

The Future of Museums:
The Importance of Physical Institutions

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For many, museums are thought of as institutions where learning and socialization take place. This may not be the case for long however, as the internet increases the interconnectivity of ideas and the future of the physical museum is at stake. Search engines allow academics to have perfectly condensed information in seconds. Chat forums allow intellectuals to connect over the latest happenings without leaving the comfort of their desks. In this new age, museums are gaining a misguided reputation for being an outdated delivery vehicle in a modern world. However, the digital preoccupation with information sharing has ample drawbacks that individuals are discovering as they grow dissatisfied with living out their lives in the digital. Museums must take on a new role as one of the few remaining physical sanctuaries in the digital world. Museums should focus an effort on maintaining and expanding their physical presence for the maximum benefit of social, economic and educational gain for the public in a world that increasingly values digital interactions.

The popularity of the internet has had a serious toll on museum attendance in the first two decades of the 2000s. Bob Beatty of *Hyperallergic* did some reporting on the quantitative number change history museums have experienced. One finding, “Americans were 50% less likely to visit a historic site in 2012 than they were in 1982,” is particularly alarming to those in the field of museums.¹ This has been a similar trend across other fields of museums as well. Art museums have more popular studies completed that show similar trends. Art museum attendance was down 20% from 2002 to 2012 according to a survey completed by the National Endowment

¹ Bob Beatty, "Running the Numbers on Attendance at History Museums in the US," *Hyperallergic*, Paragraph 3.

of the Arts.² These statistics are alarming, but not necessarily surprising when you compare the outward appeal that digitized museums have for modern audiences.

Digital museums allow unprecedented access to information in the digital age. The Museum with No Frontiers is a totally online museum that hosts artwork from different physical locations side by side. This means that pieces from, for example, the Textile Museum of Canada and MKG Museum of Art and Industry in Hamburg, Germany, can share the same space online that would be impossible to coordinate in the physical world. Even better yet, this museum can be accessed from any phone or computer with the freedom of an internet connection and the World Wide Web. Other special features unavailable from physical museums include the ability for visitors to curate their own collection and search a database to find exactly what they may be looking for. Finally, information about the piece can further be accessed, like its location, time period, and medium. A brief description often accompanies a piece to give contextualizing information and further bibliographies are available for those looking for deeper meaning.³ Everything the Museum with No Frontiers presents was a pipe dream in the 1900s and all of these features seems too good to be true because, in many ways, they are.

From an object and artifact standpoint, The Museum with No Frontiers cannot compete with tactile exhibitions. Art loses meaning without texture and context provided by an exhibit. For the museum as a whole, the website lacks what makes traditional museum exceptional. There is no opportunity for social connection through feedback or peer-to-peer connections. It is non-profit, which means that its only access to revenue is from donations. The experimental nature of the project may make that funding easy, but as all museums begin the process of

² Ibid., Paragraph 1.

³ Salah Sayour. "Wooden Panel," *The Museum with No Frontiers*.

digitization that funding will become scarce. Finally, the lack of curation and physical artifacts affects the ability of amateur museum goers to learn.

The Museum with No Frontiers is just one example of a digital museum, in fact, many museums are putting resources into developing digital presences. The accessibility of these collections is a clear benefit, but institutions should continue to strive for building funding and upkeep. Physical museums provide a social platform that is ineffective or totally unavailable digitally. Museums are places to discuss and learn together. There are limitations to doing that online in emotion and communication.

This is not more apparent than in relation to children attending museums. A compilation of ten years of research on children's learning styles by Andre, Durksen, and Volman published in *Learning Environments Research* labels the three most successful interaction types they observe children engage in as child–environment, child–adults/peers, and child–technology. While child–technology can be done by handing an iPad over to a youngling, the other two are best curated through the lens of a museum building. One of the ways this is clear is through information retention for children in museums. Andre et al. writes that “conversational instruction coupled with hands-on activities (child–environment–adults/peers), resulted in children’s abilities to report program-related content immediately after the exhibit and again after two weeks.”⁴ Children do not get in person interaction with others online.

