

# How Aileen Fuchs is working to rebuild the National Building Museum for the Covid-19 era



Fuchs, executive director, National Building Museum

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By [Daniel J. Sernovitz](#) – Senior Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal  
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*[Aileen Fuchs](#) has officially assumed her post as only the fifth executive director to lead the National Building Museum. She takes over at a time of uncertainty and change for the 40-year-old, 31-employee (now up to 38-employee) cultural institution after it saw 17-year captain Chase Rynd retire, underwent a \$2.23 million renovation and saw its net income get cut in half to roughly \$190,000 on relatively flat revenue of \$8.6 million for fiscal 2019 — even before Covid ravaged D.C. tourism.*

*Fuchs, however, is used to rising up to meet the challenges confronting her. She moved to Brooklyn on Sept. 2, 2001, just days before the attack on the World Trade Center, and witnessed a city transformed in its wake. She now arrives in D.C. from Staten*

*Island, New York, where she had served as chief executive of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden since 2017 and lost one staff member to the coronavirus.*

*In her new post, she's focused on charting the path forward for a place that's long celebrated the built environment — but of late has been forced to embrace the virtual one as well amid the Covid-19 era's public health restrictions.*

**It seems like you're taking to the D.C. region?** I had the luxury of basically living in the Hotel Kimpton every other week for the last couple of months. Don't tell my family, but it wasn't terrible to be able to do that. I'm a real foodie, so I got to really explore the city a bit. And I love scooter life. I'm actually getting a scooter so I can do my part of the commute. I love that part of the city, I love the architecture, I love the culture. It's really been an unexpected sort of gift to explore the city.



Washington D.C. August 31st 2021. Aileen Fuchs, President & Executive Director at National Building Museum posing for a portrait at the National Building Museum in Washington D.C.

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**Now that the museum has reopened, are people coming back?** I like data and I like numbers, and so we've been starting to look at trends. People are definitely coming. I would say we've had a little bit of a drop around the new mask policies again, so I'm curious about that link, but we've definitely been seeing hundreds of people a day every day over there. We're seeing a ton of families, we're seeing people from almost every state.

**What's new at the museum?** We have two small exhibits coming up. One is a 9/11 memorial exhibit in photography, and then we're doing an event called Sukkah City.

We're going to do some installations partnering with the Capital Jewish Museum outside interpreting Sukkahs with local architects, which I think is really cool. And I think what's going to be our biggest exhibit of the season coming up is going to be The Wall — a look at the border wall as an aspect of the built environment, and as construction.

**What was the process of hitting the reset button and reopening the museum?** Reopening means reopening the physical space, but it also means reimagining all the different ways you serve your public. NBM, is, I would say, pretty renown for events as a destination, as host for events. There continues to be challenges both in how we approach that, how we optimize that, and where we see that moving forward.

**What does the 20th anniversary of 9/11 mean for you?** I had literally been in my Brooklyn apartment for one week. We woke up and heard something on the radio. We walked outside and had a clear shot to the towers and saw them collapse. Not too many years later, I married an FDNY firefighter who, in their house, they had lost seven guys at 9/11. So, it's a huge milestone for our country and especially for New Yorkers, those of us who were there.

**Have you been to any museums here in D.C. since you took the job?** Every time my kids have come down, we've tried to do that. We went to the Smithsonian Museum of American History on the Fourth of July weekend. Someone was nice enough to walk my children through the "Star Spangled Banner" exhibit.

**Favorite meal you've had here so far:** I'm really happy and impressed with the food scene here. We went to Rose's Luxury. I loved that. We've had some great meals at The Wharf — there was a Mexican restaurant where we had the most delicious mole. I just love the ambiance down there. We've been to so many of José Andrés' places.

**Favorite hobby:** I practice yoga, and I practice meditation, though I haven't meditated in about 10 days. I do like running, and I'm super pumped about the Rock Creek Trail that's right here.

**How would you say you've changed as a leader in the past year?** I think it's now an expectation that you lead from a different place of empathy. Uncertainty is like the mother of anxiety, and as a leader right now, you've gotten used to leading through utter uncertainty. It's like the goal posts keep changing, the rules keep changing. It's your responsibility to motivate and inspire your team, which is very, very challenging to do through uncertainty.

**Is there something people would be surprised to learn about you?** I bartended to pay for graduate school, so maybe that's surprising. I also taught water aerobics classes to senior citizens in high school.

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## **The basics**

### **Aileen Fuchs**

*Executive director, National building Museum*

**Age:** 41

**Family:** Husband John; twins Faith and Fletcher

**Residence:** Bethesda

**Education:** Bachelor's in theater and English, Muhlenberg College; master's in public history, New York University

**First job:** Bussing tables