Editorial: Refiguring Museums: Investigating Tensions in Exhibition Spaces

Sarah Etz*, Séverine Marguin**, Henrike Rabe***

Understood as active in the mediation of knowledge and values (e.g. Macdonald 2007), so far, museum spaces have not been – and that was certainly the early starting point of this special issue – central in museum studies, even if there have been several inquiries and important contributions to establish a *spatial turn* in this particular field of research (e.g. MacLeod 2005; von Bose *et al*. 2012; Tröndle *et al*. 2012; MacLeod 2013; Tzortzi 2015). What we are interested in is not only to question and investigate the museum space as such, but also to focus much more on the *transformation* of museum space. To this end, we want to introduce a specific theoretical framework, the *refiguration of spaces*, which aims to think spatial transformation in a non-linear, multi-scalar and multiple way: the basic assumption is not to presume a sequential historical transformation of spatial arrangements of museums – from chambers of wonders, through universal museums and white cubes towards interactive museums – in which a new type always replaces the previous one, but rather to draw our attention to the dense juxtaposition of these types, which continue to be drawn upon, competing to reshape museums, and which continue to inform our spatial understanding of the museum of the future. The refigurational approach, by breaking with the idea of a linear transformation of museums, allows us to consider the shifting heterogeneous landscape of museum spaces.

Transformations in and of museums are in full swing. With its 'Initiative for Ethnological Collections', the Federal Cultural Foundation in Germany recently supported three large museums in order to 'test innovative forms of museum presentation', among other things, with the view to subsequently incorporate them into permanent exhibitions. At the heart of these experiments in museum display are various spatial interventions and redesigns: at one location a space in the permanent exhibition that was to be remodelled is turned into a 'laboratory' (Linden Museum Stuttgart); at another location a temporarily 'in-between space' is set up (MARKK Hamburg). Elsewhere, the comprehensive redesign of the permanent exhibition is augmented by a 'backstage' area intended to facilitate a look behind museum staging, and for reflection on the practices and infrastructures of museum-making (GRASSI Leipzig).

Other spatial interventions of similar thrust can be observed in the field of art museums, municipal history and natural history museums. Between 2018 and 2022, an 'Open Space' was set up in one of the exhibition halls of the Kunstsammlung NRW, serving as a dialogue with, and as an extended urban space. With the curation of a performative program – including readings, panels, poetry slams, screenings, and more – space for topical issues was created here. For many years, due to long-term renovations and thus a lack of space, the Historisches Museum Frankfurt had been displaying exhibitions of its 'Stadtlabor' (city lab) at various locations across the city. And the recent exhibition of Berlins' city museum in the Humboldt Forum features 'open spaces' designed to be used by diverse city actors to topically complement the exhibition, critically comment on it or make 'blind spots' visible. While the Natural History Museum in Berlin has installed its 'experimental field for participation and open science' in 2018, there are also bigger plans to jointly create a science campus with the Humboldt University in Berlin, going beyond museum walls to further engage the public with scientific research.

All of these spatial reorganizations and rearrangements aim to create spaces of possibility or innovation in which the museum can potentially be thought of in new and different ways. This corresponds with the current conjuncture of (critically) questioning and updating what the museum is and could be in the future – and although our examples are mostly from Germany, the contributions of this special issue will show that the scope of museums in

refiguration can be extended to further contexts.

