

Laboratory for Change
mak.frankfurt as argument, experiment, and example

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ABSTRACT

Most museums of applied art came into being in the late decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, and were charged preserving the traces of daily life, and with preparing the public to participate in the late industrial economy. How can the applied arts museum find relevance in contemporary society without compromising its own principles - and its own identity? What is the applied arts museum to become if it wants to avoid being a history museum on the one side, or a design museum on the other? This paper looks at the new positioning of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, not only as the necessary renewal of the Museum and the repair of its building, but as a far-reaching social experiment, in which the Museum explores the possibilities of playing a new role, in the rapidly changing first decade of the 21st century. In particular, the paper looks at the ways in which mak.frankfurt is explicitly experimenting with a new models for museums in the 'dot.com' economy.

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MUSEUMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – A MANDATE FOR CHANGE

On May 10, 2000, the former Museum für Kunsthandwerk re-opened its doors with a new name, a new identity, new visitor facilities, and newly-installed collections.

What distinguishes the mak.frankfurt project from nearly all apparently similar projects, however, is the degree to which every aspect of the renovation is linked to an explicit ambition to experiment with a completely different relationship between the museum and the society in which it is embedded. As will be argued, even this new relationship has its precedents – and in many ways it suggests a model to bring the museum (and if the experiment is a success, other museums as well) – much closer to their original mission.

First we need to make the argument for change. What are the challenges facing the museum community at the beginning of the 21st century? Let us start with a brief sketch history of museums, for if we are to say what our museums should be in the future, we must first look to what they have been in the past. According to Joseph Veach Noble (Head of Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later President of the American Association of Museums) the purpose of the museum is '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.'

If one defines the museum largely as the first three fingers of the hand, its history is linked to that of the collection, and the museum has its roots in the Classical past. The earliest museum of which we can speak was actually a library: the 'mousseion' of Alexandria, the institutional sibling of the famous library that flourished three centuries before Christ. Since the Renaissance, the dominant model of the museum has been the collection, and the demands of the collection have taken precedence in the museum's organisation. If one puts the emphasis on the last two fingers, the museum's history can be traced to the late 18th century. By the end of the 18th century, the political situation was extremely volatile, and the demands for access to social, political and cultural machinery found decisive political expression. Following the French Revolution in 1789, the very existence of private collections was called into question. Out of the passionate defence of the need for collections to the Convention of 1793 and 1794, the first modern museums were born: the Louvre, the Museum de l'Histoire Naturelle, and the Musée des Arts et Métiers.

Beginning in the late 18th century, a social and economic earth tremor transformed the nature of Western society and European economy - the 'Industrial Revolution'. In particular, industrialisation had an impact on the applied arts. Factory-based industrial process spelled the end of 'cottage industry', and large numbers of people moved from the countryside into the cities, where the industrial machinery was located. At the same time, with a greater proportion of the population engaged in wage labour, consumer goods found a willing market, and demand increased for industrially produced goods. With the growth of an increasingly affluent middle class, bespoke culture slowly gave way to shopping. As McCullough says with reference to a later, post-industrial age, 'just as artisans had become labourers, now citizens became mere consumers.' [Abstracting Craft pg. 74]

Hand-in-hand with the celebration of the new industrial paradise by some who looked ahead to a future wherein human labour would be freed and transformed by technology, came a reaction from others such as William Morris and John Ruskin, who looked back nostalgically to an idyllic past. Confronted with the ugliness of industrial production, a whole type of museums was founded on the conviction that culture was morally uplifting for the masses, and that exposure to beauty would create a new class of cultivated workers and factory owners, ready and willing to infuse industrial production with artistic merit, ready to make – and consume – new mass-produced products. In the last three decades of the 19th century, scores of new museums devoted to the Applied Arts were founded in Europe and America, including the museum I currently direct, Frankfurt's Kunstgewerbemuseum, which was founded in 1877 as part of a broad concern for the education of craftworkers and improving the quality of industrial production.

