The Neighbourhood museum

Community engagement at an art institute

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Abstract – For my graduation project I am designing the Neighbourhood Museum, which is

about implementing a museum in its immediate environment and becoming part of the

neighbourhood life by engaging the community to come and be an active role in the museum

organization. This paper will be about how the museum of today can be designed to engage

the community. It will look at community engagement models and at case studies of

participatory projects with communities in museums. Additionally, it will look at the idea of

the constituent museum, that puts relationships with participants central. Components of the

theory of the 'liveable city' by Jane Jacobs will be used to imagine mixed used spaces in the

museum that can increase community engagement within the institute.

Keywords: Museum, Community engagement, Participation in museum, Community centre,

liveable city

Word Count: 5391

#### 1. Introduction

For my graduation project at the Tu Delft, I will be designing the museum of tomorrow. Museums of today have a very specific building type. It has clean and white exhibitions rooms, a museum shop, a café and some rooms backstage that the public cannot see. The museums of today are made for the general public and have a very international character. Unfortunately, this international character leads to a museum that does not tend to the specific location, local visitors and artists. They do not put attention towards the neighbourhood the building is living in. The museums of today are losing their individual identity.

With this research I am going to investigate, how to get the museum be part of the neighbourhood life and serve the neighbourhood. With my main research question: *How can the museum of today be designed to engage the people living nearby?* I want to study how the museum of tomorrow can be designed and combined with other (community-related) functions to make the museum be part of the neighbourhood and engage people living in the area to come.

I will firstly explain the Modernist Museum by using the Museum studies of Carbonell (2012). Then I will look further into community engagement models in museums by using literature by Wills (2017) and Gurian (2006). Then I will introduce the concept of the Constituent Museum, explained in the book by Byrne et al. (2018). Next I will go into participation in museums by looking at case studies and literature by Lane et al. (2007). Finally I will talk about how to implement the ideas of the liveable city by Jane Jacobs (1992) in a modern museum.

### 1.1. What is my museum about?

For my graduation project I am designing a museum, that will become a platform with a local identity for residents to come together, learn from the museum and artists and engage with art. It will become a hub for dialogue and engagement about critical ideas and focus on collaboration between residents, artists and local organizations. It will represent the art and the society it lives in. To engage local residents with the museum the museum will actively reach out into the neighbourhood with different activities and events. To achieve this goal, I looked at literature about community engagement in museums.

#### 2. The Modernist Museum

The modernist museum has a particular attitude towards its visitors. Their communicative aim is to enlighten and to educate. The modernist museum lays out knowledge in such a way that it can be absorbed by visitors. The educational aim of the modernist museum is to transfer or transmit information about 'art history' to recipients (Carbonell, 2012).

### 2.1. The Transmission Model of Communication

The transmission model of communication is the underlying view of knowledge and of learning, to this approach of communication. It understands communication as a linear process of information transfer an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver (Carbonell, 2012).

The transmission model explains the approaches taken by museums today to develop their exhibitions. The curator is seen as the scholar, the expert on the collections. However, the audience is rarely defines beyond the 'general public'. The museums envision a general mass audience with no research done into the levels of information that the 'general public' might

bring with them to the museum, as well as no research about the experience of the visitor.

Carbonell (2012) argues in his study about museums, 'that these processes belong only in the museum of the past' and unfortunately many museum today still use the approach without knowing who visits their museum and why they might come.

# 2.2. The Modernist Museum based on the Transmission Model of Communication

Many values of the modernist museum can be explained by looking at the transmission model of communication. These include naturalised assumptions of separation from the ordinary, an emphasis on scientific values about collection research, the organization of an exhibition based on the structure of an academic discipline, a lack of research into the audience and an ignorance about the visitors and their worlds. The modernist museum focusses on the perspective of exhibition technology only and excludes the visitor. 'The social and cultural aspects of the process are not considered' (Carbonell, 2012).

### 2.3. Conclusion: the concept of the 'active audience'

The transmission model of communication is based on the stimulus/ response model of education. It was assumed that the targets were open to the persuasion of the mass media and there would be a universal effect on them. However, following a range of studies of these assumed 'effects', it was gradually realized that visitors were not merely passive absorbers of the media presented to them. They found out the relationship between media and audience was complex and multifaceted (Carbonell, 2012).

