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Rethinking Museums for the Climate Emergency

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Critical Heritage Studies and the Futures of Europe



Edited by
Rodney Harrison,
Nélia Dias and
Kristian Kristiansen

UCLPRESS

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is an outcome of the project ‘CHEurope: Critical Heritage Studies and the Futures of Europe: Towards an integrated, interdisciplinary and transnational training model in cultural heritage research and management’. The project was funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) – Innovative Training Networks (ITN) programme (Grant Agreement Nr – 722416). ‘CHEurope’ was a PhD training programme in cultural heritage studies and was the result of a collaboration between key European academic and non-academic organisations in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The project ran for almost 5 years (November 2016 to August 2021), supporting the research and training of 15 Early-Stage Researchers (ESRs)/PhD students from Europe and other parts of the world.

The project was led by Kristian Kristiansen of the University of Gothenburg (UGOT), Sweden, with the assistance of project coordinator Gian Giuseppe Simeone (UGOT/Culture Lab, Belgium), without whom the project and this volume would not have been possible. The ESRs funded by the research programme were Khaled El-Samman Ahmed (UGOT), Anne Beeksma (Spanish National Research Council / Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), Spain), Łukasz Bugalski (Istituto per I Beni Artistici, Culturali e Naturali of the Region Emilia Romagna (IBC), Italy), Vittoria Caradonna (University of Amsterdam (UvA), The Netherlands), Carlotta Capurro (Utrecht University (UU), The Netherlands), Moniek Driesse (UGOT), Nermin el-Sharif (UvA), William Illsley (UGOT), Marcela Jaramillo Contreras (ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal), Marcia Lika Hattori (CSIC), Nevena Markovic (CSIC), Katie O’Donoghue (University College London (UCL), United Kingdom), Janna Oud Ammerveld (UCL), Hannah K. Smyth (UCL) and Mela Zuljevic (Hasselt University (UHASSELT), Belgium). They were joined by named applicants, principal supervisors and work package leads Henric Benesch, Cecilia Lindhe, Ingrid Martins Holmberg,

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The project organised six residential Joint Research Seminars and two Summer Schools. These were hosted by UCL (organised by Esther Breithoff and Rodney Harrison), UvA (organised by Robin Boast, Chiara De Cesari, Rob van der Laarse, Vittoria Caradonna and Nermin el-Sharif), UHasselt/Z33 (organised by Liesbeth Huybrechts and Mela Zuljevic), IBC (organised by Maria Pia Guermandi and Łukasz Bugalski), UU (organised by Gertjan Plets, Jaap Verheul and Carlotta Capurro), ISCTE-IUL (organised by Nélia Dias, Rodney Harrison, Janna Oud Ammerveld and Marcela Jaramillo Contreras), CSIC (organised by Felipe Criado Boado, César Parcero-Oubiña, Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, Alfredo González-Ruibal, Nevena Markovic, Anne

Beeksma and Marcia Lika Hattori) and UGOT (organised by Kristian Kristiansen, Khaled El-Samman Ahmed, Moniek Driesse and William Illsley), respectively. The project's final conference took place online on 15 and 16 October 2020 and was organised and hosted by UGOT. Many of the chapters in this volume were first presented at that conference. We thank the organisers, contributors and speakers at each of these events for their input to the research and training programme. The project was also supported by the joint UGOT–UCL Centre for Critical Heritage Studies.

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Further information about the project, and its online exhibition 'Yesterday is here. Exploring heritage futures across Europe and beyond', designed by curator and artist Nuno Coelho, is available at <http://cheurope-project.eu/>

1

Rethinking museums for the climate emergency

Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling

Introduction

Museums, galleries and collections are often seen as static and backwards-looking, more concerned with the past than with the present and the future. While this impression is slowly changing, they are perhaps not the most obvious subject to focus on when thinking about climate action. However, climate change is much more than simply an environmental or scientific concern. It impacts on all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life, including museums. Questions of sponsorship, carbon emissions, waste, transport and the need for more sustainable buildings are currently being debated across the sector. At the same time, museums have an important role to play in communicating the climate emergency to the public. For many people, they remain a trusted source of information, with the capacity to inspire real change in individuals and society. Far from being relics of the past, museums are increasingly called upon to help shape a more just and sustainable future.

