



(Aalam, 2015)

The role of architecture in constructing socially inclusive and participatory museum sites: a research project into the architectural renewal of The Holburne Museum, Bath

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Summary

This research examines how museums can be made socially inclusive and foster cultural participation via the context-responsive utilisation and adaptation of their buildings. It explores the evolving social and cultural role of museums in society, providing justification for the contemporary aim of museums to be 'open' and 'participatory'. It is argued that museums can have significant value for those who visit them, however, they commonly serve an exclusive subsection of society and display an elitist culture. The barriers that museum architecture can pose to inclusivity and participation are explored in this research and the architectural opportunities for change are considered. The Tate Modern and Sydney Modern Project reveal examples of real architectural possibilities.

Eric Parry's architectural renewal of the Holburne Museum in Bath is examined as a case study of how adapting architecture can 'open' a museum to wider audiences and engage them in culture in new ways once through the door. This case study demonstrates that exterior changes can make museums more approachable and internal spatial design can shape the atmosphere of a museum to enhance visitor comfort and foster active discovery.

Recommendations are given for how museums can learn from the architectural renewal of the Holburne Museum to implement architectural changes that foster social inclusivity and cultural participation in their own contexts.

Context

This project was produced by Bethany Buckingham, a student researcher in her final year of studying BSc Sociology at Bath Spa University. Her interest in The Holburne Museum and contacts with participants have been drawn from her time as a volunteer at the museum.

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Introduction

A contemporary mission in the museums sector to ensure relevance (Simon, 2016) is to enhance 'openness', defined by (Ullrich, 2017) as openness to "new demographics" and a concern for "the entire society". This responds to the growing societal demand to expand influence over culture beyond the exclusive group of similar individuals who have controlled it historically. A trend is underway towards achieving openness through participation (Museums Association, 2020; Ullrich, 2017; and McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016), ensuring visitors' confidence in museum spaces and shaping the museum-visitor relationship to encourage visitor agency (Sandell, 2005).

This research project focuses on two facets of openness:

Social inclusivity: the first step of the process; being open to individuals from excluded or marginalised groups to come through the door and creating an environment where they feel comfortable and are fully included.

Cultural participation: the next step; engaging visitors as confident participants and agents in culture.

It is crucial to transform the museum-visitor relationship from teacher-beneficiary (Lynch, 2016, p. 30) to mutually engaged agents in the negotiation of culture. The aim of this research is to explore how museum architecture can achieve this, posing the question 'how can museum sites be intentionally designed to facilitate social inclusivity and cultural participation?'.

Buildings can influence a museum's culture by determining the symbolic image of a museum presented to the public and how the space is physically experienced, both impacting the public's engagement and relationship with it (Sandell, 2005, Macleod, 2005). A common reason cited by members of the public for reluctance to visit museums is the image and atmosphere of the buildings (Ullrich, 2017). This research seeks to explore how museum buildings can be designed, adapted, and utilised to serve as a facilitator to openness.

Challengingly, the purpose of museums to preserve artefacts and heritage must be appropriately balanced with transformation to meet the needs of contemporary society. It is important to consider 'how can museums appropriately balance preservation with transformation to ensure relevance?'.

A case study of Eric Parry's 2011 architectural renewal of the Holburne Museum is examined to consider how social inclusivity and cultural participation is architecturally facilitated in practice. Interviews are conducted with

Dr Alexander Sturgis (AS) (former Director)

Louise Campion (LC) (Learning and Engagement Lead)

Spencer Hancock (SH) (Head of Visitor Services)

Eric Parry (EP) (lead architect)

Where their insights are referenced, their initials are used as attribution.

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What is a museum? Who is it for?

Ideology

Although currently being revised, the International Council of Museums' (2007) definition emphasises that a museum "acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits... heritage" for "education" and "enjoyment" "in the service of society". They are sites where cultural knowledge is created and they "reinforce our understanding of our own culture" (Beisiegel, 2017). Therefore, engaging all people is crucial in creating knowledge that belongs to everyone.

