

# [***How Museums, Zoos and Public Gardens Lead by Example on Climate Change***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BDV-B8C1-DY68-1004-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Some 150 museums, zoos and other cultural institutions are part of a Climate Toolkit that helps make facilities and grounds more climate friendly.

**Body**

About 30 years ago, Richard Piacentini was considering renovations to the buildings that house the Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, where he had recently taken over as CEO.

The century-old greenhouses and gardens at the Phipps were showing their age and lacked some amenities visitors expected, like a café and gift shop. Piacentini hired an architect who shared some ideas about a different way of design and construction.

"He told us about this new thing that was coming out called LEED," Piacentini told *Newsweek*.

LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is now a widely used system for building with greater energy efficiency and healthy indoor conditions. Back in the '90s, LEED was still an emerging trend and Piacentini and his team got interested in the ways their facilities could use less energy and water and become healthier places for visitors and workers alike.

"We were just kind of blown away," Piacentini said. "We had no idea that buildings had such an impact on the environment."

Energy efficiency was just the start. The Phipps team took the LEED idea and ran with it, expanding purchases of local materials and replacing thirsty lawns with drought-resistant grass.

The Phipps campus now boasts some of the [*world's greenest buildings*](https://www.newsweek.com/2023/04/14/climate-friendly-buildings-that-look-great-do-their-part-planet-1791512.html?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). Their star is the Center for Sustainable Landscapes building, which generates all its own energy and captures and treats all its wastewater.

Piacentini wanted to help his colleagues in museum management turn their facilities into showcases for environmental action.

"A lot of people have no idea where to start," he explained. The Phipps developed a [*Climate Toolkit*](https://climatetoolkit.org/) with practical advice on everything from energy use to environmentally friendly café meals. Working with partner organizations, the Phipps hosts workshops and facilitates an exchange of ideas among people who run gardens, zoos and museums. There are now 150 cultural institutions using the Climate Toolkit.

"If you think of the collective power in this, there's something like 100,000 museums in the world," Piacentini said, laying out a vision for each cultural institution to raise climate consciousness among its visitors. "We need to lead by example."

**Curating Climate Art**

Of course, it isn't just the buildings and grounds that matter for museum visitors. Many zoos, nature centers and science museums have for years been using their exhibits and displays to educate and inform people about climate change and conservation.

Art institutions, however, have been slower to adopt climate-oriented programming, according to Miranda Massie, co-founder and director of the [*Climate Museum*](https://climatemuseum.org/) in New York.

She started the museum six years ago to highlight the rapidly growing body of artwork reflecting climate action.

"The arts are a profoundly welcoming and inspiring framework for inviting people into civic activism on climate," Massie told *Newsweek*. "They remind people of the human capacity for creativity and so they expand our sense of what we can do both as individuals and collectively."

She said one of her favorites the museum has displayed is a 45-foot-long mural by the artist Gregory Christie that visually carries viewers from a history of industrial exploitation and colonialism to a possible future that is more just and sustainable.

Massie said the bulk of [*philanthropic funding on climate change*](https://www.newsweek.com/why-rockefellers-are-spending-their-oil-fortune-end-fossil-fuels-1836165?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) education has been geared toward science and technology. While those are certainly important, she said, the arts have an important role as well.

"The arts touch us on an emotional level and it's an emotional shift that we need," she said.

**Living Better**

At the Phipps, Piacentini said the conservatory is expanding its climate-related programming with a [*youth climate initiative*](https://www.newsweek.com/stressed-climate-change-these-young-people-are-turning-eco-anxiety-eco-action-1828610?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) that links young people in Pittsburgh with other groups of young people via museums around the country.

He said cultural institutions are uniquely positioned to take on that sort of action thanks to one of their most precious commodities: trust.

"Museums are some of the most trusted organizations," he said, and several [*surveys back up*](https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/) that claim. Piacentini said curators and directors should be putting that trust to use to build a wider public base of climate awareness.

"Climate change is not going to be solved with just top-down solutions," he said. "I think museums can help in that role in generating that basis of support."

There is a satisfying historic arc to the Phipps Conservatory's leadership on climate action. Piacentini said the conservatory was founded in the 1890s in part to provide Pittsburgh residents a refuge from the industrial pollution belched out by the city's steel mills and factories.

Today, as Pittsburgh continues its transition from an economy based on heavy-polluting industry to one based on cleaner high tech and health care, the Phipps is again demonstrating a healthier way to live and work in green buildings.

While the ***politics*** around the climate debate can be divisive, he said, people tend to unite behind ways to live and work in healthy and pleasant conditions.

"Forget the ***politics***," he said. "This is just a better way to live."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2353951/phipps-conservatory-green-building.jpg)

**Graphic**

Phipps Conservatory green building

Annie O'Neill/Courtesy of the Phipps Conservatory

Visitors outside the Center for Sustainable Landscapes at the Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh. The Center is among the greenest buildings in the world.

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