

MAKING SPACE, CHANGING SPACE

BLACK PEOPLE AND NEW MUSEUMS

Ngairé Blankenberg

Museums are important symbols of what a society values. The proliferation of new museums in the world is a wonderful reflection of our changing values and perspectives. Today we have so many museums telling so many previously unheard stories—an African American or Hispanic American history museum, museums of immigration, centers for peace and tolerance, a children’s story center, museums for performance art, and even museums of heartbreak.¹ It is sometimes easy to lose sight of the essential value of museums, particularly when there is much to criticize. They are public places—places where you can explore treasures of the world, of your communities, of past and present at your leisure, a change of pace in a world increasingly dominated by screens and brands. Museums are not only places that represent the black body; they are also places black people and others can actually choose to inhabit.

Museums Should Be Places We All Want to Be in

The fact is, many of us don’t. Even though most people in the West agree that museums should exist, many more don’t choose them as places to go to during their leisure time.² Typically, museumgoers



The author's children inhabiting space their own way at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

are very educated, earn a higher income than average, and are white, even as the population in the West is undergoing a major demographic shift. In the United States less than one in ten museum visitors are from minority groups, even though more than three out of ten people in the general population are minorities.³ By 2050 the percentage of what are now considered to be minorities in the United States is projected to make up roughly half the national population. Will the demographics of museum visitors keep pace? The signs are not encouraging.

College education is the single biggest predictor of museum attendance, but museums on the whole are doing a dismal job of attracting nonwhite college students and graduates, thereby missing an important opportunity to create a museumgoing culture among a key segment of the population.⁴ The National Endowment of the Arts Participation Survey in 2012 found a 12 percent decline in arts attendance among college-educated Americans, and the median age of museum visitors has shot up from thirty-six years to forty-three years in the last twenty-five years.⁵

If you live in the United States or Canada and

many other Western countries, the younger you are, the more likely you are to be of color. The more likely you are also to never visit museums unless you are forced to at school. There is a real possibility that many museums may eventually age themselves into redundancy.

The future of museums in the West lies in the multiracial millennials of today. But, as writer Beth Spotswood acknowledged in her blog, *Tourist Trapped*, “like most people, I wish I enjoyed museums more than I actually do.”⁶ Millennials don't seem to be too impressed by museums.

Let me summarize what you likely already know: the millennials of today—you, your students, your children, your friends—have grown up in an era of ubiquitous technology. Millennials like to be in the know and can be through social media and 24/7 access to information via the Internet, often on smartphones. They are the fastest-growing age segment for travel.⁷ They are connected, and social relationships are very important; their choices of where to go are heavily influenced by their peers.⁸ Millennials expect choice and the ability to customize an experience. They value being able to interact and participate, and they lose interest when

expected to be the passive recipients of information. They like experiences that are meaningful to them. They like art events, or art on the streets, but they are not so keen on museums.⁹

New Social Relations Demand a New Space

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre coined the idea of social space, based on the idea that every society produces its own space and that the hegemonic classes use space as a tool to reproduce its dominance. For Lefebvre, any change in social relations demands a new space.¹⁰ We need to conceive of the space of museums differently in order to attract a new color-full generation.

Creating a more participatory experience can radically change how compelled people feel to come to a museum. Making a connection with another human being is one of the most powerful and memorable experience-creators one can ask for. I have two children. They have been hauled to a lot of museums and a lot of progressive museums. I can tell you that despite my best efforts, my enthusiastic commentary (“Wow! Check out the way he’s transforming bottle caps into this amazing piece of cloth!” Or, “Can you believe this is the actual prison where Mandela was kept?” Or, “Isn’t it incredible that we can see one of the first records of human writing!!”) more often than not falls flat. Their eye rolling is my personal motivation. What is it that will help them find their space in these great places of the human soul?

There Are Many Barriers

I recently visited the Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration (National Museum of Immigration) in Paris. I did not know beforehand, but the museum is in a grand old building, the Palais de la Porte Dorée, constructed for the Paris Colonial Expo of 1931. After the Colonial Expo, it became the Museum of France Overseas, then the Museum of African and Oceanic Art, and then the National Museum of the Arts of African and Oceania. In 2000, its collections moved to the Musée du quai Branly, and the building became the home of the Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration and the Dorée Tropical Aquarium. The idea apparently was to show how France has progressed by making space for a museum tackling the very contemporary

issue of immigration in a building formerly devoted to celebrating its colonial age, a political statement implying that while the connection remains, colonization and colonial relations are a thing of the distant past.

As we approached the building, I was amazed by its architecture. Closer still, at the steps leading up to the front door, an exterior text panel described how it was a former Museum of the Colonies. Initially as I read I thought it was an interesting idea to link colonialism to immigration and migration, but then I saw the photo accompanying the text. It seemed to be of two men working on the external bas relief of the building (itself a 1,200-square-meter ode to the flora, fauna, and “natives” of the colonies). One of the men is fully clothed, his face obscured. The other is a naked black man with scars on his back, seemingly working on the sculpture. There is no explanatory text for who either of the men is or why the one is naked and has scars and what he is doing on the building. Just a jarring image confronted me that I interpreted as a naked slave working to create an idealized story in stone that would remain, triumphant in the public imaginary, long after he, his name, and his wounded black body would.