Museums are also deeply entrenched in broader histories of colonialism, globalisation and capitalism. As such, they are closely bound up with many of the forces that have led the planet to the brink of ecological collapse, 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.

This chapter describes and reflects on an international collaborative research project, ideas competition, exhibition and series of activities – Reimagining Museums for Climate Action (RMCA) – which aimed for a significant intervention in contemporary thinking about museums, to inspire radical changes to address the climate emergency in the lead-up to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference – COP26¹ – held in Glasgow in November 2021 (Harrison and Sterling 2021; McGhie 2021; RMCA 2022). The chapter concludes with a discussion which draws on what we learned from the project and from our participation in various activities linked to COP26, and the implications for museums worldwide.

Why rethink museums? Museums and the climate emergency

A range of activities have emerged across the museum sector in recent years in response to the climate emergency. Across the globe, museums 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 emergency (e.g. Brophy and Wylie 2013; Cameron and Neilson 2014; Newell, Robin and Wehner 2016; L'Internationale 2016). At the same time, a broad range of initiatives have challenged the familiar idea of the museum in direct response to the climate emergency. These include activist-oriented climate museums in New York and the UK, but also 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 (e.g. see Garrard 2021). 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 USA, 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 destructive environmental forces, including colonialism and the extractivist methods of industrial capitalism. Museums have

never been isolated from the injustices of the world, but their complicity in a range of oppressive and damaging structures is now being thrown into sharp focus on multiple fronts.

As the editors of *Ecologising Museums* note, ‘the museum’ is not just a ‘technical operation but is also imbued with a certain (modern) mindset which itself raises questions of sustainability’ (L’Internationale 2016: 5). Acknowledging the pervasiveness of this mindset leads to an important question, namely: ‘To what degree are the core activities of collecting, preserving and presenting in fact attitudes that embody an unsustainable view of the world and the relationship between man [sic] and nature?’ (L’Internationale 2016: 5). A growing subfield of climate-related publications in museum studies has begun to explore this line of enquiry in recent years, including three special issues of relevant academic journals on the subject in 2020 alone (Davis 2020; Sutton and Robinson 2020; Þórsson and Nørskov 2020). 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 change (Cameron, Hodge and Salazar 2013); the possibility for collections – especially natural history collections – to inform new approaches to biodiversity conservation (McGhie 2019a); the need for museums to promote alternative forms of consumption (Arfvidsson and Follin 2020); the opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that may emerge around specific objects and narratives related to climate change (Newell, Robin and Wehner 2016); and the potential to break down the boundaries between nature and culture through different modes of conservation and curating (Þórsson 2018). What such work highlights most clearly is the fact that 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 alliances.

What we also find across much of this work is 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. This realisation offers a useful corrective to an often optimistic reading of museums as a diverse global phenomenon. While the global museum ‘franchise’ described by Janes (2009) may be seen as a valuable tool in the fight against climate change on the one hand, it can also be read as an artefact of the Industrial Revolution, or of colonialism, or of the Great

Acceleration. Museums are being called into question in this moment of crisis precisely because they can be seen as both an instrument and a legacy of the processes that have led to this crisis. Even as they celebrate and promote their capacity to protect, conserve and ‘care for’ the planet, museums also embody and, in some cases, perpetuate the ‘Great Derangement’ (Ghosh 2016) that undergirds climate breakdown.

This brings us to an important point in understanding the roots of the RMCA project, which at its core aimed to inspire radical change in museums to address the climate emergency. The key point here is that, in many ways, this change is already upon us. As authors such as Timothy Morton (2013), David Wallace-Wells (2019) and Andreas Malm (2018) highlight, the climate emergency is more than simply a problem to be overcome so that we can get back to business as usual – it is, potentially, a knowledge system or condition as all-encompassing as modernity or postmodernity. Such a perspective recognises that 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 history (Wallace-Wells 2019: 155, Malm 2018: 11). This is the change that 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.

