

My museum of future present

I have created a new museum: the museum of the future. It is a museum of Art and Archaeology. It's on a busy downtown street and there is only one entrance. It is not very well lit and can be difficult to find, its sign lost in the myriad of bolder and more impressive neon boards fighting for your attention.

But you are in luck and you find it. You push the door open and there lies your first surprise: there is no reception and no ticket desk. You have entered a white, square room, with a white, flat ceiling and there are no doors leading anywhere. The only information is printed in a barely legible font size on a plain leaflet, hanging from a white stand in front of you. There is only one copy of the leaflet.

There is no one else inside: no staff or other visitors: yet, you know the museum is open - its sign was lit and the door was unlocked. There is nothing to see, either, other than some low-resolution images of objects printed on the walls around you: you assume they are part of the collection and they appear to have been there for years. Does anyone ever replace them?

As you get acquainted with the space you notice, at the other end of the room, opposite the entrance (which, by the way, seems to have now disappeared), a counter window, bordered with a thin grey frame. You approach it, hoping to speak to someone who could direct you to the displays. There is no one on the other side.

As you near the counter you notice a pile of small cards and a pen. On the cards there is a note informing you that there are 345,786 objects for you to discover. Below the note, a grey box with the word "Search" above it and some instructions: you are invited to write something in the box and push the card through a slot with the word "Submit" above it.

The trouble is: you don't know what to write in the search box: you know you entered a museum of "Art and Archaeology", but what art and what archaeology the museum contains can only be guessed. You entered the museum hoping that you could wander through its galleries, get a sense of its content and then immerse yourself in what captured you, but that doesn't seem possible here: the search cards imply you already know what you are looking for: there is no room for epiphanies.

This dystopian vision represents the majority of the digital museums of today, which focus on comprehensive digitisation and full-text searching, instead of the curatorial approach found in their physical counterparts.

Museum curators create thematic journeys through the collection, with notes and contextual information to cater for diverse audiences. Their purpose is to help audiences navigate content and context, as well as to educate and entertain them.

A lot of online collections seem to focus on quantity, instead of quality: push the full collections database online and make them searchable, at the expense of making them relevant. Online museum collections are all too often targeting audiences that are already knowledgeable - failing in their mission to entertain, as well as educate, *everyone*.

There is a lot of work required in digitising and documenting (and don't get me wrong: this is a very important effort), but that work cannot be considered completed after the digitisation is: in that repetitive process, each object is an island - let's call it a dot - and work is required to connect those dots, creating meaningful and intellectually stimulating stories.

This part is crucial: a good museum display is not just a collection of single, isolated, artefacts, each with its own little label. A good museum exhibit allows the visitor to learn and explore at their own pace, independently of their knowledge of the subject matter - but that requires surprises, not just a grey search box.

In my view, what will make a good museum of the future, both in the physical as well as the digital world, stems from two interrelated factors.

First, objects should be placed in context, in terms of relationship to other objects, when they were created and used, the people they were made by and for, the places where they originated and were used: all of these are as important, if not more, than the object details. As one of my clients, who manages a collection of artefacts and knowledge related to the First Nation peoples of Nova Scotia recently put it: "We will show you a basket, but also illustrate how a basket is made. There will be beads in our museum and website, together with the opportunity to learn what beading is".

This brings me to my second wish for my museum of the future: to make the past come to life and project it into the future. In a current exhibition on Donatello at the V&A, among the many sculptures, largely made of marble and terracotta, there were videos of present-day sculptors at work, one creating a marble bas relief and the other a terracotta tile (the final objects were on display too). Usually, the finished objects hide their complexity underneath their polished and finished surface. Through the videos though, a time-travel window was suddenly opened to reveal the mysteries of the creative processes, what sculpting means and how it was conducted, as well as what tools and techniques were available at the time of their creation. The objects went from being static and dead to being alive: they become timeless, merging past, present and future into one: museums should be places where creators get inspired and in them, everything is virtually contemporary.

In my view, the museum of the future is a "place" where physical and digital realms complement and learn from each other: in the virtually unlimited space of the digital world, an almost infinite number of artefacts can be displayed. Like ingredients in a well-stocked kitchen, those artefacts will offer themselves to be layered and curated into delicious dishes, alongside exhibits in the physical museum.

At the same time, the digital world could afford a natural expansion (in real architectural terms) to the time and space constraints of the physical museum, so that journeys can start in either of them and continue into the other one - no passport required.

It will be a beautiful museum, where digital and physical domains are seamlessly integrated and treated as one.

While I wait for that to happen, you will find me busy with putting some colour on the walls (and ceiling) of my museum of the future. And maybe open some doors into its collections.

Cristiano Bianchi, MD, Keepthinking
London, 15 February 2023
c.bianchi@keepthinking.it