Holding Space for Conflict: Unpacking the Multi-scalar Exhibition of Conflict at the Conflictorium – Museum of Conflict, Ahmedabad

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Abstract

This article analyses the Conflictorium – Museum of Conflict, founded in 2013, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, and its use of museum space both within its designated location and the broader socio-spatial surroundings of the neighborhood and city. The museum is discussed as a site that offers space to experience and engage with conflicts about religion, citizenship, caste, identity and belonging in the historically and contemporary, polyphonic processes of Indian nation-making. By unpacking four, partially interrelated, dimensions of spatial transformations in the Conflictorium, the article offers an empirically-grounded understanding of museums' different spatial strategies to convene information, create affective atmospheres and memories about contentious aspects of contemporary Indian society that might not be attended to in state-run museum or political discourse. In sum, the article argues that museum spaces can function as socio-spatial and -technological infrastructures that forge for the cultivation of consciousness about conflict, and the radical interrelatedness of India's diverse social fabric.

Keywords: conflict, museum space, India, scale, museum activism, heritage

Introductory vignette

When I reach the Conflictorium – Museum of Conflict for the first time, it is 10p.m. on a Saturday night in February 2023. My arrival and collaboration with the museum have been stalled for almost three years due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, with its concomitant difficulties for travel. That evening, it is still around 20 degrees Celsius, and Mirzapur Road, situated in Ahmedabad's UNESCO heritage site, the Old Town, is bustling: street vendors offering grilled chicken, shops on wheels selling *paan* (little sachets of tobacco and spices to be chewed, and less deliciously, spat out onto the street later), snacks and non-alcoholic drinks (the province of Gujarat is officially a 'dry' state). Families, rickshaw drivers, children, friends as well as goats and dogs are hanging out on the streets. The daily soundscape of honking cars, motorcycles and *autos*, green-and-yellow rickshaws, is slowly fading into a quieter night.

The Conflictorium is housed in a two-story Victorian-style white building from the early twentieth century. At night, its iron gate is closed; it will open in the morning at 11a.m. to unravel different temporary and permanent exhibitions on the conflict-laden history of India's independence in 1948, as well as contemporary divisive issues such as femicide, religion-, caste- and sexuality-related discrimination and marginalization. The hut in front of the museum is faintly illuminated: a private dwelling in the Gool Lodge, which previously housed Ahmedabad's first female-run professional hair and beauty salon. When I finally walk inside the Conflictorium's halls, carefully stepping over two sleeping dogs that rest on the light sandstone doorstep, I slowly move through the exhibition pieces entitled *Conflict Timeline, Gallery of Disputes, Mutineers Cage, Empathy Alley, Moral Compass,* and *Memory Lab.* I spent most of my time with the latter exhibition piece, tucked into the ground floor hallway, daylight piercing through green and blue glass-stained windows (Fig. 1). The whole museum space is embellished with the never-ending honkscape from outside traffic.

Memory Lab is 'full' of empty glass jars; over 150 are stacked on white-painted wooden

shelves stretching across the corridor wall, filled with paper notes written by visitors over the years. This sharing of a personal memory – possibly painful, secretive or shameful, maybe joyful, funny or silly – in the transparent and open space of a glass jar leaning against the walls of a publicly-accessible museum, to me, was quite an intimate experience (see section 3.1). This radically open invitation to visitors to write themselves into the museum space constitutes the starting point of this investigation – a spatially nuanced analysis of how the Conflictorium exhibits its core matter of concern: socio-political conflict. Drawing from ethnographic data collected during a field research stay in February 2023, I develop a framework to unpack the multiple spatial scales with and via which museums unravel affective-material, historical and contemporary conflicts. This multi-scalar approach to museum space helps to understand how spatial openness, emptiness, and extension differently serve to create affective experiences of conflicts. Beyond the individual case of the Conflictorium, a spatially-attuned analysis of museum space advances knowledge about novel practices of museum-making beyond object-centered collections. In sum, the article contributes both empirically-grounded insight into a hitherto little studied museum initiative and showcases how diverse spatial practices offer both informative and affective encounters with social difference and conflict.

