

MUSEUMS OTHERWISE:
A COMPENDIUM OF POSSIBLE FUTURES
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Reimagining

This book is not a typical academic edited volume. Nor does it subscribe to the usual dictates of an exhibition catalogue. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of work on climate change and museums or claim to have discovered One Quick Trick to Solve the Climate Emergency. Instead, the book reflects the main characteristics of the *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* project: it is collaborative, distributed, conversational, subversive, nomadic and, at times, playful. The arguments it puts forward emerge through dialogue and speculation just as much as they respond to and build on empirical research. In this sense, the book is perhaps best seen as a partial and in many ways still evolving artefact of the *Reimagining Museums* project. It can be read from cover-to-cover, or its varied contents can be traversed in a less rigid fashion. It is one “output” among many, and its main aim is to prompt further transdisciplinary alliances, rather than set out a particular position or manifesto. To this end, the book invites peripatetic readings and strange deviations. It is anchored by eight concepts that reflect the diversity and creativity of museums, but it is also motivated by a desire to (re)situate this field within a broader set of debates on the roots of social and environmental injustice, and the role of museums in these histories.

Our earliest conversations about the *Reimagining Museums* project took place in January 2020, when news of a novel coronavirus was still relatively muted. As the gravity and urgency of COVID-19 became apparent, timelines and priorities shifted. With many museums closed and COP26 postponed, we debated whether to continue the project. Other tasks and responsibilities, both personal and professional, seemed infinitely more pressing than the call to “reimagine” a particular field of practice. And yet COVID-19 has also been a stark reminder of the constant need for reflection and reimagination across all walks of life. As Arundhati Roy wrote in the early weeks of the pandemic, such a rupture can be

‘a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.’¹

The necessity of “reimagining” the world was also brought into sharp focus by that other seismic event of 2020: the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the subsequent intensification of Black Lives Matter protests across the world. The growth of the BLM movement crystallised and accentuated a range of issues simmering beneath the surface of

museological discourse and practice for at least the past decade, not least around questions of decolonisation, restitution, diversity and inclusion. Whether or not this will be a watershed moment for the cultural sector remains to be seen, but there is a sense that certain ways of working and ways of thinking should not – indeed cannot – go “back to normal.” As filmmaker and activist Ashish Ghadiali argues in this volume (see ‘Genealogies of the Emergency’), the events of 2020 may well come to be understood a ‘precursor of the consciousness and the awareness that is to come ... the impacts of that event [the murder of George Floyd and the BLM protests] will be felt over exactly the same timeframe in which the transition towards global justice, towards ecological equilibrium, has to unfold.’

As Ghadiali highlights, the pandemic and the widespread calls for racial justice seen across the world cannot be disentangled from the climate crisis. This is not to say that climate change “transcends” COVID-19 and BLM, or that it represents a “bigger problem” on the horizon, as some commentators have suggested, but rather that it prefigures, intensifies and in many ways undergirds crises as seemingly disparate as biodiversity loss and systemic racism. Here again Ghadiali provides a useful provocation for thinking through these interwoven problems, arguing that understanding the roots of climate change means understanding ‘the 500-year history of slavery, of colonialism, of neoliberal structural adjustment, as part of one continuous narrative.’ Only by recognising the multiple connections between these ‘seeds of oppression,’ as Ghadiali puts it, can we ‘start to create a community of care around the world.’

It is in this light that *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* can also be seen as a call to reimagine museums for a post-pandemic world, or for racial and social justice, or for care and reciprocity between human and non-human kin. “Climate action” in our reading crosses all these registers and more. Within policy circles, the two main pillars of climate action – mitigation and adaptation – help to guide the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and implement the changes necessary to adapt to a warming world. Museums can contribute to both these trajectories in various ways, but they are also well placed to address the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of the climate crisis. They can encourage new forms of governance and participation, support progressive research and education, and (potentially) provoke systemic change across society. At the same time, climate change poses significant challenges to the way museums operate. Practices of collecting, conservation, exhibition making and community engagement may all need to be rethought in times of rapid social and environmental change. What might museums look like in a world altered by

rising seas and intense heat domes? How will they function and who will they serve? What role might they play in reconnecting nature and society, and in combatting the knotted problems of climate change, inequality and social justice?

This book approaches these questions through dialogue, concrete case studies and speculative proposals. There is a sense across the following pages that we may well be at an epistemic (or even existential) “tipping point” when it comes to museums, galleries and other cultural institutions. What has come before no longer seems fit for purpose. The cultural infrastructures of the fossil-fuel era risk being stranded in the same way as outmoded extractivist mining technologies if they do not evolve to meet the challenges of a warming planet. Here it should be noted that many museums would not be innocent victims of such a collapse. The emergence and spread of museums around the world is closely bound up with many of the forces that have led the planet to the brink of climate breakdown, including the separation of human and non-human life; the marginalisation and oppression of Black, Indigenous and minority ethnic peoples; and the celebration of progress narratives dependent on unlimited economic growth. Recent years have witnessed a profound shift in the way museums engage with such legacies, but their underlying logics of preservation, interpretation, curating, education and research remain largely unchallenged.

