

**Keynote: The Soft Power of Museums: Waking the Sleeping Giants in our Cities**  
Austrian Museum Day 2017  
Museum Arbeitsweit, Steyr, Austria  
October 12, 2017, 9h30 am

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A few years ago Gail Lord- who was then my boss and is now my friend- and I pulled together this bright pink book.

Last night at a lovely dinner here in Steyr- we were speaking about the pitfalls of 'curating by title'- when you don't really have an idea for an exhibition but you figure if you give it an impressive sounding name and throw in a bunch of great art- it's good enough.

That's kind of what happened with the book. We started with words and asked some people we knew and respected if they could help us turn those words into chapters and hopefully a thesis. We're still working on it... and I'd love to hear your thoughts about it throughout the day- but I'll tell you where we're at now....

Those three words were 'museums', 'cities' and 'soft power' and our ideas were simple: there is an unrecognized relationship between these words that bears exploring.

Quite soon into our research we realized that it is actually something relatively rare to firstly acknowledge that museums exist in a specific geographic place – namely

cities- and secondly that museums have power- both hard power and soft power- which I'll explain in a bit.

But first- let's start with cities

## **Cities**

Museums, like subways, high-rises, sports leagues and parks, are an urban phenomenon. Most of the world's more than 80,000 museums exist in towns or cities. Big museums are concentrated in big, established and global cities- like New York, London, Paris or Mexico City.

Smaller museums are in smaller towns. Did you know- that the main towns or cities in the world's smallest states all have museums? (with the possible exception of Tuvalu pop. 10 000 in the Polynesian Islands. Which I think closed...

The thing that is interesting about museums is that their names- 'Museum of Modern Art', National Palace Museum, Museum Arbeitswelt- refer to their contents, but rarely their place- with of course- the notable exception of city museums. There are good and deliberate reasons for the invisibility of geographical markers when it comes to museums. Many of these museums are funded by national rather than local governments or they aspire to be 'universal' museums with treasures from everywhere for everyone. **But the placelessness with which they present themselves to the world cannot disguise the basic and self-evident fact that the vast majority of museums inhabit a physical structure within an urban context which they either choose to embrace or ignore.**

So what does the location and the form of museums tell us?

For the most part, museums occupy some of the most expensive land in a city. Or their construction helps to create the most expensive land in a city through a process of gentrification or 'art washing'. They are generally in the centre of town- in the vicinity of other commercial or civic buildings, rather than residential buildings- depending on how far you look.

Increasing urbanization worldwide and increasing densification in cities throughout Europe mean that more and more people live and work in a museum's neighbourhood- they pass it or look at it every day.

*One Thousand Museum by Zaha Hadid Architects* is a high-rise ultra-luxury residential condominium under construction in Miami, Florida, USA located across the street from Museum Park- a 30-acre urban park- home to notable newly renovated museums Perez Art Museum Miami and the Patricia and Philip Frost Museum of Science that opened just a few months ago.

Developers even capitalize on 'museum views' and cities build museums precisely to transform an area- like this development across the street from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

In turn, residents protest a new museum for fear that it will drive up property prices.

Yet for all this fuss, museum buildings are often just a monolith- a sleeping giant that one walks past without scarcely a thought or a glance. What happens in the

museum, stays in the museum and their impact on the people around them is negligible.

German philosopher Jurgen Habermas described European culture prior to the 18th century as being 'representational' in that those in power sought to 'represent' themselves on their audiences. In representational culture- those in power seek to represent their supremacy through physical forms.

In "reading museums' one understand that they continue to be landmarks with a representational form that tell a story of a glorious era gone by...

a beloved symbol,.

an imagined future...

Without the imperatives to make profit or serve an obvious utility- like the other commercial and government structures in a city - museums have the dubious freedom of being manifestations- in form and content- of meaning and expectation.

Habermas contrasts the 18th century representational culture of monarchical Europe with 'öffentlichkeit'- the bourgeois public sphere- of cafes, public squares and in the media- a physical and metaphorical space outside the control of the state where people can engage in public discourse.

Many contemporary museums and cultural centres are surrounded by a public gathering place- like a square or a park- particularly as modern day architects advocate anew for 'öffentlichkeit' in space if not in operations. In fact- one of the most common features of museums constructed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries

are the prevalence of outdoor public space- which seek once again to get people talking to one another.

