



# Cities and museums of cities

## Hybrid discourses and social ecosystems

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*The revolution in our times has to be urban or nothing.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Museum-city [is] far richer in every respect  
than any city-museum can ever be.<sup>2</sup>*

### ABSTRACT

*Cities and museums are chameleon-like, hybrid artefacts that operate in a world that is nowadays immersed into a kind of 'great unsettling'. Urban identity, citizenship and civic engagement, belonging, urban networks, cooperation and connectivity, activism and innovation in various forms from environmental sustainability initiatives to the cultural incorporation of immigrants are key matters for reflection and action within this context. If David Harvey, as a social historian, sets in his study on rebel cities the age-old question 'what kind of city we want', this article aims to re-address the question within the context of museums and exhibitions that deal with contemporary urban utopias, dystopias and networks of urban experiences and ask what kind of city museums we need in contemporary societies. It discusses how museums of cities are living systems of tremendous scale and potential which embody a hybridity of cultures and employ an array of modalities that tell different stories of the world. It also reflects on urban museology through a systems thinking lens and sets new questions on key social issues about cities and museums of cities.*

### URBAN UTOPIAS, DYSTOPIAS AND NETWORKS OF URBAN EXPERIENCES

The urban process is global in scope. David Harvey suggests that it is also a process 'wracked with all manner of fissures, insecurities, and uneven geographical development'.<sup>3</sup> The right to the city, as he argues drawing from Henri Lefebvre's seminal essay,<sup>4</sup> is connected with key existential concerns about the quality of everyday life in the cities in times of crisis and the creation of alternative urban life that promotes more meaningful and open encounters between people. It is also connected with the political question of who shapes cities, which elites prevail in decision making, based on which needs and desires, and how various complex processes in the cities are addressed by different social agents.<sup>5</sup>

Recent work on the happiness crusade in cities encourages us to think of them not merely as engines of financial wealth but rather as social systems that should be shaped to improve human wellbeing. In this respect, we are warned not to judge the happiness of a city by its

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey 2012, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Cotton Dana 1920, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey 2012, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre 1968, x-xii.

sheer wealth but assess its quality of life by the quality of the relationships that the citizens develop between themselves and acknowledge those relationships as more important than local and global economies.<sup>6</sup> No doubt, city barometers and indexes do exist as a way to define material and immaterial evidence of urban qualities, create comparative ranking tables and distil the essence of sustainable city brands.<sup>7</sup> Within the globalisation creed and a highly competitive world, the 'branding' of cities and the amassing of collective symbolic capital becomes a political act. There are several known examples around the world, both of cities<sup>8</sup> and museums, that serve a successful branding ambition. Cities use their soft power,<sup>9</sup> namely their ideas, knowledge, values and tangible and intangible culture, in order to stand out. City branding relies a lot on the creation of an iconic 'experience' or 'signature architecture' and the staging of cultural events of all kinds. However, the wide adoption of architectural choices and methods that have increased homogeneity among cities does not promote their distinctiveness and unique identities. It is also true that most branding campaigns have been based on deliberate formal strategic procedures adopting top-down approaches and much less on place brand co-creation initiatives that take equally into account the experiences of local people and their needs or even the stories city museums tell. Co-creating city brands in partnership with a multitude of local stakeholders and in accordance with a bottom-up approach offers a more representative and dynamic frame of work which fosters better ownership of the brand by locals. With this in mind, we can sense the potential impact of museums, and specifically of city museums, as 'guardians of collective symbolic and cultural capital'<sup>10</sup> in the formation and constant renegotiation of urban identity and the need to develop more co-creative procedures of place branding in the museum by involving a multitude of stakeholders.

Sustainability and social innovation in cities can also be related to cooperation especially today when we begin to come to terms with the limits placed on the planet and at the same time we realise the importance of connectivity both on a local and on a global level. A kind of dialogue of cooperation or co-designing process<sup>11</sup> arises as a 'process in which everybody is allowed to bring along their ideas'.<sup>12</sup> Social cooperation, as advocated by thinkers like Richard Sennett,<sup>13</sup> can be an essential asset for the making of better cities but it is also a 'thorny process, full of difficulty and ambiguity'.<sup>14</sup> Nowadays, the excess of rigidity in form as well as people's de-skilling in the practice of cooperation affects urban design, leading often to cultural homogenization as well as fear for conditions of complexity and difference, be they political, racial or any other.<sup>15</sup> A vision of togetherness would instead provide useful alternative insights. From Sennett's plentiful references on this matter, I would like to highlight some which in my view resonate not only with the function of cities and our everyday life challenges in them but also with the function of museums in cities as spaces for dialogue that promote human empowerment, empathy and openness. Sennett distinguishes the dialectic from the dialogic kind of conversation both grounded on the act of listening between two different parties. Although he clearly states that the difference between dialectic and dialogic conversation is not a matter

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<sup>6</sup> Montgomery 2013, 42.

<sup>7</sup> For various kind of indexes, see Florida 2008 and Insch 2011.

<sup>8</sup> The relevant literature is vast and here come only two titles out of many: Bell and Avner de-Shalit 2011; Glaeser 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Dexter Lord and Blankenberg 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey 2012, 105, 108.

<sup>11</sup> Manzini 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Manzini 2015, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Sennett 2012. For an interesting review of the book, see Runciman 2012, 3 February 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Sennett 2012, x.

<sup>15</sup> Sennett 2012, 8.

of either/or, he nonetheless clarifies that 'in dialectic, the verbal play of opposites gradually builds up to a synthesis and the aim is to come eventually to a common understanding'.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the dialogic discussion does not resolve itself by finding common ground but by making people aware of their own views and thus expand their understanding of one another. Interestingly, Sennett goes further into relating the notions and acts of sympathy and empathy with the dialectic and dialogic kinds of conversation, the former acting more as an embrace and the latter as an encounter.<sup>17</sup>

Cities and museums are chameleon-like, hybrid artefacts that operate in a world that is nowadays immersed into a kind of 'great unsettling'.<sup>18</sup> Urban identity, citizenship and civic engagement, belonging, urban networks, cooperation and connectivity, activism and innovation in various forms from environmental sustainability initiatives to the cultural incorporation of immigrants are key matters for reflection and action within this context. If Harvey sets in his study on rebel cities the age-old question 'what kind of city we want' alongside some other side key questions as 'what kind of people we want to be', 'what kinds of social relations we seek', 'what relations to nature we cherish', 'what style of life we desire', this article aims to re-address such kinds of questions within the context of museums and exhibitions that deal with contemporary urban utopias, dystopias and networks of urban experiences and ask what kind of city museums we need in contemporary societies.