Reimagining Museums for Climate Action seeks to push these debates forward through critique and creativity. It advocates for a kind of forwardness that is also an unravelling: a deep questioning of the way things have been done that can also act as a framework for what might be possible. The conversations and essays included in this volume speak to this idea in different ways, responding to and building on a set of core “concepts” developed for the *Reimagining Museums* project and exhibition, held at Glasgow Science Centre from June to November 2021. Below we give a brief background to the project, before revisiting some of the key themes and questions that have emerged through this ongoing process of reimagining.

Process

How can we expand the dialogue around museums, and how might we move from speculating about what museums could be, to practically reimagining their role in and for the future?

Reimagining Museums for Climate Action began life as an international design and ideas competition. Launched on International Museums Day 2020, the competition aimed to open up the discussion around the subject of museums and climate change to new publics and

new constituents, asking how museums could help society make the deep, transformative changes needed to achieve a net-zero or zero-carbon world. Rather than focus on a specific location or type of museum, the competition invited proposals that aimed to unsettle and subvert the very foundations of museological thinking to support and encourage meaningful climate action. It specifically asked for design and concept proposals that were radically different from the “traditional” museum, or that explored new ways for traditional museums to operate. The competition brief invited ‘designers, architects, academics, artists, poets, philosophers, writers, museum professionals, Indigenous groups, community groups and the public at large to radically (re)imagine and (re) design the museum as an institution, to help bring about more equitable and sustainable futures in the climate change era.’ We received over 500 expressions of interest from around the world, resulting in 264 submissions from 48 countries. These ranged from the fantastical to the highly practical, and encompassed a broad spectrum of museum typologies (social history, science, community, natural history etc.).

Following the competition, eight teams were invited to be part of an exhibition at Glasgow Science Centre which would open in advance of, and continue during, COP26. The exhibition was integrated with the science centre’s permanent *Powering the Future* exhibit to highlight the crucial role cultural institutions have to play in shaping the world of tomorrow. Crucially, this way of designing a temporary exhibition in and around under-utilised spaces within an existing permanent exhibition mirrored aspects of the competition brief itself, forcing us and our designers to practically explore ways of reimagining an existing exhibition for climate action. This experiment was challenging, but rewarding, creating unexpected synergies and juxtapositions between permanent and temporary exhibits. The exhibitors included established designers, curators, academics, sound artists, digital specialists, Indigenous filmmakers, emerging architectural practices and museum managers – a good example of the transdisciplinary conversations and alliances required to “reimagine” museums in any meaningful way. Their concepts are included in these pages, along with varied essays and reflections on the broader ideas of the project. The international scope of the competition also underlined the fact that critical and creative thinking about museums often involves moving between different scales and contexts, from the hyper-local to the planetary, from city centres to forest ecosystems.

A number of different research trajectories came together in co-authoring the competition brief, including Henry McGhie’s policy-oriented work on museums and the Sustainable Development Goals², Harrison’s speculative approach to heritage as a future-making practice³, and Sterling’s interest in critical-creative design practices in heritage

and museums⁴. While these trajectories overlap in some ways, the gaps and tensions between research that is quite theoretical in outlook and work that is more concerned with policy and practice provided a useful foundation for thinking holistically about museums and climate action. To this end, the brief encompassed issues of collecting, conservation and exhibition making, the links between decolonisation and decarbonisation, the need to challenge foundational principles, the desire for speculative ideas about what museums could be, and the relationship between museums and climate justice. As an activity linked to the UK's hosting of COP26 in Glasgow, the brief also paid particular attention to the various UN programmes connected to museums, including Action for Climate Empowerment⁵.

This book and the associated website and “toolbox” act as artefacts of a project that – by necessity – could only have a limited lifespan. We hope these resources will remain useful well after COP26 and the exhibition at Glasgow have finished. The concepts and commentaries contained in this volume bring together a number of academics, activists, architects, artists, curators, designers and others to reflect on the broad themes of the project. As the title of this chapter suggests, we would like to think of the book as a kind of speculative sourcebook for exploring possible museum futures; futures that might inspire radical action within and beyond the museum and heritage sectors to address the climate emergency.