"Museums were set up to be democratic" (Fleming, 2021). In other words, when effective they "attract diverse audiences" and are "representative of society" (Fleming, 2021). The Museums Association's (2020) Learning and Engagement manifesto proclaims access to and participation in culture as a human right. Museums must dismantle barriers to reach a broader range of people (Lang, 2001) thus becoming 'democratic museums' (Fleming, 2021).

Fleming (2021) insists 'democratic museums' involve the public through participation, featuring the voices of the community. If museums represent culture back to society, everyone in the community must have the opportunity to shape the narrative. Lang (2001) suggests that museums are required to meet the needs of users by developing their services in partnership with them. While participation can take numerous forms, the emphasis is on enabling museum visitors to be active in the museum, creating the culture in partnership with the museum (McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016). Lynch (2016) insists museums should not teach their visitors their culture, but visitors should be agents in it, making the museum a 'commons' in which visitors are contributing citizens.

As a result, the museum is not governed by an elite but is publicly accountable (Fleming, 2021).

Not all museums will have the same social or cultural task, but all should rethink their "purpose and practices" for inclusivity according to Dodd and Sandell (2001b, p. 2). The contemporary agenda for museums is to enhance 'openness'. This is an attempt by museums to take up a more impactful social role by opening their traditional functions and opening to new demographics (Ullrich, 2017). The intention is to abandon "elitist status" (Ullrich, 2017, p. 165) and make culture accessible to all.

Policy context

In 1970, Cultural Affairs officer for Frankfurt, Hilmar Hoffman, popularised the phrase “culture for all”, suggesting that museums can only realise their social role when they inspire those who are not interested in art (Ullrich, 2017, p. 116).

This broader access idea was adopted into UK policy by New Labour (1997-2010). The New Labour government promoted their ‘social exclusion agenda’ which sought to deal with social disadvantage and inequality via social capital (McNeil, 2016). The emphasis was on including the people on the margins of society in areas of public life including by funding museums to offer free admission (Heal, 2009) and establishing regional museum hubs (University of Leicester, 2021). New Labour committed to “improving access for all” in museums (Heal, 2009) under the policy Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All.

However, the Coalition government later dissolved the hubs and reduced funding, passing responsibility from the state to the Arts Council (University of Leicester, 2021).

The current government aims to make museums flourish by developing a strategic focus and providing funding for “caring for collection” and “welcoming diverse audiences”, as laid out in the Museums Action Plan 2018 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018, p. 3).

The social and cultural value of museums

Access to museums is important because they have significant social and cultural value. Fleming (2012) maintains that democratic museums enable the entirety of society to access their benefits. Museums have a “social responsibility” (Dodd and Sandell, 2001a, p.4) and a “social role” (Lang, 2001) to make a positive impact on those with whom they engage.

Social value

Museums can...

- “empower” individuals, enhance self-esteem (Dodd and Sandell, 2001a, p. 4) and “promote self-confidence” through volunteering and participation (Museums Association, 2020).
- support visitor wellbeing ((Museums Association, 2020); and National Museum Directors Council, 2015).
- lift members of the community out of social isolation (Museums Association, 2020, p. 3) and be actively engaged in community life as citizens (National Museum Directors Council, 2015, p. 2).
- enhance locals’ sense of belonging in the community (National Museum Directors Council, 2010).
- maintain a civil society through the promotion of collective heritage (National Museum Directors Council, 2015).

Cultural value

Museums can...

- “inspire, educate, inform” (Dodd and Sandell, 2001a, p. 4) people about their collective cultural heritage which strengthens communities (National Museum Directors Council, 2010, p. 18).
- enable citizens not just to consume cultural capital but “contribute through culture to the wider good of society” (Museums Association, 2020, p. 3).
- “promote creativity” (Dodd and Sandell, 2001a, p. 4) through active engagement with culture.

Problems in practice

Museums “preserve our history and reinforce our understanding of our own culture” (Beisiegel, 2017, p. 9). But what if that culture construed as ‘ours’ is actually constructed and disseminated by a select few?

Exclusivity

Traditional museum “systems and structures” can perpetuate exclusivity (Dodd and Sandell, 2001a, p.5).

