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Farewell to cabinets of curiosity

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Have museums become relics of the past? Andrew Fong of Allen Jack+Cottier believes they are undergoing a renaissance, building new currency through playful, dynamic and broad engagement.



Many traditional institutions are seeing the trend of diminished visitation and therefore diminished funding. As a result, cultural spaces are undergoing a monumental shift as museums reimagine themselves to broaden their reach to new audiences. The future of museums is fast evolving through innovative initiatives in public programs, participatory culture, play and learning. So what role do museums play in our current context?

In the not-too-distant past, museums were synonymous with formal adult-focused environments – a culture very much built around the protocol of ‘look but don’t touch’. There were some exceptions, such as the Exploratorium in San Francisco and Experimentarium in Hellerup, Denmark, or our beloved Questacon in ACT; however these ‘niche’ museums specifically target children and families. The sector has since evolved with many major cultural institutions positioning intergenerational and cross-cultural engagement at the forefront of their future vision.

Now, museums are looking through the lens of users to better engage visitors and reposition themselves as hubs for collaboration, knowledge and inspiration. Exciting times are ahead, with an array of pioneering proposals being put into play to make them relevant again.

The evolution of public programs

Powerhouse Parramatta demonstrates an unprecedented leap in how museums define themselves. Although the museum itself is currently under construction, the project has drawn enormous amounts of attention from the community and media over the past few years.

The Powerhouse is broadening its reach by supporting the western Sydney region with the development of this new major cultural institution. Powerhouse Parramatta in turn promises expansive floor space and international standard exhibition and programs spaces. However, what’s truly unique is the inclusion of initiatives such as the Lang Walker Academy.

This initiative will include world-class STEM education spaces with dorm rooms so students and teachers can stay overnight. The offering will better connect schools and tertiary education institutions with authentic and immersive learning and is particularly positive for those students and teachers who have long travel times or come from interstate or overseas. Knowledge, inspiration, resources and experiences which would not ordinarily be easily accessible, will now be on the doorstep of this rapidly growing region.

Urban-scale intervention

Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), established by David Walsh in 2011, has led the way in reinventing how people interact with museums and its wildly successful winter solstice festival, Dark Mofo, has been especially influential. With the first Dark Mofo held in 2013, this isn’t a new initiative, however, it’s taken the role and identity of museums into entirely new territories through provocative works and an urban-scale presence.

I had the chance to experience the multi-sensory, immersive nature of Dark Mofo this past June. The festival offers installations and exhibitions in MONA’s main Berriedale location (situated within the Moorilla winery). It also extends the reach through its community with initiatives such as the Winter Feast and intimate installations and performances throughout the city.

Central Hobart came alive at night with intergenerational masses of locals and tourists slipping through alleyways, exploring industrial warehouses and discovering ominous, unexpected, yet intriguing provocations.

It was a truly memorable experience and certainly the antithesis of what you might imagine a traditional museum offering to be.

Play in museums

Takaharu and Yui Tezuka, founders of Tokyo-based architecture practice Tezuka Architects, have played an important role in the cultural sector with their design of Play! Museum in Tokyo, which is entirely focused on play. Ambience, materiality and textural qualities within the museum are thoughtfully curated to offer joyful experiences for both children and adults through the making of objects, food, sound and movement. Takaharu is also the director of the museum and imparts his depth of knowledge on children and play to create memorable moments for families.

Play! Museum offers a dynamic range of installations centred around a 'large dish', which provides opportunities for children and adults to be messy and run around, or relax and reflect on a cushioned surface while listening to visitor performances on the grand piano. The museum offers a space for intuitive, unstructured play and as a result, visitors have the agency to lead their experience with pure imagination.

Long gone are the days when museums comprised solely of 'cabinets of curiosity' and art galleries were exclusively for the elite. While this recent shift may see the traditional museum buff stunned by radical change, we're seeing a future that has its doors open, with infinite knowledge,

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innovation, creativity and culture that is accessible to all.

There will always be a place in museums for the independent visitor to dwell, study and immerse themselves in static objects, to be engaged and to play, collaborate and ultimately learn the narratives of the past, present and future however we are in a much-needed period of change and this will keep our museums relevant and alive.

The blurring of lines between culture, community and learning invites visitors, whether aged nine or 99, to be engaged and to play, collaborate and ultimately learn the narratives of the past, present and future, for generations to come. I am reinvigorated by the transformative shift ahead of us.

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