Cultural infrastructure: urbanising the museum?

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Museum of London & Theatrum Mundi

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Introduction

What does it mean for a museum to be urban? How do you exhibit what a city is?

The Museum of London is making plans to leave its purpose-built modernist structure at London Wall and renovate part of the old Smithfield Market as a new facility. As it does so, it has the opportunity to transform its relationship to the city spatially, socially, and culturally.

Theatrum Mundi worked together with Museum of London to stimulate a critical debate about the implications of translating a museum of the city from a singular, purposebuilt architecture to a plural, pre-existing fabric: in other words, what it means to urbanise the museum.

Urbanity, amongst other things, is a concentration of differences – functional, social, and temporal – and of tensions between these differences. To be a museum of London is surely to be a museum of this heterogeneity, but can a museum operate in an 'urban' way or only represent the effects of urbanity through artefacts and information?

In order to address this question, we invited participants coming from various background — curators, programme managers, academics, historians, researchers — to participate to a discussion on 24th April 2018 organised around two broad themes. On one hand 'Production and display'¹, on the other 'Day and night'².

The aim of this workshop was to think critically about what museums of the city are for, and how this might inform the way they are made, rather than to answer specific questions in the design of the Museum of London. With this project as a starting point, we hope to think about the conditions that constitute urbanity, and by what means a museum can communicate or create those conditions.

The present document is a short report summarising the discussion that took place on that day. Through graphic design, we have put the emphasis on three key elements:

quotes examples suggestion

¹ Cities are machines for the production of forms (social, material, symbolic) and for the representation of those forms in cultural spaces. The role of museums is weighted towards the latter, but how much of the former is needed for a museum to be urban? Can the museum meaningfully support making, or even industry, and what kinds? Should productive activities be put on display to truly represent the city, or only the forms they make?

²Urban form supports a rhythm of changing activities from day to day, and the night is increasingly recognised as a time for culture, labour, and public life. These temporal differences allow for social diversities, but those that use the city at night often suffer from inequality of provision. What kinds of rhythms can the museum incorporate? How could it change from day to night? What would the relationship be between users and uses at different times?

Participants

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Finbarr Whooley Director of Content Museum of London
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Paul Williams Director Stanton Williams
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Movement and starting points

The spatial typology of the grand cultural institution is more one of a single access point, which is used to share information and prepare people for what is to follow, perhaps with a single subsidiary entrance relating to a different function than the main collection. A single entrance suggests gatekeeping of the order and establish the mode in which a collection is encountered, a control over the narrative, and a clear transition into the museum space through a kind of initiation.

The logic of commercial architecture is that it requires multiple access points, so that there is a flow through the building to bring footfall past different shops. Westfield, for example, is now looking to emulate streets that are open at both ends, for both reasons of footfall and to blur the distinction between 'public' and privately-managed commercial space. The privatisation of some commercial streets through ownership by retail management companies makes them almost indistinguishable from the Westfield model of open-air streets in a shopping mall. Though singularly owned and managed, they rely on multiplicity of choice of destinations and routes through. For example, commercial streets that are embedded into the urban fabric are both destinations and routes from one place to another. They have 'to-movement' as well as 'through-movement'³. Their economic value is predicated on both creating opportunities for transactional exchange by overlaying commercial display onto streets with instrumental value as transport infrastructures.

³ Bill Hillier and Tim Stonor, 'Strategic Urban Design', City Planning Review 284 (25 June 2010): 4.

What is implied when the same spatial logic is transferred to a cultural institution? Multiple access points allow for, or dictate, a fragmented narrative. This is amplified by the diversity of historical and functional conditions surrounding the different access points to the market building. The surrounding urban fabric offers a set of distinct starting points for narratives that can be carried into the museum.

