

THE FUTURE OF MUSEUM AND GALLERY DESIGN

PURPOSE, PROCESS, PERCEPTION

EDITED BY
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MUSEUM MEANINGS

THE FUTURE OF MUSEUM AND GALLERY DESIGN

The Future of Museum and Gallery Design explores new research and practice in museum design. Placing a specific emphasis on social responsibility, in its broadest sense, the book emphasises the need for a greater understanding of the impact of museum design in the experiences of visitors, in the manifestation of the vision and values of museums and galleries, and in the shaping of civic spaces for culture in our shared social world.

The chapters included in the book propose a number of innovative approaches to museum design and museum-design research. Collectively, contributors plead for more open and creative ways of making museums, and ask that museums recognize design as a resource to be harnessed towards a form of museum making that is culturally located and makes a significant contribution to our personal, social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Such an approach demands new ways of conceptualizing museum and gallery design, new ways of acknowledging the potential of design, and new, experimental, and research-led approaches to the shaping of cultural institutions internationally.

The Future of Museum and Gallery Design should be of great interest to academics and postgraduate students in the fields of museum studies, gallery studies, and heritage studies, as well as architecture and design, who are interested in understanding more about design as a resource in museums. It should also be of great interest to museum and design practitioners and museum leaders.

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Museum Meanings

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Museums have undergone enormous changes in recent decades; an ongoing process of renewal and transformation bringing with it changes in priority, practice and role as well as new expectations, philosophies, imperatives and tensions that continue to attract attention from those working in, and drawing upon, wide-ranging disciplines.

Museum Meanings presents new research that explores diverse aspects of the shifting social, cultural and political significance of museums and their agency beyond, as well as within, the cultural sphere. Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and international perspectives and empirical investigation are brought to bear on the exploration of museums' relationships with their various publics (and analysis of the ways in which museums shape – and are shaped by – such interactions).

Theoretical perspectives might be drawn from anthropology, cultural studies, art and art history, learning and communication, media studies, architecture and design and material culture studies amongst others. Museums are understood very broadly – to include art galleries, historic sites and other cultural heritage institutions – as are their relationships with diverse constituencies.

The focus on the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from objects and collections and the study of museums as text, to studies grounded in the analysis of bodies and sites; identities and communities; ethics, moralities and politics.

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Edited by Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay

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Jonathan Hale and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay*

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INTRODUCTION

The future of museum and gallery design

Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay

As we draw the chapters together for this book in spring 2017, strange things are happening in museums in our home countries, the UK and China. In the UK, already large museums are planning expansions, seemingly only able to survive in a state of perpetual growth. We have seen examples of collections being moved from museums in the north of the country to London, reducing the cultural resource for audiences in one location whilst simultaneously fuelling even more expansion in the capital (Ellis-Petersen 2017). Flagship Heritage Lottery Fund projects, part of the growth in new museums and updating and expansion of many established museums which took place across the country around the millennium, are under threat of closure as their funding is cut, and it is assumed that they can operate in just the same way as large London-based museums where tourism and corporate sponsorship now dominate (Newbould 2017). In extreme cases, these museums only continue to survive as a result of the energy, ingenuity and vision of their leaders. And once iconic exhibits and displays such as Launchpad in London's Science Museum, which offered free educational fun to families for almost 30 years, have been replaced by high-budget displays with big business sponsors and placed behind a paywall (Macrae and Payne 2015; Garrard 2016). This is happening elsewhere in the country as the notion of charging for access to public collections gains greater traction in the face of cuts in public funding and a lack of alternative vision.

In China, the context is different but the shape of museum development is equally worrying. The recent drive to expand the number of museums in the country has progressed at such a rate that it is ahead of the building of collections, content, trained personnel and, most importantly, a sense of why the arts and culture might benefit people in China and provide an important addition to their cultural lives. New museums stand empty, some abandoned and, in places, large cultural developments have been frozen as the vast resources needed for their continuation have dried up. In addition to the government-funded museums, an increasing number of museums are being built and run by developers as they have, in Ou Ning's words, 'come to realize that building museums is an effective means of obtaining land and marketing the adjacent residential projects with attractive cultural packages' (2014: 120). The scale of growth and investment has made China a magnet for architects, designers and a whole range of international consultants who see an opportunity to win new contracts, without always

thinking deeply about the needs of audiences or the specific and varied context within which they are working (Ibid.). Whilst these observations are not new – critics have been citing similar examples internationally for many years – the realities they describe continue to unfold around us, seemingly unchallenged.

The impetus for much of this activity, of course, is economic. Museums are the archetypal malleable institution; they have come to speak of civilisation, modernity, democracy and economic prosperity (regardless of the realities), and any self-respecting international city must now be home to museums and galleries of international quality, ideally on a waterfront site. Conceived as a draw for tourists, at times they are built with only this in mind, while in other cases local museum services are harnessed in a bid to generate city brands and tempt inward investment, as we can see in the way that Manchester is currently being marketed to international travellers. At one level these may be perfectly reasonable uses for culture and museums (as the ultimate malleable institution, museums have the capacity to be many things to many people simultaneously); nonetheless, the power and force of these economic drives does push museum developments in specific directions, towards commerce, towards income generation and often, in design terms, towards the bland uniformity of the generic. These tendencies are not benign. As Richard Sennett reminds us, human feelings of exclusion and indifference are not only tied to the march of capitalism and its processes, but to the physical built forms capitalism produces (Sennett 2000). Conceived from such a high level, these developments ignore the realities of life as it is lived and, far from silent and inactive, they erode community, belonging and care for others.