After the transmission model of communication has been called into question by communication theorists, the concept of the 'active audience' has been developed. The cultural approach to understanding communication focuses more closely on how meaning is

made. It sees communication as an integral part of culture as a whole and acknowledges the relevance of voice and the importance of interpretation (Carbonell, 2012).

## 3. Community engagement

### 3.1. The need to include the 'community voices' in curating exhibitions

There has been an important change within cultural heritage institutions during the late twentieth century. A shift has happened from an emphasis on objects representing a form of objective knowledge, to a bigger emphasis on the role of human subjects and living people in the past, present and the future. The idea of 'The New Museology' has museums around the world influenced since the 1970s. It argues that people should be central to the purpose of museums. Objects are primarily for their associations, meaning and significance to people in the past, present and future. The new museology focuses on the museum having the position to respond to issues of the present and the past. There is a need to include the 'community voices' next to experts while representing issues of broad social concern (Lane et al., 2007). Gurian (1996, as cited in Wills, 2007) argued, that if communal behaviour is a human need and that community centres offer the space for people to come together, why not challenge those institutions that are normally not interested in communal activities, to build programs that encourage more civil interactions. Gurian defines 'community' as the collective of anything. This could be families, neighbourhood, organizations and even just random formed groups. These communities form, for better and worse, our society (Gurian, 1996, as cited in Wills, 2007). Understanding these communities is especially important, when museum workers, start to try understand the dimensions and complications of them while engaging with them in the course of their activities (Wills, 2007).

### 3.2. Community engagement models

The idea of community engagement has become an important part for today's museums, with justifying their relevance to society. Especially programming their needs to be mindful of representation and exclusion, of education and learning objectives, and of project sustainability. However, this can be a time consuming and often complicated process. To make the most of local contacts and expertise, it is important to include them from an early stage. A number of models have been developed within museums and will be explained below (Wills, 2007).

### 3.2.1. The Ecomuseum concept (European model)

The ecomuseum model is derived from the Scandinavian open air museum, were heritage was transferred and clustered onto a specific site. To design a Ecomuseums it is important to interpret the cultural and natural landscapes and ecology of the site, and generate and respond to community initiatives. It places human development in the context of the surrounding environment (Wills, 2007). In Figure 1 and Figure 2 you can see the different models of the ecomuseum and the traditional museum, and their relationship to the surrounding environment and community, illustrated by Davis (Davis, 2005).



Figure 1: 'Ecomuseums must be located within the community and the local environment' (Davis, 2005, p. 373)

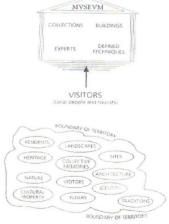


Figure 2: A spatial representation of differences between museum types: traditional museum (top) and the ecomuseum (bottom) (Davis, 2005, p. 371)

The ecomuseum combines an increased awareness of place and environment into their activities. It extends the museum beyond the confines of the museum walls.

#### 3.2.2. Social Inclusion in British museums

Social inclusion has been a major theme for contemporary British musicologists (Wills, 2007). Sandell developed a model (Figure 3), in which museums, engaged in the business of social inclusion, could have an impact at three levels: individual, community and society (Sandell, 2003). The model suggests on how communication methods reach all these groups. Face-to-face on a personal level and neighbourhood regeneration at the community level (Wills, 2007).

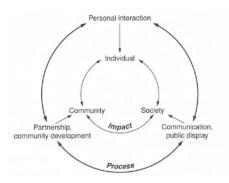


Figure 3: Social inclusion and the museum: impact and process (Sandell, 2003, p. 5)

Even though there is a lot of critique on this model, one of the strengths is the inclusion of the rural context in the social inclusion debate; the model contributes with an awareness of social inclusion and exclusion issues that affect groups beyond those traditionally being addressed, like geographic location, unemployment and seasonal work and limited access to services (Wills, 2007).