Fig. 1: Memory Lab*, Conflictorium, source: author*

The objective of this article is to unpack the Conflictorium's multi-scalar spatial practices of exhibiting conflict, proceeding as follows: First, I outline the methods of data collection and analysis underlying this paper (1). Second, I delineate current scholarship's engagements with museum definitions and museum space (2.1), and subsequently situate the Conflictorium within the national and local landscapes of Indian museums (2.2). Third, I propose a four-fold, inductively developed framework of spatial scales, foregrounding the exhibition of conflict (3). These scales range from micro-level spatial extensions within the inner-museum space (3.1) to the museum's outreach into its immediate neighborhood (3.2), creating a digital space (3.3) and extending the museum's connections beyond its own concrete location, leading to the foundation of other Conflictorium-like museum structures (3.4), zooming into Mehnat Manzil – Museum of Work, a sibling museum in Ahmedabad's New Town, which creates visibility for, and information about, the largely un(der)represented sector of informal labor in

Indian urban economies. Fourth, I discuss the interconnections of different spatial scales and implications of such a spatially-attuned approach to museums for interdisciplinary museum scholarship and practice (4). Fifth, and last, I conclude with reflections on the importance of conflict in societies both struggling with and thriving beyond conflict (5).

1. Methods, data collection and analysis

The data this article presents stems from multiple sources collected since the spring of 2019. An online search of 'museum' and 'conflict', which first showed many other search results focused on war and military museums, revealed the Conflictorium as a *different* museum of conflict – rather than dwelling on violent or armed conflict, the Conflictorium also highlights the generative potential of conflict to understand social difference and diversity. The search results for 'museum' and 'conflict' first led me to war museums, or anti-war museums, which display rather negative notions of conflict (i.e., predominantly considering the latter as armed or violent, and thus to be avoided for the sake of peace). While the trope of 'peace museums' has been discussed in relation to other Indian museums (Chakrabarti 2016: 67), in which 'ideals of non-violence and peaceful life are preached and practiced', the Conflictorium approaches the appeal for peace (and conflict, respectively) with a much broader notion of both terms as facilitators of difference. For example, the museum entry sign underscores conflict as a necessary part of social life and an important driver for transformation towards more equitable societies, and self-describes as 'an initiative that will strive to engage every section of society with a variety of conflict issues, by celebrating plurality and encouraging conflict expressions and avoidance in artistic and creative ways'. Accordingly, the museum website states, 'We acknowledge and explore the phenomenon of "conflict" as a key move in imagining a peaceful society'.[1]

Since this serendipitous beginning, dialogue with the museum's stakeholders has manifested in countless emails, recorded and informal online interviews, Instagram messages, WhatsApp calls, a joint roundtable discussion in June in 2020,[2] a first in-person chat on a warm summer lawn in Berlin in 2022, a joint publication (Landau-Donnelly and Sethi 2021), and finally, a week of ethnographic field research in Ahmedabad in February 2023, filled with many more recorded and informal conversations, numerous site visits to various museums, neighborhood walks, audio and video recordings, both poetic and systematic ethnographic field notes. Inspired by Singh's plea that 'the future of the museum is ethnographic',[3] I offer my own ethnographic analysis of the Conflictorium's multi-scalar and relational spatial tactics to conceptualize museums' spatial transformations. Notably, entering the interdisciplinary field of museum studies from a background in political philosophy, urban sociology, cultural geography and conflict theory, my approach to conducting a museum ethnography might differ from more canonical ways of doing so. Moreover, writing as a white queer scholar, my experience in collecting this data, walking in streets, markets, and museums, has been shaped by my very body – often misgendered as male, and standing out due to my height and light skin color. Before unpacking these embodied ethnographic impressions, let us first define some terminological parameters that contour what a museum 'is'.

2.1 Theorizing the Conflictorium as museum

According to the International Council of Museums, and their recently modified definition, a museum is

> a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, **interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage.** Open to the public, accessible and **inclusive, museums foster diversity** and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, **offering varied experiences** for education, enjoyment, **reflection** and knowledge sharing.[4]

While the scope of this most recent definition includes more social and non-object-based elements of museums, spaces like the Conflictorium do not (and maybe do not want to) align

with these set museum parameters. In the context of counter-hegemonic and reflexive decolonial critiques of museums, it is important to consider this carefully constructed definition precisely for what it is – a construction based on conscious inclusions and exclusions. When thinking about the definitional limbo of the Conflictorium as museum, Vergès' (2016: 25) proposition of the 'museum without objects' may be insightful: she describes it as

> neither a virtual museum nor a museum of images and sounds, but a museum that would not be founded on a collection of objects, where the objects would be one element among others, where the absence of material objects through which to visualise the lives of the oppressed, the migrants, the marginal, would be confronted.

