The Liberation of Identity. The Margin Redraws the Museum – a Preliminary Study

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The Museum

With the Palestinian Museum opening in May 2016 and the recently successful fundraising campaign for Faheem Majeed and Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford's Floating Museum in Chicago, it would be tempting to suggest that we are entering a new praxis of the marginal in the museum. Often intimidating, the problems of access, interpretation and representation in museums trouble architects, curators and exhibition designers alike.

> *A museum is a permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the material evidence of a people and their environment.*
> (International Council of Museums (ICOM) statutes[1])

This definition of what a museum is (or should be) could be considered fairly broad, but in fact it leaves no room for pushing at the margins. It is hard to argue that a museum is something in the service of society, but must an institution be permanent to be a museum? Must it acquire a collection? What if the material evidence has been stolen or lost over time? To what extent must the typology of a museum building both reflect and enable the marginal artefacts contained within? How can you design a functioning museum without producing something that enhances its ideologies?

If we draw a timeline of institutions and observe their layout and appearance, we can see that in most cases the architectural form of a museum directly follows the ideological function behind it[2] (Fig. 1). The museum as we know it can be traced back to the temples, palaces and libraries of Mesopotamia in the third and second millennia BCE. Through Ancient Egypt and into the Renaissance some places became identifiable as repositories of knowledge and facilities of study. The concept of the display as we know it comes from the sixteenth century Italian idea of the "museum as theatre" – both a theatre of memory, where knowledge is classified, and a theatre of nature, where knowledge is arranged systematically. Simultaneously in Northern Europe "Wunderkammern" were developed – rooms of curiosities to provoke surprise and wonder. With the Enlightenment came Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772) and thus a systematic methodology of knowledge became dominant. It was not until the 2000s that "performing museums"[3] began to favour knowledge enacted through theatrical display technology, and the sense of wonder became pivotal once more.

A seminal moment in the history of museums came in the early 1700s with the discovery of the Roman city of Herculaneum. The visual evidence from the past uncovered by archaeologists

1 Adopted by the 22nd General Assembly of ICOM in Vienna (Austria), held on 24 August 2007 Full document available at http://icom.museum/the-organisation/icom-statutes/

2 Timeline adapted from Antonello Marotta, "Typology Focus: Museums," trans. Russell Jones, ed. Carol Raphael, *The Architectural Review* (19 December 2012).

