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## The New Museum

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Many claims are made in relation to new museums and the stakes are high. They often charge an entry fee, and are expected to provide visitors with cultural capital equal to that associated with attending the opera – while participating competitively in the field of leisure industries against pastimes as diverse as cinema going, shopping, and attending sporting events. In seeking to transcend the distinctions between high culture and popular culture and in aspiring to remain financially viable businesses, a series of difficulties have emerged for new

museums, especially in relation to their 'core business' of artefact preservation and exhibition making. Often enjoying massive budgets, resources and a surge of public interest on opening, the claims to newness made by these museums are undoubtedly rich with the potential to offer exciting and illuminating ways of talking about museums and contemporary culture to visitors. However, this idealism is accompanied by a series of acute structural problems that are caused principally by the pressure to appear always and continuously new. This supplement is concerned with interrogating some of the complexities and contradictions that attend the new museum.

New museums are described as physically new institutions that are dedicated to the exhibition of cultural objects, artefacts and experiences. Emerging from about 1990, they exist globally, but

are most numerous in Western cities because of the interrelationship between these representational spaces and late capitalist systems of sponsorship (being funded generally as joint initiatives by governments, private donations and corporate interests). The term 'new museum' refers to museums that exhibit social history, natural history, ethnology, science and technology, and it is also used in relation to museums of art. Unlike museums of the past, which have been defined according to the categories of objects they collect, research and display, new museums aim to be defined primarily against a highly self-conscious image of 'newness'. They seek to blur disciplinary boundaries, and promote interpretation according to a wide and inclusive scope of reference. This image of newness refers to the style of architecture, the approaches toward installation, and the modes of publicity circulating around the museum, rather than to what is exhibited. Although they often borrow objects and representational approaches from museums that are more rigorous in regard to the protection of disciplinary boundaries, they often employ the effects of post-modernity to represent a break with more traditional museums and their methodologies. While the term 'new' refers thus to a particular style of museum that has emerged recently, it also, and more importantly, indicates a desire for museums to appear relevant and appealing to contemporary society.

The 'new museum' is a generic term or way of describing a set of components and characteristics shared by museums developed in the last 15-year period. A certain homogeneity exists amongst new museums; they appear visually similar and they share a common approach to representing material culture and storytelling. Although variations based on the particulars of exhibition, mission and geographical location do exist, for the most part, these museums all signify newness by reference to a global lexicon that tends, problematically, to transcend issues of local context or regional identity. The Museo Guggenheim Bilbao is most frequently cited as the archetypal new museum. Designed by celebrity architect Frank Gehry, and completed in 1997, the Guggenheim Bilbao attracted 1.36 million visitors within its first year of operation, paid for its building costs, and reinvigorated the city through providing new opportunities for economic development, employment and trade. Representing the initial step in the global expansion of the Guggenheim industry masterminded by Thomas Krens and strategically coordinated from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in New York, the Guggenheim Bilbao was closely followed by the construction of several other Guggenheim branded museums across

America and Europe. Although these subsequent museum developments have received vastly varying degrees of success and failure, the homogeneity of the term 'new museum' certainly increased the popularity – and funding possibilities – made available to Krens in the first instance. The Guggenheim Bilbao was also designed as part of a large-scale publicly funded capital works project that aimed to renew the urban environment and infrastructure programme of the previously struggling industrial region of Bilbao in the north of Spain. As any photograph of the area demonstrates, images of the rejuvenated city represent the franchised museum as larger than life, and as overshadowing other more ordinary or everyday urban spaces. In this instance, and at this time, the benefits associated with the Guggenheim's global branding and marketing of culture appeared astute and resilient to criticism.

As evident in this description, the new museum is primarily a conceptual and rhetorical model that has a tenuous relationship to local contexts and politics. It is useful and popular as a mode of speech, or as a shorthand way of referring to a particular style of museum. We know, for instance, that the museum is new because we are told this by publicity produced about the architectural competition in the first instance. We are then reminded about this by media generated to celebrate opening the new museum building. As visitors, we recognize these museums as new because of an architectural design that demonstrates an inter-textual similarity with other new museums, regardless of where they are located geographically. Controversy was enflamed, for example, by similarities perceived to exist between the Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed by Daniel Libeskind and opened in 2001, and Ashton Raggatt McDougall's National Museum of Australia which opened that same year, and which, some argued, had 'plagiarized' features from Libeskind's concept.