## IDEAS ON HYBRIDITY AND SYSTEMS VIEW OF LIFE AND OF CITIES

The social linguist James Paul Gee studies the nature of hybridity<sup>19</sup> and sees in human language two main functions: the first is about scaffolding the performance of social activities and the second about scaffolding human affiliation within cultures, social groups and institutions. One of his most important reminders is that 'life for all of us is just a patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions in Discourses' (with a capital D).<sup>20</sup> In other words, we are all members of many, a great many, different Discourses, which often influence each other in positive and negative ways, and which sometimes breed with each other to create new hybrids. So, hybridity is often hidden, denied or its origins forgotten, whereas people overlook the fact that almost everything in history is a mixture, a hybrid. Likewise, the idea for a hybrid nature of museums of cities could be an inspiring one, because in this way we can identify many different generic and hybrid types of cities and accordingly different museum practices. We can thus list at least dozen different options of generic cities, and this list can further expand depending on contemporary socio-political understandings and interpretations about them: the *palimpsest* historic city; the *hyper-diverse* city; the *mega-city*; the *global* city; the *post-colonial* city; the *post-industrial* city; the *branded touristic* city; the *ecological/green* city; the *traumatised* by conflict, social unrest, terrorism or poverty city; the *refugee camp* city; the *slum* city; the *ghetto* city; the *virtual* city; the *port or/and isle* city; the *peripheral-edge* city; the *nucleus* city (at the level of the street and/or of neighbourhood), not to mention so many other taxonomies of cities based on their current challenges: i.e. *resilient*, *walkable*, *creative*, *smart*, *(in)formal*, *open*, *digital*, *decent*, *accessible*, *fluid*, *sustainable* or *happy* cities. Imagine how this diversity of city types affects the cities and citizens, all the people involved in the making, re-making and daily operation of their respective urban museums.

A museum of city is a complex ecosystem whose organisms define its mind, body and spirit.

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<sup>16</sup> Sennett 2012, 18–20.

<sup>17</sup> Sennett 2012, 20–1.

<sup>18</sup> Sennett 2012, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Gee 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Gee 1999, 7.

Its heartbeat is constantly tuned by the heartbeats of its separate parts and although louder than their sum, it remains strong only when all of them stay alive. Monitoring daily the collective urban heartbeat and keeping it in good health is the prime role of museums of cities. A curator from Museum Rotterdam, during the process of its transformation, raised the following pertinent question: 'how can Rotterdammers with all their differences work and live together and how can the Museum play a significant role in this and in their life in general'.<sup>21</sup> What pre-occupied the museum discourse in other words was whether there was a role for the museum in exploring 'difference' and also the kind of resulting tensions and stress found in various domains in the city.

So, Museum Rotterdam has been studying these domains of modern city life in partnership with Rotterdammers in order to devise strategies to cope with urban tensions, as this is both a way to identify important trends in the city and also to collect the heritage of the current era (Figs. 1–2). To use Nicole van Dijk's exact words 'by doing this together with Rotterdammers we are working towards a new set of values for a twenty-first century museum which acknowledges the importance of "living heritage"'.<sup>22</sup> And this is where the systems thinking can also be insightful for making this daily heartbeat and metabolism understood better.

Systems thinking sets its emphasis on the exploration of relationships, qualities, networks and processes. In essence, it reminds us that the world and any living system within it including social systems like small or large cultural organisations, are very complex, non-linear entities that need to be explored as interconnecting within a broader network of relationships by taking into account a large number of variables.<sup>23</sup> Based on two core theories that represent two different perspectives in life, the theory of autopoiesis and the theory of dissipative structures, systems theorists set out to outline the defining characteristics of living systems by starting from the structure of a single cell.<sup>24</sup> They explain that a cell is characterised by a boundary (the cell membrane) which distinguishes the system (the 'self') from its environment. Within this boundary, there is a network of chemical reactions, the cell's metabolism, by which the system sustains itself. Membranes are always active, opening and closing continually, keeping some substances out and letting others in. Membranes are very different from cell walls which are rigid structures. Membranes regulate the cell's molecular composition and thus preserve its identity. The cell membrane is thus the first defining characteristic of cellular life. The second is the nature of the metabolism that takes place within the cell boundary and determines its self-maintenance. When we take a closer look at the processes of metabolism, we notice that they form a chemical network. Networks are the key to the systemic definition of life because 'networks continually create, or recreate, themselves by transforming or replacing their components'.<sup>25</sup> This dynamic of self-generation is named 'autopoiesis' (a Greek word literally meaning 'self-making') and is identified as a key characteristic of life. Yet, the theory of autopoiesis does not provide a detailed description of the physics and chemistry that are involved in these networks. All cellular structures exist far from thermodynamic equilibrium and would soon decay and die if the cellular metabolism did not use a continual flow of energy to restore structures as fast as they are decaying. This means that the cell must be an open system and needs to be fed on continual flows of matter and energy from its environment in order to stay alive. The study of the flow of energy and matter through complex systems has resulted in the theory of dissipative structures which focuses on the spontaneous emergence of new forms

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<sup>21</sup> van Dijk 2015, 33–7.

<sup>22</sup> van Dijk 2015, 36.

<sup>23</sup> The seminal book by Capra and Luisi 2014 provides an excellent analysis of systems thinking and its application to all aspects of life.

<sup>24</sup> Capra 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Capra 2002, 9.





