

(UN)LEARN MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE – A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE REGARDING THE NEW ICOM DEFINITION* OF 2022

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Abstract

Although the architecture of museums often radiates dominance and power, the spatial aspect is frequently neglected in the current critical debate on museums. This contribution illustrates in different ways a critical look on museum architecture – regarding the latest museum definition of the International Council of Museum (ICOM) from 2022. The concept of (un)learning – discarding old structures or rethinking them – therefore takes a central position to develop transformative, spatial conditions for museum architecture. They are later applied to two museums from North-Rhine-Westfalia – the Museum Abteiberg and the Kunstmuseum Bochum.

This work shows on the one hand the potential of spatial interventions in a process of change and on the other hand wants to encourage the reader to question the extent to which these spatial and institutional boundaries can be overcome.

Keywords: museum architecture, (un)learn, ICOM museum definition, spatial interventions, institutional critique

*‘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.’ (icom.museum, 2022)

According to the latest museum definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), museums are inclusive, diverse, open and sustainable places for our society. Regarding today's museum landscape, the definition is more of a vision than a description of the current situation, which would be instead: elitist, unreflective, inaccessible, commercial, and not sustainable for our society.

Like most today's institutions, museums are under enormous pressure to change – and with good reason, as museums are themselves monuments to a burdened past based on exploitation, violence and power. In this context they left and still leave out the stories and narratives of many people. It is therefore not surprising that they are being called upon to change. Criticism of its conception of content and administration is particularly prevalent in the public debate. The original core tasks of a museum are collecting and preserving. For several decades now, the restitution of so-called ‘Nazi-looted art’ in

German museums has called into question this permanent preservation – the demands for the return of cultural artefacts from colonial contexts in European museums even call into question the institution as such (Schulz, 2022).

Individual museums are already trying to respond to the demands of this change. In some museums, for example, critical contexts are now emphasised alongside selected paintings or individual rooms are dedicated to the provenance of permanent collections. Some try to not only in terms of content, but also administratively – by opening up the profession more and more to marginalised groups.

These steps are long overdue and are taking place very slowly – yet they are a little sign of change. But what about the architecture in which these changes (should) take place?

In this complex debate about the role of museums today, the critical architectural perspective on museums is often underestimated. Museums have a considerable relevance for the urban form as many museums are massive buildings with a very strong presence in public space. Current topics in museums such as restitution, climate neutrality, accessibility etc. are supported by architecture – or not. Large, iconic star architectures proceed to emerge and museum construction continues to be hyped as a means of solving urban problems – but aren't they themselves difficult urban places?

For a new (spatial) understanding of museums

The guidelines formulated by ICOM apply to museums in their entirety – i.e. also to their architecture and therefore as well impose spatial requirements. Nevertheless, the architecture appears unshaken by all the debates that have taken place.

To find the few signs about the provenance or the critical historical context of individual art works one often still has to squeeze through a single entrance into a temple of art, pass through several security gates, a spacious, infinitely high foyer and climb a spectacular staircase. If one wants to take a short break from all this, there are either seating options only at the end of the exhibition or, if one is lucky, a few isolated hard, uncomfortable benches in the white, cold exhibition rooms. For the most part, the museum still seems to be a long way from fulfilling the latest ICOM definition in its entirety.

But how can the museum become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place in the sense of the ICOM definition if the architecture, the so-called hardware, already represents a barrier on several levels?

Solutions to this question can be found less in today's museum landscape than in the 1960s to 1980s: At that time, the museum institution was also questioned in the course of a general critique of representation and a process of (un)learning was initiated. Outdated institutional characteristics were to be unlearned, i.e. discarded, and new, more democratic structures learnt. The museum buildings created at this time were intended to

support this process architecturally. But to what extent do these architectures still fulfil the requirements of society today?

Economisation versus the temple of the muses

To answer this question it is necessary to take a closer look at the institution behind. The museum still holds the position of being a neutral, apolitical institution. Since its inception as a politically motivated and publicly accessible institution, the museum has always been a political instrument: during colonialism for the exploitation and extermination of oppressed population groups; during the National Socialist regime in Germany as an expression of state power and a manifestation of an ideologically infused conception of culture; and today as the supposed collective memory and as a solution to urban planning challenges with the frequent consequence of accelerated gentrification. This contradicts the fact that museums, through their role as carriers of collective memory, have a social, and therefore also political, power beyond the past – for the present and the future (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 24). In addition, as we understand it today, successful museums are always measured by the number of visitors – in other words, by their economic success. This economic focus and the associated dependence on sponsors show that the neutral, apolitical stance is hardly ever realised.