Mobilising

This project is not the first to raise the potential for museums to contribute to climate action, and it is unlikely to be the last. Over the past decade museums globally have mobilised to address the challenges of a warming world through curatorial work, collecting programmes, public engagement activities and new development strategies that do not shy away from the profound consequences of the climate emergency⁶. At the same time, a broad range of initiatives have challenged the familiar idea of the museum in direct response to the climate crisis. These include activist-oriented climate museums in New York and the UK, both of which are featured in this volume, as well as the proposed Museum for the United Nations, whose first project – *My Mark, My City* – aimed to galvanise climate action in communities around the world. Alongside these, we cannot fail to mention the urgent work of protest groups such as Culture Unstained and BP or Not BP?, who seek to end fossil fuel sponsorship across the cultural sector (the activities of these groups are also featured in this book in the form of a visual essay by Culture Unstained co-Director Chris Garrard).

A growing sub-field of climate related publications in museums studies has also begun to explore this topic in recent years, including three special issues of relevant academic journals in 2020 alone⁷. The breadth of case studies, creative interventions and conceptual approaches found across this literature provides a valuable overview of the manifold ways in which museums intersect with climate action. Some of the main dimensions of this work include the idea that museums are “trusted spaces” in which different publics can engage with the science of climate change⁸; the possibility for collections – especially natural history collections – to inform new approaches to biodiversity conservation⁹; the need for museums to promote alternative forms of consumption¹⁰; the opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that may emerge around specific objects and narratives related to climate change¹¹; and the potential to break down the boundaries between nature and culture through different modes of conservation and curating¹². What such work highlights most clearly is the fact there is no single pathway or theory of change for the sector in relation to climate issues – addressing this crisis involves new imaginaries, new practices, new concepts and new strategic alignments.

There are important parallels here with broader initiatives that aim to address the ongoing role of museums and heritage in supporting systemic forms of racism and inequality. In the UK and the US, campaign groups and forums such as Museum Detox, Museums Are Not Neutral, Museum as Muck and Decolonize This Place have drawn attention to the historical and contemporary injustices of the field in ways that often coalesce with the political dimensions of climate action. Such work helps to surface the dense entanglement of museums with questions of colonialism, imperialism, nationalism and industrial capitalism. Museums have never been isolated from the world, but their complicity in a range of oppressive and damaging structures is now being thrown into sharp focus on multiple fronts.

Across much of this work we find a recognition – sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit – that the emergence and spread of museums around the world tracks the rise of carbon emissions and environmental degradation in ways that can no longer be ignored. In his book *Museums in a Troubled World*, Roberts Janes describes the global museum ‘franchise’ as a valuable tool in the fight against climate change¹³. This franchise however may also be read as an artefact of the Industrial Revolution, or of various empires, or of the Great Acceleration. Museums are being called into question in this moment precisely because they can be seen as both an instrument and a legacy of the processes that have led to the climate crisis. Mobilising the infrastructure of museums to address this crisis means reckoning with a set of practices, institutions and

ways of thinking that may need to be wholly repurposed, rather than simply “reimagined.”

Uncertain futures

Imagination, however, remains an essential tool in this process. Writing in his book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh argues that ‘the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination’¹⁴. As such, there is an urgent need for new creative imaginaries to help confront the challenges of a warming world. *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* has aimed to inspire and promote such imaginaries in a number of key areas. First, by recognising that museums are historically interwoven with the *problem* of climate change, we sought to underline the need for an epistemic shift in museological practice to bring about meaningful climate action. Second, by highlighting the manifold ways in which museums are to some extent already embedded in the work of climate action, we hoped to draw together disparate strategies and approaches from across the sector. Third, by expanding the conversation around this problem to those outside the rather narrow field of “museum studies,” we sought to encourage transdisciplinary perspectives and positions. Finally, by embracing speculative design as a creative methodology for the field, the project has aimed to challenge preconceptions about what a museum could or should be.

The impacts of climate change are felt not just in rising temperatures, biodiversity loss and other environmental consequences, but in psychic experience, cultural responses, business, politics and our relationship to time and history¹⁵. This is the change museums are currently navigating, just as much as they are confronting the damaging effects of a warming world. This vastly expands the scope of museological “reimagining,” which in our view can no longer be left to museologists alone.

Taken collectively, the concepts, stories and commentaries assembled in this book highlight a number of important transformations that might take place for museums to facilitate climate action. The first relates to breaking down boundaries and moving away from authoritarian values of order and control. In an inevitably altered future world, museums must accept and embrace the creative possibilities of uncertainty and change rather than work against these forces. This will mean rethinking the familiar structure of museums. Instead of centralised spaces and buildings, many of the ideas put forward for the competition emphasised non-hierarchical “networks” supporting decentralised methods of collecting, curating, education and research. Such a shift would bring museums closer to the communities they ostensibly serve: another key theme that can be observed in different ways across the book. It is no doubt

telling that many of the ideas submitted to the competition highlighted the relationship between traditional museums and the varied processes by which capitalism extracts and accumulates value from the world. Working *with* and going to people rather than taking objects *from* them may seem like a modest strategy, but – if implemented properly – such an approach could fundamentally reorient the purpose of museums.