Figs. 1-2. Museum Rotterdam entrance hall and main exhibition area which is regularly changing in order to focus on contemporary urban issues through the concept of "bonding heritage".

of order at critical points of instability. This new 'emergence' is the dynamic origin of development, learning, creativity and evolution. Thus, system theorists conclude that open systems develop and evolve whilst life constantly reaches out into novelty.<sup>26</sup>

The aliveness of a living system like a city or of an organization like a museum resides in its communities and their relationships, in the ways their membranes and metabolisms work and the ways they process matter and energy from the environment. The process of emergence entails a certain openness within an entity or organization, a willingness to be disturbed. A new urban vision for an Open City is clearly based on systems thinking and the theories of autopoiesis and dissipative structures.<sup>27</sup> Richard Sennett, who advocates it, talks about the creation of ambiguous edges and the differences between the boundaries (cell wall) and the borders (cell membrane) within an urban context. He refers to the *boundary* as an edge where things end (the boundary as a dead-end) and defines a guarded territory where the exchange between different racial, ethnic or communities is non-existent. On the other, he claims that a *border*, both porous and resistant, is where difference groups interact and connect. Cities as open systems are in any case non-linear, flexible, fragmented, evolving bottom-up places that belong to the people who, in their social life, are encouraged to develop diverse dialogic approaches.

## DIFFERENT VISIONS OF URBAN UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Today, creating visions for the future and debating about changes seems as timely as in the 1900s or the 1960s. In the 1900s, for instance, the world experienced radical social changes due to industrialisation and large-scale flows of migrants into European cities or/and immigrants leaving the Old Continent for a new life in America. Issues of difference, otherness, empathy and coexistence, and the virtue of solidarity, both as an expression of unity and as a reflection of diverse inclusion, were then as timely as they are today. Exhibitors in the Paris Universal Exposition at the turn of the twentieth century aimed to celebrate the 'Triumph of Industry and Empire' but in parallel raised key social concerns through 'a show that no modern museum curator would ever have mounted'.<sup>28</sup> It was the so-called 'La Question sociale', a side-space social museum set up in few rooms, on a side street outside the range of the shiny innovations that were presented in the Fair. Mostly in the form of documents and maps mounted on the walls, whose content aimed to show 'the surging capitalism of their era, its inequalities and oppressions',<sup>29</sup> the Social Question was no other than a self-reflective exercise on 'how should society be made different'.<sup>30</sup> Some of the exhibits included Charles Booth's maps of poverty in London (for Great Britain), documents on the history-making coalition of labour unions and political parties (for Germany), pamphlets on social policy (for France) or daunting statistical material on the fate of African-Americans in the state of Georgia, USA and race differences (for the USA), a totally novel topic at least for the Europeans who usually focused on class differences. All the exhibits in these rooms were meant to be provoking. Visitors seemed<sup>31</sup> to be more interested in this kind of material than the industrial innovations presented in the central spaces of the Fair. The common theme that connected all the displays in these rooms was solidarity and its meaning for different people.

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<sup>26</sup> Capra 2002, 11–2.

<sup>27</sup> Sennett 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Sennett 2012, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Sennett 2012, 35–9.

<sup>30</sup> Sennett 2012, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Sennett 2012, 36.





Figs. 3–4. Poster and a view from the exhibition *Tomorrows: urban fictions for possible futures*.



Making a big jump in time, some contemporary exhibitionary examples resonate with that early exercise of social activism in the space of an exhibition. The first such example I would like to mention is the fascinating exhibition *You say you want a REVOLUTION? Records and Rebels 1966–1970*,<sup>32</sup> on show in 2016–2017 in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The exhibition framed and explained this pre-digital global uprising, still relevant for our contemporary societies. As the exhibition curators noted in the Preface of the exhibition catalogue ‘the years from 1966 to 1970, just 1,826 days, shook the foundations of post-WWII society and undeniably shaped the way we live today. They set the agenda that is at the heart of the current struggle between Western liberal values and fundamentalism of all sorts’.<sup>33</sup> With their focus being on different kinds of revolutions that took place in look, lifestyle, politics and beliefs, they used music to create sensational and evocative connecting paths for audiences to explore in depth these five fascinating years of world history. Their clue was that ‘in a world without mobile phones, music provided the connectivity for the late 1960s, linking similarly minded people thousands of miles apart with ideas, words, humour, images and, above all, a sense of community and common aspirations’.<sup>34</sup> And as they note, ‘a huge amount of this revolution of “utopianism”, is still with us’<sup>35</sup> despite the fact that it later fell into decline.

In Athens whilst the economic and social crisis holds strong, the Onassis Cultural Centre<sup>36</sup> organised a separate urban project, in a series of many such projects, entitled *Tomorrows: urban fictions for possible futures*, on view for two months in spring 2017 in one of the most multicultural neighbourhoods of the city (Figs. 3–4). The exhibition aimed to present utopian and dystopian scenarios about the future and to ‘unfold the multiple aspects the future presents today through the works of artists, architects, and designers’ (exhibition leaflet). The thinking behind the exhibition was triggered by the fact that today ‘a series of environmental, technological, and social shifts are changing the planet, forcing us to reassess our place on it’.<sup>37</sup>

The exhibition’s approach to contextualize its exhibits within contemporary relevance has been grounded on the premise that on one hand ‘the Earth resembles a city which keeps on sprawling outwards while other areas are abandoned due to climate change and extreme socio-political conditions’.<sup>38</sup> Not totally unexpectedly, the exhibition focused on local urban visions for the cities of the Mediterranean and set at centre stage a utopic project also rooted in the 1960s, the so-called *Ecumenopolis* (1959–1974) which was conceived and developed by a Greek visionary urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis as a continuous network of interconnected cities. This mega city would occupy the whole of the inhabited planet by the beginning of the twenty-second century, yet the most interesting part of this futuristic project would be its function, the type of life that would be created with the city and the quality of life that would offer to the people, all very relevant concerns for our lives in the cities today. Doxiadis’ core philosophy was expressed in his *Ekistiks* and was grounded on some key elements them-

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<sup>32</sup> On show from 10/9/2016 to 26/2/2017, the exhibition explores the era-defining significance and impact of the late 1960s, expressed through some of the greatest music and performances of the twentieth century alongside fashion, film, design and political activism, and considers how the finished and unfinished revolutions of the time changed the way we live today and think about the future.

<sup>33</sup> Broackes and Marsh 2016, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Broackes and Marsh 2016, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Broackes and Marsh 2016, 14.

<sup>36</sup> OCC is a highly repeatable institution and cultural space that develops and supports local and international projects across the entire spectrum of performative, visual and digital arts, hybrid arts and design, architecture and sciences and also promotes interdisciplinary approaches to the understanding of the urban phenomenon. See <http://www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1/>.