These spaces have become a hallmark of our cities today. They are what Saskia Sassen calls nodes of 'incompleteness' - places where the powerless can assert themselves. Sassen writes:

*"A city is a complex but incomplete system: in this mix lies the capacity of cities across histories and geographies to outlive far more powerful, but fully formalised, systems – from large corporations to national governments.*

*In this mix of complexity and incompleteness lies the possibility for those without power to assert "we are here" and "this is also our city". Or, as the legendary statement by the fighting poor in Latin American cities puts it, "Estamos presentes": we are present, we are not asking for money, we are just letting you know that this is also our city.*

*It is in cities to a large extent where the powerless have left their imprint ...*

*"Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all", The Guardian*  
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/24/who-owns-our-cities-and-why-this-urban-takeover-should-concern-us-all>

Transforming museums from representational landmarks into the hosts of public squares accessible by everyone to an important step for museums seeking to embrace an urban public.

Yet the possibilities of public space attached to museums do not in and of themselves result in public dialogue. Nor do they inherently transform the museum institution.

Too often- there is little connection between what happens outside and what happens inside a museum.

So let's go inside.

I work now at an exhibition design firm, Kossmann.dejong based in Amsterdam, who works very hard at challenging the form of museums on the inside. We are very proud to have been awarded the American Architecture Prize for Interior Design based on our approach to narrative design. Our team is always looking for ways to create an experience within the museum that allows for individual meaning making and dialogue.

We create environments in which we use scenography, media and people to catalyze discussion- like the Ziezo kMaroko exhibit at the Tropenmuseum Junior in Amsterdam.

Often we get a brief from a team of curators that have a very strong idea what they want to say, but a much less clear idea as to whom they wish to speak to and the impact they want to have. We try and bring our experiences of audience engagement to the table but....

One of our biggest challenges in the work we do- is also one of the biggest challenges facing museums today- sharing of power.

Our best work comes when we work closely with museum clients to create a unique experience in which forms and content are inextricably combined. But like many

exhibition designers it is often tough for our perspectives to be taken seriously. Curatorial knowledge is more powerful than design knowledge- and we are acutely aware of the power dynamics involved in creating exhibitions for both new and existing museums.

So let's now talk some more about power

### **(Soft) Power**

We have seen how many museum buildings are part of 'representational' culture- their architecture is a symbol of the power of their patrons- whether the state, the region or a private company- as in this new museum in Saudi Arabia.

Museum collections, traditionally and particularly in Europe, are also representations of the powerful- many having been literally procured through war or colonialism- which can be termed hard power- i.e. influence through force or economic pressure.

Museum exhibitions also have traditionally supported the stories of great men and civilizations, told from the singular perspectives of the victors- something Daniel Neff, curator of the Fairbanks House Museum in the US at the recent MuseumNext conference in the US called " the Old White Guy Problem".

Many museum exhibitions follow a didactic model of information presenting- "*this is the truth, this is what you should learn*". There is little attribution in the text panels

that give a single perspective, little provenance made clear in the collection labels, and little encouragement for questions, or alternate readings.

This is *soft* power at work. Soft power does not operate through force or payment- but it does influence through framing the agenda, deciding what collections, what artists, what stories to validate and which ones to ignore.

Museums are institutions that are remarkably good at soft power. In several studies in Canada, the US, the UK and Australia- museums are regarded as the most trustworthy form of expertise- more than the media, government and in other studies- big brands and even teachers and the internet. Museums have influence based on their credibility and trust worthiness.

*Yet- soft power may not be gun nor money but it is still power. It seduces the same. It can be deployed for good or for bad. We have it. We close ourselves around it. We replicate it. We maintain it.*

There is a power shift happening- but it is not from within.

External forces at work include

**Urbanization-** Just two centuries ago, only 3 percent of the world's population lived in cities. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was just 14 percent. Today more than half of the world's population live in cities. And by the year 2030, more than five billion people (six out of every ten human beings) will live in cities and urban centers.



More people living in cities means more competition for urban space, and more claims to urban amenities- such as public buildings and squares of museums- by diverse people

**Diversification of Patronage:** In the last 40 years, economic changes such as the increasing concentration of wealth in private hands have stimulated the growth of civil society institutions worldwide. Not only are wealthy people donating collections or opening their own museums, they are placing their money into professionally run foundations. These foundations support a myriad of causes- not least museums. As government financing decreases both proportionately and in absolute numbers, the museum sector has become more dependent on new forms of patronage from foundations, philanthropists, sponsorship and earned sources. This has resulted in a change from inward-looking, collection-focused institutions to outward-facing, donor- and visitor-focused ones

This has also created a shift however in how museums are viewed, and what is expected from them. Whilst government museums are regarded as largely following government policy- which to a certain degree reflects a democratic process- civil society institutions have even more direct expectations of accountability- to the citizens they serve.

