



D.C.'s Newest Museum, Planet Word, Opens to the Public

The world's first voice-activated museum, Planet Word, brings language to life with immersive galleries featuring cutting-edge technology.

October 22, 2020 (Washington, D.C.) — Today, Planet Word, a revolutionary museum dedicated to the power, beauty, and fun of language and to showing how words shape the human experience, opened its doors to the public. Housed in Washington, D.C.'s historic Franklin School, Planet Word is the world's first voice-activated museum, featuring immersive galleries and exhibits that will engage visitors of all ages in experiencing words and language from a wide range of perspectives. General admission is free.

Founded on the belief that literacy is fundamental to the health of democracy, Planet Word aims to inspire and renew a love of words, language, and reading. Appreciation for the power of language fosters empathy and encourages civil discourse. By engaging people of all ages with language, Planet Word encourages visitors to both fall in love with the joy and whimsy of words and understand how vital they are to American society and to our world.

"I am so thrilled to open Planet Word's doors to the public and cannot imagine a more

fitting time for a museum of language to open in our nation's capital," said Planet Word founder and CEO Ann Friedman. "Democracy depends on literate citizens. I hope that Planet Word can provide a forum for civil discourse and a place where our community, in all its vibrant diversity, can gather to share the words that bridge differences and forge solutions."

The museum held a mostly virtual ceremony to commemorate its public opening. This event featured remarks by District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser and Planet Word founder Ann Friedman. It also included remarks by writer and actress Anna Deavere Smith and a performance by spoken word artist Charity Blackwell, as well as a musical performance from Renee Fleming, a freestyle hip hop performance from rapper Christylez Bacon, and a poetic dedication written for the occasion by Naomi Shihab Nye. Planet Word supporters including former President Barack Obama, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the Grammy-winning musician Paul Simon also made surprise virtual appearances.

Planet Word is the world's first major museum taking a high-tech approach to bringing language to life. It features ten immersive learning galleries designed by exhibit design firm Local Projects which use technology in imaginative, ingenious ways to reimagine the modern museum experience. Among the museum's voice-activated exhibits is "Where Do Words Come From?", a 22-foot-tall talking word wall that shares the story of the English language through a conversation with visitors and extraordinary light effects. Other highlights include an acoustically-sealed room where visitors use a teleprompter to deliver one of eight historically significant speeches; a karaoke lounge where music lovers will learn secrets of great songwriting; and a secret poetry nook hidden in the stacks of a magical library. In other galleries, visitors can create an advertising campaign, literally paint with words using "smart" paint brushes, and converse with native speakers of widely spoken and endangered languages. The gift shop was designed by Nate Berkus, the well-known interior designer, author, and television personality. In the spring, Planet Word looks forward to welcoming the buzzworthy, cause-casual eatery, Immigrant Food, as its restaurant partner - to be housed at the museum. Immigrant Food, whose values and mission align closely with Planet Word, opened its flagship location right next to the White House in 2019 to rave reviews.

In the newly created courtyard entrance of the museum, Speaking Willow — the first permanent installation in D.C. by renowned contemporary artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

— provides an immersive language experience for visitors upon arrival at Planet Word. The metal sculpture, resembling a weeping willow, plays voice recordings from hundreds of different languages as visitors pass underneath its branches. The interactive sound-and-light sculpture features 364 individual speakers and 3.6 miles of ethernet cable and was commissioned by Ann and Tom Friedman in partnership with New York’s Public Art Fund.

Planet Word builds on the long history of innovation at the Franklin School, a National Historic Landmark building and the site of both one of the city’s first public schools and the world’s first wireless voice transmission, a feat achieved by Alexander Graham Bell in 1880. In the past two years, the building has undergone a major restoration and rehabilitation, funded by Ms. Friedman, and led by the architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle in partnership with general contractor Whiting-Turner. The project included the restoration of the soaring Great Hall — the building’s architectural centerpiece — and replication of its original frescos; the two grand staircases with ornate railings and original ceramic tile treads have been restored to their former grandeur. To learn more about the significance of Planet

Word’s home in the Franklin School, visit PlanetWordMuseum.org/Franklin-School.

Planet Word previously announced a multifaceted partnership with Shared_ Studios, a global collective that creates meaningful human connections between people separated by distance and difference through transformative conversations in both immersive and virtual environments. The museum is home to one of Shared_ Studios’ Portals, which is outfitted with immersive AV technology that enables visitors to converse and interact with people from around the world as if in the same room. Visitors to the Planet Word Portal will make live connections with others across the globe — and in doing so discover the richness of languages and how words shape our lives, our decisions, and our relationships.

Planet Word and Shared Studios’ DIVERCITIES initiative — a program that explores the commonalities and the uniqueness of languages in cities and cultures across the world — launched online in September. Each month, through moderated conversations with comedians, poets, artists, journalists, educators, and activists, DIVERCITIES will connect D.C. locals with peers in cities in the Portal

network, including Lagos, Erbil, Milwaukee, Mexico City, Berlin, and Dallas. For more information about this initiative and other Planet Word programming, visit PlanetWordMuseum.org/Events.

Since breaking ground in June 2018, Planet Word has met its initial \$20 million fundraising goal to cover the creation of the museum’s exhibits, experiences, and start-up operating costs. Planet Word’s generous donors include AT&T, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Carolyn Bucksbaum, the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation, Ann and John Doerr, Microsoft Corporation, and Christine and Stephen A. Schwarzman. The rehabilitation and restoration of the Franklin School as a home for the museum was funded and overseen by Ms. Friedman.

Planet Word will be open Thursday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. General admission is free, with a suggested donation to support the museum’s mission-driven programs, exhibits, and educational outreach. Due to Covid-19, the museum has instated a number of safety procedures, including limiting capacity in the building to support social distancing. Planet Word recommends visitors reserve timed passes online in advance of their visit; a limited number of passes may be available for walk-ups on a first-come, first-served basis. Masks are mandatory for all visitors over the age of two. Stylus pens compatible with the museum’s interactive exhibits will be available to avoid the need for visitors to touch surfaces, and hand sanitizing stations are located throughout the museum. To register for tickets and review visitor guidelines, visit PlanetWordMuseum.org/plan-your-visit.

“Planet Word, much like Washington, D.C., is all about celebrating art, creativity, and innovation,” said Mayor Bowser. “This beautiful museum has found the perfect home in Downtown DC at the former Franklin School, where children and families alike will enjoy a one-of-a-kind cultural and educational experience. Thank you to Ann Friedman and my team at the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development for bringing this national historic landmark back to life.”

— Mayor Bowser, Mayor of Washington, D.C.



About Planet Word

Planet Word is a nonprofit museum dedicated to the power and fun of language. Founded by philanthropist Ann Friedman, the museum will invite visitors of all ages to discover what words mean to the human experience in a fun, technologically advanced, immersive environment. Opened to the public on October 22nd, 2020, Planet Word is housed in the Franklin School at 13th and K Streets, NW, a National Historic Landmark with a rich history in public education and the site of the first wireless voice transmission by Alexander Graham Bell in 1880. Planet Word’s governing Board of Directors includes leaders in education, media, real estate, technology, the arts, and museums, led by Chair Ann Friedman. Restoration and rehabilitation of The Franklin School was overseen by Beyer Blinder Belle; the general contractor was Whiting-Turner. Planet Word’s project partners include Local Projects for exhibit design and media production, Solomon Group as exhibit fabricator, installer, and A/V integrator and Lone Shark Games for development and production of “Lexicon Lane: A Word Sleuthing Adventure!” For more information, visit PlanetWordMuseum.org.