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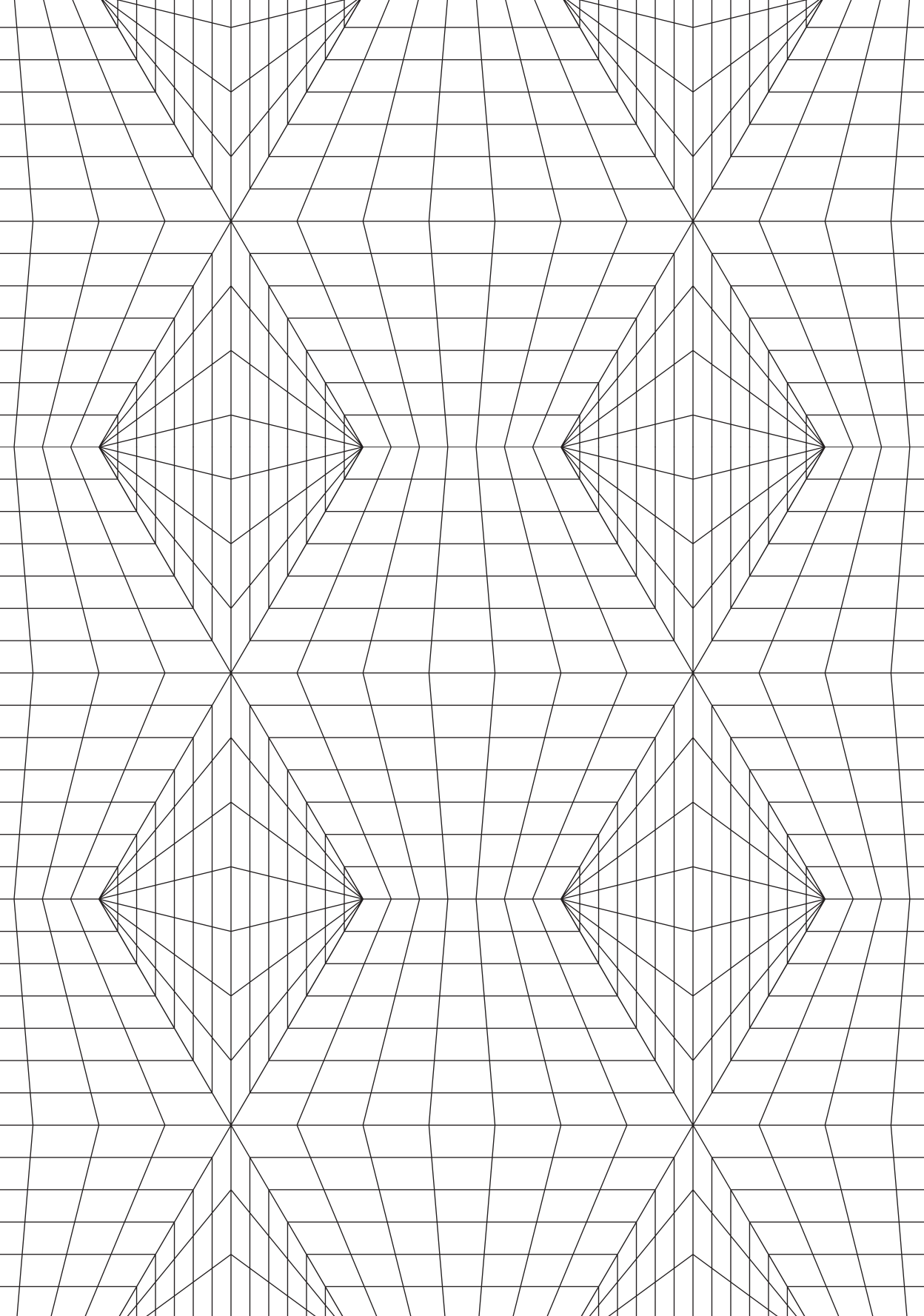

Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

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Contact: *Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design*
H-1121 Budapest, Zugligeti út 9–25.
disegno@mome.hu

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THE SHIFTING INSTITUTIONAL LOGIC OF MUSEUMS:

ECONOMY, AUDIENCES, AND ARCHITECTURE

Márton Horn

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contemporary transformation of museums as hybrid institutions situated at the intersection of cultural representation, public engagement, and market dynamics. It argues that museums have shifted from collection-centred, scholarly spaces toward experience-driven, audience-oriented cultural hubs shaped increasingly by economic pressures, evolving visitor expectations, and new architectural paradigms. The study analyses how changing funding structures, the integration of popular culture, and the rise of the experience economy have redefined the museum's social role and internal logic.

