“Art Museums and the global tourist: Experience centres in Experience-Scapes”

Introduction

Our global culture places increasing value on leisure and entertainment, and tourism is a consummate industry for catering to such experiences. Art museums play an important role in global cultural tourism because they offer culture, leisure and entertainment in popular cultural precincts, and thereby contribute to the process of reifying heritage, art, and other cultural experiences, which have become a kind of currency in our neo-liberal era.

The tourism industry is growing at a phenomenal rate. It is estimated that there were 1.87 billion tourists in 2014 (which is 1 in 7 of the global population), of which 107 million were Chinese tourists (an increase of 20% Chinese on 2013 figures). By 2030 Chinese tourist numbers are predicted to grow to 1.8 billion (spending $1.8 trillion) thereby doubling the current global figure for all tourists. [http://www.cottm.com/news-center/news/china-dominate-asia-outbound-travel-2030] Tourist numbers are growing all the time, as in Japan, which has just announced a record 1.7 million tourist visits in April of this year, up 43.3% on 2014, and following new records for tourist visits in Feb. and March. Greece clearly demonstrates the economic significance of tourism, as in 2014 1/6 of all Greeks were employed in tourism, and 16.4% of this country’s GDP derived from tourism. And many of these tourists are ‘not just any tourist, but international “experience guests”, primarily interested in “high culture” attractions such as historical sights, design exhibitions and luxurious shopping malls’ (Ek/O’Dell, 80).

In response to this lucrative market, many of the globe’s urban and regional infrastructures are being re-organised to service the experiential demands of an increasingly mobile populace. These include experience centres such as theme parks, cultural heritage sites and art museums, and their incorporation into expanded environmental experience-scapes, such as urban and suburban cultural precincts that include ‘stores, museums, cities, sporting arenas, shopping centers, neighbourhood parks and well-known tourist attractions’. (O’Dell, p. 15) Even entire cities are becoming cultural experience-scapes, as is evidenced by Europe’s European Capital of Culture (since 1985, current holders Mons and Plzen).

This paper will briefly examine the cultural and economic roles that art museums play in experience-scapes, before undertaking a more detailed consideration of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart Tasmania, which is a fascinating example of an art museum in an experience-scape. [image#1] It opened in 2011 and houses the private art collection of David Walsh, a gambling entrepreneur. This art museum’s contribution to the Tasmanian tourism industry and a struggling local economy has exceeded the
The Art Museum as experience centre

In the late 1980s as neo-liberalism consolidated its influence over economic and political life many publically funded (art) museums were placed under pressure to appeal to broader audiences. This fed into the field of “new museology” where museums moved away from the didactic use of collections and devoted more resources towards attracting populist audiences via blockbuster shows, biennials, the display of celebrity artists as brands, and novel and participatory art. Museums also initiated a range of entertainment activities and events that were normally outside the purview of art, such as jazz nights, wine tasting sessions, and festival-type events. This has been part of a larger shift in purpose ‘from a museum of “interpretation” to one of “experience”’ (Foster, 119), as well as a transition from cultural repository of valuable material artefacts to ‘a theatrical set for staging multi-media experiences.’ (Huppatz, 200)

As art museums have become more like entertainment venues they have played a crucial role in attracting tourists to cultural precincts and experience-scapes. In New York for example, 79% of the 50.5 million foreigners who visited that city in 2012 attended a cultural institution [f/n]. A sizeable portion of these visitors attend the major art museums MoMA and the Guggenheim (in the world’s top 50 museums). Of those visitors to MoMA only 15% were from the New York area, while for the Guggenheim that figure was around 13% out of the 1.18 million visitors that attend that institution every year. These statistics demonstrate the vital role art museums play in attracting global tourists and enhancing economic benefits to the city of origin.

“Place Marketing and art museums”

In an intensely competitive global environment cities have become more business-oriented and are investing more resources into marketing and promoting their unique cultural wares. These include architectural monuments such as stadiums, music halls, theme parks, festival marketplaces, leisure parks, art museums, cultural centres, as well as distinctive urban planning, gastronomic distinctiveness, and other cultural attractions. All of these are used for ‘place marketing’, which involves the discursive and
marketable ‘framing’ of specific urban precincts and regions ‘in order to attract business, tourism, conventions, and sports teams that promise a pulsating environment for employment and trade’ (Klingmann, 272).