The number of visitors that come to a museum always depends on various criteria: the location, including the urban community and political orientation, the collection, the programme and the museum management. How the museum functions is therefore mostly a question of economics, management and local culture – but the last of these aspects seems to be fading more and more into the background. As we understand it today, most successful museums are already successful before they are even built – thanks to a location that is rich in tourism, their integration into a museum complex, a well-known foundation or a star architect. The big, famous museums usually fulfil several of these criteria. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, for example, was created as part of the world-famous Guggenheim Foundation by star architect Frank Gehry – and is still sold as an outstanding urban example for the Basque city Bilbao. The Vitra Schaudapot – as a star architecture by Herzog & de Meuron – is embedded in a campus consisting solely of buildings by internationally renowned architects. The other category are museums, that become successful through sponsorships, donations or extensions by star architects over the course of time. The Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main for example became more successful under the direction of Max Hollein and his new museum management based on conceptions of sponsoring and marketing in the art world.

From an economic point of view, however, the admission prices generated by high visitor numbers as the primary source of income are not nearly enough to ensure economic success. Rather, this comes from the number and generosity of sponsors that a museum attracts. Without sponsorship, it would be difficult to finance the demands placed on museums today – the high energy consumption of growing collections or the elaborate, eventful exhibitions. As most today's German museums are run by local authorities or associations (statista.com, 2020), which often only have limited and small budgets at their disposal, they are increasingly dependent on sponsors. Building up a broad base of

supporters is extremely helpful to implement changes and innovations in museums – especially when the respective sponsors are unable to take on these financially.

On the one hand, this means saving and paving the way for more opportunities – on the other hand, there is the pressure to fulfil expectations. Many museums see themselves under pressure to keep up with the growing demands. This requires more financial resources – in other words, more sponsors if public funds are not enough. Maintaining a balance between your own statement and the influence of sponsors then becomes a major challenge. After all, it should not be forgotten that this need for external funding means that museums are at least partially under the influence of mostly large companies or powerful private individuals. This does not mean that they are exploiting their power per se, but the dependency structures cannot be denied. This is demonstrated by formats such as sponsor dinners and pre-vernissages – exclusive events in favour of supporters. There is no longer a balance when the satisfaction of the sponsors overshadows the content itself due to high visitor numbers (Lautenschläger, 2021).

But how can museums keep a balance? What are the bad, alarming developments and what is necessary to stay in tune with the zeitgeist – or rather to get there?

The concern and criticism, mostly from academic-intellectual circles, that museums transform into participatory organisations and entertainment temples (Schulz, 2022) is numerous – but so is the rush of visitors to precisely these places (Wurth, 2020). If museums are more active, livelier and also more accessible, they have the potential to be more democratic, because visitors do not walk past paintings by great masters in awe. The problem, however, is that this new way of experiencing art is not primarily the result of a motivation to democratise museums, but rather for economic reasons.

The complex situation of museums today makes the process of democratising difficult. Whilst they are trapped in financial limitations, they are at the same time supposed to fulfil a definition that is far away from their current state. Since ICOM represents today's museums as an international network and is not an external association – i.e. most members of ICOM primarily work in the museum field themselves – the definition can, as already mentioned at the beginning, also be understood as a goal in itself and as a motivation to work in this direction. The definition can also influence the economic aspects by creating new funding programmes or adapting existing ones to topics that were previously not so present – such as participation, sustainability, diversity or integrity.

Critics of the new museum definition see concerns about the 'progressive transformation of museums into participatory organisations' (Schulz, 2022, translated by the author) confirmed in precisely these concepts of current social developments. They describe topics such as participation, sustainability, diversity and integrity, which have received little attention to date, as 'core concepts of the current ideological whirlwinds' (Schulz, 2022, translated by the author) and as a danger to the museums original task of collecting.

On the one hand, the concern seems justified, because many new museum buildings are still being built and are getting bigger and bigger. Trapped in capitalistic constraints they

prioritise entertainment and experience above all else to increase the number of visitors. However, the criticism focuses on the wrong terms, so that 'a hard-earned critical vocabulary is often emptied into a label' (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 11, translated by the author) – as it is also known from other political discourses. The institution, which is already encrusted, thus persists in an understanding that doesn't corresponds to the present day and instead of answering the questions of our time only seems to raise more.