"You're coming in from lots of different historical points, whether it's St Bart's, or whether it is from Charter House, these all have very significant different meanings for the narrative of your chronology of London. So, in one way, this is, you know, where do you want to start the story? Or do you want to create an entry point which takes a story away and then you re-create it within the space? Because you can tell the whole history of London just by walking around Smithfield's. So, does it, as it were, outside the building there's already a cabinet of wonders. It's whether you want to make some sense of it once you've come inside." — Leo Hollis

This "kaleidoscopic" narrative itself is urban: rather than encountering something through a choreographed single access point with a grand façade, there are different perspectives and trajectories for arrival. Though the blurring of the boundaries between public and private is concerning in the context of ownership and management of commercial streets, it could offer a valuable model for the museum, deformalizing the relationship between inside and outside so that rather than a clear transition into the museum, parts of it could also have 'through-movement'. This notion of urbanity — overlaying functions onto one another — could imply conceiving some parts of the museum space as having instrumental value as movement space, as well as symbolic value as display space, like the commercial street.

The market building already offers a hybrid architecture of 'institution' inside, and 'city' outside. Could this be retained by ensuring a difference in occupation between the inner and outer 'crusts', for example by populating the outside purely with commerce in a way that reflects both its history and the transaction-based logic on which the city of London was developed? Arguably, this would constitute the museum acting like London rather than representing it. This leads to the "Nando's question" (Finbar Whooley): would the most inclusive and representative food offer for the site be a chicken shop?

"The pavements and streets around the museum are already participating in the business of encountering the objects that tell the stories and the history" — Richard Martin

"I think that gradient of city-facing things to internal-institutional things is what we want to keep alive, actually, in the future project." — Matthew Beaumont

Include a Nando's and use it to talk about the ways that the poultry we consume in London is produced, transported, and stored.

Having objects displayed on the outer crust, so the narrative and the curating have already started before you come in.

Invite other institutions to occupy the outer crust.

Transactions and supply chain

The market, as well as a spatial typology, offers analogies with different modes of exchange and transaction that could take place within and around the museum in relation to different aspects of its architecture. For example, window shopping is pure display: products are on display in the vitrines of traditional shop fronts that are used to communicate products visually without bringing other senses into play, similarly to traditional museum displays. Shops, however, also invite customers in to convert that display into different kinds of encounters, both from a social and sensorial point of view, with versions of the goods displayed in the window. A market offers a different model again: rather than there being separate spaces for different goods, customers enter one space with the possibility of multiple transactions with different people and a direct presentation of the goods for sale, without a vitrine to communicate about them in advance.

How much could the ways that the outer and inner crust of the museum work be based upon these models?

"In a market you touch, you negotiate, you chat, there's banter, there's energy, and often in museums that's slightly lacking. And the passivity of a visitor doing the gaze, the reading, the press behaviour, that's not an urban museum, that's not an exciting museum" — Sara Wajid

Storefront for Art and Architecture New York. The façade of the centre already works as part of the display, allowing a view inside but also acting as an artefact in the cultural offer of the museum itself.

As well as different ways of displaying and communicating artefacts, these models also imply different backstage activities — supply chains, production and so on, that animate the city in different ways. Many shops in the City of London have also been spaces for artisans to carry out their trades as well as sell their products. Their equivalents today are artists, makers, and tech freelancers, though they do not usually produce and display their products in the same spaces.

Is it valuable to create space for production in the outer crust or would this only ever be tokenistic? Which contemporary artisans could benefit from doing their crafts in visible spaces like shop fronts?

The existing Smithfield market buildings represent the institutionalisation of food supply, having been provided as a urban infrastructure to improve meat supply. Goods arrived through industrial scale rail infrastructures bringing animals from across the country, mixed with multiplicity of individual exchanges drawing from the suburbs via droving routes. Ancillary industries around the market such as leather goods makers were stimulated by the meat trade taking place inside. Can the transactions going on within the museum have externalities that stimulate new trades and crafts in the surrounding urban fabric? How can the museum also set up flows of materials that link it into the wider city, by drawing on production taking place in the urban fringes?