As many contributors to this volume and the project as a whole noted, all of the above would require a significant rethink of the way museums have typically been governed and managed. Certain crises demand new forms of decision making where experts and lay people can come together to imagine new futures. As Mark Chambers puts it in his conversation with Climate Museum Director Miranda Massie (see ‘Climate Commons’), ‘we need creatives and the public to cocreate clear visions of possible futures that include and support those who’ve been excluded from traditional official visions of who makes the future.’ As Chambers also notes, design is ‘the first manifestation of intent.’ In many ways this project and this book attempt to address the questions that inevitably follow: ‘what do we intend to do? What exactly is our intent now?’ The “intent” of climate action is usually communicated through numbers, charts and diagrams: reduce global greenhouse gas emissions to a certain level to ensure average temperatures do not cross a particular threshold. It hardly needs stating however that the simplicity of this intent masks a complex array of possible actions and future scenarios.

With each new Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is greater clarity on what kind of future the planet’s biosphere is racing towards without concerted action, but the social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of this future are less clear-cut. Put simply, if certain systems do not change, the impacts of climate breakdown are likely to be so severe that things will *still* change beyond recognition; by the same token, the transformations required to *avert* such changes will mean altering the familiar contours of life for many people around the world to an unprecedented degree. “Reimagining” museums in this context means navigating a constantly shifting terrain of social, political, economic and environmental transformations that are likely to veer between the inescapable and the desirable. As a participatory thought experiment, *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* asks how museums and other cultural institutions might help to deliver the “intent” mapped out by the IPCC, but we remain mindful of the fact addressing this goal may well involve fundamental changes to the very substance of museological thinking and practice.

¹ Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *Financial Times* April 3, 2020, accessed August 12, 2021 <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

² Henry McGhie, *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: A How-to Guide for Museums, Galleries, the Cultural Sector and Their Partners* (Curating Tomorrow, 2019)

³ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013); Rodney Harrison, "Beyond 'Natural' and 'Cultural' Heritage: Towards an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of the Anthropocene," *Heritage and Society* 8, no.1 (2015), 24-42; Rodney Harrison, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini, Esther Breithoff, Harald Fredheim, Antony Lyons, Sarah May, Jennie Morgan and Sefryn Penrose, *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices* (London: UCL Press, 2020); Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, eds., *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2019)

⁴ Colin Sterling, "Designing 'Critical' Heritage Experiences: Immersion, Enchantment and Autonomy," *Archaeology International* 22, no. 1 (2019), 100-113

⁵ "What is Action for Climate Empowerment?," United Nations Climate Change, accessed August 12, 2021 <https://unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/the-big-picture/what-is-action-for-climate-empowerment>

⁶ Sarah Brophy and Elizabeth Wylie, *The Green Museum: A Primer on Environmental Practice* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2013); Fiona Cameron and Brett Neilson, eds., *Climate Change and Museum Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kirsten Wehner, eds., *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); L'Internationale, eds., *Ecologising Museums* (Paris: L'Internationale, 2016)

⁷ Joy Davis, ed., "Museums and Climate Action" [special issue], *Museum Management and Curatorship* 35, no.6 (2020); Sarah Sutton and Cynthia Robinson, eds., "Museums and Public Climate Action" [special issue], *Journal of Museum Education* 45, no.1 (2020); Bergsveinn Þórsson and Nørskov Vinnie, eds., "Curating Climate" [special issue], *Nordisk Museologi* vol. 2020, no.3 (2020)

⁸ Fiona Cameron, Bob Hodge and Juan Francisco Salazar, "Representing climate change in museum spaces and places," *WIREs Climate Change* 4, no. 9 (2013), 9-21

⁹ Henry McGhie, *Museum Collections and Biodiversity Conservation* (Curating Tomorrow, 2019)

¹⁰ Helen Arfvidsson and Ann Follin, "Connectedness, consumption and climate change: the exhibition human nature," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 35, no.6 (2020), 684-696

¹¹ Newell, Robin and Wehner, *Curating the Future*

¹² Bergsveinn Þórsson, "When matter becomes a monster: Examining Anthropocenic Objects in Museums," *Museological Review* 22 (2018), 44-53

¹³ Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (London: Routledge, 2009), 179-180

¹⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9

¹⁵ David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future* (London: Penguin, 2019), 155; Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 11