Instead of aiming to fill historical-material voids, a 'museum without objects' works from, with and through absence. On the one hand, a museum without objects actively challenges externally ordained, planned or willed absences (and presences), but also self-curated modalities of absence and emptiness on the other (see Landau-Donnelly and Sethi 2021). Ontologically speaking, the Conflictorium collection 'is' nothing in the narrower sense of artefacts, but materializes structural-historical absences of marginalized voices, positions and memories (e.g., via the paper notes in *Memory Lab*). By acknowledging the absence of individual and/or marginalized voices, and making them temporarily present, the Conflictorium gathers feelings, stories, thoughts, connections, possibilities for change and reconciliation hitherto *not* collected, archived, exhibited elsewhere in museums. The materials, and materialities, of Conflictorium exhibitions are simple, often re-used from previous exhibitions or acquired from nearby markets; the objects are not auratized as art objects, they function as signifiers of a 'trace … a tool among others' (Vergès 2016: 32). As Nayan, the Conflictorium museum manager, explains to me: 'In the museum, you can touch everything, open every cupboard, turn everything on'.[5] Remarkably, this invitation very much runs counter to behavioral patterns in other Indian, and South Asian, museums where touching, spitting and praying in museums is strictly prohibited (Mathur and Singh 2015). But what exactly does a museum space without objects look like?

Within critical museum studies, physical space in and of museums has been little researched (exceptions are MacLeod 2005; Barrett 2011; Smith and Foote 2016). Adding to spatial analyses of museums, which, for instance, investigate visitors' walking routes or embodied experiences within museum space (Steier 2014; Tzortzi 2014, 2017; Diamantopoulou and Christidou 2019), as well as the impacts of digitizing museum space (Markopoulos et al. 2021), this article focuses on the *conditions* and *processes* of meaning-making within the Conflictorium's museum space (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sandell 2005; Schorch 2013). Conspicuously, the museum has not been built *as* a museum, but rather constitutes an adaptive (re)use of an existing built environment to house a museum therein. For example, the spoken word installation *In this house and that world* by Conflictorium founder Avni conjures the original use and users of the museum space – creating bonds between here and there, now and then, and subtly invoking possible futures, too. Vis-à-vis the lingering connections to past and present memories and places, let us look at the Conflictorium's position within the broader Indian museum landscape.

2.2 Situating the Conflictorium in museum landscapes in India and Ahmedabad

Today, there are more than 3,000 museums in India,[6] ranging in great variety regarding size and location, as well as the composition of their collections of artefacts, specimens and objects; they attract audiences of different ages, socio-economic and caste-related backgrounds. Various typologies have sought to classify Indian museums in relation to their curatorial and collection-related behaviors (Correa 1999; Chakrabarti 2016). One potentially insightful approach to understand the Conflictorium within the Indian museum landscape is Jain's (2011) reference to Cameron's (1971) distinction between Indian museums as 'temples' or museums as 'forums' – whereas the former represents musealized objects as sublime and mute(d) objects, the latter provides space for dialogue and debate. While this differentiation

may be instructive, it also problematically compares a supposedly secular institution (i.e., a museum) with a religious institution (i.e., a temple), which carries the danger of instrumentalizing politics of cultural representation as a religious narrative-building device. However, superlative references are increasingly driving India's museum discourse – taking into consideration the recent plans to erect the world's largest museum in Delhi.[7] In relation to Jain's conceptual pair, the Conflictorium does reveal features of a 'forum' – by hosting events and discussion formats that follow the credo 'keep talking', a slogan reappearing on posters in the museum's entrance hall. Instead of working as a temple, the Conflictorium cautiously refrains from encouraging or supporting religious activities – regardless of the religion.[8]