"Trade offers a network model of connections, of multiple connections. A decentralised set of relations where you have, obviously, that site, but that site is connecting in multiple ways to other sites... I was really interested in the ways in which rail networks are also part of these multiple connections... So, I think it's

an interesting challenge to take on some of that geography of connections and build it into the design and the purpose of the museum. But, also on the other hand, I think that trade has its limits, right? And in a city where commodification seems to be the only response to producing space, I would want the museum to resist that." — Isaac Marrero

At the same time, it is important to avoid romanticizing activities that longer takes place. Rather, the market building's link to trade suggests paying attention to the city as a set of flows of materials and thinking about how internal flows within the museum can interact with urban-scale ones. Rather than recreating historical activities, what are the contemporary equivalents of things that worked within the particular texture of the market as it was? What elements of the building lend themselves to different structures such as commons, state-provided services, commercial spaces?

Entering the museum in itself is also a transaction. Having the museum be free makes some people suspicious as to whether there is another side of the contract they are not aware of, particularly as supposedly 'free' transactions that take place with social media platforms, for example, turn out to be demanding personal information of us that many were not aware of. The museum is a vertical benevolent model: its resources are given scarcity and 'bestowed' upon audience. Is Nando's — representing everyday commerce — a more democratic model of exchange and transaction than the inequality of an institution with value gifting it to an audience without?

"One of the things that's seductive about the transaction or commercial interaction is that it's quite clear as an offer and a goal" — Sara Wajid

A reverse transaction in the shops outside, that become points 'where you solicit contributions of objects' to build up a collection constituted by Londoners. A 'Museum of Londoners' indicates co-creation of content.

Civic Infrastructure

To what extent can the museum be a setting in which social production takes place? Libraries, community centres and halls, for example, are places that people enact social functions — local political decision-making takes place, new associations are formed, and so on. Do museums fit into the same logic?

Among the potential examples to draw inspiration from: Intermediæ ⁴ at Matadero in Madrid. Creation of an open space with good temperature control and Wi-Fi as basic infrastructures for use. No objects or programming — instead it is allowed to exist as an empty space. This led to a productive confusion when it was first created, but slowly (over several years) was adopted by the neighbourhood and used for 15-M assemblies. It is hard institutionally to defend the need for non-structured spaces.

British Pavilion⁵ at the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture. Trying to create space for genuine production and participation — while still proposing some

⁴ More information on their website, https://www.intermediae.es.

⁵ More information on the British Council's website, https://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/2018-exhibition.

parameters to engage with the space. Providing a position gives people something to respond to. Opening out and offering something might not work together.

"What does openness actually mean in a city that has multiple parameters, physical and otherwise. People don't interact as much as we like to say that they do. People actually really like privacy, and this idea of offering space as a gift is, I think, a really loaded one... There is an agenda behind openness, whatever happens" — Gwen Webber

The question, then, is whether the museum as a civic infrastructure requires physical openness, or if social production in the form of active political and civic decision-making actually need architecturally closed and protected spaces. A community meeting will take place behind closed doors, so how does a museum translate political openness into architectural form? There is a tension, as museums and civic spaces actually require different forms. What are the elements that allow people to take ownership and for the civic to take hold?

Another issue is in who this civic space is for. The Museum of London is not in a neighbourhood in the same way as Centquatre⁶ in Paris or Matadero⁷ in Madrid. There is not a local populace that can take hold of unstructured open space and start to use it habitually as part of their everyday world. It is a 'slightly floating entity' — not a national institution, nor a very local one. How can the museum be a skills provider? The role of volunteers is mentioned — opportunities for them to learn transferrable skills. You also have curators working with local communities, it goes beyond traditional curatorship to be social work.

"Centquatre was developed in relation to the neighbourhood which is still arguably one of the poorest districts in Paris... and [with the MoL] the question is that there are virtually no inhabitants in the city of London. I checked and there's around 9,000 people living here. There are 326 districts in England, and City of London is the 325th in terms of population" — Justinien Tribillon

On the other hand, it has to think about multiple publics and understands its responsibility in relation to networks of international flows of people — tourists and migrants. Roughly half the museum's visitors are from overseas, and by visiting museums, Londoners encounter people from other places. This challenges the idea of the civic museum, which is a local resource, has responsibility to a local population, and could actually exclude those international visitors.

