Aug 11th, 12:00 AM

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Citation

Wen, Q., and Ng, S. (2020) Inclusive Design Museums and Social Design, in Boess, S., Cheung, M. and Cain, R. (eds.), *Synergy - DRS International Conference 2020*, 11-14 August, Held online. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2020.268>

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Inclusive Design Museums and Social Design

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2020.268>

Abstract: The design museum was a rising genre of museums in the late 1980s during a golden age of museums on an international scale. Along with the building boom of museums, with the advent of new museology and the notion of socially inclusive museums, museums become more visitor-oriented and inclusive. Based on Richard Sandell's theory, this thesis argues that design museums can be seen as a form of social design to deal with social exclusion. It chooses two Asian design museums founded in recent years and explores how they use design as an assistive approach to achieve the goal of social inclusiveness and to what extent they achieve their objectives.

Keywords: social inclusion; design museums; social design

1. Introduction

The design museum was a new genre of museums that emerged in the late 1980s along with the building boom of museums on a global scale. It is a specialty museum dedicated itself to collecting, researching, conserving and displaying design or design-related issues. Having its roots in the early industrial and decorative arts museums, the design museum has taken an educational responsibility to promote design and educate the public with its collections (Bayley, 1983). In the past decades, design museums were built internationally. They played an important role in the design industry and society and were conducive to connect design and the public.

However, questions about the significance and reasons for museums in documenting and displaying design have been raised (Farrelly & Weddell, 2016). They are related to the functionality and commercial implication of design as well as the nature of museums, because design becomes "an object of contemplation" when it is displayed in a museum setting (Taylor, 2016). The thesis thus serves to be one of the many answers to the questions. On the one hand, as design evolves constantly, many derivative concepts such as critical design and social design emerged and challenge its utilitarian association. On the other hand, museums used to be a place for admiring art and a place of social exclusion that only served the royalties and elites, while museums have been increasingly visitor-oriented under

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the guidance of experience-based new museology since the 1980s (McCall & Gray, 2014). In the late 1990s, Richard Sandell (1998) proposed the idea of socially inclusive museums that should be an open, diverse, inclusive, educational and visitor-orientated institution. The foci of the idea are the social roles and functions of the museums, especially when addressing marginalized groups. This idea overlaps the concept of social design and museums becomes an experimental platform that employed design to deal with social exclusiveness.

The thesis will briefly contextualize design museums and their transformation under the influence of new museology. Then it traces how the idea of socially inclusive museums came into vogue and explores what the social roles of design museums should be. At last, the thesis discusses two museums in Asia that use design as an assistive approach to achieve the goal of social inclusiveness and to what extent they achieve their objectives. These two museums were founded in recent years and both do not have collections. Their focus thereby places on the engagement of their local communities. The thesis argues that design museums could be considered as a form of social design to represent and engage with the public, and further, improve individuals' well beings.

2. Musealization of Design

The emergence of design museums has intertwined with industrial fairs and expositions which traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century (Williams, 2016). Many industrial exhibitions were held to showcase national manufacturing progress. The most distinguish event was the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* opened in London in 1851. After the exhibition, many products on display were collected and formed the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), which became a model of industrial and decorative arts museums that were flourished in Europe. The authorities believed the exhibitions were cultural diplomats as well as manifestations of national power (Williams, 2016), and the museums were established for the commercial purpose—to promote design industry and economy—and for educational and aesthetic purposes with the endeavor to shape the public's "good taste" (Weddell, 2012).

The latest upsurge of design museums has been identified in the new century. Design museums were lavishly built in Asian countries, such as Singapore, Japan and China. In this period, ideologies and paradigms shift from a Eurocentric model to dynamic and diversified ways of operations among these new museums and those well-established.

3. Socially Inclusive Design Museums

3.1 The Social Role of Design Museums

Museums were regarded as the ivory tower for elites and the privileged and denied access from the general public. Since the twentieth century, the social functions and roles of museums have been discussed and debated by the academia and practitioners. With the advent of new museology in the 1980s, visitors became the central concern

of museums (McCall & Gray, 2014). The new museology introduces a new philosophy regarding the social and political roles and functions of museums and their relationship with their communities and societies (McCall & Gray, 2014). It shifts the museum paradigm from the isolated, elitism and collection-centered tradition to a more diverse, inclusive, communicating, educational and visitor-orientated institution.

As defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Statutes, a museum is a non-profit research and exhibition organization that collects, conserves, researches, communicates and displays the tangible and intangible heritage with an intention of education and entertainment (ICOM, n.d.). Museums today are cultural organizations with multiple functions and purposes. Design museums in an era of change are no longer a static warehouse but a living and interactive space driven by multiple purposes of education, social innovation and “national salvation” (Twemlow, 2017, p. 139). They can also “chart the history of design movements and influence design principles and contemporary taste” with the aid of curation and exhibitions (Erlhoff et al., 2008, p. 122), at the same time, create a futuristic scenario and open debate for the public, academia and industries through exhibitions and conferences. They can be considered as a synergist of design since it is an open platform that connects design and the public.

Whereas the most important role that museums play in society are in education (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Sandell, 1998). In the nineteenth century, museums were regarded as an “instrument for positive social change” that can be achieved by education (Sandell, 1998, p. 408). The establishments of the V&A and Design Museum in the UK, for instance, were also out of an educational purpose. The former was part of the education reformation in the 1850s (Pevsner, 2014), while the Design Museum plays a pivotal role in providing educational programs for school children and college students from its inception (Usherwood, 1991). Design museums are crucial in promoting design and social innovation by educating the public. As Sandell puts it, as an educational institution, the museum must now present “its justification in terms which demonstrate its ability to promote social inclusion, tackle issues of deprivation and disadvantage, and reach the widest possible audience” (Sandell, 1998, p. 403).

3.2 The Inclusive Museum and Social Design

Social inclusion, or social integration, has often been discussed in comparison with social exclusion, which has been increasingly important discourse in European and British academia and governmental policy-making in the 1990s. In the article *Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion*, Sandell (1998) boldly raises the questions of social exclusiveness of museums, when museums of that time overemphasized their economic values rather than their social influences due to the political agenda. He elucidates the social responsibility and roles of museums and proposes a typology of socially inclusive museums in light of “an increasing desire to make clear the museum’s social purpose and the value it provides in relation to addressing contemporary social issues” (1998, p. 415).

Social exclusion used to be associated with poverty and deprivation, referring to those handicapped or disadvantage people that have been marginalized by society. But social exclusion has a broader meaning and is more multidimensional than poverty. There are four interconnected dimensions of exclusion from cultural, social, economic and political aspects that would have a negative impact on individuals and society(Sandell, 1998). For example, an excluded person can be excluded from education service, employment market, cultural organizations and some social or political communities.

As Sandell discerns, there are three roles of museums that should play in the multidimensional social inclusion. They are “the inclusive museum”, “the museum as agent of social regeneration”, and “the museum as vehicle for broad social change”, all of which have different backgrounds, goals and achieved methods. The first one aims to embrace cultural inclusion through representing and engaging the marginalized groups (open access); the second to improve personal life by encouraging personal development or working within small communities that have been marginalized; while the last plays “a campaigning or advocacy role” for social betterment “by exploiting their potential to communicate, educate and influence public opinion”(Sandell, 1998, p. 412). Graham Black(2010) explores five principles that support museums to engage communities. Although he adopts urban history museums as an example, the principles are universal and applicable for varied kinds of museums. Among the principles, the advocacy of museums being social and democratic institutions echo the appeal of Sandel that museums should act as agent of social inclusion.

In the realm of design, inclusive design is a similar concept, whereas it primarily addresses issues on accessibilities(Imrie & Hall, 2001), transdisciplinary research and user-engagement(Langdon et al., 2018). Imrie and Hall’s publication concerns the inclusive design in creating an accessible architectural space for the disadvantaged. This is particularly crucial in public space such as shopping malls, hospitals, schools, public libraries, theaters and museums.

However, the employment of inclusive design in museums could make the space more friendly and accessible, but that cannot help museums to achieve the goals as Sandell defines above. Compare with inclusive design, the concept of “social design” deals with a broader scope and people. In 2013, the British Arts and Humanities Research Council conducted a research project on social design in the UK. As the research team defined:

“Social design highlights design-based practices towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial or consumer-oriented objectives... It is associated with professional designers, students, staff and researchers in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and also promoted and practised by some public sector bodies, funders, activists and non-profit and commercial service providers.”(Armstrong et al., 2014, p. 6)

The research team makes the point clear that social design reaches towards “collective and social ends” and it is distinguished from commercial design and executed by public sectors. Similarly, Ezio Manzini asserts that social design is:

“a design activity that deals with problems that are not dealt with by the market or by the

state, and in which the people involved do not normally have a voice (for the simple reason that they do not have the economic or political means to generate a formal demand)... Thus social design is intrinsically a complementary activity: a design that, to exist, asks for someone else who can and will generously pay for it.”(Manzini, 2015, p. 65)

Manzini elucidates the ethical and charitable nature of social design since the people do not have a voice normally are excluded from economic, cultural or political agenda due to their disadvantages or poverty. While this exclusion can hardly be solved by commercial or public services because these people cannot “sustain the cost of design” (Manzini, 2015, p. 65). Social design hence is urgently needed to tackle social inequalities and exclusion.