3 Valerie Casey's term quoted in Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 96.

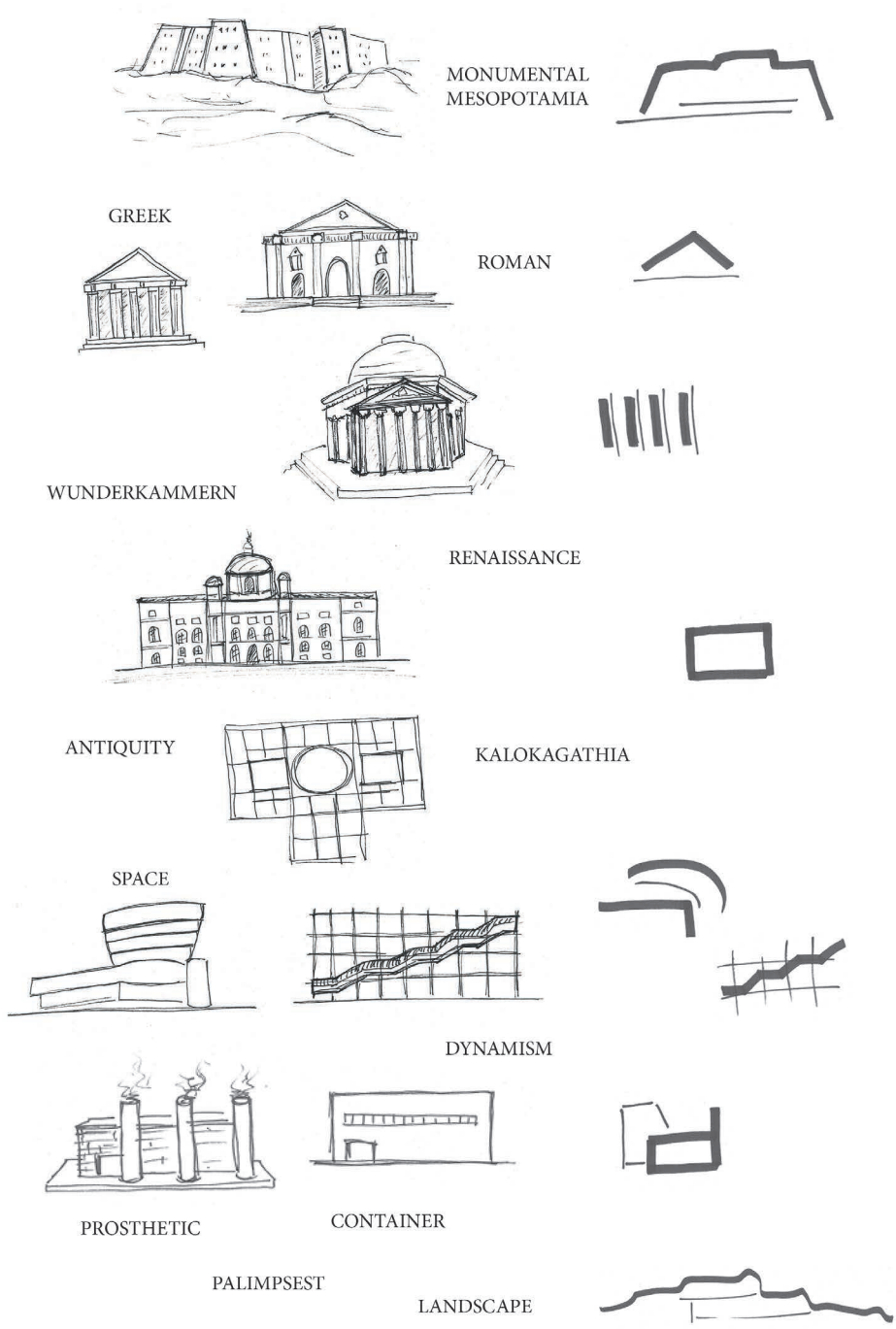


Fig. 1. Typology timeline and abstracted archetypes

at Paestum (1738) and Pompeii (1748) revived a fascination with antiquity that still fills the museums of today. With the rediscovery of the Greek ideal of perfection in the body and the city ("kalokagathia") came the concepts of balance, justice and proportion in museum architecture. Nineteenth century museums became palaces where culture and power converged to portray the image of an idyllic past. These palaces came crumbling down in the twentieth century, when war ravaged Europe and the world, and museums became reinterpreted as acts of remembering. Architects such as Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright broke with nineteenth century aesthetic limitations to produce spaces that drew on classical influences and not their direct representations. In the UK, this period delivered the arts centre, a symbol of the hopeful nature of post-war culture, an agent of civilisation in an age where state-funded culture was seen as crucial.[4]

Museum architecture as an end in itself (with or without objects) is an invention of the twentieth century, one of the most famous examples being Frank Lloyd Wright's 1959 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, with its sweeping spiral in the void. Space had its own meaning, inspiring architects to go even further: the 1960s became the era of the museum as a kinetic, dynamic machine, with moving parts and flexible spaces for display. The museum was thus liberated from its contents and the telling of history was no longer a complete, self-referential activity.

By this time many of the capital cities in the world had their own national museum. For those who wanted to exhibit contemporary art, however, most of these buildings were not suited for purpose. Instead institutions began to look at industrial areas and disused sites where the new architecture could intrude into the fabric of the past and turn it into a memory machine. Museums became a type of prosthetic, drawn from the palimpsest and often used as a catalyst for action in residual and marginal areas. Unveiling the palimpsest revealed culture through nature, and we see the museum as landscape emerging – almost rocky contours, brooding, granitic and resisting the passing of time.

Perhaps the museum as it is designed today can be defined as just that: a container, with pathos, permeated by time.

The Museum is Dead?

There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.
(Walter Benjamin[5])

A hallowed place once reserved for the cultural élite, the museum has a history embedded in imperialist gains and repressed losses. All the international museums currently regarded as seminal have foundations built upon the exploitation of marginalised others. Indeed, it is impossible to extricate the history of funding sources from the creation of many municipal buildings in the UK, its museums most of all.

Sir Henry Tate was an English philanthropist, whose money came from refining and trading sugar. Tate founded London public institutions such as the Tate Library in Brixton, and is best known for establishing The National Gallery of British Art (now known as Tate Britain) in 1897.

The premise of Tate Britain was rooted in the concept that the establishment of a museum could improve its surroundings. The chosen site was that of the former Millbank prison, described by contemporaries as a "desolate and somewhat inaccessible area of London."[6] This "temple of art"[7] proved to be a successful catalyst for a total transformation into what is now considered a prime London location, and has served as a model for what urban regeneration projects (with their

4 Christoph Grafe, "Come Together: Reinventing the Arts Centre," panel discussion curated by the Architecture Foundation, held at the Barbican, London, 29 June 2015.

5 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans Harry Zohn, ed Hannah Arendt, (New York: Shocken, Harry Zohn, 1969), 256.

6 Contemporary comment, quoted by Emma Barker in "The museum in the community: the new Tates" from Emma Barker, ed, *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (USA: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1999), 179.

7 Ibid.

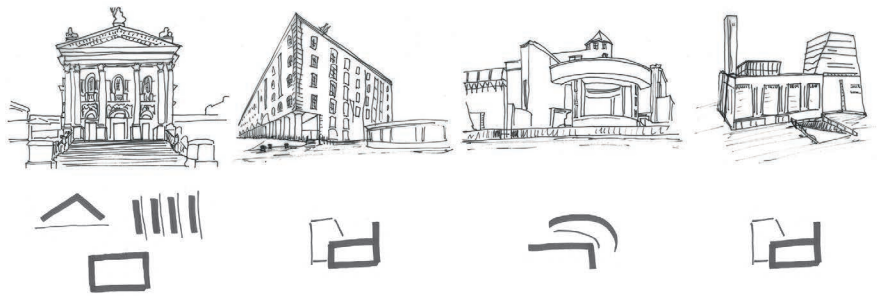


Fig. 2. Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool, Tate St Ives and Tate Modern

flagship buildings) could achieve. Indeed, the Tate group has grown into four institutions: two in London – Tate Britain and Tate Modern – and two outside – Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives – the latter two with the specific remit of reinvigorating their local communities.

Tate Liverpool was established in 1988, following two decades of decline in a once-flourishing port city that began with major losses in the shipping industry in the 1970s and included the Totexth race riots of 1981. Initially this institution was perceived as an offshoot of the London metropolitan model, whose "very existence tells the people of Liverpool that they cannot forge their own models of cultural development."[8] The site chosen for the gallery was a group of converted dock buildings on Albert Dock, overlooking the iconic River Mersey. Already then the gallery was tapping into the city's heritage, and embedded into a once-thriving area. A perceived lack of a ready-made audience encouraged the Tate curators to take a more inclusive look on their learning programmes, and to consider communication and access more seriously.[9] The result is an institution that helped put Liverpool on the cultural map: Liverpool was a European Capital of Culture in 2008 and is the UK city with the most galleries and museums outside of London.[10] In 2011 the city opened its new Museum of Liverpool, a purpose-built building situated right by Tate Liverpool in Albert Dock.