"It is not just a museum for Londoners — museums are part of international networks. We really need to be thinking about multiple publics. Even the idea of the museum with a civic institution, I think we have to question now because again we know it's not just about London, but it's about London in relation to other cities all around the world. When we as Londoners visit museums in London, we meet people from all over the world in their spaces. We don't meet each other, and that's quite an interesting condition of the space." — Clare Melhuish

⁶ The City of Paris's former municipal caretaker facility, redeveloped as a cultural space in 2008.

⁷ Madrid's former slaughterhouse, redeveloped as cultural hub in 2007.

A museum about itself, displaying the histories and trajectories that all the people, goods, energy, money there takes, showing how a museum in a specific location is part of networks of flows at different scales.

What makes the Museum of London a museum, and not the South Bank Centre or a community centre, though, is the collections. The museum is not just a spatial infrastructure for activities to take place, but a set of artefacts. If people use the museum but do not engage with the collections (see Brooklyn Museum example below) is that a failed engagement? Again, this challenges the idea of the museum as an open space: its raison d'être is not to provide empty space but actually to enclose and protect a shared cultural heritage. The imperative of a civic space might actually be detrimental to the museum's ability to preserve its collection. It could, then, see the museum as purely a site for public engagement and store the collections away from the most valuable central London space. The collection can still be seen, though, as an active thing: it can be an infrastructure and a pretext for other kinds of production such as developing language skills by handling objects.

"But on the other hand, if you really create access, intellectual access to those collections, having them on site is not monumentalising and hopefully it could be about intellectual access, and popularising, rendering them the means of knowledge production, or creative production, or any kind of production for the people who own them. And if you ship them off somewhere further out, you're just replicating the privatisation of the centre of London, rather than pushing against that" — Sara Wajid

What are the limits of the civic responsibility of the museum? Are the museum's core functions jeopardised by its attempt to fill the gaps left by the decline of other services, and does it even endorse that decline by agreeing to do so? In reference to the night, but relevant for its civic role, is the potential of the museum working with local charities to tackle things like homelessness or providing a refuge and language service for migrant women. What kinds of skills does it want to stimulate in its community?

Two opposing views were offered:

"The museum seems to be taking up the slack that the rest of the city can't provide, and I think that's putting a big burden on it. Just because everything else is failing, we can't give in and expect the museum to respond to that. It's sort of going back to the idea that whether it's night or day, the museum needs to be a cabinet of wonder and a memory palace, and a civic space, but we can't put all of these things at the same time" — Paul Williams

"I might disagree with that... I do think cultural realm does need to respond to it rather than to continue to be just a place of provision of joy, it also has to provide for the people. It's back to that idea of, who's coming? Who do you want in those doors? If they are a younger group, they probably feel the pangs of: 'I'm probably not going to get a job; I'm probably not going to get a university education.' I think cultural institutions do have to acknowledge that systems have let people down, the Government has let people down. How do you then provide culturally with objects, with curation, provide a space of refuge and intrigue, while

acknowledging that we're not in those glory times of just being able to display objects and have beautiful buildings. I think we're beyond that" — Gwen Webber

Improvising the museum

Following on from issues of spatial openness — how much the possibility of civic ownership is constituted by a lack or a presence of boundaries within the museum – is the question of temporal openness. To what degree does programming constrain or indeed facilitate possibilities for community ownership and informal use? The examples of Madrid and Paris are particularly relevant here: Matadero and Centquatre have 'curated' emptiness and freespace by leaving major aspects of their space physically 'empty' in order to act as a catalyst for grassroots cultural activities. The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, on the other hand, has interpreted freespace as the opportunity to present a timetable of different activities rather than a fixed physical form.

How much does *freespace* require a timetable? If there is no structure in place, does its usefulness break down? But then who controls the timetable and invites in different uses at different times? If we think about the museum as 'improvised', this does not necessarily mean a complete absence of an imposed rhythm, which can enable improvisation to take place.

