

Can museums survive the postmodern?

Suzanne Keene

Although archaeologists regard museums as vital repositories of important research materials, museum professionals take a broader view of their role in not only preserving natural and cultural heritage but also of how they could or should be presented, or interpreted, to the public. In this personal view, issues of what museums should be, or seek to be, in a postmodern world are explored.

In the early twenty-first century we find ourselves living in a world that is frequently described as “postmodern”, a condition defined by a particular set of ideas and concepts from social science and philosophy. The question is, can these notions help to explain the diverse inconsistencies and logical binds in which museums find themselves entangled today? Do postmodern ideas present the possibility of salvation or reinvention? Or, are museums as institutions doomed, lacking currency in the new postmodern age?

The postmodern has been defined in many ways, such as:

... the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity.¹

Or:

Rapid technological change... shifting political concerns, ... the rise of social movements especially with a gender, green, ethnic, racial focus... But the question is even bigger: is modernity itself... disintegrating, including the whole grand edifice of Enlightenment worldviews? Is a new type of society appearing, perhaps structured around consumers and consumption rather than workers and production?²

The modern and the postmodern

The postmodern is understood in contrast with the modern project, born in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, in which superstition and belief were swept aside by scientific evidence, orderly arrangement and a stable social order. In the west, the rational scientific mindset became the dominant way of explaining the world. Museums are deeply implicated in the modern project, as instruments for cataloguing and characterizing first the natural world and, later, the world of invention, design and technology.³ They are also seen as promoting the interests of

social elites and as a means to socialize and educate the lower classes. In its gallery *Making the Modern World*, the Science Museum perfectly illustrates the progression from the roots of scientific measurement in the eighteenth century through the age of the engineer, to mass production of identical objects and to the age of ambivalence, perhaps culminating in the double helix of DNA, the ultimate signifier of life itself, and its manipulation leading to the production of designer creatures such as the “oncomouse” (Fig. 1).

The modern foundations of museums

Postmodern concepts call into question four of the defining psychological characteristics of museums:

- The postmodern opposes elitism in culture, and this threatens the museum function of education for the masses and support for the social order. Funding bodies have set museums the political task of promoting social inclusion and education as a high political priority; yet these objectives are out of tune with postmodernism, where individuals are accepted and celebrated for what they are. Some claim that such activities serve at best to obscure the real causes of the problem: poverty and the huge gap between the haves and the have-nots, exacerbated by the constant enticement to consume.
- Pluralism, heterogeneity and relativism are the essence of the postmodern. Yet,



Figure 1 *The oncomouse, displayed in the Science Museum (London), is an example of a creature created through direct genetic manipulation, in this case to be prone to cancers so as to facilitate medical experiments.*

ordered categorizing is central to museum psychology. An assemblage of objects becomes a collection when its components are classified and ordered, and the ordered “modern” view was that museums constructed meaning through imposing systems of classification on their objects. However, rigid classification is anathema to postmodern notions, to the extent that it is sometimes argued that museum classification is destructive of meaning,⁴ because only a single system can be represented. Some museums are now moving to classify their collections to reflect more effectively the multiple meanings arising from a diversity of communities and cultures.

- In the postmodern, the concept of objective truth is rejected – only personal meanings are valid. Yet museum collections have been seen as unassailable repositories of evidence of material culture, art, natural history and archaeology. Museum conservators have striven to preserve the validity of the object as evidence: its true nature.⁵ But postmodernity challenges the very proposal that an object can have one objective meaning accepted by all. Culture is a quest for individuality, not for the collective memories that museums have traditionally nurtured.
- The postmodern world consists of simulacra, signs and images. Jean Baudrillard, the French social scientist and philosopher, saw a progression from representation during the Renaissance through mass-produced identical parts and objects to the virtualization of things, where the object’s only true meaning is as a sign. Now, “one is not the simulacrum and the other the reality: there are only simulacra”.⁶ This threatens authenticity and authority, normally seen as touchstones of museums, and invalidates the “real” things traditionally seen as the museum’s heart. Even museum objects are dematerializing. Works of art created in digital and other new media may exist primarily as files of specifications and rights, and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has recognized the importance of the intangible heritage, such as dance, performance, storytelling and music. Beyond the Science Museum’s traditional gallery, *Making the Modern World*, lies the Wellcome wing, with objects mainly displaced by electronic displays (Fig. 2).

The postmodern also brings with it the context of the rise and centrality of consumerism. This leaves museums floundering to see what they should now collect, at the same time as they strive to meet escalating expectations of quality and scale in what they should deliver.

Museums for the future?

