

Space creatures

The museum as urban intervention and as social forum

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First published in the Journal of Museum Education, Vol. 24, Nos. 1&2, pp.16 – 20

ABSTRACT

In addition to its hydra-headed role of collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting (the five fingers of Joseph Veach Noble's hand), the museum plays other, equally important roles in society. Foremost among these is the way in which the museum defines places where certain things can happen, and where certain kinds of experiences are validated. The museum creates a social space - space where the full richness of human interaction can be recognised and celebrated. Thus in addition to its role as steward of a collection or site of informal learning, the museum as a building project is often part of a City's strategic plans to better serve its citizens, enhance its reputation, or guide redevelopment and expansion. This paper looks at two European museum projects, one from the 80s (the Museum für Kunsthandwerk in Frankfurt am Main), and one from the 90s (newMetropolis in Amsterdam), and examines their aspirations, their successes, and their failures - both in terms of their 'museum' functions, and their urban ones.

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The container for the thing contained

Traditionally, museums have been publicly defined in terms of their content. Their names proudly announce to potential visitors the nature of the treasures guarded inside. The Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Kunsthalle. Of course there are exceptions - some museums declare their monumental gratitude to a founder (the Victoria and Albert, the Wallace Collection),

or their allegiance to a city (the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute) - but by and large their identity is inextricably bound up with the content of their collections.

This emphasis on content continues to mark the current definitions of the Museum. For instance, in 1970, in his 'Museum Manifesto', Joseph Veach Noble (Head of Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later president of the AAM) defined the museum's five principal responsibilities as: to collect, to conserve, to study, to interpret and to exhibit. These, he said, 'are like the five fingers of a hand, each independent, but united for a common purpose.' Five years later, ICOM agreed to the following definition, 'The museum is a permanent, non-profit, institution, at the service of society and its development, open to the public, which conducts research concerning the material evidence of man and his environment, acquires these, conserves them, and notably exhibits them to the ends of study, research and enjoyment.'

Not a word about people, beyond being at society's service, not a word about what people do in museums, and almost remarkably, not a word about the immense spaces museum buildings often enclose. After all, many people only know the museum as a building - they pass it every day, and never set a foot inside. It is as if the museum can be defined solely in terms of its own activities - as if a supermarket were to be defined as 'a place where tins of soup are collected, arranged, recorded and priced, to the ends of re-sale', or a park were defined as 'a place where trees and flowers are planted, and lawns are trimmed every six weeks, for the enjoyment of society.' Something seems to be missing in the definition of the museum. Two things perhaps - where are the people, and where are the spaces?

The following paper looks at the issue of museums as public spaces, and as the question - what does it mean for a museum to succeed as a public space? What would we see? What would be happening in such a museum. To sketch a provisional answer to this question this paper looks in detail at the experience of two new museums, the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, opened in 1985 in Frankfurt am Main, and newMetropolis, opened in 1997 in Amsterdam. Both museums are housed in

striking buildings designed by prominent architects. Both museums, in addition to their manifest content, have played a major role in their City's urban strategy. Both museums shape the visitor experience with their architecture, and the architecture, both inside and outside, plays a strong role in determining what is, and is not, possible - in short, what role the museum can and cannot play.

Where have all the flâneurs gone?

Genuine public spaces have all but disappeared from the life of most western societies. This transformation is comparatively recent, and has largely escaped notice. The erasure of public places could perhaps be said to date from the widespread introduction of the automobile in the early decades of the century. The automobile demanded a new infrastructure of roads, created the possibility of new dispersed suburban communities, and changed the character of existing urban spaces. The car made discussions while standing in the street difficult and dangerous, and public squares are now either dominated by the automobile or rendered lifeless by artificial pedestrian zones. In the same way, the places in which people met, discussed and debated have been replaced by individual appropriated spaces¹.

Almost imperceptibly the city has been robbed of its character as a forum; its squares turned into roundabouts, its sidewalk agorae eliminated to make room for wider streets, as a procession of individual spaces, drivers at the wheels of their private worlds, listen to the radio alone or shout into cellular telephones. Along the narrow sidewalks file passers-by, each listening to their own private soundtrack, plugged into the world of their Sony Walkmen, rushing home to their televisions to watch the videos they have just rented. Activities that were once shared, and hence created places and occasions for discussion, have all but disappeared. We have almost seen the demise of repertory cinema, and even mainstream films face stiff competition from made-for-video productions - not to mention the explosion of cable channels! Even the market, always a public place, has been supplanted by the shopping mall - a private space appropriating an

ostensibly public function. Where are the places in which people meet to talk, to share ideas, to discuss?

Almost by default, the museum has become one of Western society's last truly public spaces². Whatever its architecture - be it an imposing neo-classical palace, a crisp white modern cube, or deconstructed titanium-clad flower - the museum is first and foremost a built space. And, unlike the bank, the office tower, the factory, or the school, it is by definition a public space.

Real physical space is indispensable. It is a part of being an active participant in the world around you. No-one goes to a restaurant to chat with other diners, but we still go to the restaurant instead of eating at home. Moreover, it is often the specificity of the physical environment that has the greatest allure, not the cuisine. We know from the research of Marilyn Hood³ and others that for the majority of museum visitors, it is precisely this public physical space that is one of the central motivations for visiting. Although it tries, the Internet cannot yet replace real public space⁴. A public space is one which has other real, flesh-and-blood creatures in it, creatures demonstrably different from their e-mail addresses, opinions, or self-representations. The human body only exists in space, and the public human only exists in a public space.

The museum space is not only a social space - a place where people meet and mingle - but a socialising space - a place where they learn the skills of public interaction. It is in the museum that the rules of public behaviour are taught and learned. If the street is 'a room by agreement', as Louis Kahn once said⁵, surely the museum is a house by agreement - a house wherein the objects are arranged in a certain way, and in which certain behaviour is expected. It is also a house in which the visitor has a certain autonomy - which implies both freedoms and responsibilities.