It is essential to note that these developments take place *across* spatial scales – from exhibits, exhibition areas, exhibitions, storage and visitor areas to entire buildings or even beyond – and attempt to intervene more comprehensively into established scripts of the museum. These new spatial formulations, by negotiating things differently, attempt to transgress standard procedures and reflect on core practices and therefore what the museum could be. However, this is not necessarily accompanied by a critical politics of innovation. In this special issue, we would like to argue that the intervening quality and aesthetics of these 'other' museum spaces lie in their concurring divergence from established spatial orders and modes of knowing – particularly the permanent exhibition and its traditional forms of presentation. Of course, ideally, such spaces 'enter into a dialogical relationship with the original presentations' (Muttenthaler 2012: 357) and thus generate a 'relationship of tension' that works 'in the sense of a stimulating difference in knowledge and experience' (Muttenthaler 2012: 385). And yet, their intervening potentials often come as spatial displacement, spatial and temporal insertion and aesthetic interruption, restructuring and opening etc., that highlight and convey strong conflicts and struggles about the politics and poetics of museums (Karp and Lavine 1991). For example, postcolonial museological perspectives, which address the colonial origins of the museum institution, and which are particularly emblematic in the case of ethnological collections, problematize the spatialized and temporalized representational logics of the museum as it relates to the complexes of power knowledge that have co-produced certain notions of culture, identity and the Other (e.g. Lidchi 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Spatially juxtaposing the display of ethnological collections with contemporary art from related communities has been one approach to address such problems through the spatial and temporal disruption of denied coevalness and categorical knowledge.

It is exactly these spatial tensions and struggles that we want to place at the centre of our reflection. In this editorial, we purposely argue for a shift from a transformation towards a refiguration framework, in order to think about the conflicting contemporary spatialities of museums. For this, we will firstly (re)trace the different spatial-aesthetic figurations of museums (1) and work out the limitations of a transformational framework. We will then introduce the refiguration theory and its potential (2), before presenting the seven contributions of the special issue and synthesizing their findings about the conflicting and shifting multiple spatialities of museums (3). We want to end our editorial with a speculative reflection about the futures of refiguring museums (4).

1. (Re)tracing Spatial Figurations of Museums

Space holds a special place within museum analysis. As central places of cultural knowledge production and mediation, museums in their specific medium and form can be interpreted in relation to different spatial scales and notions of space. Here, the close-knit entanglement of museum concepts and practices with a spatial program become apparent, giving form and spatial order to powerful narratives that bring forth values and power-knowledge in aesthetic and material ways, and governing people, exhibits and representation. As such, museums can be understood as central sites that inscribe the cultural values and experiences of societies in spatially and aesthetically specific ways (cf. Klonk 2009). Thus, not only *what* is displayed and narrated within museums is important, but also *how* this communication interconnects and places different actors within, but also beyond museum spaces.

However, spatial-aesthetic decisions are achieved on several layers and scales: of architecture, interior design, scenography and exhibition design as well as exhibit presentation. Here, more generally speaking, architecture and exhibition design can intertwine and relate to each other or operate in a disintegrated manner when exhibition spaces hide or modify the actual architectural features in the sense of a second skin (cf. Pilegaard 2023). The relationship and referentiality of museum architecture and exhibition design are therefore not simply given, but are designed and adapted in accordance with the respective political narrative in play. Among other things, the temporal logics of special and permanent exhibitions play a role here. While permanent exhibitions usually present the museum's collection as part of its architectural identity, special exhibitions often deal with themes that are specifically staged.

In their long history of transformation, specific spatial-aesthetic notions of what a museum is have evolved. Concepts of political power, the public and governing systems, as well as key cultural practices at any given time, have found form in certain architectures, spatial programs and arrangements of the museum, as well as its interior aesthetics and display strategies. Changing physical and aesthetic arrangement is closely linked to the change in these relations between politics, public and cultural practices, since they inform the idea of the museum in light of social transformation.

A notion of the public(s) is one central aspect in this, which is and has been central to the identity and definition of museums over time (e.g. Barrett 2011). Here, the figure of the 'citizen' not only establishes the social role of the museum as a public sphere, but is embedded in the instrumental formation of entangled notions of knowledge, history and identity, nature and culture through the networks that connect in the idea of the museum. Particular figurations, for example the universal museum, thus scaled and organized knowledge as scientific, history as national, nature in contrast to culture, in the pursuit of national identity and the related representation of colonial networks grounding this.

While there is no fixed form to the spatial design of museums, a number of aesthetic and spatial types have emerged throughout the transformation of museums that are worth briefly considering. Each of these characteristic museum forms traces back to a specific cultural-historical figuration of the museum idea, its spatial organization and the public sphere. The following is therefore designed to outline such a spatial-aesthetic typification of museum and exhibition spaces, which reflects a certain genealogy of museum development. However, here we want to suggest it as a spatial-aesthetic densification that provides cultural 'identification schemes' (cf. Ege and Wietschorke 2014: 17) in museum-making practices and for the spatial design and synthesis of museums today – proposing a repertoire of museum spatial-aesthetic forms, so to speak.