Apart from potentially religious undertones, Indian museums bear the mark of 'colonial import' (Roß 2023: 21). As Avni puts it in an interview, 'the form of museums is not endemic to our culture'.[9] In light of museums' Western and bourgeois origins (te Heesen 2012), colonial underpinnings are tangible, for example, in India's first and largest museum, the Indian Museum in Kolkata, formerly known as the Imperial Museum of Calcutta, founded in 1814 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Inaugurated by an Indian government institution that facilitated the rule of the British East India Company since 1784, the museum – until today – bears witness of both colonial and post-colonial artefacts and narratives. While a thorough discussion of the Conflictorium as a post-colonial museum (Chambers *et al.* 2014) exceeds the scope of this article, the museum does challenge narratives of universalism, the linearity of time and history, via its manifold invitations for visitors to write their own stories and curated reminders of forgotten or suppressed narratives into the museum space. As Mathur and Singh (2015: 2) suggest, 'vernacular appropriations of the idea of "the museum", and the considerably more eccentric establishments they represent, are as crucial to understanding the landscape of museums in India as the impulse towards internationally recognised museological models'. Hence, instead of 'judging the efficiency of Indian museums by the standards of Victorian pedagogy that brought them into existence' (Mathur and Singh 2015: 2), with the following analysis, further work towards the deconstruction of Western-centric museum narratives and definitions shall be offered.

In Ahmedabad, India's fifth-most populous city of about 7.5 million inhabitants, museums are situated within material-symbolical conflicts, both historical and ongoing. Ahmedabad, described as 'a divisive and divided city' (Thomas 2017a: 719), bears repeated and continuing histories of inter-religious riots between Muslims and Hindus, starting in the 1960s, flaring up in the 1980s and 1990s.[10] In 2002, over 2,000 people were killed and hundreds injured (Chatterjee 2009; Gupta 2011; Deshpande 2014). Disturbingly, this violent heritage in contemporary Ahmedabad is not very tangible or visible, where urban planning and development authorities such as the Ahmedabad Management Corporation (AMC) are focused rather on Ahmedabad's aspirations to appear as a 'global' or 'world-class' city with distinct architectural heritage and commercial infrastructures, as well as vibrant arts and craft economies (Chatterjee 2009; Da Costa 2014; Thomas 2017a, 2017b). Furthermore, it needs to be borne in mind that now-prime minister, Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi, was Chief Minister of Gujarat during the 2002 riots, and has been accused by some, and exonerated by others, with regards to encouraging violence against Muslims (or at least not discouraging police brutality against Muslims then and now). Notably, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been charged with having instrumentalized the Gujarat protests for their own political agenda (Deshpande 2014).

Ahmedabad has a variety of privately-run and public museums. While the brutalist Corbusier building of the Sanskar Kendra City Museum has been closed since March 2020, first due to COVID-19 and, subsequently, due to renovations, there are a number of private initiatives such as Calico Museum of Textiles, Lalbhai Dalpatbhai (accessible only via a pre-booked, free tour) as well as religiously or spiritually inspired museums like Gandhi Ashram or Swaminarayan Museum. Various Ahmedabad museums are co-f(o)unded by former cotton mill industrial families, exercising soft power influence on the local culture via boosterism (Da Costa 2014). While Sanskar Kendra has been framed as a 'cultural node of a living heritage' (Thomas 2017b: 135), Ahmedabad's museums face complex discourses of heritagization. More concretely, instead of instituting a memorial culture that keeps the violent inter-religious struggles present in public discourse, Ahmedabad 'perform[s] a simultaneous *forgetting* of the pogrom and the atrocities against the Muslims but *remembering* the moment of Godhra

[Gujarati city where a train with 59 Hindu pilgrims was set on fire, kick-starting the 2002 riots] valorizing the majoritarian Hindu identity' (Popli 2021: 287). In the spoken word installation *In this house and that world* in the Conflictorium, Avni asks:

> Do you see the violence of light and colors tearing apart your grey serenity? Do you see rioters rampaging through the inner-city lanes? If you don't, then you need to make a wish that you would – because otherwise, your children will have to see through them.

In sum, Ahmedabad's history is striated by lingering tensions around (in)visibility, (in)tangible heritage and contentious heritagization, religious and social diversity and conflicts. Even though conflicts have been discussed within interdisciplinary museum studies regarding specific geopolitical conflict zones such as postcolonial Canada (Dean 2009) or Israel-Palestine (Mendel and Steinberg 2011), there have been no specifically conflict-attuned discussions of museums in India (exception is Rajendran 2016). Besides scattered empirical accounts, a theoretical conceptualization of conflicts is rather underdeveloped in museum scholarship (exceptions are Sternfeld 2018; Hill 2021; Landau 2021). In line with the above-stated objective of this article, the following passages unpack the Conflictorium's multiple spatial practices and transformations to exhibit conflict. Moreover, this empirical account aims to add theoretical detail to understanding activism and conflicts in and around museums (Janes and Sandell 2019).