So what kind of place should a museum be? What kind of activities should we come to expect in our museums? Should the museum remain a quiet temple where we worship respectfully at the altar of high culture, or should it be a town

hall - a piazza - where different voices contend and a variety of opinions are heard? Can it be both? Weren't temples and cathedrals also at certain times in their history both sites of worship and places for discussion? The following takes the example of two museums I know at first hand as a way of looking at these questions in greater depth, and looking at the kinds of activities museums can and should support.

A tale of two Cities

AMSTERDAM

NEWMETROPOLIS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY CENTER

Renzo Piano, 1997

Since November 1994, I headed the design process for newMetropolis, in Amsterdam. Opened June 4th, 1997, newMetropolis is Europe's newest science centre. But it is important to note from the outset that newMetropolis is not a science centre in the 'traditional' sense. It is not *about* science and technology, nor is its prime goal to transmit information about science and technology. It is an informal learning environment in which the emphasis is explicitly on developing new skills - such as abstraction, experimentation, collaboration, and systems thinking - that allow users to better deal with the rapid changes caused in large measure by advances in science and technology. It is a place where the human being - in the fullest sense - is at the centre. It is a learner-driven environment developed explicitly to allow the user can develop new skills to allow her to better deal with the challenges of contemporary society⁶.

newMetropolis is a not only a new kind of institution, it is a brand new building, already one of Amsterdam's signal landmarks. Designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano, newMetropolis is located in the heart of Amsterdam, astride the entrance of the tunnel linking the city centre with Amsterdam North. Where the tunnel plunges under the harbour from the city, a pedestrian ramp rises from the quai, a pedestrian ramp leading to a stepped roof with a panoramic view of the city centre. The copper cladding of the facade and the brick facing of the ramp symbolically recall materials found in the old city. As a consequence of the institution's emphasis on the centrality of the human being, from the outset an explicit goal of the building project was to create new social space - to enlarge the city of Amsterdam. newMetropolis is the first and key project at the centre of the redevelopment of Amsterdam's inner harbour. Within the next decades will be added a new public library, a centre for new music, performing arts spaces, and waterfront cafés.

As an urban project, newMetropolis seems well on the way to success. By means of the vast roof - normally a private and pragmatic feature of a building, Renzo Piano created a new social space - a new 'piazza' - a combination of the lively public forecourt and the breathtaking view that defines the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It is this inclined piazza that gives newMetropolis the means to integrate itself into the social life of the city. By exploiting the roof's 'forum function' - by creating events and concerts in the open air - newMetropolis can augment its already broad spectrum of free-time activity, which includes debates, discussions, seminars, and performances.

As a museum project with almost half a million visitors in its first year, newMetropolis has also proven to be a public success. Inside newMetropolis, the building unfolds over four floors - each itself a kind of public 'piazza'. From the bottom of the stairs on the first floor, you can see ahead through the building to the bright, glazed temporary exhibition hall, and looking up, you can see almost to the furthest reaches of the building. The openness of the building's architecture is mirrored in newMetropolis's interactive exhibitions, which were designed, like the building, as a kind of 'noble factory' - a modest, unpretentious environment designed to support the pleasure of learning.

The exhibitions inside newMetropolis take full advantage of the cues provided by the building - after all, one of the key goals of the newMetropolis exhibition project was to encourage greater collaboration among visitors. Here the building and its exhibitions - although developed independently and clearly articulated - work hand in hand to fulfil the project's mission. The exhibition 'Get Connected' is a concrete example of this complementarity. 'Get Connected' is a live, real-time video-conference, comprising ten computers linked to each other by means of a video camera, a microphone, and a unique interface. Despite the inherently social nature of the museum visit, it has long been recognised that it is difficult to get people who do not know each other to collaborate openly. Visitors are extremely reluctant to initiate contact with complete strangers.

In 'Get Connected', the first thing we noticed was the immediate willingness to make contact - when 'masked' by the interface of video and computer screen. We soon observed teenagers using the video links to flirt with each other. In one case a teenage girl covered up the video lens when contacted by an unknown young man - in another case we saw a young couple chatting briefly, an hour later we saw them spooning in a corner. This phenomenon of masking has already noticed on the Internet, where there is extensive evidence of users disguising their identity, secure in the knowledge that their correspondent was unable reveal their deception. In 'Get Connected', the correspondent may be sitting directly behind you, no further than 5 metres away, so the possibilities for deception are dramatically reduced. Nevertheless, the fact of having a screen, and of having a certain psychological, if not physical, distance from the other players, creates the conditions for supporting the kind of social behaviour desired by both the architect and by the exhibition designers⁷.

Here clearly the museum becomes a site for learning new skills of public interaction - skills which are needed more than ever in a world that has largely squeezed out public social space, and replaced it with private, individual encounters. These opportunities for learning the skills of public interaction are found throughout newMetropolis - in fact, they were explicitly built in. The social skill of collaboration, and the goal of being a social forum were among newMetropolis's foremost explicitly-stated goals from the outset. Every computer-based experience in newMetropolis (and there are many) was designed, prototyped, and built with multiple players in mind - in fact, most of them encourage discussion and co-operation during play. The Public Lab is a working laboratory in which visitors must work together to make their own experiments. Even the under-sixes have their own co-operative play environments such as building a house. Thus both a building project and an exhibition project, newMetropolis's success can and should be measured in social terms, and, if we consider one of the goals of a museum to play a social role, newMetropolis can be said to be a model for a certain kind of museum success⁸.

FRANKFURT am MAIN

THE MUSEUM FÜR KUNSTHANDWERK (Decorative Arts)

Richard Meier, 1985

The Museum für Kunsthandwerk was founded in 1887 by a group of Frankfurt citizens who had banded together to form the Central German Association for Arts and Crafts. The Museum and its collections were taken over by the City of Frankfurt in 1921, and housed in a building on the Mainzerstraße until the building was destroyed during World War II. It was not until 1966 that the collections could be re-installed, this time in the Villa Metzler on the banks of the Main. By 1982, the situation in Frankfurt was ripe for a new building project. The city of Frankfurt had been flattened by Allied bombing in 1944, and the renewal of the urban fabric had been a constant concern for the decades since the War.

