

What if? there were no cultural institutions and we reinvented them again

Homework: Think of one or two of the best cultural experiences you have had in your life – that's it.

Now a background note as a thought provoker

A meeting of cultural leaders were from a wide range of fields was held in Berlin in June 2017. The aim was to explore how culture and cultural institutions are and could develop so they are tune with the emerging world of antagonistic politics, social media and immersive experience, they included: The directors of the Berlin Ensemble, The Royal Academy, the Berlin Museums, the Library service, David Chipperfield, who redesigned the Neue Galerie, the inventor of the Love Parade and experts in creating experience as well as thought leaders. The aim is to instigate a series of experiments in Berlin where new thinking is put trialled and put into practice. They considered that:

We are in the **midst of redesigning the world and all its systems** as we witness the biggest mass movement of people, goods, factories, frenzied finance and ideas in history. Vast flows make the new norm nomadic. Yet there is a yearning for belonging, distinctiveness and identity as the 'anytime, anyplace, anywhere' phenomenon enabled by digitization is changing how we interact with space, place and time.

Old certainties are crumbling and systems are breaking at escalating speed. Apprehension is in the air as we seek to invent a different kind of city. This is perhaps the Civic City where togetherness in difference meet and mix well. It tries to find a pathway through the major faultlines, dilemmas and potentials of our time – shared lives, inequality, environmental distress, urban vitality, the desire for involvement and engagement.... and most importantly, at a personal level, peoples' longing for meaning and a sense of wholeness.

So this is a place where we reinvent anchorage, an urban commons, connection, but also possibility and inspiration. Where do cultural entities – institutions if you like - new, rediscovered or as they always were, fit within this landscape?

Everything changes or is that really so? Is it merely the form and appearance or are the tectonic plates moving? Think back to the buildings you knew, the street layouts, the urban forms, the shops you went to and galleries, theatres, libraries, museums, the spectaculars, the experiences.

Consider now: Deutsche Bank's main building in 180 Friedrich Straße that calls itself 'Future Quarter' and looks and feels like a hipster hangout with a co-working space attached as well as a zen inspired exterior space.

<https://www.deutsche-bank.de/pfb/content/quartierzukunft/mein-quartier-zukunft.html>

Consider too: Kamppi chapel in Helsinki – the chapel of silence – with no church services and where everyone is welcome and comes regardless of philosophy. It is a combined initiative between the city's social services department and Lutherans. An elegiac experience that moves you into yourself and out again it was created as part of the World Design Capital year.

https://www.google.de/search?q=chapel+of+silence+kamppi&rlz=1C1CAF8_enGB601GB601&source=Inms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjIqNeCxorUAhXFHJoKHSazCJgQ_AUICygC&biw=1252&bih=615

Consider Jochen Sandig's adaptation of Brahms requiem more a 'concert installation' than a simple piece of music it breaks down the distinction between singers and audience.

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/arts/music/review-a-white-light-festival-to-re-energize-your-inner-self.html?_r=0

Consider the 'Ode to Joy' flash mob in Odessa's fish market as a symbol of European togetherness and a collective, participative experience.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwBizawuIDw>

Consider the urban art or street art movements and what they might do to the gallery system. People say 'Urban art is **new, exciting, subversive, bold and highly democratic** because of its rootedness in public, communal spaces'. Is that so? <http://www.widewalls.ch/urban-art-movement/>

Consider the Stadtschloss Humboldt Forum reimagined as the Humboldt Jungle - a contemporary message yet with historically grounded references. http://hybridspacelab.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HUMBOLDT_DSCHUNGLE_011_DIE_ZEIT_NEW_SPAPER_PDF_230316.pdf

Consider the library world less as the dull and dowdy and more as the vital and urgent, where the calm and the vibrant and the interior and exterior seamlessly connect.

<https://katiepekacar.wordpress.com/2014/10/13/a-walk-in-the-park-learning-from-south-americas-public-library-revolution/>

Consider crucially how everyone now talks of 'stories', 'narratives' and 'frames' since cognitive overload threatens to overwhelm. So stories create the threads and coherence from the fragmented parts.

Yet it appears that as we have **more sensory bombardment we have lost the art of appreciating** the varied sounds, words, smells, the texture and quality of materials and the look and feel of events, things, buildings and places. So the irony is that as we seek a 360 degree, all embracing, immersive experience we sense, feel and understand things through increasingly narrow funnels of perception. Living in an impoverished perceptual mindscape makes us operate with a shallow register of experience and understanding about 'what really matters'. And at the same time commerce and media seeks to pump up our desires in ever more shrill tones.

This reminds us then of the **crucial difference between iconic and narrative communication**. It helps us understand the roles cultural entities could play.

The iconic seeks to help grasp, encapsulate and convey complexity in one and fragmented minds find this easier. Narrative communication by contrast is concerned with creating arguments; it takes time and promotes reflection. Its 'band width' is wide as its scope is exploratory and linked to critical thinking; it is 'low density' in the sense of building understanding piece by piece. It is about creating meaning. Iconic communication by contrast has a narrow 'band width' and highly focused purpose; it is 'high density' and sharp as it seeks to 'squash meaning' into a tight time frame, creating high impact by encouraging symbolic actions that make what is being projected feel significant. Typical forms of iconic communication are adverts. They do not aim to explain causes but simply to trigger a response and an action - now.

The challenge of creative cultural initiatives is to embed narrative qualities and deeper, principled understandings within projects which have iconic power. Emblematic initiatives can then leapfrog traditional learning and avoid lengthy explicatory narratives through the force of their idea and symbolism.

Back now to the cultural institutions: Many were invented in their current forms in the 19th century, others like theatre before or film later. Are they 21st century proof?

Is this an issue for all the types of cultural institutions? Perhaps the existing approaches and settings continue to work for some in the

contemporary age. Some updating or tinkering will be enough – they say at least. If not what do we do with the books, the plays, the poetry slams, the concerts, the media, pictures and objects, the physical settings, the design? Will we create libraries, museums or art galleries in the form we know them now? How will we navigate, move and experience as we make these spaces into places? More airy, more open, but what else?

Purpose, focus and style: Everyone knows the historic civilizing mission of cultural institutions, their transmission of the acknowledged canon linked to their learning and research agendas. They know too the challenges to this and debates and dilemmas around quality/quantity, high/low, elite/wider audiences and the need to go beyond these divides.

What if the starting point and primary focus of cultural institutions instead was to create meaning, deep experiences and memorable moments? What if it were to bridge social fractures, to try to be a glue, a safe haven, a gathering place for chance encounter and the meeting of difference? What if creating joint rituals was important? What if civic generosity were key? What if leaders moderated rather than tell? What if things were more audience driven rather than producer led? What if we were makers, shapers and co-creators of our collective experiences? What if sharing knowledge and experiences were the primary motivation? How then would institutions be managed and organized and what skills would be needed? What would these civic places of tomorrow look and feel like? Do they spill into the streets or from the street back? What would next generation cultural places do and how? Would these places embedded in the digital world be cultural institutions as we know them? What convergences and cross-fertilizations can occur? How would they behave and what would be their institutional form?

Words matter: starting with a focus on the heightened registers of experience or meaning making or jointly sharing knowledge and insight is different from stressing 'to transmit the canon'.

Finally can we ask questions about fairness or do we pretend it does not matter or is the wrong question? Mostly our cultural institutions still only attract a minority just when the world discusses the participative imperative. An extreme is that each Staatsoper seat is subsidized by 250 euros – perhaps there is a special justified reasoning. Do fairness questions affect what cultural institutions should do? How much then is left over for innovation and real exploration?

Charles Landry Ascension Day 2017