



Museum Futures

Conference Report on the Second Martin Roth Symposium

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Introduction

We live in a time of converging crises, economic, political and environmental, and, since earlier this year, a global public health crisis of historic proportions. COVID-19 has devastated economies, social norms and the modus operandi of cultural institutions around the world, but it's also brought existing challenges into sharper focus, accelerated many of the questions and issues we were grappling with (too slowly) already, and imbued the present moment with a feeling of possibility but also of danger. We are at a crossroads. What path we choose could dictate the future, for good and for bad.

This is the context and background of the second Martin Roth Symposium that took place both online and in-person from the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin in early September and explored what the future holds for the world of museums. Over five days some 45 speakers from the cultural, political and academic sectors in 11 countries presented and debated the following themes: Museums and Futures, Museums and Power, Museums and Entertainment, Museums and Architecture and Museums and Failure. They asked salient and urgent questions. Could museums overcome the current moment and survive in their present form? Could they become more representative and inclusive of different ethnicities, religions and social backgrounds? What should they do differently in terms of their real estate, infrastructure and organisational management to become more flexible, informal and responsive? Could they spark joy and learn from their failures? And, most importantly from the western context, can a museum ever truly be decolonised?

Each day was divided in the form of four or five daily "Sprints", 10-minute thought-provoking presentations by different speakers, followed by "Deep Dive" sessions where the speaker interacted with a so-called first responder and answered questions from the audience. The final panel of the day – called Future Forward – saw one speaker from that day round up some of the day's key themes with a political educator and a student responder.

Day 1 – Museums and Futures

"Making museums is not a normal kind of activity." – Kavita Singh

A brief intervention by Germany's Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the start of Day 1 set the tone. The growing nationalism and anti-liberal tide around the world was of great concern to Martin Roth he said. "Roth believed that the souls of museums were in danger of being destroyed by it." As a counter to this threat museums should be genuine "democratic spaces for global, diverse and critical dialogue" Roth believed. In practice, this meant not falling back on the simple, harmonious presentation of objects and seeking instead moments of confrontation. "It's only through openness and collision that new ideas can emerge," he concluded.

The new ideas and interesting collisions came thick and fast with the first Sprint of Day 1. As a professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Kavita Singh started by describing herself as a museum observer not museum-maker. India is not a country of great museums she stated, nor did it have a strong museum culture, but, historically, museums in India have been free or affordable to visit and therefore frequented by illiterate and

working-class people. This was one of the first civic spaces in which the poorest got their first inkling of what it meant to be “a citizen with rights” she said. The great collections of the past were made under the aegis of colonialism continued Singh, and fed “off conditions of radical inequality and unfairness.” Letting the market do the work of squeezing out unethical or immoral items was not working she said. We should move to a model where museums (and their collections, most of which are in storage) become lending libraries and the focus becomes cooperation and sharing.

Next in line were a succession of speakers who addressed the question of the future of museums from different professional as well as personal perspectives. Philip Tinari, Director and Chief Executive of UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Shanghai, talked about how running a museum with no permanent collection meant they saw themselves as a temporary space for “open and human encounter”. The museum recently put together a post-lockdown exhibition featuring 26 artists remotely and in a record eight weeks, something unheard of in ‘normal’ times. “The Chinese condition of doing things very quickly became a source of strength and power,” he said. Later, he elaborated on this point. “To suspend things that are in other moments taken as absolute requirements can be liberating, which is not to say that you lower your standards, just that you try to meet them in different ways.”