Nearly all the new museums had as their mission to educate the public - notably the labouring classes – often with the explicit expectation that an increased exposure to the arts would be translated into better products. Museums were no longer to be the preserve of the few – they were to open Sundays and evenings for the many. Workers newly sensitive to beauty would give industry the competitive edge. This was the Golden Age of the Industrial Revolution, and industry needed a visually literate public - to buy its goods, and to produce them. The museum was an important part of a broad social, economic, and cultural strategy.

We are now facing another period of unprecedented rapid change, heralded breathlessly (and perhaps prematurely) as the ‘Information Revolution’, the ‘Third Knowledge Revolution, or Alvin Toffler’s now old-fashioned phrase, as the ‘Third Wave’. Where does the museum fit in this changing world? Traditionally museums have relied almost entirely on tax revenue for their support – and as a consequence believed themselves to be immune from changes in the society around them. Recently, however, there has been a move away from the complete subsidy of museums, which has meant that museums must now ‘compete’ by providing new services. Merely slashing budgets is not sufficient, however, any more than chopping off the leg of a fat man makes him thinner. One of the ways in which many institutions have responded is to forge closer links to the private sector. At the same time, industry is beginning to see the institutions of informal learning, not as a luxury for the privileged few, but as one of the motors of the new economy.

MUSEUMS IN THE NEW ECONOMY – A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

One of the consequences of the new economy is that education is becoming a big business, and the failure of the public school system is a major political issue. As Marjorie Scardino, CEO of Pearson says ‘Education is one of the great growth industries of our time.’ In America the crisis in the school system is being compared to the crisis in the American auto industry in the 1970s – and the consequence is the same – America now has to import more and more creative brains from outside the country. It is also creating a whole new market for remedial education, and for corporate universities and colleges. But are schools and universities the only place we learn? Or even the best places to learn? Where do we learn the joy that comes from unforced learning – the pleasure that comes from discovery, from self-initiated and self-directed exploration? Almost certainly not at school. But where?

If we must – at all costs – become a learning society, the museum is the institution at the heart of that society.

And if the museum – as the leading institution of informal learning – is at the heart of the knowledge-driven economy, we have to transform the museum from a static and passive temple of desirable objects, into a vital and interactive informal learning environment. What are the key goals for a museum in the society described above? Of course the museum is, and must remain, in the words of Sherman Lee ‘a permanent storage battery’. However, it must also be, in the words of Nelson Goodman, ‘an institution for the prevention of blindness.’ I would argue that in addition to its traditional role of collection and preservation, a museum must explicitly emphasise the following transformations:

From visitors to users. The value of the museum is created through use. Our institutions of informal learning must not be satisfied with the casual visit, nor driven by the single-minded goal to increase the numbers of visitors through the turnstiles. The museum must draw lessons from the library, not only the theme park, and provide experiences that satisfy the full range of interests and expectations. A library is not judged by the number of tourists that visit, nor by the blockbuster appeal of its presentations. The museum must create its base in the community, work with its local community to expand that base, and encourage repeat visits - real or virtual.

From display to knowledge transfer. A fundamental part of the museum’s mission is to generate new knowledge about informal learning, and turn it into effective new tools for teacher training. By definition, informal learning is learning sought for its own sake – it must be self-initiated, self-directed, and above all, self-sustaining. Traditional, school-based research is unable to investigate these questions, as schools have little or no access to an environment in which learning is unforced. Publishers, on the other hand, are not geared to take risks to create new educational tools, and lack the means of adequately testing their products prior to release. Only a public informal learning environment, with a stream of un-coerced users, can provide the research setting necessary to create the tools and the training so desperately needed by the schools, and by society.