Cities promote existing cultural infrastructure (such as the Parthenon), and/or turn to the construction of urban precincts that combine cultural institutions, shopping districts and luxury accommodation to appeal to wealthy clients and tourists. These urban and regional infrastructures are the new experience-scapes, which under the influence of neo-liberalism, sees the city itself as a commercial entity, or corporation, that can be developed and promoted in an attempt to claim a lucrative share of the global tourist market with its experiential offerings (as NYC’s re-branding in the late 1970s demonstrated). Accordingly, like any other branded product city experience-scapes can be ‘re-conceptualized, re-structured, re-made, re-presented and re-marketed.’ (Ek/O’Dell, 87).

Art museums have had a significant influence on the branding, design and orientation of experience-scapes. One of the landmarks in this regard was Rogers and Piano’s Pompidou Cultural Centre in Paris (1979) [image#2]. This marked an international turning point in the museum’s transition from didactic authority to tourist-centric experience centre, for it opened the era of the museum as blockbuster with auteur buildings designed to dazzle and attract a public eager for the consumption of spectacles. This building has an art collection, but is also a multidisciplinary cultural ‘living space’ with public library, music venue, centre for industrial design, workshops and conference sites. Since its opening it has attracted millions of tourists a year, and is an iconic Pop Art-style building that looks like a factory outside (surrounded by plazas), and a shopping mall inside. It is situated in the Beaubourg tourist precinct, and was erected to act as a catalyst for urban regeneration and the gradual gentrification of the Marais area of Paris.

Another star in the firmament of art museums that have contributed to the successful reception of experience-scapes is the Guggenheim Bilbao (built in 1997 by stararchitect Frank Gehry) [image#3]. In an attempt to revive this dilapidated Galician industrial city its authorities hired Gehry and the Guggenheim to construct a museum with an iconic design. In this instance, the Guggenheim in New York was the flagship store, and the Bilbao its franchise, so this architecture was very much a ‘product’ from the beginning, and it had proved to be extremely popular. The 1 million tourists it attracts every year is testament to this success. Its iconic design also branded the city with a distinctive aesthetic profile that added cultural and social prestige in the global tourist marketplace. In addition, it revitalized the city and led to gentrification of certain districts and other urban infrastructure projects, including a metro system that was designed by another stararchitect Norman Foster. The museum’s distinctive architectural design and its contribution to the Bilbao experience-scape far outweigh its value as a repository of art objects. This successful enterprise led to the term, “Bilbao effect”, and its strategies were quickly adopted by ambitious cities seeking to attract
more tourists. This included the requisite employment of star architects to build distinctive art museums; as with the Guggenheim in Las Vegas by REM Koolhaas; Milwaukee Art Museum (Santiago Calatrava), Hermitage Art museum (Zaha Hadid); and the Tate Modern (Herzog & de Meuron).

Experience-scapes

Some experience-scapes are associated with gentrification and wealthy ‘tourizens’, and are like cultural, shopping and lifestyle theme parks. The art museum as cultural experience centre is often an important component in such precincts, and are designed ‘to assist in the postindustrial refashioning of old industrial cities – that is, in its being made safe for shopping and spectating’ (Art Since 1900,700). It is this kind of commercial streamlining of urban centre into marketable lifestyle environment that characterises many experience-scapes. O’Dell describes experience-scapes ‘As sites of market production, the spaces within which experiences are staged and consumed [and] can be likened to stylized landscapes that are strategically planned, laid out and designed. They are ... landscapes of experience ... that are not only organized by producers (from place marketers and city planners to local private enterprises), but are also actively sought after by consumers. They are spaces of pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment’ (O’Dell, p 16)