<sup>37</sup> A statement by the exhibition curators Daphne Dragona and Panos Dragonas. See <http://tomorrows.sgt.gr/article.php?article=1&lang=en>

<sup>38</sup> See more information about the exhibition in its website <http://www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1757/>.

selves used in the context of the exhibition to outline the main components of the future and related fields of change. These elements would be defined as nature and anthropos, his different shells and networks as well as society at large. The relations and balance between these elements would eventually determine the connections between humans and their physical environment. He believed that this ideal continuous city could be 'the real city of human', a cosmopolis in which all people would be equal and united into one world without national, racial, religious or other categorisations which serve to divide. Using Doxiadis' work as springboard for their interpretative approach, the curators of *Tomorrows* posed two core existential questions for individual and collective contemplation and provided five key subthemes as conceptual pointers around which they re-contextualized the projects selected for the exhibition. The questions were: 'Which future is, at the end, the one we want, and what will be our role within its formation?' The five subthemes were interestingly set along the line of systemic thinking. The first theme, identified as the 'Post-natural environment', brings to the fore complex entanglements between nature and humans. The second theme, 'Networks and Infrastructures', is about connectivity and the immense changes brought to all aspects of our everyday lives. The third concept-theme, 'Shells and Co-habitats', questions the architecture and technological development of different containers of human life and human-made resources. The fourth concept, focusing on 'Algorithmic Society', brings forward the dilemmas and challenges of contemporary economic and social crisis, the refugees' issue, the growing xenophobia, the need for more social cooperation, solidarity and co-existence, as well as dystopias and utopias related to these new conditions. The central overriding question at stake is about the sustainability of contemporary cities and the evolution of their anthropogeography, a question that also connects with the final section and theme of the exhibition. Entitled 'Beyond Anthropos', it explores the limits of the sovereignty of humans on the planet and raises the issue, if not fear, of dominance of 'artificial superintelligence' over the human control. *Much is at stake and, in essence, the meaning of human life itself.*

*As the year 2016 marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's Utopia,<sup>39</sup> it comes as no surprise that utopic/dystopic imaginary scenarios bring new force to cultural production and appear as core elements in various hybrid exhibitions that cut across different fields of cultural production. In fact, the curators of the You say you want a REVOLUTION? used More's Utopia as a starting point of their exhibition paying special tribute to his vision in creating a fictional society that rejected intolerance, personal gain and property to promote instead a spirit of peace, contentment and community building.<sup>40</sup>*

Such is also the philosophical agenda of Lisbon's new and totally hybrid Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) which focuses on contemporary culture through a combination of visual arts, media, technology, science, society, architecture and the city.<sup>41</sup> MAAT is already deemed as 'the ideal location to consider the current mood of urban civilization'<sup>42</sup> and a core contributor to Lisbon's 'strong case for getting on the list of global contemporary art hubs'.<sup>43</sup> The new museum complex is located along one of Lisbon's most historic sites, the riverfront of Belém's historic district, next to the recently renovated iconic Central Tejo Power Station (and now the Electricity Museum). MAAT represents the new architecture, 'a spectacularly modest structure'<sup>44</sup> in a broader and most ambitious urban revitalization project earning

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<sup>39</sup> For a recent review of the book, see Eagleton 2015 16 October.

<sup>40</sup> Broackes and Marsh 2016, 13.

<sup>41</sup> For an overview of the museum project, see Gadanho 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Thorpe 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Choy 2017.

<sup>44</sup> A characterisation suggested by the Financial Times of London, as we get informed by MAAT's Director; see Gadanho 2017, 6.

# CITY NOW CITY FUTURE

**We are living in a world of cities. More than half of the world's population now live in urban areas. By 2050 more than 70% of us may be living in cities. What does the future hold for London and for cities around the world? And how can we all play a part in making our city better?**

**City Now City Future** is a year-long season of exhibitions, events, workshops, talks and debates that explore the wide range of initiatives taking place in cities globally, with a particular focus on the lives of Londoners today. We encounter the city as a series of relationships at different scales – as individual urban dwellers, within our local communities, our wider neighbourhoods and the city beyond. In London and around the world, ideas and innovations seek to improve cities and the experience of living in them. From governments and policy-makers to community groups and individual residents, we are all part of making our city.

By reflecting on the present and the past, we can start to imagine how cities could change and how we can all be part of shaping the cities of the future.

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Figs. 5–6. Introductory text and one of the info-graphic panels of the exhibition *City is Ours* at the Museum of London.





the status of a 'mini Bilbao effect'. Its position in the contemporary world of architectural innovation and urban regeneration, the challenges and opportunities the overall project brought to the city of Lisbon are indeed hot topics of discussion. MAAT was inaugurated in October 2016 and has already become one of Lisbon's top must-see locations. With years of previous professional experience in MOMA New York, MAAT's Director Pedro Gadanhó aims 'to relate contemporary art's critical discourse with crucial themes in current social and political debates' and 'discuss the impact of change in society'.<sup>45</sup> He urges audiences to reflect on how 'architecture, the city and technology are at the core of so much of the transformation of the world around us' and through contemporary art engage socially diverse communities and provide essential critical reflection on current social issues. In this frame of mind, he suggested that 'the contemporary museum can, and indeed should take a critical position' based on a triptych notion of its role 'as activator, as activist, and as agitator'.<sup>46</sup> This activating and agitating force in MAAT's new museum vision is imprinted in its inaugural exhibitions that opened to the public in March 2017. One of them on show during the first half of 2017, entitled *Utopia/Dystopia – A Paradigm Shift*,<sup>47</sup> was assigned the status of a first 'manifesto exhibition'. It shared concerns with the *Tomorrows* exhibition in Athens and revealed its inspiration source as also being Thomas More's *Utopia*. Through a hybrid assemblage of 60 artworks and projects from the fields of art, technology and architecture, the exhibition aimed, according to its press release, to reveal 'how the dichotomy between utopia and dystopia reflects a time of paradoxical acceleration, where anxiety and optimism collide' and notably recognized that 'today technological developments stimulate expectations of enhanced connectivity and a better quality of life'. However, cyclical crises constantly arise and disturb the social, political and ecological spheres.