Director of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow Zelfira Tregulova made a similar point to Kavita Singh, about strengthening cooperation, in this case as a response to the closing of borders in Europe and around the world. Historically, in complex political times, culture has been about “building the bridges that politicians were tearing down” she said. While Andrew McLellan, an art historian from Tufts University in Medford, USA, examined whether museums in the US were really capable of changing in response to social justice movements. Museums have tried to address colonial narratives and the absence of certain voices in the collections in two ways, he said. “Works of art are given new labels with contextual information about subject and ownership.” According to McLellan, the problem with this approach is that it can only “achieve inclusion in a negative way, by representing marginalised people as both subjugated and absent”. Another strategy is to “include non-elite objects made by and of underrepresented people. In other words, what has traditionally been classified as folk or vernacular art.” This is problematic too because though folk art and the art of the elite are contemporaneous, the two are as segregated spatially in the museum as their makers were in life. And here he makes his most important point, and one that often is not taken into consideration in the context of representation, but that has huge implications. “Prioritisation of museum space is a key metric of exclusion.” Bundling your indigenous art into the smaller rooms or lower floors of your building for instance, is a less obvious but implicit way of ensuring that its ‘secondary status’ is maintained.

A theme throughout the week was the importance of the digital, and the way all things digital had been accelerated by COVID-19. Alain Bieber, Artistic Director of the NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf, talked about shops without online portals disappearing during the crisis, and schools and museums without digital offerings becoming detached and, in some cases, condemned to insignificance. “Museums have to fight for their relevance,” he said. Like Singh, he talked about the importance of empowerment and participation and turning visitors into “members of your community by actively integrating them into your programme”. His proposal was that visitors should become citizen counsellors and creators that could decide on collections and exhibition projects.

The day ended with a Future Forward session between Alain Bieber, Eva Kahn, a creative strategist and student of art and visual history, and political educator and diversity trainer Sarah Bergh, who began by asking how hard it was to digitalise curatorial work. “It could be quite easy,” said Bieber, “but the problem is that museums are very heavy, bureaucratic structures.” The directors of institutions may change every five years but the rest of the staff is there for 10 or 20 years and changes in management are rare he said. In terms of representation, Kahn mentioned how just a few days before the Symposium the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, had sold its only Jackson Pollock in order to purchase more work by female artists and people of colour into their collections. A bold and interesting move.

Day 1 can be summed up by Singh’s phrase - “making museum collections is not a normal kind of activity” – which underlined the privileged and elitist sphere that far too many museums still operate in, both in terms of staffing and collections, but also in terms of who feels welcome inside them. Perhaps the biggest takeaway was the admission that change rarely comes only from within an institution, it has to be pushed for from the outside, by the public and by grassroots and non-governmental organisations.

Day 2 – Museums and Power

“For us racism is the fact that so many collections in institutions have ignored everything beyond Europe and North America and are only starting now to open up and look into what’s being produced beyond those places.” – Yvette Mutumba

The second day of the Martin Roth Symposium was dedicated to the question of museums and power. The first speakers were Yvette Mutumba and Julia Grosse, editors and co-founders of the art magazines Contemporary And (C&) and Contemporary And América Latina (C&AL), who discussed themes of accessibility and diversity. Diversity should be broad and wide-ranging said Grosse, and start with the museum’s security staff, extend to the curatorial team and board and even go as far as friends of the museum associations. “Many European museums would probably say they don’t have structural racism in their institutions,” said Mutumba, “but the definition of what racism is, is very different from different perspectives. For us racism is the fact that so many collections in institutions have ignored everything beyond Europe and North America and are only starting to open up and look into what’s being produced beyond those places now.”

During the Deep Dive session between Julia Grosse and Head of Arts and Culture at the World Economic Forum Nico Daswani, the latter made a very valid point. “There is no incentive for those in power to share their power” he said. “We’ve seen change, but it’s change that is safe for those in power.” He felt there was perhaps now more of an opportunity for radical change than ever before and spoke of institutions, such as the Ford Foundation, that have started to fund their programmes through the lens of social justice. “If the project does not contribute to social justice, it does not get funded.” Of course, deciding on who is contributing to a more just and fair society is another area fraught with potential problems. Who decides and what are *their* biases?