The experience-scape has come into its own in an era when commerce has increased its reach into cultural lifestyles, and where there has been enormous investment in the construction of entire environments on unprecedented scales to cater for tourists and tourizens. Some of the more prominent examples include Shanghai, where the Rockbund Art Museum sits at the ‘cultural heart’ of a riverside promenade called the Shanghai Bund [image#485] (O’Dell, 2005). This extensive urban redevelopment scheme has a usable floor area of 102,000 sq. m and will offer luxury apartments, offices, malls and cultural facilities. It is being built by developer Sinolink Worldwide Holdings and the Rockefeller Group at a cost of 240 billion Euros. When finished it will cover 6 city blocks and will include 7 heritage buildings in one of the most valuable slices of real estate in Asia. The gentrification of the Shanghai Bund ‘fits seamlessly into globalisation rhetoric located between glamour and luxury, with historical building fabric [the 1930s Rockbund] used as the crowning element of an orientation in progress’ [Archit Aktuell, no. 364/65 July/August 2010, p 20] f/n It is of interest that the global artist Cai Guo Qiang has recently shown works at the Power Station of Art in the Bund and is providing his customary fireworks displays for global tourists visiting Shanghai [image#6]. Cai is the consummate global artist with his entertainment-focused fireworks art.

Los Angeles is also in the process of constructing a new cultural precinct that will contain “The Broad (brode)” a new contemporary art museum. It will be funded by a $200m endowment from Eli Broad and is being designed by star architects Diller,
Scofidio + Renfro. [image#7] It will include a 32-metre long escalator tube as a novel addition to the precinct, which should appeal to tourists. The Broad art museums will share Grand Ave with MOCA and the Frank Gehry designed Walt Disney Concert Hall. The Broad museum has been described as ‘not just a $140m building. It’s at the core of a cultural boom’ (GW, 31/10/2014, p41). The Brazilian government is also investing millions in the gentrification of the Porto Maravilha (Marvellous Port). [images#8 & 9] This experience-scape will be largely financed by corporations such as Tishman Speyer, the Trump Organization and the Westfield Group, and will transform a precinct known for its neglected favelas into luxury towers, hotels, and shopping malls. At its heart is the art museum Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR). This cultural centre (architects Bernardes & Jacobsen Arquitetura - 2013) has a distinctive flowing roofline to establish its iconic credentials, and ‘is the first landmark of the port-area renewal project, thus heralding a series of transformations that seek to turn the site into a predominantly corporate and tourist district … [and it will be] the “cultural anchor” of Porto Maravilha’ (ArtF). It will be one of three museums, including the Museu do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow - designed by Santiago Calatrava) at this site. This ambitious experience-scape has been described as an example of the ‘corporate cultural’; that is a style of urban infrastructure that appeals to affluent locals and visitors, and presents a standardised range of services such as art museums, prestige shopping malls, luxury apartment blocks, yachting facilities, etc. In some respects, the design of these ‘scapes is today’s “International Style” and promotes cultural cache, gentrified aspirations, and experience zones that are attractive to tourists. These projects however, as with the earlier forms of modernist architecture, are not always sensitive to local contexts and concerns.

**MONA**

MONA in Tasmania does not exist on this grand scale, but has managed to gain ‘cut through’ in the global market by surprising means. Firstly, Walsh did not employ a global stararchitect to create his building, opting instead for Greek-Australian, Sydney architect Nonda Katsalidis. The building also doesn’t rely on a spectacular and iconic exterior design to attract attention. Its most unique and distinguishing features are inside the building. If approaching by ferry one berths at a small dock site and then ascends a flight of exterior stairs that leads to a broad plaza with a tennis court, a couple of public artworks, and other public spaces. These don’t appear to lead anywhere in particular, and there are no signs that provide directions to what is a rather nondescript entrance. After entering the space one goes into a ‘foyer’, which is in part an actual lounge room from a 1950s home on the original site that has been incorporated into the new museum (and was designed by Australian modernist architect Roy Grounds). This allusion to domestic intimacy takes the viewer aback because there is no grand public-styled entrance. Instead, entry to the exhibition spaces is obtained by descending a spiral staircase where one eventually discovers that the ‘start’ of the museum is on a third floor basement level. [image#11] There are three basement level floors, as well as catacombs and a tunnel that links the museum to original heritage buildings above
ground. This makes it a little like an adventure playground. The most spectacular part of the interior is a wall that consists of a 143m long Triassic sandstone cliff that was excavated into the riverbank of the peninsula. The sandstone walls have a dramatic impact that that is reminiscent of theatrical scenery, and this unusual feature is combined with cantilevered mezzanine floors that open up the various floors to multiple perspectives, which adds drama and a strong sense of theatre.