1.1 Chambers of Wonders

While the birth of the modern museum is frequently associated with the formation of nation states during the Renaissance, the collections on which these museums were built in the nineteenth century had already been started within the earlier colonial formations and practices of the sixteenth century, like collecting and studying (cf. Findlen 1989; Abt 2006). This conception, that pre-dated the museum, was a world-making system (Findlen 1989: 61) that manifested itself in the microcosm of the 'chamber', a densely filled 'room without windows that achieved completeness through closure' (Findlen 1989: 64). First, these collections followed a cosmologically anchored order, displaying objects – from art to nature – in juxtaposition (Findlen 1989; te Heesen 2012). With expanding trade and colonial programs, collections grew and formerly established knowledge in relation to nature and the arts came into crisis (Findlen 1989: 68). This transitioned from a rather encyclopaedic representation of, and gaze onto, the world into the era of classification (e.g. Foucault 1972). It manifested, not only in specialized cabinets with 'more or less systematic arrangement in tidy cabinets, cases, drawers, and other specialized furnishings' (Abt 2006: 119) that ordered collections into classified objects and staged a history of nature and the arts as universal knowledge, but also transformed a wondrous spectator into a more comparative scholar. Yet, these collections remained rather exclusive spaces, 'often in specially designated rooms in the homes and workplaces of amateurs and scholars' (Abt 2006: 119). However, towards the seventeenth century this started to change, as collections gained importance as imperial self-representations, hence access to them for 'the learned, curious, and famous of the day' was more and more spatially organized in semi-public cabinets and galleries (Abt 2006: 122-3).

From the seventeenth century onwards and along with processes of enlightenment, the formerly less accessible and private collection spaces opened up to the public. In this process, they found their spatial setting more in the gallery as 'a space through which one passed, in contrast to the static principle of the spatially closed studio' (Findlen 1989: 71). Here, walking and looking, as central modalities of visiting, started to become inextricably conjoined in the museum experience: 'walking choreographs visuality within the museum' (Leahy 2016: 75ff.) and as such was tightly impacted by a spatial architectural script.

1.2 Universal Survey Museum

The donation of private and royal collections to social institutions and European nation-states in formation in the eighteenth century marks the era of this new idea of the 'public' or universal museum. Collection and display logics were being refigured in support of patriotic functions (Duncan and Wallach 1980). Collections that had earlier 'formed a part of the cultural accessories of power in contexts in which it was the organization and transmission of power within and between ruling strata [now become a] display of power before the populace' (Bennett 1995: 27). Here – along with the founding and construction of numerous museums during the turn to the nineteenth century – the education and disciplining of 'citizens' advances to become a leading principle, resulting in didactic display strategies deploying 'arranged objects as parts of evolutionary sequences, which formed a totalizing order of things and peoples', as Tony Bennett (1995: 96) has put it (cf. te Heesen 2012: 52-9). The ceremonial architecture of this type of museum – temple, palace or mausoleum – imposed an architectural script on the visiting body that shaped the experience of the museum as a 'civilising ritual' (Duncan 2005) and sacred space (Duncan and Wallach 1980; Giebelhausen 2006). Many such museums followed a spatial program and arrangement that showed (national, European) heritage through an ascent into the inner sanctum that can be equated to the very notion of civilization (cf. Giebelhausen 2006) – often juxtaposing 'the Own' with 'the Other' – visually formulating the nation as a set of cultural artefacts and values (as identity formation) that address a supposedly uniform public (cf. Macdonald 2003). In this way, the museal conceptualization of the national or universal created a spatial imaginary that was bound to a specific form and scale comparable to such categories (Richardson 2018: 201).