### 3.2.3. Animating Democracy at American museums

In America there has been discussions under American practitioners about the link between democracy, civic dialogue, the arts industry and museums. Schaffer- Bacon identified in his program, *Animating Democracy*, the potential for the arts to stimulate and motivate

above, can be achieved and match with the needs of the museum industry. Additionally, the program identified an additional role for a facilitator, that will make sure that the traditional arts practitioners become involved in engagement with participants (Wills, 2007).

#### 3.3. Conclusion: engagement being fundamental

As Wills (2007) says, participation is not a new concept: it is a fundamental dimension of human interaction with culture, democracy, community development, education and environmental management. To improve community engagement with participatory projects at museums, Wills argues that a critical reflection on itself is very important. This means that museums have to reflect on their own past programs, to improve their futures projects and increase community engagement (Wills, 2007).

The models presented make it clear that the idea of community engagement has re-emerged as an important part for many museums. The concepts of access diversity, inclusion and learning are central to understanding the way that museums have developed community engagement initiatives and are vital for their own development and for the public they represent (Wills, 2007).

### 4. The Constituent Museum

The theory of a constituent museum is to put relationships at the centre of their operation. It puts the visitor as an active member of the constituent body, instead as a passive receiver.

The museum provokes and inspires the visitor. By putting the visitor at the centre of the museum organization, and keeping a collaborating and co-producing relationship between the two, the relative positions of the museum and the visitor begin to shift and change. Many

people believe that museums have a key role to play in this social reimagining of our future (Byrne et al., 2018).

Like Arlandis said(Byrne et al., 2018), the constituent museum engages fully with the world, its movement and its life. It is not a place of knowledge production but a place of study, a place for becoming-with others through art in motion. The architecture of the constituent museum is not the architecture of a building or an institute, but the architecture of love and togetherness (Byrne et al., 2018).

### 4.1. Museum Organization

The constituent museum, both physical and ideological, has gone through a shift from object to relational/ durational-based practices. The normative physical, ideological and conceptual architecture of the museum, driven as a top-down, curatorial construct for developing and spreading knowledge, has become speculatively replaced with a conception of the museum as a constituent process that operates within a basis network of exchange and collaborative production. The constituent museum of the future can be imagined as a model of dispersion and connection as opposed to a model of expansion and colonization (Byrne et al., 2018).

A series of activists, thinkers and makers, all tied to the currently conceptual framework of museum architecture, have questioned the relation of production within a museum and the division of labour between curators and mediators/audiences. They suggest a shift from vertical to horizontal forms of usership and organization. Byrne (2018) explains it as "the ultimate aim is to conceive of the museum space as a site of constituent practice that is capable of accommodating relational discourses between process, discourse, object and archive as a living producer of histories and futures" (p. 77).

# 4.1.1. Case Study - Middlesbrough's Institute of Modern Art

An example of an art institute that combined community activity with the museum is the Modern art Institute in Middlesbrough, UK. Due to a lack of materials about migration in the public archives of the tow and not having a public space where the voices of migrants could be heard, a team at the institute wanted to address this. They felt the responsibility as being part of an organization with a civic agenda, that connects with its context and publics (Byrne et al., 2018).

So they started with a constituent-led approach to bring in experiences and expertise of their most marginalized publics. They initiated new public programs, among which a monthly movie night with a shared meal and discussion. An intensive public programme focused also around one specific day a week with workshops, chess meetups, IT classes and conversation classes where the people could practice their newly-learned English. Going forward, these weekly classes and workshops became central to the program as the 'Community Day', where the museum gets transformed into an active public space, accessible and inclusive to everyone. Due to this specific day, the program deliberately brings together people of all different ages and backgrounds, instead of focussing on one specific group (Byrne et al., 2018).

# 4.1.1. Case Study - Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm

Tensta museum started as a group exhibition in 2013 and developed over time into almost a real museum. For the exhibitions, participants were invited to contribute to the exhibitions with new works and new research, as well as with workshops, lectures, discussions and screenings. The museum focuses on contemporary art and to be present in the area. Because of lack of funding the museum has had trouble over time and many new ideas emerged.

Because the local school asked to use the art centre for Swedish lessons for Migrants, the museum added a classroom. Which has additionally been used by many other local groups and associations, like homework assistance, language café and a women's café centred around handicraft and meetings of the local city administrations. Tensta konsthall has become a site of sharing, learning and knowledge production. Parts of courses are also developed together with invited artists and the team (Byrne et al., 2018).