#museums, #hybrid institutions, #experience economy, #inclusivity, #House of Music Hungary

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the role and function of museums are undergoing a profound transformation. While they were once primarily institutions dedicated to the preservation and scholarly processing of collections, they have increasingly become key actors in cultural community life and the global cultural marketplace. The notion of the museum thus extends far beyond the exhibition space: it simultaneously encompasses scientific, educational, communal, architectural and touristic dimensions, while situated at the intersection of social representation, cultural identity, and market logic. (Bennett 1995)

BACKGROUND

The Enlightenment placed a new emphasis on rational classification, universal knowledge, and the ordering of objects under systematic categories. Institutions such as the Ashmolean Museum (1683) and later the British Museum (1753) institutionalised these ideals, transforming private collections into public repositories and positioning museums as instruments for educating the citizenry (Bennett 1995). Yet the notion of "public" remained limited: access was controlled, and the interpretive frameworks privileged elite worldviews.

Beginning in the nineteenth century with the widespread establishment of national museums, these institutions took on an explicitly civic and ideological function. Collections that had begun as elite curiosities evolved into instruments of cultural representation and authority, transforming the museum into a tool for asserting political and intellectual dominance (Coombes 1994).

FROM AUDIENCE TO MARKET

From the mid-twentieth century, museums increasingly shifted from being closed, self-defining scientific institutions toward becoming cultural centres that sought dialogue with audiences while also adopting market logics (Bennett 1995). Globalisation, financial pressures, and changing societies radically reshaped the role of museums and gave rise to new participatory narratives.

From the 1970s, one-sided and politically motivated storytelling was increasingly questioned, both by the communities represented and institutions, whose local interests were increasingly subject to pressures of globalisation. Museums gradually came to recognise that serving an audience is just as important as representation. Today, it is difficult to imagine any museum, concert hall, or public space where the needs and expectations of audiences are not taken into account.

Prior to the rise of consumer culture, representation was largely one-directional: messages were formulated with minimal involvement of the audience or local community, and without engaging visitors. The market played a secondary role and the visitor was not defined as a consumer. Instead, science—and scholars themselves—operated with relative autonomy from the public. These two realms remained separated, a distinction reflected in both the buildings and the spaces created. Sacred spaces emerged in which science contextually and symbolically set itself apart from the public. The aim was not collaboration, collective thinking, or the creation of communal space, but rather the preservation of a "we and they" distinction.

The breakthrough came with globalising cultural policies: there was growing demand for accessible information, for new forms of social representation, for competition with adjacent cultural domains, and for the accommodation of market pressures that both created competition and standardised aspects of the field. Moreover, institutions were forced to become accountable: external funding (EU, state) demanded demonstrable social utility, while audiences required spaces that were accessible, inclusive, and enjoyable for all. These spaces had to act as mirrors of society, shaping it while simultaneously responding to it and encouraging participation.

By the late-twentieth century, new representational tools had emerged that allowed museums to employ strategies already common in community centres, concert halls, cinemas, and other cultural venues, thereby challenging the previous forms of representation. This opened up a new discourse on what museums mean today: how new architectural and curatorial narratives arise, creating a conceptual repertoire for contemporary cultural institutions. The extent to which new approaches to representation are perceived as undermining the authority of artistic and scientific disciplines and succumbing to excessive for-profit pressures (McGuigan, 2004) is an ongoing debate. How does the system of representational tools develop in the new kinds of museum spaces, and what are the consequences of these processes?

TRANSFORMING CULTURAL DEMANDS: DISMANTLING THE IVORY TOWER

At the very least, the perceptible shifts in cultural consumption, along with the growing importance of popularity and market considerations, have blurred the rigid boundaries between high culture and mass culture.

