

DEMOCRACY IN PROGRESS

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Abstract Our contemporary world faces multifaceted crises spanning political, socio-cultural, and economic aspects, underlined by events like the COVID pandemic, climate emergencies and geopolitical conflicts. These challenges fuel scepticism towards democracy's efficacy in surmounting obstacles, evident in the rise of far-right movements globally. Amidst this situation, museums can serve as crucial spaces for fostering dialogue and understanding as they not only act as repositories of collective memory but also have the potential to become platforms for re-evaluation and innovation. Furthermore, they provide needed physical spaces in a digital age, which can offer opportunities for communal engagement and knowledge sharing. Futurium in Berlin and Theodor-Heuss-House in Stuttgart exemplify this by providing forums for discussing the principles of democracy and its future. Through interactive exhibits and public events, they facilitate informed discourse and societal reflection. By studying their approaches, we gather insights into fostering democratic engagement, highlighting the pivotal role of museums in nurturing informed citizenship, and shaping the trajectory of democratic societies. **Keywords: discussing the future of democracy, Futurium, Theodor-Heuss- House.**

The crisis of democracy Observing the current state of political, sociocultural, and economic development around the world we can note a palpable and persistent sense of crisis. From the COVID pandemic, the worsening climate crisis and various ongoing war conflicts around the globe to the growing divide between rich and poor, the rise of nationalist political movements and the discrimination against minorities, the constant instability we are presently experiencing often challenges not only our everyday experiences but also our stance on every aspect of life. On the one hand, this constant sense of instability and fear presents a fruitful soil for far-right groups defying the democratic system as clearly visible in the tensions in the eve of the upcoming 2024 US presidential election or the popularity of right-wing political parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Europe. Such heightened tendencies and sociocultural transformations lead to a logical scepticism regarding the ability of democracy to overcome such obstacles. In our digitalised and interconnected world this phenomenon is starting to occupy every aspect of our existence

and consumption – from talk shows and articles to the booming market for nonfiction books on the core, threats, and future of democracy with titles such as *How democracies die* (2019) and *Tyranny of the minority* (2023) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt or *Rebooting democracy: A citizen's guide to reinventing politics* (2014) by Manuel Arriaga. Herein lies the ray of light in the current situation – while constant instability foments a sense of fear, which can potentially have detrimental results for the development of democratic societies, it also forces us to question the status quo and gives us the opportunity to build stronger democratic communities, motivating individuals to work towards such a future.

The role of museums As history has proven, the best antidote to fear and uncertainty is knowledge. Museums as custodians of societal collective memory have the potential not only to safeguard knowledge and experiences made but to also create a space to re-evaluate current concepts and generate new ideas. In this regard Audunson et al. (2020) fittingly describe the present situation as 'a seeming paradox':

'in spite of massive digitalization of our everyday lives, libraries, archives, and museums are heavily used as physical spaces and meeting places. The role of LAM-institutions as physical spaces seems to be increasing.' (Audunson et al., 2020, p. 1).

Thus Audunson et al. (2020) study the role of libraries, archives and museums as physical meeting places and knowledge repositories for society in a digital age acknowledging the importance and continuing popularity of such institutions in present society. Further studies on the transformation of museums in the digital age and the implementation of new technologies in exhibiting and communicating with visitor audiences support the observation that this is the path towards creating social institutions, 'developing social spaces for innovation, (...) building a shared authority on cultural heritage, involving the user as an active participant in co-production of cultural heritage knowledge' (Romanelli, 2021, p. 79). The presently transforming profile of museums from mere knowledge repositories to social meeting places (Gau, Sachs and Sieber, 2024) offering accessible discussion platforms not only secures their relevance within a digital world but also allows them to become a realm for education and social action (Hein, 2005) or 'an incubator for sustainable social development and environmental protection' (Gustafsson and Ijla, 2016, p. 446).

Evidently, it is in our power as scholars, curators, planners, and members of the public to implement the tools of the digital era in order to transform museum structures into

collaborative and open spaces for social action offering insights and creating strategies for our future as democratic societies. While this is an aspect addressed by professional bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Council for Museums (ICOM) in their proposed Guide for Local Governments, Communities and Museums (2019), the paths towards such development can be very different. Therefore, the current paper offers two examples from the German museum practice as case studies, giving us insights into the implemented strategies, their success in aiding social dialogue and ideas for aspects, which can be used in other museum projects around the world.

Futurium and Theodor-Heuss-House – two approaches to the same topic

Germany can be viewed as an important indicator for the ongoing transformation in Europe and the clear rise of far-right movements and nationalist rhetoric. Observers fittingly describe the current situation as a 'rude political awakening' for 'there's no greater sign of Germany's shrinking political center than the rise – and growing extremism – of the AfD' (Angelos, 2024). Most recently, fuelled by a report on a secret meeting of right-wing extremists including politicians from the AfD to discuss a plan to deport foreigners and "'non-assimilated'" German citizens' (Bensmann et al., 2024), large groups of concerned citizens viewing the party as a grave danger to democratic society have participated in massive demonstrations.

Within this political climate of division and uncertainty the need for public platforms addressing the principles of democracy is becoming profoundly clear. Moreover, the act of protest against right-wing movements such as the AfD we have experienced in the past months indicates the importance and demand for physical spaces, in which people can gather, experience community and open and rational conversation while gathering inspiration for collective action.

