

Planet Word: New museum devoted to language opens in Washington DC

The museum's virtual ribbon-cutting was attended by former US president Barack Obama



Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer 'Speaking Willow', an interactive light and sound sculpture, welcomes visitors to the Planet Word museum. Instagram / Public Art Fund



Melissa Gronlund

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A new museum has launched in Washington DC dedicated to the love of words.

Planet Word, housed in the historic Franklin School building only blocks from the White House, explores language as a living entity.

Founded by Ann Friedman, the museum's exhibitions demonstrate the origins and etymology of words, how languages evolve, and declaim the power of words in prose, poetry, speeches and even jokes. Audiences can try out famous speeches on a teleprompter, while another installation explores synaesthesia, or the idea that you can see words as colours, allowing visitors to paint with words.



The museum has been in the works for seven years. As Friedman said in the opening ceremony, which was screened online: “If this was an idea whose time had come in 2013, it is even more relevant in 2020.”

The virtual ribbon-cutting ceremony was surprisingly political in nature, as the US heads into an election in under two weeks. Despite the difficulties in opening a museum during the pandemic, Friedman underlined her desire to open doors before the election, in the hope, she said, that a museum dedicated to the importance of words would help people to become more careful speakers and critical thinkers.

A handful of celebrity, business and political figures attended the proceedings, including former US president Barack Obama and the city's mayor, Muriel Bowser.



"As president, I used words as a way to bridge our divides, to help people make sense of the swirl of events that happen all the time," said Obama in his digital address. "Reading and writing made me who I am; even now, they're touchstones for me. Literacy is as fundamental as ever, and it's as important as ever to help any young boy or girl make their life into what they want it to be."

Soprano Renee Fleming also sang Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now*, which has become an anthem in many quarters for the experience of life under lockdown.

Friedman's husband Tom Friedman, the well-known *New York Times* columnist, extolled Friedman's commitment to the idea over the past seven years. It had come to her, he said, in the kitchen, when she realised that a museum devoted to maths had just opened – but there were none devoted to words.

The 50,000 square-foot Franklin School has been entirely refurbished to become the museum. Originally built in 1869, it served as a model for public schools in the country. Friedman serves as founder and chief executive, with Patty Isacson Sabee as executive director.

A sound installation of hundreds of languages, by the Mexican-born artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, greets viewers as they enter, setting the tone for the museum's celebration of the global family of languages. Its first exhibition, *Diversity*, looks at graffiti from cities across the world, such as Nairobi, Lahore, Milwaukee and Kabul, where language is marshalled as art, protest and community representation.

Planet Word Museum will also have a strong educational arm. According to literature provided by the museum, 32 million adults in the US cannot read, and a third of nine-to-10 year olds cannot pass a basic literacy test. School field trips, online programming and public events will help the museum to reach out to the variety of audience who converge in DC and also to those abroad.

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