



MUSEUM LEADERSHIP HOUSE

SUMMARY

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VIENNA



MUSEUM BOOSTER

The Museum Leadership House is a non-profit platform dedicated to professionals from the museum sector, policymaking and academia, whose goal is to shape the role of museums and enable them to stay relevant within a social and cultural milieu in transformation.



The Museum Leadership House members came together for the first time in November 2022 in Vienna, where they have shared their strategies, ideas and visions on the role of museums in the digital realm, the use of digital content as well as organisational innovation.

Members of the Museum Leadership House 2022

- Evelio Acevedo** Managing Director, Museo Thyssen Bornemisza
- Tilly Blyth** Head of Collections and Principal Curator, Science Museum, London
- Paula Bray** Head of Digital Engagement and Insight, Australian National Maritime Museum
- Lath Carlson** Executive Director, Museum of the Future Dubai
- Seb Chan** CEO, ACMI
- Liam Darbon** Director of Digital and Innovation, Tate
- Johanna Eiramo** Director, Digital National Gallery - programme
- John Falk** Co-Director, Institute of Learning Innovation
- Lori Fogarty** Director and CEO, Oakland Museum of California
- Paul Frey** Director, KHM-Museumsverband
- Courtney Johnson** Chief Executive, Te Papa
- Michael John Gorman** Director, Biotopia Naturkundemuseum Bayern
- Becky Kobberod** Head of Digital Transformation, Smithsonian Institution
- Daniela Kolesa** Director Destination Management, Vienna Tourist Board
- Lizzy Moriarty** INTERCOM Representative, Leadership Project Team ICOM
- Mikko Myllykoski** CEO, Heureka
- Michael Neault** Executive Creative Director, Experience Design, The Art Institute of Chicago
- Elisabeth Noever-Ginthör** Head of Creativity & Technology, Vienna Business Agency
- Ross Parry** Director, Institute for Digital Culture, University of Leicester
- Fiona Romeo** Senior Manager, Culture & Heritage, Community Programs Wikimedia
- Merete Sanderhoff** Curator and senior advisor, National Gallery of Denmark
- Roman Scharf** Founder and former CEO, Talenhouse
- Antje Schmidt** Head of Digital Strategy, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg
- Carol Ann Scott** INTERCOM Representative, Leadership Project Team, ICOM
- Pauli Sivonen** Director, Serlachius Museums
- Scott Smith** Founder, Changeist
- David Strauss** Head of Arts Team, Bloomberg Philanthropies
- Jen Snyder** Chief Digital Officer, Detroit Institute of Arts
- Gerfried Stocker** Artistic Director, Ars Electronica Centre
- Olga Tykhonova** Head of Strategic Development, MUSEUM BOOSTER
- Lauren Vargas** Founder & CEO, Your Digital Tattoo
- Harry Verwayen** General Director, Europeana Foundation
- Sofia Widmann** Founder & CEO, Museum Booster
- Carmen Willems** Museum Director, KMSKA

SUMMARY

Meanings

The conversation focused on the meaning and relevance of museums in the digital context. Four main objectives drove the discussion: ① to establish a collective understanding of the relevance of museums, ② to reveal the assumptions about the current and future needs of museums in the digital realm, ③ to understand the role of digital tools and platforms in defining meaning, and ④ to speculate about probable and preferable future roles of museums in the world.

An initial reflection on the past, present and future relevance of museums, highlights a shift from a perception of museums as places for historically and culturally significant objects to a perception of museums as places for individual and collective experiences or places that can generate conversations.

The museums of the future are expected to evolve and become places of flow, platforms for stories and networks whose role is to reveal the obscured connections that make up our reality.

What role do digital tools and platforms play in defining the relevance of museums? Participants pointed out the ambivalence of digital tools, i.e. their potential to deliver rich, personal experiences and tell stories that bring us together and to act as drivers of social fragmentation and division.

This ambivalence was also seen to manifest itself in the misalignment between what technology can do – aggregate content present it worldwide and in different layers and dimensions – versus what it needs to do – support museums in evolving their social role. Participants mentioned that technological providers mostly pursue economic goals and thus do not necessarily support museums in evolving their role and meaning toward collective sensemaking.

If museums are to become places of refuge, sensemaking, healing, understanding, care and empathy, digital tools must help museums self-define as central spaces for the community, rather than simply facilitate the production of new types of content.

Formats

This discussion outlined a definition of 'digital content' and the role of platforms and technologies in its production. It detailed a set of guiding principles for museums in their role as content creators.