It has become unavoidable for museums to respond to the expectations of broader audiences. The goal of reaching wider visitor communities has reshaped not only how culture is interpreted and packaged but also how it is funded.

In the past, European and Anglo-Saxon countries funded culture in very different ways: Europe relied more on strong state support, while Anglo-Saxon countries combined public and private support from the outset. Today, however, these models are becoming increasingly similar. Most cultural institutions now operate with a mix of public funding, private sponsorship, commercial partnerships, and revenue-generating activities. As market actors—such as sponsors, corporations, and the experience economy—gain a stronger presence in the cultural sector, and as cultural policy encourages institutions to demonstrate social and economic relevance, the traditional line separating "high culture" from the mainstream becomes less clear. Cultural value is increasingly measured by public interest, visibility, and audience engagement. Something once seen as elitist or exclusive can now gain recognition precisely because it attracts large, diverse audiences and proves its relevance in contemporary society.

These standards are now measured less by quality or originality and more by quantifiable successes: rankings, reviews, viewing figures, and visitor numbers. Without such metrics institutions would risk irrelevance. As Hecken (2006, 85) notes: "Being popular means getting noticed by many". This change, however, entails an epistemic shift: quality and originality risk being subordinated to visibility metrics. According to Paßmann and Schubert (2020), aesthetic valuation in the digital age often stems from networked attention rather than critical consensus. The challenge for museums is to reconcile this new "economy of attention" with their curatorial mission.

Digital culture has multiplied access while fragmenting experience—visitors photograph artworks instead of contemplating them. The museum must thus rethink authenticity: not as an immutable quality of objects, but as a relational experience co-created with the audience (Jones 2010).

This raises the question of whether popularity necessarily dilutes cultural values and to what extent it is rather a new form of cultural participation. What is clear is that serving broader audiences leads to structural transformations within cultural institutions. The debate centres on how this occurs and on its advantages and drawbacks. The popularisation of culture certainly broadens access, but does this democratisation strengthen equality, or does it establish new cultural hierarchies? The democratisation of access need not imply devaluation. Therefore, inclusivity requires not only open doors but interpretive support. Educational programs, participatory design, and digital mediation become crucial tools for mitigating symbolic exclusion (Hooper-Greenhill 2000).

In this framework, museums ideally strive to assist interpretation, but this comes with compromises and challenges: they must preserve their authenticity while participating in economic and cultural competition. Technology can support accessibility and interpretation, but consumer-driven considerations must not dominate collection strategies. The preservation of material culture remains essential for national and local identity, and historical and scientific research cannot be conceived without it.

In Frederic Jameson's view, culture itself becomes commodified in postmodernism, a feature of late capitalism, where new products and technologies alter the classical concept of the commodity (Jameson 1991). Contemporary art is of course bound up in this dynamic and the sense in which art might be critical of consumer society has changed since the advent of late capitalism. Pop art, for example—Andy Warhol's work in particular—raises the question of where the commodity ends and where art begins. Pop art has entered the realm of high culture while using the tools of consumer culture, even if it is often understood as offering a critique of that culture.

Related to this are the dilemmas contemporary cultural institutions face. They simultaneously seek to meet the ideological expectations of high culture while keeping pace with economic and political demands. This balancing act requires accepting the pluralisation of cultural values, raising the difficult question of where the boundary lies between mainstream and high culture, and—crucially—who gets to decide.

In practice, institutions have an interest in avoiding sharp divisions since popular culture has emerged as a revolutionary force on the once-isolated terrain of high culture, striving to redraw its former boundaries.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ECONOMY AND CULTURAL POLICY

The differing models of cultural financing, shifts in state involvement, and the growing dominance of market logic have all compelled museums to search for new operational pathways. Responses to audience demands can thus only truly be understood in the context of broader economic and political conditions.

In Europe, private sponsorship and corporate partnerships became essential. Governments reframed cultural policy in terms of "creative-industry" growth, encouraging museums to generate their own revenues while demonstrating social impact (Gray 2008). This shift reframed culture not only as a public service but also as an economic asset, positioning cultural institutions as contributors to urban development and tourism. Projects like the Guggenheim Bilbao exemplify this paradigm: the museum's spectacular architecture functions simultaneously as cultural symbol and economic catalyst (Plaza 2006).