"I can walk into [South Bank Centre] and it is genuinely the people's palace, for me. [...] it has a hierarchy and I don't mind that hierarchy. I'm not a member, but I know that I'm not really bothered by people who pay for that membership, and have that space that gives them the penthouse moment because I know that actually down at the ground at the scrubby level, there's going to be some kind of odd tea dance or a rave, or maybe a poet performing... I think that you have to curate public space because that activity is what draws people back to it.... I think that you have to curate public space because that activity is what draws people back to it. I think an empty space is a different challenge, and you are experts that have a duty to the people, but that duty comes with information and understanding of things that they may not, and that's the beauty of that interaction, I think, that transaction is, we have things here, come and enjoy them." — Gwen Webber

A space where you can be a passer-by or a participant, representative of London's openness. No frisking at the door, no strict instruction on the way I behave but a certain level of security thanks to staff present.

The 24-hour museum

What does it mean to be a 24-hour museum? The night is more and more acknowledged in urban policy as a valuable space within the 24-hour cycle of the city: where leisure, culture, economic production takes place. What kind of cultural programming could happen for the museum? The night is changing, including in Smithfield, with the wholesale meat market probably moving away within 10 years or so and Fabric's future in question. Is it the role of the museum to preserve that night life? This would constitute becoming an agent that

curates and protects processes and activities in the city around it as well as collecting objects that tell the story of its past.

Is nightlife by its nature contemporary? Aside from nostalgia nights, people go out to experience the immediacy of the city as it is, rather than to memorialise it. Tate Tanks are to some degree beginning to act as a nightclub — their particularly subterranean, enclosed architecture and acoustic lend themselves to it. But does nightlife belong in the museum itself, or should it be an opportunity to draw attention to the other kinds of activity that constitute that nocturnal? Those activities, though, might be some of the activities that are the lowest paid, with the poorest conditions and stability, like cleaning. An urban museum and a museum of the way London works needs to valorise those kinds of labour equally to things that already are viewed with value, like cultural and civic production, but doing so also runs the risk of adding extra pressure to those already difficult conditions by turning them into a performance.

Rather than replicating existing activities and trying to act as an alternative to things that are already taking place, the museum might think of stimulating new functions that the nocturnal city can be for. Can the museum use scheduling to transform civic and cultural opportunity for those who use the area at night, whether they be clubbers or market workers? There is a tension again between deciding what those opportunities should be, programming them, and offering them, or making the nocturnal museum a free space and standing back, even through periods of uncertainty, to let those who use the city at night find ways to occupy it. The 'night school' for example is a nocturnal urban culture that the museum could learn from. On the other hand, is it simply about providing basic services: could the museum provide safe and clean public toilets at night? And what time is the night? This is different for everyone, depending on their own personal rhythms. Are we talking about what happens at 8pm, or at 1, 2, and 3am?

Is London really a 24-hour city — or is it mainly a PR exercise? It is also important to acknowledge what does not and cannot happen at night. Interesting element to come out of the discussion is the way to curate, and layer the collections:

"[...] to play with architecture design and temporality because you're having different layers [...]. Like, the Roman in the bottom with the exhibition which might be more traditional curatorial human historical, but then you might have a different temporality in a middle layer, and again a different temporality. Then the top layer is constantly linking with a 24-hour city" — Monica Degen

Sound could also be fundamental at night: using the audio archive to make the building a portal from which content could ripple outwards at night when it is easier to hear. The night, then, is also a different set of acoustic conditions as well as visual ones.

Equally, whilst designing with light at night has obvious potentials, creating opportunities for darkness could be valuable, and has a socio-political link to Smithfield's history of transgression: prostitution, blood, etc. Light has the potential to work against the draw of the night time for those who are deemed transgressive but is of great value for those who are forced to use the night, who are often immigrants and people of colour – there is a highly racialized aspect to the rhythm of the museum. The night might not have to literally mean whether the museum is open after a certain time, but more about how it deals with the kinds of things that happen at night: queerness, the edgy, the hidden, sex work. How does the museum reflect this sense of the whole city rather than just the 'vanilla' city? It could

recognise its role as a sanctuary for young people needing to escape spaces controlled by teachers and parents.