Museums are “dominated by educated people” not the working classes (Fleming, 2021) therefore fail to provide “wider public benefit” (Social Justice Alliance for Museums, 2021).

Elitist culture

Dodd and Sandell (2001a, p. 5) acknowledge more traditional museums as often “elitist”.

Many museums fail to be democratic according to Fleming (2021), instead they “serve elite minorities” and are run “like private clubs”.

This means that their culture is closed and not representative of diverse local experiences.

Disempowered audiences

Fleming (2021) argues the democracy of museums is damaged by their power systems. Who runs museums, how they are run, and for whom is characterised by an unequal power relationship between museum decision makers and the community.

Visitors are disempowered as the ‘beneficiaries’ of culture presented to them (Lynch, 2016).

Fleming (2021) claims museums do not provide value to the whole public therefore are perpetuating inequality. In their tendency to be exclusive, museums fail to be contemporarily relevant (Fleming, 2021; and Simon, 2016)

Clearly, museums can be deeply beneficial to those who are included and enabled to participate in their culture. However, in reality many people are not.

Therefore, it is important for museums to be socially inclusive and participatory for all people to **have the opportunity to benefit from their social and cultural value**, and for all those entering museums **to be empowered to participate in the culture**.

Museum architecture: problem or opportunity?

The concept of openness, though meant symbolically, is a physical metaphor – ‘opening the door’ to outsiders. Therefore, it can be deduced, the symbolic openness of a museum is intricately linked with architectural openness. Borrowing ideas from Borsa (1990), Lynch (2016, p. 30) calls on museums to let up their ‘cultural borders’ which ‘enclose’ us in the safety of ‘concrete places and spaces’, demonstrating the power of architecture over the museum-public relationship and culture.

Problematic architecture

Quinlan-Gagnon (2016) argues that architecture is not merely functional but itself a message of communication that determines whether the public feels included or excluded by a museum. Museum buildings have been criticised for fostering exclusion in the following ways.

Macleod (2005, p. 2) criticises museums as iconic buildings as a means of separating “the building, its contents and its context” and allowing architectural history, or lack of, to create a hierarchy of museums. Therefore, she argues, iconic architecture hinders access and inclusion. Grandeur, Quinlan-Gagnon (2016), can intimidate potential visitors.

Furthermore, Sandell (2005, p. 185) argues that museum spaces are associated with a history of “social inequalities” being “constituted, reproduced, reinforced”. The spatial arrangement, in his view, connotes “othering, disempowerment, and oppression” (p. 185). For example, monofunctional buildings are considered inappropriate for multi-layered contexts in which museums are contemporarily situated (Ullrich, 2017, p. 165).

The evident exclusionary symbolic connotations of traditional museum architecture hinder the relationship between the public and the museum. People are reluctant to initially enter a museum due to the disconnect Macleod (2005) implies between the context of people in society and the museum building; Ullrich (2017) evidences that people commonly view museums as “boring” and “unwelcoming”. Those that do step through the door are forced to engage with whatever culture is presented as a passive learner, a “beneficiary” in Lynch’s (2016, p. 30) terms, as they filter through a silent ‘look but do not touch’ spatial arrangement.

The challenge, then, is to build museum architecture which is both inviting to outsiders and spatially arranged to facilitate visitors' active engagement with and influence over the culture shaped within the museum's walls. Architecture should be designed to transform the relationship between the public, the museum, its collection, and its culture.

Agenda for change

Despite criticisms of iconic museum buildings and a trend towards virtual viewing of collections, museum buildings can still be a cultural asset according to Beisiegel (2016). A reinvention must create the 'new museum' which is tied to its location and prioritises visitor experience (p. 11).

Macleod (2005, p. 3) suggests the value of museum architecture should not be in the beauty of the building itself but in the visitor experience it privileges, creating new possibilities for interaction. To create 'open museums' architecture must facilitate participatory engagement from visitors (Ullrich, 2017) where relations between people are central (Lynch, 2016).