3. Exhibiting conflict on multiple scales

Since its inauguration in April 2013, a lot around and within the Conflictorium has changed. Surrounding buildings have been built and torn down, people and animals have moved in and out, multiple crises and a global pandemic have deeply affected everyday life and politics. While Avni originally curated the exhibition rooms on the ground floor as part of her final graduate work in social design (some of which are still on display today, such as *In this house and that world*), others have been curated later by the constantly growing network of Conflictorium curators and team members. The pre-given spatial conditions of the Gool Lodge (e.g., a concrete staircase, relatively low ceiling, stain-colored windows) have affected the museum's parameters of exhibition design with regards to lighting, height of installations, relations of spatial proximity and distance, density etc. Renovations have both modified and extended the museum space.

The upper second floor is used for temporary exhibitions, often featuring guest curators or invited artists. To trace the museum's multi-layered spatial practice, Löw *et al.*'s (2021: 29) notion of 'refiguration' undergirds the following discussion. Refiguration addresses the spatiality of society and its transformation. To shed light on this specific form of spatial refiguration or transformation in a museum context, or *museum transformation* (Coombes and Phillips 2020), I consider museums as part of both societal transformation and transforming societies. Furthermore, I deploy a conflict-attuned lens (Landau *et al.* 2021) to study museums as transformative places, to highlight that processes of negotiation regarding positionalities and epistemologies are inherently conflictual. However, intensities and disagreements about what a conflict actually 'is' may differ greatly depending on the beholder's eye. Hence, it is crucial to examine the ways in which a conflict museum such as the Conflictorium presents itself as a so-called 'conflict zone' (developing James Clifford's and Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the 'contact zone' further; see Løgstrup 2021) to make conflicts tangible, experiential and negotiable in different spatial settings.

3.1 Emptying and filling the museum's inner space

To begin with, the repurposing of the Gool Lodge into a museum can be interpreted as an act of spatial transformation within the museum building itself. The almost century-old building has served as a hair and beauty salon and storage facility beforehand, and is now curiously filled with museum guests, objects, stories, feelings. From a spatially-attuned perspective, the above-mentioned ground floor installation *Memory Lab* invites visitors to engage with conflicts in an 'empty' exhibition space setting. Of course, the space is not

literally or completely empty – there are white-painted shelves, glass jars, paper notes to be written upon, pondering bodies. Yet the staging of the transparent jars (some of which are, matter-of-factly, still empty, waiting for more memories to be collected) and the blank paper notes underscore the curatorial choice to grant the available museum space to individual stories rather than grand narratives, to personal memories rather than abstract information, to an unforeseeable diversity of voices rather than a crafted, homogenized or streamlined narrative of 'what happened'.

What Sandell (2005: 191-2) calls a 'spatial device' of 'pluralist display' can amplify a distinct or marginalized group's voice or position, but can also 'draw upon and emphasize concepts of sameness, in some cases purposefully downplaying difference in order to suggest common and shared experiences, values and beliefs between different groups'. In *Memory Lab*, the positions of sameness (i.e., expressing memories in the same paper form, in the same glass jar space) and difference (i.e., sharing massively diverging memories and feelings from different places and times) swing back and forth like a pendulum. This way the installation makes conflict tangible, but in subtle, quiet, miniature ways, becoming accessible when visitors take the glass jars into their own hands, peek into the stories that are either similar or different from their own. With this radically open curatorial approach of *not* curatorially intervening into the notes' memorial content, *Memory Lab* holds space for a myriad of hitherto untold/ unwritten/marginalized stories and memories, but potentially affronting or discriminatory ones, too. This leaves the museum space drastically open to visitors' own associations, narratives, and sense-making processes (Fleming 2005; Schorch 2013). In sum, the installation's spatial choice for emptiness reinforces with the Conflictorium's commitment to celebrating plurality and social diversity.

Additionally, with regards to inner-museum transformations, in past years the Conflictorium has increasingly hosted curators or artists working on installations on-site on the second floor as a form of artist residency. However, usable space on the second floor is limited, as the bathroom and kitchen facilities are inadequate for longer stays. In the context of an international collaboration with a European cultural funding institution, the Conflictorium hosted international artists in the summer of 2023, yet housed them in residency space in Ahmedabad's New Town across the Sabarmati river.[11] In conclusion, within the museum space, there are conscious choices to mark systemic emptiness and counter this through the activation of visitors to (temporarily) fill the space with their own stories. Other exhibition pieces such as *Gallery of Disputes* or *Mutineers Cage* offer an abundance of sounds and information to mark the variety of voices, stories and conflicts within the Conflictorium.

