Memoria est futuro: ‘Futurescaping the Museum’

Keywords: Design Culture; Cultural Heritage; Digital Cultural Heritage; Museology

A conversation held at DRS2016 - Brighton
June 29th 2016, 4:00 – 5:30 PM.
This document is conversation proposal and documentation in one.

Catalysts

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Introduction

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary Design Research Society conference, this Conversation ‘Futurescaping the Museum’ explored design as both a form of cultural heritage and catalyst for socio-cultural agency as part of a curated open exchange about museum futures. The confluence of this subject is extremely timely and relevant given the Victoria and Albert Museum’s transformative vision and influential, catalysing role in the redevelopment of the Olympic Park precinct in East London. As part of London’s single most significant cultural infrastructure project since the 1850s, the museum is approaching the V&A East project as a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity to redesign the museum in response to the digital, democratic age. In this Conversation session, an invited panel of catalysts initiated an exploratory dialogue with participants about the topic of museum futures through the different lenses of data, materiality, participatory cultures and curatorial design.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
This overview provides a summary account of the orientation of the session, its structure and the scope of discussions that it facilitated, along with additional biographic and bibliographic details.

The public platform of the DRS conference provided an incredible opportunity to bring the larger research and development project that the V&A is embarking upon through VARI (the V&A Research Institute) into contact with the collective knowledge represented by the international design research community. By fostering a generous, open dialogue between stakeholders, including design academics and researchers, creative practitioners and museum professionals, the session drew upon “futurescaping” as its conceptual basis. According to Superflux1, design futurescaping borrows from the ethnographic concept of “thick description” (with reference to the work of Clifford Geertz2) in an effort to more fully grasp the meaning of cultural communications. Through analysing actions, objects and practices from the deeply immersive perspective of engaged practice, ‘we can begin to detail a “slice” through future society – the product of multiple trends, actors, agents, technologies, and “thick” meanings’. (Superflux 2011, 7) Studio co-founder Anab Jain describes how futurescaping workshops serve as a springboard for strategic thinking and invention. She makes an important clarification about the way that futurescaping can be used to support how design works with existing structures, cultural content and social values when stating that ‘when we talk about the future, this isn’t something that comes at the expense of the present’. Rather, she continues: ‘When we talk about the future, we are expressing our interest in the processes and dynamics that shape the present moment: in the tools and products we use, the things we experience, the ways we think about ourselves, and the world we inhabit’. (Superflux 2012) Reinforcing this orientation, cultural theorist Katherine Hayles points out that:

Nothing is more problematic than predicting the future. If the record of past predictions is any guide, the one thing we can know for sure is that when the future arrives, it will be different from the future we expected. Instructed by the pandemic failure to project accurately very far into the future, my interest is not to engage in this kind of speculation but rather to explore the influence that such predictions have on our present concepts. (Hayles 2005, cited in Jain 2012)

This Conversation session sought to raise some of the major issues involved in rethinking the role of the museum as part of what might be described as a “collect-and-share” economy. How the “programme architecture” of the museum in the 21st Century might be constituted along these lines and how open source or peer-to-peer activities reflect a shifting cultural landscape were also focal points of the resulting discussions. As distinct from attempting to more overtly “future-proof” the museum in the face of such transformation, the session afforded the chance to trouble museological conventions and orthodoxies by asking: What are the new dynamics of cultural innovation and knowledge creation that museum

1 Superflux is an Anglo-Indian design practice co-located in London and Ahmedabad.
institutions can embody to promote and empower public participation, co-authorship and citizenship? Such provocations challenge a reconsideration of how museums have done things in the past and turn attention instead towards the future; thereby demanding us – as designers and curators, educators and researchers – to speculate upon what kind of catalysing role(s) cultural institutions can – and should – play in the postdigital era.³

Figure 1: Futurescaping the Museum – Digitally composited montage of worksheets from the DRS Conversation session blended with Henry Cole’s ‘Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of all Countries’, 1867 (reproduced from exhibition poster for V&A applied arts project ‘A World of Fragile Parts’, the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, 2016).

‘Montage has the immediate advantage of employing the familiar and, by selection and rearrangement, transforming it into the new. At the very least, this enables us to see new potential in the existing and obviates the need to begin – in the usual utopian sense – from scratch.’ (Lebbeus Woods 2010/2016, cited in Superflux 2011, 9-10)

The Session

Introduction

‘Futurescaping the Museum’ revolved upon interactive conversations that encouraged a mixture of expert and alternative perspectives to be shared. The Conversation session itself was designed to function optimally within a 90-minute time frame for an audience of 20 participants. In order to facilitate a dynamic form of exchange, the room was divided into four “stations” that smaller groupings of participants were directed to move between on a rotating basis. Each of the four catalysts was based at one of these tables and hosted discussions and co-design activities with migrating groups of ~5 participants. By keeping these interactive conversations to 15-minutes duration, a sense of energy was maintained throughout the session – although, in retrospect, this had the consequence of short-circuiting numerous lines of inquiry, we hope to harness and reconnect some of those threads as part of further dissemination efforts in the near future.