So where does this examination of museums through the lens of the postmodern

take us? The film *Blade Runner* is celebrated by postmodernists, including Lyon, for its depiction of the future and its exploration of the concepts of humans as simulacra.² What sort of museum would you expect to find – indeed, would you expect to find any museums at all – in the streaming, crowded, frenetic world of Los Angeles in 2019, as depicted in this film? Will it be the celebrated, and deeply conventional, Los Angeles Museum of Art, with its strictly categorized collections? Even there, the museum has responded to the hurricanes of the postmodern with a virtual exhibition of artworks consisting of software that creates a new exhibit for every viewing. Or, will it be the bizarre Museum of Jurassic Technology, also in Los Angeles? Writing of a visit to that museum, an online commentator describes a typical exhibit, “A box from which emanates the sound of barking. When you look through a peep-hole on the side of the box, you see a tiny desert landscape with a coyote’s head mounted on the right wall, and black and white film footage of a man tied to a straight-back chair, barking, projected against the ‘sky’ on your left.” He goes on: “For the past eleven months, the Museum



Figure 2 The Wellcome wing of the Science Museum (London) has been described as “a breathtaking theatre of contemporary science”. A minimum number of objects serve as props for putting across new scientific discoveries.



Figure 3 Panning for gold in Sovereign Hill Open Air Museum, Ballarat, Australia. The stream is replenished with gold flakes fortnightly for the amusement of visitors. Other attractions include fake snowfalls four times a day in winter.



Figure 4 (above and right) *Rosia Montana goldmining museum, Romania. The museum and machinery have been abandoned and a huge opencast mining operation threatens to obliterate all, including the Roman goldmine on the site.*

of Jurassic Technology has been my personal yardstick for the peculiar; but what is it? A con? A grand delusion? Performance art effortlessly, ineffably strange?"⁷ Maybe it is all of these, but the Museum of Jurassic Technology is seriously discussed by art historians and cultural critics.⁸

Is the idea of the museum, like the ideas of the Enlightenment itself, being usurped by institutions such as the Ark of the World Museum, where "Adam walked with dinosaurs"? Museums are recognized to be important agencies for promulgating ideas and social perceptions. "The centrepiece of the museum is a series of huge model dinosaurs, built by the former head of design at Universal Studios, which are portrayed as existing alongside man, contrary to received scientific opinion that they lived millions of years apart." At a cost of \$25m, the Ark of the World Museum is devoted to converting more people to the ideas of creationism, perhaps the most influential anti-Enlightenment movement in the world today.⁹

Is it now only shared leisure experiences that can build collective memories and identities? "History becomes 'heritage', and the musty museum a 'hands on' multimedia experience".¹⁰ In Ballarat, Australia, the highly successful Sovereign Hill, a re-created goldmining town, is seen as helping to build the Australian national identity. At the same time it is unashamedly an experiential (and, as I found, highly enjoyable) attraction, incorporating an hotel where one can "wake up in 1896", and pan for gold in a stream, replenished

regularly (Fig. 3). Or do we see the future in the elegiac fate of Rosia Montana goldmine museum in Romania (Fig. 4)? It is currently destined to be swept away – rusting British mining machinery – Roman gold-mining galleries and all, by a monstrous opencast development run by an international mining company. Although not so obviously destructive in the material sense, in Greenwich we see the "classically" scaled and proportioned National Maritime Museum visually overwhelmed, virtually buried, by the looming commercial towers of Canary Wharf (Fig. 5).

The well known museologist, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, has contrasted the modernist museum with what she has termed "the post-museum". The essence of the post-museum is to be more a process or experience, than a building to be visited. In it, the exhibition is the focus for a plethora of transient activities – dynamic events within and outside the museum.¹¹ But is this future museum postmodern or is it just answering to a series of current political