1.3 White Cube

With the turn of the twentieth century, the monumental and, as such, seemingly eternal idea of the universal museum changed in light of broader economic and social shifts demanding 'impermanence and flexibility' from architecture and display strategies (Giebelhausen 2006: 232). It is specifically in the field of modern art that the ideology of the white cube arose. Detached from the building in which it is located the white cube gives no hint of the architectural shell in which it is contained (te Heesen 2012: 184); a space that was characterized by the absence of everything that could distract from the evaluation of the artwork, as artist and art critic Brian O'Doherty (1986) has described it. Isolated masterpieces were hung on white walls with sealed or no windows and no furnishings, imposing an atmosphere that suggested 'while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not' (O'Doherty 1986: 15). The visiting public in this regard was imagined as a 'universal viewing subject', as Miwon Kwon (2002: 13) has termed it. But it is not by chance that this exhibition aesthetic was originally connected to the notion of contemporariness, a collection strategy grounded on continuous acquisition and a more generally developing art market. These ideas contributed to the architectural idea of a 'spiral, from where the gallery spaces unfolded with the potential for unlimited growth' (Giebelhausen 2006: 232). Although the idea of the white cube was adapted in less strict ways, the overall aim of a visual rather than discursive education persisted (Klonk 2009: 147ff.).

> In doing so it established the museum as a space in which consumers could cultivate their taste, up-date themselves in matters of style, and recognise themselves as informed members of the consumer society that was then emerging in the United States (Klonk 2009: 149).

As such the figure of the visitor changed from a citizen to be cultivated to a taste-exercising spectator (cf. Klonk 2009).

1.4 Interactive Museum

During the 1960s, growing institutional critique and museological reflection called for greater possibilities for visitors to participate in the museum. Visiting was no longer understood as a

cognitive learning process, but as an experiential and contextual activity of diverse meaning-making (Hein 2006). The visitor was no longer the 'universal viewing subject' (Kwon 2002: 13); with the educational turn, those coming to the museum have been increasingly imagined as a multitude of highly varied bodies and identities able to participate and perform their museum visit (cf. Macdonald 2016). This has posed challenges in making the design and architecture of existing spatial scripts accessible and as such supposedly open to participation. However, the paradigm of participation is ambiguous (Robinson 2020) – not least because the ideal of wide and engaged public(s) is tied into neoliberal politics. Nevertheless, new museology's centring of the audience (e.g. see Ross 2004) fostered a rethinking of the museum as a social space, in which the visiting public is a central actor who informs thinking about spatial, architectural, and design parameters (MacLeod 2013). Given the heated debates about cultural authority and the often violent histories of museum collections, classificatory forms of display have increasingly been called into question, with greater calls instead for interpretive-narrative arrangements. As such, ideas around display are shifting from the Renaissance ideal of exhibiting collections as 'truthful' knowledge towards constructivist notions of interactive engagement with exhibits that speaks to visitors' different needs and senses (cf. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel 2011: 260 in Noy 2017: 281f.). The development of other forms and presentation of sensory engagement in exhibition design, such as hands-on and interactive exhibits, and the advance of digitalization, has changed the sensory conventions and key modalities of the museum space. Now that interpretation is a key parameter, the museum visit is increasingly imagined as an unguided process. Open floor plans and flexible architecture seem to best meet such visitor-centred museological requirements.

This typification is by no means exhaustive nor do types separate neatly nowadays. Here, understood as identification schemes within the analysis of museums, they nevertheless have to be examined as figurations of specifically inscribed museological ideas, entangled with a specific spatial-aesthetic program and the specific politics of public engagement at a certain moment. This also applies in particular to the colonial and post-colonial formations of museums in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where museums were established by colonial regimes on the one hand, and where they were founded in the course of the independence movements in the style of European models on the other (e.g. Singh 2002).