Consequently, museums now navigate a triadic tension between public service, market survival, and symbolic legitimacy. Institutional strategies increasingly rely on diversified revenue streams—ticketing, events, retail, and cultural tourism—while still invoking non-profit values. This hybrid model situates the museum within what Andrea Witcomb (2003) terms a "contact zone": a field of negotiation among curatorial ethics, visitor expectation, and economic pragmatism.

Economic rationality and public mission can become mutually constitutive rather than opposing forces. The museum's sustainability now depends on its ability to articulate cultural value in both ethical and economic terms—a balancing act that arguably defines the contemporary institution.

VISITOR EXPECTATIONS—THE AUDIENCE-FRIENDLY MUSEUM

Growing demand for engaging visitor experiences requires increasingly complex service structures, which in turn drive up operational costs. Museums traditionally functioned as sacred spaces of knowledge and heritage, with architecture that reinforced hierarchical spatial structures and guided visitors through a prescribed sequence of revelation. Today, they are becoming open, community-centred, and experience-driven institutions, filling a gap increasingly felt in urbanised societies.

This "experience turn" aligns with what sociologists describe as the shift from the information society to the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). In this framework, visitors seek affective and memorable encounters; museums respond with immersive design, multisensory storytelling, and participatory activities. The result is a new social contract between institutions and their publics: the museum promises engagement, and the visitor contributes presence, data, and visibility.

This transformation has directly impacted financial needs, as audience-friendly services, educational initiatives, and experience-oriented exhibitions require far greater resources. In addition, cultural tourism has become a global phenomenon, demonstrating that large-scale cultural projects can even reshape entire cities (as in Bilbao). Tourism, in turn, exerts significant influence on museum financing.

Equally important is the rapid evolution of new technologies and digitisation. These developments simultaneously provide opportunities and challenges: they impose additional cultural and financial pressures, force institutions and creators into popularity contests, but also open up new sources of revenue. In this often contradictory situation, museums are continually asking themselves what visitors (consumers) need, and where the boundaries of artistic freedom lie in relation to these expectations.

The challenge is to reconcile conflicting cultural policy goals: to achieve high visitor numbers and revenues while fulfilling institutional missions, meeting public responsibilities, and adapting to market pressures. Artists also feel this dual pressure. Increasingly, creators consciously seek ways to meet both artistic and market demands, producing hybrid forms that serve such needs while sparking debates about whether these represent radical artistic innovation or simply the infiltration of mass culture into high culture.

INSTITUTION AS SERVICE PROVIDER

In the wake of the service-oriented turn, the museum can increasingly be understood as a "third place" (Oldenburg 1999) where cultural mission intertwines with community experience, brand-building, and considerations of sustainability. This new operational logic manifests not only in content but also spatially: architecture is becoming an active agent in the museum's narrative. Our observations in the House of Music show that museums with more open spaces and less prescriptive floor plans—spaces that can be seen as facilitating social interaction—achieve higher visitor numbers. In such spaces, museums can more easily monetise ancillary services: cafés and other hospitality, museum shops, supplementary programs, and events. By continuously renewing exhibitions, museums promote the idea that a visit is no longer a one-off experience.

These dynamics appear not only in service areas but can permeate core operations as well. Exhibition concepts may be shaped by market logic—albeit to different degrees in publicly funded versus fully private institutions. The curator's role has changed: complex organisational decisions determine exhibition content, and annual market strategies can influence artistic programming. Alongside art-historical criteria, institutions now frequently rely on market research and marketing strategy. Narrative, too, has assumed a central role; like visitor journey design, storytelling has become a core institutional function. From architectural conception to exhibition design, dramaturgy is decisive. The exhibition becomes a coherent story consumed experientially—much like watching a film or attending the theatre—and this can extend to other spaces within the building. The goal is to create an experience—typically through immersion and affect. The architecture itself can provide the framework for this.