The next Sprint of the day was by the Chief Executive Officer of the Iziko Museums of South Africa, Rooksana Omar, who was eloquent about the need for museums to be nimble and agile and have the ability to reinvent themselves. “The modern museum was treated as a kind of sacred place, closed off to the ebb and flow of everyday life,” she says. “This type of museum is unsustainable.” The new museum that must now emerge will necessitate new open and democratic relationships with community, non-governmental organizations and other cultural institutions she believed. In her Deep Dive session with Nico Daswani she said that museum buildings often “scare people” and make them “feel unwelcome”. One way of making them more accessible is by creating museums located in far-flung and smaller remote communities, or travelling to these communities with collections. Her museum runs a mobile museum programme that does just that. “These people may not have objects to represent their lives but that doesn’t mean their lives and connection to the world don’t matter,” she said.

The third Sprint of the day was by Hartmut Dorgerloh, General Director of soon-to-open Humboldt Forum in Berlin, an arts centre located in the reconstructed Prussian Royal Palace in former East Berlin that unites the collections of four institutions (Berlin’s Asian Art as well as Ethnological Museums, the City Museum of Berlin and Humboldt University) and will offer everything from exhibitions to theatre performances, drawing to yoga lessons, and that aims to attract both passers-by and aficionados, locals and international visitors. “The museum of today and tomorrow needs to be a public edifice, a multi-purpose building, something like a railway station, which is there for everyone,” he said. “But how do we create an open forum without dominating it?” His hope was that the Humboldt Forum will do so by being less intimidating than conventional museums, also thanks to its free entry, seven-day opening and accessible rooftop.

The issue of colonialism was discussed at length during the Symposium and, in particular, the 19th century vision of the museum “defined by Europe and by a particular kind of power, empire and the exertion of economic and military control and of cultural power”, as the Director of the future V&A East museum Gus Casely-Hayford put it in his Sprint. His vision for the V&A East, which is located in the East London borough of Stratford, was that it would include other narratives, other lenses and other perspectives on history and power. Most importantly, said Casely-Hayford, “we want to make the centre feel like the periphery and to make the periphery feel like the centre”. Although he meant this metaphorically in terms of representing the marginalised, it touched on a literal point made by many other speakers too: that a post-COVID-19 re-engineering of the city is afoot, where, with more people working from home, the suburbs where people actually live are taking on a new more fundamental role in people’s lives.

The final Sprint of the day was a fast-paced session with Elvira Espejo, a poet, essayist, musician, weaver, artist and former Director of the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore (MUSEF) in La Paz. Collections are often organised solely according to criteria of conservation and preservation and based on what is beautiful instead of the production chain behind them, she stated. “How, for example, are the raw materials processed and where do they come from? How do they pass from one community to another, from one region to another?” Understanding the movements involved in the trading of the raw materials required for each object would allow us to understand the political and power dynamics behind each one very differently.

During the final session of the day, the Future Forward panel with Sarah Bergh, Yvette Mutumba and Yara Haridy, a science communicator and PHD student, Mutumba reiterated this idea that

had crystallised during the day: that people have power, more power than they realise. When asked to participate in a project with a museum with a far-from-perfect record on representation or social issues, she recommended: “Say no if you can, but if you can’t say no come up with some demands and requests, workshops about diversity for staff or things like that.”

Day 3 – Museums and Entertainment

“The blockbuster may be dead.” – Julia Grosse

“Museums operate as part of the experience economy.” – Tim Reeve

With the recent exponential growth in museums, their undeniable contribution to the cachet and economy of a city (and country) and the resulting pressure for them to become ever more commercialised spaces, Day 3 of the Symposium looked at whether a balance could be found between creating oversimplified experiences for mass consumption and serving more scholarly audiences. It raised the question of why so many museums are still so afraid of putting popular entertainment into their programming.