In museum discourses, there is often an historicizing understanding of successive museum figurations that have passed from one to the other. This perspective, in regard to spatial transformation, unfolds along different dimensions, all following the enlightening path of modern(ist) progress: from the *privateness* of the chamber of wonders to the *publicness* of the universal museums and further museum forms; from a *deterministic* museum layout with a unidirectional movement script for visitors to a *probabilistic* one that is more improvisational and explorative (see Leahy 2016: 83, in reference to the *space syntax approach*). What we find limiting and reductive in such linear historicizing understanding is as follows: a) it assumes a sequentiality between these figurations, yet in fact we witness juxtaposition, mingling of, and throwback to these different spatial-aesthetic types, for example, the praising of the Wunderkammer as something topical once again (Ennis 2018); b) it is blind to the interplay between different scales, at least between the building and the exhibition space but also towards smaller (the display, the content) or broader (circulation between museums, between countries) scales, and how these diverse levels are deeply entangled.

2. Refiguration of Museums: Taking Space-Time Entanglements Seriously

With this special issue, we would like to introduce a new theoretical framework that precisely captures the simultaneity, overlaps and possibly conflictual collisions between the different museum spatial arrangements just described: the theory of the refiguration of spaces, which aims to take fundamental spatial changes as a starting point in the analysis of social change (Knoblauch and Löw 2020) and to emphasize the tensions and conflicts that result from multiple spatialities. In this section, after a brief introduction to the theory of refiguration, we would like to work out the main tensions in the spatial change of museums. This is also where we see the contribution of this special issue, insofar as the seven contributions have elaborated their arguments around specific tensions arising during the spatial mutation of museums.

2.1 Refiguration Theory: Non-Linearity, Multi-scalarity and Multiplicity

The desire to write this ambitious socio-spatial theory came from the observation that, despite the well-established spatial (Soja 1989; Löw 2001) and topological-topographical turns (Weigel 2002; Schlögel 2003; Döring and Thielmann 2008), we still experience the absence of comprehensive theoretical elaborations on space and especially spatial change in basic social theory. There have been highly relevant partial theoretical propositions such as the *network society* by Castells (1996), *fluid spaces* by Mol and Law (1994), *knots* by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), or *scapes* by Appadurai (1996), but these theories or theoretical pieces have focused on one sole aspect of spatiality for the comprehension of the social. The refiguration theory proposes to think about the transformation of societies through the analysis of the multiple transformation of spaces. In a nutshell, 'the concept of re-figuration draws attention to the question of how the current social order is being transformed because of social tension between different large scale figurations' (Knoblauch and Löw 2020: 265). With large scale figurations we mean spatial changes that have been occurring since the 1960s in the course of global processes such as globalization, digitalization, climate change or decolonization and that have deeply shaken local, regional or national social formations, practices and knowledges.

Non-Linearity and Simultaneity
As such, the refiguration theory is a theory about social change of global proportions (Löw 2022: 83). Change here is conceptualized as *non-linear*. Social change is not a one-way transformation process from A to B but includes throwbacks and simultaneities of potentially contradictory processes. The tendency of de- and re-bordering processes of political regimes currently at work is a good example: on the one hand, borders have become in some macro-territories more open and porous and, on the other hand the number of unpassable fortified borders has never been as high as today (Mau 2022). In this sense, 're-figuration seems to not result in the elimination of previous "figurations" but rather in their superimposition, resilience, and new formations of interdependency in ways that cannot be derived logically but must be empirically explored' (Knoblauch and Löw 2020: 268). The theory explicitly distances itself from a progress-oriented or developmental path with which concepts of transformation or social change are generally associated.

Multi-scalar Interdependencies
'Refiguration' means that forms of knowledge, practices and regimes can follow different logics of spatialization, and that in the case of opposing spatializations, manifest conflicts emerge that unfold empirically as spatial conflicts. For this, the refiguration theory calls for taking multi-scalarity seriously. To investigate shifting figurations, empirical investigations should indeed consider entanglements and interdependencies between different structural scales (micro, meso, macro), but also spatial scales (from the local to the global) and of course also temporal scales (in the sense of rhythms, tempo or periods) that are of relevance (Datchary and Marguin 2023: 9).