3.2 Reaching into the Neighborhood

The most significant exhibition piece that extends the Conflictorium's museum space into the immediate neighborhood is *Sorry Tree* (Fig. 2). The massive peepal tree lurks onto the balcony on the museum's upper floor, and provides shade, a bench to sit on and rest after the museum visit inside. Is the tree a museum object in this museum without objects? Are the walls and floors museum artefacts because hand-painted messages in Gujarati, Hindi and English take over this space? Strikingly, the wall facing Mirzapur Road is covered with a hand-written goodbye letter composed by Rohith Vemula, a Dalit (i.e., lower-caste) PhD candidate from Hyderabad, who committed suicide in 2016 due to a caste-motivated suspension and interruption of his financial stipend. The connection to apologies, mourning and memory is loose but powerfully present in this outdoor, airy exhibition space. Apologies inhabit, cover, ornamentalize every inch of the museum's building's surfaces, filling the external space to the brim. A transparent exhibition plaque states: 'Apologizing and forgiving are perhaps the most profound of all human behaviours, with the capacity to transform the destinies of future generations'.

Fig. 2: Conflictorium balcony with outlook on Sorry Tree*, source: author*

Sorry Tree subtly expands the museum space towards its urban outside, thus spatially maximizing the museum, and visually interconnecting the space with the neighborhood. Similar to *Memory Lab, Sorry Tree* invites visitors to take a pen and paper, write an apology, and hang it into the tree branches. In comparison, however, participants here are free to choose the location of their message, selecting a tree branch of their liking to pin down their message, which then dangles in the wind. Yet, the messages' position and belonging to the museum collection is precarious – the apologies might fall off, become dirtied by smog, released by the wind and travel onwards into the neighborhood; the notes might blend in with the many other little objects to be found on the streets of Ahmedabad. When I was standing on that balcony, pinning my own apology onto a branch, two women huddled by the nearby Chalta Peer Dargah shrine (characterized by the myth that it moves an inch every year) wave up to me. I wondered whether these two smiling women had ever been up here, in this museum of conflict? Do they consider the space a neighborhood venue? Were their apologies hanging in the same tree as mine – and what would they be sorry for?

Moreover, the museum entertains varying relationships with its immediate neighbors

and local environment. Sometimes, the Conflictorium jumps in to sponsor a neighbor's daughter's wedding celebration by providing electricity; sometimes, the museum hosts inter-generational events such as theater performances or film screenings in their facilities. The nature of collaborations depends on neighbors' requests: 'We never support religious events, neither Hindu nor Muslim', Avni says.[12] While the museum had originally intended to offer a social space like a café, the idea was met with resistance from people in nearby dwellings. Specifically, the Conflictorium's proposal to build more windows and thus allow light from the back alley to flow into the museum building was stalled by neighbors' protests. In direct dialogue, the museum team learned that local residents were concerned about a local business being inhibited by the planned museum café, so the Conflictorium team humbly withdrew their plan. Seen from the busier front street, Mirzapur Road, giving the neighborhood its informal name, the Conflictorium is tucked away behind the dwelling constructed in front of the museum. While a color-splashed sign advertises the museum, the Gool Lodge itself does not stand out as a landmark cultural institution. In summary, the unrealized café illustrates that conflicts can occur throughout *potential* museum transformations – but may not materialize. While this potential clash was resolved through dialogue, other exhibition pieces might continue to carry conflicts into the neighborhood, and beyond.

3.3 Creating digital space

Besides physical refigurations, the Conflictorium creates wholly new spaces in(to) the digital realm. The Conflictorium introduced, and maintains until today, so-called *Instagram takeovers*, where curators, journalists, writers, performers, and activists are invited to feature content via the Conflictorium's social media account, with more than 9,500 followers on Instagram. In this fast-moving digital space, local, Indian and global audiences of the museum intermingle, share stories, videos, texts and links, like, comment, follow back. Through the digitally mediated, community-oriented space, people who have not (yet) visited the Conflictorium can gain insight into the kinds of conflicts exhibited there.