Futurium in Berlin and Theodor-Heuss-House in Stuttgart are two museums, which strive to offer society exactly this – a physical public space combining knowledge on the principles of democracy serving as an open platform for conversation and exchange on the future of democratic societies. Both museums aim to educate on and discuss our role in a democratic society but take a different approach to the topic. While Futurium aims to offer an outlook into our future by presenting our current situation and possible development in the aspects of urbanity, nutrition, health, mobility, energy, work, and democratic policy, the permanent exhibition of Theodor-Heuss-House under the motto 'Democracy as a way of life' chooses a historical approach, focussing on the life and work of Theodor Heuss, the

first Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany after WW2 and Elly Heuss-Knapp, a politician, social reformer and author.

Futurium (2019), Berlin

Futurium, which was unveiled in 2019, is designed as a participative experience with the aim to tackle the question of how we want to live in the future and offers not only insights on ongoing technological and scientific development but furthermore a public forum for discussion and inspiration (Leinfelder, 2014). Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, a number of research organisations and industrial partners, the museum incorporates different spaces of exchange. The latter range from the continually updated permanent exhibition, changing exhibitions on various future issues, the integrated future lab, inviting visitors to join in through an interactive workshop and experiment space, to the future forum, which offers a platform for debates and conversations on the development of our society (BMBF, no date).

The participative concept of Futurium is greatly supported by the spatial design of the museum and its visitor policy. The building is located in the heart of the city, close to the main train station and the government district and offers free access to all visitors. It is exactly this heightened visibility and open access policy that allow Futurium to become a meeting place for Berliners and guests of the city alike, relating to all age and social groups, giving them the opportunity to learn, explore, discuss, and co-create the development of our democratic society. The low-energy building in itself serves as a home to innovative technology and invites the public to explore it in all its details. The visitors are led through the interactive future lab and exhibition levels to the Skywalk on the roof top, where they can experience the development of the surrounding Berlin skyline, the solar panel system supporting the electricity generation for the museum as well as its solar thermal system (2).

The topic of democracy has a central place in the programme and exhibition at Futurium as it is not only an underlying aspect within the different thinking spaces of the permanent exhibition but is also directly addressed by installations within the future lab (Figure 1). The installation 'Smile to Vote', for example, is a voting booth simulating AI reading the face of the visitor in order to garner their political convictions while 'Citizen Quest' presents an interactive game, in which players improve democratic decision-making in a virtual city while exploring different future scenarios (Figure 2). Simultaneously, the event programme within the future forum complements the conversation on the topic by introducing participatory experiences and event series such as 'Dating Democracy', allowing us to get

to know this form of government better and discuss how we can collaborate on creating



Figure 1. David von Becker (no date). Exhibition focus on democracy and the current obstacles it faces. Photo courtesy of Futurium / David von Becker.



Figure 2. David von Becker (no date). Futurium Lab on digital democracy. Photo courtesy of Futurium / David von Becker.

concepts for a better future (Futurium gGmbH, no date).

Theodor-Heuss-House (2002/2023), Stuttgart

'Theodor-Heuss-House' has become the designation for the last home occupied by the first Federal President Theodor Heuss (1884-1963) in Feuerbacher Weg 46 in Stuttgart. After it was attained by the Foundation Federal President Theodor-Heuss-House in 1995 the building was transformed into a museum and a venue for cultural events based on the design of architecture firm Behnisch & Partner in 2002 and later renovated, extended, and reinvented with a new permanent exhibition in 2023. While the museum grants its visitors access to the living quarters of the first Federal President and educates on his role as part of the government of the republic, the motto of the new permanent exhibition 'Democracy as a way of life' reveals its central aim to educate on the foundations of democracy as a political form and a lifestyle. In order to do so the exhibition presents the historical development since the late 19th century through the lens of the personal accounts of Theodor Heuss and his wife Elly Heuss-Knapp, who both played active roles in translating their democratic beliefs into actions, experiencing the painfully undemocratic political system of Nazi Germany and later helping rebuild a democratic German society in the post-war period (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Franziska Kraufmann (no date). Lenticular installation depicting a portrait of Theodor Heuss and Elly Heuss-Knapp. Photo courtesy of Theodor-Heuss-Haus / Franziska Kraufmann.

Furthermore, the museum offers a wide range of workshops, public events, guided tours, and knowledge transfer events for school children as well as the general public. Consequently, the permanent exhibition presents the visitor with an interactive experience targeting all age groups through audio-visual materials, historical objects, as well as

physical games (Figure 4). The tour through Theodor-Heuss-House is completed with the openly accessible garden and seating steps connecting the interior of the exhibition space with the green exterior of the courtyard, inviting the visitors to linger, reflect and discuss the content of the exposition with others. The latter is one of the central aims of the museum as the foundation states the following:

'Theodor-Heuss-Haus does not provide ready-made answers to the questions of our time. Rather, it sees itself as a place of historical and political discourse, education, and reflection, in short: as a house of open society.' (Stiftung Bundespräsident Theodor-Heuss-Haus, no date) (3)



Figure 4. Franziska Kraufmann (no date). A view inside the exhibition. Photo courtesy of Theodor-Heuss-Haus / Franziska Kraufmann.

Possible experience transfer

Despite their different orientation on a historical level, both Futurium and Theodor-Heuss-House have the potential to serve as discussion platforms on our future as a democratic society. Studying their concepts especially in addressing and involving their visitors and communicating the topics at hand not only through the medial and interior design but also through the architecture of both museums allows us to gain insights we can transfer to other projects of the same calibre. The varied scale of the two projects allows us to experience the similarities and differences in their consequent strategies. While Theodor-Heuss-House does not have the spatial resources or funding of Futurium needed to offer free access or create large-scale changing exhibitions, its success as a public discussion platform on the past and future of democracy underlines the central role of event series,

accessible guided tours, and knowledge transfer opportunities in establishing a needed physical space for learning and social discourse.

Notes

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