Curating an open exchange about museum futures (with a focus on the Victoria and Albert Museum’s major V&A East development)

Before embarking on this participatory phase, the background and scope of the Conversation session was briefly outlined, as well as introducing the invited catalysts and their roles. At this point, Marta Ajmar (Deputy Director of the V&A Research Institute) shared a short presentation relating to current developments at the V&A focusing upon its V&A East expansion. Her generous insights provided background information, context and a “real-world” perspective to the session.

V&A East is a significant expansion for the museum that will take shape on the site of the 2012 London Olympics. Located in the area between the Westfield Stratford City retail complex and the Olympic Stadium, the V&A will share this new cultural and educational precinct with new campuses of the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London and Sadler’s Wells Theatre. Set to reactivate the legacy of “Albertopolis” and the values imbued by its civic ideals, “Olympicopolis” – as it has been termed – will be characterised by an outward-facing emphasis driven by partnerships with communities and institutions at a local levels as well as nationally and globally. Ambitiously, V&A East aspires:

to create a new model for how cultural and educational organisations can work in the future, with increased collaboration, a real sense of connection to the local community and a desire to support emerging talent and lead new research. The V&A vision for Stratford will complement the existing V&A sites. The new venue will present more of the Museum’s outstanding collections in never-before-seen ways and greatly enhance access to 1000 years of design, architecture, art and performance. It will encourage public participation in almost every aspect of museum activities with storage, research and conservation spaces that are visible to the public. Permanent galleries on site will include the first dedicated museum space in
the UK to document the full breadth of digital design and begin to write the design history of that fast moving field. (V&A Museum 2015)

In 2015, Dublin-based architects O’Donnell + Tuomey were awarded the architectural commission for the V&A’s new galleries based on their concept inspired by an 18th Century Japanese cabinet box. In seeking to offer improved access to both the collections it houses along with the expertise that it hosts, the museum’s new spaces and facilities will place a spotlight on making, process and skill. Occupying 18,000-square-metres, V&A East will include public areas and a series of gallery “neighbourhoods” that will contain dedicated spaces for temporary exhibitions and collection-based display, learning and research, as well as residency studios, museum offices, preparation and storage spaces. According to the schema conceived by O’Donnell + Tuomey, at entrance-level, a “Civic Room” serves as an open and flexible zone informing the programme of the building as a whole. This transitional layer creates access to both a temporary gallery below ground (identified as a “jewel box”) and a succession of galleries and spaces that span three floors above (whose function within the overall complex is indicated by the metaphors of “lab” and “cloud”). The design also promises new approaches to the interface between physical and digital throughout.

In conjunction with these architectural expressions, V&A East also entails important infrastructural developments. One of those is the V&A Research Institute. VARI will play an integral role in delivering upon many of the projects larger ambitions. Conceptualized as a “Thing-Tank”, VARI is a platform for taking the museum’s approach to research, teaching, display and interpretation into a new phase. To close her introductory briefing, Marta Ajmar posed a series of questions that these new partnerships and public-focused strategic priorities hinge upon:

*How do we ensure wide, structural, continuous participation in planning and delivering these new facilities?*

*How can we embed a philosophy of “openness” to collaboration, public engagement and new forms of learning and working, inspired by ideas of co-design and co-production?*

*How can we instigate new ways of generating knowledge-production that are embedded in that collaborative approach?*

*What are the novel forms of collection-based engagement that we want to develop and showcase? (e.g. residences, experiential learning, interdisciplinary research, apprenticeships).*

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4 The programme for these spaces has been visualized in a series of commissioned designs by Sam Jacobs Studios. With the stated aim of conceptualizing the vision and brief for the museum’s role as a public, civic space, ‘An East London V&A’ explores ideas relating to mixed activities, display vernaculars, timescales (e.g. propositionally, how to achieve greater responsiveness through rethinking the “speed” of exhibition-making), chronology and the connection between the new gallery and its East London context. Ref.: http://www.samjacob.com/index.php/project/va-east-strategy/
Four “lenses”