Tate Gallery St Ives opened in June 1993. Whereas Tate Liverpool was, from the outset, a Tate project with Tate management, St Ives was supposed to involve only the lending of Tate works from their London collection; ultimately the Tate took full managerial control. Another location facing economic decline (here due to a fractured fishing industry) it was hoped that the Gallery would both increase access to works by Cornish artists and aid the economic recovery of Cornwall. The Gallery was purpose-built on the site of an old gasworks right on the sea front. This enabled the architects Evans and Shalev to create a design where "negotiating the building encourages the same relaxed pleasure one gets from exploring the curving lanes of St Ives itself."[11] The architecture creates an experience that is unintimidating and accessible to both tourists and locals. The Gallery has proved itself worthy of its existence, as St Ives is now a popular resort (winning British Travel awards in 2010 and 2011).

In 2000 the Tate Group added the last member of its family: Tate Modern, Bankside, London. With its creation, the old Tate Gallery became Tate Britain, so as to distinguish the younger sibling as a place of international Modern and Contemporary art. The old Bankside power station was closed in 1981 and lay dormant for over a decade, during which time locals campaigned to save the building from developers. Tate purchased Bankside in 1994 and in June 1995 Herzog & de Meuron were announced as winning architects, following an international competition. The resulting gallery building provides ample useful space for a variety of exhibition media. The central Turbine Hall is a challenging space, and hosted some impressive installations, such as Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* and Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*. With the opening of its new extension in June 2016

8 Philip Dodds, "Won from the art," *New Statesman* (17 June 1988): 45-46.

9 Emma Barke, "The museum in the community: the new Tates", 179.

10 From the "Visit Liverpool" website.

11 David Shalev and Michael Tooby, eds, *Tate Gallery St Ives: The Building* (London, Tate Publishing, 1995), 5.

(consisting of a further ten stories, comprising the old Switch House and Tanks), Tate Modern now houses the world's first museum galleries dedicated permanently to live art. (Fig. 2)

That the Tate mission was a success is evident. What cannot be forgotten however is how it all began: the Tate family made their money off the backs of sugar slaves in the New World plantations. It is perhaps easier to witness this in the architecture of Tate Britain than in the younger siblings, due to Tate Britain's "temple of art" aesthetic (neo-Classical columns and so forth). However, simply tracing the aesthetic course of all four Tates is indicative of the museum typology timeline almost to the letter. We see the public-perfecting monumental Tate Britain, followed by the prosthetic-palimpsest of Tate Liverpool, then the space-dynamism of Tate St Ives and, finally, the all-encompassing prosthetic-container-dynamism of Tate Modern. The new Switch House extension of Tate Modern may seem different, but quite clearly slots in nicely with the prosthetic typology. Tate is clearly a product of the design theories moving around it, and certainly its curatorial and acquisition ethos has echoed contemporary socio-political agendas: whilst the new Tate Modern has broadened its reach, the older Tate Britain seems to be the kind of building we associate with the British Empire in the nineteenth century and all the attainment that came with it. It is possible to change the ethos, but not the building: unless completely new, resonances of a colonial past will always linger.

In the traditional architecture of public institutions, we can clearly see two types of attainment from colonial or imperialist ventures: financial gains and cultural acquisitions. The British Museum – quite possibly the most famous museum in the UK, and certainly renowned worldwide – has within its walls artefacts of the greatest value from all corners of the Earth. The provenance of its eight million objects is divided between those purchased or acquired and those looted through the power play of colonial endeavours. Established in 1753, the British Museum was founded on the Enlightenment ideal that human cultures, though extremely varied, can come together and understand one another through a mutual engagement.

This ideal of "universal knowledge" and cross cultural investigation is clearly still strong in the British Museum today, as it describes itself as holding "in trust for the nation and the world a collection of art and antiquities from ancient and living cultures."[12] It is this that enables the British Museum to argue that pieces such as the Parthenon Marbles (also known as the Elgin Marbles, taken from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin in 1801 under a controversial permit from the ruling Ottoman Sublime Porte and passed to the British Museum in 1816) belong in its galleries in London as they have a place in the thread of human history, not just Greek history. The same universal ideal could be used (and indeed has been used) to argue for retaining the Egyptian Rosetta Stone and the Nigerian Benin Bronzes.

It has been said that if all objects were returned to their places of origin, then all the great museums of the world, the British Museum included, would be emptied. All these contested objects "have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them."[13] This view surely negates the importance of objects created by those native to the UK, while simultaneously suggesting that other museums do not deserve these objects in their own collections in their respective countries.

In December 2002, the directors of eighteen leading museums signed the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" – a statement that underlined their belief in Enlightenment ideals as a way of justifying their modus operandi. Amongst the group we find the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Louvre Museum, Paris. The British Museum did not sign the Declaration; however, it initiated the project and the Declaration was first published on its website. The Declaration argues that these objects are only significant because they have been "widely available to an international public in major museums" and that "museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation."[14] How does

12 British Museum website, "About Us" section.

13 Peter-Klaus Schuster, "Declaration of the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," with Commentary by Peter-Klaus Schuster and George Abungu, *ICOM News* 1 (2004): 4.

14 Ibid.



Fig. 3. British Museum

Fig. 4. Louvre Paris and Louvre Abu Dhabi

this differ from any other museum in the world, and why should it mean that contested objects cannot be returned to their native countries? Criticism of the Declaration picks up on this, accusing the signatories of arrogance when they describe the objects as having been "saved" or "rescued" from their original contexts. It is notable that the signatories are all from museums in Europe and North America; no museums in Africa, Asia or Latin America were consulted in the drafting of the Declaration.[15] Perhaps they do not meet the "civilised knowledge" remit.

