
In a field where the majority of discussion has concentrated either on a critique of the content of exhibitions, or on a discussion of the architectural vision of famous architects, this extremely stimulating collection of essays has created a space to discuss an equally important aspect of contemporary museological practice—an awareness that the spatial qualities of exhibitions and the buildings that encase them contribute to, and even ground, the narrative interpretations on offer and the experiences of the audiences that engage with them.

Using the voices of museum academics as well as a range of practitioners involved in the development of new museums and exhibitions (directors, curators, architects, project managers and multimedia developers), this book is admirable for the way in which it mostly avoids positing a distinction between theory and practice as well as an opposition between past and present. As MacLeod suggests, ‘museum space is now recognised as a space with a history of its own, a space active in the making of meaning and, most importantly, a space open to change’ (p. 1). From this starting point,
MacLeod begins to build a narrative in which the qualities and functions of a wide variety of different museum spaces can be analysed from both historical and contemporary points of view by both insiders and those looking on.

What emerges from the various accounts of museum and exhibition development processes (both contemporary and historical) is a high degree of awareness of the political, economic and cultural contexts within which museums operate and the contribution made by different disciplines to the nature of museum spaces. The focus is on how these spaces are made, and on understanding the forces that animate their making. Taken together, certain patterns emerge in the nature of the arguments the various contributors make. To begin with, all are committed to using and creating museum spaces to further an agenda of increasing access, relevance and the representation of difference. All are committed also to allowing a role for the audience in the process of making meaning, aware that the nature of museum spaces can either enhance or detract from that process. In these respects, the contributors share common concerns with most other commentators within the field of the new museology. The unique contribution of their focus on museum spaces, however, is their awareness of the importance of aesthetic concerns to these aims. In arguing for a museological practice that pays more attention to the relationship between form and function, between the qualities of the spaces and their content, the contributors argue not only for more cooperation between architects and those involved in providing the content of iconic buildings, but also between traditional content providers and creative practitioners more broadly — from architects to designers, filmmakers, scriptwriters and multimedia producers. What they describe as good leading examples of the way in which we should move forward provides a radical reinterpretation of most of the disciplinary traditions at work in museums. Curators are asked to stop thinking only about objects, architects only about the building, designers only about providing a backdrop for the objects. Instead, they are asked to work together, from the beginning, in order to create something which sits across all of their disciplines. Moreover, they are also asked to work with other creative practitioners and to look across to other exhibitionary sites that bring people together.

The book should be required reading for anyone engaged in contemporary museum work — project managers, curators, educators, designers, architects, multimedia producers, artists and filmmakers. For me, it also raises a question about how we should be educating those who want to work in this field in the future. With the emerging collapse of a distinction between content providers and designers, it may well be that we need to create spaces where future practitioners can develop the skills to work in an interdisciplinary environment — where a curator can understand the perspectives of the architect, designer and filmmaker and vice versa.

— Andrea Witcomb, Built Environment, Art and Design, Curtin University of Technology