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CMLT 210: Essay 2

Sticking to the Status Quo or Breaking Free: Debates on Museums as Agents of Social Change

Historically, museums were founded to shape identity and memory, creating spaces to perpetuate narratives about national identities. They came to being as a method for the state to shape and educate the public on the dominant identity and values, with each item and story curated to push these ideals. In the West, these museums and their narratives historically focused on the predominant groups of society, often pushing Euro-centric, racialized narratives that supported imperialism and the subjugation of minority groups to benefit the power of the state. Since that time, many museums took a stance of historical recordkeeping, maintaining the status quo in pursuit of tracking history. In recent years, the history of these museums and the narratives they curate have come under scrutiny, with many arguing for a shift in the focus of museums. The debate centers around what the role of museums should be, with arguments over whether modern museums should act as agents of social change. Those supporting this push to shift museums argue that the historical role of museums as curating national identity points to a need for museums to act as agents of social change, placing museums in an ideal position to address societal issues such as climate change, inequality, and human rights. On the other side, skeptics caution against risks of politicization, worrying that a focus on social activism may compromise the objectivity and universality of museums, arguing that museums should be apolitical, focusing instead on the traditional roles of preservation, research, and education. By breaking down the debate and examining the arguments for and against, a middle ground can be found that maintains the historical role of museums while acknowledging the evolving demands of society for their museums.

Critics of the push for shifting the role of the museum range from outraged traditionalists to those upset at perceived biases in narration proposals. The outraged traditionalists are those convinced that the museum should remain as originally designed, as classical structures where national truths are shared with the public, who are upset that the museum will no longer be focused on a “master narrative” of civilization, society, and progress (Casey 293). Other critics are upset by the potential biases they perceive in new museum designs, feeling there is too much representation of minority groups, and not enough of the previously highlighted groups (Casey 294). These proponents of the status quo argue that the main purpose of museums is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and educate, serving as centers for human knowledge and culture, a role they believe should be centered in neutrality and objectivity, free from political agendas. Beyond direct critics, are those who find the idea too much of a utopian dream, something unrealistic in fulfilling because of financial, political, and institutional limitations. For example, many museum staff and curators hesitate to support this shift because they fear it will reduce visitor numbers as it is not something visitors want to see, that certain positions, like celebrating queer identities, will be too controversial, leading to backlash and a drop in visitors (Proctor 259), or even that taking sides will ruin the public trust in the institution.

The limitations are important considerations to make not every museum can become a site pushing societal change, for a variety of reasons. A museum could be state funded by a government that takes more conservative viewpoints or receive funding from private donors who want to preserve the status quo of the museum and could risk losing their funding by taking more progressive stances. Furthermore, a museum could have its main audience rooted in those who would protest or produce backlash against the museum for certain views and wish to prevent alienating part of their audience (Proctor 259). Finally, it is also possible that a museum’s own guidelines may be constructed in such a way that prevents it from making changes to be an actor

of social change (Belsey 13), such as Sir John Soane's Museum, which was instructed to be left exactly as he had curated prior to his death (Proctor 44).

Overall, the arguments for opposing museums acting as agents of social change highlight a cautious approach pushing for the preservation of the status quo for a variety of reasons, including maintaining historical narratives, financial stability, and general accessibility. This perspective underscores the complexity of balancing the traditional roles of museums with the evolving expectations of society, suggesting that the path forward may require careful consideration of the variety of roles museums can play in the public sphere.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, are arguments in favor of museums becoming active agents of social change. This perspective is rooted in the belief that museums, with their resources and public platforms, can play a crucial role in addressing contemporary social issues (Van Broekhoven 3). Over history, the role of museums has significantly shifted. The modern museum has its roots in the Wunderkammer, as private collections of curiosity, accessible only to the elites, then shifted to the public institutions created for purposes of state education and enlightenment, these shifts occurred to reflect the changing needs and values of society (Bennett 24-27). This evolution sets a precedent for museums to evolve to preserve and exhibit artifacts and engage with contemporary issues and audiences. Embracing social change reflects a natural progression in their mission, aligning with a long-standing tradition of growth and adaptation.