Disappointingly, design is often blamed for these ills, as those working in museums are puzzled by the museum that gets built or as budgets are doubled as a result of the pressure on designers to create something new and iconic. Rarely do those involved in cultural developments – museum professionals, design professionals, politicians and funders – stand back to consider how their project is being shaped by economic and political forces, to question design decisions from the perspective of the politics of space and the vastly differentiated experiences and often competing claims of the people who occupy the locale, or to ask how the investment might connect more fully with an integrated, comprehensive plan for community development, the production of empowering social relations, or the creation of moments of clarity, connection and openness in an increasingly homogenised and socially fragmented world. Whilst the progress of museums designed as disconnected icons feels unstoppable and way beyond the control of people working in and for the cultural sector, it is also clear that more interesting forms of museum making are happening in places where it clearly *is* possible to generate a greater sense of social intent, stronger institutional identities and community connections, and where the users of arts and culture (actual and potential) are a significant part of the design process. In these examples, design and designed forms are recognised as a significant resource for socially purposeful museums.

It is within this context of massive museum investment which far too often fails to strive to meet its full social potential, that discussions about the future of museum design have flourished over the last 15 years. Driven by a desire to acknowledge the opportunities socially driven museums and galleries miss when they fail to think deeply about design and seeking to release design from the narrow and bureaucratic commercial and economic constraints museums place around it and, instead, recognise design processes and a design sensibility as having significant contributions to make to the shaping of museum experiences which can enrich the lives of citizens in whole variety of ways, an international, dynamic and connected

network of ‘museum design thinkers’ has emerged. Supported by research teams at the Universities of Leicester, Nottingham, Central Saint Martins and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, researchers from across museums, design and academia are working together to build networks, share resources and ideas and, importantly, offer new research and knowledge which might inform alternatives to the dominant, economically led modes of museum making. This work has taken on an interesting urgency in various cultural contexts in recent years and months as political unrest and turmoil have made clear the need for privileged public institutions such as museums to harness the opportunities they have to shape our social world in ways which benefit the many, not just a privileged few.

The Future of Museum and Gallery Design has emerged directly from this set of interactions and collaborations, the result of the enthusiasm and conviction of those involved that design can, if allowed and if approached in very specific ways, play a fundamental role in the reshaping of museums and galleries of genuine interest and relevance to the lives of not just established museum audiences (which, as we know, represent a very narrow segment of society), but also to the lives of a far greater range of people. The project began as a conference in Hong Kong – a large gathering of experts interested in sharing their ideas, learning from others and exploring new possibilities. As with all the work previously undertaken by network participants, the conference attracted academics, museum professionals, architects, artists and designers of varied career ages and from diverse contexts. As a group, we represented 16 different countries.

The location of the conference in Hong Kong was pivotal to establishing connections between design research groups and individuals from across the world, an opportunity which continues to positively impact those involved. Over the course of three days, we established some common ground, discussed research and research-led practice, shared something of the differences of our cultural contexts and what that might mean for museum development, and took part in an active programme of workshops, visits and performances. Many of us left Hong Kong with a very clear sense of some of the fundamental cultural differences between, for example, Europe and Asia which must, particularly in China, be allowed to impact museum development. Since then, a number of researchers and practitioners who were unable to take part in Hong Kong have joined the conversation by contributing important chapters to this volume.

One of the activities worked through at the conference involved a large-scale pyramid game where participants were asked to write down their top hopes and principles for the future of museum and gallery design. The hundreds of response cards were then reduced down to our Top 20 Principles through a process of group discussion and debate. The Principles, which are reproduced at the back of this book, were not necessarily surprising but did get straight to the heart of some of the key challenges for design in museums today. At the top of our list were visitors and the need to place visitors and their specific needs at the centre of the design process. It remains incredibly rare for museum architects and designers to establish a consistent focus on visitors and generate new design methods and strategies which can channel knowledge from and about visitors and the broader society into the physical solutions produced. The pull of museum conventions, the formality and commercialism of the client/consultant relationship and the formality of museums and galleries themselves mean that design is still, in the main, focused around objects in cases and the communication of curatorial knowledge. Within this inherently conservative sector, participatory innovations are all the more impressive and our entire group of some 150 conference participants were

united around the desire to learn from these innovations and seek new routes to inclusive forms of museum design.

More than this, the principle of placing visitors first also pointed to a small but powerful number of projects which do not simply reach out to draw visitors and their expertise into the museum – to encourage participation – but which begin from community. An outward focus which demands that museums involve themselves with a whole range of issues and challenges in the locale, in these museums citizens and their needs provide the very rationale for the institution and resources and programmes are shaped accordingly. This Principle placed pressure on museum designers to familiarise themselves with studies of leading-edge practice and particularly the vast bodies of research about museum learning and the social impacts of culture as a route to generating experimental design processes and appropriate spatial and social forms. Only through the development of a specialist focus on *design for the cultural sector* will design fully embrace the social aims and ambitions of many in the arts and culture sectors. Such a focus on others also demands that both designers and museum professionals relinquish control and let go of some of their professional preferences. In one sense feeling like familiar territory, these ideas are significantly under-developed and under-utilised in museum design.