Individual and collective reflections revealed an understanding of digital content as a tool, an act of expression, an output, or a source of informational and educational enrichment. The meaning of 'digital content' appeared as unique to each museum and its role as contextual and conditional. In conclusion, Museum Leadership House members insisted on a value-led approach to technology that is dictated by this unique understanding of digital content.

Participants called attention to the need for museums to set expectations for digital in the form of social contracts that promote healthy digital engagement to counterbalance the sometimes hidden meanings attached to 'digital' - seen as a signal of funding and power that has implications for the production and use of content.

Finally, participants defined guiding principles for museums in their role as digital

content producers. This is a first iteration of the list of guiding principles suggested by those in attendance:

- **Consider a value-led approach to technology from selection, operation, adaptation, and integration to maintenance decisions**
- **Consider the why, i.e. the relevance, purpose and prevailing context and conditions**
- **Consider FAIR principles**
- **Consider the role of wellbeing, i.e. the personal, intellectual, social, physical, and global needs of visitors and communities**
- **Consider how engagement could be made consistent and coherent across physical and digital touchpoints**
- **Consider the role of the museum as a creative platform and the tools needed to sustain it**

- **Consider how organisations might think and act collectively, by pooling resources, information, technologies and support of our networks**
- **Develop mindsets, skill sets, and tool sets that allow one to be comfortable with and manage criticism**
- **Identify the signals an organisation wants its visitors and communities to experience**
- **Establish requirements to support an embodied, fit-for-purpose digital experience**

Structures

The conversation focused on the dynamics between a digital transformation and the existing systems and processes of an organisation. The participants identified five threads for the conversation: advocacy, alliances, adoption, approval, and applied knowledge. Different needs were articulated for each of these threads.

The **need for advocacy** to be clarified was articulated as a need for clarity and consistency in the language the sector uses to speak of 'digital'. This involves the museum sector critically engaging with the language used by the tech sector to develop a new language that illuminates and confidently articulates the common purpose of digital technology within the sector.

The **need for alliances** to be mobilised was translated into a need for the sector to understand that collective acts of advocacy are stronger than individual ones when responding to and preparing for digital transformation. Participants suggested that for this to happen, digital transformation must be set up by default to partner and share rather than compete and retain, and include communities of practice and interest around technology.

The **need for adoption** to be contextualised was connected with the assumption that there is not only one path to digital maturity and organisations have different relationships with change and transformation. Thus, processes of adoption and adaptation must be informed by the unique contexts, identities and aims. This does not undermine alliances, but rather points out how they can benefit from understanding, valuing and enabling differences.

The **need for approval** to be simplified suggested that for cultures of experimentation and curiosity to be fostered and for people to be empowered to use technology and pivot when needed, organisational processes and systems must become the means to foster

innovation rather than restrict it and encourage imagination rather than smother it. This was coupled with the need for collective advocacy to governments for more agile structures in museums to enable them to adapt their organisation structures according to the more flexible needs of digital engagement.

Comparing a variety of museum structures to see where 'digital' is located would provide the sector with ideas and comparisons of organisational structures that are suited to the experimental and agile nature of digital engagement.

Finally, the **need for applied knowledge to be aligned** was addressed with the idea of a shared, open-sourced infrastructure for capacity building that is relevant to all organisations. Besides being organisations of learning, museums should become learning organisations that lead the way towards a better understanding of digital with the setup of a 'Digital Technology Leadership Academy'. Museums should partner to mutually build capacity in both soft and hard skills, through staff exchanges, secondments, joint projects, knowledge sharing sessions. Such initiatives, through informal networks, need not be costly.

Conclusions

The meaning of museums is evolving in the digital age, and that digital tools and platforms have both positive and negative impacts on the ability of museums to define their role and meaning. To reconcile the capabilities of digital with the future meaning of museums, a value-led approach to technology is needed, which takes into account the unique context and conditions of each museum. Additionally, museums need to set expectations for digital engagement through social contracts that promote healthy digital behaviour and establish guiding principles for their role as digital content producers. Finally, in order to facilitate digital transformation, museums need to develop a language of digital that illuminates and confidently articulates the common purpose of digital technology within the sector, and foster a culture of experimentation & innovation through more agile organisational structures.

Moderators of the sessions, who contributed to the summary, are:

Scott Smith, Founder, Changeist

Dr. Lauren Vargas, Founder & CEO, Your Digital Tattoo

Prof. Dr. Ross Parry, Director, Institute for Digital Culture, University of Leicester

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