<sup>45</sup> Gadanhó 2017, 9.

<sup>46</sup> See Pedro Gadanhó, TEDx conference in Vienna, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiHTGBT8hIc>

<sup>47</sup> Official website press release for the exhibition, <https://www.maat.pt/en/exhibitions/utopiadystopia>



Another example of a museum project that puts together local and international projects that are now real and happening and highlights the ways in which individuals, communities, universities and governments practice cooperation to improve city life is the exhibition *City is Ours* on show at the Museum of London during the second half of 2017. As an exhibition that was originally created by the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris, it is a useful addition to the list of inspiring exhibitionary ideas about contemporary urban visions. It is an interactive exhibition that according to the curatorial note 'looks at how and why cities are changing and what urban communities around the world are doing to improve city life'.<sup>48</sup> These objectives are realized through the four core sections of the exhibition: 'Urban Earth' which visualizes the urbanization of our planet through data and compares the features of major cities around the world; 'Cities Under Pressure' which deals with the challenges of urban growth and the personal experiences of cities by citizens; 'Urban Futures' which turns the spotlight to ground-breaking initiatives for the cause of sustainable cities around the world; 'London' which is about the contemporary reality of the British capital on the basis, among others, of a specially commissioned film projecting ideas about its future perspectives and twenty-five London-based community projects. The *City is Ours* exhibition is part of a wider project entitled *City Now, City Future* which stands out as a year-long season of ideas, debates and inspiration 'about the past, present and future of our cities' (running from May 2017 to April 2018) (Figs. 5–6). Through creative commissions, exhibitions, public events, talks, workshops, gaming and collective decision making, the project aims to explore the issues that matter to Londoners most, signposting thus a period of change and transition not only for London but also for its metropolitan museum whose relocation in the West Smithfield Market will be a reality by 2021–22. The preamble text of the project starts with an overly used statement: 'we are living in a world of cities. More than half of the world's population now live in urban areas. By 2050 more than 70% of us may be living in cities'. Yet, the project aims apparently to get beyond clichéd data and explore, now even more urgently as the Brexit clock has already started ticking, the following questions: 'how and why are our cities transforming?', 'what does it mean to live in a truly global city?', 'what does the future hold for London and for cities around the world?', 'what are urban communities around the world doing to improve city life?' and 'how can we all play a part in making our city better'? The interpretative museum approach is notably based on human-centred ideas and on participatory governance and civic engagement. The text panels occupying the walls of the museum entrance-induction area make references to such values through the adjectives defining the city of London today, envisaged more on a human scale rather than as a techno-dystopic tale: a people's city, a shared city, a living city, a future city.

## MUSEUMS (OF CITIES) AS HYBRID LIVING SYSTEMS: HOW DIFFERENCE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE AFTER ALL

Museums have the potential to build better societies by emancipating their citizens through participatory community involvement and creative work to reach meaningful self-governance in each one's adventurous pathway to self-fulfilment. They can serve as activators, activists and agitators. They can be the membranes and borders of societies that believe in cooperation through dialogue between diverse communities. But do they do that? What are their visions, missions, values and actions? And in analogy with the question posed by Harvey for the city, what kind of city museum do we want after all? This is the kind of question raised by the spe-

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<sup>48</sup> Anon. 2017, 3 April; see also the official exhibition website <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/museum-london/whats-on/exhibitions/the-city-is-ours>

cialised international committee for Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities (CAMOC)<sup>49</sup> which was founded under the administrative framework of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in recognition of the special role and multiple values cities hold. In 2015, an already 10-year-old recognised professional network, CAMOC set as priority to re-explore institutional identities by rethinking the role and character of museums of cities, the work of other museums on cities, their fluid borderlines and ultimately rewrite the definition of city museums in the twenty-first century. At the last section of the article, what will be attempted is a commentary on some key institutional trends that may also serve as indicators of broader changing discourses of museums of cities, especially now that many of them at least in Europe are undergoing large-scale transformations (in cities like Frankfurt, London,<sup>50</sup> Paris, Berlin,<sup>51</sup> Lisbon, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Valencia, Barcelona, Rotterdam, Helsinki and others).

Through a diversity of connecting debate routes such as a questionnaire-based survey and a number of workshops<sup>52</sup> in Berlin (2015), Moscow (2015), Glasgow (2015) and Athens<sup>53</sup> (2017) and its online publication *CAMOCnews* (later becoming a journal, *CAMOC Museums of Cities Review*), CAMOC set out to redefine the city museum and explore the work museums of cities develop in relation to key social issues such as migration. All these initiatives have been thoroughly documented, thus their detailed analysis will not be sought for here. What will be sought are brief digests and some key definitions on the city museum. The inaugural workshop of the ambitious project *Migration:Cities | (im)migration and arrival cities*,<sup>54</sup> organised in Athens in early 2017, discussed intensively the issue of migration and current refugee crises and the social dilemmas and responsibilities faced by city museums in dealing with these realities. The workshop had a range of positive outcomes, among others the co-creation of a *Vision* and a *Manifesto/Mission* statement for museum professionals and museums in regard to local and migrant communities in the cities, as well as a series of proposed *Strategies* to have in mind and endorse when embarking on social projects involving migrant communities or/and individuals.

Key-concepts that define city museums in contemporary societies form a long list of words, which if classified under broader rubrics like urban space, museum activities, changes in society, emotions, to a large extent resonate with many of the issues we discussed in the previous sections of the article. The need for city museums to approach communities and individuals in a proactive way and become co-production spaces and crowd-sourcing collectors of memories by developing participatory methodologies of collecting, curating or even governing, has been expressed frequently in the survey responses. The most prevailing concepts mentioned have been diversity, participation and community engagement. Building networks in cities and between cities and regions has also been identified as profoundly important, but of course there are different museum mind-sets and strategies, different social norms, and political cultures in terms of community engagement and participation in the work of museums in different geographical regions from north to south of Europe and outside Europe's frontiers.

Regarding the physical space of city museums, there is a certain fluidity and flexibility. Museum space is under constant renegotiation, especially as museums move around the city and form strategic partnerships with other agents in order to present their collections and work beyond their restricted locations. Today there is much more imagination in the use of public space by museums as an extended urban lab and can take pop-up forms or alternatively may

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<sup>49</sup> For the history of CAMOC, see for example Jones 2015 and Altayli 2015.