Second in our list and directly linked to the desire for new spatial and social forms was collaboration. Seemingly obvious, collaboration not only pointed to an interest in team-based approaches to exhibition making which have been prioritised sporadically in museums since the 1960s and '70s as well as more recent participatory and experimental approaches, but also to deep-seated feelings within our group around two key issues: the continued holding of design at arm's length in museums *and* recognition of design as a significantly under-utilised resource. For many of the design professionals at the conference, the high importance of this Principle reflected their sense that design is rarely allowed to be a full collaborator in the process of making museums. Still a process which prioritises curatorial knowledge and museum knowledge above all else, discussions made clear both the need for more in-depth engagements with what a genuine process of collaboration entails, and a need for all those involved in the production of museums and galleries to open up to an understanding of design as a resource laden with potential to make a significant contribution to arts and culture. This Principle placed pressure on museum personnel and all those with a vested interest in museum design to broaden their understanding and educate themselves about the skills, qualities and roles of the excellent, socially engaged designer. A design approach that gives a voice to a wider range of potential participants within the design process itself will also produce outcomes where all the constituent elements of the designed environment – from the physical to the virtual – can become active agents in creation of inclusive visitor experiences.

A number of other Principles linked directly to notions of collaboration and the need for improved processes: a plea for non-hierarchical approaches to museum making which value and take concrete steps to build on the knowledge of diverse stakeholders; the need for the sharing of practical and tested processes of participatory design and co-design; the need for risk-taking and experimentation; the need for all involved in museum making to look beyond museums for their inspiration; and the need for our community of design thinkers to be strategic, visible, connected and organised. All of these ideas were underpinned by a sophisticated understanding of visitor experience as owned by visitors themselves and created through diverse forms of action and interaction with the institution and its resources. Included in the Principles, then, was a plea for museums to trust their visitors and recognise the role of museum makers as one of creating opportunities to access new ways of knowing – moments

in our lives when we might, even momentarily, understand the experience of someone else or suddenly see the world differently. Implicit within this Principle was an awareness of the need for museums to free themselves from the desire to create exhibitions full of information and to, rather, open themselves up to creating spaces full of complexity, opportunity and possibility. Research was identified as playing an important role here and museum makers were challenged to find ways to make use of, direct and consolidate the growing body of museum design research through their practice.

A number of the Principles related specifically to the experiences of museum users inside the built, physical museum. Perhaps unsurprisingly in light of the identities of those involved in the conference, these echoed recent research in visitor experience and perception. The Principles captured the need for museum design to work hard to appeal to all the senses in recognition of the embodied nature of all our experiences and our increasing understanding of sensory perception and emotion in processes of cognition. They called for design solutions which prioritise movement and action in recognition of the centrality of movement to the museum experience and action to human meaning-making processes. In a world where society is retreating further into the private spheres of family and individuality, participants recognised the need for an emphasis on museums which seek to enable social interaction and which are varied as a result of their willingness to encourage and celebrate difference.

Linked to all of these priorities, *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design* was tasked with finding new ways to break down the formality of museums and embed the arts and culture more fully in everyday life. In relation to this last Principle, of seeking physical solutions to embedding museums and galleries more effectively in everyday life, were others which expressed a desire for museums built at a human scale and which involve themselves in real human processes such as engendering curiosity or increased and empathetic awareness of other people and places. Across all of these discussions, there was a very clear sense that by driving forward innovations in museum design of the kind suggested here, design itself could be a driver for transformation and democratisation not just at the level of the museum but in society more broadly.

The future

The Future of Museum and Gallery Design, then, is not about gizmos or digital technologies; it isn't about predicting what museums will be like in the future or about a radical form of museum making that we seek to promote. Rather, our focus is on the future role of museum design in a broader and far more complex process of museum making, both within museums themselves and across the broader physical and social landscape. This approach acknowledges cultural context, seeks positive social impacts, and pays attention to the vast array of people who need to be involved in the production of museums readdressing the balance between museum professionals, funders, designers, architects, researchers and, most importantly, the far wider range of people who will, ideally, use the museum as part of their daily lives and in whose lives and locale the museum might be regarded as a force for good. Here, our concerns are with the ways in which design, often outsourced and held at arm's-length from the organisation, is integrated and allowed to come closer to the museum as organisation.

We are concerned then, with the ways in which design is conceptualised and seek to expand limiting notions of design as a technical process of display or building, to a far more expansive notion of design as a significant strategic resource to be harnessed by museums in

their drive to shape truly visitor-centred experiences and institutions which have the potential to positively impact the larger society. These are ambitious aims which give full credit to the skills of the excellent designer and the importance of the physical, designed forms of museums not just in individual visitor experiences but also in the tangible manifestation of organisational vision and values (consciously or unconsciously) in the wider world.

We began our discussions in Hong Kong with a series of questions and we pose them again here. How can design be harnessed to create the social, life-affirming spaces full of possibility and opportunity for all that our public museums and galleries should be? How can we construct them in such a way that they might open up opportunities for moments of insight, learning, sociality, wellbeing, reflection, empathy and political empowerment at a time when our lives are shaped so much by the agendas of big business and when politics seems more and more disconnected from daily life? What kinds of design processes and what kinds of designers are needed for such an ambitious aim? And what is at stake if we fail to recognise design and designed forms as key resources in the drive to produce located, dynamic and empowering cultural spaces of direct interest and use to a diverse range of people?

For the contributors to *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design*, the answers to these questions are likely to be found in the sharing of ideas and the generation of new forms of research-led design and design-led research. Across the three parts of the book, a series of approaches and case studies are introduced which speak to all of the themes above and which also provide a sense of the range, diversity and creativity of museum design research and practice at the current time. Here we have purposefully sought to include the voices of early career researchers and practitioners alongside more established voices.

