Generous crowdedness: Cultivating space(s) for care at alternative design museums

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GENEROUS CROWDEDNESS: CULTIVATING SPACE(S) FOR CARE AT ALTERNATIVE DESIGN MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

The design discipline is implicated in the trajectories that have led us to an unsustainable present. There is an urgency to re-direct the design discipline, so that it can become able to not only stay with past and present trouble, but also to develop other futures. To see how design museums might support change rather than preservation, we look to the example of protest archives. Based on an analysis of relational space, we suggest that the relative crowdedness of protest archives emerges out of matters of care, and allows for the development of alternative ways of being and creating. We thus identify a set of qualities that might be used to inform development of alternative spaces for care in design that aim to become able to respond to urgencies and to open up more just futures.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pathways that the modern society and its design discipline have followed so far, have led into an unsustainable present. There is an urgency to re-direct the design discipline, so that it can become able to not only stay with past and present trouble, but also to imagine and develop other futures (1) (2). However,
design is instead often preserved in various ways, most notably and literally in design museums. In this paper we explore how design museums might function to support change rather than preservation.

In contrast to established design museums, protest archives support social justice movements. By making accessible alternative histories, they enable alternative ways of dealing with the present and of envisioning alternative, more just futures. The activists who are running them often do not want their materials and efforts to be included into bigger, institutional archives; they rather want to create and sustain their own spaces. Run by and for marginalised communities, these often crowded spaces revolve around plenty of material from social justice movements (like in case of Interference Archive, New York; das feministische Archiv FFBIZ, Berlin; or Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives, London) and/or rich, lived experiences that otherwise are rendered invisible by mainstream history and society (like in the case of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York), always in regard to changing the status quo and fostering a multitude of other futures (3). These archives also serve as a home for community to gather. Even though densely populated with all kinds of material and hosting many visitors, they also manage to make space for exhibiting material from the archives to support discussions and workshops. Protest archives and similar spaces support efforts of challenging and changing society.

In the design discipline, spaces for change are lacking. Instead of opening up ways for leaving the trajectories that brought us to the present, these very trajectories and the current state are often preserved by established design museums (4). These institutions take up space in what is generally defined as the design discipline. They are either entirely dedicated to design (like the Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein), or include a design collection in a bigger setting framed as arts and crafts, applied arts, or similar (like the Victoria & Albert Museum, London). Some of them are older than others, and they are housed in different building types; however, they often share understandings of how and which design results to present. Historically, design museums have been influenced by the idea of the nation state, by classism, patriarchy and capitalism. Their interpretation of time often takes the shape of a straight timeline (representing progress) that leads from one universal past to one universal future. They aim to raise awareness about design and its importance; and offer designers insights into the history of their profession, inspire, but also foster “good quality” (5).

One difference that comes into view when comparing established design museums and protest archives is related to space. Established design museums seem to have much blank space in their exhibition rooms; however, they seem to not make space for whatever
Figure 1: Permanent design exhibition at Museum of Applied Arts Cologne. Photo: Anja Neidhardt-Mokoena, 18 June 2022.

Figure 2: Permanent design exhibition at Grassi Museum of Applied Arts. Photo: Anja Neidhardt-Mokoena, 4 Sep 2022.

Figure 3: Lesbian Herstory Archives: “A few photos from this morning’s Little Rainbows: Storytime at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, a series we started early 2018. All parents and little ones welcome. Stories emphasize queerness, difference, and social justice. Join us for the next Little Rainbows on Saturday, February 16 at 10.30am. Organized by a committee including @catalina_schliebener @baxtellen @lucianapinchiero @allwevegotfilm and Mr. Elvis. Photos by @catalina_schliebener and @allwevegotfilm” Posted on their Instagram channel, 12 Jan 2019. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BsjHZayh4AS/ [Accessed 6 Dec 2022].