A participatory thought experiment

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 the future? Prompted by the need for radical new thinking around museums and heritage in response to the climate emergency (and in direct contrast to previous work undertaken by one of us which focused more on engaging with heritage and museum practitioners and policymakers; see Harrison et al. 2020), RMCA began life as an international design and ideas competition, launched on 18 May 2020 for International Museums Day, that aimed to open up the discussion around this subject to new publics and new constituents. The competition specifically 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’. Responding to the two main pillars of climate action, mitigation and adaptation (see also oud Ammerveld,

this volume), the competition asked 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 in order 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 responses, which could address any aspect of museum design and activity, ranged from the fantastical to the highly practical.

A number of different research trajectories came together in co-authoring the competition brief, including McGhie’s policy-oriented work on museums and the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. McGhie 2019a, 2019b), Harrison’s speculative approach to heritage as a future-making practice (Harrison 2013, 2015; Harrison et al. 2020; Harrison and Sterling 2021) and Sterling’s interest in critical-creative design practices in heritage and museums (Sterling 2019). 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 created 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 United Nations programmes connected to museums, including Action for Climate Empowerment.

The competition attracted over 500 expressions of interest, resulting in 264 submissions from 48 countries around the world. Working with an international panel of judges, and in partnership with the Glasgow Science Centre (GSC) as hosts, we selected eight winning entries to form the core of an exhibition to be hosted by the GSC in advance of COP26 and then during the event as part of the ‘Green Zone’.² The exhibitors included established designers, curators, academics, sound artists, digital specialists, Indigenous film-makers, emerging architectural practices and museum managers – a good example of the transdisciplinary conversations and alliances required to ‘reimagine’ museums in any meaningful way. 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.

Reimagining museums for climate action: the exhibition

The exhibition was composed of an introduction and eight individual exhibits which were developed by eight competition-winning teams in consultation with the project team. These were as follows:

1. *Museum of Open Windows* (Livia Wang; Nico Alexandroff; RESOLVE Collective: Akil Scafe-Smith, Seth Scafe-Smith, Melissa Haniff; Studio MASH: Max Martin, Angus Smith, Conor Sheehan: UK), which aimed to repurpose the existing global infrastructure of museums to support inter-community collaboration and citizen research on climate change and climate action (see [Figure 1.1](#)).
2. *Existances* (Jairza Fernandes Rocha da Silva, Nayhara J. A. Pereira Thiers Vieira, João Francisco Vitório Rodrigues, Natalino Neves da Silva, Walter Francisco Figueiredo Lowande: Brazil), which aimed to show the power of collective knowledge in the fight against climate change, imagining a network of micro-museums embedded in and responding to the diverse lifeworlds of African and Amerindian communities in Brazil (see [Figure 1.2](#)).



Figure 1.1 *Museum of Open Windows* exhibit as part of the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition at the Glasgow Science Centre for COP26. © Rodney Harrison.