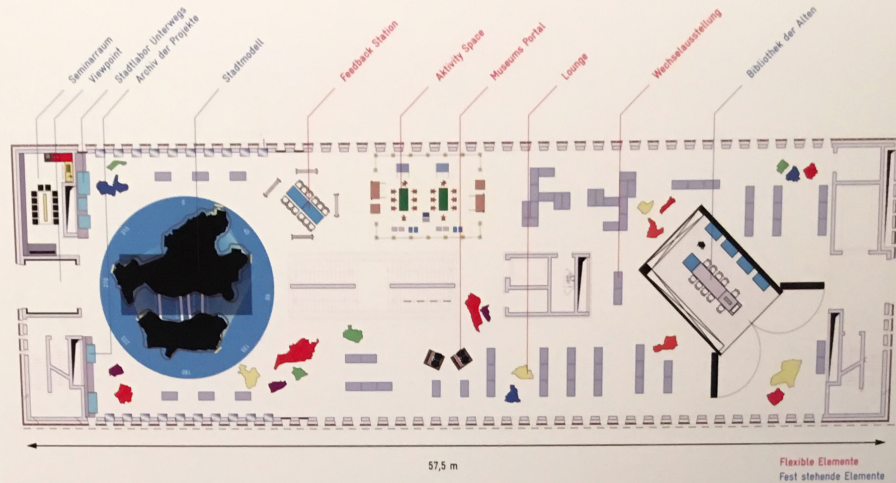
<sup>50</sup> Ament 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Anon. 2017, 23 August.

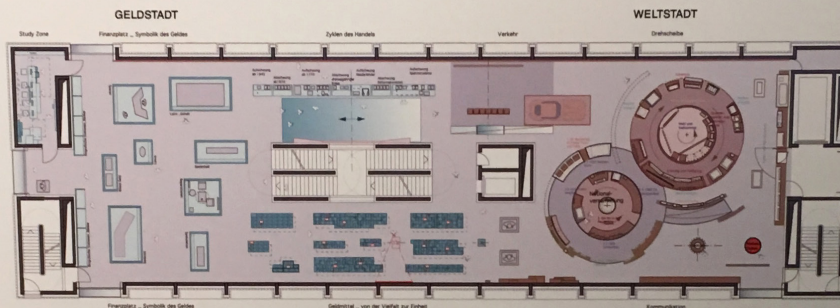
<sup>52</sup> A series of articles about these workshops and research work conducted by CAMOC is available online: Mouliou 2015a; 2015b.

<sup>53</sup> Mouliou *et al.* 2017.

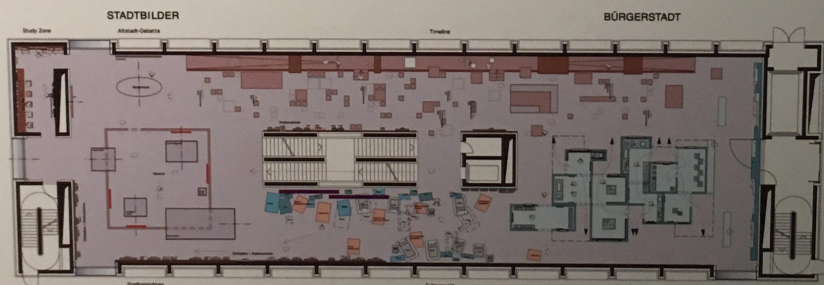
<sup>54</sup> Mouliou *et al.* 2017.



Grundriss der neuen Dauerausstellung »Frankfurt Jetzt!«  
im 2. Obergeschoss des Ausstellungshauses  
(Entwurf Kossmann DeJong, Amsterdam, 2012)



Grundriss der neuen Dauerausstellung »Frankfurt Einst?«  
zur Stadtgeschichte im 1. Obergeschoss des Ausstellungshauses  
(Entwurf gillmann + schneegg, Basel, 2012)



Grundriss der neuen Dauerausstellung »Frankfurt Einst?«  
zur Stadtgeschichte im Erdgeschoss des Ausstellungshauses  
(Entwurf gillmann + schneegg, Basel, 2012)

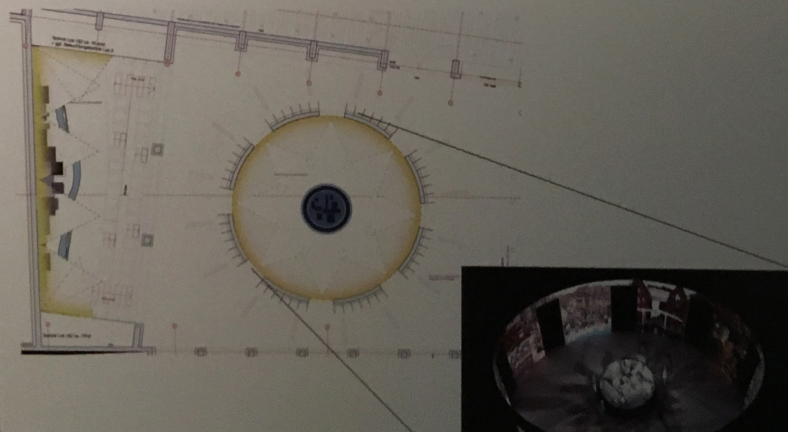


Fig. 7. Historical Museum of Frankfurt: re-design plans, on show in 2016, for its major transformation now completed



occupy only digital space. The presence of city museums in e-culture is very strong (websites, blogs, social media, apps on smart phones) reaches bigger and more diverse audiences. Many city museums of course operate in historic museum locations, which need to be respected as monuments but also be used creatively as modern functional spaces. Conflicts of interest between preservation and accessibility often arise. Some professionals feel that new museum buildings may be a viable solution for city museums to display more recent history and developments of the city as it is today, but this is not necessarily the only way.