Figure 4: Bishopsgate Institute: “Open Day: Archiving LGBTQ+ Futures – This Saturday 26 March. Out and About! may have drawn to a close, but you can experience our LGBTQ+ collections first hand our archive open day at the Institute. Come experience displays, archive tours and the opportunity to donate to the collection and the future of LGBTQ+ history.” On their Instagram channel, posted 23 Mar 2022. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbchFknu6hT/ [Accessed 6 Dec 2022]
deviates from prevailing narratives and norms (Fig. 1 & 2). Protest archives, though, seem to be crowded and sometimes even messy, while simultaneously open to accommodating even more (Fig. 3 & 4). This paper aims to explore how this phenomenon is related to the trajectories that each of them follows. What could be learnt for the design discipline, especially when it comes to dealing with urgencies and supporting change towards more just futures?

2. APPROACH AND METHODS

In order to explore these questions, we think about space not as a container or as absolute, but rather as relational (6). Furthermore, we understand things as gatherings; they are not just physical objects, but come with immaterial and invisible contexts (7). This allows us to take into account not just the objects we see exhibited, but also the contexts in which they were created, used and collected. However, following feminist thinking, we argue that some matters need more care than others (8). We are using our particular perspective as feminist researchers in the design discipline to identify blind spots, things that usually go unnoticed, that are absent or pushed aside, cut off or rendered invisible. This approach can make it possible to explore what things to care about.

This exploratory paper is part of an ongoing design research project and informed by museum visits and workshops that the first author conducted. It is not a museology study, or an architectural analysis of space, a curatorial approach or a focus on policies. It emerges from within design research.

We also approach the very design of this paper in spatial and intersectional feminist ways: In the references we foreground people who are not white men (9), stating their full names to make their identities more visible, and letting them take up space in a side column, on the same level and in dialogue with the main text. The design of the paper aims to allow for different readings: One is the text itself, another one is the references, and a third one is the images and table. With all this we aim to contribute to changing ways of knowledge building in design research.

3. RELATIONAL SPACE IN DESIGN MUSEUMS

Earlier we observed that established design museums seem to have much space in their exhibition rooms, while protest archives seem to be crowded. One reason for this might be that established design museums are focusing on the preservation of design, which in itself is based on a definition of good quality and therefore on selection criteria and exclusions, leading to space left blank. The crowdedness of protest archives, though, seems to emerge from other characteristics that allow

for new connections and the development of alternative ways of being and creating.

3.1. PRESERVING OBJECTS

As a way to understand what these characteristics might be, we propose to think about relational space in design museums with the help of the concepts matters of fact, matters of concern, and matters of care. Established design museums seem to preserve and exhibit rather objects than things. Objects are cut, and therefore isolated, from their attachments, in contrast to things which are gatherings of objects and their attachments (10). Especially in permanent exhibitions, design museums tend to present objects on pedestals, with a distance between and in isolation from each other, even though exhibited together with either objects of similar aesthetics, time periods or locations. The focus is mainly on their formal, visual features, accompanied by short texts.

The Panton chair is an example of a design that can be found in many design museums. For a design to be collected, it needs to fulfill criteria such as new material, outstanding form, innovative function and great color choices. However, also the established name of a designer, like Verner Panton, makes a design like the Panton Chair, relevant for an institution like the Grassi Museum of Applied Arts to collect (11). However, we know that the figure of the predominantly white male star designer shadows team work (12). Verner’s wife Marianne Panton and his colleague Rina Troxler managed his career and even long after his death, keep his name and his work alive (13). If an established name is a reason for a museum to collect a design – is then building a big name not part of the design process? And, therefore Marianne Panton and Rina Troxler designers too – even though they are not trained designers and claim to never have influenced any of Verner’s designs? Different definitions and criteria would shift focus and also shine light on the team.

We can see that the facts that are accompanying the exhibited objects already create a certain context, but so do the ways in which the designs are arranged in space. The Panton chair is often shown alongside other designs to represent a period. Each contextualisation is a choice to showcase a specific development and through the setting it becomes the one and only story, even though so many others could be told. (Fig. 5–17)

Exhibiting “isolated” objects only works if there is an agreement on definitions and criteria, and if visitors know the established narratives and leave their own attachments at the door too. Our identities and lived experiences can enable us to see things from perspectives that deviate from a given norm. The pressure to take a distance from ourselves in order to see “objectively” can lead to feeling alienated, and can be


In the 1960s the triumphal march of plastic could no longer be stopped (our translation. Original: “In den 1960er Jahren war der Siegeszug des Kunststoffs nicht mehr aufzuhalten”). As if this change had been unfolding in front of us, outside of our control, as if not made and driven by human beings.
The Big Bang – Pop Art, Anti Design and Radical Design

In the 1950s, an art movement developed independently in the United Kingdom and in the United States: pop art. It queried the value system of the (consumer) societies of the time and turned it upside down by using seemingly trivial motives. A significant technique of pop artists was the ‘blow-up’. This means that an everyday small object – for example a soup can – was presented in giant size as a silkscreen print or hand-painted on canvas.