During COVID-19, the Conflictorium did not digitally share their exhibitions, when the museum was shut for several months in 2020 and 2021 (even though on-site interactive, audio-heavy exhibition pieces such as *Empathy Alley* or *Mutineers Cage* could have been made easily accessible on the museum website). While the importance of museums' digitalization has arguably increased since the pandemic, which has been observed in European museums[13] and globally (UNESCO 2020), for the Indian context, Galla (2020: 232) voices concern that (post) pandemic museums in India engage in a rather 'rhetorical' discourse on museum inclusion and development. Beyond this rather gloomy assessment, the potentially generative implications of the pandemic for Indian museums in general, and the Conflictorium in particular, remain to be assessed in the future.

Apart from digital exhibitions, the Conflictorium Archives materialized throughout the pandemic. Drupath, who joined the museum team after co-curating an exhibition on freedom of speech in 2019, was put in charge of the archive, which now contains information about the 35 to 40 exhibitions that have taken place at the Conflictorium since its foundation. While the archive took shape, and was launched in 2021, the idea and desire for a Conflictorium archive had been on the museum team's agenda since 2016.[14] The Conflictorium website, designed as a staircase seen through a glass door similar to the one found in the actual physical museum space, states:

> The museum has a digital repository of our events, posters, podcasts, exhibits, performative and everything else that has lived and continues to live here with us. It is designed to offer not a historical but lived account of our socio-political, economical and cultural realities as a museum of conflict.[15]

In sum, social media platforms and the archive exhibit conflict with diverse trans-local audiences in mind. These engagements can be embodied and localized or digitally mediated, spanning across large geographic and cultural distances. While there are interactive elements in online encounters with the Conflictorium (e.g., clicking, watching videos, liking etc.), digital visitors can inscribe themselves into the museum space in rather fleeting, indirect ways.

3.4 Spreading across Town – Mehnat Manzil

Lastly, looking at the spatial practice of extending the Conflictorium's conceptual and curatorial approach, two initiatives are important to mention – the Conflictorium branch in Raipur, inaugurated in 2022, and Mehnat Manzil – Museum of Work, which opened in Ahmedabad in 2019. Conflictorium Raipur features similar themes of India's constitution, borders, violence and conflicts around resources and identities,[16] and is situated in the province of Chhattisgarh, about 1,000 kilometers away from the Ahmedabad Conflictorium.

The thematic emphasis of Mehnat Manzil, which translates to 'hard manual labor' in Gujarati, rests on the vision of its founding institution Saath Charitable Trust – to improve the livelihoods and living standards for informal laborers, marginalized communities and youth, to build 'inclusive and empowered communities'.[17] In 2019, Avni was engaged as a design thinking consultant and process facilitator to plan the museum's first exhibition, which is still on display four years later.[18] At Mehnat Manzil, visitors are welcomed by a shiny, illuminated plaque that shows the number '92%' on an indigo-blue background. This number stands for the overwhelming number of workers who do not have a written work contract, paid leave and other benefits such as health insurance or retirement benefits.[19] Before entering the museum, a heavy wristband is placed on one's arm, underscoring the physically straining labor many in the informal sector carry out every day. The bracelet is taken off only 25 minutes later, to emphasize the often pre-structured time allotments of dependent work (during my walk-along interview with Mr Rajendra Joshi, the museum coordinator, I spent much longer in the two museum rooms). The inner exhibition halls are mixed displays of paintings, photographs, everyday objects, a climbable replica of a narrow underground canal, a site of informal work for human scavengers. Similarly to the Conflictorium's above-mentioned stretching of inner-museum space, and reaching into the neighborhood (which resonates with the second dimension of museum space refiguration, see section 3.2), at Mehnat Manzil, its newly tiled terrace directly borders a private dwelling unit. During our conversation, the neighbor washes metal dishes outside, accompanied by her toddler son, who curiously eyes us up while we are sipping *cha* and talking about how Saath encourages local informal workers to come to the museum. Notably, Mehnat Manzil is situated in a predominantly residential, Muslim-populated neighborhood in Ahmedabad's New Town, which was severely damaged during the 2002 riots.[20] The museum is close to the Juhapura neighborhood, which emerged in the 1970s due to flood-related displacement of Muslim communities in Ahmedabad, and developed into a 'self-sustaining ghetto' (Thomas 2017a: 716). However, zoning-wise, Mehnat Manzil belongs to the caste-specific residential area of Gupta Nagar. While caste-related and religious tensions prevail in this area, the museum centers around the precariousness of informal work, dwelling, and living – which is reflected in choices of moveable, touchable, climbable museum objects (everything can be touched, here, too).