From information to skills. The museum must stress the acquisition of new skills, not just information. These skills are largely shared by art, science, and technology

alike - creativity, collaboration, abstraction, thinking in terms of systems. The common ground provided by putting the accent on skills has the effect of making less important the distinctions formerly made according to content - science, ethnology, history, fine arts. Of course information is still indispensable, but it must be linked to the skills of finding, using, and appropriating that information. This strategy recalls the humanist education of the Renaissance, and prepare the learner for all fields of endeavour. As Jonathan Miller once said, they 'prepare us for a world in which the life of the mind is a pleasure.'

From top-down to bottom-up. Our visitors are competent. They are already experts in some things, and they often know more than they know how to say. Visitors create their own understanding, and the museum gives them opportunities to create new knowledge during and after their visit. In the museum, the visitor is in control, and the visitor charts her own course - learning is bottom-up. The museum experience must be seen as a way of empowering the visitor, of not only recognising the visitor's role as a participant, but of conferring true actorship on this participation. For the visitor to truly matter, her involvement must really count. The visitor must actually be able to determine, in a non-trivial way, her own learning experience.

Think global, act local. A new learning platform must place its emphasis on what is unique to its specific locality - on what cannot be found or done somewhere else. It must put a premium on local culture, local practices, local experience. It must be firmly rooted in its local conditions, and use them to build a community commitment to the institution. The new media and the Internet now allow our institutions to put the emphasis on local circumstance and local culture for the physical site - and global culture and global circumstance for the virtual site. Global information networks allow for the first time real, virtual institutions, open to visits from around the world, and to real-time participation. By exploiting the new media the physical scale of the institution can be tailored to local circumstances.

Each of the transformations above plays an essential role in bringing the museum back into alignment with the society of which it is a part.

MAK.FRANKFURT – SIGNPOSTS TO THE FUTURE

Given the above – a rapidly changing society, the threats to existing institutional structures, and the strategies designed to realign the museum with its users – how does mak.frankfurt function as an example of a new institutional model? What changes at mak.frankfurt go beyond the merely cosmetic? Let us look at the mak.frankfurt project in detail.

A new identity – mak.frankfurt. There is now a new name outside the museum – the Museum für Angewandte Kunst – mak.frankfurt. This is not just a fashionable change of clothes to dress up an old reality. The new name means a new direction – with a broader mission, a new emphasis on families and young people, and an ambition to become a new 'piazza' in a multicultural city. From 1935 to 1999 the museum was called the Museum für Kunsthandwerk – the Craft Museum. But the meaning of craft

had always been too narrow to properly describe the museum's collections – particularly of Asian and Islamic art, and it had also become too narrow to encompass the applied arts of the 20th century – notably the industrial design and digital appliances that are shaping our lives. The new name was no caprice – it was a necessity. The new identity is also an important signal. mak.frankfurt is not a traditional museum any longer – and its identity as mak eclipses the importance of its identity as 'museum', 'applied', or 'art'. mak.frankfurt is mak.frankfurt, and must take on a meaning uniquely its own.

User not visitors – museum as 'piazza'. If they are to avoid becoming marginalised, museums must concentrate once again on creating a cultural practice based on use - not visits. For the past few decades, in response to falling visitor numbers, museums have increasingly relied on 'blockbuster' exhibitions to bring in the crowds. While the visitor numbers have indeed soared, museums lost their identity and specificity. The museum of the 21st century, if it is to become more than just an empty shell for temporary exhibitions, must think in terms of users - not merely in terms of visitors who may come only once. Like the library, the museum must place the emphasis on its own collection, and find ways to encourage its use. If mak.frankfurt is to become a 'piazza', as part of its commitment to increasing the number and variety of museum users, it must offer facilities that *can* be used – rather than just visited. This means enhancing the features of the museum that are currently used – the café/restaurant, playground, the neighbouring park – and adding new facilities that encourage repeat use, such as a shop, reading tables, and frequently changing its permanent collections. It also means staying open to the public later – in mak.frankfurt's case until 20.00, six days a week.