Refiguration of Modernity and Multiple Spatialities
As mentioned, the theory of refiguration focuses on the very specific temporal framework of the contemporary: we consider primarily the diagnosis of shifts in society from the 1960s onwards, specifically the increase in mobility and the densification of the circulation of goods, knowledge, and information, especially through digitalization. These shifts have been portrayed in abundant literature as the shift from a modern order to a late modern, ultramodern, or postmodern order. Instead of taking this transformation for granted, we are more interested in analysing the order resulting from the tensions between these coexisting orders (Knoblauch 2022). With this concept, Knoblauch and Löw build on work about multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) and multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012) and, in that sense, put the questioning of modernity at the core of their reflections. The point here is to work out versions of refiguration that touch on a multitude of modernities, including their questioning, transgression and overcoming. In doing so, 'in contrast to multiple modernities,

which emphasize the difference between the various paths to modernization, the concept of multiple spatialities takes into account the critique expressed in postcolonial theories, which emphasizes the entanglement of the various modernities' (Knoblauch 2022: 107, authors' translation). All this implies an understanding of museum developments as an entangled and thus always global relationality of shared histories. This is no more visible than in the case of current plans and tensions for museum institutions in Africa, such as, for example, the newly initiated Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) in Benin City, Nigeria – which shares a close relationship to postcolonial refigurations of European museums and their colonial collections in light of the restitution of cultural artefacts and broader decolonial demands.

2.2 Refiguration of Museums: Showing Tensions

In the course of the refiguration of spaces, that is, in the course of major tendencies that include digitalization, decolonization, democratization, or commodification, to cite the most important, we observe a reordering of museum spaces and a wide questioning of what a museum is or should be. The different spatial figurations we elaborated in the first part of this article provide the backdrop for asking whether there can be a simple rejection of past forms and innovation without them, as well as what the politics are of revitalizing 'old' spatial-aesthetics (as in the case of the Humboldt Labor). What does the mingling of different spatial figurations produce? This spatial re-ordering does not happen without conflicts and tensions. In the special issue, we gathered seven contributions that are engaging with this specific understanding of museum transformation, advocating for a non-progress-orientated, non-linear, multi-scalar and multiple perspective. In so doing, they all show different tensions emerging from the refiguration process. The contributions come from a wide disciplinary range of scholarship, bringing together views from sociology, anthropology, architecture and urban planning on spatial changes in museums.

The special issue begins with three contributions that centre the perspective of actors making museums and, as such, are responsible for the spatial (re)staging of knowledge. These contributions explicitly apply a refigurational framework and, in doing so, reflect precisely upon the idea of modernity. In the first contribution, the architect **Jamie-Scott Baxter** and the sociologist **Séverine Marguin** investigate the staging of nature in botanical gardens and the tremendous change they are facing in the course of decolonization and climate change. The article deconstructs the multi-scalar spatial production at work in the botanical garden of Berlin, unfolding at the intersection between global climatic zones, colonial networks, trans-local scientific networks, and the very local care for the plants. The authors point out the conflicting spatialities resulting from tensions between the imperative to change and the stratification of the garden's design, whose layout is under protection.

In the second contribution, the sociologist **Jochen Kibel** applies the refigurational framework in his investigation of the spatial transformation of military museums. He shows how the German Bundeswehr, under pressure to distance itself from its past, co-opts a post-heroic mode of identity formation to spatially embed a coherent self-narrative that smooths out historical fractures and multiple conflicts of recent history. This is manifest in the spatial arrangements of the Military History Museum of the Bundeswehr (Dresden), where the 'critical engagement with the past' is tackled and staged in and through architecture and as a result is materially and symbolically institutionalized.

In the third contribution, the urban cultural geographer **Friederike Landau-Donnelly** investigates the Conflictorium – Museum of Conflict, founded in 2013, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. By unpacking four partially interrelated dimensions of spatial transformations in the Conflictorium, the article offers an empirically-grounded understanding of the museums' different spatial strategies to assemble information, and create affective atmospheres and memories about contentious aspects of contemporary Indian society that create poetic space for 'other' memory politics that counteract state-run politics. In sum, the article argues that museum spaces can function as socio-spatial and -technological infrastructures that call for the cultivation of consciousness about conflict, and the radical interrelatedness of India's diverse social fabric.