The City's cultural department had already made the renewal of the City's museums - in particular those that lined the south bank of the Main river - the so-called 'Museum Embankment' (Museumsufer) - a top City priority, and had signalled the City's commitment to the best in contemporary architecture. Under the leadership of Hilmar Hoffmann, Frankfurt's Minister of Culture, the City was to commission buildings by O.M. Ungers (the Icon Museum), Hans Hollein (the Museum of Modern Art), and Gunther Behnisch (the Post Museum). In 1982, after a lengthy international competition, the American architect Richard Meier was selected to design the new home for the Museum für Kunsthandwerk. The project took three years to complete, and incorporated the existing museum - the 19th century Villa Metzler - and took in the adjoining park that separated the Museum from its neighbour, the Museum für Volkerkunde (Ethnography)⁹.

The Museum für Kunsthandwerk was profoundly shaped by the personality of the architect and the character of the architecture. The architect Richard Meier, and the then Director, Dr. Anneliese Ohm, aimed for a magisterial display of the museum's collections unfolding along the twin axes of time and place. As the collections were of very high quality, but 'incomplete' in a museological sense, the architect argued strongly against 'period rooms' in which the pieces were shown in their historical

context, and lobbied instead for a display in keeping with the building architecture. As consequence, the vitrines echoed the pure, white, timeless nature of Meier's neo-Corbusian architecture, and underlined the impression that both the Museum and its collections were there for eternity by building the vitrines into the floor itself, from which they could not be moved save by ripping up the parquet. Clearly the message sent by the Museum's architecture was that change was anathema - the Museum was a rationalist temple, and the collections were its unalterable and ineffable altars.

For the first few years, the Museum für Kunsthandwerk basked in the sun of public attention. The visitors came in droves, from both Frankfurt and abroad, largely to see the new building - an architectural landmark. The Director responsible for guiding Meier's work retired in 1987. By 1989, with the only change being in the form of temporary exhibitions, visitor numbers had fallen predictably (following the so-called 'S'-curve), although the quality of the Museum's exhibitions continued to draw a loyal following. Unfortunately, in 1994, the City began to feel the pinch of their generous support of the cultural sector (at its peak, Frankfurt's cultural budget exceeded the cultural budget for all of Holland). Slowly the money supply was turned off. Exhibition projects went unfunded, positions went unfilled, maintenance went undone. For the first time, Frankfurt's museums had to charge admission. Not surprisingly, given the double impact of diminishing value and increased prices, visitor numbers plummeted.

By 1998, the situation was still serious, albeit stable. Visitor numbers had stayed roughly constant for three years, at less than a third of the first year's heights, and just over half the pre-1994 levels. The Director retired in 1997, and the Senior Curator installed as Acting Director in his place. In July 1998, I was appointed Director, with the explicit goal of helping to awaken the 'sleeping' museum¹⁰, and to restore it to its former vitality. This awakening would be signalled first by increased visitor numbers, and secondly by reduced financial dependence on the City. This process must of course take into account the strengths - and the weaknesses - of the Museum's architecture.

In the terms in which it was conceived, the Museum für Kunsthandwerk is a complete success. In urbanistic terms the Museum für Kunsthandwerk has more than lived up to the expectations of its supporters in the Frankfurt City Council. The Museum is a Frankfurt landmark - a masterpiece of modern architecture - and the keystone of the entire Museum Embankment¹¹. Even those who have never set foot inside the Museum für Kunsthandwerk know the building, and the surrounding park (also designed by Meier) is used extensively year 'round, thus contributing to the visibility of the Museum Embankment and to the liveability of the City. While perhaps not a 'piazza', the park is the site of much social interaction, particularly in the summer, when it is used for concerts, picnics, and playing with the children.

In museum terms, the success is more equivocal, and the feeling of public space that infuses the park does not readily cross the threshold into the Museum. The spaces are cool, crisp, and elegant - but can also seem sterile and uninviting. The Museum is filled with natural light - a huge advantage on a sunny day - but the light also spills into the exhibition rooms, reducing the drama of the display lighting and drawing attention away from the collections. The vitrines are immovable and uniform, overwhelming and homogenising the objects displayed in them - however different they may be. This was not Meier's stated intent - he claimed that 'the architecture defers to exhibits, serving as a frame for their display'¹² - but unfortunately this deference is difficult to discern. Many of the permanent vitrines are far too high for children to see into them at all - an unintentional (and surely unwanted) signal to parents that the Museum is for grown-ups only.

The unfortunate consequence of the architecture's excellence is that the Museum's exceptionally fine collections of international-quality applied arts are in constant competition with the building itself, and often lose out to the great vistas and the majestic play of light in space. One of the challenges the Museum faces is to re-establish the equilibrium between the delight of being in the space and the delight of being in the collections, to humanise the space, to make it more social, more accessible, and especially to convey the impression that change is an essential part of a museum - not its antithesis. The Museum must come to share the feeling of the park - it must be a place to stroll and wander, a place to meet, to rest and chat. Given that

the user must now pay to be in the Museum, the Museum and its collections have to work all the harder to compete with the Park. Nevertheless, only once the Museum is seen as a welcoming environment for families, and a place wherein there is always something new to discover, will it be able to play its full role in Frankfurt's cultural life.

Conclusions: making space for the museum

The museum is a public space - a social space - and the museum's effectiveness - and that of its architecture - must be understood in social terms. The museum's architecture, while it serves other masters, must first and foremost contribute to and support the social interaction that is the foundation of the skills of appropriating culture. As Nelson Goodman wrote in 1980, 'the museum has to function as an institution for the prevention of blindness in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum's major mission. Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organisation and reorganisation of experience, in the making and re-making of our worlds'¹³.