An uncontemporary attempt to build a contemporary museum

In the media, images of the planned Museum der Moderne at the Berlin Kulturforum show an attempt to build a contemporary museum in the sense of the ICOM definition. The building, designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, promises to be 'a much more sustainable building – also in social terms' (bundesregierung.de, 2023, translated by the author). Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth describes the yet unrealised museum as a 'future house for everyone' (bundesregierung.de, 2023, translated by the author). This house will connect the surrounding culture and open to a wider society through several entrances on different sides of the building, longer opening hours and admission-free areas.

However, it is questionable whether the oversized barn architecture will really turn the urban island of the Kulturforum into a place for Berlin's broader urban society. It will certainly solve some specific urban planning problems, but not the general question of the relevance of a new museum.

Planning a contemporary museum building means acting in accordance with the requirements of the present – in terms of architecture: no more (unnecessary) new buildings!

So why is a new museum building costing over 350 million euros being realised in times of climate crisis, war, inflation and material shortages? And in a place that is already well served by museum buildings?

The new building is intended to create space for the previously hidden, highly political collection of modern art (Messmer, 2019) at the Neue Nationalgalerie. This is not to doubt that the collection should be exhibited, but does a new, huge star architecture have to be built for it? What about the many vacant buildings in Berlin? When it comes to museum buildings, status and success still seem to supersede the actual mission, otherwise truly contemporary concepts would be considered, that are more sustainable, participatory and democratic.

Deconstructing the usual - approaches to a renewed (un)learning

The concept of unlearning is essential for a new way of thinking about museums and a transformation of this institution. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Director of the Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, makes clear that people working in the museum field have a lot to unlearn in terms of their own expertise – to then engage with new professionalisms and perspectives. Connecting the museum with urban society and other public institutions should be part of the process – but always with a view to ensuring that

participatory education programmes do not overshadow the unlearning of the museum institutions themselves (Meijer-van Mensch, 2023: min. 06:55 – 07:25). Museums must organise themselves self-critically and be prepared to respond to criticism and feedback from outside – especially from people whose stories have been left out – ‘as learning institutions and to incorporate new themes and tasks into their work’ (Greve, 2022: 338, translated by the author).

Looking at the African continent – the laboratory of the future according to Lesley Lokko – exciting movements and forms of interaction are emerging that embody new ideas about what a museum is, should be or can be (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 257).

However, the search for new museum forms in African countries – as a constant starting point – take into account that the museum is actually a foreign body there. It is a construct of the colonialists spatialising their power and exploitation and then establishing this kind of institution in the exploited countries themselves. It is a concept that the local people did not need and did not want for their cultures (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 256). These are often based on artefacts and rituals that were not intended for exhibitions but were often part of everyday life – and still are today. The artefacts were (and still are) degraded by the colonial powers, deprived of their purpose and exhibited in distant, rigid, white rooms. This contradicts many African countries' own concept, which, according to architect Kabage Karanja, is centred on life and the appreciation of real existence, teaching children what it means to live in a real environment and in a communal setting (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 256). In terms of the collective design of museums, European institutions must also take a look at the many projects in South America – where community-based projects have grown very quickly without large funds, in competition with large projects.

European museums should learn – with a clear emphasis on learning instead of adapting – from these concepts outside Europe to unlearn their problematic structures.

From theory to practice – to a visible (un)learning

The problems that museums must contend with today and which they repeatedly encounter when attempting to make changes are structural problems. No matter how great the work of a museum is, as long as the limitations of these old structures continue to exist, they will continue to come up against them. The economic success of successful museums ensures their existence in the end – it is irrelevant whether they overcome the institutional boundaries or come up against them.

But what about the less successful museums that have not learnt to assert themselves in capitalist competition?

These museums will not survive much longer unless they realise that they must take a different route to survival than the large, successful museums. To be relevant again in today's museum landscape, they must unlearn their encrusted institutional structures and see or develop their own focal points to act much more strongly as local institutions.

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But how can the bridge be built from theory to practice – to a visible (un)learning? Many issues that have been fought for years or decades – such as intersectional feminism, anti-racism, institutional critique, decolonial and queer theories or environmental policies – are now also more present in institutions, but the necessary structural changes associated with them are either not taking place at all or only very slowly (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 11). The vision of ICOM also hovers over museums as a path to a museum of the future, but 'everyone knows the theoretical critical approach that seems to call for an "ideal state" and cannot be realised in practice' (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 13, translated by the author).



Demands within the framework of a dynamic manifesto for a new (spatial) understanding of museums.