"Sound has a much more porous boundary. It's harder to contain it. It could be an interesting experience to produce something with the sounds of the city and the sounds of the museum has collected over time, to propose a museum that is constructed around that sonic experience" — Isaac Marrero

Different layers of collection, curated in different ways. The 24-hour collection is available on the outside, you can see and visit it overnight, and it is used to illuminate the night. Do the collections have to be inside the museum at all? Place them in doctor's surgeries and local libraries, freeing up the museum itself.

"I don't think we should just associate lateness with the music, or more activity. Actually, the single best time to see the collection displays at Tate Modern is 9 o'clock on a Saturday night. It's quiet. It's really nice to be there. And actually, the rhythms, a lateness that responds to quietness or relaxation or reflection is equally valid as a rave in a car park" — Richard Martin

"People imagine futures for London in the past, and whether that would become part of the story telling, and part of the way the museum is physically convenient as well." — Sophia Psarra

Can the things taking place at different times in the museum, then, be completely separate, without the need to interact, like the meat market and the nightclub at Smithfield? This might require an approach to displaying collections that sees the museum as a backdrop.

If you include the activities that are easily 'night-time' such as a food market, once the people are there, then you can think of how you can attract them to the museum, to the collections. The collections placed against this kind of activity could be unique in bringing more of a historical context to new markets in London. It is important to be careful, though, about whether this is just a case of amplifying things that are already successful when there are many tensions between different kinds of market or other activities. Would a car boot sale though be an appropriate form of market in relation to London, and a MacDonald's more accessible? These questions return to the Nando's question: should the museum amplify or counteract what is already present in the urban environment, and if so which aspects of it?

"Brooklyn Museum's rave⁸ is kind of an amazing failure, but it was such a success as a rave venue that they continued to do that because they thought that was, again, this kind of provision for their, not just their community locally but more broadly, and it became a destination for that" — Gwen Webber

"Something that we're exploring through some drawings at the moment. If you imagine the museum above ground as a kind of cake with candles on it, through the night you're slowly blowing out candles. So, the light is diminishing across the site, but maybe there's one candle left which is a corner, the bar on the corner which maybe does open until 5. So, you go from the entire plot to maybe

⁸ Brooklyn Museum organises a rave in its car park, it was aimed to bring new audiences to the museum, but it failed because those coming to the rave did not come back for the museum.

inside that extinguishes, then the edges, they diminish and then it pulls to one corner which is maybe the bit near Fabric that's useful. That's kind of a way home beacon or something." — Asif Khan

Brooklyn Museum rave party in New York City and the T-Site bookshop⁹ opened until 5 Am in Tokyo [they have now reduced their opening hours to 7AM-2AM].

Conclusions: a museum of the city is a museum of its struggles

Aside from thinking about what the city is and has been, the conversation concluded by thinking about what it should not be. This raises a fundamental philosophical question: are museums' roles to reflect or to change society? Can curation and protection of the past fit into the same institution, physically and organisationally, as the production of new forms of politics, culture, and society? Perhaps the way for the museum to resist certain aspects of the city is more material: through the simple creation of attention, space, quiet, and so on, rather than trying to act the same way as a community organisation or a political meeting place.

"Terms like refuge and sanctuary also remind us that we've talked a lot about wanting this institution to reflect the city, but there's also aspects of the city that it might want to resist and challenge, and actually be a space away from as well" — Richard Martin

"A museum in a city for me has to reflect the city struggles as much as it does its pleasures and its leisure" — Gwen Webber

"I think the museum would be interesting if it engages people with how you can imagine relative futures, and how we can actually take agency in their hands. How they can bring a change themselves" — Sophia Psarra

"The origin of many of our old museums comes out of the discipline of anthropology... They were also people who were going out there and doing fieldwork and learning about societies comparatively and bringing back that knowledge as well, and I think that's something we could build on in our urban context. Again, looking towards the future and how we get to better understand this city and the other cities with which we interact" — Claire Melhuish

"The dynamics of the city is for me, the people, and the life. And if that will be incorporated by leaving things to happen, and not over curating... people and creating a public life. I want life in the museum" — Monica Degen

⁹ More info on the bookshop's website: http://real.tsite.jp/daikanyama/english/.