Perhaps a more tangible way of talking about how to measure the success of the museum of the next century is sketched by Kenneth Hudson, the English historian of museums, and Director of the European Museum Forum. During the early months of developing the concept for newMetropolis, we corresponded regularly, and he once wrote 'People will want to do what they see other people doing. This is perfectly all right, so long as they see these other people sitting down in ever-changing groups talking to one another. I shall judge newMetropolis by the number of chairs it has around. If I see a lot of people sitting, I shall know things are going well. If they are all operating pieces of equipment or watching their fellow visitors do this, I shall be seriously worried. I am quite convinced that the future of the museum lies with chairs.'¹⁴ newMetropolis has chairs (specially-designed easily-carried stools, actually) and people do sit in ever-changing groups to chat - as well as operating 'pieces of machinery (the exhibits) and watching others. In this regard, newMetropolis is a

success. This same sociability is far less in evidence at the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, although both the Park and the Café are alive with families and groups of friends, sitting and chatting.

A museum can only function as a forum if the museum's architecture supports interaction - by creating spaces for people to meet and discuss, and by allowing for a wide range of encounters with the collections - not overwhelming the collections with loud and Mannerist gestures. The museum is a home for the soul, a place 'to learn that the life of the mind is a pleasure'¹⁵, not an architectural end in itself, a showcase of the skills of the architect to the detriment of the collections preserved within. If it is true, as is argued above, that the museum is fast become one of our last remaining social spaces, this brings with it a heavy responsibility to create spaces which sustain this 'forum function' - not diminish it. Only by bringing our material culture into the forum - and embedding it in the ongoing process of making culture - can museums hope to survive into the next century, and participate in the 'making and remaking of our worlds.' Only then, in addition to the richness of the museum environment, the excellence of its collections, and the quality of its curators, can we begin to judge the success of the museum by the chairs.

Charm and Chairs
The future of museums in the 21st century

Dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Hudson 1916 - 1999

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First published in the Journal of Museum Education, Vol. 26, Nr. 3, Fall 2001 pp. 3 – 9

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On the face of it, this short paper is about museums with charm, and museums with chairs. What is charm, when it is applied to museums? And, as chairs themselves need no explanation, what do they have to do with museums? Given the increasing number of charmless museums being constructed in the latest flurry of publicly financed largesse, and the large number of museums still without adequate seating, I would argue that these questions are neither merely rhetorical nor uninteresting. Whilst am certainly not the first to pose these questions, this particular reflection is meant as a tribute to one of the museum world's greatest question posers and bubble bursters, Kenneth Hudson.

I first met Kenneth Hudson late in his life, at the meeting of AMSTCI (the association of French science and technology museums) in 1991. I was myself working as a museum consultant in Paris, and found his questioning of the museum mission refreshing and provocative. In 1994, I invited Kenneth Hudson and museum specialist Caryl Marsh of the American Psychological Association to speak at the annual ECSITE (the European association of science and technology centres) meeting in Amsterdam, where I had just begun work as the head of Design for the newMetropolis science centre. The discussions we began years earlier took on a very practical importance as we developed the plans to create newMetropolis, and Kenneth, Caryl and I met and corresponded regularly from November 1994 until after the centre opened in June 1997.

Kenneth Hudson was born on the 4th of July in 1916, at the height of the First World War. He visited Germany in the 30s, and returned shortly after the end of the Second World War as a re-education officer. He was an avid student of languages, and worked as a journalist for radio, television, and print. During the course of his long career he authored over 50 books (including the ‘The Social History of Museums’ and ‘Museums of Influence’¹⁶), and was a pioneer in championing the cause of industrial archaeology. He lectured extensively, and despite his natural suspicion of large organisations, advised both ICOM and UNESCO. His independence was perhaps best manifested in the organisation he himself helped found in 1977 – the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA), and later, the European Museum Forum. The award and the forum gave Kenneth a platform from which he could promote and recognise what he considered best museum practice.

Perhaps ironically, Kenneth Hudson was himself never a museum professional – he was a professional museum visitor. He never lost his ability to visit a museum with fresh eyes, nor his ability to ask irritating questions – questions that many museum professionals would find heretical. Until the end of his life he continued to challenge many of the accepted ‘truths’ of the contemporary museum world – the self-evidence of increasing attendance, the necessity of blockbuster exhibitions, the assumption that all museum visitors are equally good for the museum. First and foremost he believed in intelligent, engaged, and critical debate, and he stayed in contact with a wide circle of correspondents. When Kenneth Hudson died on December 28th 1999, the museum world – and in particular the museum visitor – lost one of its most outspoken champions.

In a paper Kenneth Hudson published in 1999, he argued that the only museums that would survive would be ‘museums with charm, or museums with chairs.’¹⁷ Taking this tantalising remark as a starting point, I would like to offer the following reflections:

CHARM

We all have been to charming museums. But what makes a charming museum so charming? What distinguishes a museum that leaves you feeling uplifted, fulfilled, and happy, from one which leaves you numb, tired, frustrated, or even annoyed? There is no one answer, of course, and much has to do with the quality of the individual visit. Was the museum full? Was the staff friendly and helpful? Were the floors clean? Was the weather fine? Everything can influence one's perception of a single museum visit. Nevertheless, there are museums which are like old friends, museums to which one returns years later feeling that you have never left, museums that never cease to thrill or surprise. What makes these museums so special?

Kenneth Hudson was clear about his position: 'When I am in a museum' he wrote in 1999, 'I like to look at an object and let my imagination work on it. I like to say to myself *What am I learning from this object that kicks my imagination into life, that helps me to have a better understanding of the world in which we live and a better understanding of history?* I see museums as places with that as their main function.¹⁸' [italics in original]

What 'kicks the imagination into life' in a museum? I would like to look at three factors – of necessity interrelated – that contribute to the irresistible 'charm' of certain museums. These three qualities are character, coherence, and consequence.