(Un)learning in Mönchengladbach and Bochum

To illustrate the attempt of a process of (un)learning, two selected museums in North Rhine-Westphalia are chosen to develop spatial interventions: the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, built by the Austrian architect Hans Hollein and the Kunstmuseum Bochum in the Ruhr region, built by the Danish architects Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert – both in the 1980s.

The two categories Update and Upgrade define two types of intervention in this work. An update is an actualisation, a continuation, a successor model or an improvement. In contrast, an upgrade significantly expands an object with new functions. If a museum

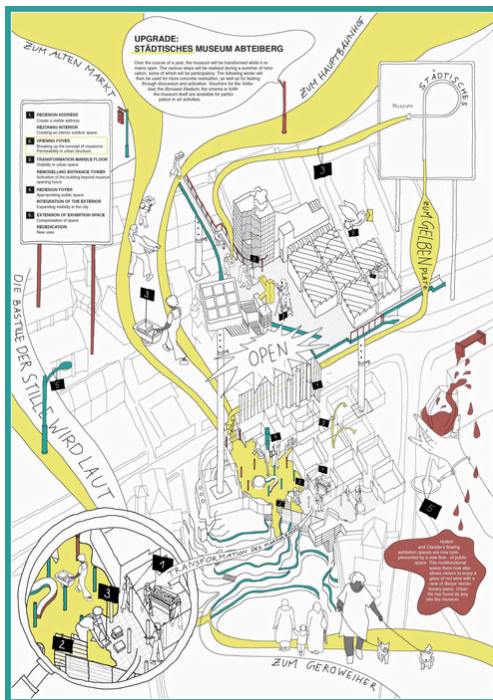
requires an update, this means that the interventions build on, strengthen and supplement something. If, on the other hand, a museum needs an upgrade, it requires interventions that change the location more radically and add new focal points.

In Mönchengladbach, there is a need to transform the Museum Abteiberg on a larger and more complex scale. Despite its originality and potential, the museum, which initially attracted a lot of attention as a media event in the 1980s, seems to have been almost forgotten nearly half a century later. This is very much related and connected to the urban development problems of the city. However, to promote the qualities and potential, the museum must unlearn its inward-looking position and open up more to the outside on all sides.

The upgrade places a new focus on the urban aspects of the Museum Abteiberg and makes it accessible to Mönchengladbach's wider urban society. The starting point is the opening of the foyer as a new public, permeable space inside the museum. This space will be structurally and thermally separated from the exhibition rooms to create more room for manoeuvre but will remain visually connected to them. Following spatial measures as the conversion of the entrance on the roof terrace into a typical regional kiosk results in a certain way from the first intervention and supports it.

While the transformation in Mönchengladbach starts from the interior, the update at the Kunstmuseum Bochum starts in the exterior space. The continuation of existing architectural elements should in turn make the interior visible to the outside. The intervention updates the museum by connecting the building with the city park opposite and creating its own address. By redirecting the road that separates the museum from the park, space is created for the museum to become rooted in its surroundings. The qualities of the museum – what it can already do – are taken up and continued. Thus, the intervention does not fundamentally change anything about the museum building, but simply expands on its existing potentials.

Both interventions ultimately create new public space – linked to the institution but focussing on the space outside it. Even if this public space is located inside of the museum building, as in the case of the Museum Abteiberg intervention. This new public space is actually intended to make the institutions more accessible. At the same time, however, it also calls the relevance of this institution into question to a certain extent showing that the space outside the institutional borders is more accessible, qualitative and human.



Spatial interventions at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach: a process including participatory, administrative, artistic and constructional steps.



Spatial interventions at the Kunstmuseum Bochum in the Ruhr area: a process including participatory, administrative, artistic and constructional steps.

Unlearn museum (architecture)

The finding from the two interventions that spatial changes at both museums mean focussing more on the public space and thus in a certain way breaking out of institutional boundaries leads to a reshaping of the question posed at the beginning of the paper. Instead of asking how the museum can become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place, the more fundamental question needs to be raised: can the museum institution ever become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place in the sense of the ICOM definition as a whole?

Architecture can definitely support a process of change through interventions and help to use the spatial and urban potential of museums (Szántó, 2022: 20).

But in the end the question remains whether museums, as we would like them to be according to the ICOM definition, are really possible within the existing institutional structures. Can we ever trust the ground under our feet in museums, places that are based on oppression, exploitation and power and that are today trapped in the constraints of capitalism? Can these places ever be spaces of rootedness and responsibility as long as they are held by these structures?

Breaking out of the spatial and institutional boundaries, integrating the public space and interweaving with it is in the end only possible in reality if the institutional boundaries shift or even more radically – dissolve.

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