The value of cultural attainment in Universal Museums is once again made evident in the architecture of the buildings that contain them. Greek architecture was that of the great civilisation based on democracy, philosophy and knowledge. The temples discovered by archaeologists in the 1700s, and then by Romantic artists on their Grand Tours of Europe, inspired planners and architects to create echoes of antiquity. In order for a building to house knowledge and power it must look the part, and Greek architectural tropes certainly provided the tools to enact this. Therefore, all the great cultural buildings had columns, porticos and friezes as signifiers of their importance. It is a form of self-colonisation, whereby a chosen architectural style, perceived as "better" is adopted into the vernacular.[16] The ideology of the Universal Museum is enhanced and validated by the architecture that houses it. (Fig. 3)

As we have seen with the Tate, the "civilising mission" of the museum presence can be seen operating within the same geographical borders. However, it is the global expansion of recent decades that has witnessed the museum being used as a brand name and marketable icon for cities striving to represent themselves as attractive places to visit and live. Guggenheim outposts such

15 Kwame Opoku, "Is the Declaration on the value and importance of the 'Universal Museums' now worthless?", *Elginism* (24 February 2010).

16 Cosmin Minea, panel on Architecture and Exhibitions, "Transnationalism(s)" (postgraduate conference at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies [SSEES], London, 20 February 2016).

as Bilbao (designed by Frank Gehry and opened autumn 1997) are useful for a deprived city that desires an icon in order to enter the world cultural stage. Visitors come for a unique architectural experience, and the hope is that they linger in the city, thereby aiding its economy. The museum serves as a kind of validation for a city to be seen on the world stage. Unlike other projects, the Guggenheim Foundation has active control over the display programmes in all its locations across the globe. This makes it very much an American institution with an international outlook and an eye to global expansion, rather than a partner in an institution fostering the local community. This is in stark contrast to museums such as Tate Liverpool, which worked together with local communities and adapted to their needs.

The Louvre Museum, Paris, opened on 18 November 1793 as the first public museum in the world. It was born in a France that had just come through the Revolution of 1789, when the demand to open museums to the public became ever louder. This was partly due to the notion that the "beautiful" supports the "good", and was key in promoting a model virtue in society. The Louvre, like the British Museum, defines itself as a Universal Museum and prides itself as being "a product of the encyclopaedic thought of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution."[17] It is these ideals that the Louvre wishes to bring to "the first Universal Museum in the Arab World."[18] (Fig. 4)

Louvre Abu Dhabi began on March 6th, 1997, with an intergovernmental agreement signed by France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) whereby they endeavoured to create a museum that "will bring together the dynamism of Abu Dhabi and the values of excellence embodied by the Louvre name."[19] It is very much seen as an alliance, not as an outpost (again, in contrast to the Guggenheim Foundation's activities); the involvement of the École du Louvre will help foster local talent with its training programmes and qualifications. There will be work placements, hoping that long-term relationships will form between professionals in France and their new colleagues in the UAE.

The transfer of knowledge also extends to assistance in building Louvre Abu Dhabi's collection. Within 8,000m^2 of galleries there will be 600 artworks on display, 294 on loan from the Louvre's newly established *Département des Arts de l'Islam* (until 2046). The remit for Louvre Abu Dhabi's permanent collection is one of multidisciplinary diversity, which the Louvre sees as a reflection of Arabia as an age-old bridge between North, South, East and West. Commentators are hopeful that this collection mandate will help stem the flow of cultural objects from East to West, and perhaps also help reverse some of the acquisitions made during colonial times. Indeed, the Louvre has returned some stolen Egyptian frescoes to the Grand Museum in Giza;[20] perhaps the trend can continue with Louvre Abu Dhabi.

As witnessed with the Tate family of buildings, the two Louvre museums fit snugly into the typology timeline: the eighteenth century Parisian monument to public betterment with its symmetry and order, followed by the new ambitious dynamic younger sibling taking root in the Middle East in the twenty first century. That the two museums look different from each other is obvious. What is hidden however, is that they both have a similar mission: the cultural improvement of the local population. What does this mean in a post-Imperialist world? That the international forays of long-standing museums are increasing, but their success depends on the absorption of the marginalised culture they land in.

It is certainly possible for an established museum to promote marginal cultures, but is it possible to design a museum of the margins from scratch, or is the term "museum" too loaded? Can the concept of "museum" be more flexible in order to keep up with the cultural world as it is now? Who has the right to circulate material[21] and who gets to use it for their own ends?

17 About Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Louvre website.

18 Ibid. Of course, this assumes that Universal Museums are the invention and property of the West.

19 Ibid.

20 Kwame Opoku, "Is the Declaration on the value and importance of the 'Universal Museums' now worthless?"

21 Nick Denes, "Dissonant Archives" (book launch and panel discussion curated by Ibraaz and the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, held at Rivington Place, London, 10 September 2015).



Fig. 5. Palestinian Museum – embedded in landscape, terraces and contours

The Museum Encounters the Margins

There have always been those fighting the mainstream when it comes to culture and its representations. In the Middle East, for example, there has been a grassroots network of contemporary spaces, galleries, cultural foundations and schools in cities such as Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul, Jerusalem and Ramallah for almost twenty years. This independent network has little or no state funding, and is in part shaped by a lack of a national museum that represents them and their contemporary art in the region. The question of how to transmit, collect and preserve their local traditions is especially important given the developments taking place with museums in the UAE. The Gulf Labor Artist Coalition (founded in 2011 in New York) highlights the plight of migrant workers responsible for building Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (and others), but it has also brought into sharp relief the important role that artists are now demanding to play in the formation of these nascent institutions. Why not create their own institution that represents their own interests?