Some museums charm us by their character – the way things are put together according to a series of beliefs. This charm often has the quirky character of a founder, and Kenneth Hudson was always extremely sensitive to the real humans that stand behind choices in museums¹⁹. Museums of charm, he wrote, are 'usually museums which are identified with a particular individual.'²⁰ The Musée Arlesien, the Goç Museum in Istanbul, or London's John Soane and Wallace Museums are clearly still marked by the personality of their founders. Mistral himself wrote the labels for the museum in Arles by hand – in French and in Provençal. John Soane supervised the still astonishing revelations to be had by opening one set of panels or another to reveal a series of views – and as a consequence new relationships – beyond²¹. The Wallace Museum too still bears the stamp of its founder in the almost idiosyncratic choice of collections – from majolica to weaponry to paintings.

One tinkers with this kind of charm at one's peril. Think of the way in which a perfectly charming 19th century railway station – the Gare d'Orsay – was ravaged when it became a museum, with little or no attention whatsoever paid to the original fabric of the building, despite the attentions of six different architects! Or of the Grand Palais, whose exhibitions rarely acknowledge the charming fantasias of riveted iron flora and grand cast iron architecture of the 1900 World Exposition. Charm need not be a casualty of renovation of course. In the same city the Muséum de l'histoire naturelle's Galerie de l'Evolution retained a great deal of the detail of the old building, while at the same time inserting a theatrical new defilé of (still) charming 19th century masterpieces of taxidermy²². The chapel of the Musée des arts et métiers – the setting for Umberto Eco's 'Foucault's Pendulum' – has survived a complete re-installation of early aeroplanes and even earlier automobiles, only losing a little of its earlier charm.²³

Other museums charm us by their coherence – the extent to which each aspect of the experience seems to hang together in a single coherent whole. Maria de Peverelli, former director of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation, writes of her first experience of the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, then still in its former home at the Villa Favorita in Lugano 'One had a feeling of perfect harmony between, if I can use a 'modern' expression, the container and its contents. It gave me the same kind of sensation that, as a Florentine, I have every time I go back to Florence and cross one of the bridges and fall in love, every time, with the perfect harmony between nature and architecture.²⁴' The Villa Favorita at the time Maria writes was a perfect example of an organic relationship between the setting, the architecture, and the works on display – a whole far greater than the sum of its parts.

Other museums that enjoy this exceptional relationship to nature are the Louisiana, just outside of Copenhagen, the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Hoge Veluwe national park in Holland, and the Brücke Museum in Berlin. Overlooking the sea, the Louisiana's architecture lets the collection of modern art reach out into the landscape. The grounds of the Louisiana are a favourite picnic spot, and the easy flow of visitors from the grounds into the museum's collections makes the museum a complete

pleasure to return to. The Kröller-Müller shares this relationship with nature, and its sculpture garden (including a marvellous Ferdinand Leger labyrinth) is unforgettable. The collection itself is distinguished by a ruthlessly coherent parcours, and by the purely voluptuous quality of its collections. The Van Goghs you know best are not in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam – they are in this jewel of a museum in the middle of a green park with white bicycles. The Brücke Museum is also nestled in a green wood, far from the bustle of Germany's capital city. Here Emile Nolde's works can be seen in a setting that gives them new meaning.

Finally museums can charm by their pure intelligence – by the way in which they are conceived. It has long been my conviction that – contrary to the belief among some museum professionals – that our visitors are not only intelligent, but that they derive real pleasure from confronting material that makes them think about the world in which they live. Baxandall writes of the importance of 'patterns of intention'²⁵, and it is the invitation to create a meaning that seduces us in certain museums. Making meaning – the central task of every child – is able to provide an almost sensual delight. It is the key to engagement and interactivity. That people find pleasure in using their minds can be found everywhere – from the sales figures for murder mysteries and science fiction, to the membership in chess clubs. The term 'edutainment' has always seemed to me a pernicious nonsense, a puritan prejudice that associates pain with gain, and pleasure with frivolity. The fact that many couch potatoes are as well informed as coaches about their team's past performance speaks for the willingness of people to engage with material that matters to them. The fact that many museums are under-attended is witness, not to the inability of the visitors to appreciate the material, but more often than not of the museum's inability to make it relevant.

Kenneth Hudson put the importance of the museum's public mission bluntly. 'Nowadays, if museums do not exist mainly for the benefit of the visitors who go there, they are not doing their job. A museum that believes its justification to exist is based only or mainly on its ability to provide a living for the people who work there has no right to exist under today's conditions.'²⁶ Kenneth Hudson was intolerant of museums that shamelessly took advantage the generosity of the public purse by not

taking seriously their mission to serve the public. A museum had to be paid for – and money didn't just fall from the sky. 'A museum has to have money in order to survive. And where is that money going to come from? The money will come, directly or indirectly, from the people who come to see the museums.²⁷' Or put another way, 'It comes from the taxes paid by poor widows²⁸'. A museum that only displays its treasures, but cannot make them relevant to its visitors, cannot justify its existence.

Museums (not surprising often those that lack charm) are often trapped in the assumption that their main task is to display – to exhibit. Other museums, however, take seriously Nelson Goodman's contention that museums should be 'institutions for the prevention of blindness'. He goes on, 'the museum has to function as an institution for the prevention of blindness in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum's major mission. Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organisation and reorganisation of experience, in the making and re-making of our worlds²⁹'. Museums such as London's National Gallery, despite the enormous pressure of tourist crowds, continue to produce thought-provoking and intelligent exhibitions. Jonathan Miller's 'Mirror Image³⁰' and Neil McGregor's 'The Image of Christ³¹' challenged the visitor to come to grips with difficult ideas, and savour the delight of thinking about familiar topics in unfamiliar ways. In a recent exhibition treating the subject of time in painting, the National Gallery allowed visitors to participate in an eye-trace experiment, and placed a small camera next to Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' to allow visitors to look at other visitors looking at Van Gogh.