Given their privileging of visual culture, image and architecture, new museums usually employ a high profile architect, as in the case of the Centre Culturel Tjibaou in New Caledonia (1998) designed by Renzo Piano, or the Tate Modern in London (2000) designed by Herzog and De Meuron. As illustrated by Kiasma: Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (1998), they emphasize interactive and multimedia modes of display to further enhance this image of newness, and highlight the technological innovation (and 'expensive high-tech virtuosity') of their design. Moreover, they deploy features of postmodernity to achieve a clear differentiation from museums of the past, which not only privileged singular categories of disciplinarity, but which were

produced to glorify the private patron, monarch or state. Indeed, as demonstrated by the Jewish Museum–National Museum of Australia debate, new museums prefer to be understood as similar to each other and relevant to a present context, rather than drawing their significance from the past.

Yet, while the image of newness projected by new museums may reject both the princely ancestry of Renaissance collections and the education-driven public museums emerging in the 19th century, the architecture of new museums reveals the equally concrete existence of an alternative lineage. Not only do the architectural features of the new museum suggest a connection to the commercial architecture of shopping malls, and the contemporary commodity culture of mass media and popular culture, but it shows itself to be part of the chronology that emerged in the mid-19th century with the emergence of new technologies and strategies of spectacle, experience, conspicuous consumption and novelty that occurred at this time through the development of mechanized industry, cinema, transportation and tourism, and as illustrated throughout the international exhibitions and fairs of this era. This means that in offering a postmodern architectural facade, an interdisciplinary approach toward representation and diverse, multimedia strategies of address, new museums do offer strategies of representation that differ from more traditional museums and are, as such, new. However, despite aggregating these superficial components, they tend not to recognize that this preference for newness itself fits within a chronology of modernity and modernization.

Characteristically, as part of their attempts to be perceived as spectacular and engaging, new museums often combine cultural history exhibitions with contemporary arts, frequently inciting controversy on the basis of their apparently incongruous approaches to exhibition, or because of their perceived privileging of popular culture and entertainment over 'high' culture. They regularly function as a site for community festivals and other cultural activities. In 1998, opening celebrations for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa were disrupted by protestors unimpressed by the display of *Virgin in a Condom* (1994), a contemporary artwork by British artist Tania Kovats. This situation had been worsened by the Museum's promotion of Te Papa as a commercial brand which, it was feared, might undermine the symbolic function of the national museum. Others objected that Te Papa looked more like a theme park than a museum.

It is a common strategy for new museums to commission contemporary artists to complement

or re-work existing collections, and although this has in many cases – such as Fred Wilson's *The Other Museum* (1991) – resulted in a successful re-imagining of the museum's traditional spaces and authority, it can also work to further ostracize the visiting public. In most cases, the aestheticization of collections seeks to draw attention to the political imperatives that have guided the kinds of exhibitions museums have made in the past. It occurs primarily in relation to ethnographic and social history collections, and has developed as a way to challenge colonial practices and hierarchies of collecting and display, as well as more contemporary modes of representing politically sensitive material. Moreover, because new museums present an interest in the ways in which museums contribute to the production of meaning, they have the potential to demonstrate the interconnections between the pedagogical structures of traditional museums and the cultural and political agency of those individuals and groups who are (or are not) represented. This deployment of politically aware post-colonially informed modes of analysis does not, however, always or necessarily translate into actual or pragmatic changes to the ways that cultural difference or historical conflict is represented, or to changing attitudes toward the repatriation of material culture.

Through the invocation of newness and modes of speaking derived from postcolonial critical theory and postmodernity, the rhetorics surrounding new museums can be regarded as greater than the museums themselves. While they may aspire to the multitude of claims that are made on their behalf – that they are contemporary, relevant, exciting and politically engaged – success tends to be evasive. They exist, instead, as deeply compromised, complicated and complex institutions that balance a series of seemingly historical factors and contemporary bureaucracies, boundaries and constituencies at the same time as they project an image of newness to their visitors. And yet, perhaps it is precisely because of these complexities – and the museums' extraordinary popularity – that the 'new museum' may still come to provide a valuable vehicle for the critique of contemporary culture.

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