The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit (Fig. 5), opened in May 2016 as an "independent institution dedicated to supporting an open and dynamic Palestinian culture nationally and internationally" whilst "fostering a culture of dialogue and tolerance."[22] It is the flagship cultural project of the Taawan-Welfare Association, who first began developing the idea in 1997. The Taawan-Welfare Association are a group of London-based Palestinians who came together in 1983 seeking ways to preserve and communicate Palestinian heritage.[23] Initially the Museum was to be a memorial to the Nakba, the forced expulsion of approximately 60% of the Arab population of Palestine (roughly 700,000 people) from their homes in 1948. Subsequently the project remit has broadened into one of unifying national identity, of the history, society and culture of Palestine from 1750 onwards.

Much like the Jewish Museum in Berlin (opened in 2001), the Palestinian Museum has opened without housing a permanent collection.[24] In Berlin, the question of what to exhibit was underlined by the need to tell the stories of Jews in Germany without ostracising a significant proportion of visitors. The directors desired an exhibition that was accessible and informative, whilst also appealing to a diverse array of audiences. Indeed it could be argued that the positioning of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, as opposed to a holocaust site (such as Dachau), was in itself a muting gesture. Why not take visitors directly to the site of the trauma? Because this would negate the wider existence and contribution of Jews in Germany. The museum in Berlin serves as reconciliation, an act of remembrance of the importance of Jews in contemporary

22 "About the museum", Palestinian Museum website.

23 Taawon-Welfare Association website.

24 Julia M. Klein, "From the Ashes, a Jewish Museum," *The American Prospect*, 12.3 (12 February 2001).

culture. The relatively neutral ground of Berlin thus preserves the "shadowed ground"[25] of history whilst the employment of a Jewish architect (albeit a British one) ensures the museum's relevance to the question of identity.

In addition to not having a permanent collection, another problem with such a museum (where a traumatic event is central to the narrative, and inescapably so) is the likelihood of being "object-poor"[26] – consistent with the fact that, in the event of a human atrocity, lives are lost and belongings left behind. We are then presented with a gap in knowledge that Lebanese artist Jalal Toufic has described as an "immaterial withdrawal of tradition."[27] One must recreate (and rehabilitate) that tradition via less tangible means, such as oral histories and personal artefacts. Artists play an important role here, as they can draw on their own family stories to translate history into something visual that can be witnessed by museum visitors.

The Palestinian Museum has initiated a "Family Album" project where they are collecting photos from the homes of Palestinians and incorporating them into their archive. The Museum is also assisting with the digitisation of items collected by the United Nations Works and Refugees Agency, who have been documenting the lives of Palestinian refugees since 1950. These projects, together with the Palestinian Audio Visual Archive form the Museum's digital archive, a major part of its online presence that can be accessed by the diaspora (currently numbering around six million people across the globe). There will be outposts of the Museum in Amman, Beirut, Michigan and Santiago, which will stage satellite exhibitions. The first of these, *At the Seams: A Political History of Palestinian Embroidery*, was on display at Dar El-Nimber in Beirut until 30 July 2016.

The Museum serves a population spread around the world, so it is somewhat fitting that the design and construction of the project was made possible by an international mix of professions.[28] The architects Heneghan Peng are based in Dublin, the local construction partners Arabtech Jardaneh in Jordan, the lighting designers Bartenbach Lichlabor in Austria, and the engineers Arup in several cities all over the world. A non-Palestinian design team places greater importance on the siting of the Museum, in contrast to the Jewish Museum where the ethnicity of the architect was of greater importance. The chosen site in Birzeit (around 7 miles/11Km north of Ramallah and 19 miles/31Km from Jerusalem) reflects both the past of Palestine and its hopeful future, with the neighbouring Birzeit University providing the 40,000m^2 plot for the Museum. The building is a communicator of knowledge via the planned displays, but also by the workshops and learning programmes on museum practice and archiving that began in June 2014 (Fig. 6a, b, c).

The building is situated at the top of a valley, surrounded by landscaping reminiscent of the terraced hills around Birzeit. The gardens include several varieties of native plants, trees and flowers – these could be interpreted as the first permanent collection of "objects" for the Museum – and form the perimeter wall of the complex. There is a floor area of 3,500m^2 containing the exhibition space, offices and visitor services. The raw materiality of the building makes it resemble the undulating geography around it, with white Bethlehem limestone shining under the arid sun. There are no Arabic archetypes at play here. It is a museum that expresses its national identity by referencing its surrounding topography, and not the vernacular typology.

The Museum is funded by a diaspora whose uniting feature is the landscape they originated from. It would have been a career-making opportunity for a young Palestinian architect that may or may not have produced the same effective building as an experienced firm. That a team of Irish architects were chosen was at least a choice of clear prescience of thought, as perhaps only Irish

25 See Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (USA: University of Texas Press, 2013).

26 Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, 25.

27 Quoted by Chad Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster: Walid Raad's Projective Futures," in Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, part two of Ibraaz and the Kamel Lazaar Foundation *Contemporary Visual Culture in the Middle East* series (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 218.

28 Oliver Wainwright, "Palestinian Museum review – a beacon of optimism on a West Bank hilltop," *The Guardian* (17 May 2016).