When Mr Joshi first neatly sets up the collection of small, movable wooden blocks, reminding of children's toys (Fig. 3), he asks me to imagine an encompassing housing structure with bedrooms, toilet and washing facilities, illustrating the piecemeal constitution of informal dwellings, or slums (see Ghertner 2010) – and then wipes it all out with the one brush of a hand. Here and then, it becomes strikingly clear that the status of museum objects, and maybe even of the museum itself, is built on precarious foundations. Meanings, feelings of belonging and home can vanish at the discretion of political and administrative elites. Conflicts materialize with the clunking sound of tumbling homes.

In sum, at Mehnat Manzil, conflicts become tangible as socio-spatial realities entrenched in contingent, sometimes arbitrary, contested conditions. The livelihoods of informal workers are built on uncertain dreams, hopes, on shaky grounds that are constantly subject to government regulations (or lack thereof). Built structures can be tolerated or not, thus showing themselves as always vulnerable to the next slum clearance. Lastly, reminiscent of Vergès' museum without objects, the exhibited building blocks might not narrowly qualify as museum artefacts or objects, but they do play a crucial role in marking the conflictual absence (and presence) of marginalized social and religious communities in transforming cities such as Ahmedabad.

Fig. 3: Untitled, Mehnat Manzil, source: author

4. Discussion: Interconnected Spatial Refigurations

Beyond the individual case of the Conflictorium, this section outlines how the spatially nuanced registers of museum space can inform future-oriented museum scholarship and practice. To begin with, it is worth noting that the different spatial scales often intertwine, intersect and mutually mold each other's meaning, position and scope. For example, inadequate or insufficient physical space might lead to relocations, re-use and expansion into the digital realm. The refigurations of museum space can vary – they blend various spatial dimensions, ranging from minute changes on the outer boundaries of museums (e.g., walls, floors, ceilings, terraces, trees), scaling up to wholly new spatial constructions such as familiarly connected museums in other places. To foster visceral, affective experiences, museums like the Conflictorium make extensive use of questions, poetry, sound, moving image, and the active invitation to

touch, climb, sit, click, write themselves into the museum space, leaving something behind. While these dimensions of spatial refiguration have been developed inductively from the present empirical material, there are certainly other modes of grasping how museums *take place* or *make space* to address socio-spatial conflict. Moreover, further knowledge on how museums' spatial refigurations work with physical, digital and discursive spaces near and far can ignite dialogue and awareness for more conflict-sensitive societies that celebrate rather than police and suppress difference and diversity.

5. Conclusion

The Conflictorium actively holds space for conflict – together with its diverse visitors, their memories and open-ended stories. With this open engagement with conflict, the Conflictorium offers an understanding of museums as spaces where reflection, pain and hope can linger side by side, and can together become parts of mobile museums, collections, or archives without being forced into paradigms of conservation or conclusiveness. Rather than transmitting information about simplified historical narratives, initiatives such as the Conflictorium reinterpret, and maybe also reappropriate, the meaning of what kind of space a museum can be. Such a conflict-embracing space grants voice to individual and collective marginalized narratives, not as curatorial afterthought or add-on, but as the core of ever-growing, ever-contingent museum infrastructures.

　　The Conflictorium's new incoming artistic director Prerana, taking over from Avni after ten years, envisions the museum's second decade in a direction of 'moving sideways', stating that the team is 'planning to move the museum more out of its building'.[21] Where exactly this journey will take the museum of conflict, and its future forms, siblings, allies, and narrations of conflict, remains to be seen. The below poem constitutes an excerpt of an invited contribution to the Colonialism and Affect Web Lab[22] – and lingers in the uncertain futures of how to keep holding space for conflict.

>　　if you could grasp conflict better, would you punch it in the face?
>
>　　but how to face nothingness?
>
>　　it used to make me shiver
>
>
>　　would you Band-Aid conflict? ban it?
>
>　　how to nurse conflict when we can't escape it
>
>　　how to charge the seemingly quiet past with conflict
>
>　　not everybody is assembled in your law
>
>
>　　conflict Band-Aid
>
>　　conflict banned
>
>　　conflict bandit

Notes

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