Other museums charm by virtue of the ruthless coherence of their concept. The 'Museumsinsel' Hombroich, for instance, believes in the unmediated experience of great art in a pastoral setting³². The owner of the collection has built a series of pavilions in which works of art ranging from early Chinese ceramics to early 20th century expressionists are displayed for the visitor's delectation – without a single label. The 'Museum of...' in London invites artists to change its content every six months. The penultimate installation – the Museum of Emotion – featured exhibits on

fear, love, and doubt. Perhaps one of the finest museums in this regard is David Wilson's 'Museum of Jurassic Technology' in Los Angeles³³. The museum would qualify as charming on all counts – it is marked by the personality of its founder, it is a completely coherent whole, and it is ruthlessly intelligent. It is perhaps best described as a 'critical' museum. The exhibitions recall the museums we remember from our childhood – and employ all the techniques we are familiar with. Carefully controlled lighting, expertly crafted display cases, fascinating objects, 'son et lumière', detailed 'chat labels' – the museum employs all the tools we use to convince our visitors of the truth of our statements. But there's a catch. In the Museum of Jurassic Technology the improbable is probably true, and the likely, likely to be false – and nowhere will you be told which is which. Provocative, intelligent, luscious – and just charming.

CHAIRS

At first glance, the issue of chairs seems fairly straightforward. We put chairs where we think it is appropriate to sit – in waiting rooms, in restaurants, in libraries. But what about museums? What is appropriate behaviour in the museum? Looking at most museums, the prevailing assumption seems to be that museums are places for looking at things, and that the relatively short period spent looking at any particular object, combined with the large number of objects to look at, means that museums are places for standing, not sitting. Sitting is of course allowed, but only grudgingly as a concession to those with weak backs and weak moral fibre, unable to soldier on for two hours of uninterrupted cultural ecstasy. It is not generally known that some of the first visitor studies, conducted at the beginning of the last century, were addressing the problem of so-called 'museum fatigue'³⁴. If we expect the museum experience to be defined by a series of small epiphanies of short duration, then it is neither inconsistent nor surprising that we expect the museum visitor to be in a state of almost perpetual motion, not dissimilar to a bumblebee flitting from flower to flower. Nor is it surprising that we create museum spaces as long series of passages, along which the visitor can flit, or shuffle, depending on the crowds.

But what if we don't think that the museum experience is defined by periods of relatively short engagement, one-on-one, with objects of putative desire? What if we believe that the museum experience is marked by affective moments with others – with friends, parents, grandparents, classmates? What if the binome of viewer and artwork is in fact, as Michael Baxandall argues, a triangle that includes others³⁵? What if we believe that the museum is a privileged site for informal learning, not the cognitive learning of the classroom, but the realisation that, as Jonathan Miller says 'the life of the mind is a pleasure'? If we believe that these moments tend to be sustained, social, marked by discussion and exchange – in short, take time – then the chairless museum suddenly begins to look slightly misguided. Kenneth Hudson puts it quite succinctly. He writes 'I believe that the real barrier too museums developing in a balanced and creative way is their tradition of pedestrianism.'³⁶

In the early 1980s, the Canadian anthropologist Drew Ann Wake and I came to similar conclusions about the nature of the museum (and by way of extrapolation, science centre, interpretive centre, and even world's fair pavilion) experience. We were not the first to notice that in most exhibitions visitors edge by paintings at close range in order to read the minuscule text on the label, thus obscuring the work and its interpretation entirely from those who wished to view it properly – what one could call the 'Vermeer shuffle'. The more popular the exhibition, the more pernicious the effect. As Kenneth Hudson writes, unfortunately this practice – particularly pronounced in popular blockbuster exhibitions – 'is commercially effective and culturally abominable.'³⁷

While working on the inaugural exhibition of the newly re-opened Vancouver Art Gallery in 1984, Drew Ann Wake proposed cutting through this Gordian knot of museum practice by linking the obvious need of a critical museum visitor to be a correct distance from a work of art with the equally obvious need for the visitor to have interpretive material close at hand. The answer lay in endowing the exhibition gallery with long, comfortable benches – placed at exactly the right distance from the objects on display – and placing the exhibition labels along the benches. The result was that visitors stayed longer, viewed the works longer, and discussed the works with one another. Notwithstanding the occasional epiphany by visitors racing through

the gallery on the way to the shop, the result appeared to be a marked increase in critical engagement with the objects on display.

At the same time I was struggling with ways in which one could ensure narrative coherence of an exhibition, while at the same time, abandoning the necessity of linearity. Rather than having to follow a story in order to ‘get the message³⁸’, it seemed important to encourage visitors to make their own way through the exhibit hall – but without losing a sense of what the exhibition was about. Many designers since the 1950s have considered their task to constrain the visitors’ experience in order to ensure that the story the museum wanted telling was delivered. The most extreme form of this narrative control is of course Disney rides at EPCOT, which solve the problem of unwanted visitor autonomy with regards the message by strapping them together into mobile carts that snake their way through a three-dimensional version of television documentary. On the contrary, it seemed to me that if the coherence of the story came at the expense of constraining the visitor’s variety to the point that every visitor became effectively the same – then the whole point of the experience was lost. The answer seemed to be in creating environments that were rich in a variety of media, information, and possibilities for action – and providing a lot of places where people could sit together and talk. This meant providing a lot of chairs.

Experience had convinced us that, in Drew Ann Wake’s words, ‘nobody learns standing up.’ We were not alone in this conviction. Kenneth Hudson also believed a museum was a place to discuss things. He wrote that in contrast to other forms of activity, ‘What you can not get without actually going to a museum is the magic of objects and the opportunity to discuss with other people what is there and to ask questions about those things. And in order to do that properly you need to be able to sit down.’³⁹

Since the early 1990s, seating became a hallmark of exhibitions that Drew Ann Wake and I designed, either together (Body in the Library⁴⁰, Beyond the Naked Eye⁴¹, Mine Games⁴²) or individually (Chips!, The Merchants of Light⁴³). Often seating is associated with specific activities, objects, or exhibits, but for years I had been struck

by the way in which chairs are used in the San Francisco Exploratorium. Since its earliest years, the Exploratorium has made use of a robust, four-legged varnished oak stools to encourage their visitors to spend more time looking carefully at exhibits and phenomena – with notable success. Thus when it came to developing the interactive exhibit strategy for newMetropolis in 1994, it was not surprising that to find that we proposed endowing the public exhibition spaces with hundreds of sturdy easily carried wooden stools.