The following two contributions in turn centre a user perspective, emphasizing the

experience of museum transformations from the point of view of the audience. In the fourth contribution, the interdisciplinary team comprising the anthropologist **Sarah Etz**, the sociologist **Séverine Marguin** and the architect **Henrike Rabe**, investigated how the audience responds to the associative, multiperspective, multimodal, deconstructive, and open plan layout of a newly designed exhibition space in Berlin that is staged as a 'modern chamber of wonders'. Applying a mixed-methods research design, combining movement tracking, visitor survey and ethnographic observation in a multiple correspondence analysis, the article shows that spatial appropriation of the museum space differs in relation to museum spatial knowledge and proximity to science. The authors show that the legibility of museum space varies according to the visitors' cultural and specific symbolic-spatial capital and has a direct influence on ways of knowing.

In the fifth contribution, the architect-theorist **Sabine Hansmann,** following actor network theory, considers not only human but also non-human actors to analyse the daily changes in the architecture of one iconic open-plan museum in the UK, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich. Drawing on the concept of spacing by Bruno Latour, this paper highlights the multiplicity and complexity inherent in museum practices. Analysing the work towards and negotiation of stability and flux, of homogeneity and heterogeneity inherent to museum spaces, it articulates the characteristics that allow for a rich and nuanced understanding of the relationship between people and physical things.

The last two contributions are oriented towards the future of museums. In the sixth contribution, the sociologist and cultural theorist **Sophia Prinz** makes a strong case for what she calls the 'pluriverse museum' as the refiguration of the universal museum, which has fallen into crisis. Contrary to their own image as bearers of cultural heritage, museums seem to be losing cultural and social relevance precisely because of their historical legacy: any clear-cut division of exhibits into art and non-art, modern and pre-modern, or the West and the Rest is becoming untenable in a post-migrant, globally entangled world. The task of contemporary exhibition design is to invent new perceptual 'affordances' – ones that subvert the cognitive bias, linear historiography, and identificatory logic of Western museology.

In the seventh and last contribution, the architect **Kali Tzortzi** makes a call for a multi-scalar museum porous to the city. In the contemporary world of social change, accelerated mobility and plural identities, the creation of open and inclusive environments seems to be a recurrent aim at all levels, from cities to buildings and to museums in particular. The spatial nature of the contemporary museum, it is proposed, points towards a new concept of the museum as part of the city, both in the sense of how it connects to and internally is more like a city, and in how it is a continuation of it.

These seven contributions provide insights into what we frame as the refiguration of museums, that is, the entangled spatial transformations of museums that create multiple links to former as well as to future spatial figurations of museums. Investigating how museums are changing spatially is extremely productive in understanding larger dynamics and topical processes, be it decolonization, democratization, and the circulation of knowledge, and their impact on contemporary museums.

Conclusion

In this special issue, we have paid close attention to museum spaces with specific focus on exhibition spaces. A common attribute of all the contributions is not simply to consider the surfaces of the building but also the intertwining of building, exhibition space, displays, content, and also bodies and imaginations: that is to 'move attention […] to the multiple agencies and politics involved in architectural production and place an emphasis on lived experience and bodily occupation' (MacLeod 2013: 177). The seven contributions show how fruitful a non-linear, multi-scalar and multiple analysis of spatial changes can be.

We would like to end this editorial with two topical issues that arise from our reflections about the refiguration of museums and in our rich exchange with the authors.

- The first concerns the profession of exhibition designers. If the question of mediation is stated as something constitutive and no longer subordinate, then the materiality of mediation as one fundamental element in the production of exhibition spaces

should be taken seriously and hence such competence might need representation within curatorial teams. This would mean that exhibition designers are no longer considered simple subcontractors carrying out the instructions of their clients (the curators or the museum directors), nor that they become involved only when the exhibition concept is written; rather, that they are integrated as co-producers of the exhibition.