#### 4.2. Architecture of a constituent museum

In the constituent museum, Alberto Altés Arlandis (Byrne et al., 2018) argues that to make architecture of encounter, one needs to include responsibility and matters of care as primary dimensions of spatial practices. He explains (Byrne et al., 2018) "'care' as a doing, as a situated ethics and as a politics of architecture, to explore the fragile power of the anarchic share: an active learning, a generous gifting, an open encounter based on accepting that we are not single beings" (p. 81).

He also states that a constituent museum emerges from the combination of a dwelling perspective, which means an active engagement with ones surrounding and valuing it. It also represents a shift from what a museum should look like to a more what should it do. Arlandis adds a perspective, were just adding a museum to our society is not enough. We must contribute with our museum to increasing the amount of devotion we have for our universe (Byrne et al., 2018).

#### 4.3. Conclusion Constituent Museum

The concept of the constituent museum is based on putting relationships at the centre of the museum organization. Case studies show that by bringing in the community with a special organized community day or opening up the exhibitions to the outside, a wider range in

visitors will come and engage with the art. The museum will become a place of sharing, learning and knowledge production (Byrne et al., 2018).

According to Byrne (2018), the architecture of the museum should be based on what it should do instead of what it should look like. The etymological roots of the word 'museum' in Latin relate to a place dedicated to muses, a place of studying, a library. The museum today could be imagined as a place of education, doing and learning together with others and should put more focus on the engagement of visitors instead of letting them be passive (Byrne et al., 2018).

### 5. Participation in museums

On a basic level can the word 'participate' be defined as having a share of, or taking part in something. This means the act of participation needs someone being involved. The practical approach and pursuit of participation at museums, remains a complicated issue. Yet, we know that integrating these participatory dimensions and processes from an early start of the planning phase of new projects is crucial. Moreover, leadership is required on a management level to benefit the participants, museum workers and the visitors to the works being created (Wills, 2007).

### 5.1. Participatory museum projects

Many museums nowadays try to increase their audience by introducing participating projects. The notion of change and the development for personal growth is basis of the participatory ideal. The concepts of education and identity are the main part of participatory project development because they have the capacity to be process and outcome. However, due to many museums focusing on outcome instead of process these projects often diminish the real potential. It weakens the ideal of participatory and collaborative community engagement

projects developed as a linked or cooperative project. Even though many museums focus mainly on outcome and the long term institutional viability, Wills (2007) argues that they can add value, depth and relevance to museum projects. There are four categories to consider when looking at the benefits: Firstly the value of the people that contribute to their stories and participate in the production of the museum products, secondly the value of what is learned during the project process and how the project is developed, negotiated, managed and delivered, thirdly the value of the applied learning within the project that is valued even after the project, and finally the value of the information and research materials gathered during project (Wills, 2007).

Furthermore, museums should consider the way how they approach participatory and collaborative community projects, because they have the potential to contribute to both social and institutional development (Wills, 2007).

#### 5.2. How to engage residents?

Lane (2007) analysed two case study projects from the *Australian Council for the Arts*, in which they put the new community partnership approaches between government and community organizations into practice. During the study the impact of museum programs on both community participation and audience is researched. They key aspects of these was to capture the interest of people who were not already involved and interested in the matter (Lane et al., 2007).

#### 5.2.1. Case Study – Basin Bytes program

Their goal was to invite the community to increase the community engagement. During the *Basin Bytes* program, participants got engaged in digital photography, documentation and story-telling issues to participate in an online exhibition. A conclusion coming out of this case

study, was to focus on a specific place with the theme of the exhibition. This had the potential to engage people who were normally not really interested in the issue to combine the location with the issue and care about the topic. Furthermore the content produced by the different participants highlighted the diversity of values of the different participants. This could lead from a more personal approach to the subject to a more fact driven result (Lane et al., 2007).