ON ARCHITECTURE AS NARRATIVE

Distinct from architecture as a support structure of exhibition narratives—a set of spatial metaphors that structure the visitor's emotional and cognitive journey (MacLeod 2005)—is the notion of architecture as narrative itself. The latter has its own cultural mission, community

potential, and touristic appeal. The rise of "starchitecture" and the rethinking of communal spaces, however, raise new questions: how can all this be sustained over the long term, given economic and ecological constraints?

It is worth highlighting broad shifts in the formation and transformation of museum architecture. A museum typically bears the defining architectural marks of its era. Historicising idioms, for instance, often produced sacral, hierarchically ordered spatial structures that guided visitors through a prescribed sequence of revelation—, narrated the history of (classical) art through a heavily linear structure. The buildings functioning as scenographic instruments of high-cultural representation as the main mission of the museums.

Contemporary museum architecture now rather prioritises buildings where their spaces are used not only for housing and presenting objects (for museum visitation), but as part of everyday communal life, grounded in quotidian experience and the enjoyment of place. Interdisciplinary spaces emerge in which, beyond core functions, mixed-use, leisure-oriented zones appear, along with more indirect modes of experience afforded by atmosphere. In other words, beyond visual perception, increasing emphasis is placed on how we feel in a space and on the layered ways we can live the time spent there. Shifting technological possibilities and changing cultural habits both support this turn. This turn corresponds to what Hilde Hein (2000) called the "museum in transition"—an institution that constructs meaning through affective and participatory engagement.

The cleaner, more legible design culture of everyday life has also become decisive in shaping museum spaces. As cultural venues operate ever more on market terms, they seek simultaneously to enable an increased consumer experience and to fulfil the function of cultural representation despite market pressure. One form this takes is that not only individual artworks, but the very building itself becomes a quasi-artwork. Whereas in early institutions this appeared in the elevated decorative grandeur of historic edifices built for elites, since the second half of the twentieth century the cult of contemporary star architecture has served—albeit with different aims—as another instrument of representation. A further trajectory is represented by museums whose buildings themselves carry the institution's primary narrative message—quasi-monumental museums, such as Jewish and Holocaust museums. Architecture therefore becomes a curatorial device: spatial sequences and atmospheres can guide interpretation as effectively as labels or texts. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin, for instance, deploys disorientation and voids to evoke loss and rupture—translating historical trauma into spatial experience.

Sou Fujimoto's House of Music Hungary (2022) represents a more recent iteration of the museum-as-experience, one that has been es-

pecially useful for me as director of the institution. The building's porous structure blurs interior and exterior, embodying the continuity of nature and culture. Fujimoto's design emphasises transparency and human scale. Its perforated canopy creates dappled light reminiscent of a forest—which could be interpreted as spatial metaphor for harmony between art and environment.

Along these lines, he reconceives spaces and the time spent within them, attempting to dissolve the boundary between the built and the natural, constructing productive oppositions—inside/outside, constructed/natural, communal/private. He employs these polarities as a new dramaturgy of spatial composition, creating an architectural whole that enables unprescribed modes of use that positively affect its users. His aim is not to convey a strong discursive message but to produce an effect on those who inhabit the space.

Of course, every building produces different relationships between institution, visitor, and architecture, which are shaped by myriad factors. Ultimately, the uppermost goal is to create a museum building fit for its context—one that truly functions in dialogue with architecture, institution, and users. Today, this is strongly influenced by those who use the spaces, as well as by funders and political stakeholders, all of which could push the presentation of art into the background. This leads to criticism that star architecture may undermine the artworks and the institution's actual remit, instrumentalising artistic content as mere "decoration" for architecture commissioned for market or touristic reasons.

Architecture is capable of producing its own narrative, confronting visitors with environments that step away from the everyday and place them in a new situation. It becomes a subtext which reminds us that museums always construct artificial environments—frameworks that enable relationships among content, objects, and visitors, and support the understanding of connections among them. Yet the opposite can also occur: architecture may hinder interpretation.

Without the building and its associated spaces, there can be no discussion—at least in the contemporary museum—of reception, institutional messaging, and perception, since the frames are constituted by space and its atmosphere. Through its spaces, functions, and permanent or temporary exhibitions, the museum creates situations that invite visitors into this shared narrative. In some cases the building itself becomes the primary focus of the museum experience.