I forced myself to enter the building and visit the immigration museum, which incidentally was quite interesting. But mostly for the rest of the afternoon I felt battered and wanted to go home. How could I feel comfortable in a place that normalized the humiliation of black servitude? Do they not know that this is not over yet? Changing the use of the old colonial spaces is not enough without a fundamental shift of power relations in the institution.

Our museums are often tainted, many beyond repair. I think you need only to see this image once and you are turned off to museums for life. Plain old racism is still the biggest barrier to entry. Museums have to take a seriously critical look at what they collect and exhibit and who their staff is. There is still, shamefully, so much to be done. There are also barriers such as the hostile front of house staff or all-white museum personnel, high admissions, inaccessibility of location, and so on.

We need to look at how museums engage people. The typical museum is set up to minimize conversation. They assume individuals are attending alone and eager to quietly reap knowledge from the

exhibitions, constructed by a certain expert. Most museum visitors, however, tend to visit at least in a group of two. During the museum visit, we tend to stop talking to the person we're with and disappear in the solo world the museum creates for us.

Museums encourage people to literally only look one way in a presentation model (authority telling you something that you consume). And even if we re-present through exhibitions curated by people of color who problematize race or who simply address identities, histories, and communities of color, it is the same didactic model. I would argue that this is not necessarily the new space that will give rise to new social relations.

Postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha contends that it is “the inbetween. . . that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this ‘Third Space,’ we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.”¹¹

Bhabha speaks of the notion of creating a third space of empowerment where cultures collide and new realities are made. I would argue that the very model of representation reinforces the politics of polarity. It creates little space between authority and recipient. For me, the third space is conversation and engagement. It is about agency. Museums that are serious about changing power relations have big empowering third spaces. Those that aren't, don't.

What could this third space look like? We know because those who are most successful at attracting young people of color are doing this. Changing social relations is not just about changing what we exhibit. It's not just about presenting exhibitions about race or about a particular cultural identity, although this goes a long way to make the invitation. While showing exhibits that deal with race or diverse cultural communities sends a positive message of invitation and acknowledgment, it cannot be the sole strategy to enable black people to own their public museums. In fact, such shows may unintentionally backfire. I recently saw the *Making Africa—A Continent of Contemporary Design* exhibit produced by the Vitra Design Museum and the Guggenheim Bilbao. The exhibit, which had Nigerian star curator Okwui Enwezor as its consulting curator, showcased the work of

over 120 artists and designers and aimed to present Africa as “a hub of experimentation generating new approaches and solutions of worldwide relevance” and “as a driving force for a new discussion of the potential of design in the twenty-first century.”¹² The design and art objects were undoubtedly glorious and were well chosen and framed, but the way in which they were presented was traditional, didactic, leaving little space for visitor engagement beyond just looking and reading. I couldn't shake the feeling (which is probably unfair of me) that the incredible vibrancy and creativity that I knew had given rise to these works within very specific contexts had been reduced to “Africa, on show,” or, even worse, “Look! Africans create cool things too.” I saw the exhibit in Barcelona, where I live, with a crowd of mainly



Conguitos on display in Barcelona

white people. There are not a lot of black people in Barcelona, and black people in public visual culture are reduced mainly to Médecins Sans Frontières billboards of suffering black babies being rescued by white care workers and the painfully ubiquitous Conguito sweet displays. The exhibit represented well, but as an “object” in its own right, it didn’t even try to change the fundamental social relations here.

We need to create the conditions of conversation. We don’t need to own the conversation, but we need to let it happen.

I remember very clearly the one time my daughter was really excited about going to a museum. We were living in Canada, and she went on a school trip to the War Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. She had been to both before with me. I was amazed to see that on her BBM status she posted: “so cool. Met a real war vet from WW2 at the museum.” For this to make it to her BBM status was an indication as to how a personal contact can make (and also break) an experience.

You don’t need much space for conversation. In order to allow four people to talk in a group in a circular configuration there needs to be approximately 4.5 square meters of free space in the gallery. That’s it—some space, a trigger, a question, clear instructions for what to do.¹³ But this is typically what happens:

I’m in a workshop, a place that, as a consultant, is like my second home. It is a workshop dedicated to developing the storyline for a new museum. We’ve assembled together a mixed bag of people: the museum director, some curators, the public and education program staff, and some external experts, normally academics and researchers as well as a few community organizers and maybe some artists.

I stand in front of a flipchart, marker in hand.

“What is the central idea you think this museum should convey?”

We go around the room. The directors talk of mission, funding, and politics. The curators provide complex analyses of theme, subject, and narrative. The education program staff speak of pedagogical outcomes and curriculum. The IT people talk of mobile and augmented reality. The academics say things like “intersection,” “disruption,” “trouble the

story,” and “deconstruction.” The artists talk about doing something out of the ordinary.