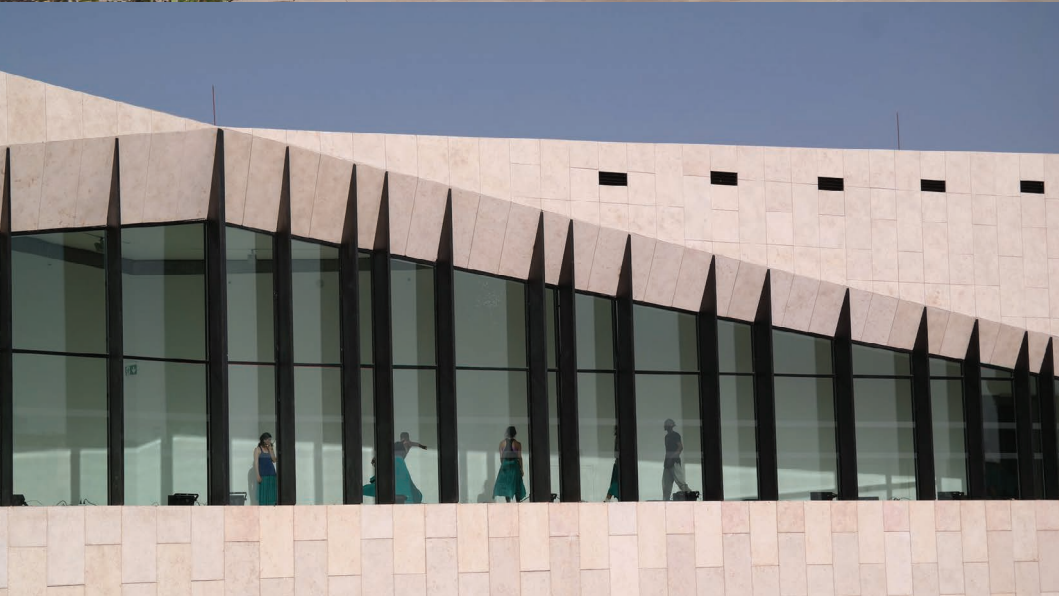


Fig. 6 (a, b & c). Palestinian Museum (opposite page)

architects could truly understand the importance of a shared landscape amongst a troubled past as well as the Palestinian people they represent in their design. The history of Ireland and its people is another example of displacement and the struggle for self-identity following a forced occupation.

The Palestinian Museum is rooted into the landscape, as immovable as the mountains that face it. It is this solid presence that makes the Palestinian Museum so relevant to the discussion of the marginal. The existence of the building testifies to the existence of the Palestinian people themselves. It ostensibly represents the effort to prevent a rewriting of history, a removal of a narrative, a cultural annihilation, a holocaust.

A desire for self-identification is not limited to those who are fighting external imperialist forces or overcoming a particular event, but includes those fighting for recognition in their own country. Rasheed Aareen's *Preliminary notes for a Black Manifesto*,[29] written 1975-76, was a call to arms to those "Third World peoples" who live in Western countries and find themselves in the same racist post-colonial predicaments as those living in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Aareen describes how Black artists had been denied recognition for almost twenty years.[30] Although citizens of the British state, Black artists were perceived as being on the margins or simply as followers of an artistic tradition, a tradition drawn from a totally Western perspective. As Aareen explains: "the establishment of European Civilisation as the mainstream is one of the most catastrophic developments that have taken place in human history, destroying and suppressing other cultures and civilisations."[31]

The Western canon perpetuates the colonialist stereotype that Black art is somehow primitive, a product of the cultural Other, an exotic icon.[32] This act of turning ancient civilisations into icons dehumanises and marginalises them.[33] Aareen believed that in order to overcome the colonial suppression inherent in the major institutions, there must be a true international movement or platform where all cultures can make their unique contributions. By being in direct communication, artists can define their own traditions and transcend these ideological machines that cannot escape their origins. Aareen created *Black Phoenix* in 1978, not as a journal or a magazine, but as the beginning of a new international movement. For him, Black artists were to become the vanguard pushing art forward, and what could be more visible than a physical document?

Today in our interconnected world, the question of making oneself visible can be as simple as posting an update on social media. Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter began on Twitter to highlight the plight of African Americans suffering direct oppression at the hands of the state. It is a way of recording incidents, of creating their own archive and displaying their true image. For those suppressed and ignored peoples, being able to visit an institution such as a museum and see your history reflected within it, is rare, but empowering. It is moments like this where we can see that the museum still retains a role in promoting the marginal, so long as the marginal is celebrated on its own terms and not appropriated. It is vital to claim your own narrative. We must move away from a canon that states you cannot make your own art, that you cannot make your own objects, and therefore that you cannot make your own museums.

The DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago is the oldest museum dedicated to African American art and history. Jean Baptiste Point DuSable was Chicago's first settler, an immigrant from Haiti who in 1779 started a trading post that grew from a settlement to the city of Chicago.[34] The building that now houses the DuSable Museum was designed by

29 Rasheed Aareen, "Preliminary notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix* 1 (Winter 1978).

30 In his Manifesto, this refers to 1956-1976. However, one can claim that this continues today, some sixty years later.

31 Ibid., 4

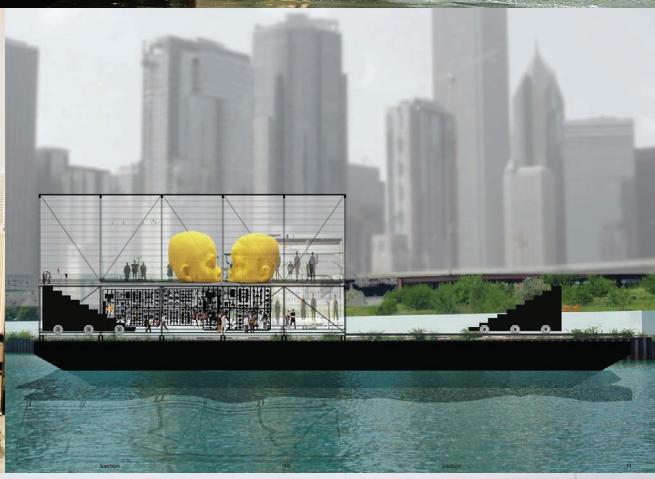
32 Elisabeth Court, "Africa on display: exhibiting art by Africans," from Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, 150.