Although the chapters are varied in their approaches and span a range of cultural contexts, a number of themes recur. First is the belief in museums as sites full of potential to offer something fundamental to diverse individuals in a complex social world. Museums here are encouraged to shake off established conventions, to recognise design as a process which demands an ethical prioritisation of others, and to open themselves up to new spatial and social forms. Second is the belief in design as a strategic resource which can be channelled towards the empowering of citizens. Implicit here is a critique of the tendency to always reach for tried and tested solutions or for references and solutions from the world of commerce, and a belief in the social value of making things together, through collaboration, experimentation and participation. Design here utilises the museum as a site for exploration, visitor-centred participatory experimentation which draws on the collective creativity of all those involved and, as a result, builds diversity into the very heart of strategic design processes.

Third, and finally, colleagues are giving a great deal of thought to how increasingly sophisticated understandings of processes of human perception, the narrative tendencies of human beings and the possibilities embedded in new research around the embodied processes of human cognition can be drawn into museum design and museum design research, as a route to creating empowering and impactful experiences at the level of the individual. There are interesting synergies here between research in China focusing around the idea of the 'yellow box' and how museum makers might reimagine a museum space where Chinese traditions and ways of seeing might flourish, and research in Europe exploring phenomenological approaches to museum making.

All of the museum design research described above demands input from users, from designers, from architects, from a range of academics as well as from museum professionals if it is to really move our understanding forward and impact our ability to shape museums in new and

wholly democratic ways. As well as demanding cross-sectoral collaboration, recognition that design must be research led and research must be design led demands the production of new creative methodologies. Interestingly, these new ways of working have the potential to blur previously distinct boundaries between design and curation, between design and research, and between museums and everyday life. Such an approach to museum design is dependent on the testing and open sharing of findings and on small-scale experimentation with users. It demands openness and generosity on the part of all involved and a shared desire to ensure that museums genuinely support the only political project which really matters: the lives of ordinary people. This is the future of museum and gallery design.

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PART I

Purpose

Social responsibility, cultural specificity and museum making

Introduction

Part I focuses on the larger Purpose of museum design and draws together a diverse range of chapters from researchers and practitioners in China, Hong Kong, the UK and the United States. All of the chapters in Part I point towards the potential for making museums in ways which respond to their locale and raise related questions of personal, social and environmental sustainability. Importantly, all of the chapters in Part I work to overcome false divisions between the built, physical world and our social experience, recognising that designed forms, design process and a design sensibility have diverse social effects and possibilities, both positive and negative. A number of the chapters concern themselves with how design can be harnessed towards the needs and desires of citizens, rather than the advancement of corporate power. Museums and galleries here are constantly evolving public events, diverse social and civic spaces animated through inhabitation and use as well as sites for social production, not least the creation of empowering forms of cultural experience and citizenship. In this analysis, design is an enabler, directed towards the creation of opportunities for action and transformation.

In Chapter 1, Suzanne MacLeod argues that museums have yet to effectively draw design into their strategies to reposition themselves as socially purposeful institutions. Through a detailed exploration of a research project undertaken with Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) in the UK, she sets forward the case for an ethics of museum design as a route to demanding deep reflection and consideration of design choices. The chapter both illustrates a research-led process which sought to provide HRP with an ethical framework for design and interpretation at the Tower of London, and begins to sketch the characteristics of an emerging ethics of museum design. Design here is an as yet under-utilised resource to be harnessed by museums as a route to new social, civil and spatial forms.

The focus on ethical practices, processes and outcomes is picked up in Chapter 2 in a short and provocative piece of writing from Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, one-time founding director of MOCA Shanghai and now professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Ho questions the usefulness of museums in the context of China and in light of the often heavy-handed

use of culture in top-down economic processes. Pointing instead to the lived cultural experiences and objects of Hong Kong residents, and to the spontaneous cultural productions of young protestors during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, Ho sets forward a challenge to museum makers in Asia to develop far more sophisticated approaches to representing and enabling this lived experience of culture as a route to generating sites of genuine significance and relevance to the lives of local people.

In Chapter 3, Elaine Heumann Gurian continues the focus on relevance, introducing the notion of complexity and setting out a vision for the future of museums which prioritises plurality of political perspectives and supports citizens towards more thoughtful, civil and open-ended discussions of pressing contemporary issues. Driven by the current political climate in the United States and the evident danger of simplified and polarised argument which is coming to characterise political behaviour, Gurian begins to imagine a new form of museum design which rather than prioritising specific narratives and experiences for specified target audiences embraces the challenge of museums for all and the need for complexity in complex democratic societies which aspire to democracy and equality. Museums here are, importantly, intentional, subtle resisters – rather than collaborators – in a world becoming more autocratic.

The next pair of chapters in Part I shifts our focus beyond the institutional space of the museum in order to explore the potential for museum making processes in the city. In Chapter 4, Tricia Austin explores the potential for exhibition making as a social process and takes us through an important review of approaches to exhibition making in the public realm, from high-art interventions to artist-led critiques of museums as institutions, digital projects to which users can contribute content and the ‘illusive practice’ of genuine co-curation. Reviewing the relationships between the genesis of notions of co-curation and co-design and introducing a project undertaken as part of her research and teaching practice, Austin makes a strong case for socially motivated designers to be acknowledged as creative strategists, social mediators, user-centred enablers, inventive storytellers and experts in engaging audiences.