Skills not (just) information – museum as centre for informal learning. If the museum is to play a role as a new learning platform, it must have new facilities. mak.frankfurt now has a two computer labs, wireless Internet throughout the museum, a multi-purpose reading room – the so-called 'FAZ Leselounge' (after Germany's leading newspaper and museum partner, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), and a learning lab. It is not enough to have the facilities alone, however, they must be used. The museum has already developed a strong reputation for its courses and workshops, and these will remain a central part of mak.frankfurt's activities. As the museum's mission grows, however, so do its possibilities. Let me describe some of them briefly below.

THE LEARNING LAB. In the JP Morgan Lern.labor, children can learn 'hands-on' with LEGO's digitally programmable 'Mindstorms' building blocks – and can programme their own robots to follow trails, avoid obstacles, or climb walls. In conjunction with Bill Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt, children can learn about how they move – and use this knowledge to choreograph their own 'robot ballet'. This programme was presented in Thessaloniki at the 3rd World Summit for Media and Children in March 2001. In 2001 'three-generation' ROBO.mak teams will be organised in lower-income housing projects whereby grandparents, parents, and children can compete to create the most entrancing robot ballet.

COMPUTER LABS. In the 'Test Drive' programme in the Nokia Lab, teenagers use the museum's computers to evaluate the latest computer games – and to help pick the best games and websites for the museum's 'digital craft' collections. The best of the

young computer experts will be encouraged to work with the museum on a longer-term basis, forming the core of a volunteer crew that will help museum visitors of all ages learn the skills of surfing the Internet or making their own website. In addition, the programme hack@mak gives young people the chance to learn the skills of programming – not just playing, whilst the programme puellae@net lets young women develop their own web resources. In the Arthur Andersen Computer Lab visitors of all ages can learn the skills of the new economy – how to surf the Internet, how to navigate through cyberspace, how to make their own website. In a special programme for schools – the ‘Flying Classroom’ – teachers and students will be able to develop their own digital programmes for the museum and its collections, and test them *in situ* on the mak.frankfurt website.

From top-down to bottom-up – user-driven learning. If museums are to fulfil their promise as privileged sites for learning in the next century, they must rethink the way in which they function, and become increasingly user-driven - in a word, more ‘bottom-up’. In abstract terms this means taking the visitor's competence and abilities seriously, and creating opportunities for the visitor to actively shape their experience in the museum. But let me give you a concrete example. In my office is a vitrine, specially designed for the Richard Meier monument of which I am steward. In the vitrine is a selection of beautiful glasses, from a 16th century Venetian masterpiece to a set of Boris Sipek glasses. I often use the vitrine to test new text panels – after all; we are not an interactive science centre! I have one text panel with the title ‘Glasses through the century’. It is amusing, informative, and written in a popular style. Visitors to my office often stop to read it, and chuckle at the humour. I also have another text panel, with another title. This title reads ‘One of these glasses is a fake’. The difference in behaviour is striking – often visitors stand for ages closely inspecting the glasses. Nor is the question trivial – after all, what is a fake glass anyway? All that has changed is the direction of the learning process – from top-down, to bottom-up. Of course our museums remain treasure houses of interesting and wonderful objects - objects that can be enjoyed, inspected, compared, and discussed. Our eyes are sharpened by the process of looking. By honing our critical faculties the museum is indeed ‘an institution for the prevention of blindness’. This emphasis on the learning of new skills brings us back to the origins of the applied arts museum, and to the heart of its unique role in the museum world.

As of May 2000, the museum re-installed its permanent collections, and added a permanent collection of Design for the first time in the museum’s history – a collection which includes the first acquisitions of the applied art of the 21st century, so-called ‘digital craft’. Over the course of the next years, the museum will be experimenting with new approaches to interpreting its objects, approaches that encourage users to chart their own course in the museum, and make their own knowledge. As a practical starting point, all the museum’s texts are in both German and English – and sometimes other languages as well, such as Turkish and Arabic. And information does not just mean text on the wall. It also means reading tables throughout the museum – reading tables with not only books and magazines, but Internet access. It means wireless access to the new mak.frankfurt website in English and German – anywhere in the museum.