The day started with a presentation on storytelling by Robin Reardon, Portfolio Executive Producer at Walt Disney Imaginary, who honed in on the need to communicate ideas well and in an immersive fashion. She believed the aims of museum exhibitions and entertainment were similar in the sense that they both draw people into a story and make it memorable in order to ensure you remember it. “A story well told can be the difference between memory and obscurity, between engagement and disinterest, between passivity and action,” she said.

Deputy Director and COO of the V&A museum in London Tim Reeve said what many museum directors are scared to say, that a museum, especially in 2020, should provide joyful, responsive, optimistic and emotional experiences. “We’re not part of the entertainment industry,” he said, “but it is okay, I think, to say that we are in the happiness business. We are looking to entertain as well as inform, to be places of serious debate about the future of our society, but also places for escapism, leisure and recharging.” With 2.5 million objects and seven miles of public galleries, the V&A has the space and experience to serve and reflect different interests, perspectives, preferences, and modes of consumption without compromising its commitment to excellence he believed.

The next Sprint took us to the African continent, and more specifically, Benin. In 2005 Marie Cécile Zinsou established an art foundation in the West African country in her name after realising that it was impossible to teach children in Benin about African art history. Partly because colonialism means a lot of African art is not actually in Africa, and partly because the country’s inhabitants had little experience of visiting museums or opportunities to appreciate art because of a dearth of art galleries in the most inhabited cities. She and her team soon realised that the best way into art for most people was making the experience fun, and bringing objects and artefacts outdoors, as had been the custom during historic annual celebrations in honour of the King when Benin was a kingdom. “We decided to show art in the streets, and brought exhibitions to the football stadium and to the beach.”

This strategy, of bringing art closer to the people and making the experience more informal, worked and is something many speakers referenced during the Symposium. “Art museums should be more open-minded and leverage the internet and social media to provide a successful, joyful, immersive, inclusive, and participatory experience for all,” agreed Senior Curator at Hong Kong’s forthcoming M+ museum Pi Li in his Sprint. The traditional elite concept of the museum of the art history, of the history museum, was no longer valid he said. “We have to develop a new museum culture in the 21st century.”

Despite being an interaction designer, Raphaël de Courville was more circumspect about the role of technology in the arts, stating that it had to be used carefully and in collaboration with experts. One of the most frequent pieces of feedback he received during collaborations with museums was that the digital experiences he and his colleagues had devised would be ‘great for kids’. Not adults, kids. “I think it’s revealing of a general attitude towards playfulness,” he said. This fear of playfulness was not unjustified he continued, as curators do not want fun experiences to draw away from the art and need to ensure all information is scientifically accurate but not oversimplified. One way to counteract this anxiety was to involve curators every step of the creative process and do testing with real visitors. “Listen to the visitors, listen to the curators, and only use as much technology as is necessary to achieve the goals set for you by the curators,” he concluded.

A common thread in the Day 3 presentations was a certain ambivalence about the idea of entertainment, and about the idea of using technology to engage with audiences. This is clearly an area that needs attention, but as Roth himself proved with his diverse list of exhibitions during his time as V&A Director, a balance can be achieved between excellence and entertainment, the analogue and the digital.

Day 4 – Museums and Architecture

“Build less. Build lighter. Reuse. Be more innovative with the spaces and buildings you have. Be more rooted in the immediate context in society around you.” – David Chipperfield

“The museum represents a productive in-between space, but it is important to keep clearing the space to make sure there is room for the unexpected.” – Bice Curiger

Artistic Director of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation Bice Curiger opened Day 4 of the Symposium by making a powerful case for a museum that opens up art discourse. “The museum represents a productive in-between space, but it is important to keep clearing the space to make sure that there is room for the unexpected,” she stated. There also needs to be less of a white cube approach in the art world, or a constant striving for perfection she believed, because this is too limiting and cold. To illustrate this point she spoke of how Van Gogh, in a letter to his sister, had written: “Don’t feel uncomfortable about hanging my paintings in the corridor, in the kitchen, in the stairs. My paintings are above all to be seen against a simple background.”