Dave Colangelo picks up Austin’s focus on exhibitionary strategies in the city in Chapter 5 to explore the potential of massive media – large urban digital screens – in offering citizens something more than an endless barrage of products and marketing. Exploring the scope for the participatory practices of museums to impact the urban scale and experience of urban life, and focusing on the potential in massive media to memorialise culture in new ways and experiment with new ways of being social and civic, Colangelo asks how the utopian and emancipatory qualities of the Situationist International, who argued that citizens should be able to reconfigure the infrastructures of the city, might be captured in the curating of massive media and deliver audiences to critical and creative encounters with art, the city and each other. Of particular note here is the potential for massive media to generate new forms of public space, take an active part in creating a shared sense of democratic debate and open up opportunities for the nurturing of perceptual acuity as well as collective and individual intelligences.

In Chapter 6 we return to China, though this time looking back to the first decades of the twentieth century, to explore the introduction of European modes of exhibition and display to Asia. In a chapter which speaks directly to Oscar Ho Hing-Kay’s contribution above as well as Tsong-Zung Chang and Shiming Gao’s chapter in Part III, Pedith Chan considers the ways in which new museological standards introduced to China through the 1935 *Shanghai Exhibition* changed traditional display conventions and expected viewing practices in China,

despite their reinterpretation through key Chinese concepts. Drawing attention to the history of museum making in China, Chan highlights the importance of contemporary discussions about museum design in that context and makes clear the need for museum design researchers to seek far more located, culturally specific approaches to museum making.

The final two chapters in Part I return our focus to contemporary modes of museum making and the need for deep analysis – in order to better understand the physical forms of museums and galleries and the varied roles they seek to play – and, importantly, confident new modes of museum making, if museums and galleries are genuinely to generate new forms of civic and social expression. In Chapter 7, Laura Hourston Hanks explores the strategies used by a series of architects in the representation and manifestation of place in the visitor experience. Recognising that a close focus on place has emerged as a key strategy utilised by museum architects, Hanks explores both the potential and limits of a situated approach to architectural development through a number of recent architectural projects in the UK. The chapter draws our attention to the importance of spirit of place in future museum making whilst simultaneously questioning the specific ways in which this *genius loci* is harnessed and expressed.

Locality is also of great significance in our final chapter in Part I, though in a very different way. In Chapter 8, Timothy J. McNeil takes us back to 1970s California to reveal the inspirations for and deep thinking involved in generating inclusive design approaches in the building of the new Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis. McNeil takes us through the user-centred design process developed at the museum, revealing how the process of making the new museum was leveraged as an opportunity for community debate and interaction. The project stands as one of a small number of museum architectural projects which have genuinely sought to move beyond the established conventions of architectural development. McNeil captures the learning for museums and for design from this process. The project is an important example of how a clear articulation of intent and desired social impact can lead, in the right hands, not only to a new and vital museum but also to multiple positive impacts in the lives of diverse people.



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AN ETHICAL FUTURE FOR MUSEUM AND GALLERY DESIGN

Design as a force for good in a diverse cultural sector

Suzanne MacLeod

Abstract

Chapter 1 argues that museums have yet to effectively draw design into their strategies to reposition museums as socially purposeful institutions. As a route towards this, the chapter argues for an ethics of museum design and suggests that museums need to wrest control of design from the political and economic drivers that often shape it. Such an approach recognises the ways in which the processes and built forms of museums are implicated in an unequal and divided social world. Developed through a detailed case study from the Tower of London, the chapter also poses a larger question. Could we, it asks, if led by the values and visions of cultural organisations and their desire to impact our creative lives in diverse ways, shape a more explicitly differentiated cultural landscape of wider relevance to peoples' everyday experience?

Introduction

In 2010 I undertook a series of interviews with museum professionals, all of whom had been involved in leading capital developments in UK museums, the building of new museums or the expansion and renovation of existing museums. At that time, discussions mainly focused on process. Were design processes making use of the wide range of expertise available from stakeholders, including audiences? Or were architects, designers and institutions being swept through such projects in order to get them completed on time with little opportunity to think deeply about the decisions they were taking and the various social, environmental or economic impacts (positive and negative) those decisions might have? The landscape was mixed as one might have expected, but what emerged from the interviews and a desk-based research process that took place alongside, was the observation that an approach to design which prioritised a deep consideration of sense of place in recognition of the importance of place to belonging and identity; harnessed diverse expertise through stakeholder participation in design as a route to social relevance and use; recognised that capital development is

an opportunity for reflection on and building of organisational identity; and utilised new and more sophisticated models for measuring social, environmental and economic sustainability as key factors of success beyond the simple formulation of completion within budget offered potential routes towards socially purposeful ways of making museums (MacLeod 2011).

The research made a claim for ethical museum making; a form of museum design which responded to and prioritised the public-facing missions and ambitions of museums, galleries and heritage sites and which acknowledged that cultural organisations should have a duty to the broader society to set some standards and ambitions for public life and the future of our shared social world. All of this research and discussion was, of course, undertaken in full recognition of the enormity of these projects, the bureaucratic constraints that local governments, funders and institutions placed on such projects and, importantly and unfortunately, the political and economic agendas that would push and pull cultural developments, sometimes to such an extent that they would become unrecognisable to the professionals within.