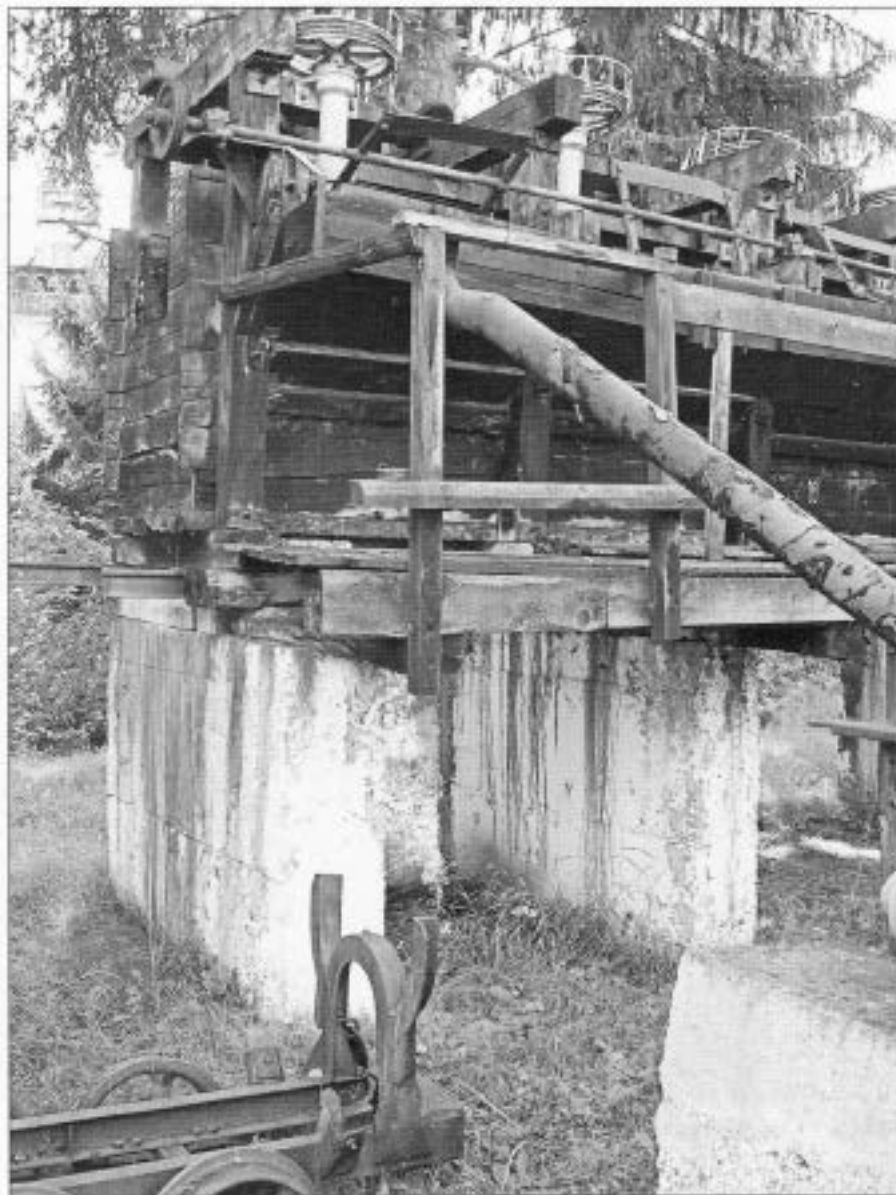




Figure 5 The classical buildings of the Royal Naval Hospital, Greenwich (southeast London), now occupied by the National Maritime Museum, juxtaposed against the towering commercial complex of Canary Wharf across the River Thames.

demands? These activities such as these leave unexploited the collections themselves, still the defining feature of a museum and a huge and costly resource. Such peripheral events are not accepted as sufficient by the unrepresented whom they are supposed to reach: they have been called “steel pans and saris” activities.¹²

But is the only alternative to the bleak futures delineated above to go back?

Turning the museum inside out

The museum’s postmodern salvation could surely lie in its collections. It is the collections that are seen as critically important by the groups with whom museums seek to engage.¹² Museums could shrug off their insistence on seeing exhibitions as their major function (with a little outreach to satisfy those who don’t visit) and be much more positive about using the collections themselves as a resource for the future.¹³

They could move from:

- being guardians of collections to being facilitators of engagement with them
- storing static collections to managing them as a service to individuals and other organizations (but without prejudicing their value for the future, too)
- their perception that they are so different and separate from other institutions that they can have no realistic interface with them, to performing as players in networks in which other, different organizations take the lead, drawing on museum collections to perform their own distinct functions.

I agree with Mark Dion, the installation artist: to be valid in the postmodern future “the museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage”.¹⁴

Notes

1. Note 1, p. 13, *After theory*, T. Eagleton (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
2. See p. ix, *Postmodernity*, D. Lyon (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).
3. Chapter 6, *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*, E. Hooper-Greenhill (London: Routledge, 1992).
4. See p. 59, M. Fehr, “A museum and its memory”, in *Museums and memory*, S. Crane (ed.), 35–59 (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2000).
5. Chapter 9, *Contemporary theory of conservation*, S. Muñoz Viñas (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005).
6. J. Baudrillard, quoted on p. 52, *Postmodernity*, B. Smart (London: Routledge, 1993).
7. See MJT: the Museum of Jurassic Technology, www.mjt.org/; and the Museum of Jurassic Technology or, What the Heck is Jurassic Tech?, www.thecobrasnose.com/xxexcure/mjt.html
8. M. W. Roth, “‘The Museum of Jurassic Technology’, Culver City, California”, *Technology and Culture* 43(1), 102–109, 2002.
9. J. Langton, “In the beginning . . . Adam walked with dinosaurs”, *News Telegraph*, filed 2 January 2005.
10. See p. 73, *Postmodernity*, D. Lyon (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).
11. See pp. 152–3, *Museums and the inter-*

pretation of visual culture, E. Hooper-Greenhill (London: Routledge, 2000).

12. S. Blacklock, “Collections and diversity”, a contribution to *Collections and the future: the MA’s Enquiry* (London: Museums Association, 2005).
13. *Fragments of the world: uses of museum collections*, S. Keene (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005).
14. See Mark Dion: *drawings, journals, photographs, souvenirs, and trophies, 1990–2003*, R. Klein (ed.) (Ridgefield, Connecticut: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003).