In recent years, museums have increasingly sought to complement their core tasks with the widest possible array of instruments: related programs, installations, educational content, and activities that support visitor participation or leisure. At the House of Music for instance, this complex institutional structure—housing performing arts, museological, and music-education functions under one roof—is, in part,

an institutional experiment. Spatially, the integration is achieved by freely usable communal zones and programmatically by offerings that connect the domains. This enables a complex functional use in which multiplicity supports a broad economic palette while allowing the institution to fulfil public responsibilities and act as a communal space. Overall, the building can provide the supportive framework for treating cultural goals as a whole and for reaching new audiences, thereby optimising revenues.

THE MUSEUM AS A COMPLEX CULTURAL MEDIUM

Mounting an exhibition has accordingly become a complex team effort: curators, architects, communications professionals, scenographers, fabricators, and digital producers work together to build a unified dramaturgy. This shift also makes it possible for institutions to think beyond the object—either supplementing artworks or, at times, mounting exhibitions without them. These innovations blurred the line between curator and user, reinforcing the idea of the museum as a distributed, collaborative platform (Simon 2010).

In designing our own permanent music-history exhibition at the House of Music Hungary, we sought to translate these principles into practice by placing emotional engagement at the centre of the dramaturgy. The aim was to enable visitors to move through the broad arc of music history while gaining a clearer sense of how different periods relate to one another—inviting them to engage with the evolving relationship between sound, society, and expression. Rather than presenting history as a linear sequence of facts, the exhibition sought to immerse visitors in atmospheres, practices, and sensibilities that characterise different musical eras, encouraging them to listen, explore, and physically engage with interpretive elements. Visitors were thus offered a range of interactive, sensory, and audiovisual experiences designed to evoke emotional resonance and support personal meaning-making.

These approaches demonstrate that exhibitions must ultimately convey atmosphere and emotional tone. Research consistently shows that visitors remember information more effectively when it resonates affectively and is embedded within a narrative framework from which they can construct their own interpretations (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). Exhibition-makers therefore focus on creating conditions that support such narratives—designing environments, interactions, and interpretive layers that guide without prescribing, and that invite visitors to situate themselves within the story of the exhibition. In this sense, the role of the curator expands beyond object selection to the orchestration of experiential, sensory, and conceptual cues that enable visitors to build personal yet institutionally informed narratives.

Museum stakeholders need to work out how to serve public taste while maintaining artistic commitments. For a purely market-oriented cultural venue the calculus is clear, since economic performance is paramount. For state-funded museums, the public mandate is decisive—the social mission for which they receive support. In practice, institutions finance operations from both sources, and thus must simultaneously satisfy market expectations and their own cultural missions.

CONCLUSION

The museum's transformation—from the nineteenth-century project of national representation to a twenty-first-century experience- and community-oriented concept—should not be understood merely as gradual opening but as a shift in cultural logic. The rise of participatory museology and the dominance of the experience economy has challenged the traditional hierarchy between institution, curator, visitor, and artifact. The real question is simply no longer whether it can respond to visitors' expectations, but whether it can preserve its institutional integrity in an age when memory, identity, and cultural representation increasingly become arenas of political and economic contestation.

This raises a further dilemma: what, today, counts as a museum at all? Experience-driven institutions—often without collections—together with thematic attractions and digital venues can draw audiences as effectively as classical collection-based institutions. Yet this phenomenon can blur the boundary between museum and entertainment centre, calling into question the extent to which the preservation and transmission of knowledge remain the museum's core task.

The issue, therefore, is not only how museums can continue to find new ways to address audiences, but also how they can define their own boundaries. If experience institutions without collections identify themselves as museums, the very concept of the museum risks dissolution into the logic of the cultural market—even if such institutions are often innovative. If, however, the museum maintains its basis in collections while functioning as an experience, a communal space, and a reflexive cultural medium, it can retain a distinctive social relevance—not merely as a producer of experiences, but as a responsible mediator of memory and knowledge. The dilemmas of representation, therefore, are not problems to be solved once and for all but dynamic tensions that define the institutions. Museums remain relevant because they mediate the tensions between art and commerce, tradition and change, and the individual and the collective.

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