Museums maintain importance for communities outside of the traditional day to day visits that are typical of the operation. The building itself stands in cities as a symbol of multicultural events and meetings that take place within. These act as singular moments of time

⁴ Andre L.T. Durksen & M.L. Volman, “Museums as Avenues of learning for Children,” 59.

where random chance can cause unplanned happenings. A digital museum asks users exactly what they want and gives it to them with little chance of variation. In a physical space, social interactions can ignite new friendships or interesting opportunities to learn and work.

At a Visionnaire Speaker Series lecture hosted by The Grand Rapids Art Museum in 2019, Amy Auscherman spoke of what working for museums did for her. Auscherman is the Corporate Archivist for Herman Miller. Their work spans over 100 years with graphic, textile, and product design industries all represented in the corporate archives housed in Zeeland, Michigan. Before she was hired, Auscherman says she was worried she was working herself into a corner while at Indianapolis Museum of Art curating their preservation of the mid-century modern “Miller House” exhibition. The house is a collection of pieces that span Herman Miller history, but there was not much else to work with because of the intensely focused nature of the exhibit. She believed that her expertise in that museum was becoming too narrow to prove useful in the future, but was proved wrong when she got the archival job.⁵ Working in the physical space of a museum with decades of furniture proved useful in her making job connections in the future. Archival as a whole requires physical object curation and documentation. Auscherman was forthcoming about her hatred of emails and Slack messages. The automated mailing system deletes messages automatically after a certain time period, so the writers are responsible for making sure they save a copy for archival. In the past this was something that secretaries had done in the past with official correspondence, but currently has no standard practice.⁶

In this way, museums as physical, social institutes can be looked at as beneficial to museums because of the direct impact it has on learning and economic gain. Working at the

⁵Amy Auscherman, “Visionnaire Series,” Grand Rapids Art Museum.

⁶ Ibid.

Indianapolis Museum of Art was inarguably beneficial to Auscherman's career. There are benefits for museum owners as well as staff by keeping physical operations ongoing.

To the audience of museums, brick and mortar institutions seem to be a fading trend thanks to the availability of information on the internet. The upkeep of museum spaces is much greater than an app or website, but there is still room for a payday when cards are played right.

Fortunately, mixed media in physical museums is inline with changing consumer habits as long as experiences are crafted correctly. The picture-sharing platform Instagram is an example of how the physical and digital can meet for the benefit of all.

Until very recently, most museums had strict anti-photography rules. The administrations claimed this was due to copyright laws, protecting artwork from light damage of camera flashes, or just making an unobtrusive experience for most guests. In reality, social media apps are increasing connectivity with physical space by creating digital-friendly environments.

There is a new trend of rooms filled with brightly lit, experimental art installations that are called "pop-up museums." They are much talked about, and much shared, by younger museum-goers. One such example of a pop-up exhibit is a recreation of Yayoi Kusama's "Obliteration Room" for the Rosé Mansion in New York City. The room experience asks guests to interact with the physicality of the room by placing stickers on the walls and furniture. By doing so the guests are cemented in the space for the length of the exhibit.⁷ Even though the Rosé Mansion's room wasn't directly attached the Kusama's famous name, guests felt that space was more worthy of sharing than other exhibits from lesser-known artists and would post about it on Instagram because of the aesthetic value or the interaction they had in placing a sticker. This new

⁷ Christophe Haubursin, "How 'Instagram Traps' are Changing Art Museums," *Vox*, 1:35.

type of contemporary art exhibit, ones that are inherently Instagrammable, deliver with huge increases in numbers for more traditional museums as well.