#### 5.2.2. Case Study – Pass the Salt

The second program *Pass the Salt* was another place-focused project based on personal stories of local people addressing the issue in various ways. This project offered insight into the power that human scale stories represented by museum curators as 'history in the making' could have in inspiring community-based actions. Next to the strong potential the project had to stimulate awareness among online audiences, it also identified the benefits of an online archive of the stories, to be used to support others with their research and project work (Lane et al., 2007).

## 5.3. Conclusion: benefits of participation in museums

To increase audiences, many museums started doing participatory projects. Unfortunately, these museums often only focus on the outcome instead of the process and hence diminish the real potential and value. There are actually many long term benefits coming from process based participatory projects in a museum, like the value of creating connections with participants, what is learned during the project process, the value of applied learning within the project and the information and research materials assembled (Wills, 2007).

Furthermore, focusing on a specific place will engage more people, that normally would not come to the exhibition. Another benefit coming from these projects are the power of human scales stories and the awareness it can create in people (Lane et al., 2007).

## 6. Mixed-used spaces in museums build community

Museum leaders have been introducing the idea more and more that museums can become safe places for unsafe ideas, meeting grounds for diverse people and neutral forums for discussing contemporary issues. Even though not all museums' leadership believe community functions should be central to their work and have different stated purposes, this chapter will talk about some ways that museums can enhance their role in building community (Gurian, 2006).

Interestingly, economic and social theorists have been stating that only non-profit organizations, the institutions of the social sector, can provide the enormous diversity of communities we need. Only they provide opportunities to volunteer and with this provide the possibility to have a place where people are in control and they are able to make a difference (Gurian, 2006).

## 6.1. Jane Jacobs and components of a 'liveable museum'

Museums of today have been focusing on broadening audiences, public programs and exhibitions. Their physical spaces have been regarded as necessary anchor spaces but never as multipurpose ones, where spontaneous 'informal public life' can happen. However by looking at the three elements – space, space mix and unexpected use – we can attempt to enhance the community-building role that the institutions increasingly play (Gurian, 2006).

Jane Jacobs (1961, as cited in Gurian, 2006) argues that spaces as mixed-use environments must be present to let community buildings succeed. Furthermore she states, that formal public organizations in cities need an informal public life underlying them, mediating between them and the privacy of the people of the city as supposed to in suburbs and towns, where they grow more naturally. According to Jacobs (1961) there are a couple of elements needed for making streets vibrant and the people using it in a civil and safe manner. These elements could be implemented in museum buildings, to enhance the community activity in them (Gurian, 2006).

#### 6.1.1. Placement of museum in neighbourhood

According to Jacobs and important part of a liveable city is the need for sufficient dense concentration of people, including the people who live there. The physical placement of museums within their immediate neighbourhood can make them more or less 'owned' by the surrounding community. Also in museums that are not yet naturally 'owned' by the residents, neighbours sometimes create unexpected activity that can be encouraged or enhanced by the museum (Gurian, 2006).

#### 6.1.2. The city inside the museum

Other components of a liveable city and that should be implemented in the 'liveable museum' are strolling opportunities with pleasant streets and frequent corners to turn, a clear separation between private and public spaces, comfortable opportunities for hanging out, a wide mix of services spread out over the whole day and especially at night, and made for a wide range of people. The museum's internal spaces need to be seen as streetscapes and by implementing these components drawn up by Jacobs, the museum can become more liveable (Gurian, 2006).

Gurian (2006) states that the decision to enter the museum can be based on reasons as diverse as the offering within it. The more varied the internal spaces are, the more diverse the visitors become. Another reason to make the audience of a museum even more diverse with a street-like mix of people, is to make it without entrance fees. An example would be the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, which has day care centres, galleries, libraries, hands-on children areas, multiple food venues and different shops. This museum experiences visitors ranging from parents dropping off their pre-school children, to workers meeting for lunch and visitors to come for the shops or the resource centres (Gurian, 2006).

#### 6.1.3. The entrance hall as an inside square

The entrance hall in museums is traditionally a nonprogrammed space and is the one location where the most concentrated and differentiated activity happens, with hours being used often longer than in the rest of the building. The entrance hall in museums today can be compared to malls; they are often multistorey, leading to many other functions and benefit from natural light. The spaces encourage for strolling and resting no matter what weather outside. Furthermore, the space can be used for different kinds of activities, like it is happening at the Joslyn Art Museum with a monthly concerts, a holiday fair, and many other events and exhibitions (Gurian, 2006).

