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Museums as Custodians of the Future

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We are familiar with the museum as the custodian of the past, as the keeper of artefacts that constitute cultural memory. But the museum is, and has always been, a custodian of the future. It is a keeper of the future in the sense that what the museum presents, what it puts forward in the present, is not just an expression of the past. It is also a kind of offering, a sample, from which artists, writers, all kinds of creative people, will make the future. The museum, in short, has a kind of virtuality. It presents things that might have a past, but which might also be materials for making the future.

This future might include the future of the museum itself. Possibilities for making the museum over are probably already there in thecquarie museum, and it would be possible to present the materials of the past in such a fashion that this might be graspable.

You may remember Andre Malreaux, and the 'museum without wall': I mention this as just one instance in which the relationship between the physical site of the museum, the museum as monumental building, has been put in a relation with wider media, in that case television. I suspect that the museum has always existed at the interface between the built environment and other kinds of media, and my hunch is that it would be possible to create a museum exhibition that would show exactly that.

Let's just think for a moment about the differences between different kinds of communication vector. I call them vectors because while a given communication technology may have given technical properties, and a particular kind of cost, it nevertheless also has a virtual dimension, which lies in the fact that it is not given in any communication vector just what it will communicate or to where.

As the Canadian communication theorist Harold Innis once suggested, communication vectors can be space binding or time binding. They can create a milieu that can exist across time more effectively than across space, or vice versa. His famous example, and I repeat it because these are some of the most treasured artefacts of the western museum, were the Egyptian papyrus scroll and Egyptian stone carving.

Papyrus is a space binding medium. It was a vector that enabled an effective empire to spread out from the Nile delta. Military orders and reports can be swiftly communicated, and cannot be falsified en route.

Stone is a time binding medium. It was a vector that enabled an effective priestly cast to assert its authority from generation to generation. Stone, indeed all of architecture, is among other things a vector of communication, a communication across time.

The museum is usually a monument to time binding. Most museums are the kind of buildings that persist even while cities change around them. The brief of most museums lists conservation pretty highly in its priorities. But museums have i think always been involved in both space and time binding communication. A museum is not just a building housing objects that persist through time. A museum is also a catalogue, an advertisement in the newspaper, a review of a show on the radio.

The participation in space binding media, like radio, newspapers, and so on, may actually be a supplementary part of the primary mission, which is to persist across time. The museum exists not just as hard memory, in stone and wood and metal, it exists in soft memory, in the knowledge people have about its value.

So in short, even if a museum's primary directive is time binding, to persist through time, to hoard the past for the future, and to be, in short, a custodian of the possibility of the future, its vectoral strategy may still involve space binding vector.

In our lifetime, a great new space binding vector has come along — the internet. Its much more flexible in its distribution patterns that television, and unlike telephone, it supports the transmission point to point of pictures and texts as well as sounds.

Its very hard to say what kind of time binding capacity this vector has. Its still so new. It clearly lacks the kind of physical permanence that makes architecture so useful for any institution with a brief to act as a custodian for the future.

It is certainly not the case that it will replace the built environment of the museum. There is no reason why it should make the museum any more redundant than print media or television, for example. Both print media and television, both relatively space binding vectors, have altered the relationship of the built museum to space and time, but have not eradicated it.

So the question about this emerging vector is really how to use it to enhance the primary mission of the museum, rather than thinking it might replace it. This is not a communication revolution we are living through. It is a communication evolution. Vectors evolve all the time. If there was a revolution, I think it was the telegraph, and the moment of that revolution was, interestingly enough, 1848, the year not only when liberals took to the streets against autocratic states, but when the telegraph went into regular service across Europe. The internet is just telegraphy made a bit more convenient.

I think its worth emphasising this so that we can think about integrating changing vectors into the museum in a relaxed way, and without looking over our shoulder, thinking we're all going to be made obsolete. For example, some museums want to put a digital version of their collection online, but worry about whether anyone will come to the actual built space of the museum any more. I think they will. I think if anything, the better the digital expression of the museum, the more likely people are to want to come visit.

Of course there are a lot of problems to be solved in relation to this. Firstly, there is intellectual property. Museums may hold the works, but not own the rights to reproduce them. Secondly, the resolution of images that are available free. You don't want to put up images that are so bad they misrepresent the work, on the other hand, you don't want to give away good quality images that people will steal and reproduce without permission. In any case, if its too good, it will take too long to download. The world wide web should not be the world wide wait.

But these are things to experiment with, in a pragmatic fashion, rather than to be afraid of. This is not a revolution, this is an evolution. In general, however, I think the web is a gift economy, and institutions that can think of useful resources that constitute a valued gift will i think find that the reputation of the institution is enhanced by that, and so too is the human memory component of the museum's passage through time.

A lot of institutions are thinking about a web presence, but few have integrated the digital expression into management and also exhibition space. That I think is the real challenge: to create a single interface that is used by remote browsers, by patrons visiting the institution, and the museum staff. A single interface to a coherent database, although one that may have different levels. It may be that you have to come to the museum not just to see the actual artefacts, but to get full use of the digital data about those artefacts. For those concerned about what happens to the revenue stream if you give information away free on the web, here is a possible solution.

Printed media and video found there way into the exhibition space a long time ago. There is no reason why digital media ought not to be fully integrated into the exhibition space. Rather than think about the digital as a representation of a pre existing set of artefacts, why not think of the material and immaterial as just two expressions of the museum, with different biases in terms of their space binding and time binding properties?

Museums, as custodians of the future, are custodians of economic futures as well as cultural ones. Its clear that in the old world, and the developed world, museums are part of a strong set of economic assets that can turn cities into international economic centres for the information economy. So part of the strategy of thinking about this double museum, the material and immaterial vectors of the museum, might be a question of identifying opportunities for positioning an institution globally, as a keeper of information value.