(Now, turning attention to the participatory-aspect of the Conversation session) Four identified “lenses” were used to elicit a range of perspectives from participants on the subject of museum futures. Each catalyst was assigned to an individual “roundtable” and over the next 60-minutes a series of exploratory dialogues were hosted with rotating groups of participants guided by their designated theme. To initiate the conversation session, each catalyst offered a brief contextual introduction to the particular “lens” they are representing; these cases being: Teal Triggs (Participatory Cultures), George Oates (Data), Marta Ajmar (Materiality) and Vince Dziekan (Curatorial Design). Related themes or topics were used as a basis for exploration and debate. In addition to the discussion points offered in direct response to V&A East, the following prompts were used to activate interactions reflecting the range of interests of attending delegates by broaching a broader, encompassing discussion of design’s role in social and cultural transformation:

In what ways can curatorial programming, exhibition-making and mediated forms of museum communication respond to the systems literacies associated with digital transformation?

How can the relevance, sustainability and socio-cultural value of museums be ensured – and propagated – into a postdigital future?

What are the new dynamics of cultural innovation and knowledge creation that museum institutions can/should embody to promote and empower public participation, co-authorship and citizenship?

Discussions were instigated by employing a variety of conversational and co-design techniques over the course of an hour. At the close of the activity-based phase of the session, Elisa Giaccardi was invited to provide a short summative overview gleaned from “eavesdropping” on the preceding roundtable conversations. By acting as an interlocutor, Elisa was able share her candid observations of the different “roundtables” and successfully drew these otherwise disparate insights together before bringing the session to a close.

Postscript

In addition to this summary document, further post-conference dissemination is planned. These publication plans will seek to provide a more considered, fully contextualized and critically reflexive account for the numerous formative ideas that were generated by these conversations. Importantly, this process will also seek to acknowledge the input of the participants to the discussion by extending an invitation for contributions. We hope that, prospectively, this effort will both provide a representative documentary record of the conversations instigated at DRS2016 and stimulate further interest in tracking the continuing transformation of the museum today – and pursuing the promise it holds for the future.
References


About the Catalysts:

Dr Vince Dziekan is Director of Programme, Graduate Research in Design at Monash University. His research focuses on the impact of digital technologies on curatorial design and the implications of virtuality on exhibition-based practices. This interdisciplinary investigation is articulated in his book, Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum (Intellect, 2012). He is curator-at-large of MWX – the exhibition initiative of Museums and the Web, and associate editor of Curator: The Museum Journal. Earlier this year he was a visiting scholar at the V&A as part of an Australia Council-supported research residency. He is currently working on new publication projects with Bloomsbury and Routledge in the areas of new media art, museum media and communications.

Dr Marta Ajmar heads the V&A/RCA History of Design Postgraduate Programme at the Victoria and Albert Museum and is Deputy Director of the V&A Research Institute (VARI). She combines academic work with exhibition curation and has published on many aspects of design and materiality of the early modern period. One of her current research projects focuses on the interaction between design, embodied skill and knowledge creation in historical context and contemporary practice and on activating participant collaboration between different knowledge-makers. She has been the recipient of research awards from the Getty Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, the Leverhulme Trust and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

George Oates is a designer and friend to museums, libraries and archives. She created the Flickr Commons back in 2008, and has revolved around the sector ever since, at the Internet archive, as a research associate at the Smithsonian, and as art director at stamen Design. In 2014, she started her own design firm called Good, Form & Spectacle, centred on design in service to cultural heritage.
Professor Teal Triggs is Associate Dean, School of Communication, Royal College of Art, London. As a graphic design historian, critic and educator her research focuses primarily on graphic design history, self-publishing and feminism. Teal is co-editor with Leslie Atzmon of the forthcoming anthology The Graphic Design Reader (Bloomsbury). Her previous publications include the children’s book 'The School of Art' (Wide Eyed Editions) and Fanzines (Thames & Hudson). She is also Editor-in-Chief of the academic journals: Communication Design (Bloomsbury/ico-D), co-editor of Visual Communication (Sage) and Associate Editor, Reviews, for Design Issues (MIT Press). Teal is a Fellow of the International Society of Typographic Designers and the Royal Society of Arts.

Elisa Giaccardi is full professor of Interactive Media Design at the Department of Industrial Design Engineering, and one of the recipients of the TU Delft Technology Fellowship for top female scientists. Her background brings together humanities, digital media, and interaction design. She obtained her PhD in 2003 from the University of Plymouth, UK (CAiiA-STAR) with a dissertation on metadesign. She has been the recipient of several scholarships and grants, including a NSF Science of Design grant on participative systems and a EU FP7 ICT on open interaction design. She is the editor of Heritage and Social Media (Routledge, 2012), in which she uses heritage as a lens to understand how emerging information and communication technology and services are changing the way in which people participate in the assessment and passing on of the ‘things we value’.

Participants:

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