At the time, and in recognition of the politics of space and the centrality of space to the ongoing transformation of museums and galleries, part of this desire to utilise capital builds to generate a discussion of ethical design in museums and galleries was to seek a route towards the manifestation of the human and social values of cultural organisations physically in our surroundings as a challenge to the commercialism that, in the main, shapes our environments and life experiences and continues to diminish our civic and social lives (Crouch 2011). Increasingly however, we see this same commercialism shaping museums and galleries. They share the same shiny, attention-seeking architecture of shopping centres and bright, produce-laden interiors of department stores. Since then, the ethics of museum design continues to be a minor question in our sector; ethics codes, even of design groups, tend not to relate to the physical thing designed and built, the opportunities to generate empowering encounters built into (or out of) them or the design processes and methodologies used, but rather to ethical business practices and ethical behaviours towards clients (Till 2009: 180). As a result, large amounts of funding continue to be spent on museum developments, but without the fine-grained and open discussion of the ethics of design that the social scale and impact of these spaces deserves.

Since 2010, I have been involved in a number of projects with cultural partners around particular aspects of design, and ethics continues to emerge as a necessary frame within which to think about the potential of museum design, if allowed, to make a significant contribution to the cultural sector's social ambitions. This chapter draws these ideas and activities together through a discussion of what an ethics of museum design might entail, and why the development of an ethics of museum design could be a game-changing addition to the cultural sector. The discussion is developed through a single project undertaken with Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), the Research Centre for Museum and Galleries in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (RCMG) and Berlin-based exhibition design studio Duncan McCauley (DMC), as a mechanism for exploring the ways in which an ethics of museum design, as a responsibility, an outlook and a process rather than a specific set of guidelines, might be worked through. The chapter contains a clear challenge to design researchers, design practitioners and cultural organisations to 'think together' about the various roles of museums and galleries, the physical, material and embodied nature of all human experience and the urgency of opening up new ways of making vital, valued and socially impactful spaces for culture in an increasingly commercialised, homogenised and divided social world.

'Design is as moral as a hammer': from caricatures of museum design to complexity, purpose and ethics

Design is a complex and competitive field. It is also a field in which caricatures – poor, ludicrous imitations of reality – abound. These over-simplifications of design and designed forms complicate the ways in which cultural organisations engage with design and negatively influence expectations of, and approaches to, investment in the physical infrastructure of museums. For example, design in museums continues to be discussed as the object of the designer, a view fuelled not just by the reductive words and images which architects and architectural critics place between us and design in museums (images of people-less galleries, images of spectacular forms with a distant and blurry world around them, reductive stories of what specific architectural forms represent), but also by anecdotes of architects who will not waver from their vision. Whilst the caricatures come from somewhere (the examples are often real enough) and the images and words have their uses (selling an idea or enabling us to make sense of a complex architectural form), they also work to mask the complexity of capital projects, the diverse range of people involved in capital projects and the ways in which decisions come to be taken. Most significantly perhaps, such ideas and practices impact design decisions; they continue to separate our social and physical worlds, ensuring that the social impacts of design and designed forms remain out of reach and, in museums and galleries at least, beyond detailed discussion.

A few studies *have* sought to trace how decisions are taken on such projects and reveal the ways in which cultural projects are implicated in the wider social world. For example, Paul Jones (2011) has explored the role of iconic architecture in state-led projects, an area where museums feature strongly. Investigating how culture and urban space are mobilised in the production of surplus value, Jones reveals the ways in which museums today are drawn into a direct relationship to economic elites and their struggles for power. Interestingly, this kind of research is often undertaken from outside museums and museum studies, and there remains a paucity of internal reflection on and analysis of the social implications and impacts of design decisions in museums. There are also a number of studies which, contrary to the mass of projects in the cultural sector which rightly seek to illustrate the value of culture, point to the complicity of cultural projects in so many social ills such as the draining of scarce resources, environmental degradation, social segregation and the creation of spaces which lead to the production of passivity, uncritical nostalgia and a valuing of icons, spectacle and consumerism (Janes 2009; Harvey 2000; Glendinning 2010). Museums generally don't claim that they want to generate passivity, nostalgia or a celebration of consumerism, yet we rarely question the decisions taken on museum projects (about either process or form) and how they might be complicit in such social processes.

How, then, do we differentiate between projects? Where are the amazing examples of low-cost, effective cultural spaces which prioritise social relationships, encourage debate and are activated through the inhabitation and action of diverse groups of people? Could we, if led by the values and visions of cultural organisations and their desire to impact our creative lives in diverse ways (by opening up, variously, opportunities towards wellbeing, education and learning, political awareness, critical engagement with the world around us and understanding of others), shape a diverse and more explicitly differentiated cultural landscape of wider relevance to people's everyday experience? The question is too large to be dealt with in full here, and there will always be competing interests in all museum design projects which influence the decisions taken (though which, I would argue, need questioning and challenging), but a discussion about ethics can, nonetheless, open up the possibility of thinking and acting differently.

An emphasis on ethical design perhaps also explodes another caricature which is implicit in the discussion above and unfortunately still abounds in museums – that design is a technical process of display or, put more accurately, a specialist process of making a building, a display or some other physical entity. Of course, design does do this and in museums, where design is still, in the main, held at arm’s-length from the organisation and contained within bureaucratic processes and practices, it is often reduced to exactly this. However, there are other ways in which design can be utilised as a resource by museums and approached in a much fuller, all-encompassing and potentially impactful sense, where it can be recognised as a social process.