33 Sheyma Buolli, "Disappearing Cities of the Arab World" (day symposium curated by the Mosaic Rooms as part of Shubbak Festival 2015, held at the British Museum, London, 12 July 2015).

34 DuSable Museum website.







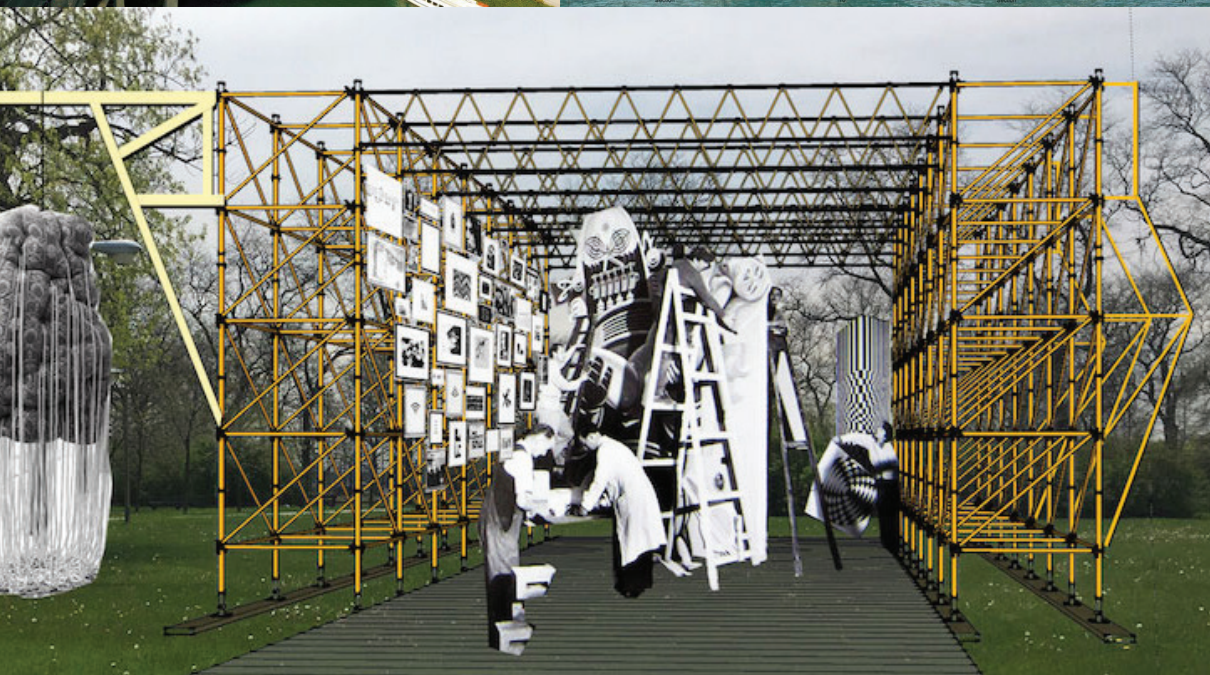


Fig. 7. Floating Museum – (a) DuSable water view, (b) – DuSable road view, (c) – Floating Museum water prototype, section, (d) – Floating Museum land prototype

D.H. Burnham in 1915 and was originally the Chicago Park District Administration Building, before becoming a lock-up facility for the Chicago Police Department until finally being converted into the permanent home for the mueum in 1973. Margaret Burroughs, teacher and art historian, together with other leading Chicago figures, founded the Museum in 1961. Burroughs used to invite her students into her home to show them her diverse collection of art. The community began calling it a museum and it was there that the institution began. It is "a predominantly Black space founded out of a domestic space."[35]

The Floating Museum is a collaboration between artists Faheem Majeed and Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford, with support from architect and planner Andrew Schachman. The artists are known for working with sculpture, performance, installations and structural interventions, but it is perhaps their commitment to education that produced the Floating Museum (Fig. 7a-d). The project is a structural interpretation of the DuSable Museum that moves to various locations, with plans to float down the Chicago River.[36] It utilises the architecture, evolution and historical significance of the DuSable Museum to become a think tank for experimental museum practices and to question how art could be an engine for change. It is the architectural embodiment of Aareen's platform of contributions.

By creating a museum that hinges on people and not a building, Majeed and Hulsebos-Spofford have reversed the usual dynamic of bricks and mortar institutions by bringing that institution to the people.[37] It is architecture as a medium for exchange that blends creative place-making, activism and exhibition design to create a platform for conversations.[38] It will focus on those parts of Chicago with limited access to museums, building a network of partners and not a physical place. There is a practical purpose to not having a permanent building in a settled location, in that any money raised can be channelled into programming and not the upkeep of a building.[39] By being able to react to a demographic, Majeed and Hulsebos-Spofford are able to counter the feeling of reverence usually provoked by being in a museum. Instead of being faced with "do not touch", what if a reproduction of a painting was passed around, handled, drawn on, changed? Would it improve the object? This is a complete divergence from the usual model of "spectator as disembodied eye"[40], able to move through space, but not allowed to interact. The experience becomes altogether more accessible and welcoming to museum newcomers, very much following the spirit of Burroughs and the beginnings of the DuSable in her own home.