Furthermore, to claim museums have historically been free from political influences is to ignore the foundational purposes of museums beginning in the Age of Enlightenment. These spaces were founded to create centers that would shape national identities and push the values of the state on to the public (Bennett 19-21). To this day, the politics of the past continue to have shaped these spaces, through the displays and curations of narratives of the pieces (Proctor 12).

The counterarguments to the arguments center on the fact that everything in a museum is political because the museum is inherently shaped by the politics of the world that made it. To claim agendas are not there does not mean they do not exist, it simply means they align close enough to the viewers' that they are taken for granted (Proctor 16).

For proponents of this shift, there is a recognition that museum displays have always been a tool for those in power for controlling the narratives, and a weapon of the oppressed to push back. For these supporters, it is important that museums provide a place for discourse, by offering a reflective space where people can consider various issues within their context and against their historic background. The idea is that museums can offer comfortable spaces and encouragement for dialogue, as museum consultant Elaine Gurian says: "a safe place for unsafe ideas" (Casey 296).

At their core, museums are not neutral as opponents suggest. Nothing about them suggests neutrality, as they are centers of culture and knowledge, everything within them reflects the world outside. Despite being designed through the institution's architecture and ideologies; the biases and perspectives visitors bring will be reflected in their own interpretation of what they see (Proctor 258-259). By being centers for cultural and ideological development, museums hold a place of trust, influence, and society, a role that carries with it an ethical responsibility to contribute positively to society. Advocates argue that museums have the moral obligation to use their influence and resources to promote understanding, empathy, and social justice (Proctor 261). By engaging with issues like inequality, environmental sustainability, and human rights, museums can fulfill a broader mission that extends beyond the traditional ideas of preservation and education to include active participation for the betterment of society.

The museums that began during the Enlightenment were meant to educate the public, through exhibitions and programming that influenced the average visitor. This has continued to this day, granting museums a unique role in education, creating spaces that are utilized for civilizing rituals (Duncan). Education in the museum is not a new thing, and now, through exhibitions and programs, museums can educate the public on a variety of social topics, by extension influencing social change, encouraging critical thinking and informed dialogue. This role uniquely positions museums to raise awareness, shift perspectives, and inspire action on social issues. By leveraging their collections and expertise, museums can foster more informed and engaged communities, who are equipped to navigate and address current social challenges.

One example of a museum acting encourage social change is the Tenement Museum in New York City. This museum focuses on the history urban immigrants in the United States. Through guided tours of restored tenement apartments and the stories of the families who lived there, it offers insights to the immigrant experience. The museum's mission, as stated on their website, is: "to build an inclusive and expansive American identity and ... that ... [exploring] our complex history—one with moments of both inclusion and exclusion—helps prepare us to recognize and discuss today's complex issues with empathy and nuance" (Tenement Museum). Their work highlights the importance of shifting museum's role to work in social change, as their goal of providing space of often underrepresented stories, fosters a deeper understanding of the complex issues that surround migration and cultural identity in the United States to this day, while also balancing the traditional role of museums as preservers of heritage, as they also preserve and represent the spaces as history held them.

At the end of the day, it is not about sticking to one side of the spectrum but finding a way to combine the two roles, so that history is preserved and curated, while also allowing space

for underrepresented groups to be highlighted, and contemporary issues to be highlighted. If the influence of museums in establishing national identities, and the strength of the state can be traced, it becomes clear that museums can also be used to push support of current issues in similar ways. At the heart of the debate, both sides want to keep the museum as a place for education and public engagement, so finding common ground should not be difficult, as it comes to down widening the spotlight from the traditional focuses. What is critical to the debate is maintaining open dialogue, within the museum community and the public. Having this dialogue will allow the range of opinions and roles of museums to be heard, allowing space for trust to be maintained and further built between museums and their audiences. This is societal engagement on its own, as museums can further promote and reflect principles of inclusivity and mutual learning needed today.

A uniform path for museums cannot be prescribed, it must be drawn out and navigated for each museum individually based on their unique missions, contexts, guidelines, and resources. However, by accepting this universal goal of balancing approaches to encourage social change, museums can ensure their relevance and continued impact in the contemporary role, contributing to the building of a more just, informed, and empathetic society overall.

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