In a recent issue of *RSA Journal*, the new-found status of design (‘not just as a profession but as a deeper way of thinking about the world’) was taken as the main topic of discussion (Taylor 2015: 5). Exploring the new management focus on design where the term ‘design thinking’ is used to refer to a hybrid approach driven by business and which uses design methods of brainstorming, decision-making, working with end users, prototyping and testing as a new route to innovation (Hunt 2015), a range of authors illustrated the potential contribution of design to a whole range of areas of social life from the economy to specific social problems such as reducing aggression in hospitals and the improvement of human-based services. With a common theme of design as strategy and a whole range of examples of how design is being utilised across increasingly diverse sectors and in increasingly diverse ways, the collection made clear the positive impact design is having in so many scientific, industrial and public contexts. Disappointingly, none of the examples were drawn from the cultural sector.

Similar ideas and practices do exist in the cultural sector, though they are certainly less mainstream and are thoroughly under-explored. For example, at Derby Museums in the UK (see Chapter 12 in this volume), where the organisation’s mission is ‘to inspire people of all backgrounds and interests to become part of a living story of world-class creativity, innovation and making’, human-centred design is currently being utilised to transform the ways in which Derby Museums are made, position visitors and co-production at the centre of development, and reflect on the challenges faced by museums in becoming socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Similarly, at Battersea Arts Centre in London, an iterative and participatory process of cultural production most often associated with theatre is being utilised to reimagine and transform a nineteenth-century town hall into a dynamic, embedded and vital hub for cultural engagement. Here, a ‘scratch’ process, dubbed ‘Playgrounding’, is allowing creative practice to shape the physical surroundings as a way of prioritising as well as formulating the values and ambitions of the organisation. Less obviously creative, perhaps, but no less impactful, the notion of ‘service design’ is also in use in the cultural sector and elsewhere in this volume other examples of design solutions developed through an integrated and ongoing design process are evident (see Chapter 13 on the St Louis Arch). Admittedly, this work is far from mainstream. Nonetheless, all of this activity is taking place in our sector and yet is rarely discussed at any level of detail.¹

Many of these projects can be characterised as having a research-led or experimental methodology debunking yet another caricature, this time of the creative genius. Here, rather than a design brief being produced and a designer being commissioned to deliver the brief, projects are characterised by an ongoing collaborative process of dialogue, iteration, reflection, research and testing where the views and expertise of diverse groups of people matter. Also here perhaps, and not reducible to but certainly informed by the methodology, is an increased emphasis on real people, on human and bodily experience as well as a recognition that the shared endeavour is to shape a meaningful and enabling frame for action driven by

the mission and values of the organisation and through which the organisation will be made manifest. To differing degrees, then, many of these projects begin to point to a more sophisticated understanding of the inseparability of our social and physical worlds.

Of course the landscape is varied as designers play with the imagery and spatial formations of museum space and as cultural institutions imagine and shape themselves in myriad ways. However, as we understand more about the ways in which the built environment of the museum is implicated in the social world and as museums and designers utilise a range of media in increasingly affective ways to *touch* us as visitors and make us *feel* (empathy, anger, sadness, happiness, confusion and so on), the need for an ethics of museum design becomes even more urgent. As Jamer Hunt (2015: 13) has argued, '[d]esign is as moral as a hammer'; design in itself is not ethical and is used by all sorts of agencies and industries to a whole range of positive and negative ends. If social, environmental, economic and individual impact matters, then, design needs to be considered within an ethical frame. In museums, that ethical frame might also open up new kinds of discussions which free us from the caricatures and default approaches to design and instead, open up the complexity of design as well as possibilities for new ways of working.

Here we might do well to learn from the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, ethics can be found in our interpersonal relations with others, in the moment of response. In our very subjectivity, he argues, we are dependent for our existence on others (past, present and future) and this debt entails a responsibility, always, to the other (Levinas 1969). Social existence then, incorporates the ethical and is 'the ultimate content of the utter particularity of the self and the other' (Morgan 2011: 10). There is an optimism in Levinas and an idea that if we put the needs of others before our own, we open the door to sociality, the varying particularities of everyday life and the possibility of reciprocity. It is for these reasons that theorists and practitioners in fields as diverse as medicine, social work, architecture and museums have turned to Levinas for something which might move beyond and resist power relations and notions of ownership and control, to seek instead a genuine focus on the hope of people-centred ethical practice (Till 2009; Rossiter 2011; Lynch 2011; Bennahum 2013).

Prisoners, punishment and torture: the context, the 'puzzle' and harnessing interpretive museum design²

Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) is an independent charity with responsibility for six royal palaces in the UK: the Tower of London; Hampton Court Palace; Banqueting House, Whitehall; Kensington Palace; Kew Palace; and Hillsborough Castle. Since 1998, when it became an independent charity, HRP has been self-financing and has built a reputation for the development of a highly successful business model which incorporates large-scale reinvestment in the physical conservation of the palaces, enlightened management and a visitor-focused emphasis on witty, theatrical and enjoyable storytelling. Since 2005, visitor figures have risen by approximately 76% and HRP has been able to invest over £100 million in preserving the fabric and future of these important historic sites.³

Of all of these heritage sites, the Tower of London is arguably the most iconic. Built in the eleventh century as a fortress and a symbol of power by King William I, the Tower has housed a variety of institutions over its long history including the Royal Menagerie, the Royal Armouries, the Royal Mint and the Royal Observatory. It has been both a royal residence and for a long period up to the mid-twentieth century was used to hold prisoners considered to pose a particular threat to national security. Today, the Tower is a complex site covering some

12 acres and is home to the Crown Jewels, the Royal Armouries, and the Yeoman Warders as well as being part of HRP. In 2016–17, the site received 2.78 million visits.⁴ A high proportion of visitors are from overseas and are part of time-limited, highly structured tours.