Starting in Italy, the anti-design and radical design movements formed in the late 1960s. Both styles, between which the transitions were fluid, turned against pure purpose orientation and tried to transfer the methods of pop art to the design context. Good examples are the Capitello/lounge chair by the Italian design and architecture practice Studio 65 and the Cactus coat stand, which was designed by Guido Drocco (born 1942) and Franco Mello (born 1945). The Capitello bears reference to a marble Ionia column from 1945. The Capitello is made of flexible polyurethane foam, the Cactus uses capital, but it is made of flexible polyurethane foam; the Cactus is used as a coat stand and also proves to be of limited use as a coat stand.

Figures 8, 9, 10, 11: The Museum of Applied Arts Cologne does not only show the Panton Chair in its permanent design exhibition as well. It too, puts the chair on a white pedestal and in combination with a small text that offers facts like name of the designer and when he lived, production company and its location, materials and production method. Photos: Anja Neidhardt-Mokoena, 18 June 2022.
Figures 12, 13, 14, 15: Panton chair in the permanent design exhibition at Grassi Museum of Applied Arts. Photos: Anja Neidhardt-Mokoena, 4 Sep 2022. Here visitors can walk around the Panton chair and see it from different angles. However, they can’t see everything: For many years the design and production team was unsuccessful to keep the plastic from becoming porous when the chair was placed outdoors, causing injuries (Sabine Epple, 2022). Not to speak of the environmental impact of promoting plastic as a new material to achieve and celebrate unprecedented, extraordinary aesthetics and shapes.
Figure 16 & 17: Until recently, the Design Museum Denmark showed a list of “10 Danish chairs (and designers) you should know” on their website, including the Panton chair, suggesting that this knowledge is a requirement. Available until recently at: https://designmuseum.dk/en/exhibition/the-danish-chair-an-international-affair/ [Accessed 3 Nov 2022].
seen as part of a rigid space that produces, or attracts, always the same visitors, and that revolves around the preservation of a very specific design discipline.

It becomes clear that established design museums exhibit and preserve rather objects than things: objects that are cut from most of their attachments and only presented in combination with a few selected facts. This is based on, and also creates, exclusions and blind spots leading to blank spaces.

3.2. CHANGING GATHERINGS

A supposedly easy step forward for established design museums would be to not cut attachments, to move from objects to things, from matters of fact to matters of concern. Most museums have for example by now changed the description of designs by Charles and Ray Eames, finally including Ray as the designer she was. However, the definitions and criteria for supposedly good designs and the ways they are presented often remain the same.

Some museums try to welcome more diversity by re-formulating or re-interpreting criteria and foci for their practices, which allows them to for example now include feminist zines, activist posters or pussy hats. These efforts seem to only work to a certain extent, since many of the new designs are still cut from attachments that made them relevant in the first place.

Even if there was enough space to include all context, all matters of concern, this would contradict the very principle of the established design museums, which is based on creating blank spaces to distance objects from each other and from visitors. Apart from this, including everything is not just impossible, it is not helpful either.

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with”, as Donna Haraway (14) says. While the concept matters of concern can help to understand how things are assembled in order to draw a bigger picture of reality, its aim is not a de-construction of the interests these things might represent (15). The concept matters of care, though, “aims to add something to matters of fact/concern with the intention of not only respecting them but of getting further involved in their becoming” (16). We believe that thinking with matters of care can inspire us to approach museums and the role they play in and for the design discipline in other ways. Since design museums are involved in world-making, we have to ask: “What worlds are being maintained and at the expenses of which others?” (17) There is a need for “becom[ing] able to cut in a certain way because of our own attachments – because we care about certain things more than others” in order to “foster caring relations” (18). It matters which attachments we care about and for, and why we do so. Apart from this, we can only cut differently when we are not alienated from ourselves, so that our own lived experiences, perspectives and values can guide us.