In this regard, an inclusive design museum can be considered as a form of social design that represents and engages the minority and improve the life of the marginalized individuals. A difference is that museums should not only serve the minority and the poor, but also for all economic and social levels of society.

However, limitations exist in institutional settings. Many museums simply consider social inclusion as “audience development and access” (Sandell, 2003, p. 47) which is reluctant to fulfill any of the three roles mentioned above. The notion of visitor-oriented museology has been put forward for several decades, it is not extensively accepted by all museums, or the changing role of museums has been underestimated by society(Black, 2010; GLLAM, 2000; McCall & Gray, 2014). To deal with change inhibitors, regulatory, financial and policymaking assistance from different external bodies, as well as attitudinal and structural shifts of museums themselves, are required(GLLAM, 2000; Sandell, 2003).

In 2000, the Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM) commissioned a research project into museums and social inclusion. Despite the limitations and difficulties, as the GLLAM Report affirms, “museums are natural engines for social inclusion work as long as we choose to adopt this role”(2000, p. 5). The thesis hereby discusses two museums that use design as an assistive approach to achieve the goal of social inclusiveness.

4. Design Museums as Social Design

4.1 Design Museum as a project

Figure 1 Design Museum Dharavi, Mumbai, India. Source: <http://designmuseumdharavi.org/>

Design Museum Dharavi was a cultural platform opened in 2016 by Jorge Mañes Rubio and Amanda Pinatih, an artist and a curator based in Amsterdam. The museum has been sponsored by two Dutch cultural organizations, the Creative Industries Fund and The Art of Impact. Located in Dharavi, Mumbai, India, this place is the largest informal settlement in Mumbai and one of the largest “slums” in Asia that has been featured in the film “Slumdog Millionaire”. A high density of population which consists of one million immigrant workers and their family rests in a 3 square kilometers’ space. Many belong to the poor, low-caste groups that are historically marginalized (Srivastava & Echanove, 2016). The living condition is hazardous: the area is lack of basic civil infrastructure as well as well-equipped health and hygiene systems such as toilets (West, 2018). The working condition is hazardous as well. Dharavi has many factories for export business, most of which are “illegal, untaxed and unregulated” (West, 2018, p. 136).

Despite the above, creativity is an invisible wave in Dharavi. Hindu, Muslim and Christian are three main communities that are strong and united, and the major industries in Dharavi are leather, textile, pottery and jewelry and so on (West, 2018). As the area is developing slum tourism recently, visitors are increasing. In 2013, the Alley Galli Biennale began inaugurated

at Dharavi to connect and revive the area with themes of art, health, recycling and community.

The situation of Dharavi inspired Rubio and Pinatih to make nomadic exhibitions for cultural exchange and innovation (Pinatih et al., 2016). The design museum project was thereby launched and aimed to connect this impoverished place with the rest of the city, “to employ design as a tool to promote social change and innovation, and to challenge the negative perception of informal settlements around the world” (Rubio & Pinatih, n.d.). It is not usual to open a museum in an informal settlement like Dharavi. Design Museum Dharavi called itself “a museum on wheels”, because it was not a traditional museum with a stack of collection and a static house. Rather, it was a temporary museum project with exhibitions and workshops traveling around this area.

Representation, participation and access are three elements for an inclusive museum in cultural dimension (Sandell, 1998). The Design Museum Dharavi was open to all and engaged local makers and represented the once marginalized groups. Besides, the museum encouraged the makers and showcases their design around this region. Rubio and Pinatih collaborated with local makers and craftsmen and encourage them to create for the exhibitions. Inspired by local customs and industries, the created objects ranged from pottery, broom, embroidery, leather works and carpentry and so on. Among the objects, Chai, for example, is an important local beverage which is associated with their identity, therefore more than fifty different tea containers were designed and featured in exhibitions; while brooms and fans making are normally regarded as low-value production, the makers were then encouraged to use different material and techniques in this project (Pinatih et al., 2016). The museum team also worked with *urbz*, a design and architecture collective founded in Mumbai, as well as local construction contractors and artisans, to co-design ideal tool-houses,¹ a pre-industrial multi-story building in Dharavi that combines the living and working space like a home factory. The team and *urbz* recognized the energy within the spontaneous design, assisted them to improve the building and made the dynamism visible to local media and the public.