Think global, act local – Digital Craft. The applied arts of the 20th and 21st centuries are not limited to physical artefacts – the products of mind and hand can be virtual as

well as material – and the Museum's interest in the applied arts stretches from the distant past into the virtual world of the future. Digital artefacts increasingly shape the world around us. As McCullough states, 'Ultimately the computer is a means for combining the skilful hand with the reasoning mind'. Digital products - which are increasingly shaping the world around us – are legitimate, even indispensable objects for our museum collections. Certainly there are museums that already collect hardware – computer museums, film museums, museums of the moving image, technology museums. There are also museums that collect digitally created art, such as the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM) in Karlsruhe and the Ars Electronica Zentrum in Linz. But who is collecting the computer games, the websites, the palm pilots, the mobile phones – all artefacts whose interest lies in their combination of beauty and utility? Many museums use digital media – but who is collecting it? The answer is that despite the huge number of projects in this field worldwide, only a few museums have taken this challenge seriously.

In June 1999, the Museum launched 'Digital Craft' a three-year research project in collaboration with Frankfurt's Institut für neue medien (INM) that has as its goal to define a museum approach to what can only be described as the applied arts of the next century - digital media. This project has also very quickly attracted partners from the private sector – Nokia, Apple, Sun Microsystems – and aims to have an international impact on thinking about the role of new media in museums. As a research project, it aims to organise seminars, work with universities on curriculum development, and publish regular research reports. Moreover, by means of both the www.mak.frankfurt.de and the www.digitalcraft.org websites, the museum can experiment with ways to make a virtual visit to the museum as meaningful as a visit in the flesh. Programmes that allow close-up inspection of the museum's objects, virtual explorations of the museum's collections, and games that encourage the discovery of hidden aspects of the museum's work are all promising avenues to be explored in the coming years.

THE NEXT STEP – LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIMENT

Without hypotheses there is no experiment – so what should we see following the changes implemented above? What outcomes can we expect, and in what time frame?

In the short term, we can hope to see an increased number of users of the museum. This will be signalled by participation in the evening programmes, bookings for tours and courses, and increased overall attendance to museum activities. Specifically, there should be an increased number of visits after 18.00 – and a corresponding increase in the use of the café, restaurant, and bar. For the last five years, the average number of visits per year has been stable at around 90.000. By the end of 2001, it is hoped that we will see the total climb to some 120.000, levelling at approximately 150.000 visits per year in 2003. An important part of the evaluation will be to determine which visitors are repeat visitors (future museum users) and which are one-time tourists. One indicator of increased use will be increased subscription to evening and weekend programmes.

It is the position of this paper that among the fundamental skills of the new economy – and indeed of a democratic society – are creativity, flexibility, and the ability to

innovate. Moreover, I believe that it is the responsibility of our museums to develop a museum environment that allows the public to experience these creative forms of thought. Museums that have as their goal the communication not only of facts, but of skills, encourage new audiences – people often at the periphery of the museum culture due to the lack of confidence, background or skills. Museums that put the accent on skills especially encourage children, the ground in which every generation must plant the memory of its past for the future, in order that new ideas flourish.

The challenge of mak.frankfurt is to imagine a museum that takes into account the interests of the visitor, that see the museum as a ‘piazza’ where the visitor can chart her own course, and sees the visitor as intelligent and willing to explore new skills. In this way, we can help give our visitors the means to engage with their own culture from a position of knowledge and competence, to become the actors they once were in the childhood of discovery and innovation, when the world was theirs to discover, to invent and to inhabit. We can create an environment in which to explore, and, as a consequence, encourage our visitors to become full participants in the world they have inherited and are in the process of creating.

[25.032 signes/4.078 mots]