In 2017 the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden hosted an official exhibition of Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Mirrors". These "Mirror Rooms" showcased spaces with playful and experimental lighting enclosed by mirrors from the floor to the ceiling. After the exhibit opened at the Hirshhorn, their annual membership went up by a factor of over 65 according to an article on Artnet.com. Because there were only approximately 150 members before the opening of the show, this means that Kusama's exhibit helped bring in 9,800 new paying members. The money gained from an uptick in visitors can be funneled back into future improvements for the physical space or for increased marketing to get visitors in. There is no argument that Instagram makes funding like this possible. In fact, the museum claims that there were 34,000 posts of the exhibit on Instagram, and searching for related hashtags pulls a plethora of related works.⁸ The impact that the now-closed Kusama exhibit will be felt by the museum and its visitors for sometime to come thanks to this marketing and funding.

Certain specific spaces within museums can pull double duty on creating an attractive and profitable environment for guests while also drawing in money. Popularly, these spaces manifest themselves as cafés and gift shops. Food, drink, and shopping all help to bridge a social and economic gap. This is proven to be attractive to visitors in technology museum study run by researchers on how the physical environment influences educational tourism. In "How Physical Environment Impacts Visitors' Behavior in Learning-Based Tourism—The Example of Technology Museum" the authors research information what planning and design principles can

⁸ Julia Halperin, "Anatomy of a Blockbuster," *Artnet*.

be incorporated to meet “attractiveness, occasion, and social interaction” in relating to positive motivations for guests of physical technology museums.⁹ The research was hosted by the National Science and Technology Museum in Taiwan, as they wanted evidence on what tourists were looking for when visiting destination museums. The researchers concluded that their “study shows shop and café, which have long been neglected, have a decisive influence on visitor satisfaction as well as meeting visitors’ motivations including attractiveness and social interaction.” This article is written for an academic audience yet it is made clear that shops and café revenue makers are attractive to visiting families. It can be gleaned is that these two elements of gift shops and cafés produce both monetary revenue as well as curb appeal to potential visitors.¹⁰

Of course, the monetary aspects of running a museum are not the main reason museums claim to be in business. While museums must keep operational funds in consideration, many are nonprofit institutions. Under any economic circumstance, all museums, however, have the right to be called educational. The internet has been booming for academia thanks to free, easy to access and constantly available information. On the other hand, there are plenty of benefits to entering into a museum building to gain knowledge. Current museum employees should not be afraid of expanding into the physical space as members of the public react with information better in person than digitally.

For art museums, the building itself can be this informational display of artwork. One interesting consideration is the ability for the architecture to have an impact on guest experiences with learning in the museum. The architecture of a physical building is a strong tool that can

⁹ Heng Zhang, Po-Chien Chang and Ming-Fong Tsai, “How Physical Environment Impacts Visitors’ Behavior in Learning-Based Tourism,” 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

focus the visitor's attention on the collection, a set of ideas, or a certain subject. Victoria Newhouse's *Towards a New Museum* covers what makes certain museums sacred spaces for their collection to be housed. When online, that sanctity, the feeling of being set apart and elevated, is lost as it becomes part of a bigger digital picture and loses contextual meaning.

To craft this sanctity and make visits more impactful, buildings can be used to orient guests towards challenging themselves to view art. Dominique and Jean Menil advocate for this as quoted throughout *Towards a New Museum*. Dominique Menil writes that "The great things are those you discover."¹¹ This is a type of design principle that goes against modern accessibility practices for most online and in person museums. There is evidence of this in the buildings that Dominique and Jean Menil commissioned in Houston, Texas. For their galleries, sometimes planned difficulty of use would take the shape of a door that was heavy to open. The reward would then be revealed as a treasure cove of sculptures in the room behind.¹² Another instance includes a narrow steel walkway without handrails at the Philip Johnson Painting Gallery that, according to the titular architect Philip Johnson, was "springy—and precarious, with an uneasy feel of a rope bridge" as it unnerved new visitors, funneling them into an underground "art bunker."¹³ These are exciting design practices that precondition user senses before they engage with art.