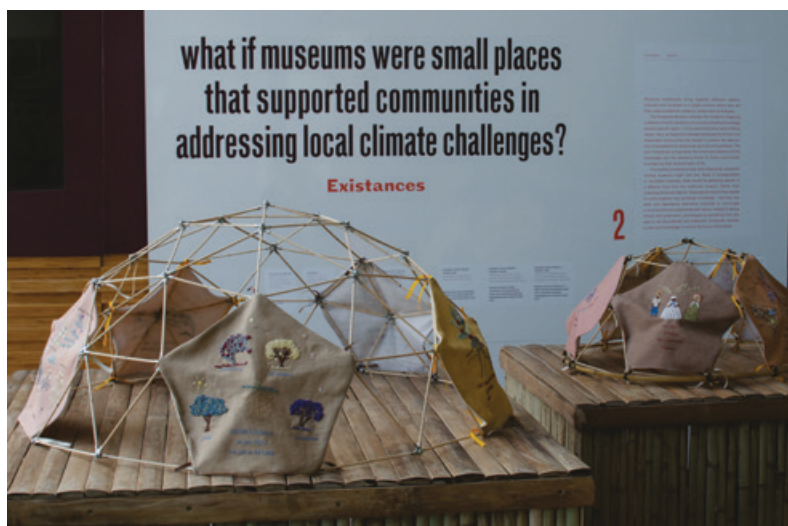


Figure 1.2 *Existences* exhibit as part of the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition at the Glasgow Science Centre for COP26. © Rodney Harrison.

3. *Natural Future Museums* (Takumã Kuikuro and Thiago Jesus: Brazil/UK), which asked what it would mean to confer museum status on existing Indigenous lands in forests and other places that play a key role in climate action, in doing so, questioning the very idea of the museum itself.
4. *Weathering With Us* (Isabella Ong and Tan Wen Jun: Singapore), which imagined a new kind of contemplative museum space where climate action is materialised in the very structure and experience of the building (see [Figure 1.3](#)).
5. *Dundee Museum of Transport* (Peter Webber, Alexander Goodger, Matthew Wong, Wendy Maltman and Katherine Southern: UK) which asked how a traditional museum might evolve to address the contemporary challenge of sustainable travel in an inclusive way.
6. *Elephant in the Room* (Design Earth: Rania Ghosn, El Hadi Jazairy, Monica Hutton and Anhong Li: USA), a short film, narrated by Donna Haraway, which offered a fantastical story in which a stuffed elephant comes to life and forces museums and wider society to confront their role in climate change.

7. *Story: Web* (The Great North Museum: Hancock, Open Lab: Simon Bowen, The Tyndall Centre/CAST: Sarah Mander, David de la Haye: UK), which mobilised existing museum collections to empower people to curate their own climate stories, experiences and networks on a global scale.



Figure 1.3 *Weathering With Us* exhibit as part of the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition at the Glasgow Science Centre for COP26. © Rodney Harrison.

8. *A Series of Collective, Non-Statistical Evidence* (ppppooilll: Kamil Muhammad, Haidar El Haq, Amelia M. Djaja, Gregorius Jasson and Ken Fernanda: Indonesia), which applied familiar museum practices of collecting, display and participation to imagine spaces of dialogue, where different communities come together to share and articulate their personal experiences of climate change.

The exhibition also contained a selection of images from an additional 71 concepts and proposals from the competition which were featured on the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action website (RMCA 2022) to inspire radical change in museums to address the climate emergency. It was integrated within the existing Powering the Future display at the GSC to highlight the crucial role that cultural institutions must play in shaping the world of tomorrow. In addition to hosting this further long-list of proposals, a website was developed to provide virtual access to the exhibition for those who were unable to travel to Glasgow to visit in person, while a series of resources, events and activities to inspire new thinking both inside and outside of the sector on the role of museums in the climate emergency were also developed over this time.

Reimagining Museums for Climate Action at the UNFCCC COP26

The Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition first opened at the GSC in June 2021, running through until mid-October 2021 and being seen by around 60,000 visitors. It reopened on 31 October 2021 as part of the official UNFCCC COP26 Green Zone over the two weeks of the conference from 31 October to 12 November, during which time it was seen by another 60,000 or so visitors (see [Figure 1.4](#)). The exhibition was also featured as one of ‘Five incredible ideas from the COP26 Green Zone’ as part of the COP26 Virtual Green Zone, hosted by Google Arts and Culture, which remains live as a virtual artefact of the exhibits and the activities which took place there.³ RMCA team members participated in several events at the COP26 Blue and Green Zones, presenting a virtual plenary panel from COP26 for the Museums Association Conference and co-organising the panel ‘Powering climate action through heritage policies, organisations, research and public programmes’ which took place in the EU Pavilion.