In the summer of 2012, HRP was grappling with visitor evaluation undertaken at the Tower, which had revealed that whilst visitors were satisfied with their experience overall, they expressed a wish for more (and perhaps more gory) interpretation around the themes of punishment and torture. In an approach which illustrated the openness of the organisation and the value it places against research, HRP approached RCMG to ‘think with’ HRP about how the organisation could meet the perceived needs of its visitors whilst also maintaining its desire to act ethically and position itself at the forefront of museum practice. By then, Alex Gaffikin, interpretation manager at HRP, had completed some preliminary research, visiting a range of heritage sites and looking at how those sites were positioned in the museum, heritage and visitor attraction sectors. Whilst there was at this stage a lack of clarity about what form interpretation at the Tower should take (Alex phrased this as ‘the Tower needs to find its voice’), Alex and colleagues were very clear that although they wanted to be entertaining and provide an enjoyable day out, they did not want to be the kind of gory visitor experience which traded on horror and disgust, or a historic theme park where the drive to entertain might lead to a loss of focus on the history of the site and visitors’ sense of authenticity.

A number of preliminary questions were occupying the minds of Alex and her team: How could the Tower incorporate more interpretation around themes of prisoners, punishment and torture? How could they generate an engaging experience around these themes without recourse to waxworks and horror? How could HRP forge its own identity for the Tower, one which would be ethically informed and potentially make a contribution to the ongoing development of museum and gallery practice? And how could HRP navigate the complexities of a shared site which offers visitors access to a range of historic places as well as varying organisations and collections, in order to generate a coherent visitor experience? HRP wanted a piece of research that would work through these dilemmas and provide a framework within which future interventions within the historic site could be made; to use research as a thinking process which could feed findings and principles into the broader, ongoing processes of exhibition making and interpretation. After some lengthy discussions, the research question was identified as: how might the Tower of London take forward their interpretation of stories of imprisonment, punishment and torture in ways that would take account of and reconcile (1) visitors’ expectations, motivations and interests and (2) HRP’s commitment to interpretive practice underpinned by ethical values and standards of museological and curatorial practice?

As the research plan developed, RCMG felt that the site-specific puzzle could be understood in relation to a suite of broader international scholarly and professional debates in the field, all of which could help to inform the research. The project was also recognised as an opportunity to explore how a design sensibility and interpretive design approach could be utilised as part of the research methodology in order to engage in a truly integrated way with both the physical and social aspects of the visitor experience. As a result, RCMG drew together a multi-disciplinary research team including interpreters, designers and academics with a range of expertise and skills relevant to the solving of the research puzzle and designed a methodology which would

enable this range of skills and knowledge to impact the research process and findings.⁵ All team members would work through all aspects of the methodology which would include:

- Site visits to establish the way in which the theme was currently interpreted and to begin to apply research-led master planning and interpretive design approaches to the site.
- Working papers which addressed themes connected to the puzzle and which would provide important underpinning knowledge for the project: (1) emotional and learning experiences; (2) narrative and embodiment; and (3) challenging histories.
- In-depth qualitative visitor research to supplement the existing visitor evaluations and provide a more fine-grained understanding of visitors' ideas and experiences at the Tower.
- A two-day workshop which would provide an opportunity for the research team to work through all of the data together and where we could place an emphasis on creative approaches and activities intended to ensure that the full range of knowledge and expertise in the team (academic skills and knowledge, 'designerly' skills and knowledge, the skills and knowledge of the museum practitioner) could impact the research findings.
- The testing of an 'ethical framework' with the wider HRP team as a route to refining the findings.

Social biographies of space and embodied narrative experience

Two related ideas provided the research team with an important starting point for the project – *social biographies of space* and *embodied narrative experience*. *Social biographies of space* related to how we might understand the physical site of the Tower in ways which would get beyond simply dating or accrediting certain sections of the Tower to different periods, monarchs or functions. Reduced back to the deceptively simple premise that people shape spaces and spaces shape people (Lefebvre 1991), the team began from the assumption that all built environments can be understood as social and cultural productions constituent of social relations and active in the making of our social world. Here architecture and built forms are recognised as physical manifestations of deep structures of power that simultaneously embody human thought and have the capacity to impact on how people feel, think and act. Here then, social relations and social experience exist, and only exist, in and through space (Ibid.). Importantly, from this perspective, architecture or our built environment is all material forms (from the site to the built structures, layout, interior architecture and furniture to the objects, collections, exhibition hardware, interpretive approaches and media on display). Even more importantly, this material is produced, and can only be understood, through the multiple lives that have shaped and reshaped it constantly and in myriad ways over time.

From this perspective, the physical site can be recognised as an ongoing human and bodily production, produced through all sorts of ordinary practices and ways of being and active in so many aspects of our lives such as the production of relationships, identities and experiences as well as our understanding of past, present and future. At a historic site such as the Tower of London, this production is evident in layer upon layer of human existence that one can see from the moment of arrival at the site and in the infinite tiny traces of human inhabitation of the site. Here, the Tower can be viewed as a rich, experiential environment; both embedded with multiple biographies (latent narratives) of the people who lived, visited and died at the Tower and as a living, ongoing site of inhabitation and production with the potential to place us in time and in relation to others.