

ASPEN INSTITUTE HISTORY AND PURPOSE

More than seventy-five years ago, Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke, and his wife Elizabeth, had a cultural vision: a post-World War II gathering place for thinkers, leaders, scientists, artists, musicians, and the general public to reassess the intellectual and moral foundations of our society. They saw in Aspen, a nearly-abandoned silver mining town surrounded by natural wilderness, the potential to create “a place where the human spirit could flourish.” That vision became the organization we celebrate today—an institute whose deep-rooted history in the Roaring Fork Valley community of Colorado works in tandem with a growing global network of programs, fellows, and partners to form what is today one of the world’s pre-eminent and trusted leadership and convening organizations.

As we have gained new insights and understanding over the years, our humanistic ethos endures. Today, the Aspen Institute’s various programs reflect our foundational belief that dialogue among people of different backgrounds and beliefs is essential to both improving our understanding of each other and the world around us, and to finding solutions to modern challenges. This enduring commitment has fueled our work and enabled our impact.



Image: Marble Garden on the Aspen Institute's campus (date unknown)

Founding Vision (1949 - 1971)

On June 27, 1949, several thousand participants from across the world convened in Aspen, an almost-abandoned silver mining town in the Colorado mountains. "The Goethe Bicentennial Convocation"--inspired by the humanism of German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, featured lectures by intellectuals and public figures, an extensive music program, and informal conversations as the participants learned from those around them. What led to all of these people descending on the largely unknown site of Aspen--and why then?

Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke together, University of Chicago Chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins, writer Thornton Wilder, and others recognized that the tumult of urban technological life had clouded our vision. Leaders needed a time and place away to reflect on the persistent human and social problems we face. Walter Paepcke was a successful Chicago industrialist and CEO of the Container Corporation of America; his wife Elizabeth was an avid lover of culture and nature who was taken with Aspen's potential as a backdrop for intellectual curiosity and social renewal. The Paepckes and other organizers recognized that a culture preoccupied by material possessions need to be reoriented toward moral principles.

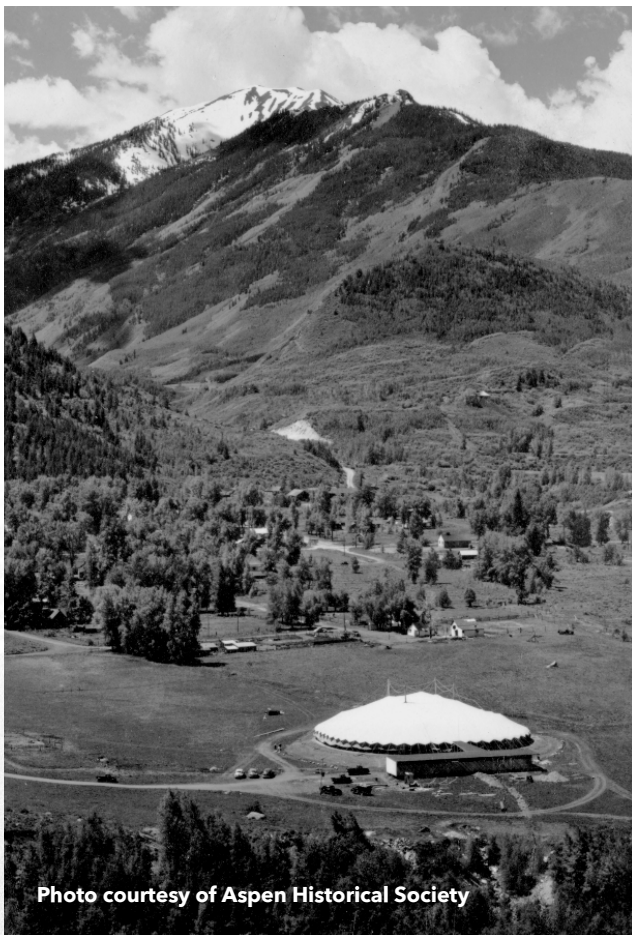


Photo courtesy of Aspen Historical Society

They illustrated the notion that dialogue and self-examination were key opportunities to think about how humans use their power, as leadership is ultimately about making decisions. For the Paepckes, Aspen's remote location and natural beauty were essential for individuals to step away from the hustle and bustle of daily life to gain new perspectives. It would be an ideal gathering place for thinkers and leaders to become more self-aware and self-fulfilling in their ultimate purposes of putting their talents and services to use toward benefiting something greater than their individual selves--society as a whole.

"The difficulty of our time is a difficulty of the human spirit...If man is somehow one and if the world is somehow one, it is not too soon to wonder what it is that unifies both man and the world...We try here to undeceive and fortify ourselves."