During the two weeks of COP26, volunteers from a number of different organisations helped the RMCA team to engage with visitors by asking ‘What if museums ...?’ and collecting their ideas about how museums might change to empower them, and the groups they represented, to take their desired form of climate action (see [Figure 1.5](#)). These



Figure 1.4 Speaking with visitors to the Reimagining Museums for Climate Change exhibition during COP26. © Rodney Harrison.

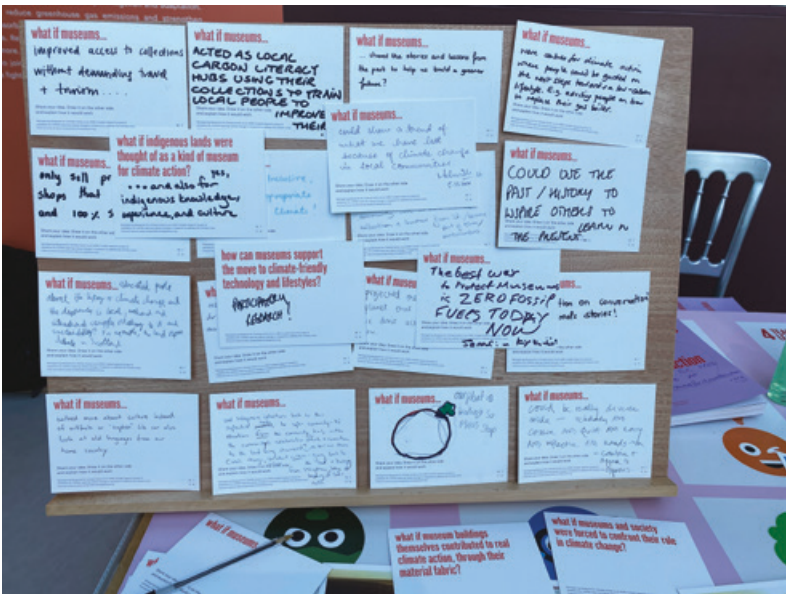


Figure 1.5 Collecting responses to the question ‘What if museums...?’ from visitors to the Reimagining Museums for Climate Action exhibition during COP26. © Rodney Harrison.

additional ideas, which we collected from visitors to the Green Zone during COP26, are also featured on the project website, and provide an additional set of concepts and ideas for museums to consider when taking radical action for climate.

Mobilising Museums for Climate Action: a toolbox of ideas

In addition to the ideas competition and exhibition, the project developed a series of open-access resources that aimed to explore how we can rethink the shape and purpose of museums, reimagine new forms of museum and mobilise the potential of museums – in current and new forms – to accelerate, amplify and transform climate action everywhere.

The Mobilising Museums for Climate Action ‘toolbox’ (McGhie 2021) is a collection of practical tools, frameworks, essential climate knowledge and opportunities that museums and their partners can adopt. The toolbox is organised into bite-size chunks to break through the complex and sometimes confusing nature of climate action work. The toolbox is available as a PDF and as a web-based version for automatic translation for accessibility in different languages.

Mobilising Museums for Climate Action is framed around a set of five ways for museums to contribute to climate action, which are addressed in different sections of the toolbox:

1. **Mitigation through museums.** Museums must support all of society to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, rapidly, in line with Paris Agreement commitments, by encouraging and empowering people to understand the part they have to play in climate action, and to use less, waste less and make sure anything they do use is renewable. They can foster support, and sharing of resources, for nature conservation efforts that strengthen nature’s ability to absorb greenhouse gas emissions.
2. **Mitigation in museums.** Museums must aggressively reduce greenhouse gas emissions across all aspects of their activity, in line with Paris Agreement commitments. They can ensure all staff and all people and organisations in the value chain understand the part they must play in climate action and are empowered to act through policies and resourcing so that every action is supporting climate action, in order to use less, waste less and make sure anything that is used is renewable. They can direct financial and other resources towards

- nature conservation efforts that strengthen nature's ability to absorb greenhouse gas emissions, through their everyday decisions and procurement practices.
3. **Adaptation through museums.** Museums must support all of society and nature to face and cope with current and projected climate change impacts.
 4. **Adaptation in museums.** Museums must understand how they will be impacted by climate change and adapt their practices, location, programmes and collections to be fit for the future.
 5. **Climate action as part of sustainable development, climate justice and a just transition.** Museums must ensure that all climate change activity is undertaken in ways that do not themselves disenfranchise people or communities, locally or globally; and recognise that, in tackling climate change, other sustainable development challenges must be addressed at the same time.