During the continued creation of the Menil Complex, a collection of five museums and additional spaces in a Houston neighborhood, the Menil's commissioned the Renzo Piano Building Workshop for the construction of a key building: The Ct Twombly Gallery. This space, as could be guessed, solely consists of a collection of unchanging pieces by the American painter

¹¹ Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

Cy Twombly. The museum is stark and white. The lighting is designed to give off a warm yet synthetic atmosphere that gives off the impression the pieces are frozen in time. Because there are no traveling exhibits, this becomes true for the works inside.¹⁴

For fans of Twombly, this Houston location can become a sort of religious destination to travel to. Caroline Delahoussaye, an Arts and Cultural Management Graduate from Michigan State University, says she would travel over three hours to the Menil Complex to view the Twombly gallery when she lived outside of Texas. Recalling her last visit, she says she had an especially visceral reaction to the painting *Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor*. The work takes up an entire wall of the space. It is a series of three canvases that erupts into a wave of acrylic, crayon, and oil colors that overwhelms the visual senses in person.¹⁵ The scale and scope of a project like this is difficult to translate through a digital medium. The artist's intention for texture and movement cannot be experienced fully through a computer screen.

Art may seem like cheap point to make in a debate for the continuation of physical museums, as it is a subjective matter as opposed to the histories and sciences housed in other collections. However, two associate professors of design and environmental analysis at Cornell have spent time deciphering what makes learning within the physical confines of all genres of museum so special. One of their key findings is that distraction can be negated in physical environments. The authors decipher what it is about crowds, noise, and exposed floor plans, that make them negative impacts for learning.¹⁶ Digital distraction is far more disadvantageous. People feel at home on their digital devices. Using social media apps or bingeing Netflix are a lot more tempting to individuals than directing attention to a digital museum. Even then, guests that

¹⁴ Newhouse, 82-83.

¹⁵ Caroline Delahoussaye, "Personal Conversation."

¹⁶ Lorraine E. Maxwell and Gary W. Evans, "Museums as Learning Settings," 4.

enter a museum needs to feel that the space is interactive, to give them a sense of control.¹⁷

Limiting the options that are available to guests is a way to do that. This is much easier to do in a confined physical exhibit than on a website with flashy ads and personal notifications flashing on the screen.

Going back to the *The Learning Environments Research* article that covered some social positives of physical museums is useful for a discussion on educational benefits as well.

Museums are common hot spots for children because of field trips and at its core, the article is prudent to the roles they have in the education of children. The authors conclude that child—peer and child—environment learning types play a big role in when they overlap with children’s use of technology.¹⁸ Independent use of technology is valid and does not require travel, but it misses many of the favorable aspects presented by peers and the environment. For example, one natural history museum provides an organized storytelling activity that incorporates hands-on activities with peer and teacher social dynamics.¹⁹ Technology cannot as of yet recreate these benefits for young minds.

Above all, educational benefits should be held in the highest priority for modern museums. The priority in design and execution of daily operation and long term planning should put education at the forefront. It just so happens that providing a physical arena for learning to take place is crucial in optimizing museum performance in this regard.

There is no need to be picky on which area of benefit, be it social, economical, or educational, one must choose. The three categories can all benefit naturally from the physical

¹⁷ Maxwell and Evans, 5.

¹⁸ Andre L.T. Durksen & M.L. Volman, 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

institution of the museum in a way that the digital has not been able to emulate. Going forward in the future it may prove useful to flesh out what each museum needs on an individual basis, like The National Museum of Science and Technology did in Taiwan.

Through these three elements, the future of museums, even in the physical world, looks bright. Digital only museums and experimental online outlets are becoming more and more available with new accessibility and usability features. While these advantages are hard to deny, the industry must keep in mind the numerous reasons that physical museums have broad impacts on social behavior, economy, and education. There are numerous advantages to continuing the exploration of physical museums. Although the digital has a tempting allure of profitability and accessibility in the moment, cultivating in person experiences will pay off for future generations.

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