•   The second concerns the need to think of space and time together. Indeed, this is a core aspect of refiguration theory, which is concerned with the change of spaces in time. In our editorial, we have tried to show how historic figurations comprise the core of the current debate. This echoes debates in museum studies about the future of (post; late; ultra) modern museums and the direction new museology wants to take. Of course, the future of museums is not exclusively a current conjuncture, rather, it has been a recurrent feature of discussion in museology:

[It] must first be noted that the "new museum" is not an idea of the twenty-first century, but is simply back in fashion today […] It is possible that the new beginning of the museum as a socially relevant place is just as much a part of the idea of the modern museum as the talk of its demise (Sternfeld 2018: 13, authors' translation).

This is exactly what we found very exciting about the refigurational framework as a complex theoretical approach to grasp multiple spatialities as well as multiple temporalities. It remains to be seen how specific concepts that are currently being taken up again and again on a temporary basis, such as the laboratory, the forum, the open space or similar culturally and historically coded spatial figures, will become new, stable figurations.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]   'Initiative For Ethnological Collections', Kulturstifung des Bundes. https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/de/projekte/bild_und_raum/detail/initiative_fuer_ethnologische_sammlungen.html, accessed 23 November 2023.

[2]   'Linden LAB', Linden Museum Stuttgart. https://www.lindenlab.de/en/, accessed 23 November 2023.

[3]   'Zwischenraum – A Space Between', MARKK Hamburg. https://markk-hamburg.de/zwischenraum-the-space-between/, accessed 23 November 2023.

[4]   'Backstage', GRASSI Leipzig. https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/reinventing-grassiskd/backstage/, accessed 23 November 2023.

[5]   'Open Space', Kunstsammlung NRW. https://raumlabor.net/open-space/, accessed 23 November 2023.

[6]   'Stadtlabor', Historisches Museum Frankfurt. https://www.historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/de/stadtlabor?language=en, accessed 23 November 2023.

[7]   'Open Spaces', Humboldt Forum Berlin. https://www.stadtmuseum.de/en/open-spaces, accessed 23 November 2023.

[8]   'Experimental Field For Participation And Open Science', Natural History Museum in Berlin. https://web.archive.org/web/20210205030058/https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/museum/exhibitions/experimental-field-participation-and-open-science, accessed 23

November 2023.

9   There may be many more types that would need a similarly dense theoretical debate of their spatial-aesthetic figuration, as the ones sketched out here have had: for example, the period room (e.g. Pilgrim 1978) or the display depot (e.g. Natter *et al.* 2010).

10   Clémentine Deliss, 'Why Africa's Future Museums Should Forget Western Models', The Art Newspaper 13 January 2020. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/01/13/why-africas-future-museums-should-forget-western-models, accessed 9 February 2024.

11   Adjaye Associates, 'Museum Of West African Art (MOWAA)'. https://www.adjaye.com/work/edo-museum-of-west-african-art/, accessed 23 November 2023.

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*Sarah Etz studied Social Sciences and European Ethnology at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. From 2021-2022, she was research assistant in the interdisciplinary research project "Museum Space Knowledge" at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and coordinated the science communication of the CRC 1265 "Re-Figuration of Spaces". Currently, she has been a doctoral researcher as part of the CRC 1512 "Intervening Arts", investigating the planned science campus between the natural history museum Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin as a future workshop.

**Séverine Marguin, (Dr.) sociologist, is Head of the Methods-Lab and of the Graduate School within the CRC 1265 "Re-Figuration of Spaces" at Technische Universität Berlin. Aside from her habilitation on the relationship between sociology and design, she leads two research projects: "Afronovelas: Spatial Stories and Production Regime in West-African Soaps" at the Technische Universität Berlin and "Museum Space Knowledge" in collaboration with the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her interdisciplinary research focus lies on culture and knowledge production, sociology of space, experimental and design-based methods.

***Henrike Rabe is an architect and researcher with a focus on 'architectures of knowledge' such as laboratories, museums and schools. Currently, as a construction manager for BIM GmbH, she oversees the planning and (re)construction of cultural buildings in Berlin. Previously, she was a doctoral researcher for the research project ArchitecturesExperiments at the Cluster of Excellence Image Knowledge Gestaltung at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. As an architect, she worked amongst others with Kazuhiro Kojima + Kazuko Akamatsu / CAt in Tokyo and with Brisac Gonzalez in London. She studied architecture at Technische Universität Berlin.