(16) Ibid, p. 66.

(17) Ibid., p. 44.

Figures 18, 19, 20: The water bottle in the first image is only one of a few designed object in this permanent design exhibition doing what it is designed to do: storing water and providing it to a gallery attendant as an act of care – keeping a human being alive. While there are pots, jars and bottles exhibited in the vitrines, there is no space for those bottles which are in use – they need to be hidden from visitors’ and superiors’ eyes. Photos: Anja Neidhardt-Mokoena.
Currently design museums seem to prioritize taking care of preserving objects. Less care is for instance directed towards the bodily experiences and physical needs of the visitors: like offering (enough) comfortable benches and possibilities for eating and drinking. But also, since design is usually defined as a combination of form and function, what if design museums would enable ways of exploring things through touch and use, and not merely through looking at them?

Then there are also those human beings who are neither decision makers nor visitors, and who are often unseen and their experience of the museum presumably even less cared for: like gallery attendants. Long hours of standing and walking in stuffy rooms, the few present benches (which are not exhibits) are reserved for visitors to rest, and bringing a water bottle is hardly allowed (Fig. 18–20).

Following “caring as a transformative ethos” (19) shows that not only other things and attachments need our attention. It also matters who invites whom and what, on which terms and based on which criteria and definitions, and into which space. Apart from this, gathering humans and non-humans in caring ways might create new and other contexts in which design can be experienced and discussed.

4. CULTIVATING SPACE(S): SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF ALTERNATIVE DESIGN MUSEUMS

What if we, instead of trying to change existing design museums, aim at de-centralising them by envisioning and creating alternative design museums? What can we learn from how protest archives are working in terms of relational space? From our exploration the following characteristics emerge (Table 1).

OPENNESS WITH LIMITS

Protest archives cut things differently: They care and therefore allow for other gatherings, by taking a stance according to their own values. Compared to established design museums, we think of alternative design museums as more open in some aspects, but still excluding in others. There are different kinds of exclusions (20): Some discriminate against people and/or things, like when a group in power excludes those who are already marginalized. However, exclusions coming from oppressed communities can be self-empowering and lead to the creation of alternative spaces (21). These exclusions need to be negotiated and it is also important to have the possibility to un-collect things if they, for example, become less relevant. Openness with limits might be one reason why protest archives seem to be crowded, but still welcoming. It is precisely this kind of crowdedness that allows for new
connections and therefore also alternative futures to emerge.

PROTECTING AND PRESERVING DIFFERENTLY

Limited openness also means that there need to be some safety measures in place, mainly to prevent that the space gets (intentionally) harmed or even destroyed. Here again much can be learnt from activists (22) (23). Since many protest archives are run by and for the same people, there is more freedom to contextualize the information from one’s own perspective, and there is also more trust that materials are treated respectfully. Here it is about finding a balance between protecting materials and making them accessible.

CROWDING

The Museum of Things in Berlin seems to be something in-between an established and an alternative design museum: The vitrines are crowded and there are several timelines visitors can follow (24). The museum speaks of things rather than designs, and maybe that’s one reason why its collection holds much more than the typical modern design classics, but also things that are used in daily life, Kitsch and other things that are usually seen as ugly or childish. The Museum of Things also brings topics into the picture that usually are rendered invisible: It for example shows chest binders in combination with package tape. This gathering tells a very specific design story that unfolds from a queer perspective and life experience (25).