Most city museums continue to rely on historical collections but, it would be interesting to explore whether there has been an evolution in their collecting strategy and their missions at large. Ghent City Museum (STAM) in Belgium, for instance, doesn't collect historical weapons any more (although the museum has such a collection) but concentrates on collecting scale models of the city and on developing projects about migration which feedback the museum collection with material and immaterial cultural heritage items. The nature of museum collections is expected to differ depending on its geographical distinctiveness. A typical city museum in Europe, for example, consists of paintings, prints and drawings, art objects, historical and some archaeological objects, audio-visual and photo collections, textiles, furniture, coins and medals, armoury, toys, scientific instruments, technology, everyday life etc., whereas a collection in an African museum may contain arts and crafts, pearls, traditional textiles and games, song and musical Instruments as well as audio-visual material. Some Chinese museum focus on pottery and calligraphy collections. Although museum narratives still tend to be much more informative in describing and understanding the past of the city and its present than dealing with the future of the city, most would agree that 'the focus of the narrative in the City Museum needs to be dialectic. The Chair of the ICOM national committee of Brazil has observed, within the framework of CAMOC's survey work, that being articulate, and able to describe, and interact with the past are essential factors to understand the present and design the future. These temporal references are interdependent and define the profile and characteristics of cities and their way of living. Assessing the museum presence in the cultural life of the city, the responses in CAMOC's survey identified networks as quite important and highlighted that museums could be really active on different levels of urban cultural life. In Amsterdam for instance, the city museum is represented in the Board of the Amsterdam Consultative Body of public and private museums; it has close links with the municipal marketing organisation and website *I Amsterdam* and equally close contacts with the municipal archive, the municipal archaeological service and the university. In Graz, the city museum collaborates with the Akademie Graz, local festival organisations, the University, the Association for History and Education (CLIO), the Association for Support of Youth, Culture and Sport, the Steirische Kulturinitiative, the Werkstadt Graz and others. In Brazil, there is a network of initiatives called culture points and points of memory, in which peripheral groups fit together. This network would be the main connection of collaboration of a city museum in Brazil. Jan Gerchow, the Director of the Historical Museum of Frankfurt and creator of the special City Lab has a motto for his kind of museum vision, which he expressed in the context of the above survey. He says that 'everyone is an expert in his city', whereas city museums themselves are to be perceived as the 'Living Rooms of Cities'.

The survey<sup>55</sup> also helped trace different strategies in terms of community engagement and participation in museum work in different geographical regions around the world. We can certainly argue that there are different mind-sets, different social norms, different political cultures, and different museum practices from north to south of Europe and outside Europe's frontiers. Participatory projects are an integral part of museum work in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Glasgow, London, Ghent and many other museums in north and

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<sup>55</sup> By way of concise presentation of innovative city museum projects suggested by the survey respondents, see Mouliou 2015a, 8.



central Europe and the USA, whereas such projects are now being endorsed as a way to exercise effective social practice in museum organisations in the south of Europe. In Brazil, where society is now facing major crises which could give birth to innovative urban projects of great public interest, a city museum would be the obvious body to organize them. The first crisis deals with ethics and involves a political action of society against corruption on the part of rulers and the second one is the crisis of water which is directly related to the issue of sustainability of cities (need for conscious consumption, the role of media in public information campaigns and the kind of social practices implemented, ethics, etc.). Financial sustainability, social relevance, building new audiences and influencing local politics are obvious key current challenges that come to the fore through CAMOC's survey research.

Beyond the survey, when looking at all the museum projects discussed in CAMOC's publications from 2011 to today, it is possible to argue that there is a proliferation of innovative initiatives (from Sao Paulo, Auckland and El Paso to Osaka, Tokyo and Taiwan, from Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Newcastle and Krakow to London, Helsinki, Berlin, Ghent, Rotterdam, Trento and Istanbul) that resonate with systemic principles, especially those on the value of diversity and cooperation and the importance of finding meaning in life, which, of course, is not solely a museum concern. When comparing definitions proposed by professionals representing museum organisations from different countries and continents, some interesting observations come to the fore. In Europe, a city museum like the Historical Museum in Frankfurt is defined by its Director more like a centre of information, reflection and discussion about a city, a multi-vocal and multi-faceted forum, which is concerned about all the temporalities of the city and important topics concerning municipal society (Fig. 7). It is perceived as an agent for understanding social processes in the city, as a vehicle of representation and projection of the diverse civic societies of the twenty-first century. This diversity is connected and respected throughout all the resources of the museum: collections, activities, and human resources. A key factor is the participatory culture of work, by which the collective wealth of citizens' experiences and knowledge is endorsed as part and parcel of museum operation. A Latin American voice from Brazil resonates with this European perspective and focuses on the forum-like nature of the city museum, its democratic and open culture of giving to people the right to reflect on their past, to become responsible citizens in the present in order to formulate collaboratively the future of the city. In this approach to civic exploration and construction, the Latin American voice gives predominance to the present moment and to the contemporary challenges of city museums. A definition proposed by a professional working in Cameroon gives an African perspective; it focuses on museum professionalism and the status of the museum institution as a space of well-being and entertainment for the families as well as an institution responsible for creating programmes through which the communities will identify themselves. An insight from USA highlights the importance of the three 'E' of museums as spaces of Exploration, Experience and Enjoyment, giving equal importance to local communities and tourists alike. The Asian voice, reflecting the rapid transformation of cities in China, perceives the city museum more as a public cultural reservoir of memories and objects through which citizens can find a spiritual home for their reminiscences. It acknowledges that city museums can be key cultural landmarks of a city, especially as cities grow so fast and seek their own position within the global tourist industry.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE MUSEUM INSTITUTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Debates about new visions and missions of city museums resonate with similar debates about the museum institution at large. There are many connecting threads with contemporary ex-

