

## FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

**Introduction to the Special Issue: Discursive Space**

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This special issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* represents three years of discussion, debate, and inquiry about what purpose museums serve in contemporary society. We harken back to Weil's (2002) claim that museums start from having a social purpose, a purpose for which they develop capacity, effectiveness, and efficiency. But Weil remained quiet about the idea of purpose as something that is constantly being negotiated. While museums may state their purpose through long, drawn-out efforts at strategic planning and occasional "stakeholder" input, their users and benefactors may choose to support and permit other goals that they may find more relevant. And despite the best efforts to live to a mission, their curators may act as freelance critics who challenge that purpose by staging contentious exhibitions.

The essays of this issue seek to challenge the idea of the museum as solely a home for scholarly discourse or storytelling. They seek to challenge Robert Archibald's claim that museums are "the new town square" (2004) by suggesting that town squares are perhaps a bit too neat and tidy to be an apt metaphor. The three of us writing here had a rather adventurous idea: to stage a quick conference in 2013 that represented a collective discussion around the concept of the museum as a "Discursive Space." Discursive spaces, for us, are spaces that foster

negotiation and debate, polarize and politicize space, and invite discussion fraught with contradictory views. They embody spatial experiences that are not always as clear or explicit about their meanings as the typical power dynamics among curator, creator, and operator might imply.

We built the idea for this effort on the successes—and with input from the organizers—of two previous conferences that challenged the sacred contract of museum exhibition space: *Creative Space* (2005) and *Narrative Space* (2010) at the University of Leicester. Based on these predecessors, we offered up the theme "Discursive Space: Breaking Barriers to Effective Spatial Communication in Museums." This theme was meant to provoke speakers and attendees to negotiate these ideas in a public forum. We invited the attendees to contemplate the integration of art, design, and architecture for the creation of memorable and immersive museum experiences, all while balancing users' expectations that their visits would be self-directed, and that they would be able pick and choose from a smorgasbord of experiences without being forced to learn what curators care about.

Our predecessors sought to be clear about the pedagogical opportunities presented by museums; their work focused on negotiating the issues around authority and the construction of meaning as an intentional act. But the

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prevailing notion that museums can control their own narratives is antithetical to the current generation of thinkers. Today's social actors are continuously challenged to break down barriers—barriers that separate individuals from ideas. Art and design, in their truest forms, are created to fracture barriers and initiate dialogue both introspectively and socially. How does one make an emotional connection to an issue, create a dialogue with didactic signage, or immersively engage a museum user with an authentic experience that is devoid of pretense?

When we organized the call for papers we asked the authors to interpret or express the challenge of defining the authentic experience of “discursive space.” This special issue of *Curator* represents a broad representation of the themes that emerged in response to this challenge at the conference.

Although many of the contributions to this issue employ the word “visitor,” we ask the reader to consider instead the idea of a museum “user” in contrast to that of a museum “visitor.” In proposing this shift in terminology, we hope readers will challenge the notion that a curator can dictate how the materials he or she presents are used. We propose that an exhibition sets a possible field for action. However, museum users’ entrance narratives, if considered seriously, are the more fertile territory for understanding the utility of museums to society. Museums have suggested that those who walk through the doors are “visitors” or “guests”; both of these terms assume that there is some degree of hosting and welcoming on the part of the museum. They assume a power dynamic that places the museum as a self-important purveyor of knowledge. By contrast, there may be another position—a “transgressive usership”—that disavows the authority of the museum. Those who stage a protest in a museum are authentic “users”; they use the cultural patrimony of the

museum as a foil. But, in similar fashion, some “users” are learners who seek to expand their understandings of a particular topic.

How cultural institutions can reconnect with their publics and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life has been at the forefront of discussions between scholars, designers, and other professionals. These discussions have been at the core of multiple recent conferences: “The Transformative Museum” (Roskilde, Denmark 2012), “Creating Exhibitions: Collaborative Approaches/Meaningful Experiences” (Philadelphia, 2013), and “Chaos at the Museum” (London, 2014). Even the theme of the 2015 American Alliance of Museums annual meeting, “The Social Value of Museums: Inspiring Change,” reflects these current debates. In order for the “Discursive Space” conference to have relevance within the museum community, it had to have relevance—not just for those who work in or study museums, but also for those who visit museums, those who design museums, and those who see museums as an educational resource.

It has been nearly forty years since the “blockbuster” museum spectacle took center stage as museums sought to justify their budgets to their audiences. This took the form of either a fantastical, simulated experience of nature or displays of plundered cultural treasures. Creating spectacle has become an inherent part of both the curator’s and exhibition designer’s repertoire. But recently there has been a shift in focus towards reconnecting with the visitor by designing more personally meaningful exhibitions. This refocusing—achieved by the production of exhibitions which address key societal and historical issues—allows for the augmentation of the museum as a social instrument and as a participant in a dialogue with the visitor. Hence, it becomes a “discursive space.”

While it appears that current users of cultural institutions desire a more sense-rich,

emotionally engaging, and personally relevant experience, the rise of social media has also altered people's expectations of what makes experiences meaningful or engaging. Users of social media are asked not just to consume cultural content, but to identify and redistribute it. Some may lament this "skimming" of content (in both senses of the word), but often that cursory scanning is really an act of selective curation. These user-curators seek opportunities for creative expression in response to the increasingly interactive media they consume. They want their own identities and interests to be acknowledged, and to connect to likeminded communities around the world. These shifts are changing the way that cultural institutions of all types, public or private, from museums to libraries to experiential environments, express themselves to—and communicate with—their ever more demanding audiences.

A new generation of museum users, who frequently use technology for self-directed information-gathering and cultural consumption, also expects a new kind of museum experience. They expect exhibitions that include a sense of shared power between themselves and the museums, authentically personal engagement, and their treatment as collaborators co-creating an intriguing and meaningful experience. This new power structure can only be achieved when users and makers come from various disciplines and demographics.

Our focus, with both the "Discursive Space" conference and this issue of *Curator*, is to ask what the museum should be for this new generation. This stands as a concerted effort to confront the challenges presented by our more-interactive, technologically mediated cultural landscape, and to invite greater diversity into the museum experience.

By striving to create fully immersive experiences, many designers and institutions explore

space-making as a link between the real and the virtual, which, in a way, represents an extension of society. Through engaging with a socially networked museum experience, non-institutional participants can distribute their subsequent discursive experience. The narratives expressed go beyond local connections to global connections of like-minded individuals. The innovation within the experience is not the technology itself but rather what it allows to occur. Every narrative the participants explore is informed by technology, but did not need to be technically advanced.

The papers selected for this issue suggest that the practice of creating discursive space is emerging within the museum sector. We believe that this new approach—creating a "rhetoric of negotiation" between museum-users and institutions—will confirm the power that museum-users have to establish their own outcomes, and continue to change how museum users influence existing museum narratives. Allowing users to include their own identities within their experience of the museum is likely to promote the culture of the users, rather than the traditionally dominant culture of the institution (which has decided, previously, what outcomes should be prioritized). We look forward to a new culture of museum-making that accepts multiple dialogues co-occurring in a place, and one where active debate can occur between an institution, its spaces, and the users who make that space relevant to their lives.

END

## REFERENCES

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