It was then on to David Chipperfield, an architect who has designed some of the world’s most celebrated new museums and gallery extensions. He began by speaking about how museums have broadened their appeal and become ‘destinations’. The contemporary art scene, and the power and wealth of art collectors had grown, and architecture had played a role in this transformation

he acknowledged, something that was not necessarily all positive. “The consumption and leveraging of costs, forces us into an inevitable need to sell more, make more and consume more,” he said. But the advent of COVID-19 had exposed not only the social inequality in our societies, and failings in social systems, but how much this cycle of consumption was ravaging our planet. “One of the things that we know but were unwilling to confront is the contradiction that exists between our absent commitment to growth and the explicit damage that this has on the environment.” Lockdown, which was a period of suspended animation, had given us a chance to reconsider growth as a motivator and justification of everything. “Cities that have been hollowed out by tourism and retail seemed like places that might become ours again.” He ended with an exhortation that might seem surprising for someone in his profession, but that was welcome, refreshing and necessary. “Build less, build lighter, reuse, refit and adapt, be more innovative with the spaces and buildings you have, be more rooted in the immediate context around you.”

David Adjaye talked next about the national museum of African-American culture he had designed for the Washington Mall that attempts to re-contextualise not just the objects of colonial endeavours but of slavery. He believed we should attempt to create a new kind of museum where the spaces allow for this re-contextualising of artefacts. “The museum as a place of reconstruction and a place of remaking memory,” he called it. Like Chipperfield, infra-disciplinary architect and professor at the University of California Pinar Yoldas questioned the current modus operandi and talked about how architects might respond to the systemic effects of global warming. “It doesn’t feel right to just mindlessly continue the way we’ve been building things,” she said. “Can there be other paradigms that we can follow, like architecture that disappears, or more transient spaces for instance.”

For architect Louisa Hutton museums have a ‘collective’ function. They don’t merely provide opportunities for dialogue with the exhibits but supply meeting places for both formal and informal gatherings that are free of commercial pressure she said in her Sprint. Now that museums have been knocked off their 19th century pedestals, she continued, they should be made as accessible as possible, with welcoming entrances and other outside-inside places before the exhibition or event spaces start. She ended with a question that touched on a less talked-about and less tangible aspect of the role of architecture. “As COVID-19 continues to instruct that our much-cherished contact with one another is denied, can the physicality, the aura, the spirit of architecture with its light, with its texture, with its hapticity, provide some sort of solace?”

Day 4 probed the issue of architecture in museums from various angles but came up with some common preoccupations. An important one was whether the mass physicality or monumentality of the modern museum was necessary, or even desirable. The pandemic had shown that the mega museums in big cities had been far more dramatically affected by the crisis than the smaller ones outside city centres. As student responder Luise von Zimmerman said in the Future Forward panel at the end of the day: “I don’t think it’s necessary to have these huge monuments, to use all these materials and to attract people from all over the world, when in fact the museums that work best are those that try to build community locally.”

Day 5 – Museums and Failure

“For art to thrive we need to be less risk-averse.” – Lucy Darwin

“One could also ask if the construction of the museum itself cannot be interpreted as a failure. This is certainly true with regard to the invention of the ethnographic museums in the 19th century when seen from today’s perspective.” – Inés de Castro

The final day of the Symposium saw participants debate and present from Berlin’s Museum für Naturkunde with a socially distanced but live audience on the premises. The theme – failure – led to insights, provocations and honest admissions. Małgorzata Ludwisiak, an independent art critic and curator who had formerly been Director of the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, started by saying that museums are facing challenges from all directions, but that they should also recognise how they were part of the problem. With the huge flows of capital and machines of production involved in exhibition- and collection-making, the need to bring in vast numbers of visitors and the massive carbon footprint created, museums are actively contributing to the crisis she said. Also, on the social and political level they had failed, she continued, becoming “exclusionary places for the privileged” that were “detached from society.” If we could acknowledge the elitist position of museums said Ludwisiak, it would make it easier to understand the huge backlash by populist regimes against museums, especially against museums of contemporary and modern art.