During the early months of developing the concept for newMetropolis, I corresponded regularly with Kenneth Hudson about our strategy. In response to a letter in which I waxed poetic about my expectations for the new science centre, he wrote ‘People will want to do what they see other people doing. This is perfectly all right, so long as they see these other people sitting down in ever-changing groups talking to one another. I shall judge newMetropolis by the number of chairs it has around. If I see a lot of people sitting, I shall know things are going well. If they are all operating pieces of equipment or watching their fellow visitors do this, I shall be seriously worried. I am quite convinced that the future of the museum lies with chairs.’⁴⁴

People did sit in ever-changing groups to chat at newMetropolis – as well as operating ‘pieces of machinery’ (the exhibits) and watching others. In this regard, newMetropolis was a success, at least in Kenneth Hudson’s terms⁴⁵. Unfortunately, as newMetropolis had made the rather rash and unusual promise to be 100% financed by visitor revenue, an exhibition strategy that encouraged visitors to stay longer was seen by some as the road to financial ruin – akin to putting comfortable chairs in a MacDonalds. Renamed ‘NEMO’ in 2000, the current management seems to put little faith in chairs which risk reducing capacity (let alone in experiences that increased engagement times by a factor of ten, which was the case for most of newMetropolis’s exhibits). No, the new institution is driven by exactly the market forces that Kenneth Hudson so despised. Museums, he said ruefully, ‘have become victims of the equation, better = more, and they have adopted policies which they believe could bring them the extra visitors which... their employers are driving them to find. They dare not wonder whether going for popular appeal will lessen or even destroy quality’⁴⁶.

I left newMetropolis in 1998 to become Director of Frankfurt's Museum for Applied Art – mak.frankfurt. Not surprisingly, if you visit, you will discover evidence of the convictions sketched above. Kenneth Hudson's ideas percolate throughout my thinking about museums, and have shaped the kind of museum environment mak.frankfurt has become since its 'relaunch' May 10th 2000. mak.frankfurt is not interested in more visitors – we want museum users instead. Not that we want to have fewer people in the museum – on the contrary. But we want the museum to become a 'piazza' for families, friends, young and old to drop in to– not a stadium driven by events and blockbuster exhibitions that are exhausted by a single use. We are convinced that the key to fulfilling the potential of a museum to be a 'motor of the learning society' lies in use. Use is defined largely by time – repeated, sustained and pleasurable engagement with the museum in all its variety. The key to creating a museum for users, rather than visitors, lies in creating a wide variety of opportunities to invest time in the museum experience.⁴⁷

The mak.frankfurt strategy begins with the ticket⁴⁸. We are open daily until 8 p.m., and every ticket is valid for one month from the date of purchase, transferable, and admits a child free. There is a group of specially trained interpretive staff – the so-called 'mak.crew' – ready to provide information, explanation, or even tours on demand. On every floor there are reading tables stocked with books, magazines, newspapers, and Internet access. There are small ladders to help children look into the taller vitrines. All the museum's wall texts are in German and in English – and in our Islamic collection they are also in Turkish and Arabic. Many vitrines are designed with integral bench seating. The museum supports wireless Internet throughout, which means you can wander around with a laptop (available from the info counter) and access in-depth information about museum object – whilst sitting beside the object! The museum's 'mak.3' shop is not just a shop – it is an integral part of our education programme. The objects in the shop have interpretive labels – and we sell objects that can be found in our collections and exhibitions. Even the museum bistro is not just a bistro – it is part of the museum⁴⁹, with objects from our collections on display. It is open until midnight, offers over 50 wines by the glass, and features designer porcelain and glasses – after all, in a museum of applied art, you have to be able to see the collection in action!

And of course there are chairs. Throughout the museum there are chairs – lightweight and elegant portable stools that can be picked up, carried, and left. The configurations in which they are left tell a story of how people stop to chat, to talk with one another, to discuss what they have seen.

Chairs were one of Kenneth Hudson’s hobbyhorses, and I would like to finish this tribute with his own words, in which I personally believe. Kenneth Hudson wrote ‘I have one recommendation to make which I believe would greatly help to set museums on the road which leads to salvation rather than damnation. It is to end the concept of a museum as a place where people are in perpetual motion, walking or drifting ceaselessly room to room. The museum of the future should be a place which emphasises the value and the necessity of sitting down, in order to digest, reflect, and discuss what one has seen. It should be a place with many light, pleasant-looking and easily movable chairs, with the help of which ad hoc groups could form and a new kind of staff member could stimulate and guide visitors in periods of stocktaking. One usually thinks much better sitting down than standing up and the physical shape and appearance of museums needs to change in order to acknowledge and cater for this. The traditional linear arrangement of museum galleries encourages walking and forward progress. What is required now is a pattern of circles and closed views, so that sitting down and reflecting becomes an automatic reaction to what one has seen. To replace the linear with the circular should be the basis of the new museum revolution.’⁵⁰

Good ideas are like chairs, and Kenneth Hudson’s insights remain an inspiration and an influence, for like good chairs they are sturdy, robust, and encourage discussion.