In 2022, we received additional funding to run a series of workshops around the toolbox, in partnership with a number of key UK-based and international museum organisations and individual museums, showing how the principles developed as part of the project could be put into action in specific contexts. As a result of this additional funding, over 1,200 people participated in online and in-person events organised by the project team or to which project team members contributed, presenting the project and toolbox. In addition, over 30,000 people watched a recording of an event at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum for the Sustainable Development Goals, organised by Latvia, that included discussion of the project and its outcomes.

Reflections on the project and our involvement in COP26

Enabling, empowering and mobilising public action on climate will clearly be crucial to the goal of maintaining global heating at or below 1.5°C and to reimagining and recreating a net-zero or zero-carbon world. The Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement both recognise the crucial importance of involving the public in climate action. They both specify the importance of public education, training of key groups of staff, public awareness campaigns, public participation in climate change decision-making, public access to information on

science and policy regarding climate change, and international cooperation. These six areas are known informally as Action for Climate Empowerment, or ACE.

The submissions we received from the ideas competition, the work we have done with and around the exhibition, and the discussions we had at COP26 itself show that museums have incredible potential not only to communicate but also, and perhaps more importantly, to become facilitators for real and radical climate action. Museums are specifically named as key institutions to facilitate public participation in climate action in the 10-year Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment (and this is something we were particularly involved in following and contributing to at COP26 as a project team). Activities under the work programme are focused on four priority areas that aim to address gaps and challenges in implementing the six elements of ACE and to create opportunities to accelerate implementation. The four priority areas are as follows:

- Policy coherence, to strengthen coordination of ACE work at the international and national level.
- Coordinated action, to build partnerships that bring together different expertise, resources and knowledge to accelerate ACE implementation.
- Tools and support, to enhance access to tools and support for building capacity and raising awareness among various stakeholders regarding ACE.
- Monitoring, evaluating and reporting, to strengthen monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the implementation of all six ACE elements.

The Glasgow work programme reconfirms the key role that a broad range of stakeholders – such as national and subnational governments, educational and cultural institutions, the private sector, international and non-governmental organisations and the media – play in implementing ACE, and promotes cooperation, collaboration and partnerships among the diverse stakeholders.

But to do this, they need to do a number of things. The Mobilising Museums for Climate Action toolbox proposes five practical pathways to climate action for museums:

- Reducing emissions in museums, through a range of direct and indirect initiatives to rapidly shift away from fossil fuels in heating, energy and transport, and change working practices and standards that use

these, or that are inefficient; as well as less direct ones, such as reducing employee business travel and commuting, reducing consumption of goods and services, and considering issues such as visitor travel to museums, investments and waste management (see McGhie 2021, Part d).

- Supporting society to reduce emissions.
- Ensuring museums are fit for the future to adapt to climate change.
- Supporting society's adaptation.
- Ensuring that climate action is fair and contributes to broader sustainable development goals (McGhie 2021).

But these practical goals can only be achieved by taking further action to rethink the roles of museums in society. To this end, there are another five ways in which we would suggest museums need to fundamentally change to reimagine themselves for future climate action.

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, they need to reckon with their histories, and how those histories continue to play out in the present. As shown by ongoing discussions about the restitution and repatriation of objects in museums, they need to take a critical look at their histories and the role played by the narratives they have produced – narratives of human exceptionalism, hierarchical understandings of human culture and an emphasis on 'progress' and 'civilisation' – in underpinning and helping to produce the current climate emergency.