Local artisans and makers were often required to make repetitive manual works based on production order which stereotyped the community as low-valued and uncreative. But when enough freedom was given, they were more confident and able to create interesting works. The museum thus served as a platform that helped to represent the marginalized groups as a creative community and the works in exhibitions helped to reverse the identity of the community with their dynamism and creativity (Pinatih et al., 2016). After their collaboration with local artisans, the museum team found more attractive works were designed and

1 As Srivastava and Echanove (2016) examine, the tool-house is a multifunctional and flexible building that is unintentionally “designed” by local families according to their sheltering needs and modes of production. The chaotic neighbourhood induces the authorities to do a wholesale makeover and relocate people to high-rises, however, this is a misplacement that would destroy the dynamism of these communities.

displayed in their family shop.² This is exactly what Sandel calls a socially inclusive museum and “the museum as agent of social regeneration”.

However, the flexibility of the mobile museum hinders its sustainability at the same time—the museum only functioned for a short period. The objective of the museum team was not to create a permanent site of design objects, but to create a scenario and to explore the possibility of boosting local development with design with this model, which can be applied to other settlements in similar situations (Pinatih et al., 2016). At the end of November 2016, the Design Museum Dharavi was nominated the Beazley Designs of the Year and exhibited at the Design Museum, London. In the same year, the museum received the Leading Culture Destinations Awards in the category of ‘Best New Museum of the Year - Asia Pacific’.

4.2 Design Society: Design to Love

Design Society is another museal institution open in December 2017 in China. It is organized by the state-owned company China Merchants Shekou Holdings (CMSK) in cooperation with the V&A Museum and located in the Shekou Industrial Zone, at the southwest side of Shenzhen city, Guangdong Province. The industrial zone was established during the Reform and Opening period around 1978 when Shenzhen was set up as a special economic zone. The area was full of factories and warehouses. Along the coastal line, there were docks, containers and vessels. In recent years, as many manufacturing industries were updated and transformed, many factories gradually moved out of the city and left many empty buildings.

Design has been featured and promoted lavishly in Shenzhen at the beginning of the century. The city believes design can innovate society, transform the industrial structure and stimulate the economy. Since Shenzhen has been part of the Creative Cities Network and entitled “City of Design” by the UNESCO, design-related cultural events were prevalent.

Design Society was born in this context, while slightly closer to the commercial center of Shekou. It aims to serve the society and function as a cultural hub to ‘combine, connect, cross-fertilize and, by doing so, transcend cultural territories and boundaries’ (*Design Society - New Culture Hub*, n.d.) and revive the forty years old industrial region with design and creativity. The institution believes design is ‘a key factor for societal, ecological and economic renewal in China’, hence intends to be a bridge connecting the public, industries, business and other cultural institutions with design and creativity. The institution’s Chinese name ‘Sheji Hulian’ makes its point very clear—the Chinese characters literally mean connection by/with design. Since it is the first overseas program of the V&A, it connotes both organizations’ anticipation of building international networks as well as the aspiration of developing cultural diplomacy for both nations (Reeve, 2019). In addition, as coined by the Bilbao effect, Design Society hopes to rejuvenate this post-industrial region with an innovative identity and cultural tourism.

The founder initially wanted to build a Shekou Design Museum, but Design Society turns

2 According to the report provided by Jorge Mañes Rubio and Amanda Pinatih.

out to be very different from a traditional museum. It is part of the Sea World Culture and Arts Centre (SWCAC), which is a cultural complex, designed by Fumihiko Maki's studio. The SWCAC consists of the Design Society and V&A galleries, several commercial art galleries, a theatre, an art training school and several restaurants. The operation model to some extent guarantees that the non-profit cultural activities can be sustained by the profits from enterprises.

As a museal organization, Design Society has dedicated itself to connecting with the public. It holds design exhibitions as well as many interesting educational events, ranging from maker fairs, design workshops, lectures and communities' activities. Besides inviting students and teachers to come to the museum, Design Society also goes into local schools' classrooms and gives lectures about design thinking.

Figure 2 “People’s Canopy”, displayed at the exhibition “Social Design, Learning at Play” in 2019, Design Society, Shekou, Shenzhen, China. Photography by Author.