DESIGN WORKS THAT WORK IN TWO WAYS

Alternative design museums that are spaces enabling change rather than the preservation will collect differently while at the same time working on transforming overall structures. Working in two ways, on both content and structure, as Sheila de Bretteville (26) argues, is part of feminist tactics to redirect design. Since design is ontological, the collected and exhibited things need to allow for “ontological investigation of what design brings into existence, and thus, in turn, what design designs” (27). (Fig. 21–23)

METABOLIZING GATHERINGS

Following Clémentine Deliss (28) we suggest to see the collection as a body: breathing, living, changing, … almost ephemeral: “No longer should anything be seen in isolation, but each inquiry becomes a reflection of temporary interdependencies between [design] works, people, objects, media, equipment, experiences, observations, laws, economies, and affects.” (29) This could “initiate new relations between forms of art and emergent meanings, challenging the monopolies of the museum and university to produce and control new diasporic imaginaries.” (30) Deliss thinks of “a museum without condition” (31). Here, any blank
Figures 21, 22, 23: It matters which work we can find easily and have access to. Imagine there would be a space where designs, texts and other works that are difficult to find and hard to access would be gathered, so that we could rather spend time, energy and further resources on learning from them and working on changing current structures instead of repeatedly re-discovering and losing access. This is why we think of alternative design museums as places where this kind of material can be gathered and made (more and easier) accessible to those who want to consult it as a way to care for the development of more just futures. Not only rare designs, but also texts like Sheila Levrant de Bretteville’s paper “Habitability from a Feminist Point of View” (1973) need to be protected from getting lost for future generations, and at the same time made accessible. De Bretteville’s paper for example speaks about important feminist tactics as a means to change the design discipline. Currently it is difficult to find, and has to be ordered and paid for.
spaces are always in flux, serving as invitations for new connections and possibilities.

CARING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE ETHOS

This last characteristic is simultaneously the main guiding principle. Caring as a transformative ethos is a reason for welcoming crowding and even messiness, for focusing on design works that allow for ontological investigations, and for a metabolizing collection. Furthermore, such an ethos also means taking care of the bodies that navigate the respective spaces. In protest archives like the Lesbian Herstory Archives visitors are welcome to use the kitchen to make coffee, and there are also enough comfortable sofas and chairs that invite to stay long, while reading, thinking and discussing. As this paper suggests, following caring as a transformative ethos can show us that alternative design museums could be spaces for practicing hope (32).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper started with the question how design museums might contribute to change rather than preservation of the trajectories that have led us to an unsustainable present. In order to approach this question, we explored the phenomenon of established design museums apparently having much blank space in their exhibition rooms; while they seem to not make space for whatever deviates from prevailing narratives and norms. We have looked to the example of protest archives, which seem to be crowded, even though simultaneously open to accommodating even more. We approached this phenomenon from a feminist perspective as well as in terms of relational space, and thinking with the concept matters of care. This led us to see a need for collecting and exhibiting things instead of objects, which inspired us to formulate a set of characteristics: openness with limits, protecting and preserving differently, crowding, design works that work in two ways, and metabolizing gatherings. It is possible, and even needed, to have a great variety of spaces with such qualities that follow caring as a transformative ethos – and they might be called alternative design museums. They could enable us to leave the trajectories that brought us to the unsustainable present, to respond to urgencies and open up more just futures.
Table 1: Characteristics of alternative design museums.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caring as a transformative ethos</th>
<th>Openness with limits</th>
<th>Protecting and preserving differently</th>
<th>Crowding</th>
<th>Design works that work in two ways</th>
<th>Metabolizing gatherings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the main guiding principle and reason for generous crowdedness</td>
<td>more open in some aspects, but still excluding in others, according to their own values</td>
<td>finding a balance between protecting materials and making them accessible</td>
<td>several timelines lead through the crowded space(s)</td>
<td>collecting differently while transforming overall structures</td>
<td>the collection as a body: breathing, living, changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taking care of the body of the collection and the bodies that navigate the respective spaces</td>
<td>based on ongoing negotiations</td>
<td>a space run by and for the same people</td>
<td>rich context that allows for various readings, e.g. based on lived experience</td>
<td>as part of feminist tactics to redirect design</td>
<td>without a condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nurturing hope and therefore alternative, more just futures</td>
<td>creates a crowdedness that allows for new connections and therefore alternative futures to emerge</td>
<td>a space built on trust and response-ability</td>
<td>collecting “things” rather than “designs” makes space for an expanded design definition</td>
<td>enabling for ontological investigations of what design designs</td>
<td>blank spaces are always in flux, serving as invitations for new connections and possibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. REFERENCES