The labyrinthine nature of the interior presented numerous challenges for exhibition design. Walsh’s patchwork collection also spanned diverse periods: from Minoan funerary caskets to radical contemporary art. To make the most of this, the art is situated in ‘configurations’ with works from different historical periods inhabiting the same gallery spaces. This militates against a linear navigation of the galleries, so the viewer becomes immersed in a kind of labyrinthine ‘dreamscape’ and must explore the space without guidance. The spaces are also darkly illuminated, rather than brightly lit, and there are no wall labels. The absence of wall labels further alters the experience of viewing and interacting with art, for without them the viewer must engage with the displays on a more sensory, immersive and phenomenological level without recourse to intellectual or critical assessments. This transforms the experience of art from older didactic bourgeois tradition in which the populace is taught ‘how’ to understand an artwork towards a non-guided theatrical experience more in keeping with entertainment modes.

The digital application known as the “O” is an important feature of MONA’s experiential management techniques for it emphasises a novel “interface” ‘between consumers and brand. Like any self-respecting museum the “O” devices (resembling iphones) are distributed at the entrance, but their operations and databases are different to normal offerings. For example, the icon links in the device are ‘summary’ (basic description of work), ‘ideas’ (propositions and questions related to the work), ‘gonzo’ (Walsh’s anecdotal responses to the work), ‘media’ (curator and artist interviews), and ‘art wank’ (standard museum explanations). It also has a voting facility where users can select a ‘love’ or ‘hate’ category. Visitors can also save and upload the data to their own PCs, which they can access at their leisure. The digital app provides background and explanations for the work if one wishes to consult it, but one can more easily negotiate the art and objects and explore the spaces as experience zones.

The museum also enlists the work of celebrity artists like Matthew Barney, and Marina Abramovic, and has managed a winter festival called Dark Mofo (with government tourist agencies), and has art, film, music and banquets.

Having built his fortune on on-line gambling, Walsh has recently declared an interest in establishing a casino called “Monaco” in MONA that will be aimed at ‘super wealthy art lovers from around the world’. This is a fascinating view of the art museum as commercial enterprise, and other institutions will surely follow Walsh’s ideas in future. Bellagio Hotel, Las Vegas, casino & art museum
The museum is also part of an experience-scape that includes the museum, a vineyard, entertainment stages and vacation accommodation. In addition, MONA’s riverine connection to Hobart serves to enhance and extend that city as an experience-scape. MONA lies in one of Hobart’s outer suburbs and is a 20-minute ferry ride from Hobart, and one can take a ferry ride up the Derwent River to get to it. This ferry trip departs from Hobart central docks and the pilot points out historical features along the route for tourists. They are designated “MONA” ferries and travellers can pay for a luxury berth (called the “posh pit”) that includes fine wine and a gourmet meal. Visitors are also offered various transport options to the museum, including a helicopter, and a chauffer driven Audi.

With its idiosyncratic and boutique profile MONA has made a spectacular contribution to Tasmania’s tourism industry. It is the most popular tourist attraction in the state, receives 350,000 visitors a year, and helps bring in $79 million annually. Local newspapers have lauded MONA, claiming that Tasmania’s ‘tourism industry is riding the wave of a MONA-led revolution, with visitor numbers smashing previous records; Tourism groups were yesterday celebrating results of the latest Tasmanian Visitor Survey, which showed a 14% jump in numbers for the year ending last December. The boost resulted in a 13% increase in visitor spending, to $1.58 billion.’ [Hobart Mercury, “World Class MONA helps Tassie smash tourism record”] The chief executive of the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania (Luke Martin) added, “It’s the MONA effect … It’s more than just the product itself; it’s generated interest and awareness in Tasmania which has made us stand out in the market.”

The experience-scape speaks of many things in today’s neo-liberal climate. On one level it signals a new model for urban planning and design, and reveals how vital tourism is to the economics of global cities in the early 21st C. This is experiential tourism in an era of super-capitalism, and shows how entire environments are being transformed in recognition of experience as an important economic and cultural offering. It also provides insights into the nature of globalisation itself, and how it is being defined via competition between ‘city-states’ in a global marketplace. The art museum is a very important feature in this market, and on occasion is the pivot around which an experience-scape is organized. Moreover, by investing in the tourist as primary art audience, art museums are less interested in appealing to an older ‘core audience’ of academics, art insiders, autodidacts, and university students, and are functioning as a vital conduit in the valorization of intangible cultural experience and its translation into tangible economic outcomes.

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