speakers, volunteer appreciation activities/events, increased ownership of projects, or increased responsibilities within the space
- Seek possible “feeder” systems, such as local schools or universities
- Seek out American expatriates to volunteer in spaces
- Increase the International Visitor Leadership Programs to incentivize staff
- Pitch volunteering to youth as activity that can be useful for a college application (NB: suggested by a Regional Educational Advising Coordinator, who has seen this be effective)
- Take advantage of alumni and Fulbright students as much as possible
- Encourage students from the Gilman Program to volunteer in American Spaces when they are abroad