**Law-** international cultural law is seeing a shift from cultural property or goods to cultural heritage and cultural rights. Cultural processes, knowledge, skills, traditions are increasingly recognized as community rights requiring protection. Consequently, restitution involves not only ensuring that museums repatriate or pay for looted

objects, but other ways of ensuring that communities damaged by cultural theft can benefit in the present and future- such as integrating researchers and others

**Academy/Writers-** feminism, cultural studies, public history, people's history, museum studies, critical race theory, post-structuralism, urban studies- have all tackled in one way or another the question of who owns culture, who represents culture and how is culture understood- influencing museum curators to think about the power dynamics at work in the stories they present.

**Artists-** new participative works by contemporary artists questioning role of curator, artist and public

**Activists and Students-** new people entering the museum field, activists have all been working very hard to transform what is presented by the museum and who feels comfortable in the museum.

There are more- new technologies and digitalization is of course a major influence- and each of these are a talk unto itself- but the point really is- museums are being pressured to transform from the outside.

### **Resistance to Change from Within**

Despite the external pressures that are pushing museums to be more inclusive, more audience centered and more relevant, museums are proving to be extremely resistant to change.

We subconsciously (or maybe consciously) stand in the way of a shift of power between the powerful- to whom we have always been a part- and the powerless- whom we may strive to connect with- in theory.

This is what WE do. That's right- we in the room. And we do it with perhaps the best intentions.

How many of you have uttered any of these sentences in discussing a new project or exhibition?

*"It is not professional"*

*"We have to be neutral"*

*"We have run out of time"*

*"The budget does not allow it"*

*"It is too complicated"*

In my experience, these five phrases are often euphemisms for "my power is threatened".

These phrases are the pillars of what sociologist Tony Bennett calls 'the cultural complex'. Like the Military-Industrial Complex which describes the cosy mutually-beneficial relationship between the defense industry and public policy, the Cultural Complex identifies the way in which power is exercised and maintained when it comes to officially recognized, funded and supported Culture- whether from the public or private sectors.

Museums and museum workers are part of an invisible cultural government which exercises power by producing 'distinct techniques of intervention' into the code of conduct. This cultural government operates on paper- through briefs created, funds given, awards proclaimed, conferences organized, people hired, text written, collections presented.

We are in the business of selecting, classifying, validating, ignoring, and otherwise 'regularizing' the practice of culture- in science, art, social sciences, history and even play. We are part of a web of implicit co-validations among similar people, with similar education and similar values setting the cultural agenda. Just look around to see what I mean.

We spend a lot of time identifying how to be relevant to 'migrants' and 'teenagers' and how to have a 'social impact' when it comes to public programmes and exhibitions, but we spend relatively little time asking ourselves who is in the room, on the board, writing the rules, deciding.

Who are WE and what are the values we assume are universal? What is our level of education? What language do we speak? What is our class position? Where do we live? What is our race? Our gender? Who do we hang out with? How do these things impact the way our institutions are organized, the way we hire, and promote, the programmes we support and most importantly whom we listen to and give space to? These are scary questions. What if we- despite our best intentions are being racist? Exclusionary? Elitist?

Museums have soft power- but more often than not, that power supports the agenda of the already powerful. It does not support dialogue. It does not support empowerment. It does not even support learning....

But it can.

We need to check ourselves. How much are we, subconsciously or not- part of a cultural complex that perpetuates inequality and exclusion rather than eliminates them? And are we really willing to take the painful steps to share or give over real power?

There are 4 things we can start to do right now to make a shift.

**Look Around-** take stock of who makes the decisions around you. Who is in the room. Write down your similarities- your education, your language, your discipline, your age etc. Now consider who is not here and why (- note that 'because they are not interested' is not an optional answer).

**Share the Scissors:** Invite someone new into your process. Someone who is nothing like you or the people around you. Consultants, entrepreneurs, designers, artists, children, activists. If they make you uncomfortable- take that as a good sign. Then treat them as a partner- not a focus group. Make sure they are in ALL the meetings- even the ones where you are sure it will just be distracting...

**Embrace Discomfort:** Let Go, take a risk. Ultimately people make their own meaning. Say what you want- but leave space for others. Wait until the stakes are too high to take a risk- and then wait some more.

**Be Transparent-** Who said it? Who funds it? Who decides it? Your audiences can handle the truth. They deserve to know.

In the end- the degree to which we use our power for good or for evil may depend on us.

But it just may also not.

People don't always wait patiently for power to be handed to them- if it's that important to them- they just grab it. If it isn't- they walk on by.

And then what will we do? Do we stand in the way, do we fight back, do we step aside?

Are we brave enough to follow on a new path where we are completely and utterly out of our depth. Because sometimes- that's what real change needs.