¹See Jane Jacobs classic text [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#)

²For a further discussion of this issue, see Bradburne, J. [Going Public: Science museums, debate and democracy in Planning science museums for the new Europe](#). Paris: UNESCO; 1993

³Hood has written extensively on the psychographics of museum visiting. See Hood, M. [Leisure Preferences are the key to science centre audience research](#). Unpublished paper, Vantaa: World Science Centre Congress; 1996

⁴not to be confused with the social space of dialogue, which can be very effectively supported by Internet. See Bandelli, A. and Bradburne, J. Turning information into knowledge: the Actua project at the newMetropolis in [Here and Now](#), eds. G. Farmelo & J. Carding, Science Museum; London: 1997

⁵From Louis Kahn's notebooks, quoted in Lobell, J. [Between Silence and Light](#). Boston; Shambala: 1979

⁶For a comprehensive history of newMetropolis, see Bradburne, J. [La problématique d'une création - newMetropolis in Vers les musées du XXIe siècle - La Révolution de la Muséologie des Sciences Nouvelles perspectives américaines, européennes et australiennes](#). ed. Bernard Schiele, Presses Universitaires de Lyon: Lyon; 1997

⁷This exhibit was researched extensively in 1997, see Hillegers, E. Het thema telecommunicatie in newMetropolis: Een stageverslag. Cultuur- en wetenschapsstudies Universiteit Maastricht; December 1997

⁸Alas, while it is a success in both urban and museum terms, newMetropolis cannot claim success in management terms. Although it generates nearly 75% of its operating expenses through earned revenue (arguably a financial success) its founders made the strategic error of promising the federal and City governments that the institution would be entirely self-supporting. newMetropolis formally requested protection from its creditors in January 1998, and is currently in receivership. Its future as a science centre is still uncertain.

⁹The project is described in detail in Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt; Stadt Frankfurt: 1985, and Brawne, M. Museum für Kunsthandwerk/Architecture in Detail, London; Phaidon: 1992

¹⁰a common and diplomatic expression applied often to the Museum in recent years

¹¹the Städel, Frankfurt's fine arts museum, which anchors the other end of the Museumsufer, has recently been renovated and re-opened, and could equally claim to be the jewel in Frankfurt's museum crown

¹²1985, Museum für Kunsthandwerk brochure

¹³Nelson Goodman, extracted from a speech given at Harvard in 1980 to the American Association of Museums and the Canadian Museums Association, reprinted in the collection Of Mind and Other Matters, Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1984

¹⁴Kenneth Hudson, private communication, 11/08/95, used with permission

¹⁵Jonathan Miller, 1996, private communication, used with permission

¹⁶Kenneth Hudson, The Social History of Museums, Humanities Press, London, 1975, Museums of Influence, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987

¹⁷This article was republished as The Public Quality of a Museum, Les cahiers d'étude Nr. 6, pp. 3-5, ICOM, Paris, 1999. The complete quote is 'I believe that there are only two kinds of museum which are going to survive into the next century. The first is what I call museums with charm...In another category are the museums that I call museums with chairs.'

¹⁸op.cit.

¹⁹Shortly after newMetropolis had changed its name from IMPULS, he wrote me sharply 'Whose invention was it? It has the feeling of a trendy marketing consultant about it. But certainly a man'. Private communication 04/02/97

²⁰op.cit

²¹for a good illustrated description, see Stefan Buzas, Sir John Soane's Museum, Opus 14, Wasmuth, Tübingen, 1994

²²The Museum's director, Professor Michel van Praët, was much respected by Kenneth Hudson See La Grande Galerie du Muséum, Moniteur, Paris, 1994 for details about the restoration

²³for a description, see B. Jacomy in La Revue du CNAM, No. 1, September 1992, and No. 28, March 2000

²⁴Maria de Peverelli, private communication, 10/03/00, used with permission

²⁵Michael Baxandall, Patterns of Intention, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985

²⁶op.cit

²⁷op.cit

²⁸op.cit

²⁹Nelson Goodman, 1980

³⁰See the accompanying book, Jonathan Miller, On Reflection, National Gallery Publications, London, 1998

³¹Neil McGregor, The Image of Christ, National Gallery Publications, London, 2000

³²see P. Good, Hermes oder die Philosophie der Insel Hombroich, Neuss, 1990

³³For a comprehensive account of the museum, see Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders by Lawrence Weschler

³⁴B. Gilman, Museum Fatigue, Scientific Monthly, 1916 2: pp. 62-74

³⁵in Karp and Levine, Exhibiting Cultures, Smithsonian, Washington, 1990

³⁶Kenneth Hudson, The Right and Wrong Road for Museums, 1995

³⁷op. cit.

³⁸The now common belief in the importance of a 'storyline' stems from Cummings' research into the 1939 World's Fair in New York

³⁹Cahiers d'étude, op.cit

⁴⁰see Drew Ann Wake and James M. Bradburne, The Curator's New Clothes, Muse, Fall 1993

⁴¹see Drew Ann Wake and James M. Bradburne, Au dela de l'oeuil nu, Alliage No. 15

⁴²see Drew Ann Wake and James M. Bradburne, Mine Games, La Revue du CNAM No. 10, March 1995

⁴³see James M. Bradburne, Les marchands de lumière, La Revue du CNAM No. 18, March 1997

⁴⁴Kenneth Hudson, private communication, 11/08/95, used with permission

⁴⁵'at the new Museum for Science and Technology in Amsterdam, the architect was instructed to design the museum around chairs, which you could find in every part of the museum, large numbers of chairs, which can be moved about and regrouped as necessary. Visitors can find, dotted about the building, members of the staff who are good at provoking discussion and answering questions and, when this person sees a number of people obviously interested in a particular exhibit, he can bring them together, sit them down and deal with the questions and discussion in a comfortable way.' Cahiers d'étude, op.cit

⁴⁶Kenneth Hudson, The Right and Wrong Road for Museums, op.cit

⁴⁷see the discussion between the author and Kenneth Hudson in Association of Independent Museums (AIM), February 1996

⁴⁸ For a complete description of the mak.frankfurt experiment to date, see Laboratory for Change, Alliage No. 44/automne 2001, and A New Strategic Approach to the Museum and its Relationship to Society, The Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship, Fall 2001

⁴⁹ see Salon of the future, mak.frankfurt, Frankfurt, 2000

⁵⁰ Kenneth Hudson, The Right and Wrong Road for Museums, op.cit