The International Goethe Convocation (Program Introduction, 1949)

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From this idea, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies was founded in 1949. Over the next two decades, the Goethe Convocation laid the foundation for what was to follow. The Institute primarily focused on seminars that would explore the fundamental values and texts of human civilization. At the same time, construction began in Aspen to establish permanent facilities for convenings. Inspired by meeting Walter Paepcke and hearing his vision for what Aspen could be, artist, designer, and architect Herbert Bayer and his Bauhaus-inspired perspective helped transform Aspen into a world-renowned destination over the nearly thirty years that he lived and worked there. Bayer played a fundamental role in establishing the Aspen Institute's campus aesthetic and visual identity, a place where the natural beauty of the area serves as the picturesque background for the campus we utilize today.

First Policy Programs and Growth (1971 - 2003)

While the Institute's seminars and other activities evolved throughout the 1950s & 1960s, the organization entered a significant new phase of transformation under president Joseph Slater (1969 to 1985), beginning in the early 1970s. First, the Institute's intention to utilize its intellectual resources and foster important dialogue led to the development of more specialized "action programs," what we now call "policy programs." In 1971, the Institute's Communications and Society program (the precursor to what we now know today as Aspen Digital) was established as the first in a line of highly regarded beacons for constructive dialogue on significant issues. From that point, expansions in the Institute's subject matter reach and expertise grew quickly, including the addition of fellowship programs rooted in seminars, as the Paepckes' vision of "The Aspen Idea" (a community focused on the renewal of mind, body, and spirit) took the Institute in exciting new directions.



Image: 1974 International Design Conference of Aspen (IDCA) in Anderson Park. Photo courtesy of Aspen Historical Society.

Second, the Institute saw the launch and growth of Aspen International Partners, beginning with the establishment of Aspen Berlin (now Aspen Germany) in 1974. While the Institute's vision had always been international, the growth of what today is a network of 14 International Partners—all independently founded, funded, and governed—is a significant extension of our intellectual and organizational reach. Aspen Berlin was followed by Aspen Italia, Aspen France, and Aspen Japan, and most recently New Zealand, the UK, Ukraine, and Colombia. Today, the 13 International Partners (and the nascent Aspen Initiative Africa) conduct their own programming as part of a genuinely global network.

An Era of Growth (2003 - 2018)

In 2003, acclaimed journalist and author Walter Isaacson joined the Institute as president and CEO. With prior experience serving as the editor of Time and chairman and CEO of CNN, Isaacson's tenure shaped the Institute into what we know today. This period was a time of further entrepreneurial expansion, as policy programs at the Institute grew in both number and esteem. Covering a wide range of topics in an increasingly fragmented world, Isaacson's strategic focus on policy program growth further cemented the Institute's reputation as a respected, trailblazing voice for promoting values-based leadership & the exchange of ideas.

One of the most notable additions during Isaacson's time as president and CEO was the founding of the Aspen Ideas Festival in 2005. Expanding on the vision of convenings as an essential element for humanistic change, as well as a concerted effort to make the Institute more open to members of the general public, the Aspen Ideas Festival represented a new kind of large gathering with immense public visibility. Since its founding, the Ideas Festival has been a week-long exploration of great minds coming together to be in dialogue with one another as part of "undeceiving and fortifying ourselves," as Paepcke had intended in 1949. With its celebratory vibe and inclusive environment, the Aspen Ideas Festival has become well known around the world as the Institute's signature flagship public gathering.



Image: Walter Isaacson in conversation with Bill Gates at the Aspen Ideas Festival 2010.

Bridging & Building on Our Strengths (2018 - Present)

Dan Porterfield succeeded Walter Isaacson as president and CEO in 2018. Prior to leading the Institute, Porterfield served as the president of Franklin & Marshall College, held significant leadership roles at Georgetown University, and in the US Department of Health and Human Services. As we have undertaken the next phase of our organizational evolution, Porterfield has focused on linking and leveraging the strengths of the various entrepreneurial policy, public, and seminar/fellowship programs as a way of continuing to address the human and social challenge of our time.

To this end, the Institute launched an ambitious strategic plan in 2023. Charting a path for the organization over the next five years and beyond, the plan emphasizes the strategic priorities of Societal Trust, Leadership, and Rising Generations. All of the Institute's programs touch on at least one—often two or all three—of these priorities. The strategic plan, together with its operational imperatives, including this fundraising campaign, mark an important new chapter in continuing to realize our original vision: a thriving interconnected community of leaders driving impact across geographies, generations, and viewpoints through the magic of learning, human relationships, and reflective dialogue leading to more responsible action.



Image: Dan Porterfield (right) in conversation with rising leaders (from left to right) Ashley D. Bell, Benji Backer, and Lieutenant Colonel Brittany Morreale at the Aspen Institute 75th Anniversary Celebration Dinner.