Suggestions for achieving this include multipurpose spaces and sites of open discussion and idea exchange (Ullrich, 2017, p. 185); flexible spaces responsive to visitor needs (Macleod, 2005, p. 3); and interactive co-created exhibits (McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016).

Below are examples of museums which have attempted this reinvention.

Examples of innovative architecture

Tate Modern, London

Utilising a decommissioned power station, Tate Modern privileges art over architecture (Quinlan-Gagnon, 2016, p. 50). Though large, its industrial character makes it unassuming (Quinlan-Gagnon, 2016, p. 51).

The 2016 extension realises the original cross-access concept with north west and south entrances, and other new features include the 'tanks' for performance and installation art, and ribbon circulating staircase (Frearson, 2016).

Senior Architect Ascan Mergenthaler aimed for a building that allows for "flexibility, improvisation, adaptation and change" (Frearson, 2016).

Emphasising the experiential intentions, Tate Director, Nicholas Serota, believes it will "offer a rich variety of experiences to visitors" opening "art to all", and Tate Modern Director, Chris Dercon, declares it is a reinvention of what the museum "feels like" (Brown, 2015).

Sydney Modern Project, Art Gallery of New South Wales

The Sydney Modern project to be completed in 2022 is based on the ethos "more art for more people", aiming to "transform the way visitors engage with art and ideas", fostering learning, creation, and discovery (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021b).

A new stone and glass structure will connect the original building and landscape to form a "cultural precinct" (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021b), a "new civic place for Sydney". There will be a combination of indoor and outdoor spaces with pathways and lifts to flow between (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021c). A warm-toned natural stone façade will complement the nineteenth century existing building (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021c).

Features will include an outdoor public art garden (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021c); a flexible multipurpose space for programs, performances, and lectures; a purpose-built learning and participation studios; and enhanced digital capabilities (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021b). The first gallery on entry displays Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art (ArtGalleryNSW, 2021a).

The Holburne Museum: Eric Parry's Renewal

The Holburne Museum in Bath is an international landmark and thriving museum. Eric Parry's 2011 redevelopment of the building including a glass extension broadened its audience; removed barriers to entry; and enables visitors to feel comfortable and confident in the space.

Site and museum history

The building was built in the 1790s (Myall, 2021). The Sydney Hotel was the centre piece of 'Bath New Town' serving as the "fulcrum" between Great Pulteney Street and the Sydney Gardens (Sturgis, 2011, p. 11). It had a formal façade facing the



(Cheadle, 2013)

city, merging with the contrasting world of the pleasure gardens behind. It was later repurposed as a school.

The Holburne Trustees purchased the building in 1912 as a new home for William Holburne's art collection (Sturgis, 2011, p. 12). Reginald Blomfield redesigned the building for purpose, opening the internal space for large galleries but, significantly, positioning a staircase centrally, acting as a barrier which cut the city off from the gardens (Sturgis, 2011, p. 12). Its

original purpose as a gateway between the urban city and gardens retreat was severed.

Cultural significance

The Holburne Museum is a "landmark" (LC) locally, nationally, and internationally. It is quintessential of Georgian Bath making it locally loved and a tourist destination. However, prior to 2011 it was not fit for purpose. Eric Parry's renewal revitalised it, putting it back on the cultural map and opening it to more visitors than ever before.

Challenges before the redevelopment

Prior to redevelopment the Holburne did not have the critical mass to generate enough income to remain open (AS). The building was inaccessible with crowded displays and dark lighting and atmosphere (SH). This meant it could not have a rich exhibition or learning programme and attracted a "limited audience" of mostly loyal repeat visitors (AS).

Eric Parry's architectural renewal

Intentions

The 2011 redevelopment was intended to “bring life into the museum” (AS). As part of a wider reimagining of the Holburne Museum, it sought to renew the building to make it sustainable (AS). More space was required to display more of the collection, enable a fuller programme of events, and introduce a revenue generating café and shop (AS). It was to centralise the collection at its heart (EP). It needed to appeal more broadly to significant numbers of visitors and become a museum that improves lives (AS). The environment needed to change from the traditional expected atmosphere of a museum to a more friendly, relaxed, and open space to break down barriers to entry (SH). At the same time, an imperative for the new build was to celebrate the museum's heritage (AS).