amples. There is evidently a growing shift towards re-adjusting the scale, range, identity and centre of gravity of museums. In 2015, the *MuseumID* magazine encouraged, through a public call, the online sharing of thoughts under the rubric *The #FutureMuseum Project: What will museums be like in the future?*<sup>56</sup> Museum professionals, mostly from the Anglo-American museum stage, expressed their views and today there are around fifty-five of them available online. Most focus on the connecting power of museum objects with people and on the museum identity as storytelling places, as accessible deposits and generators of knowledge and memories, as wondrous spaces for discovery, as agile promoters of intercultural dialogues and exchange of ideas, as catalysts for positive change within society and as civic connectors for expanding relationships and partnerships with communities. Authors stress the need to continue a meaningful investigation into the stories of museum objects and enhance the public's encounter with the material and immaterial richness of museums, representing human endeavours, history, creativity and diverse cultures. They also highlight the importance of encouraging a sense of ownership on the part of visitors, both for the museum environment and the museum collections. They favour the endorsement of participatory and engaging modes of museum practice and highlight the need to develop further the establishment of cooperative networks and synergies between different stakeholders, not only as conceptual theoretical ideals but as *modus operandi* in everyday museum practice. Strong organisational health as well as the happiness and wellbeing of communities are key priorities in connection with the recognition of museums as cultural networks and contributors to the development of more resilient societies. The exploration of transformative experiences offered by the magic of museums is not a novel path to take, but now the investigation of the diverse impact of museums upon individuals communities and societies becomes more sophisticated. Beyond museums' knowledge resources, the spotlight is also turned towards emotion-driven museum experiences, the enhancement of empathy and bonding within society and the strengthening of relevance of museums to people from all walks of life. Fluidity and flexibility, sustainability and resilience, trust and transparency, democratisation and social empowerment, acceptance of difference, civil rights and social justice protection, activism and resistance, public value, responsiveness and accountability are equally central terms and demands in current museum discourse. Opinions about the potential of museums to become more entrepreneurial and pro-active in re-establishing their institutional profile in order to experiment with new models of management and fund raising are also gaining ground.

The *Trendswatch series* for museums compiled annually since 2012<sup>57</sup> is also a useful compass to navigate the current agile sea of change for societies and museums. The series has been recording systematically the new elements that come through the membranes of contemporary societies (at least of the Anglo-American which is in the range of its focus) and digests their metabolism within the museum context and practice. Interestingly, many of these identified trends relate also to the systems thinking principles, and primarily to the importance of experimentation, sustainability, information flow, networking, responsiveness, cooperation and sharing, of diversity and community building, of sense and meaning making within a changing natural and social habitat.

On a more institutional formal framework, the Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society,<sup>58</sup> a very important

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<sup>56</sup> See the project's website, <http://www.museum-id.com/idea-detail.asp?id=283>

<sup>57</sup> The series is authored by Elizabeth Merritt, founding director of the Centre for the Future of Museums/ American Association of Museums.

<sup>58</sup> As it is stated in UNESCO'S website, the elaboration of this Recommendation "originated from the desire to supplement and extend the application of standards and principles laid down in existing international instruments referring to the place of museums, and to their related roles and responsibilities", <http://www.>

document for the social and educational impact of museums, was adopted by the 38<sup>th</sup> session of the General Conference of UNESCO on 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. The Recommendation is based on the premise that museums work in favour of the education of humanity for justice, liberty and peace, helping to build moral and intellectual solidarity among people taking into account the magnitude of socio-economic and political changes that have affected the role and diversity of museums since the adoption of the 1960 Recommendation concerning the Most Effective Means of Rendering Museums Accessible to Everyone. The adoption of UNESCO Recommendation is also a strong drive for a more profound change in ICOM's renowned museum definition, which together with ICOM's Code of Ethics, stands out as the most universally accepted and long-lived manifesto in the museum world. Yet, the last 'great change' in ICOM museum definition's structure and content is dated in 1974, when the wording 'in the service of society and its development' was added.<sup>59</sup> Since then and up to 2007 when the last minor adjustment was enforced, the definition remains essentially unchanged. In 2015, ICOM initiated a series of actions aiming to rethink the impact and contemporary strength of ICOM's museum definition. These resulted into ICOM's decision in early 2017 to establish a new standing Committee of Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) with representative members from all continents with a mandate to explore the shared but also the profoundly dissimilar conditions, values and practices of museums in diverse and rapidly changing societies.<sup>60</sup>

It is, thus, possible that the near future will give rise to much more interesting new thinking about museums of all kinds and of museums of cities specifically. The museum of a city is definitely a hybrid museum where 'difference' makes the difference in most aspects of its work. The definition proposed through CAMOC's Survey work by Renée Kistemaker, researcher and former curator in Amsterdam Museum, reflects this quite well. She asserts that 'a City Museum is a museum *about* the city; *for* the city and *in* the city. The city museum is a multi-disciplinary institution: it can have characteristics of a history museum, an art museum, a regional museum, a community museum, an archaeological museum, an industrial museum. In essence, the City Museum does not exist. It varies, depending on the history of the museum and its collections, the history of the city, and the size of the city'.<sup>61</sup>

The Museum of London is currently displaying a congealed block of sewage with a horrid smell from a Victorian sewer in east London (the so-called 'The Whitechapel fatberg'). It is a telling example to conclude with.<sup>62</sup> The curator who proposed its acquirement argued that it is an important item for it 'calls to attention the way we live our lives in a modern city'<sup>63</sup> and contemporary collecting choices of city museums for 'artefacts' that may be considered historic in 50 years' time. The Director of the Museum of London welcomed the proposal as it is important for the institution to display 'genuine curiosities from past and present London ...

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[unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/](https://unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/)

<sup>59</sup> The definition as it stands today: "a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly in Vienna, Austria on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> According to its mandate, the MDPP Committee, when approaching ICOM's general conference in 2019, will advise the Executive Board and the Advisory Council on museological and epistemological problem areas in the existing museum definition, and make recommendations regarding the potential gains as well as the complication in revising the definition, as a shared, international framework, to reflect and include more current conditions, potentials and priorities for museums" (article 2). For MDPP's formation, see announcement in <http://icom.museum/the-committees/standing-committees/standing-committee/committee-for-museum-definition-prospects-and-potentials/>

<sup>61</sup> Mouliou 2015a, 27.

<sup>62</sup> Greenfield 2017, 13 September.

<sup>63</sup> Greenfield 2017, 13 September.

which raise questions about how we live today and also inspire visitors to consider solutions to the problems of growing metropolises'.<sup>64</sup> This fatberg is definitely an extraordinary exhibit, a hybrid museum object *par excellence*. In its own unique way as curiosity, it forces us to re-think not only the physical limits of a city-museum compared to the Museum-city itself, but also the city's and museum's challenging task to metabolise a world of different social elements and interpret the complexity of urban life in all its facets, layers and expressions.

## PROVENANCE OF FIGURES

Figs. 1–7: Photo archive: M. Mouliou

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<sup>64</sup> Greenfield 2017, 13 September.



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