In 2016, Design Society launched the Design Community Festival to connect with the local communities. The first Design Community Festival selected its location on the Shekou Square and invited designers and artists to share their ideas and works in an open-air environment zoned by a foldable and mobile “People’s Canopy” designed by the People’s Architecture Office (Figure 2). The canopy was a large and conspicuous object that attracted audiences and created a friendly environment for public engagement.

Chinese museums used to be propaganda tools to serve the political and ideological needs of the authorities, a “visitor-oriented” direction has been identified in Chinese museums in this century (Varutti, 2014). Government policies such as the free-admission policy were issued to encourage accessibility and promote museum development (An, 2019). Whereas museums are immobilized buildings that await visitors to come; people who are not interested in

museums are less likely to visit them. The Design Community Festival hence is an approach that brings museums' activities and staff out of the museum space to reach to the local communities.

The festival is held in different communities for two days yearly. Activities are ranging from talks, open markets, workshops, live shows and film screenings which allow different levels of community members to come to learn and play. For instance, open markets display and sell design products from local makers; workshops teach people how to make objects; while design talks invite renowned designers, design educators or researchers to share their practices or ideas. The communities are thereby livened up by the festive activities.

Figure 3 2019 Design Community Festival Exhibition, Design Society, Shekou, Shenzhen, China. Photography by Author.

In 2019, the festival chose four communities and organized workshops to re-design public chairs for their communities. Similar to the practices of Design Museum Dharavi, hundreds of residents participated and teamed up to create forty-five chairs, which were later exhibited in the exhibition. The chairs were made with waste or reclaimed objects and the outcomes were interesting and innovative. The participation in design-making workshops and exhibitions have a value of empowerment that fosters confidence and competence, provides opportunities, and enables co-operation towards success for the engaged groups (GLLAM, 2000). As the program organizer puts it, the goal of the festival is to go into the communities

and connect the public through design.³

Partnerships are imperative for museums to develop socially inclusive programs (GLLAM, 2000). Design Society has collaborated with various organizations such as design companies, non-governmental organizations as well as local government offices. The latest community festival collaborated with Shekou Community Foundation and the governing bodies of the communities.⁴ In 2019, China began reinforcing garbage sorting in major cities, and this became the main focus in communities. Re-designing public chairs with recycled materials thus met the communities' need to raise public awareness of the environmental issue.

When the organization is managing to be inclusive to varied kinds of audiences, it is not, or cannot be, open to all since it charges for its two main galleries and some workshops are reserved for museum members only. Funding is an important issue that hinders the management and sustainability of many museums, and the requirement for entrance fee excludes people who cannot afford it. Although a free-admission policy was issued in 2008 (An, 2019), the subsidy from the government was mostly granted for public museums. As a young organization with limited public funding, it is a challenge to balance the incomes and expenses of managing the organization, at the same time, to be more inclusive.

5. Conclusion

Musealization of design has been a popular phenomenon since the middle of the nineteenth century. Among the three periods of development, changes in museum focus have been witnessed. The rich design collections formed the core of Western design organizations. The introduction of new museology changes the relation between museums and their communities and society (McCall & Gray, 2014). Sandell (1998) also advocates a more inclusive typology of museums. Under the influence of the social inclusive theory, museums should pay more attention to their social roles and functions in society. Design museums today thereby should not only focus on how good or authentic their design collections are, but think about how to be more open, inclusive and diverse.

Design museums as non-profit cultural organizations are a good platform for social design. They play a vital role as "catalysts and resources" in society (GLLAM, 2000, p. 54). Design Museum Dharavi in Mumbai, India and Design Society in Shenzhen, China are two Asian museums founded in recent years. Different from the well-established design museums that feature design collections made by famous designers, the former lasted less than a year and showcased works by marginalized groups in nomadic exhibitions; while the latter does not have collection and performs as a new museum practice that engages with communities with reverse thinking of going out of the organization. Both follow a socially inclusive philosophy and goal to engage their communities with design as a vehicle. Although the two organizations have to confine to a limitation of open access and sustainability, they, as

3 In a conversation with the program organizer.

4 The governing bodies received governmental funding to address civil livelihood issues such as providing professional training, establishing community libraries, and improving public facilities.

a creative museum practice as well as a form of social design, create a scenario and explore the possibility of boosting local social development with design practices and ideas.

Acknowledgements: With thanks to Jorge Mañes Rubio and Amanda Pinatih, the founders of Design Museum Dharavi for providing digital information, and to the program organizer of Design Society for providing information about the 2019 Design Community Festival.

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