We write it up; it’s shaping up to be a great place. We put together an interpretive plan.

Enter the designers. There is a long process of development. The designers try to bring the content to life. They work with the curators and sometimes the educators. The curators tend to be higher in the pecking order. The designers are practically focused on getting the artifacts, the text, the photos, the videos, and the art they need to put the exhibition together. There is never enough space; there is always one more story that needs to be told, one more exhibit that needs to be put in. Before you know it, all of the space that we had put aside for school groups and conversation is gone. It loses out to “important things you have to know.” Every time.

This is our most common barrier: museum staff who believe telling is more important than inspiring or are making space and museums that see their only form as presenting knowledge.

The Denver Art Museum did a study of how to attract young people in their museum and spoke of easy moments of creativity where visitors are invited to unleash their own creativity and not just bask in the creativity of others.¹⁴ Creativity with low barriers to entry is another way to engage.

And there’s technology. I think the hardest thing for a museum to do is to let go of the talking stick online. Online is a big scary place where you have very little control. We work with many museum professionals who have a thousand excuses about why not to let audiences post, respond, and share online. But here’s the thing—virtual space is a new space where social relations have been irrevocably altered. It is THE in-between, THE third space.

It is no surprise that the latest study of participation in the arts from the National Endowment for the Arts shows that mobile devices “appear to narrow racial/ethnic gaps in arts engagement.”¹⁵ What can museums learn from this third space? But more important, what is our intent? How committed are we to really changing social relations?

As embodied by the example from the Paris Museum of Immigration, it is easier to change what we present than it is to change who we are. Making space changes space. Isn’t it time we did?

Ngaire Blankenberg is European director and principal consultant at Lord Cultural Resources and co-author with Gail Lord of Cities, Museums and Soft Power (Arlington, VA: AAM Press, 2015).

Notes

1 For example, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian, opening in September 2016 in Washington, DC, on the National Mall, and the National Museum of the American Latino. A number of immigration or migration museums have opened over the last twenty-five years in the United States (Ellis Island Immigration Museum, Tenement Museum), Canada (National Museum of Immigration at Pier 21), Australia (Immigration Museum, Migration Museum), France (Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration), United Kingdom (Museum of Bristol), Belgium (Red Line Museum), and others. There are the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, Rwanda; the Apartheid Museum, South Africa; the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, United States; Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Japan. For children, for example, there are the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom; Discover Children's Story Centre, London. Performance arts: Turbine Hall, Tate Modern; PS1, MOMA. And the Museum of Broken Relationships, Zagreb, Croatia; the Museum of Innocence, Istanbul, Turkey.

2 There are many studies in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom that demonstrate broad public support for museums. For example, Jack Jedwab, "History Knowledge and Trust in Sources" (presentation, Association for Canadian Studies, December 2011), based on a study of survey respondents in Canada, United States, United Kingdom, and France.

3 Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums Press, 2010), based on research by Reach Advisors, who analyzed census data and survey data.

4 Gregory Rodriguez, an author and journalist, discusses demographic change in the Americas, cultural transformation, and the future of museums in a lecture, "Towards a New Mainstream" (Washington, DC: Embassy of Canada, December 9, 2009), which was subsequently released as a webcast by Learning Times and the Centre for the Future of Museums, including an overview of the demographic trends led by James Chung of Reach Advisors.

5 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, November 2009). See also Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown, *Beyond Attendance: A Multi-Modal Understanding of Arts Participation* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, February 2011).

6 Tourist Trapped Blog, "Tourist Trapped: After Hours at the Museum of the African Diaspora," blog entry by Beth Spotswood, November 7, 2011, blog.sfgate.com/culture/2011/11/07/tourist-trapped-after-hours-at-the-museum-of-the-african-diaspora/

7 *New Horizons III Executive Summary: A Global Study of the Youth and Student Traveller* (Alexandria, New South Wales, Australia: WYSE Travel Confederation, September 2013), wysetc.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/newhorizonsiii-v7-execsummary-v4s.pdf.

8 *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next. Confident. Connected. Open to Change* (Pew Research Center, February 2010).

9 Novak-Leonard and Brown, *Beyond Attendance*.

10 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

11 Homi Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 209.

12 *Making Africa—A Continent of Contemporary Design*, Vitra Design Museum, www.design-museum.de/en/exhibitions/detailseiten/making-africa.html.

13 For more on the importance of scaffolding for a participative experience, read Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010). See also Ngaire Blankenberg, "Participatory Exhibitions," in *Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, ed. Barry Lord and Maria Piacente (Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

14 *Creativity, Community, and a Dash of the Unexpected: Adventures in Engaging Young Adult Audiences* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2011).

15 *National Endowment for the Arts Presents Highlights from the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, September 26, 2013), www.arts.gov/news/2013/national-endowment-arts-presents-highlights-2012-survey-public-participation-arts.