The message of the Floating Museum is an organic one, in that it doesn't have one message, but supports many and enables them to grow. As a platform, it is not didactic. The word "floating" has a double-meaning: it is literal, in that the museum will actually float down the Chicago River, but also figurative, in that it exists in the floating thought bubbles emanating from the people involved in the project. The Museum will not bring its own collection or programming, but will instead bring resources to support creative projects already happening in the neighbourhood where it arrives. It will actively adapt to the needs of the area, whether that be in helping managing a festival or helping a society increase its audience reach. It is therefore possible to reconsider what it means to have a collection and what it means to different people. "The Floating Museum is people. It's a network and that network is growing."[41]

35 Interview with Faheem Majeed and Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford, in Dan Andries and Erica Gunderson, "Sending History up the River," *Chicago Tonight* (02 December 2014).

36 Project description in Propeller Fund "Announcing Propeller Fund Pilot Program Studio Residencies," *Three Walls* (2015).

37 Ibid.

38 Floating Museum project description (2015), Faheem Majeed website.

39 Faheem Majeed in Anna Boisseau, "Conceptual art museum opens its (figurative) doors," *Medill Reports Chicago* (Summer 2015).

40 O'Doherty, Brian, "Inside the white cube: notes on the gallery space, part I," *Artforum* XIV, 7 (March 1976): 27.

41 Faheem Majeed in Anna Boisseau, "Conceptual art museum opens its (figurative) doors".

The Margin Saves the Museum from Itself

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load, which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.
Hannah Arendt[42]

In the Palestinian Museum and the Floating Museum we see people and artists taking hold of their own institutional representation and involvement. On the surface they seem like projects with diverging interests, in that one is a permanent building with a specific narrative and the other an iterant project supporting the narrative of others, but both are clearly tapping into the demand for a museum that is more flexible and accessible. While the Palestinian people can look at the Palestinian Museum and see reflected in it the geography of their homeland, the people of Chicago can see their own homes extended into a wider institutional framework. The Palestinian Museum acts as an indicator of existence, whereas the Floating Museum is communicating with existence. The Floating Museum is funded from a local community and so moves within it, whereas the Palestinian Museum is funded by a dispersed community in need of a solid base.

Both museums rely on contemporary technologies: where would the Palestinian Museum be without the internet and its digital archive, and where would the Floating Museum be without its lightweight steel and its online crowd funding campaigns? "The more pixelated we get, the more magic there is in real objects. They put us in touch with something authentic and powerful."[43] Indeed, museums are about telling stories, seeing people and having a shared experience. They are places that should ask us to reflect, to question as well as to celebrate,[44] but as we have seen, both the Palestinian Museum and the Floating Museum proove a museum to be something that can support and confirm an identity even without a collection. Andre Malraux's "Museum Without Walls" has here moved from an expansion of taste to an expansion of audience, and an expansion of architecture itself.[45]

As for the traditional institutions and established museums, perhaps the tide is turning. Tasmanian Ashes will be returning to Australia after a battle with the British Museum lasting twenty years.[46] The last sixteen years have seen the Tate amending its acquisitions remit so as to incorporate more artists from less-represented countries, and more women than ever before. Indeed, these acquisitions include *Zero to Infinity* by Rasheed Aareen (purchased from the artist in 2009, now on display in the new Switch House extension). It is also a credit to the Tate that Tate Britain staged an exhibition exploring major works of art associated with the British Empire, *Artist & Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, from November 2015 to April 2016. Even the idea of a major museum as a permanent structure is no longer valid, as Manchester Museum has created an inflatable version of itself that tours local schools and community centres.[47]

What then is the contemporary museum? How can it be designed? Do we even still need buildings in this virtual age? Following the theoretical museological Zeitgeist inevitably results in an architecture that can be read as part of the wider typology timeline. In some cases, like the Palestinian Museum, this suits the purpose and can be used to great effect: the Museum is a concrete argument for Palestinian culture and identity. With the Floating Museum, it was necessary to have a flexible movable structure in order to enable its participation in activist

42 Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1951), ix.

43 Stephen Bayley, "How to Design a Design Museum" (discussion, part of Clerkenwell Design Week 2016, held at the Vitra Showroom, London, 25 May 2016).

44 Deyan Sudjic, ibid.

45 See André Malraux, *Museum without Walls*, revised and expanded edition (London, Secker and Warburg, 1967).

46 British Museum, "British Museum decides to return two Tasmanian cremation ash bundles," *British Museum press release* (March 2006).

47 University of Manchester, "Manchester Museum launches UK's first inflatable museum" (12 April 2016).

projects and the local community. What is truly crucial here is that the museum is accessible and legible (in both the physical and virtual realms). The museum is both a sacred space and a text to be read.[48] There is no such thing as the "ideal museum" architecture but rather a multiplicity of aesthetic and structural tools that enable a successful museum to come into being.

As we have seen, "museum" still brings with it a certain sense of gravitas and reverence. It has ideological baggage. Nevertheless "museum" no longer equals four walls and grand columns. It is not even necessary to have a permanent collection. The museum now resides in those in-between moments, in the realisation of an identity, the coming-together of a group and the celebration of a memory. Museums are "fantastic repositories of the human imagination. They are a place [where] we can think, be inspired and reconnect."[49] The museum is now two-fold: deeply personal (and/or individual) and hugely public. The museum reaches out into distant corners, in a state of constant flux. It must create spaces of Becoming rather than spaces of Being. In other words, museums must resist the tendency to be essentialist. The museum no longer constructs us, but rather we construct the museum so as to fully understand and realize ourselves. We must design our own narratives and our own museums. It is this process which liberates and fortifies identity.

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Fig. 6 (a, b & c): Palestinian Museum, photographs courtesy of Oliver Wainwright, 2016.

Fig. 7 (a, b, c & d): Floating Museum, visuals courtesy of Floating Museum, 2016.