Design

Eric Parry designed a “renewed museum”, dedicating half his efforts on restoration and half on extension (EP). A glass and ceramic extension was built at the back, housing a café on the ground floor and galleries above (EP). This was designed for transparency on the ground level (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015, p. 131) and heaviness above, an inversion of usual stonework principles in a building of opposites (EP). The upper galleries flow continuously into each other and the middle floor is split for an intimate experience reminiscent of The Holburne Museum's townhouse days (EP). The learning space was brought into the main building (EP), and an accessible lift and disabled toilet were installed.

Eric Parry's design was chosen due to his insight in the history of the building (AS). The staircase was moved to reintroduce line of sight directly through the building and into the garden behind. The primary aim was to “enhance the historic building” (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015, p. 206) by reinstating the Holburne as the gateway between the city and the Sydney Gardens (AS + SH). Blomfield made a back of what was actually a front of the building, as it should serve as a gateway from both sides (EP). Now it is a Janus-faced building again (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015, p. 130) in that it looks forward into the urban and back into the landscaped pleasure gardens. It is light in the back and heavy in the front (AS).

Planning permission and public approval

Renewing a listed building was a challenge (SH). The modernity of the extension challenged the “innate conservatism” of locals (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015, p.

130) by going against the local Georgian architecture. It polarised views in the city and beyond (AS) and become “probably the most controversial building ever in the city’s history” (SH). The conservation officer was critical of the dark glaze to reflect trees (EP). Eric Parry presented designs to the University of Bath and Arnolfini, receiving greater recognition from a different younger audience (EP). Bath planners were persuaded of its legitimacy because it would firstly give life back to the museum and benefit the city, and secondly celebrate the building’s heritage by returning it to its original relationship with the city (AS).

Impact on social inclusivity and cultural participation

Visitor numbers and audience expansion

After reopening, there was a 500% increase in number of visitors (The Holburne Museum, 2012) and the public reception of the building was overwhelmingly positive (AS + SH). The audience expanded to younger visitors (AS + LC) and now the Holburne’s community is 10% BAME compared with the Banes community which is only 7%. An accessible lift and disabled toilet enable those with additional physical needs better access (LC). There is an international tourist audience as well as a broad local audience (LC). It has become a space for “people who have never been into a museum” (SH).

It is worth noting that this is also due to local partnerships, including with Bath Spa University (SH), and museum programmes, such as Pathways to Wellbeing (LC).

Spatial opportunity for exhibitions and events

More space and better environmental controls enabled the display of much of the collection that had been in storage (AS + SH), as well as touring and Holburne-curated exhibitions (SH). The contemporary character of the extension means that more contemporary exhibitions fit appropriately in the space. Its availability for public events makes the Holburne an “integral part of city life” (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015, p. 129).

Spaces of creativity and discovery

Internal spaces enable more imaginative curatorial designs, such as ceiling-hung pots and interactive drawers (SH). Emphasis has shifted from looking-but-not-touching to creative discovery (SH). The internal learning space provides a midway point of part-immersion in the historic building but without the collection present for

users to feel more relaxed (LC). The Sackler Discovery Centre next door to new Roper Gallery enables visitors to respond freely and creatively to exhibitions (LC).

Transparency

The glass extension was built with emphasis on transparency (Heathcote and Vesely, 2015). It disappears into the landscape by reflecting light (SH), therefore does not detract from the Georgian façade. It brings light and a garden view into the museum impacting on visitor wellbeing (LC) and makes it feel lighter and airier than a traditional museum space (SH). The gardens are significant to the site's inclusivity as the pleasure gardens were originally a place of "liberation", the "common ground" of "rich meeting poor" (EP). Also, the ability to see inside before entry lessens anxiety for those who may never have entered a museum (LC).