“For art to thrive we need to be less risk averse” said film producer Lucy Darwin in her Sprint. Since all parts of the film industry are commercially-driven she continued, and failure is extremely likely, we should be trying to ensure that there are less obstacles and providing generous support. “This allows the chance of success or failure to be in the hands of the makers where, in fact, the responsibility lies,” she said. “At the moment, we have a culture where others determine the parameters of art, and where, to minimise the chance of failure, we often have scripts written by committee.”

Inés de Castro, Director of the Linden-Museum Stuttgart – Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde (State Museum of Ethnology), was equally vocal about the need for a culture that allows for failure. “I miss a safe space where failures can be discussed and where negative experiences can be shared,” she began. “This development is regrettable, because the self-critical, internal, and external reflection on failure could, in my opinion, serve as an additional motor for innovative path-taking or for fruitful change processes in museums.” In particular museums that were lucky enough to have state sponsorship, such as the Linden Museum, were in a position to be more open towards failure she said, since there was a much lower risk of falling into economic hardship.

Could the construction of the museum itself not be interpreted as a failure, she then asked. “*This is certainly true with regard to the invention of the ethnographic museums in the 19th century when seen from today’s perspective.*” Ethnographic museums were created from a purely European, colonial, and evolutionary perspective and legitimised the assumed dominance of Europe and a hierarchical view on different cultures of the world she said. “Seeing the ethnographic museum as a failure would enable us to establish and to improve self-critical processes.”

The fourth and final speaker of the day Michael Moriarty, who coaches leadership teams, opened his Sprint by referencing Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin and their, at the time,

revolutionary, discoveries that our environment is in a state of constant flux and that living beings need to adapt to this changing environment to survive. “We have to innovate, because the alternative is finding that our context outstrips us, and one day discovering ourselves relegated to irrelevance, or, worse, eclipsed,” he said. But this presented a paradox: if successful innovation is essential for survival and pre-eminence in a field, then so is failure. Yet failure is punished. Leaders must learn to deal with uncertainty and create meaning from failure he concluded, adding an apposite quote by Henry Ford: “Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.”

During the Deep Dives and final discussion, a series of further important points were made. To an audience member’s question about whether museums could become a bulwark against rising right-wing extremism and populism, Ludwisiak said “museums can’t take the safe stabilising position of critical distance anymore and have to get more involved with the outside world”. Architect Louisa Hutton, who was sitting in the audience, thought failure was being treated as a single idea, when it was actually not so black and white. “As somebody who creates things, you know whether you’ve done something well or not, whatever somebody else says.”

Despite the myriad challenges facing the museum and the world, the day ended on an optimistic note. Head of Culture and Communication at the German Federal Foreign Office Andreas Görden believed museums and cultural institutions could collaborate on a global scale to find innovative solutions for the major challenges we face: “Have a look at the Great Depression of the United States in the 1930s and their call for tender for artistic projects at a time of deep change. From the future, we can redesign the present.” Marion Ackermann saw a big opportunity in the crisis (“many changes are only possible now”), while Julia Grosse said that in an era when colonial sculptures were being pushed off their plinths (literally and metaphorically) – the latest example being the removal of the bust of physician Hans Sloane in the British Museum from his pedestal, and relocation alongside artefacts depicting Britain’s involvement in the slave trade – things were finally starting to change.

Summary

The Martin Roth Symposium on Museum Futures was stimulating, fascinating, and, remarkably, even uplifting at times. Given the huge economic, social, cultural and even psychological ramifications of COVID-19, there was an urgency, an honesty and an uncertainty to some of the contributions that was both moving and unusual for an event of this kind.

Though the debate was wide-ranging, there were several themes that were high on the agenda for the entire panel of experts.