#### 6.1.4. People watching

While once felt nonessential, social interaction within museums is today understood to be part of the experience. Museums have been increasingly implementing scrolling parameters that include seats to help visitors to people-watch and encourages conversations with strangers, which is another component in creating the civil street. Research (Falk et al., 1985, as cited in Gurian, 2006) into museum behaviour has identified that half the time spent in a

museum, visitors are doing something other than attending exhibitions and about one-third of the time is spent interacting with others. Gurian (2006) suggests that perhaps museums should start designing spaces that encourage social interaction, especially in the galleries. The National Museum of New Zealand even added a coffee bar within its exhibition (Gurian, 2006).

#### 6.2. Conclusion 'liveable museum'

All these different components prescribed by Jacobs for a more liveable city can be implanted in some kind of way to make a museum more diverse and liveable. The different components explained before, encourage more social interactivity and casual social interchange, they lead to more informal surveillance and therefore users will feel more safe and secure among strangers. Furthermore it will establish informal and formal rituals happening in the building, like celebrations and neighbourhood meet-ups (Gurian, 2006).

A lot of museums have already implemented the ideas to use space in ways that encourages the community building. And while a lot of museums may voice support for community needs, the programs of community spaces are rarely included in the general operating budget. And because of cost of building and maintaining space, the interplay between space planning, programming and emerge of unplanned social activities in unprogrammed areas does not happen often. However, when creating an architectural program plan, these unprogrammed spaces need to take priority. Because these informal meeting places where citizens can gather may help to create community. Furthermore, if museums are supposed to become institutions that facilitate community development, we should consider eliminating admission charges to enhance the community development (Gurian, 2006).

### 7. Conclusion

While the modernist museum was about the expert teaching the recipient, the museum of the future should focus more on its visitors and engage participants. It is about trying to put the participants and visitors in the foreground and keep reflecting on what is happening within the museum to increase the benefits of the participation happening. This research is trying to answer the research question: How can the museum of today be designed to engage the people living nearby?

Community engagement has re-emerged as an important part for many museums. The concepts of access diversity, inclusion and learning are central to understanding the way that museums have developed community engagement initiatives and are vital for their own development and for the public they represent (Wills, 2007).

Participation is a fundamental dimension of human interaction with culture, community development, education and environmental management and can help to increase community engagement. By especially also focusing on the process of the participatory projects, the museum will receive long term benefits. The connections with participants, what is learned during the process and the information and research materials assembled are of great value for museums (Wills, 2007).

Byrne (2018) talks in his research about the architecture of a constituent museum to be based on what it 'should do' instead of what it 'should look like'. The museum of tomorrow could be imagined as a place of education, doing and learning together with others. It is about the engagement of visitors instead of them being only passive recipients (Byrne et al., 2018). A museum like this can be described with the concept of the constituent museum. It is based on putting relationships at the centre of the museum organization. Case studies show that by

bringing in the community more, the museum will become a place of sharing, learning and knowledge production (Byrne et al., 2018).

This designing for the community and participants, can vary a lot per project. However, by using Jane Jacobs components of the liveable city, a start can be made to make the museum more diverse and liveable. This could lead to a broader audience and more community engagement within the building. An important part of her theory, is the placement of the museum in the immediate neighbourhood to increase the community engagement. Another important component is the idea of a city in the museum; strolling opportunities with pleasant streets with many corners to turn, a clear separation between private and public functions, as well as comfortable hanging opportunities and a wide mix of services. These encourage more social interactivity and casual social interchange, as well as more informal surveillance which leads to users feeling safer. The entrance hall can be seen as a square with the highest amount of traffic and a wide range of activities happening. Finally, people watching has become a big part of museum life. The need for strolling opportunities with places to sit, encourage more interaction with others (Gurian, 2006).

However, because of budgeting and maintenance cost, the program of community spaces are often not included in the general operating budget. To increase the community engagement and improve the interplay between space planning, programming and emerge of unplanned social activities, this part of designing needs to priorities (Gurian, 2006).

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