Second, they need to rapidly decarbonise museum buildings and their operations (especially things like touring exhibitions which are incredibly carbon-intensive). This means benchmarking success differently – in terms not of numbers of visitors, but of how they interact with and facilitate social action. Third, they need to take a critical look at who they associate with and the sponsorship they receive – as emphasised by current protests at the Science Museum and British Museum and the work of activist groups like Culture Unstained and Fossil Free Culture.

Fourth, in addition to telling their own stories differently, they need to tell different stories. Any museum can be a 'climate museum', and some of the ideas in the exhibition and our various project outputs explore how this might be done. Finally, they need to see their role differently – as facilitators for individuals and communities, aiming to catalyse and support them in taking the climate action they wish to take, rather than as authorities.

Every part of society will need to make radical changes to address the climate emergency, and this includes museums and the cultural

sector. Museums could, and in many cases are keen to, play a leading role in these transformations. But like all of society, they will only be able to do so if they make significant changes to the way they operate, the stories they tell and how they are told, the sponsorship they receive, and the ways in which they perceive their roles in relation to the publics they serve.

Conclusion

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh argues that ‘the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination’ (Ghosh 2016: 9). Thus, 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 push forwards critical and creative thinking in a number of key areas. First, by recognising that museums are densely entangled with the problem of climate change, we sought to underline the need for an epistemic shift in museological thinking and 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 imaginaries. 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.

Taken collectively, the competition entries and suggestions collected from the public during COP26 suggest a number of important transformations which must take place in order for museums to become meaningful institutions in facilitating real climate action. The first relates to breaking down boundaries and moving away from authoritarian values of order and control. In an inevitably transforming future world, museums must accept and embrace the creative possibilities of uncertainty and change rather than work against these forces. This will mean reimagining the familiar structure of museums – the second major theme to emerge from the competition. Instead of centralised spaces and buildings, many of the submitted proposals called for non-hierarchical ‘networks’ enabling a decentralised approach to collecting, education and research. This would require a fundamental rethink of the way museums are typically governed – the third and perhaps most important theme to emerge across the competition entries.

Certain crises demand new forms of decision-making where experts and lay people can come together to imagine new futures.

As a participatory thought experiment, what the project perhaps demonstrates most clearly is the radical potential that still clings to the idea of the museum, taking us far beyond the walls of any single building or site to encompass community activism, digital infrastructures, citizen science and diverse forms of ‘rewilding’. Such propositions do not simply imagine new purposes for ‘the museum’ as an apparatus of climate action; rather, they question and undermine the very substance of museological work and its role in the production of future worlds. We remain hopeful – despite the dire warnings for the future of the planet which have accompanied the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report – of the significant potential for museums to contribute to the broad social, ecological, economic and political transformations which will be required to address the climate emergency.

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Notes

1. In 1992, the world's governments committed to address the rapidly growing threat of global climate change by adopting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which aims to achieve the 'stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system'. The convention came into force in 1994. Since then, governments and their representatives have met twice a year to monitor progress, evaluate what action is needed to meet the convention's key goals, and agree programmes of activity that are then to be delivered in each country. Notably, the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 committed its signatories by setting internationally binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Paris Agreement of 2015 saw its signatories agree 'to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius'. Each year, a meeting is held in Bonn, Germany, in the summer, to help set the direction for the larger, more important conference that is usually held in November or December. This larger meeting is often referred to as the COP, which means the 'Conference of the Parties'. COP26, the 26th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, was originally scheduled to take place in November 2020, but was rescheduled for November 2021 on account of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This was the first year since 1984 that a COP had not been held.
2. The 'Green Zone' at any COP is the public-facing part of the conference. The 'Blue Zone' is the policy-facing part of the conference and is only accessible to official delegates.
3. https://artsandculture.google.com/story/reimagining-museums-for-climate-action-cabinet-office/tAWB_rRlcmjQ?hl=en

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