Shifted public perception and removed barriers to entry

Fleming (2021) suggests "not everyone wants to enjoy their culture in an atmosphere of reverential silence". The contemporary building changes people's perceptions of what the Holburne is (AS) and opens the potential for new kinds of experience (SH). The extension windows provide a new less formal space to display exhibitions which can be viewed for free and is an alternative entrance if the Georgian façade is intimidating (LC).

Visitor comfort and confidence

The café has transformed the Holburne into a social space (LC) and volunteers observe a new energy to the environment (SH). The 'neck', a space between the extension and the front of the building without programmed events or exhibitions, is a "flexible", "neutral" space serving as a 'tool for access' to ensure visitor comfort (LC). The Gardener's Lodge, an external building, is utilised for the Pathways to Wellbeing programme as it does not carry the same associations as the main building that can make people feel out of place. It therefore builds trust prior to users entering the main building and removes physical and psychological barriers (LC).

Contemporary appeal

The new build sends signals that the Holburne is "open... to the new... to contemporary ideas" (LC). Being "striking", it draws in visitors and its modernity puts "anyone who feels they aren't able to access art" at ease (SH). Internally, the historical collection can be displayed in a fresher, more engaging way (SH) and more contemporary exhibitions can fit appropriately in the space, such as Grayson

Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years. The Holburne is now a new “powerful cultural venue in Bath” from a “backward-looking”, “completely forgotten world” (EP).

History and heritage remain central

Importantly, the Holburne has not lost its historic appeal, but its heritage has been revitalised. The grandeur and beauty of the façade is preserved and makes the museum a “landmark” (LC). The line of sight through the building reconnecting the city to the Sydney Gardens is returned (AS + SH + LC). Modernity does not necessarily equate to inclusivity; historic sites can be just as inclusive when approached appropriately (LC).

Establishing community relationships and museum culture

Architecture cannot ensure inclusivity and participation alone, and the people and relationships in the Holburne are crucial (LC). Upon reopening, the front-of-house was run entirely by volunteers which welcomed a myriad of local people onto the team (students, homeless, people looking for work, retired) (AS). The volunteers now replicate the wider public and are encouraged to dress smart/casually to ensure visitor comfort and make the museum more approachable (SH).

Continued areas of contention

Evidently the Holburne Museum's architectural redevelopment has had significant impact on its social inclusivity and cultural participation.

However, some areas of contention remain.

- The Georgian façade, though attractive and integral to the building's heritage, can still serve as a barrier to entry to many demographics due to its intimidating image (SH). This can be mediated by how the Holburne chooses to present itself in other ways, such as through language and social media (LC).
- In breaking down barriers to entry by making the environment more comfortable and welcoming, the Holburne can be perceived as losing its sense of elitism which makes some visitors feel part of something special (LC).
- More can still be done to broaden audiences (AS).
- The café extension can still appear as an exclusive club with a more middle-class clientele (LC).

Lessons for opening the doors to socially inclusive and participatory museums

Crucially, all museums have different histories, communities, and contexts. Therefore, universal criteria for ensuring social inclusivity and cultural participation would be inappropriate. Developments should be context-led.

However, several guiding principles can be drawn from the example of the Holburne Museum that may be applicable to other museums that require architectural change.

- Spatial designs must be **situated in a wider mission of inclusivity and participation** adopted into all areas of museum life including partnerships, community projects, the language of communication, and architecture. Architecture cannot perform all the work in isolation.
- Architecture must tie into **how the museum communicates itself** to the public.
- Ensure the site or building is **visually approachable or welcoming** which could be achieved via the ability to see in, alternative entrances or informal entrances, or volunteers and staff positioned on entry.
- Create an environment with a less intimidating atmosphere than a traditional museum. Provide an **alternative relaxed experience**. This could be achieved through neutral spaces, social spaces such as cafes, or interactive collection discovery spaces.
- **Breaking down barriers and deconstructing elitism** can make spaces more approachable but also risks preventing outsiders from feeling proud to be insiders once through the door. This must be taken into consideration in context to discern appropriate changes.
- **Embracing history and heritage** of historical sites must remain centrally important and can be approached in a way that is inclusive and participatory. Making architecture more contemporary is not necessarily the same as making it more inclusive or participatory.

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