One was diversity, decolonisation and representation in the wake of the recent Black Lives Matter protests around the globe and the debate on the restitution of colonial objects and artefacts. There was talk of where power resides in museums and museum structures/organisations, and whether power could be shared. Though the speakers were mostly white, and many spoke from a western standpoint or perspective, there was a genuine attempt to be inclusive of different voices and experiences, and an attempt to speak of their institution and sector’s shortcomings openly.

As art history professor Andrew McLellan noted, for museums to change, diversity needs to happen at all levels. “I think it has a lot to do with institutions recognising their own limitations and their own implicit biases against broader practices,” he said. “It’s in the course of changing but there is the question of what we call the pipeline. Who are the students studying art history at university? What limitations do they face going into the field in the first place? Art history has long been an elite discipline and that creates structural barriers to a broadening from the very base moving up into the larger system.” He also made the far-too-often glossed-over point that where you place work in your building often says a lot about your priorities in terms of social and racial justice. This cannot be understated.

Perhaps the most resonant point on decolonisation was made by Kavita Singh. In museums with staid and conservative education departments, one way to make them more vital and relevant would be to make them the launching pad for inter-disciplinary discussions she proposed and offer something as simple as ‘alternative’ guided tours. What would it be like to be guided through a gallery of Hindu sculptures by a Dhalit (someone from the caste formerly known as ‘untouchable’) she asked. Or to be led through the British museum by an Iraqi refugee able to speak from their heart instead of a script? This is an attractive grassroots idea that would need no official seal of approval or big budget, but could be run by a voluntary organisation from the outside.

One of the most notable changes in the museum landscape provoked by COVID-19 agreed the speakers is how the local neighbourhoods, suburbs or small towns have fared far better in recent months than the glitzy city centres where the big museum exhibitions designed to pull in the crowds usually take place. “The blockbuster may be dead,” opined Julia Grosse in her presentation, while architect and architecture critic Edwin Heathcote went even further: “There’s no future for the huge shows, which cost a lot to mount and rely on even bigger numbers.” At the same time provincial museums, which are smaller and not geared to mass tourism, are probably going to flourish he said. This represents a huge re-engineering of the way many global cities now operate, where the city centre houses retail, offices and entertainment. It is also a change that will see many city centre mega-museums and so-called art islands (where several major museums and cultural venues are grouped in one area) question what the way forward for them might be.

Perhaps surprisingly technology came up less than expected during the Symposium, though many speakers recognised the value of digital tools, especially over the past few months. The most eloquent person on the topic, interaction designer Raphaël de Courville, made the point that one should only use as much technology as one needs to fulfil one’s given aim. Fears around entertainment and the use of technology point to a fear of being replaced, of becoming obsolete, he said.

By the end of the week the audience was left in no doubt, however, that museums had to learn to embrace change or risk irrelevance. To survive they should become more flexible, less oriented towards permanence and preservation and less riddled by bureaucracy and ossified management structures. Structural changes such as budgetary laws also needed attention from politicians and stakeholders. For example, employment contracts with residents from non-European countries that weren’t based on academic degrees. This seemingly minor point is actually hugely significant in terms of diversifying representation.

Ultimately one of the most achievable yet substantial outcomes of this Symposium was the notion that museums should slow down and become more responsive, more informal, more connected to context and less dependent on that cycle of ever-increasing visitor numbers and needing to provide ‘destination’ experiences. Museums should, in essence, serve their community. To do this they should eschew monumentality and detachment for a more fallible approach that keeps the public informed of their failings and is transparent about any internal efforts made to transform themselves and change. The expectation that museums are all-knowing places that tell the truth also had to be well and truly busted. As Inés de Castro said: “I would like a museum that put out more questions than answers.” A museum that constantly questioned things, reflected on its priorities and processes and collaborated with local communities, would also be much less likely to fall prey to ideology, be that ideology political or commercial. This could only be a positive thing.